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***“Going Over the Top” – The Impact of World War I on Three Leaders
of World War II***

**SUBMITTED TO
Professor Jonathan Petropoulos**

**By
Nicholas Sage**

**For
Honors Senior Thesis in History
Fall 2019-Spring 2020
Submitted May 11, 2020**

For Captain Dancy

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous support of Joseph Z. and Ruth N. Stasneck for the students of Claremont McKenna College. Without the two grants I received through the Stasneck Fellowship for Archival Research, I never would have found the primary sources that form the foundation of this thesis.

I also would like to thank the archivists of the Churchill Archives Center, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, the National World War I Memorial Museum, and the Kansas City Public Library. Their enthusiastic assistance made my first experience conducting archival research a pleasant one.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Cheek family for opening their home in Cambridge, UK, to me for two weeks in the summer of 2019 as I conducted archival research and for remaining some of my family's dearest friends for decades. I can say with confidence that my days in Cambridge were among the most memorable and introspective of my life.

To all the history faculty who devoted their time to me and my peers, I could never articulate how much you taught me not only about our field, but about myself. This includes both the incredible history teachers I had the privilege of learning from in high school and the distinguished professors of CMC's History Department. I especially want to thank Professor Wendy Lower. Although I began writing this thesis in the late summer of 2019, it was not until I took your class on the Great War the following autumn that I discovered the purpose of this project.

No one, however, devoted more of their time to cultivating my historical acumen than Professor Jonathan Petropoulos. Nearly five years ago as a senior in high school touring CMC, I met Professor Petropoulos for the first time and spoke with him about the school for the better part of an hour. I did not realize at the time that I would eventually take three of his classes and that he would serve as the advisor and reader of this project which represents the zenith of my undergraduate academic career. Professor, I owe so much of the last four years to you, and I look forward to what I am sure will be a long friendship ahead.

Lery, Tobin, and Gabe, you will always represent the other three corners of my tetrarchy, and I am so grateful that you refused to let this project devour me over the past year. I also need to reaffirm my adoration for my "life coach," Melia Wong, and my favorite Army lieutenant, Lindsay Burton, for their guidance and encouragement over the past four years. I also want to thank Lauren Broidy for her devotion not only as a friend but also as an editor of this project.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my family for their steadfast love throughout my life. My parents, John and Shelly, drilled the importance of education into me from a young age and made many sacrifices to help me get where I am today. To my brothers, Jackson and Matthew, thank you for your patience with me over the last two decades. I find it comforting to know that no matter what happens, I always have two siblings (and friends) I can rely on in life. I am also indebted to my delightful grandparents who fostered my love for storytelling and history as I grew up. Especially given the trying circumstances of a global pandemic, I have never been more appreciative of my family.

“There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know.” – Harry S. Truman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i><u>Preface</u></i>	viii
<i><u>Introduction: Worlds At War</u></i>	1
<i><u>Part One: The Aristocrat</u></i>	10
Chapter 1: “The Glittering Trot”.....	12
Chapter 2: No “Gentleman’s Game”.....	21
Chapter 3: The Second Thirty Years’ War.....	47
<i><u>Part Two: The Artist</u></i>	67
Chapter 4: Down and Out in Vienna and Munich.....	69
Chapter 5: The Corporal’s <i>Kampf</i>	75
Chapter 6: Seeing the World Through “Glowing Coals”.....	90
<i><u>Part 3: The Farmer</u></i>	111
Chapter 7: “Stirred in Heart and Soul”.....	113
Chapter 8: “The Strain, the Mud, the Misery”.....	120
Chapter 9: The Captain Who Would Be King.....	145
<i><u>Conclusion: The Echoes of 1918</u></i>	170
<i><u>Appendix: Figures and Photos</u></i>	181
<i><u>Bibliography</u></i>	192

Abstract

This thesis explores the impact that service in the First World War had on three global leaders of the Second World War: Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and Harry Truman. Through analysis of original documents from the Churchill Archive Center, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, and the archives of the National World War I Museum, this project contends that the years 1914-1918 became a common point of reference and reflection for these three leaders—especially in their private musings and public rhetoric during World War II. Additionally, primary evidence reveals that the personal narratives of wartime service that these three veterans crafted simultaneously shaped and reflected their countries' national narratives of the conflict. Churchill played into and popularized the notion of the Great War bringing an end to the “glory” of the nineteenth century. Hitler doctored his reflections of the war in *Mein Kampf* to convey the Imperial German High Command's “Stab-in-the-Back” myth accusing Jews and Marxists for German defeat in November 1918. In his written reflections, Truman noted that most Americans failed to remember their nation's brief participation in the First World War—a sentiment that aligned with the idea of the conflict as America's “Forgotten War.” Additionally, all three spoke of the two World Wars as a single, contiguous conflict. Examining these three people during the Great War thus reveals the role of shared experience in generational theory as well as the intersection between individual and collective memory.

Preface

As my horse and I neared what I knew must be the road, enemy shells began exploding after their whining and shrieking descent too close for comfort. There were many of them and they seemed to be concentrated only about half the length of a football field upon a spot to my right front. Then I heard the clatter of a horse's hooves coming wildly toward me and I knew that he was right at the edge of the road.

I pulled my horse behind a tree trunk. Looking around it, as the running horse came abreast of me, I saw a sight that will remain etched upon my mind, together with many others, as long as I live. By the instant but quickly recurring flashes of exploding shells, I saw that the running horse had been hard hit, bleeding badly and was seeking safety from an unseen enemy in the only way he knew, flight. The sight was sickening as was the thought that so many innocent animals will pay the penalty for the hatred, greed, and violence of human beings who among all living creatures should know better how to live peacefully.

Captain Keith W. Dancy
Battery A, 129th Field Artillery Regiment
Vosges Mountains, France, August 1918¹

Captain Keith Dancy was 25 years old when, by the flashes of artillery fire, he witnessed a bleeding horse gallop on a road outside of the French town of Kruth on the Western Front. The Great War plucked the young Missourian from a calm and hopeful life in the American Heartland and flung him into the mud and blood of the Vosges Mountains and the Meuse-Argonne. Few of Captain Dancy's men had ever left their home state of Missouri prior to the war; only a couple had seen the ocean before boarding their troop-transport ship in Halifax, Nova Scotia. But six months after saying farewell to his family and his tranquil life, the Captain stood in terror and disgust of that bloodstained horse—a living embodiment of the Red Horseman of War from the Book of Revelations—running itself to death in the Vosges.

Indeed, the Great War wrought destruction and despair on an apocalyptic scale. By the time the war ended on November 11, 1918, 20 million people—both soldiers and civilians—lay dead and another 21 million bore grievous physical wounds.² The cataclysm of 1914-1918 also

¹ Scrapbook record of Battery A, 129th Field Artillery, AEF, 1919, SC90, Box 1, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.

² Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013), xxi.

soiled the innocence of a generation. Captain Dancy fought in the war for less than a year, but those months of combat shaped the rest of his life. He spent every subsequent New Year's Eve and Independence Day sitting inside with the family dog, both shaking uncontrollably as the fireworks crackled outside. Other nights he lay awake, plagued by those awful memories the war had "etched" into his mind. The war remained visceral even decades later, but Keith never regretted his service nor believed that it had made a negative impact on his life. On the contrary, he forged many of his closest life-long friendships during the conflict. Similarly, his experience in World War I inspired him to work for the Veterans Administration during World War II and the Korean War. When the former Captain passed away in 1982, his mind drifted to 1918. In his final hours in this world, he repeated the same brief phrase over and over again in a trance: "Captain Dancy reporting for duty. Captain Dancy reporting for duty. Captain Dancy reporting for duty."

Captain Dancy was my Great-Grandfather.

One hundred years after the old powers of Europe went to war in 1914, I discovered an exhaustive but messy archive in an Army footlocker in my basement. One can trace the origins of this project to the moment I cracked open those rusty clasps for the first time six years ago. Although he was far from a gifted writer, Keith had a keen historical mind, preserving hundreds of letters, newspaper clippings, and photos pertaining to his military service. He also left behind an unpublished memoir of his combat experiences. These documents, tattered and yellowed with age, revealed the realities of a war that illuminated much about one's character. I have read those faded words on many occasions throughout the years. Each time I marvel at how such a short experience could so thoroughly define someone to his final breath.



Keith Dancy (left), prior to his promotion to captain. Somewhere in France, 1918 (Author's personal collection)



Keith Dancy (right) standing beside graves of Battery A men in the town of Charpentry. c. October 1, 1918 (Author's personal collection)



Keith Dancy (furthest to right) with Harry Truman (middle) and other friends from the 129th FA in 1963 (Author's personal collection)

Introduction: Worlds At War

The Great War saw the mobilization of 65 million people for military service.¹ The breadth of their wartime experiences was staggering. They fought in submarines in the depths of the Atlantic and on mountainous cliffs at altitudes of over 12,000 feet. Some guarded the same section of trench through years of stagnant warfare on the Western Front, while others travelled hundreds of miles on horseback through the deserts of Arabia and the Levant fighting mobile skirmishes. Battles tore through the streets of Chinese cities and the waters off the coast of South America. In a single regiment, one soldier may have cared for the horses, while another charged the enemy with a trench club in hand. Unsurprisingly, veterans of the conflict derived different lessons and meaning from their service in the ‘War to End All Wars.’

The events they participated in between 1914-1918 served as the genesis for our modern world. Historian Golo Mann described the Great War as the “mother catastrophe of the twentieth century;” the architect of American Cold War policy, George Kennan, called it the “*ur*-catastrophe of the twentieth century;” and American historian Fritz Stern claimed it was “the calamity from which all other calamities sprang.”² Indeed, humanity’s first four years of industrial warfare shattered centuries-old empires and weakened others beyond recovery. Their collapse at the end of the war led to the redrawing of borders not only in Europe but also in the Middle East. Many of these new borders still contribute to international tensions today. Discontent over the conflict stimulated seditious attitudes in Imperial Russia, which led to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and over seven decades of Soviet rule thereafter. As

¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, xxi.

² Jay Winter, “How the Great War Shaped the World,” *The Atlantic*, August 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/08/how-the-great-war-shaped-the-world/373468/>; Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, xxi.

hundreds of thousands of British bled at the Somme and Passchendaele, the transfer of billions of dollars westward across the Atlantic through war loans allowed the United States to surpass the United Kingdom as the world's preeminent economic power.³ The Great War fostered social changes of similar magnitude. Partly because of their contributions to the war effort, British women (over the age of 30) gained the right to vote in 1918, as did their American counterparts two years later. The drop in European immigration to the United States in 1914 paired with increased demand for industrial labor helped initiate the Great Migration of millions of African Americans from the Deep South to other regions of the country.⁴ Once confined to the periphery of the cultural world, modernist philosophy and art gained popularity among those traumatized by four years of unprecedented slaughter. But perhaps the outcome people most often associate with World War I is World War II. Even the serialization of the two conflicts reinforced the idea that the Second World War was a consequence of its predecessor. According to this paradigm, the global upheaval that followed 1945 was just another product of 1918.

The multiplicity of the Great War's participants, events, and outcomes requires any historian approaching the topic to exercise humility before making broad conclusions about the conflict. Rather than attempting to account for all the stories, experiences, and opinions of every participant, this study examines the legacy of the war in the lives of three people: a British aristocrat, a German artist, and an American farmer. Despite their divergent backgrounds, each served on the Western Front, and each became a global leader in the Second World War. Together, their stories capture an inextricable connection between the World Wars.

³ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 34.

⁴ Alferdteen Harrison, *Black Exodus* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1992), 11.

Winston Churchill (b.1874 - d.1965) had a career in World War I more diverse than most. He served as First Lord of the Admiralty—the civilian head of the Royal Navy—from 1911 to 1915. In this position, he directed British naval policy and production for years but also suffered humiliation over his failures at Antwerp and the Dardanelles. He also served briefly as a major with the Grenadier Guards and later as a lieutenant-colonel in command of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers on the frontlines of the Ypres Salient. He returned to government in 1917 as Minister of Munitions, directing the British war industry until the end of the hostilities the following year. As someone who witnessed both the inner workings of Britain’s wartime bureaucracy and the carnage of the trenches, Churchill developed a rare perspective on the conflict. Many of the lessons he learned in the Great War resurfaced when he held the premiership over twenty years later. He stood alone against the onslaught of the *Wehrmacht* for months in 1940 and guided the British and their allies to victory in 1945.⁵ Moreover, the British Premier shaped the historiography of both conflicts with his two comprehensive—yet fallible—accounts of the World Wars, *The World Crisis* and *The Second World War*.

The man who led the Nazi war machine against Churchill—and the second individual covered in this study—was also a veteran of the Great War. Abandoning his life as a struggling artist, Adolf Hitler (b.1889 - d.1945) enlisted in the Bavarian Army at the outset of war in 1914. Fighting for four years as a member of the List Regiment, Hitler served as a regimental runner and only attained the low rank of *Gefreiter*—or lance corporal. He did, however, receive the coveted Iron Cross commendation. His regiment saw action throughout the Western Front, at times only miles from Churchill and his men on the other side of No-Man’s-Land. Additionally,

⁵ Richard Toye, “Churchill, Winston Leonard Spencer,” 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/churchill_winston_leonard_spencer.

the Corporal suffered wounds from a poison gas attack towards war's end. Historians continue to debate the role the war played in Hitler's radicalization, but few refute that he wove his service into an elaborate personal mythos in his autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. Nevertheless, his experiences during World War I lent him credibility with the disenchanted and disoriented populace of the Weimar Republic. The specter of the Great War not only influenced his ascension to the chancellery but also his conduct during the Second World War.⁶

The third and final person this study covers is Harry S. Truman (b.1884 - d.1972). Mobilized with the 129th Field Artillery Regiment of the Army National Guard's 35th Infantry Division, the future president quickly earned a promotion to captain of Battery D. Although Truman and the bulk of the American Expeditionary Force arrived in France in 1918 near the end of hostilities, the Captain saw three months of combat in the Vosges Mountains and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive—the deadliest military campaign in American history to date.⁷ Many of those he served with in France became his best lifelong friends. Truman's military background also became a decisive factor in his early political success in Missouri politics. Furthermore, his experiences as an Army officer gave him an understanding of military affairs that made him an influential senator in the early years of World War II. His work investigating the efficiency of the National Defense Program launched him into the public eye and on to the 1944 electoral ticket as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's running mate. After Roosevelt died unexpectedly in April 1945, Truman succeeded him as the 33rd President of the United States. Four months later, the former Captain became the only person in human history to order a

⁶ Thomas Weber, "Hitler, Adolf," 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated January 11, 2015, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/hitler_adolf.

⁷ "The Meuse-Argonne Offensive," The National Archives, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww1/meuse-argonne>.

nuclear strike on a populated target. His time in the trenches shaped his leadership during the war and his views on policies such as the Marshall Plan, involvement in the Korean War, and American participation in the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

To assess the impact of the Great War on these three veterans, this study examines a variety of primary sources that they produced throughout their lives. From letters and diaries to policy memoranda and speeches, these documents provide insight into these leaders' conduct between 1914-1918 and the meaning they assigned to these memories later in life. But these sources also present challenges to the historian. With Churchill, for instance, the immense volume of primary material becomes an obstacle. His history of the Great War, *The World Crisis*, alone contains 823,000 words. Two weeks of research for this project in the Churchill Archives Center yielded over 1,000 photocopied pages of original documents—still just a fraction of the Center's holdings from 1914-1918. One must sift through this excess of literature to discern his true conclusions. Conversely, Hitler corresponded only occasionally with his few friends in the first half of the Great War and left a sparse written record of his life during the conflict. SS operatives also torched most of his already limited collection of personal papers in the final days of World War II. Reconstructing his wartime journey thus requires a degree of speculation and extrapolation from the few primary texts that survived.

Like all human beings, the three figures in this study proved unreliable narrators of their own experiences. Although not explicitly public or autobiographical, sources such as letters, journal notes, and even court proceedings convey “self-narrative” or “testimonies to the self” — key elements of what historians Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack defined as “ego-

documents.”⁸ Fulbrook and Rublack also noted that both individual bias and “the sheer impossibility of conveying certain experiences in words” undermine the utility of ego-documents.⁹ The limits of written language lead many people, consciously or unconsciously, to revert to archetypal narrative structures to make sense of events unfolding around them, further distorting their portrayal of reality. Despite these drawbacks, however, ego documents still enrich the study of history. Fulbrook and Rublack argued that they “allow us to engage in some form of (admittedly only one-way) inter-subjective communication with a historical individual, providing insights into the nature of subjective experience” – a personal connection often lost when focusing on broad social, economic, and political trends.¹⁰ Additionally, the paradigms that appear across various ego-documents can reveal modes of thinking that defined a certain period. The compelling nature of these sources may help explain the recent resurgence of biography as a historical study.

Many academics spurned biographical writing for much of the twentieth century. The growth of social and structuralist forms of historical thinking, such as the *Annales* school in the first half of the twentieth century, led some historians to focus on sweeping trends and systems instead of individual people. Although biography remained popular in Anglo-American circles, French and German academic communities largely turned away from the subfield because of its supposed lack of methodology.¹¹ But as historian Simone Lässig observed in her work, *Biography Between Structure and Agency*, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s resulted

⁸ Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, “In Relation: The ‘Social Self’ and Ego-Documents,” *German History* 28, no. 3 (2010): 263.

⁹ Ibid., 264.

¹⁰ Ibid., 265.

¹¹ Simone Lässig, “Biography in Modern History—Modern Historiography in Biography,” in *Biography Structure and Agency*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 2.

in greater emphasis on “such values as personal responsibility, initiative, and individuality.”¹² Such a landscape allowed biography to regain popularity. Furthermore, Lässig noted that the best modern biographies examine “critically the interpretations that the individual in question ascribed to his or her own life” and thus reveal “new insights for the history of mentalities, for the study of what human beings have experienced, processed, infused with meaning, and lived through at certain times and in certain places.”¹³ Renowned for his two-volume profile of Adolf Hitler, Ian Kershaw concluded similarly that the format allows for the “possibility of sustaining a gripping story while at the same time offering a prism through which wider problems of analysis can be viewed.”¹⁴ Covering the lives of Churchill, Hitler, and Truman before, during, and after the Great War, this project takes the form of a comparative biography. And as with any proper biography, it seeks to explore the peculiarities of the period in which they lived.

Beyond the individual experiences of these three veterans, this study examines how they understood themselves as members of a generation that took an active role in both World Wars. This perspective introduces elements of generational theory. Historian Robert Wohl once described generation not as a range of birth years, but rather as a group of people who share “a common frame of reference that provides a sense of rupture with the past.”¹⁵ Despite their different pre-war circumstances, World War I represented this “rupture” for Churchill, Hitler, and Truman. As leaders during the Second World War, they often looked to the years 1914-1918 when making, or at least rationalizing, their decisions. Strikingly, each of them also described the World Wars as a single, continuous conflict on many occasions—a phenomenon this study refers

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 9, 19.

¹⁴ Ian Kershaw, “Biography and the Historian,” in *Biography Structure and Agency*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 35.

¹⁵ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 210.

to as the “continuity paradigm.” But other people exemplified this idea as well. Many of the military and political officials surrounding these three leaders during the Second World War also participated in the Great War, as did many public figures in the arts and sciences who remained relevant between 1939-1945. Why focus on well-known individuals at all when tens of millions of “ordinary” people’s lives encapsulated those tumultuous three decades? Churchill, Hitler, and Truman shared several attributes that allow for a more thorough comparative analysis: each saw combat on the Western Front; each served in roles that placed some (but not much) distance between them the worst dangers of the frontlines; each recorded written reflections on the Great War both during and after their time of service; and their later positions as overarching leaders of their nations required them to explain their interpretations of the “purpose” of the World Wars to the public.

The relative congruence of the *types* of their experiences accentuated the variety of conclusions that different people can derive from a similar set of conditions. Each of these three veterans identified the same theme of continuity but spoke of its significance in different ways and for different reasons. National narratives often influenced their perspectives of the Great War. Churchill embraced the English elite’s legend that the loss of the nation’s brightest youth enfeebled the Empire, destroyed the aristocratic world, and precipitated another global conflict. Hitler subscribed to the Supreme Army Command’s “stab-in-the-back” myth, believing that Jews and Marxists sabotaged German victory in 1918 and that the Second World War represented another chapter in the same struggle against these invisible “enemies.” Although his nation never developed a robust narrative of the Great War, Truman’s argument that resurgent American isolationism after 1918 allowed German militarists to plunge the world into another crisis reflected the idea of World War I as America’s “forgotten war.” In turn, these leaders’ power and

platform during the Second World War allowed them to entrench national patterns of understanding the Great War even further. Thus, they captured not only the human connection binding the two World Wars together, but also the constant interplay between individual and collective memory.

Part One

The Aristocrat

“The Earth trembled with the wrath of the warring nations. All the metals were molten. Everything was in motion. No one could say what was impossible... But the storm wind ceased as suddenly as it had arisen. The skies were clear; the bells of Armistice rang out. Mankind returned with indescribable relief to its long interrupted, fondly cherished ordinary life.”

-Winston Churchill, Eulogy to T.E. Lawrence, October 6, 1936

Late in the night of August 4, 1914, Winston Churchill—then First Lord of the Admiralty—sat in his office in at the Admiralty Building listening to his clock tick. The previous month saw the assassination of nobles, the mobilization of armies, and the invasion of countries, but the British had yet to enter the Great War. The First Lord made careful preparations for such an event. A week before, with a grunt of tacit approval from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith but without Cabinet authorization, Churchill ordered his Grand Fleet to its battle station. An 18-mile-long convoy of “gigantic castles of steel” steamed past the White Cliffs of Dover to the dark waters of Scapa Flow at the northern tip of Scotland.¹ After the war, the former First Lord recalled that on August 4, “at the Admiralty there was a great calm. We had everything where we had meant to put it. There was nothing to do but see what happened.”² As he and his ships lay in wait, he wondered, “what would this war be like? What form would the collision of the great armies now everywhere gathering take? What surprises were in store?”³ He did not have to wait long. The British lost their last chance for peace at 11:00PM (midnight in Berlin), when their ultimatum calling on Kaiser Wilhelm II to order his armies out of neutral Belgium expired. With only seconds to spare, Churchill stood up from his chair and entered the adjoining room where over 40 officers stood at attention, awaiting his orders. Immediately as Big Ben’s first toll of the eleventh hour echoed through the streets of London, Churchill spat out a series of commands and issued a telegram to the most powerful armada yet assembled in history: “commence hostilities against Germany.”⁴

¹ Winston Churchill, “The Most Thrilling Days I Have Ever Lived,” *Sunday Dispatch*, December 3, 1939, CHAR 8/649/2, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

² Winston Churchill, “Twenty Years Ago Today—August 4, 1914,” *The Daily Mail*, August 4, 1934, CHAR 8/500/58, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.; Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 [1923]), 162.

Only 39 years old, the First Lord had already fought rebels in the jungles of Cuba, suppressed a colonial revolt in India, killed at least four Dervish warriors during a cavalry charge in the Sudanese desert, and escaped a Boer military prison in South Africa. But the pealing of the bells welcomed a war that represented his first trial in strategic leadership. Moreover, it yielded the darkest moments—and most important lessons—of his political career of over six decades. The years preceding the Great War revealed Churchill's aristocratic values and outlook that the conflict would corrode. Despite his initial success, the First Lord's failures at Antwerp and the Dardanelles and his time on the Western Front tainted his vision of romantic combat and provided him with painful insight into the challenges of wartime leadership. Finally, the Great War's lasting impact on Churchill manifested not only in his political and military strategy in the following global catastrophe, but also in the attention he gave to structuring this chapter of his life into a favorable self-narrative.

Chapter 1: “The Glittering Trot”

To establish the significance of World War I in Churchill's life, and in history generally, one must understand a nineteenth century worldview held by many of Churchill's contemporaries. Among the British elite existed a desire to restore and maintain tradition to protect their own power in imperial society. Even as a young man, Churchill subscribed to the archaic idea of *noblesse oblige*—the notion that the aristocratic elite deserved to rule but also had a duty to protect the lower classes. Many aristocrats in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including Churchill, became supporters of “Tory Democracy,” which mixed conservative thought with social policy reform in such a way that historian David Cannadine

described the Tories as “essentially authoritarian and paternalistic in their benevolence.”⁵ The future Prime Minister’s reflections in *My Early Life*, his memoir published in 1930, revealed his conception of politics in the years leading up to 1914. Churchill remembered watching the growing temperance and suffragist movements in the 1890s with disdain. He mused in *My Early Life*, “If these weak products of democracy held their liberties so lightly, how would they defend the vast provinces and domains we had gained by centuries of aristocratic and oligarchic rule? For a moment I despaired of the Empire.”⁶ Although he switched to the Liberal Party for a period between 1904-1924, he still held many of the same beliefs regarding imperialism and social and economic issues.⁷

Many aristocrats also promoted a message of imperial pride and nostalgia that seeped into the culture of the lower classes. Arno Mayer pointed out in his book, *The Persistence of the Old Regime*, that the industrial “bourgeois were among the most enthusiastic champions of traditional architecture, statuary, painting, and performing arts,” all of which “[harkened] back to time-honored metaphors and emblems.”⁸ The Historicist style remained immensely popular in Britain during Churchill’s young-adult life, and there existed a “commonplace patrician nostalgia for the lost Eden of the great estates, great families, and ‘the old, spacious country-house life.’”⁹ Beyond the pomp and circumstance of the era, the British and many other European peoples enjoyed economic and technological growth. In his account of the Great War, *The World Crisis*, Churchill wrote that the nineteenth century was defined by “accumulation; not of a mere piling up of material wealth, but of the growth and gathering in every land of all those elements and

⁵ David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 56.

⁶ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1930]), 257.

⁷ Dissatisfaction with the Conservative Party’s decision to implement protectionist trade tariffs largely drove Churchill’s decision to switch parties.

⁸ Arno Mayer, *Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 14, 191.

⁹ Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy*, 156.

factors which go to make up the power of States. Education spread itself over the broad surface of the millions. Science had opened the limitless treasure-house of nature.”¹⁰ The years leading up to the war stood as a time of prosperity and progress in the minds of many in Britain—especially those in the upper echelons of English society.

Tradition extended beyond domestic society to the battlefield. Aristocrats often displayed an appreciation for what Mayer described as the “cardinal virtues of honor, service, and courage,” and believed that the “violence and blood of battle promised to reinvigorate the individual, re-energize the nation, resanitize the race, revitalize society, and regenerate moral life.”¹¹ Young Winston was no different and viewed warfare as a glorious “gentleman’s game.”¹² He described joining his cavalry unit for the first time in 1895 amid “an all-pervading air of glitter, affluence, ceremony and veiled discipline,” and he marveled at the “thrill and charm” in “the glittering jingle of a cavalry squadron maneuvering at the trot.”¹³ But no large pan-European conflict had occurred since the Napoleonic Wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and thus the young cavalryman only had experience fighting in isolated skirmishes in British colonial holdings around the globe. In 1898, for instance, Churchill fought alongside a British force of nearly 25,000 against an army of 50,000 Muslim Dervishes at the Battle of Omdurman in Sudan.¹⁴ He explained in his memoirs that “ancient and modern confronted one another. The weapons, the methods, and the fanaticism of the Middle Ages were brought by an extraordinary anachronism into dire collision with the organization and inventions of the nineteenth century.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 3.

¹¹ Mayer, *Persistence of the Old Regime*, 300, 306.

¹² Churchill, *My Early Life*, 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴ Tony Bunting, “Battle of Omdurman | Summary,” Encyclopedia Britannica, August 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Omdurman>.

¹⁵ Churchill, *My Early Life*, 186.

Although dramatically outnumbered, the British lost only 48 men while taking the lives of over 10,000 Dervishes in a single afternoon.¹⁶ The asymmetric nature of these conflicts further entrenched the romanticism of battle for imperialists like Churchill; the Dervishes and the other colonized peoples who fell victim to British lead and steel did not see the same merriment in these engagements. In retrospect, Churchill understood his naivety at the time. He wrote in *My Early Life*:

To the great mass of those who took part in the little wars of Britain in those vanished light-hearted days, this was only a sporting element in a splendid game. Most of us were fated to see a war where the hazards were reversed, where death was the general expectation and severe wounds were counted as lucky escapes, where whole brigades were shorn away under the steel flail of artillery and machineguns, where the survivors of one tornado knew that they would certainly be consumed in the next or the next after that...we may perhaps be pardoned if we thought we were at grips with real war.¹⁷

Most of the middle and high-ranking British military officials during World War I first rose to prominence because of their involvement in these “sporting” colonial conflicts. Omdurman alone saw the participation of Lord Horatio Kitchener—who served as secretary of state for war during the First World War—and Douglas Haig—who commanded the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front between from 1915 to 1918.¹⁸ Their romantic experiences fighting in the colonies shaped their later policymaking, often with disastrous effect.

Although much younger than these other wartime leaders and only a junior officer at Omdurman, Churchill also took on a larger strategic role in World War I when Prime Minister Asquith appointed him First Lord of the Admiralty in 1911. His tenure in the years before the Great War showed how his fascination with the technical side of warfare influenced his leadership. When Churchill first moved into the Admiralty House, he found himself in command

¹⁶ Bunting, “Battle of Omdurman | Summary.”

¹⁷ Churchill, *My Early Life*, 180-181.

¹⁸ Bunting, “Battle of Omdurman | Summary.”

of 125,889 uniformed sailors and marines and a civilian labor force of over 50,000 working at shipyards across the Empire. Additionally, he had ten Dreadnoughts, 48 older battleships, seven battlecruisers, 127 cruisers, 112 destroyers, 27 gunboats, and nine submarines at his disposal.¹⁹ Consequently, the new First Lord faced the task of maintaining, organizing, and expanding the largest combined fleet in the world and the bureaucracy that came with it—a daunting challenge for someone who had never served in the Navy. Churchill sought to make up for his lack of experience at sea by spending nearly eight months of his first three years in office on fact-finding missions aboard the Admiralty yacht, HMS *Enchantress*. To better understand the intricacies of naval strategy and matériel, he visited nearly every ship and installation under his command.²⁰ On these voyages, the First Lord paid attention to details many of his predecessors overlooked. For instance, Churchill often questioned enlisted sailors and lower ranking officers about ways to improve the quality of their equipment and their living conditions below deck. This practice upset several of his high-ranking colleagues in the Royal Navy, including Admiral John Jellicoe, who said, “when visiting men-of-war his methods of obtaining information direct from the men, as he was in the habit of doing, were such as to tend to weaken discipline.”²¹ Churchill, however, deemed the voyages essential to proper management: “[these missions] gave me a general view of our naval machinery and personnel perhaps more complete than that possessed by any other living person. I was thus able to understand and weigh the advice given me by the admirals; and when they differed as they often did, I could form an opinion of my own.”²² Not only did the First Lord seek out this practical experience, he demanded that his admirals develop a new and

¹⁹ Brian Lavery, *Churchill Warrior* (Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2017), 44.

²⁰ Churchill, “The Most Thrilling Days I Have Ever Lived.”

²¹ Jellicoe and several admirals threatened to resign over this practice, but Churchill persuaded them otherwise; Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 71.

²² Churchill, “The Most Thrilling Days I Have Ever Lived.”

improved War College curriculum for staff officers that would “develop [their] mental faculties, such as powers of observation, accuracy in detail, appreciation of situations and of character,” among other skills.²³ The First Lord wanted his philosophy of self-education to trickle down to these officers who would then hold crucial administrative and strategic positions in the mobilization, operations, and intelligence departments of the new Admiralty War Staff. In both World Wars, Churchill connected his fascination with the technical minutiae of warfare to his visions of grand strategy—a dynamic that first became apparent as he directed British naval policy during the first modern arms race.

In the early twentieth century, diplomacy, imperialism, and national prestige depended on a nation’s ability to project naval power abroad, granting Churchill substantial power as the civilian leader of the Royal Navy. He wielded this influence to initiate a series of drastic reforms. Immediately upon taking office, Churchill caused a stir in the Admiralty by making Admiral “Jackie” Fisher his advisor. The Old Sea Dog had held the highest military position in the Royal Navy, First Sea Lord, between 1904 and his retirement six years later. Fisher pushed for many strategic changes such as the development of the *Dreadnought*-class warships that lay at the heart of the Anglo-German naval arms race. But he also cultivated bitter rivalries within the naval bureaucracy with his notoriously abrasive, confrontational demeanor.²⁴ The return of Fisher in conjunction with several other early decisions as First Lord made it clear that Churchill would not abide by the passive, civilian leadership style that most of his predecessors used.

In his first Naval Estimates speech delivered to the House of Commons on March 18, 1912, Churchill presented an ambitious agenda. First, he officially adopted a previously

²³ Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

unwritten policy requiring the Royal Navy to maintain “60 percent superiority in vessels of the ‘Dreadnought’ type over the German Navy.”²⁵ Although the First Lord’s endorsement of the new standard dashed any German hopes of contesting the dominance of the British surface fleet, he made it clear that German cuts to Dreadnought production “would be promptly followed [in Britain]...by large and proportioned reductions.”²⁶ Churchill pointed to this offer as evidence that he tried to avert war with Germany for years to come. He also announced his intention to adapt the fleet to run on oil rather than coal. The change, though seemingly small, required massive short-term investment and altered British foreign policy in the Middle East for decades.²⁷ Finally, to the displeasure of many in the Admiralty and in the Foreign Office, he proposed a plan to strengthen the Home Fleet by scaling down British sea power in the Mediterranean.²⁸ In the event of war, he argued, they could not provide the Germans with any opportunity to raid the English coast. Churchill recognized the controversial and costly nature of his plans but defended them, saying, “When we consider our naval strength we are not thinking of our commerce, but of our freedom. We are not thinking of our trade, but our lives... If this is insular arrogance, it is also the first condition of our existence.”²⁹ The First Lord, with backing from Fisher, pursued his objectives with vigor and obsession. *Orion*-class dreadnoughts gave way to *Queen Elizabeth*-class super-dreadnoughts; 13.5-inch naval guns were replaced with 15-inch behemoths; and the Admiralty budget swelled from 45 million pounds in 1912 to 51.58 million in 1914. Indeed, the First Lord only stopped his push for funding when Asquith

²⁵ Winston Churchill, “Navy Estimates” (1912), in *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), 1923.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1924.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1926.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1929-1930.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1928.

threatened to force him to resign.³⁰ Adding to the expense, Churchill brokered a long-term contract with Shell Oil Company and negotiated the British government's purchase of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company—known today as British Petroleum—which secured a fuel supply for his armada less than a month before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.³¹ But even after years of political strife and massive government expenditure, no one denied that the fleet was ready for war when chaos erupted in 1914.

Although Churchill now served behind the Admiralty desk rather than in the cavalryman's saddle, he still saw glory in his work. To many in the pre-war years, continental war—never mind global, total war—seemed a distant possibility. In the concluding remarks of his 1912 Naval Estimates Address, Churchill imagined a scenario reminiscent of the Cold War five decades later, in which “naval and military rivalries are the modern substitute for what in earlier ages would have been actual wars,” and where “the jealousies and disputes of nations are more and more decided by the mere possession of war power without the necessity for its actual employment.”³² Many of the First Lord's contemporaries shared this position. The great powers prevented international crises such as the Agadir Incident and the Balkan Wars from devolving into a pan-European conflict. These developments led some diplomats like British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey to believe they could maintain peace in the future.³³ War remained a simple hypothetical for many European leaders.

³⁰ Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 87; Robert Rhodes James, section introduction in *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches*, vol. 3, 2233.

³¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 159.

³² Churchill, “Navy Estimates” (1912), in *His Complete Speeches*, 1935.

³³ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 325.

Nevertheless, this stance did not diminish Churchill's appetite for war when it came in the of summer 1914. "Those July and August days stand out incomparable above all others in majesty and awe," Churchill wrote decades later.³⁴ As a crucial member of Asquith's War Cabinet, Churchill watched the diplomatic drama of these opening days firsthand. He later remembered how the "war presented itself to the nations and to millions of men as some tremendous, terrible, yet at the same time fascinating and ennobling new experience."³⁵ His post-war reflections on this opening phase revealed his excitement at the time but also contained a sense of painful nostalgia. In *The World Crisis*, Churchill wrote:

Nations and Empires crowned with princes and potentates rose majestically on every side, lapped in the accumulated treasures of the long peace... The two mighty European systems faced each other glittering and clanking in their panoply, but with a tranquil gaze... The old world in its sunset was fair to see."³⁶

Seething with the author's narrative flourish, the passage nevertheless captured the glory, nationalism, and enthusiasm that many felt at the outbreak war. Churchill clung to a decadent, nineteenth century vision of the world that did not survive the poison gas of Ypres or the mud of Passchendaele. The First Lord's letters from the days leading up to the outbreak of war aligned with his later reflections. At midnight on July 28, 1914, Churchill wrote his wife, Clementine: "Everything tends towards catastrophe and collapse. I am interested, geared-up and happy. Is it not horrible to be built like that? The preparations have a hideous fascination for me."³⁷ His use of the word "horrible" demonstrated a self-awareness of his taboo excitement. Nevertheless, the same obsessive curiosity that drove Churchill to study every detail of the Royal Navy now sucked him into the fervor of war that swept over Europe. He was not alone. His wife wrote

³⁴ Winston Churchill, "A People Transformed," *Sunday Dispatch*, August 3, 1941, CHAR 8/694/18, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

³⁵ Winston Churchill, "Twenty Years Ago Today—August 4, 1914."

³⁶ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 129.

³⁷ Letter from Winston Churchill to Clementine Churchill, July 28, 1914, in *Speaking for Themselves*, ed. Mary Soames (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998), 96.

back: “I know how you are feeling—tingling with life to the tips of your fingers.”³⁸ Others found his enthusiasm off-putting, such as Minister of Munitions David Lloyd George who later claimed that after the expiration of the August 4 ultimatum, “Winston dashed into the room, radiant, his face bright, his manner keen, one word pouring out on another... You could see he was a really happy man. I wondered if this was the state of mind to be in at the opening of such a fearful war as this.”³⁹ Although Churchill’s excitement was far from ubiquitous, it was not unique to the First Lord either. But the war quickly challenged this optimistic outlook.

Chapter 2: No “Gentleman’s Game”

In the opening months of the Great War, the First Lord watched as his preparations yielded success. Less than a week after Britain entered the conflict, Churchill and his newly appointed commander-in-chief of the Home Fleet, Admiral Jellicoe, oversaw the transportation of the roughly 100,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and their equipment to France. Despite the scale of this logistical endeavor, the Royal Navy managed to deliver the entire BEF to the continent by August 22—and an additional 700,000 troops by the end of 1914—without suffering any losses.⁴⁰ Long before the July Crisis, Churchill himself drafted the charter of the Admiralty’s signals intelligence unit known as Room 40, which ordered that the agency remain “exclusively secret in order to penetrate the German mind and movement.”⁴¹ Through analysis of a German codebook the Russians recovered off a stranded cruiser on August

³⁸ Letter from Clementine Churchill to Winston Churchill, July 31, 1914, in *Speaking for Themselves*, ed. Mary Soames (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998), 98.

³⁹ Entry in diary of Margot Asquith, May 8, 1915, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 7, “*The Escaped Escape Goat*,” ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1972]), 850.

⁴⁰ Roberts, *Churchill*, 185.

⁴¹ David Jablonsky, “Churchill and Technology,” in *Churchill and Strategic Dilemmas Before the World Wars*, ed. John H. Maurer (New York: Routledge, 2013), 135.

26, cryptologists at Room 40 started to decrypt the enemy's naval communiques.⁴² Although circulated only among Churchill and a handful of his closest colleagues, this classified intelligence gave the Royal Navy a strategic edge over their German competitors. "So excellent was our Intelligence Service," the First Lord later boasted, "that reports of what was passing in the minds of the German Naval Staff reached us even before Admiral von Pohl's memorandum had been laid before the [Kaiser]." ⁴³ Churchill's fleets also scored tangible victories in the first weeks of the war. In an August 28, 1914, engagement in the shallows of the Heligoland Bight—just 20 miles off the German coast—a Royal Navy detachment sank three German light cruisers and a destroyer and took hundreds of prisoners without losing a single ship. ⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the Heligoland skirmish had little strategic effect. Both navies kept the bulk of their surface fleets, including the dreadnoughts that nearly bankrupted their economies, in the safety of home waters. In 1914, the Royal Navy also gradually tightened a blockade around the *Kaiserreich* and in November declared the North Sea a war zone, which required the inspection of all neutral merchant shipping. ⁴⁵ At least from a naval perspective, the start of this new conflict appeared to align with the First Lord's romantic expectations.

Simultaneous with the Royal Navy's early victories, Churchill sought to expand his own authority within the Admiralty. Traditionally, the Admiralty Board—consisting of a civilian 'first lord,' four active-duty admirals known as 'sea lords,' and several civilian secretaries—conducted the naval war effort. In the past, first lords usually deferred to the judgement of their

⁴² Roberts, *Churchill*, 187.

⁴³ Jablonsky, "Churchill and Technology," 135.

⁴⁴ Among the German prisoners was a son of Secretary of State of the German Imperial Naval Office Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz; Julian S. Corbett, *Naval Operations*, vol. 1, *To the Battle of the Falklands December 1914* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 127.; Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 230.

⁴⁵ Eric Osborne, "Naval Warfare," 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/naval_warfare.

military advisors on matters regarding tactics and strategy. Churchill, however, created a parallel executive body known as the Admiralty War Group, which included only himself (first lord), the first sea lord, the chief of the naval war staff, the naval secretary, and occasionally the second sea lord. The War Group met daily to deliberate on the most important decisions facing the Royal Navy and assumed most responsibilities normally delegated to the Admiralty Board.⁴⁶ Moreover, armed with the naval knowledge he gained during his peacetime tenure, Churchill asserted that in contrast to his predecessors, he “claimed and exercised an unlimited power of suggestion and initiative over the whole field, subject only to the approval and agreement of the first sea lord on all operative orders.”⁴⁷ This streamlined structure contrasted starkly with the 22, and later 38, often overlapping parliamentary Cabinet sub-committees that governed the national war effort.⁴⁸ But these bureaucratic complexities still frustrated Churchill. Nevertheless, his influence grew beyond the sea. On August 16, he organized 20,000-30,000 ‘shipless’ naval personnel into an infantry force called the Royal Naval Division (RND).⁴⁹ In the introduction of the unit’s regimental history, Churchill wrote that the men of the RND “had set their hearts on serving afloat, and it was with much disappointment and many heartburnings, but with boundless and unflinching loyalty, that they devoted themselves to the deadly work ashore.”⁵⁰ Between 1914-1918, the RND saw action on some of the Great War’s most brutal battlefields. More importantly, it gave its founder greater influence over matters normally left to the British Army. The unit also played a central role in Churchill’s first major setback of the war.

⁴⁶ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 169-170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Churchill*, 185.

⁴⁹ Winston Churchill, foreword to *The Royal Naval Division*, by Douglas Jerrold (London: Hutchinson & Company, 1923), xi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

The First Lord experienced grave military failure for the first time during the Siege of Antwerp in early October 1914. Located in the Scheldt Delta of Belgium, the fortress city—and last bastion of Belgian resistance—obstructed any German advance to the Channel ports of Ostend, Dunkirk, and Calais. Antwerp also provided the Allies with a launching ground to strike the German rear and thus stood as the ultimate objective in the ‘Race to the Sea’ that began in mid-September 1914.⁵¹ On October 3, as Belgian leadership started to plan a retreat from Antwerp because of growing pressure from the German Army, Prime Minister Asquith explained to his mistress, Venetia Stanley, that he ordered Churchill to visit the city, assess the situation, “beard the [Belgian] King & his Ministers, and try to infuse into their backbones the necessary quantity of starch.”⁵² In a telegram to Grey and Kitchener later that day, the First Lord emphasized “the necessity of making these worn and weary men throw their souls into it, or the whole thing will go with a run,” and requested that they “send at once both naval brigades, minus recruits.”⁵³ But the 8,000 men of the RND detachment lacked any training or experience in land operations, and in the interest of time, Churchill demanded they deploy “without tents or much impedimenta” and with only “five day’s rations and 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition.”⁵⁴ Two days later, in a telegram to the Prime Minister, he claimed, “I am willing to resign my office and undertake command of relieving and defensive forces assigned to Antwerp...provided that I am given necessary military rank and authority.”⁵⁵ But Asquith told his mistress that this request

⁵¹ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 262.

⁵² Letter from Herbert Henry Asquith to Venetia Stanley, October 3, 1914, in *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 260.

⁵³ Telegram from Winston Churchill to Sir Edward Grey and Lord Kitchener, October 3, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 161.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Telegram from Winston Churchill to H.H. Asquith, October 5, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 163.

elicited a “homeric laugh” from the Cabinet.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the First Lord rushed around the war-torn city for days, dodging German shells and trying to rally the defenders—peculiar behavior for a civilian let alone a cabinet minister.

To many Britons, the Allied defeat at Antwerp represented a personal failure of Churchill's. Ultimately, the city fell just a week later than expected—a delay which cost 2,651 British casualties, including many from the unprepared RND.⁵⁷ The press seized this opportunity to ridicule the First Lord for abandoning his duties in London. *The Morning Post*, for instance, concluded that “this severe lesson ought to teach [Churchill] that he is not...a Napoleon, but a Minister of the Crown with not time either to organize or lead armies in the field.”⁵⁸ The First Lord's venture echoed the physical courage so valued by his aristocratic class as well as the drive for direct, ‘hands-on’ experience that shaped his peacetime leadership at the Admiralty. But the endeavor also revealed how these traits could devolve into recklessness and egotism. The Germans had barely entered the streets of Antwerp when Churchill started to steer the narrative of the siege. Responding to a request from a war correspondent to explain why the defense failed, the beleaguered aristocrat wrote, “in war results are the only things that matter. Success carries all before it, & no explanation for non-success is worth making.” Yet in the same letter, he contradicted this maxim, claiming, “the sudden & total collapse of Belgian resistance, & the diversion of the promised French aid, were factors that destroyed a good & reasonable chance of

⁵⁶Herbert Henry Asquith to Venetia Stanley, October 5, 1914, in *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 263.

⁵⁷ Roberts, *Churchill*, 191.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

saving the place.”⁵⁹ Simultaneously humble and defensive, this paradoxical style became essential to Churchill’s rhetorical method of explaining his mistakes.

Shortly after he returned from Antwerp, Churchill made another decision he came to regret: the reinstatement of Fisher as first sea lord. Deciphering the relationship between the two men proves difficult. They both held each other in high esteem partially because they shared the same bellicose disposition and strategic vision after working together for years before the Great War. The pair maintained an enduring sense of camaraderie; after the war, Churchill explained how Fisher’s “drive and life-force made the Admiralty quiver like one of his great ships at its highest speed.”⁶⁰ Considering that nearly all executive authority within the Admiralty existed between the positions of first lord and first sea lord, this mutual affinity bolstered Churchill’s power—at least at the beginning of Fisher’s tenure. The pair met several times each day in addition to communicating through letters, telegrams, and phone calls. They weighed every naval policy of consequence and even structured their sleep schedules so one of them was always awake in the event of a crisis.⁶¹ Churchill later recalled, “I had not seen the pulse of the Admiralty so strong and regular,” and that the two “formed, for the first time, an overwhelmingly strong control and central authority over the whole course of the naval war.” Together they could make their “will prevail throughout the fleets and all branches of the naval administration.”⁶² Like Churchill, however, Fisher had an arrogant, impulsive streak that often hindered this cooperation. Churchill’s biographer, Andrew Roberts, noted that Fisher “leaked information to newspapers, conspired with the Tory opposition...openly opposed several of Churchill’s policies

⁵⁹ Letter from Winston Churchill to Colonel Charles à Court Repington, October 15, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 193.

⁶⁰ Winston Churchill, “My Fight for Sea Power,” *Sunday Chronicle*, April 28, 1940, CHAR 8/676/1, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

and generally behaved like an irascible, impossible martinet.”⁶³ But the true flaws of their working relationship did not emerge until they shifted their attention from the North Sea to the Mediterranean in 1915.

Churchill maintained striking enthusiasm for the war through his success and failures in late-1914 and early-1915. In addition to divulging classified information in another letter to his mistress on September 16, 1914, Asquith wrote that “war is a hellish business at the best – and I am inclined sometimes almost to shiver when I hear Winston say that the last thing he would pray for is Peace.”⁶⁴ Although Asquith provided little context for these remarks, they mirrored the pro-war sentiments that Churchill articulated in his letters to Clementine in the final days of the July Crisis. Moreover, the Antwerp debacle seemed to compound rather than temper his ardor for war. Once again, Asquith’s letters to his mistress shared insight into Churchill’s feelings during the siege. In an October 7 letter, the Prime Minister described a phone call with the First Lord earlier that day:

Having, as he says, ‘tasted blood’ these last few days, he is beginning like a tiger to raven for more, and begs that sooner or later, & the sooner the better, he may be relieved of his present office & put in some kind of military command... His mouth waters at the sight & thought of K[itchener]’s new armies. Are these ‘glittering commands’ to be entrusted to ‘dug-out trash,’ bred on the obsolete tactics of 25 years ago – ‘mediocrities, who have led a sheltered life mouldering in military routine’ etc.⁶⁵

This exchange captured the First Lord’s glorification of combat and his longing for yet another opportunity to reaffirm his reputation for physical heroism. If accurate, this account of the conversation also suggested that Churchill valued military service above his work at the

⁶³ Roberts, *Churchill*, 194.

⁶⁴ Herbert Henry Asquith to Venetia Stanley, September 16, 1914, in *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 243.

⁶⁵ Herbert Henry Asquith to Venetia Stanley, October 7, 1914, in *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 266.

Admiralty. He later reversed this position once he joined the frontline troops in 1916. In the meantime, he nursed the wounds that Antwerp inflicted on his ego.

By 1915, he recovered his appreciation for his duties as First Lord. He allegedly told the Prime Minister's wife, Margot, at a dinner party in January 1915: "This is living history... It will be read by a thousand generations – think of that!! Why, I would not be out of this glorious, delicious war for anything the world could give me."⁶⁶ Evidently, Churchill understood the historical magnitude of the Great War and his place within it. This awareness, however, made him obsess over his own image even further. Although Margot had a tepid relationship with the First Lord and may have exaggerated what he said, her daughter, Violet Asquith, was Churchill's closest female confidant other than his wife, and she too reported similar interactions with the future Prime Minister. Violet wrote in a February 22, 1915, diary entry that Churchill told her that evening: "I know a curse should rest on me—because I *love* this war. I know it's smashing and shattering the lives of thousands every moment—and yet—I *can't* help it—I enjoy every second of it."⁶⁷ This last comment, like some of the First Lord's earlier letters to Clementine, indicated that Churchill was aware of the problematic undertone of these feelings even as he indulged them. Regardless, this outlook became increasingly rare among the First Lord's contemporaries as the number of casualties climbed from hundreds of thousands to millions. But a military catastrophe about to unfold on a rocky peninsula nearly 1,500 miles from Britain redefined Churchill's perspective on the Great War.

To this day, the Dardanelles Straights remain one of the most important strategic waterways in the world. Over three dozen miles long and between 0.75 and 4 miles wide, the

⁶⁶ Roberts, *Churchill*, 199.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

Straits divide the Turkish and Balkan peninsulas. The ancient city of Troy stood on its south bank. On the other side of the Sea of Marmora, Roman Emperor Constantine I founded Constantinople,⁶⁸ which the Ottomans continued to hold in 1915 a half-millennium after wresting it from the final remnants of the Byzantine Empire.⁶⁹ The only passage that connected the Black Sea, and thus the Russian Empire, to the Mediterranean, the Straits also played an integral role in the European diplomacy before the war.⁷⁰ Many conflicting narratives about Churchill's involvement in the failed Dardanelles Campaign exist, but one must examine his role in the strategic formulation, execution, and public understanding of the battle before assessing his accountability for the debacle.

Churchill and other officials recognized the strategic value of the Straits long before Allied forces hit the beachhead in April 1915. Early the previous September, the First Lord requested that the War Office “work out a plan for the seizure by means of a Greek Army of adequate strength of the Gallipoli Peninsula with a view to admitting a British Fleet to the Sea of Marmora,” as a contingency plan in the event of Ottoman entry into the war.⁷¹ The War Office, which began to explore possible invasion plans decades before 1914, responded that “an attack upon the Gallipoli Peninsula from the sea side (outside the Straits) is likely to prove an extremely difficult operation” and would require a force of 60,000 men for the initial landing.⁷²

⁶⁸ Today, the city is known as Istanbul.

⁶⁹ “Dardanelles,” Encyclopedia Britannica, updated October 24, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Dardanelles>.

⁷⁰ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009), 28.

⁷¹ The Gallipoli peninsula forms the northern bank of the Dardanelles; Letter from Winston Churchill to Sir Charles Douglas, September 1, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 75.

⁷² Memorandum from Major-General Charles Caldwell to Winston Churchill, September 3, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 81-82.

Explaining that the Royal Navy could work in conjunction with the Greeks to seize Gallipoli, the First Lord wrote Grey on September 8, 1914, that “a good army of 50,000 men & sea-power—that is the end of the Turkish menace.”⁷³ He proposed this plan again in a War Council meeting not long after the Ottomans joined the Central Powers. The official minutes from the meeting, however, showed that Kitchener did not want to pull British forces from the Western Front, and that Grey believed the Greeks and other potential Balkan partners would not “co-operate effectively with the Allies unless they were assured that Bulgaria would remain neutral.”⁷⁴ Consequently, the War Council tabled the idea. Nevertheless, the exchange suggested that Churchill, at least initially, saw the need for a joint naval-land strategy.

But as the fighting on the Western Front devolved into static trench warfare at the end of 1914, British officials found the possibility of opening another front against the Central Powers more appealing. In the last days of 1914 and the first of 1915, Churchill favored landing troops in the Baltic, while others such as David Lloyd George and top cabinet aide Maurice Hankey preferred launching an offensive against the Ottomans.⁷⁵ But it was Kitchener who, after precluding any Baltic mission because of the manpower it required, asked Churchill on January 2, 1915, “Do you think any naval action would be possible to prevent Turks sending more men into the Caucus & thus denuding Constantinople?”⁷⁶ Later that day, he wrote to the First Lord

⁷³ Letter from Winston Churchill to Sir Edward Grey, September 6, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 95.

⁷⁴ Secretary’s Notes on Meeting of the War Council, November 25, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 279.

⁷⁵ Memorandum from Winston Churchill to the War Council, December 31, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 347-349; Memorandum from David Lloyd George to the War Council, December 31, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 350-356; Memorandum from Lieutenant-Colonel Hankey to the War Council, December 28, 1914, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 337-343.

⁷⁶ Kitchener Telegrams #1 January 2, 1915, pages 360 in Companion Volume III, part 1

again and said that “the only place that a demonstration might have some effect in stopping reinforcements going east would be the Dardanelles” but noted that “we have no troops to land anywhere.”⁷⁷ Consequently, Churchill—per Kitchener’s request—assessed the merits of a solely naval assault on the Straights using outdated, reserve battleships. He gauged the views of the leading admiral in the region, Sackville Carden, who responded, “I do not consider Dardanelles can be rushed. They might be forced by extended operations with large number of ships.”⁷⁸ Despite his apprehension about the fleet relying on speed alone, Carden proposed an alternative, more methodical approach that involved four steps: first, “total reduction of defenses at the entrance” of the Dardanelles; second, “clear defenses inside of straights;” third, destruction of the inner forts “by direct fire at decisive range;” and fourth, “clear passage through mine field” during the “final advance to Marmara.”⁷⁹ The plan may not have originated with Churchill, but the First Lord became its advocate in the Admiralty and the War Council. He proposed Carden’s plan in a War Council meeting on January 13, and Asquith, Kitchener, Lloyd George, and Grey expressed support for the mission. Others were more skeptical. Crucially, Fisher—despite privately sharing his concerns about the need for a simultaneous land action with Churchill—neglected to voice his objections during the meeting.⁸⁰ He vented to Admiral Jellicoe a week later, saying “I am a consenting party to what I absolutely disapprove. I don’t agree with one single step taken,” and considered whether to resign.⁸¹ But Churchill did not find Fisher’s

⁷⁷ Telegrams from Lord Kitchener to Winston Churchill, January 2, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 360-361.

⁷⁸ Telegram from Vice-Admiral Sackville Carden to Winston Churchill, January 5, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 380.

⁷⁹ Telegram from Vice-Admiral Sackville Carden to Winston Churchill, January 11, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 405.

⁸⁰ Secretary’s Notes on the Meeting of the War Council, January 13, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 408.

⁸¹ Letter from Lord Fisher to Sir John Jellicoe, January 19, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 330.

objections persuasive and often pressured the Admiral into silence. Although he, too, preferred a joint strategy, Churchill committed to the implementation of Carden's plan with his usual zeal.

A cast of senior officials—Churchill included—botched the mission's execution but at different stages. Kitchener's willingness to allocate troops, for example, oscillated even after the operation began. Under mounting pressure from Fisher, Asquith, Lloyd George, and Churchill, the Secretary for War first said he would consider deploying an infantry division in the event of a breakthrough just three days before the scheduled naval attack.⁸² In mid-February, a fleet of 18 expendable, pre-dreadnought capital ships initiated the first stage of Carden's plan: the piecemeal destruction of Ottoman forts at the mouth of the Straights. But Kitchener's troops remained in reserve weeks away from Gallipoli.⁸³ Churchill grew frustrated not only with Kitchener's indecision, but with the general bureaucratic inefficiency that plagued the campaign. He urged the Prime Minister to use his authority to summon the invasion force, but Asquith refused to wield it out of fear of overriding a career general.⁸⁴ Similarly, when the Greeks indicated their potential willingness to send an army to seize Gallipoli, Grey objected because he believed such a move could alienate Russia. Disgruntled, Churchill wrote in an unsent letter to Grey: "Half-hearted measures will ruin all--& a million men will die through the prolongation of war. You must be bold & violent."⁸⁵ By February 24, Kitchener pivoted once again, claiming that "the army ought to see the business through. The effect of a defeat in the Orient would be

⁸² Entry in Diary of Lord Esher, February 16, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 516.

⁸³ Ibid.; Draft of Admiralty Note to the French regarding the Dardanelles by Winston Churchill, January 16, 1915, CHAR 2/81/27, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁸⁴ Letter from Hebert Henry Asquith to Venetia Stanley, February 24, 1915, in *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 446.

⁸⁵ Unsent Letter from Winston Churchill to Sir Edward Grey, March 6, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 645.

very serious. There could be no going back.”⁸⁶ Indeed, the Secretary of War’s fear of losing to a predominately Muslim power motivated him to send troops but only after either a clear naval success or failure—never in tandem with the initial naval assault. The fleet was set to execute the next stage of Carden’s plan and push into the Straights on March 18. The night before, however, Carden suffered a nervous breakdown, relieved himself of his post, and placed his second-in-command, John De Robeck, in charge. Within two hours the following afternoon, one French and two British battleships abruptly detonated and sank in the Straights—all striking a perpendicular line of Ottoman mines laid the night before that eluded British minesweepers.⁸⁷ Ironically, the fleet almost succeeded. The remaining Ottoman forts ran out of ammunition by the end of the day. Their occupants received orders to retreat. Followers of Enver and Talaat Pasha rigged the Hagia Sophia with explosives and began gathering gasoline to raze Constantinople ahead of British arrival.⁸⁸ Churchill urged De Robeck to renew the offensive and told him in a telegram that “the possibilities of a check in the land operations far more serious than the loss of a few old surplus ships.”⁸⁹ But the admiral ultimately decided not to jeopardize his fleet until ground support arrived. Even after the Royal Navy’s failure in March, the campaign—and the narrative of his involvement—seemed salvageable to the First Lord.

Churchill’s support for an amphibious landing and extended ground campaign contributed to the prolongation of the battle. The Ottomans used the month it took for the Allies to deploy their forces to prepare a formidable defense. In addition to fortifying the cliffs overlooking the landing grounds and sourcing more equipment, ammunition, and manpower, the

⁸⁶ Secretary’s Notes on Meeting of the War Council, February 24, 1915, in *Winston S. Churchill Companion Documents*, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 559.

⁸⁷ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 150.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

⁸⁹ Telegram from Winston Churchill to John De Robeck, March 24, 1915, CHAR 13/65/119-122, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

German military advisor to the Ottomans, General Liman von Sanders, made a series of appointments to his strategic staff. Among them was Mustafa Kemal—the future self-proclaimed father of the Republic of Turkey.⁹⁰ Moreover, Churchill and Kitchener’s social-Darwinist belief in the ethnic inferiority of the Turks led them to underestimate Ottoman resistance. As David Fromkin noted in his book, *A Peace to End All Peace*, the two veterans of Omdurman sent their troops “to their doom against an entrenched and forewarned foe at Gallipoli in an attack the British government knew would be suicidal if the defending troops were of European quality.”⁹¹ Indeed, the imperialist duo also feared that a loss to a predominately Muslim power would weaken British prestige in India and other vital colonies.⁹² Another simpler element played into Churchill’s strategic calculus: he desperately wanted to win. In a telegram to his brother—who was serving with the invasion force—shortly before the mission began, the First Lord emphasized that “this is the hour in the world’s history for a fine feat of arms and the results of victory will amply justify the price.”⁹³ But the Australian, New Zealander, and Indian troops that formed the nucleus of the invasion force were the ones who had to pay this deadly “price.” As the sun rose on April 25, the first Allied troops rowed ashore on six beaches up and down Gallipoli. Although they encountered little to no Ottoman resistance on three of the beaches and benefitted from overall numerical superiority, the Allied task force failed to capitalize on the situation because of a breakdown in communication and logistics.⁹⁴ By the end of the following day, thousands lay dead and the newly opened front began to devolve into the static trench warfare it sought to break.⁹⁵ Churchill remained steadfast even as other officials voiced support

⁹⁰ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 155.

⁹¹ Ibid., 561.

⁹² Roberts, *Churchill*, 208-209.

⁹³ Telegram from Winston Churchill to John Churchill, April 19, 1915, CHAR 13/65/170, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archive Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁹⁴ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 157-158.

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Churchill*, 211.

for an evacuation and abandonment of the offensive. “Every 500 yards gained here is an important step towards an imminent and vital result,” he wrote in a cabinet memo several disastrous weeks after the landing, “and what a result!”⁹⁶ He reiterated that a British fleet with its guns aimed at the streets of Constantinople would fracture the Ottoman Empire and motivate the Balkan peoples to join the Entente cause. Moreover, it would open a supply route to the faltering Russians. “Where else in all the theaters of the war can we look during the next three months for a decisive victory, or for results of this extraordinary character?” he concluded.⁹⁷ Ultimately, the campaign lasted nine months and cost the Allies over 250,000 casualties for no strategic gain.⁹⁸ Churchill’s political standing did not last nearly as long.

Regardless of Churchill’s exact responsibility in the downfall of the Dardanelles, he became the public symbol of its failure. One British officer on the beaches, Aubrey Herbert—who also happened to be a Conservative MP—wrote in his diary that “Winston’s name fills everyone with rage.” Accusing him of “killing free men to make himself famous,” Herbert wrote, “I would like to see him to die in some of the torments I have seen so many die in here.”⁹⁹ Condemnation for Churchill far exceeded that of anyone else involved, such as Kitchener or Asquith. The First Lord elicited criticism not only from Conservatives on the frontlines but also from his colleagues in the Cabinet and Admiralty. Lloyd George exclaimed that Churchill “has not merely bad judgement but he has *none*.”¹⁰⁰ Fisher resigned on May 15, 1915, out of spite for Churchill and his plans for the campaign. “Nothing will turn you from [the Dardanelles]—

⁹⁶ Cabinet Memorandum on the State of the War by Winston Churchill, June 1, 1915, CHAR 21/39/1, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 165.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰⁰ Entry in Diary of Margot Asquith, May 8, 1915, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 7, “*The Escaped Escape Goat*,” ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1972]), 849.

NOTHING,” he wrote Churchill with frustration (and original emphasis).¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Fisher tipped off Conservative opposition leader Bonar Law about his resignation before the Cabinet could respond. Knowing the Liberal government’s weak position amid several other crises, Law pounced on this opportunity to negotiate with Asquith to form a coalition government. The Conservatives had one stipulation: Churchill’s removal from the Admiralty. Clementine pleaded with the Prime Minister to resist this demand and argued that such a move represented “an act of weakness” because her husband was one of the few who possessed “the power, the imagination, and the deadliness to fight Germany.”¹⁰² Asquith remained unconvinced. Upon his dismissal, Churchill wrote the Prime Minister, “all right. I accept your decision. I shall not look back,” but also, “count on me absolutely – if I am of any use. If not, some employment in the field.”¹⁰³ In late May, Asquith demoted Churchill to the largely ceremonial Cabinet position of Duchy of Lancaster and confined him to an advisory role on the War Council only because of the former First Lord’s knowledge of the Dardanelles operation.¹⁰⁴ Less than a year into the war, Churchill lacked any meaningful office and drifted into some of the bleakest months of his life.

Embittered and increasingly isolated, Churchill struggled to recover his political footing. To the dejected statesman, the disaster at the Dardanelles and the restructuring of the government represented not only a personal humiliation but a threat to British victory. Churchill claimed in a speech to his constituency just days after leaving the Admiralty that he only wanted one thing from the new government: “action—action, not hesitation; action, not words; action, not

¹⁰¹ Letter from Lord Fisher to Winston Churchill, May 16, 1915, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 7, “*The Escaped Escape Goat*,” ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1972]), 892.

¹⁰² Letter from Clementine Churchill to Herbert Asquith, May 20, 1915, *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 7, “*The Escaped Escape Goat*,” ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1972]), 921.

¹⁰³ Letter from Winston Churchill to H.H. Asquith, May 21, 1915, CHAR 13/52/88, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, *Churchill*, 221.

agitation.”¹⁰⁵ After his demotion, he found his inability to drive this “action” excruciating, later recalling, “my veins threatened to burst from the fall in pressure.”¹⁰⁶ Others noticed Churchill’s decay. A journalist who visited Churchill that summer recorded in his diary, “he looks years older, his face is pale, he seems very depressed.”¹⁰⁷ Over fifty years later, Clementine told her husband’s biographer, “I thought he would never get over the Dardanelles. I thought he would die of grief.”¹⁰⁸ His sense of betrayal grew when, after promising him an official visit to assess the situation at Gallipoli first-hand, Asquith scrapped the trip the day before Churchill’s departure.¹⁰⁹ Before the cancellation, however, Churchill drafted a letter for his wife to open in the event of his death. In addition to covering financial matters, the former First Lord also made his wife his “sole literary executor,” and the letter implored her to “get hold of my papers, especially those which refer to my Admiralty administration.”¹¹⁰ He reemphasized her role as the custodian of his legacy in the final line of the letter, requesting that she “look forward, feel free, rejoice in life, cherish the children, guard my memory.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Churchill and his wife obsessed over resurrecting his reputation. The only way to do so, he believed, was by serving in the trenches.

As he foreshadowed to the Prime Minister as early as Antwerp, Churchill began to hunt for a military command. Eventually, he resigned his cabinet post on November 11, 1915. His resignation speech in the House of Commons revealed the rhetorical template he used to

¹⁰⁵ Winston Churchill, “The War” (speech, Dundee, June 5, 1915), in *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches*, vol. 3, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), 2382.

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, *Churchill*, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Soames, *Clementine Churchill: The Biography of a Marriage* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 166.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹¹⁰ Unsent Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, July 17, 1915, CSC 3/19/2, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

structure his narrative of the Dardanelles over the coming decades. He laid out the timeline of the operation's conception and reemphasized his belief that if successful, it would bring the war to an early end. Additionally, he did not fully shirk responsibility but pointed out that he managed only the Navy and thus lacked any direct control over the campaign once it evolved into a land offensive. He also noted how Fisher's failure to voice his disapproval in War Council meetings, Kitchener's indecision regarding troop deployment, and Asquith's unwillingness to assert authority contributed to failure. "War is a hard and brutal job, and there is no place in it for misgivings or reserves," the disgraced politician concluded, "You ought to have misgivings before; but when the moment of action is come, the hour of misgivings is passed."¹¹² Two days later, Clementine watched as her husband departed for France and disappeared "among a million Khaki figures."¹¹³

Churchill took to the trenches with the same energy as his early days at the Admiralty. Before he received his own unit, Churchill believed he needed to "learn first-hand the special conditions of trench warfare" by spending a few months in the line as a subaltern major with the Grenadier Guards.¹¹⁴ Although Churchill noticed that his men had a "natural prejudice against 'politicians' of all kinds," he later claimed it only took two days to win over his subordinates.¹¹⁵ Several acts endeared Churchill to the Grenadiers. One night, for instance, he happened upon a teenage sentry asleep at his post—an infraction punishable by death. Rather than reporting the sentry, Churchill told him to get some sleep and took the sentry's place on the line until

¹¹² Winston Churchill, "Resignation as Duchy of Lancaster" (speech, House of Commons, November 15, 1915), in *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches*, vol. 3, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), 2399.

¹¹³ Letter from Clementine to Winston Churchill, November 19, 1915, in *Speaking for Themselves*, ed. Mary Soames (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998), 114.

¹¹⁴ Winston Churchill, "The Narrowest Escape of my Life," *Sunday Dispatch*, December 31, 1939, CHAR 8/649/21, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

morning.¹¹⁶ Despite the “feet & clothing [breaking] through the soil, water & muck on all sides,” as well as “troops of enormous rats” and “the venomous whining & whirring of the bullets which pass overhead,”¹¹⁷ the former First Lord quickly acclimated to trench life. In addition to flesh-eating rats and mud, the front offered respite from the bureaucratic squabbling in London. “Amid these surroundings, aided by wet & cold & every minor discomfort,” he claimed in a letter to his wife, “I have found happiness & content such as I have not known for many months.”¹¹⁸ This feeling grew when he moved on to serve as the commanding lieutenant-colonel of the 6th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers—a unit that had already lost most of its seasoned, professional troops. Although initially deeming the battalion “pathetic,” the new Colonel also believed that it was “full of life & strength.”¹¹⁹ He set about tapping the full potential of his Fusiliers. In his first address to the men, Churchill said “war is declared, gentlemen, on the lice,” and he stressed the importance of hygiene and regular drills.¹²⁰ Similarly, in his first meeting with his junior officers, he established his leadership philosophy, saying, “gentleman, I am now your commanding officer. Those who support me I will look after. Those who go against me I will break.”¹²¹ Like the Grenadiers before them, many were skeptical of the politician turned colonel. But one of these officers, Andrew Gibb, later recalled that “[Churchill’s] capacity for coaxing and charming the best even out of the most boorish is a gift which I never ceased to wonder at.”¹²² The men soon came to admire their new commander for his enthusiasm. Unusual

¹¹⁶ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, November 26, 1915, CSCT 2/8/13, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, November 23, 1915, CSCT 2/8/8, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, January 6, 1916, CSCT 2/9/9, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹²⁰ Andrew Gibb, *With Winston at the Front* (Barnsley, UK: Frontline Books, 2016 [1924]), Kindle location 1150.

¹²¹ Randolph Churchill, foreword to *With Winston at the Front*, by Andrew Gibb (Barnsley, UK: Frontline Books, 2016).

¹²² Ibid.

for an officer of his rank, Churchill led over 30 patrols into No-Man's-Land and with such pep that one of his men described him as "a baby elephant" as he navigated through barbed wire and shell holes.¹²³ "Teach your men to laugh," the Colonel told his officers, "war is a game that is played with a smile. If you can't smile, grin."¹²⁴ But Churchill did not always remain in high spirits during his six months on the Western Front.

Although the Colonel claimed to enjoy his time in the trenches, his letters over these months of service revealed his growing nihilism and disillusionment with modern warfare. Like many who participated in the Great War, he found the randomness of the destruction disheartening. One day, he left his billet and slogged through the mud for an hour to meet a superior officer only to learn upon arrival that the meeting had been rescheduled. Annoyed as he made the hour trip back to his trench, Churchill's feelings changed when he learned his billet took a direct artillery hit in his absence, killing one of his orderlies.¹²⁵ "When one watches the extraordinarily arbitrary and haphazard way in which death and destruction are meted out by Providence – no guiding principle of justice or expediency apparently at work," Churchill wrote Violet Asquith, "one feels more than ever convinced of the unimportance of life."¹²⁶ Compounded by his seclusion from grand strategy, these frequent near-death experiences and grotesque scenes put Churchill into a depressive state. He wrote Clementine in late March 1916:

So much effort, so many years of ceaseless fighting & worry, so much excitement & now this rough fierce life here under the hammer of Thor, makes my older mind turn – I too feel sometimes the longing for rest & peace... Sometimes also I think I would not mind stopping living very much – I am so devoured by egoism that I would like to have another soul in another world.¹²⁷

¹²³ Roberts, *Churchill*, 239.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹²⁵ Churchill, "The Narrowest Escape of My Life."

¹²⁶ Roberts, *Churchill*, 235.

¹²⁷ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, March 28, 1916, CSCT 2/9/70-74, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

The romanticism Churchill found in the cavalry during Omdurman crumbled under the heavy artillery that pounded ‘Plugstreet’ and left the Colonel to sit in the mud for months ruminating. But not all of Churchill’s musings were morbid.¹²⁸ Not long after he arrived at the Western Front, he explained to his wife, “as one’s fortunes are reduced, one’s spirit must expand to fill the void”—a maxim that would serve him well nearly three decades later.¹²⁹ Through the exciting and trying times at the front, the disgraced former cabinet official never forgot the more personal purpose of his service: political redemption.

Churchill’s sense of patriotism and duty aside, both he and his wife knew the important role military service played in his personal narrative. Pleading her husband not to take unnecessary risks in a November 1914 letter, Clementine urged Winston not only to think of his family, but also to “think of your duty to yourself & your reputation,” noting that “if you were killed...the world might think that you had sought death out of grief for your share in the Dardanelles.”¹³⁰ Clementine’s emphasis on her husband’s reputation as an equal consideration to his family revealed the importance that Churchill attached to his image. Although his military command granted him some protection from the lingering disaster at the Dardanelles, news of his former colleagues’ plans enraged him. After he heard about the planned evacuation of the Gallipoli peninsula, Churchill vented to his wife, “The hour of Asquith’s punishment & K[itchener]’s exposure draws nearer,” and “it may fall to me to strike the blow. I shall do it without compunction.”¹³¹ Similarly, when he learned that the new First Lord was contemplating

¹²⁸ British soldiers’ colloquialism for Ploegsteert, Belgium, where Churchill served for the first four months of 1916.

¹²⁹ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, December 20, 1915, CSCT 2/8/39, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹³⁰ Letter from Winston Churchill to Clementine Churchill, November 28, 1915, in *Speaking for Themselves*, ed. Mary Soames (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998), 121.

¹³¹ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, December 15, 1915, CSCT 2/8/30, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

disbanding the RND, Churchill wrote, “how easy to destroy. How hard to build. How easy to evacuate. How hard to capture. How easy to do nothing. How hard to achieve anything. War is action, energy, & hazard. These sheep only want to browse among the daisies.”¹³² Although the evacuation went off perfectly and the RND remained in existence through the end of the war, the coalition government proved just as dysfunctional as the last with its bureaucratic mismanagement of the war effort—and Churchill knew it.

Hoping to make an early return to politics as a voice of opposition against the coalition government, the Colonel made a speech to the Commons on March 7, 1915, while he was on leave. He ridiculed Arthur Balfour and his mismanagement of the Admiralty and even called for the reinstatement of Fisher. The move backfired. Admiral Fisher remained just as controversial a figure as Churchill, and MPs across the political spectrum brushed aside the proposal as absurd. Embarrassed, the Colonel returned to the continent.¹³³ His wife cautioned him not to make another reckless political gamble and advised him to avoid returning from the front prematurely, noting it was his military service “which when all is known will strike the imagination of the people – the man who prepared & mobilized the Fleet, who really won the war for England in the trenches as a simple Colonel.” She concluded, “it would be a great romance.”¹³⁴ This time Churchill listened and remained patient.

It paid off. In May, after suffering heavy casualties, the Royals Scots Fusiliers had to consolidate and dissolve several battalions including the 6th.¹³⁵ Though this allowed Churchill to

¹³² Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, February 22, 1916, CSCT 2/9/61, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹³³ Roberts, *Churchill*, 242.

¹³⁴ Letter from Clementine Churchill to Winston Churchill, April 12, 1916, CHAR 1/118A/126, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹³⁵ Roberts, *Churchill*, 244.

part with his battalion, Gibb remembered how the men came to see their Colonel as “a possession of our own, and one of which we were intensely proud,” and declared that the Fusiliers “will always be his loyal partisans and admirers.”¹³⁶ Returning to London, Churchill still faced the challenge of resuscitating his influence.

Without government office or even the distraction of the trenches, Churchill had to wait for a political opening to make his return. He deplored the coalition government’s willingness to waste lives in foolhardy offensives, especially at the Battle of the Somme where the Germans cut down 60,000 British troops by the end of the first day.¹³⁷ The former Colonel’s time at the front taught him the futility of charging enemy trenches. Furthermore, he believed that Asquith’s high ranking military officials lacked “the mysterious, visionary, often sinister genius” necessary to “dominate material factors” and thus “save slaughter.”¹³⁸ Churchill—and the British people—were also forced to cope with the sudden death of Kitchener, who drowned when his cruiser struck a mine in the North Sea on June 5, 1916. As the literal face of the British war effort, Kitchener’s demise shocked the public.¹³⁹ Although Churchill mourned the loss of a colleague whom he respected, he also recognized Kitchener’s martyrdom threatened his own revival. Just days before, a parliamentary Commission of Inquiry initiated its investigation into the defeat at the Dardanelles, and Churchill’s defense depended on highlighting the fallen War Secretary’s errors during the campaign.¹⁴⁰ The outcome of the inquiry became even more important when Asquith’s government fell on December 5, 1916. Although the new prime minister, David Lloyd

¹³⁶ Gibb, *With Winston at the Front*, Kindle location 770.

¹³⁷ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993 [1976]).

¹³⁸ Roberts, *Churchill*, 247.

¹³⁹ Starting in 1914, the British government produced recruitment posters featuring Kitchener pointing at the reader and saying, “Your country needs YOU.” This poster became the template for the American version featuring Uncle Sam. See, Kelly Knauer, “I Want You: The Story Behind the Iconic Recruitment Poster,” *TIME Magazine*, April 6, 2017, <https://time.com/4725856/uncle-sam-poster-history/>; Roberts, *Churchill*, 246.

¹⁴⁰ Roberts, *Churchill*, 246.

George, did not ask Churchill to return to the Cabinet, the former First Lord believed the government would eventually need his experience to attain victory.¹⁴¹ Ultimately, after nearly two dozen hearings, the Dardanelles Commission released its preliminary findings in February 1917. Investigators argued that Fisher's failure to voice his objections "impair[ed] the efficiency of the public service," that Kitchener's indecision regarding reinforcements allowed the Ottomans to prepare their defenses, and that Asquith undermined planning by failing to call any War Council meetings in the two months following the first failed naval attack.¹⁴² As Churchill admitted to his friend and former battalion second-in-command, Archibald Sinclair, "the Dardanelles debate especially was very successful to me personally. The grouping of forces in the House are proving increasingly favourable."¹⁴³ But the aristocrat remained a polarizing figure. Lloyd George appointed him Minister of Munitions that summer—a move that 100 Conservative MPs formally opposed, nearly bringing down the new premier's government.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Lloyd George later defended the decision and cited the utility of Churchill's "fertile mind," "undoubted courage," "untiring industry," and "his thorough study of the art of war." He argued that "men with such gifts are rare—very rare" and "in an emergency they ought to be used in full" – provided that "you keep a vigilant eye on their activities."¹⁴⁵ Though

¹⁴¹ Letter from Winston Churchill to Archibald Sinclair, December 10, 1917, THRS 1/1/18, The Papers of Archibald Sinclair, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁴² Preliminary Report of the Dardanelles Commission, February 12, 1917, FISR 1/23, The Papers of 1st Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom; "General Conclusions of Dardanelles Commission Report," February 1917, CAB 19/1 (1917-18), Cabinet Office Files, National Archives of the United Kingdom, London, United Kingdom, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/transcripts/battles/dardanelles.htm>.

¹⁴³ Letter from Winston Churchill to Archie Sinclair, March 22, 1917, THSR 1/1b/20a, The Papers of Archibald Sinclair, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, *Churchill*, 252.

¹⁴⁵ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1 (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1938), 635-638.

Churchill did not receive a seat on the War Council—and thus not direct control of strategy—he took satisfaction in his new role.

Although it lasted less than a year and a half and did not entail the same power as his previous job at the Admiralty, Churchill gained influential experience during his tenure as Minister of Munitions. More than 2.5 million laborers and 12,000 government officials fell under the jurisdiction of his ministry—the largest procurement enterprise in the world at that time.¹⁴⁶ Much like he did with the Admiralty, the new Minister initiated organizational reforms and altered his ministry's practices to match his understanding of modern war. Namely, he sought to furnish the Army with more tanks than ever before. A proponent of armored warfare as early as 1914, Churchill explained to his colleagues, “this is a war of machinery; and generalship consists in using machinery instead of flesh and blood to achieve the purposes of strategy and tactics.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, the new Minister of Munitions pushed his factories to triple British aircraft production by the summer of 1918 and advocated for a large-scale bombing campaign targeting German industry, but this plan never materialized.¹⁴⁸ Decades before the *Luftwaffe* terrorized Londoners during the Blitz, the future Prime Minister also oversaw the distribution of anti-aircraft guns and the construction of bomb shelters to protect the British capital from German zeppelin raids.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Roberts, *Churchill*, 252.

¹⁴⁷ Letter from Winston Churchill to Chairmen of all Steel Companies, September 10, 1917, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 8, *War and Aftermath*, ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1977]), 160.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Winston Churchill to Lord Rothermere, January 26, 1918, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 8, *War and Aftermath*, ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1977]), 238; Letter from Winston Churchill to Sir Joseph Maclay, November 15, 1917, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 8, *War and Aftermath*, ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1977]), 196-197.

¹⁴⁹ Cabinet memo by Winston Churchill regarding protection from air raids, October 5, 1917, in *The Churchill Documents*, vol. 8, *War and Aftermath*, ed. Martin Gilbert (Hillsdale, MI: Hillsdale College Press, 2008 [1977]), 170.

His job also brought him into the proximity of other Allied leaders, including those of France and the United States. None influenced him more than the pugnacious French Prime Minister, George Clemenceau, known by his countrymen as *Père la Victoire* and *Le Tigre*.¹⁵⁰ The two met on many occasions in the last year of the war, and Churchill came to idolize the 76-year-old premier for his “extraordinary character” and “his spirit & energy indomitable.”¹⁵¹ In a one-on-one visit during the German Spring Offensive of 1918, *Le Tigre* told the Englishman (and later the French press), “I will fight in front of Paris; I will fight in Paris; I will fight behind Paris.”¹⁵² Churchill later concluded, “as much as any single human-being, miraculously magnified can ever be a nation, [Clemenceau] was France.”¹⁵³ Britain lacked an equivalent symbolic figure until the Second World War.

As British factories churned out unprecedented quantities of tanks, planes, artillery, and ammunition, German industry, strategy, and resolve crumbled. On November 11, 1918, Churchill found himself just a block east of his old office at the Admiralty, where 52 months prior he embarked on the warpath with excitement. Once again, he stood waiting for Big Ben to toll the eleventh hour, which this time signaled the Armistice ending the war. But the chime elicited only melancholy from the future Prime Minister. “The whole duty of life—all at a stroke vanished like a nightmare dream, leaving a void behind,” Churchill later wrote. “Links of brute force, links of self-sacrifice, links of terror, links of honour which had held our nation, nay, the greater part of mankind, to grinding toil, to a compulsive cause...snapped upon a few strokes of

¹⁵⁰ Meaning, ‘Father Victory’ and ‘the Tiger.’

¹⁵¹ Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, March 31, 1918, in *Speaking for Themselves*, ed. Mary Soames (London: Transworld Publishers, 1998), 206.

¹⁵² Draft of a 1930 article by Winston Churchill entitled, “The Man and the Tiger,” CHAR 8/282A-B/26, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

the clock.”¹⁵⁴ Hostilities concluded, but the Minister’s future was just as uncertain as when he wondered on August 4, 1914, what would befall him over the course of the war. Indeed, the Minister did not feel the same sense of purpose until the *Wehrmacht* swept over Europe more than twenty years later.

Chapter 3: The Second Thirty Years’ War

Reared in the traditions of the nineteenth century, Churchill struggled to reconcile his understanding of the world with the aftermath of the War to End All Wars. In 1923, he wrote how before the Great War, “there was the actual visible world with its peaceful activities and cosmopolitan aims,” but that the conflict revealed “a world of monstrous shadows in convulsive combinations through vistas of fathomless catastrophe.”¹⁵⁵ His disillusionment seeped into his recollections of the colonial campaigns of his youth in *My Early Life*, published in 1930. In the memoir, he wrote, “war, which used to be cruel and magnificent, has now become cruel and squalid” and “has been completely spoilt.” The aristocrat declared, “it is all the fault of Democracy and Science.”¹⁵⁶ He explained further:

Instead of a small number of well-trained professionals championing their country’s cause with ancient weapons and a beautiful intricacy of archaic manoeuvre, sustained at every moment by the applause of their nation, we now have entire populations, including women and children, pitted against one another in brutish mutual extermination, and only a set of blear-eyed clerks left to add up the butcher’s bill. From the moment Democracy was admitted to, or rather forced itself upon the battlefield, War ceased to be a gentleman’s game. To Hell with it!¹⁵⁷

Written at the beginning Churchill’s decade-long exile in the ‘political wilderness,’ his reflections in *My Early Life* also captured his reactionary attitude at the time. Similarly, he

¹⁵⁴ Winston Churchill, “That First Armistice Day,” *Sunday Dispatch*, November 10, 1940, CHAR 8/671/33, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁵⁵ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1, 11.

¹⁵⁶ Churchill, *My Early Life*, 64.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

concluded in a 1934 article, “The wars of the peoples are far more terrible and more ruthless than the wars of kings and nobles,” and that “the warriors of bygone ages of chivalry would shrink back appalled from the merciless ferocity of the Great War.”¹⁵⁸ His mention of “wars of the peoples” was a reference to growing European nationalism and the decline of monarchical empires—another factor he blamed for the war. In his 1924 essay titled, “Shall We Not All Commit Suicide?” Churchill explained that “the noblest virtues of individuals” – namely, physical strength, courage, skill, and discipline – “were gathered together to strengthen the destructive capacity of the mass.”¹⁵⁹ The Great War did not shake the value that Churchill placed on these virtues so much as remove the opportunities for individuals to exercise them on the battlefield. Consequently, the former Colonel became disillusioned not with warfare in its entirety but with modern war specifically.

The death of many of Churchill’s young friends also contributed to his belief in the paradigm of the ‘lost generation.’ Although difficult to name all the personal losses the Churchills suffered between 1914-1918, the list included people ranging from Winston’s closest school friend at Harrow to his cellmate during the Boer War—both of whom happened to die at Gallipoli.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, several stand out. As First Lord, for example, Churchill secured a commission in the RND for his friend, Rupert Brooke—a poetry fellow at Cambridge known by some as the “handsomest man in England.”¹⁶¹ Famous for his romantic pro-war sonnets, the poet’s sudden death from an infected mosquito bite while en route to the Dardanelles rattled

¹⁵⁸ Draft of article by Winston Churchill entitled “The Dominance of Nationalism,” September 14, 1934, CHAR 8/499/50, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁵⁹ Winston Churchill, “Shall We All Commit Suicide?” *Nash’s—Pall Mall*, September 1924, CHAR 8/200B/202, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁶⁰ Namely, Jack Milbanke and Major Cecil Grimshaw; *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁶¹ Keith Hale, “Friends and Apostles,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1999, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/hale-friends.html>.

Churchill and many others of the English elite. The former First Lord believed Brooke passed away “in perfect serenity, with absolute conviction of the rightness of his country’s cause,” and that he symbolized “many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward in this, the hardest, the cruelest, and the least-rewarded of all the wars that men have fought.”¹⁶² Similarly, he grieved for the death of his friend and son of Britain’s Prime Minister, Raymond Asquith, at the Somme. According to Churchill, the “so gifted” Asquith also met “his fate cool, poised, resolute, matter-of-fact, debonair.”¹⁶³ But Churchill’s memorialization of his aristocratic friends mirrored a common British narrative of the war that Robert Wohl identified in his book, *The Generation of 1914*. Wohl explained the tendency of the British to indulge the legend of a generation of patriotic, “strong, brave, and beautiful” men educated at Oxford and Cambridge who went to war “lightheartedly” only to fall victim to the slaughter. Because of their death and thus the absence of their intellectual talent, “the peace was lost; English hegemony in the world was lost; the empire was lost; even traditional English values were lost.”¹⁶⁴ The author noted that this myth emerged because young members of the elite died at disproportionately high rates during the war, and their parents used their influence to ensure the disproportionate public commemoration of their sons. Consequently, Wohl reasoned that aristocratic Britons could “[blame] the loss of their world on the war” without recognizing the broader pre-war trends contributing to its downfall.¹⁶⁵ Those of Churchill’s class were left to wallow in nostalgia for a pre-war ‘golden age’ that only their small slice of society enjoyed.

¹⁶² Winston Churchill, “Obituary for Rupert Brooke,” *The Times*, April 26, 1915, <http://exhibits.lib.byu.edu/wwi/poets/rbobituary.html>.

¹⁶³ Roberts, *Churchill*, 247.

¹⁶⁴ Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 85-86.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

Nevertheless, Churchill's lamentations did not hinder his understanding of the reality of modern war. In "Shall We All Commit Suicide?" he explained that in 1914-1918, "war really began to enter into its kingdom as the potential destroyer of the human race."¹⁶⁶ He pointed to the practice of besieging entire nations with blockades and inducing famines to show how the Great War broke down the distinction between civilian and combatant. He did not, however, mention his role in implementing these blockades. But he also described what would have happened if the war lasted just a year longer:

The campaign of the year 1919 would have witnessed an immense accession to the power of destruction...Thousands of aeroplanes would have shattered their cities. Scores of thousands of cannon would have blasted their front. Arrangements were being made to carry simultaneously a quarter of a million men, together with all their requirements, continuously forward across country in mechanical vehicles moving ten or fifteen miles each day. Poison gases of incredible malignity, against which only a secret mask...was proof, would have stifled all resistance and paralyzed all life on the hostile front.¹⁶⁷

Although this campaign never took place, the future Prime Minister argued that "should war come again to the world it is not with the weapons and agencies prepared for 1919 that it will be fought, but with the developments and extensions of these...incomparably more formidable and fatal."¹⁶⁸ For instance, he predicted the emergence of portable bombs with "a secret power to destroy a whole block of buildings—nay to concentrate the force of a thousand tons of cordite and blast a township at a stroke."¹⁶⁹ Twenty years later, Allied and Axis militaries put nearly all the strategies and technologies Churchill envisioned—with the exception of chemical warfare—into practice. British, American, and German air forces conducted widespread civilian bombing campaigns. Most armies became highly motorized and mobile. And in 1945, the Americans leveled two Japanese cities using nuclear devices reminiscent of the bombs Churchill described.

¹⁶⁶ Winston Churchill, "Shall We All Commit Suicide?"

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Writing in 1924, Churchill did not know the accuracy of his predictions. He did, however, believe in the possibility of a second global war. He concluded that while World War I left Europe weary, “the causes of war have been in no way removed” and were actually “aggravated by the so-called Peace Treaty.”¹⁷⁰ Although far from a perfect international institution, he saw the League of Nations as humanity’s best chance to avert further suffering.

Apart from his broad conclusions, Churchill also sought to reshape his personal legacy in the Great War through a literary endeavor spanning most of the inter-war period. His series, *The World Crisis*, lay at the center of this effort. Part memoir, part general history, his 823,000-word account of the war released in six volumes between 1923 and 1931.¹⁷¹ The length of the text stems in part from the author’s inclusion of entire letters, memoranda, Cabinet minutes, and other official documents alongside his own analysis of events. Most controversial and most important to the author personally was the second volume, which detailed the events of 1915 and his involvement in the Dardanelles. The author acknowledged the personal stake he had in his portrayal of the incident. In the prelude of Volume II, the former First Lord stated that he must “at the outset disclaim the position of the historian,” and thus not “pronounce a final conclusion,” but rather “set forth what I believe to be fair and true.”¹⁷² Moreover, he claimed to “accept the fullest responsibility for all that I did and had the power to do,” but also laid out his “wish to define and recount exactly what that share has been.”¹⁷³ He then elaborated on many of the same arguments he made in favor of the campaign during the war. As the primary justification for the operation, Churchill again claimed that establishing an “intimate and continuous” supply line to

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 294-295.

¹⁷² Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 2 (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1927 [1923]), 9.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 11.

Russia would allow the Russian war effort to “be restored by the end of 1915.”¹⁷⁴ While the Russians needed supplies—especially ammunition and artillery—at the time, Churchill neglected to mention that the British were suffering a shell shortage simultaneously and lacked the matériel to equip all of its own armies let alone those of another nation.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, he presented the campaign as a gamble with the potential to bring the war to a swift conclusion—an outcome far from certain had it succeeded.

In the second volume, Churchill also reasserted previous criticism of his colleagues and diverted blame away from himself. Regarding Lord Fisher’s unvoiced opposition to the Gallipoli venture, for instance, Churchill admitted that he put pressure on the First Sea Lord to endorse the mission but also argued that “war is a business of terrible pressures, and persons who take part in it must fail if they are not strong enough to withstand them.”¹⁷⁶ Similarly, he contended that “First Sea Lords have to stand up to facts and take their decisions resolutely,” rather than “go back on a decision after an enterprise has been launched, risks run, and sacrifices made.”¹⁷⁷ As for Kitchener, Churchill reasoned that after the first failure to force the Straights in mid-March 1915, the Secretary of War should have either committed fully to the ground campaign or abandoned the plan altogether. But in the eyes of the author, Kitchener failed to “make up his mind between the two courses,” “drifted into both,” and thus “was unable to sustain either.”¹⁷⁸ Conveniently for the former First Lord, both Fisher and Kitchener died before the book’s publication and thus could not defend themselves. Churchill also critiqued Asquith on what he saw as “general and public grounds,” believing that the Prime Minister failed to advocate for the

¹⁷⁴ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol 2 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 [1923]), 10.

¹⁷⁵ Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 314.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

Gallipoli Campaign despite believing in it and yielded to the demands of the Conservative opposition prematurely.¹⁷⁹ The author argued that the confluence of these actors within an institutional system where “no one possessed plenary power” created a scenario in which “every officer, every man, every ship, every round of ammunition required for the Dardanelles, became a cause of friction.”¹⁸⁰ Although Churchill’s commentary on the Dardanelles proved to be the most contentious part of *The World Crisis*, he also injected his critical observations of other decision-makers in engagements he took no part in—such as the Battle of the Somme and the naval Battle of Jutland. Some remained skeptical of Churchill’s account of the war, such as Lloyd George who admitted that the work was “brilliantly written” but “too much of an apologia to be of general value.”¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, *The World Crisis* received generally positive reviews and sold well.¹⁸² Churchill’s Great War experience simultaneously became his greatest political asset and liability.

In the decade leading up to the Second World War, the future Prime Minister once again found himself in political isolation, and his rivals often invoked his record during the Great War to justify his seclusion. A Labour victory in the 1929 general election combined with Churchill’s split with most of his Labour, Liberal, and Conservative colleagues over expanding Indian home rule first drove him into the ‘political wilderness.’ Yet he remained excluded after a mostly Conservative national government came to power in 1935, in part because the coalition’s whips often cited events such as Antwerp and Gallipoli to highlight the statesman’s poor judgment.¹⁸³ Conversely, knowing the value of Churchill’s experience in the First World War, the new Prime

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 285.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 382, 231.

¹⁸¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 295.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 401.

Minister, Stanley Baldwin, told a friend that he did not give Churchill a ministerial job because, “we must keep him fresh to be our war prime minister.”¹⁸⁴ Others brushed aside Churchill’s warnings about the growing Nazi threat as the exaggerations of a warmonger who took to the hostilities of 1914 with excitement.¹⁸⁵ His predictions regarding the Nazis also influenced how he presented his experiences during the Great War. Less than two years before the *Wehrmacht* invaded Poland, Churchill issued a reprint of *The World Crisis*. Its updated foreword read: “If we are to escape a cataclysm fatal to civilization itself let us lay to heart before it is too late the lesson, writ large in these pages, of the tragic years 1914-18.”¹⁸⁶ Once a defense of his record in World War I, the multi-volume series became a warning about the impending Second World War.

Churchill’s service in the First World War also played a role in his return to government and eventually his ascension to the premiership during the Second. On September 3, 1939, just hours after the British declared war on Germany over the Invasion of Poland, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made Churchill—who had not held any government office for nearly a decade—First Lord of the Admiralty because of his previous experience in the post. More than 25 years after the July Crisis, the First Lord found himself working in the same room, examining the same maps, commanding many of the same ships, and fighting the same enemy.¹⁸⁷ This resemblance was not lost on Churchill, but he told a colleague, “I would be happy to philosophize about the peculiar romance of my returning to this room after a quarter of a century, were it not for the devilish task at hand of destroying ships and human lives.”¹⁸⁸ He indulged this

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 393.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 367.

¹⁸⁶ Churchill, *The World Crisis*, Foreword.

¹⁸⁷ Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 378-380.

¹⁸⁸ Roberts, *Churchill*, 474.

tendency to “philosophize” after the war, writing in *The Gathering Storm*: “So it was that I came again to the room I had quitted in pain and sorrow almost a quarter of a century before...Once again we must fight for life and honour against all the might and fury of the valiant, disciplined, and ruthless German race. Once again! So be it.”¹⁸⁹ Churchill used the legacy of First World War as a narrative device on many occasions. From his failure at Antwerp to the Gallipoli debacle, Churchill leveraged his success in the Second World War to rewrite these controversial aspects of his past as fate-ordained preparation for his ultimate trial. Such a tactic depended on reinforcing the idea of continuity between the two conflicts.

Churchill’s service in the Great War also manifested in more tangible ways. In his first wartime letter to the future prime minister on September 11, 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt wrote, “My dear Churchill, it is because you and I occupied similar positions in the [First] World War that I want you to know how glad I am that you are back again in the Admiralty.”¹⁹⁰ Referencing Roosevelt’s tenure as Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Navy during the First World War, the letter marked the beginning of a six-year partnership, and friendship, between the two statesmen. But the First Lord’s Great War legacy also affected him negatively—such as during the Battle of Narvik in the spring of 1940. Intended to dislodge the Germans from the Norwegian port city to cut off their supply of iron from Sweden, the operation devolved into a disaster that King George VI and Chamberlain agreed “savoured too much of a second Dardanelles.”¹⁹¹ The parallels were clear. Lack of coordination between services, an unassertive prime minister, and logistical difficulties hampered the efforts of the Royal Navy detachment and the accompanying

¹⁸⁹ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), 410.

¹⁹⁰ Letter from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Winston Churchill, September 11, 1939, CHAR 20/15/13, The Chartwell Papers, Churchill Archive Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

¹⁹¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 480.

British invasion force. Although the Allies eventually took the town, they evacuated all of Norway just weeks later as German reinforcements poured into the area.¹⁹² And, like the Dardanelles, the First Lord risked receiving most of the blame because Narvik was primarily a naval campaign.

Fortunately for Churchill, a group of World War I veterans in Parliament emerged to help him weather the political fallout of Narvik and ultimately secure the premiership. On May 7, 1940, the House of Commons gathered to debate the situation in Norway and to demand accountability from Chamberlain's government. When the conversation turned to Narvik and MPs began to make comparisons to the Dardanelles, Admiral Roger Keyes—a veteran of the 1915 campaign—admitted that “the Gallipoli tragedy has been followed step by step.”¹⁹³ Keyes, however, also defended the First Lord, claiming he saw Gallipoli as Churchill's “brilliant conception” that Fisher ruined—a reiteration of the narrative Churchill presented in *The World Crisis*.¹⁹⁴ He concluded that “the iron of Gallipoli had entered into the soul of [Winston],” and “entered into my soul too.”¹⁹⁵ Earl Winterton, also “speaking as a Gallipoli-ite,” regretted that certain “ministers were not impeached” and “generals not court-martialed” for what occurred during the Dardanelles.¹⁹⁶ But like Keyes, Winterton declared his “wish expressly to exclude from my condemnation the First Lord of the Admiralty.”¹⁹⁷ Churchill's former second-in-command with the Royal Scots Fusiliers and now the leader of the Liberal Party, Archibald Sinclair, also spoke favorably of his former commander. He argued that “the military

¹⁹² Ibid., 488.

¹⁹³ “Conduct of the War,” Hansard, House of Commons, 5th Series, vol. 360, col. 1073-196, May 7, 1940, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1940/may/07/conduct-of-the-war>.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

consequences of our defeat in Norway [are] not comparable to those we suffered in the last war.”¹⁹⁸ Similarly, the second-to-last soldier to evacuate Gallipoli’s Suvla Bay in 1915, Clement Attlee, now served as the leader of the Labor Opposition.¹⁹⁹ Attlee never lost his faith in the strategic merits behind the Dardanelles, and thus he too recognized Churchill’s “great abilities” and disparaged Chamberlain.²⁰⁰ The Opposition Leader later recalled:

My own experience of the First World War, and my readings in history had convinced me that the Prime Minister should be a man who knew what war meant, in terms of the personal suffering of the man in the line, in terms of high strategy, and in terms of that crucial issue—how the generals got on with their civilian bosses.²⁰¹

These four veterans—two Conservative, one Liberal, and one Labor—played an essential role in deflecting criticism away from Churchill and towards Chamberlain. Because of this scrutiny, Chamberlain stepped down just three days later, and Churchill outmaneuvered the appeaser Lord Halifax to become Britain’s wartime prime minister.²⁰² Just as his experiences and connections forged in the Great War helped him secure the premiership, they influenced his decision-making over the following five years.

The impact of the First World War on the new Prime Minister became immediately clear with his efforts to consolidate executive power. Churchill, recalling the bureaucratic wrangling that paralyzed the British government in the previous war, told a friend shortly after taking office: “It took Armageddon to make me Prime Minister. But now I am determined that power shall be in no hands but my own. There will be no more Kitcheners, Fishers, or Haigs.”²⁰³

Coming to power amid the Fall of France, the bombing of London, and the threat of invasion, the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 233.

²⁰⁰ “Conduct of the War,” Hansard.

²⁰¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 524.

²⁰² Ultimately, Churchill’s ascension came down to a private, unofficial vote between four people: Neville Chamberlain, Edward Halifax, David Margesson, and Churchill himself. Churchill Won. (Roberts, *Churchill*, 509).

²⁰³ Ibid.

new Prime Minister believed he could not allow departmentalism to hinder British strategy. Consequently, he made himself his own Minister of Defense and subordinated the three service ministers who traditionally managed the war effort.²⁰⁴ In doing so, Churchill sought to limit competition between the military branches. Some scholars compared his streamlining of the War Council during the Second World War to his reorganization of the Admiralty leadership structure in 1914.²⁰⁵ Churchill himself pointed to the lessons he learned as First Lord to justify the decision. In his memoirs regarding World War II, he wrote:

It is always a misfortune when number two or three has to initiate a dominant plan or policy. He has to consider not only the merits of the policy but the mind of his chief; not only what to advise, but what it is proper for him to advise...Number two or three will have to reckon with numbers four, five, six, or maybe some bright outsider, number twenty. Ambition, not so much for vulgar ends, but for fame, glints in every mind...I was ruined for the time being in 1915 over the Dardanelles, and a supreme enterprise was cast away through my trying to carry out a major and cardinal operation of war from a subordinate position. Men are ill-advised to try such venture. This lesson had sunk into my nature.²⁰⁶

Although some did not look favorably upon the reform—especially the service chiefs—it improved the efficiency of the government and by extension the military. Yet Churchill's memory of the First World War also led him to place checks on himself.

Unlike a quarter-century before, the Prime Minister surrounded himself with advisors unafraid to speak their minds and oppose his opinions. After he saw the drawbacks of Fisher's failure to voice opposition to the Dardanelles in early War Council meetings, as well as how the obsequiousness of General Haig's intelligence advisors allowed for the slaughter at the Somme, Churchill concluded in *The World Crisis* that "the temptation to tell a chief in a great position the

²⁰⁴ Namely, the Secretary of State for War, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and the Secretary of State for Air.

²⁰⁵ Lavery, *Churchill Warrior*, 426.

²⁰⁶ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 2, *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 15.

things he most likes to hear is one of the commonest explanations of mistaken policy.”²⁰⁷ In turn, the leader’s outlook becomes “far more sanguine than the brutal facts admit.”²⁰⁸

Accordingly, in December of 1941, he appointed General Sir Allen Brooke to the office of Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). Brooke became one of Churchill’s principal military advisors, but he disagreed with the Prime Minister frequently on matters of strategy. In his book, *Inferno*, Max Hastings noted that the Chief acknowledged that the British Army was “deficient in competent commanders, imagination, appropriate transport and armour, and energy and professional skill.”²⁰⁹ With a more reserved approach to military strategy, Brooke had to check the Prime Minister’s strategic impulses on occasion. These clashes embittered Churchill. He asked General Hastings Ismay why Brooke detested him, and Ismay explained, “[Brooke] doesn’t hate you! He loves you! But he will never tell you he agrees when he doesn’t.”²¹⁰ Churchill came to value and respect this pushback from Brooke and remarked, “When I thump the table and push my face towards [Brooke], what does he do? Thumps the table harder and glares back at me.”²¹¹ Brooke, and other advisors like him, forced the Prime Minister to think through his proposals thoroughly and to address any flaws. Churchill, like all leaders, had imperfections, but he surrounded himself with people who kept these deficiencies in check—people who could not be pressured into submission like Fisher. With the domestic war apparatus running smoothly, the Prime Minister turned to diplomacy with the other Allied powers.

World War I taught Churchill the importance of an integrated command structure between allies. As the statesman noted in *The World Crisis*, between 1914-1918, “war, which

²⁰⁷ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 3 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015 [1927]), 134.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Max Hastings, *Inferno* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 640.

²¹⁰ Thomas Rick, *Churchill & Orwell* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 193.

²¹¹ Roberts, *Churchill*, 689.

knows no rigid divisions between French, Russian, and British Allies, between Land, Sea, and Air,” nevertheless “was dealt with piecemeal.”²¹² Consequently, “years of cruel teaching were necessary before even imperfect unifications of study, thought, command, and action were achieved.”²¹³ He explained that “each Allied state pursued in the main its own course,” without informing the others. “Principals must be brought together, and plans concerted in common,” Churchill concluded.²¹⁴ The Prime Minister pushed for many such summits during the Second World War, including the winter 1941-1942 Arcadia conference with the Americans, and the ‘Big Three’ conferences at Tehran in 1943 and Yalta in 1945. Informed by his memory of disorganized cooperation between Allied forces at the battles of Antwerp and Gallipoli, Churchill sought to establish a highly coordinated command structure for British and American forces. He oversaw the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee (CCS), which brought together top admirals and generals from the two countries to organize operations in Europe, Africa, and the Pacific.²¹⁵ Churchill strove to maintain a close relationship with the Americans throughout the Second World War, and the Committee represented an unprecedented enterprise in military collaboration—often entrusting British forces to American commanders and *vice versa*. Together, the members of the CCS executed the broad strategy that Churchill and the other Allied leaders developed during their joint summits and allowed them to pulverize the Axis powers by the end of 1945.

Churchill’s wartime leadership style and grasp of symbolism also resembled that of Clemenceau, *Le Tigre*, during World War I. In 1930, Churchill wrote of Clemenceau’s rise to the

²¹² Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 2, 4.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Roberts, *Churchill*, 703.

French premiership: “Such was the man who armed with experience and loaded with the hatreds of half-a-century, was called to the helm of France in the worst period of the war.”²¹⁶ Swap ‘France’ with ‘Britain’ and the characterization described Churchill’s own path to 10 Downing Street perfectly. “With his trademark quaint, stylish cap, his white moustache and burning eye,” the British premier noted, “[Clemenceau] represented the French people risen against tyrants—tyrants of the mind, tyrants of the soul, tyrants of the body.”²¹⁷ Similarly, historian Andrew Roberts wrote that Churchill’s “cigars, bow-ties, square-crown bowlers, and canes were powerful images which he used consciously” during the Second World War.²¹⁸ Churchill embodied the same guardian figure for the British that Clemenceau did for the French. The British Prime Minister’s famous declaration following the evacuation of Dunkirk, “we shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds; we shall fight in the fields and in the streets,” echoed Clemenceau’s claim, “I will fight in front of Paris; I will fight in Paris; I will fight behind Paris,” during the Spring Offensive of 1918.²¹⁹ Churchill even received his own animal personification, receiving the nicknames of the British “Lion” or “Bulldog.”²²⁰ The two men also left office in the same fashion. The British Premier reacted with surprising calm to his electoral defeat after a landslide Labour victory in summer 1945 perhaps because he observed previously how the French “flung [Clemenceau] aside and hastened back as quickly as possible to the old

²¹⁶ Churchill, “The Man and the Tiger.”

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Roberts, *Churchill*, 668.

²¹⁹ Paul Alkon, “Churchill on Clemenceau: His Best Student? Part II,” *Finest Hour* 151, no. 1 (summer 2011): 38-42, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-151/churchill-on-clemenceau-his-best-student-part-ii/>.

²²⁰ “The Life of a Lion,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/photos-winston-churchill-the-life-of-a-lion-1415374561>; Douglas Hall, “Bulldog Churchill: The Evolution of a Famous Image,” *Finest Hour* 106, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 18-21, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-106/bulldog-churchill-the-evolution-of-a-famous-image/>.

hugger-mugger of party politics” shortly after Allied victory in 1918.²²¹ Whether a lion or a bulldog, Churchill certainly was a disciple of *Le Tigre*.

The Prime Minister understood how the lessons he drew from the Great War changed him—though there were some errors he still failed to rectify. Once in the trenches of the Western Front, Churchill wrote his wife, “I should have made nothing if not mistakes.”²²² The former Colonel still believed this sentiment throughout World War II. In 1944, one of the Prime Minister’s friends recorded in his diary that Churchill said, “he was quite different than he had been in earlier years. [He] had learned a great deal. He had made many mistakes in the first war. He was making fewer in this war because of those he had made earlier... Above all he had learned to consider very carefully matters and to be cautious.”²²³ Long after the Second World War, the Prime Minister’s great-grandson, Randolph Churchill, even argued that “if not for the disaster at Gallipoli, the D-Day landings in 1944 would not have succeeded.”²²⁴ Although the lessons of the Great War made Churchill a more effective leader, he still displayed personal shortcomings similar to those he showed between 1914 and 1918. The same social Darwinist beliefs that led him to underestimate the Turks in 1915 led him to underestimate the Japanese shortly before they tore through British defenses in southeast Asia at the end of 1941.²²⁵ Similarly, the former First Lord believed his impulsive decision to go to Antwerp rather than fulfill his duties in London was an error. Yet in 1944 he insisted on accompanying the Normandy invasion force so adamantly that it required intervention from the King to prevent him from

²²¹ Churchill, “The Man and the Tiger.”

²²² Letter from Winston to Clementine Churchill, January 7, 1916, CSCT 2/9/10, The Papers of Clementine Ogilvy Spencer-Churchill, Churchill Archives Center, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

²²³ Roberts, *Churchill*, 790.

²²⁴ Randolph Churchill, foreword to *With Winston at the Front*, Kindle location 103.

²²⁵ Roberts, *Churchill*, 976.

going.²²⁶ The Great War did not change Churchill's disposition so much as teach him how to channel it. As these examples demonstrated, he could still succumb to his old ways.

Besides policy and strategy, the First World War played an influential role in Churchill's personal life. Faced with the pressures of running a nation at war, the Prime Minister often turned to the friends he made while serving in uniform in the previous conflict. Few were closer to Churchill than his Minister for Aircraft Production, Max Aitken, whom he befriended in France in 1915. The Prime Minister's secretary recorded in his diary how the pair could stay up to the late hours of the night going "over the whole course of the last war."²²⁷ As one of their colleagues observed, Aitken was "almost the last of those who had lived with [Churchill] through the shocks and strains of the First World War...it comforted the PM to talk to [him], and to compare their troubles with those they had to overcome in the First World War."²²⁸ Friends such as Aitken and Sinclair remained some of Churchill's closest until the end of his life. But while looking to his past trials could inspire confidence, they could also induce pain. In the 1970s, Clementine revealed to her husband's biographer that, "the Dardanelles haunted [Churchill] for the rest of his life."²²⁹ Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels seized on this insecurity in a February 2, 1941, article. In addition to ridiculing Churchill for his cheery attitude at the beginning of the last war, Goebbels wrote after the failed Narvik operation, "[Churchill] had been through it during the [First] World War with his disastrous Gallipoli invasion. He had walked through streams of English blood and become hard to the sentiments that might have affected anyone else after such a catastrophe."²³⁰ From political rivals at home to wartime

²²⁶ Ibid., 819.

²²⁷ John Colville, *The Fringes of Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 461.

²²⁸ Roberts, *Churchill*, 522.

²²⁹ Ibid., 223.

²³⁰ Joseph Goebbels, "Winston Churchill," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, February 2, 1941, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb26.htm>.

enemies abroad, the Dardanelles was always the best example to use when criticizing Churchill's competence. The defeat held a vivid place in the former First Lord's memory throughout the remainder of his life. His granddaughter recalled that while vacationing with him around the Mediterranean on a cruise in 1959, the boat's captain took care to pass through the [Dardanelles] Straights at night, "in case they stirred up bad memories for the guest of honour."²³¹ Nevertheless, Churchill mentioned the campaign briefly at dinner but then changed the subject abruptly. But just as the Great War still had power over Churchill personally, the statesman exerted exert influence over the popular history of the conflict.

For Churchill, shaping the narrative of World War II involved recasting the public's interpretation of World War I. The process began before he left office. The Prime Minister said in a February 1945 speech to the House of Commons, "One must regard these 30 years or more of strife, turmoil and suffering in Europe as part of one story...I have lived through the whole story since 1911 when I was sent to the Admiralty." He concluded, "in its main essentials it seems to me to be one story of a Thirty Years' War."²³² Invoking his own involvement in both periods, he fused the two events into one. Churchill reinforced this paradigm in 1948 in the opening line of *The Gathering Storm*—the first of six volumes constituting his autobiographical account of World War II—which read, "I must regard these volumes...as a continuation of the story of the First World War which I set out in *The World Crisis*...if the present work is completed, they will cover an account of another Thirty Years' War."²³³ Surveying the whole

²³¹ Celia Sandys, *Chasing Churchill: The Travels of Winston Churchill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle location 360.

²³² Winston Churchill, "Statement to the House of Commons" (speech, London, February 27, 1945), Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe, https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/68a6136f-a7cf-40cf-9765-af120da30526/publishable_en.pdf.

²³³ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), iii.

war through Churchill's perspective and an assortment of excerpted official documents, *The Second World War* followed the template of *The World Crisis*. As with his previous work, the author explained that he would "not describe [*The Second World War*] as history, for that belongs to another generation," but as "a contribution to history."²³⁴ Churchill acknowledged the personal stake he had in the book, writing, "these thirty years of action and advocacy comprise and express my life-effort."²³⁵ The author started his new series immediately where his last left off and devoted his first chapter to how the origins of World War II lay in the diplomacy at the end of the previous war.

Simultaneously, however, Churchill was careful not to treat World War II as an inevitable outcome of its predecessor. In fact, he argued, "there never was a war more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle."²³⁶ He spent more than half of *The Gathering Storm* explaining how the leaders of 1919-1939 could have prevented another catastrophe. The former Prime Minister presented the brutality of World War II, in which "every bond between man and man was to perish," as an evolution of the "fearful slaughters of soldiers in the First World War."²³⁷ All of these adages fed back into the idea of continuity. The former Colonel once said, "history will be kind to me, for I intend to write it."²³⁸ Few realize how literal this statement was. Churchill understood how individual experience and interests consciously and unconsciously shape one's portrayal of events, hence why he envisioned his books not as history but as a source for future historians. Publishing two

²³⁴ Ibid., iv.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., 16-17.

²³⁸ Erin Blakemore, "UNESCO Honors Winston Churchill's Writings With the Equivalent of World Heritage Status," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/unesco-honors-winston-churchills-writings-with-equivalent-world-heritage-status-180957409/>.

of the most comprehensive and widely read accounts of each world war in the years immediately preceding each conflict, however, Churchill set the historiographical foundation for the events that defined not just his legacy but the popular understanding of the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, this quote captures a dangerous interpretation of history not as an objective study but as a tool for monumental figures of history to embellish their own personal legacies.

Part Two

The Artist

“[The Weimar Republic] could not hold the loyalties or the imagination of the German people. For a spell they sought to cling as in desperation to the aged Marshal Hindenburg. Thereafter mighty forces were adrift; the void was open, and into that void after a pause there strode a maniac of ferocious genius, the repository and expression of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human breast—Corporal Hitler.”

-Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Volume I, *The Gathering Storm*

On August 2, 1914—the day after the German declaration of war on Russia—photographer Heinrich Hoffman snapped a picture of a dense crowd gathered in front of the *Feldherrnhalle* in Munich. The photo shows thousands of German men and women packing the famous *Odeonsplatz*, climbing the plaza’s lion statues, and waving their hats to cheer the start of the Great War.¹ One attendee, Fridolin Solleder, recalled two decades later: “All the noble passions that people had internalized now seemed to come out. The melodies, warrior songs, and enthusiastic words heard that day sounded like the songs of German strength, of German confidence.”² Near the bottom of the frame, one can make out 25-year-old Adolf Hitler standing amid the throng with excitement across his face. The following day he enlisted, as did many others in that crowd and throughout Germany. “As probably for every German, there began for me the most unforgettable and the greatest period of my mortal life,” the future *Führer* wrote a decade later.³ Yet, the photo also represented a distortion of reality. The overwhelming majority of Munich’s population did not attend these state-orchestrated rallies. Other camera angles from that day revealed that the crowd failed to fill the *Odeonsplatz* completely. The photographer chose to take the photo the moment that the crowd realized a separate film crew had started recording, which prompted them to wave their arms and hats. Additionally, Hoffman later became Hitler’s personal photographer, leading some historians to contend that he edited his patron into the original picture.⁴ As with the photo, ambiguity cloaks many elements of Hitler’s service in the First World War.

¹ See photo plate #6 in the appendix.

² Thomas Weber, *Hitler’s First War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2010), 12.

³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Complete and Unabridged and Fully Annotated*, ed. John Chamberlain (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941 [1925]), 213.

⁴ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 16-17. There is no settled answer as to whether the photograph is authentic. If Hitler’s associates fell out with the *Führer*, Nazi officials airbrushed them out of official state photos. The Soviets did the same with friends of Stalin who lost favor with the regime.

Compared with Churchill, few primary documents from Hitler's service in the Great War exist today. Contradictions and exaggerations lurk within the sources that survived, and yet they reveal how service in the Imperial German Army offered Hitler an escape from the social alienation he experienced in Vienna and Munich before the war. Additionally, in the months of disorientation during his demobilization between 1918-1919, the future *Führer* began solidifying his political ideology and first encountered the organization that later became the Nazi Party. Many others who held leadership positions in the Party were also *ehemaliger frontkämpfer*⁵ of the First World War, including Hermann Göring, Ernst Röhm, and Rudolf Hess. The paradigms of victimhood and betrayal that came with the defeat shaped both the Party's platform and Hitler's personal mythology for decades because of their prevalence in the thinking of many Germans in Weimar society. Finally, as his public and private remarks after 1939 ultimately demonstrated, the *Führer* understood the World Wars as one contiguous national and personal struggle.

Chapter 4: Down and Out in Vienna and Munich

An examination of Hitler's life in Vienna between 1908 and 1913—another period he cited as instrumental in his ideological development—provides context for the transformation he underwent during the First World War. As Hitler led the readers of *Mein Kampf* to believe, “the city that to so many represents the idea of harmless gaiety...is to me only the living memory of the most miserable time of my life.”⁶ At age 18, he moved from Linz to the Austro-Hungarian capital in February 1908 shortly after his mother's untimely death from cancer. By May, he

⁵ German term for combat veterans.

⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 29.

ceased nearly all communication with his sister and two half-siblings.⁷ Rejected from the Academy of Fine Arts the year before, the aspiring artist subsisted off his mother's inheritance, his orphan's pension, and a loan from his aunt, which proved sufficient to maintain a reasonably comfortable lifestyle.⁸ Hitler's only friend during these first months was his roommate, August Kubizek, who left Linz to join him. Kubizek's acceptance as a music student to the Academy of Fine Arts, however, strained the relationship. Although Kubizek's 1951 memoirs cast a mostly favorable portrayal of the *Führer* in his youth, he wrote that Hitler believed "that bad luck was pursuing him; there was a great conspiracy against him," and "[Adolf] saw everywhere only obstacles and hostility."⁹ Hitler parted ways with Kubizek unceremoniously in June 1908 after receiving a second rejection from the Academy.¹⁰ Hitler's self-imposed social detachment reflected what German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies described in 1887 as "*Gesellschaft*" – a term that conveyed the impersonal associations and sense of anonymity that life in industrial urban centers around the beginning of the twentieth century entailed.¹¹ Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Vienna's population grew at four times the rate of London and Paris.¹² There were many examples of extreme wealth and poverty throughout the city. And, as the seat of Hapsburg power, Vienna exhibited the political and cultural divisions of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual empire.

Hitler experienced these societal rifts firsthand, yet they failed to inspire a rigid worldview within the artist. His savings evaporated within a year. The future *Führer* became

⁷ Volker Ulrich, *Hitler: Ascent* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 34.

⁸ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 46.

⁹ August Kubizek, *The Young Hitler I Knew* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955), 86, 37.

¹⁰ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 34.

¹¹ "Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gemeinschaft-and-Gesellschaft>.

¹² Kershaw, *Hubris*, 31.

homeless, sleeping on the streets and in shelters, and surviving off change he made shoveling snow and carrying bags for travelers at Westbahnhof Station.¹³ Eventually, he met a fellow homeless man named Reinhold Hanisch who offered to sell Hitler's postcard paintings in bars and cafés and split the profits. The income allowed the pair to rent rooms in a comfortable men's home in early 1910.¹⁴ Here, Hitler claimed he read his first anti-Semitic pamphlets.¹⁵ These publications likely included pan-Germanist publications such as *Ostara* and *Alldeutsches Tageblatt*, which preached theories of "Aryan" dominance and *völkisch* "blood and soil."¹⁶ Young Hitler also took interest in prominent anti-Semitic Viennese politicians such as Georg Ritter von Schönerer and Karl Lueger. He admired their ability to channel the passions of the masses but harbored initial hesitations about their approach to the "Jewish Question."¹⁷ As he admitted in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler thought the tone of these publications and leaders "was such that I again had doubts because the assertions were supported by such extremely unscientific arguments" and "the fear of committing an injustice tortured me and made me anxious."¹⁸ Ultimately, however, Hitler claimed that in Vienna, he "turned into a fanatical anti-Semite."¹⁹ But accounts from his acquaintances during these years in Vienna challenge this radicalization narrative. Hanisch later stated: "In those days Hitler was by no means a Jew hater. He became one afterward."²⁰ Another resident who knew Hitler in the men's home in 1912 claimed: "Hitler got along well with Jews. Once he said that they were a clever people who stuck together better than the Germans."²¹ Contrary to his claim that he displayed "fanatical" anti-Semitism at this

¹³ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 35.

¹⁵ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 73.

¹⁶ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 38.

¹⁷ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 34.

¹⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 74.

¹⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁰ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 27.

²¹ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 39.

time, the future *Führer* sold his paintings to several Jewish customers and allowed Jewish salesman Siegfried Löffner to help sell his art.²² Such ambivalence revealed at most the development of the struggling artist's political awareness—not a coherent personal ideology.

Although a more stable time in Hitler's life than his stint in Vienna, isolation and lack of mobility still defined the year that the future leader of the Third Reich spent in Munich before the outbreak of the Great War. He moved to the Bavarian capital in southeastern Germany in May 1913, possibly to avoid legal repercussions for dodging conscription into the Austrian military.²³ He intended to use his artistic skills to become an architectural draftsman. Without a high school degree and professional training, however, this aspiration remained out of reach. Peddling paintings and postcards remained his primary source of income.²⁴ Hitler's reclusive habits persisted; his landlady, Anna Popp, did not recall a single guest visiting him during his entire occupancy. She remembered only that her young tenant often returned home with an armful of books.²⁵ Maintaining his insatiable reading regimen, Hitler claimed that in Munich he began to delve into foreign policy topics for the first time. He also had additional exposure to pan-Germanist conversations common in the city's beer gardens and coffee shops.²⁶ This innocuous lifestyle nearly fell apart in January 1914 when the Austrian police tracked Hitler down, brought him to the local consulate, and charged him with failing to register for the draft in 1909—a violation that carried a large fine and up to a year of jailtime. Deeply apologetic, the artist claimed he registered but that bureaucratic negligence must have led to the loss of his paperwork. The excuse satisfied the authorities enough to drop criminal charges, but they still

²² Ibid.

²³ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 13.

²⁴ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 82.

²⁵ Ibid., 84.

²⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 163.

sent him to Salzburg for a military physical. The examiner, however, deemed him “unsuitable for combat and support duty, too weak, incapable of firing weapons.”²⁷ Relieved, Hitler returned to Munich. The artist ended up in the uniform of another nation within a year.

Hitler felt genuine excitement at the outbreak of war and later identified the summer of 1914 as the first time his life converged with the course of world history. Hitler later wrote that before the July Crisis: “The waves of historical events seemed to have calmed down to such an extent that the future appeared really to belong to the ‘peaceful competition of nations.’”²⁸ But this peace did not appeal to young Hitler. Allegedly, he questioned “why could one not have been born a hundred years earlier,” such as during “the Wars of Liberation when a man really was worth something?”²⁹ After he learned of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand through street chatter on June 28, 1914, the artist worried initially that German students in Sarajevo were responsible. Hitler himself was wary of the Archduke for his pro-Slavic political orientation, but his prediction ultimately proved false.³⁰ He followed the events of the July Crisis closely over the following weeks. The only insight into his thinking at the time comes from *Mein Kampf*, which he wrote with the benefit of hindsight. In it, he defended the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia following the assassination, arguing that if anything, Hapsburg officials should have used a more forceful tone. But when the war broke out, he claimed he viewed it not as a quarrel between Austro-Hungarians and Serbs, but as “Germany fighting for her existence.”³¹ “I am not ashamed today to say,” Hitler later maintained, “[that] overwhelmed by impassionate enthusiasm, I had fallen on my knees and thanked heaven...that it granted me the

²⁷ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 41.

²⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

³⁰ In truth, Gavrilo Princip and a cell of Slavic nationalists carried out the assassination; Kershaw, *Hubris*, 87.

³¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 206, 211.

good fortune of being allowed to live in these times.”³² Though a likely exaggeration, the anecdote aligned with Hitler’s actions in the waning days of the July Crisis. The picture of Hitler at the *Odeonsplatz* after the German declaration of war, if authentic, corroborated these claims of excitement, and so did his early enlistment.

For an Austrian such as Hitler, service in the Bavarian Army—one of several regional armies that constituted the *Deutsches Heer*—appeared as an opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to the German Empire. Although other Austrians enlisted in the Imperial German Army, the practice was unusual. Hitler claimed in *Mein Kampf* that after the Germans entered the war, he issued a special request to King Ludwig III of Bavaria to allow him to serve in German uniform. He received permission supposedly within less than a day. Such matters did not fall under the King’s jurisdiction, however, thus Hitler probably fabricated the story. More likely, military recruiters ignored the artist’s nationality to help fill their quotas, just as they overlooked the ages of many young volunteers.³³ Regardless, Hitler became a *Schütze* (private) in the 16th Bavarian Infantry Regiment (RIR 16)—soon dubbed the “List Regiment” after its commander, Colonel Julius von List. At the first meeting of the Regiment, the Colonel addressed his recruits: “The Regiment, whose men for the most part are untrained, is expected to be ready for mobile deployment within a few weeks. This is a difficult task...but not an impossible one... let’s begin our work for Kaiser, King, and Fatherland!”³⁴ As he looked back with “proud sadness” and vivid memory ten years later, Hitler wrote: “One picture after the other passes before my eyes: I see myself donning the uniform in the circle of my dear comrades, turning out for the first time,

³² Ibid., 210.

³³ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 13, 16.

³⁴ Ibid., 19.

drilling, etc., till finally the day came when we marched.”³⁵ Roughly two months after he cheered in the *Odeonsplatz* as a civilian, Private Hitler departed for the front wearing the field-gray uniform of his adopted nation.

Chapter 5: The Corporal’s *Kampf*

The List Regiment’s unpreparedness for war did not dampen the Private’s enthusiasm. Most of the men’s sole military experience was their accelerated 65-day training program. With the supply of military rucksacks and helmets exhausted, Hitler and his comrades used civilian backpacks and received oilcloth hats with a gray cover that mimicked the appearance of the standard-issue helmet. But without the trademark spike of the *Pickelhaube*, these coverings often led Germans to mistake their comrades for British soldiers.³⁶ The men received their *Gewehr* 98 rifles just days before they left. Trained on older models, however, most of the recruits departed Bavaria on October 21, 1914, without knowing how to use the new weapon.³⁷ Nevertheless, the Private wrote to his landlady, Anna Popp, that he was “tremendously excited” and hoped “we shall get to England.”³⁸ Instead, the List Regiment took a train through Ulm to the Belgian-German border, where Hitler reported receiving “an enthusiastic send-off by thousands of people.”³⁹ As the train continued towards Belgium, the Private saw the Rhine river for the first time, a sight which made him feel “as though my chest would burst.”⁴⁰ As they passed the Niederwald Monument—erected in commemoration of German victory in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871—on the river’s east bank, the men started to sing a patriotic hymn called *The Watch*

³⁵ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 213.

³⁶ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁸ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Anna Popp, October 20, 1914, in *Hitler’s Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 45.

³⁹ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Joseph Popp, December 4, 1914, in *Hitler’s Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 50.

⁴⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 213.

on the Rhine.⁴¹ Hitler's "glorious journey down the Rhine" ended in the Belgian town of Lille on October 23, where the regiment began a series of marches to join an offensive at Ypres.⁴²

Anticipation grew with each step. As the Private recounted in a letter to his Munich acquaintance, Ernst Hepp, he and each of his comrades "could feel his blood pound in his veins" as they heard German howitzer shells fly overhead.⁴³ The ruins of Liège and Louvain, which advancing German troops torched in August, failed to shake the Private's patriotic fervor.⁴⁴ As with Churchill, it took exposure to combat for the Private to reevaluate his inflated expectations of battlefield glory.

The four days Hitler spent in the First Battle of Ypres represented his first, and perhaps only, experience fighting on the frontlines. Just past 3:00AM the morning of October 29, 1914, the List Regiment began a four hour march that ended in a forest near the Flemish village of Gheluvelt.⁴⁵ The objective was simple: ascend a small hill, dislodge the British from the town, and press on to Ypres.⁴⁶ At dawn, Private Hitler and the 249 other members of 1st Company sat in several large foxholes and waited for the order to advance. "Now the first shrapnel started to roar over our heads, bursting on the edge of the wood, and cutting down trees like wisps of straw," the Private wrote in a detailed account of the battle he sent to Hepp three months later, "We looked on curiously. We didn't yet sense the danger."⁴⁷ With fog reducing visibility to under 40 meters, Hitler explained, "We could see next to nothing in the foggy witches' cauldron

⁴¹ Webber, *Hitler's First War*, 30.

⁴² Letter from Adolf Hitler to Joseph Popp, December 4, 1914.

⁴³ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Ernst Hepp, February 5, 1914, in *Hitler's Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 75.

⁴⁴ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 32.

⁴⁵ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Ernst Hepp, February 5, 1914, 77.

⁴⁶ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 42.

⁴⁷ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Ernst Hepp, February 5, 1914, 77-78.

that spread out in front of us.”⁴⁸ At the blow of their officer’s whistle, the infantrymen trotted across the field in a line. British bullets “whistled” past, and shells began to burst. Hitler heard yells through the fog that their formation leader had been wounded. “Then,” the Private recounted, “men started to fall all around me. The English had turned their machine guns on us.”⁴⁹ With little cover, Hitler and the others dove into a gully. They crawled through the creek, waded through a pond, and regrouped with their major to capture a British trench. Hitler reported that the British “poured out like ants from an anthep,” and “those who did not surrender were mowed down.”⁵⁰ The Germans then fought a series of “bloody hand-to-hand skirmishes” and “cleared the lot of them out of their trenches.”⁵¹ From this position, the List Regiment attempted four more advances throughout the day—all of which failed. Returning to the trench during the second attempt, Private Hitler “found the major lying on the ground with his chest torn wide open, and a heap of bodies all round him.”⁵² The List Regiment fought for three more days. Reduced from 3,000 men to 725, and from 25 officers to 4, the mauled regiment cycled out of the line on November 1, 1914.⁵³ Despite his unit’s casualty rate approaching 75 percent, Hitler emerged unscathed. But as he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “Boys of seventeen now resembled grown men. The volunteers of the regiment had perhaps not yet learned to fight properly, but they knew how to die like old soldiers... The romance of the battles had turned into horror.”⁵⁴ The German people soon dubbed the battle, “*Kindermord*,” or “massacre of the innocents.”⁵⁵ The trauma of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 85.

⁵³ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 49.

⁵⁴ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 214-215.

⁵⁵ R.G. Grant, *World War I: The Definitive Visual History* (London: DK, 2014), 61.

these four days dispelled some of Hitler's naivete regarding the realities of combat but also provided him with the opportunity to embellish his war record years later.

The remaining four years of Hitler's war experience hardly resembled his four days at Ypres. After that first engagement, Hitler claimed he underwent a personal transformation. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "an undefinable something tried to revolt, tried to present itself to the weak body in the form of reason and was really nothing but cowardice which in this disguise tried to ensnare the individual."⁵⁶ But the future *Führer* boasted that "after a long inner struggle my sense of duty triumphed... My will had finally become master."⁵⁷ Reality proved more mundane. On November 9, 1914, he received a promotion to *Gefreiter*—a rank that fell somewhere between private first class and lance corporal. Practicality largely drove the promotion, since the regiment lost nearly all men of this rank during the fighting at Ypres.⁵⁸ Hitler never noted in his self-aggrandizing autobiography that he also received an assignment as a regimental dispatch runner. Often confused with the more dangerous position of battalion dispatch runner, a regimental runner delivered messages from the regiment's advance HQ to several smaller battalion HQs—all located several hundred meters behind the trenches. After spending three days near the front, regimental runners cycled back to the regular administrative HQ more than an hour away from the trenches for another three days.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, they still faced danger. On December 2, 1914, for example, Hitler and several other dispatch runners received the Iron Cross Second Class for dragging a wounded officer back to cover.⁶⁰ The Corporal wrote Joseph Popp soon after: "It was the happiest day of my life."⁶¹ But he also

⁵⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 214-215

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 53

⁵⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 53-54.

⁶¹ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Joseph Popp, December 4, 1914.

acknowledged that “most of my comrades who had earned it just as much were dead.”⁶² Overall, however, Hitler enjoyed relative safety compared with his comrades in the trenches. Such security may explain why Corporal Hitler refused to accept several promotions throughout the war that would require him to return to the field.⁶³ Indeed, rather than “mastering his will,” the Corporal did his best to minimize his exposure to danger.

The future leader of the Third Reich revealed little of his political leanings during this period. The best surviving indication of his beliefs came from a brief passage of a letter he sent to Hepp on February 5, 1915. After he described his experiences since leaving Bavaria, the Corporal closed:

Each of us has only one wish: that he might soon get a chance to even scores with [the British], to get at them no matter what the cost, and that those of us who are lucky enough to return to the fatherland will find it a purer place, less riddled with foreign influences, so that the daily sacrifices and sufferings of hundreds of thousands of us and the torrent of blood that keeps flowing here day after day against an international world of enemies, will not only help to smash Germany’s foes outside but that our inner internationalism, too, will collapse. This would be worth much more than any gain in territory.⁶⁴

Whether this condemnation of “foreign influence” and “inner internationalism” represented a rebuke of cosmopolitanism broadly or of the Jewish-German community specifically remains unclear. Either the way, these sentiments suggested that Hitler viewed the war as a cleansing event that would strengthen German society and national identity.⁶⁵ The letter provided one of the earliest indications that Hitler had internalized pan-Germanist beliefs—not a surprise considering his exposure to these ideas in Vienna and Munich. Nevertheless, if Hitler subscribed

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 91

⁶⁴ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Ernst Hepp, February 5, 1914, 90.

⁶⁵ Hitler was not the only one who harbored this belief in pre-war Germany, nor were these sentiments limited to people who leaned conservative. Many liberal, forward-thinking German artists also saw the war as a purifying event initially and believed it would release societal and cultural tension that grew under the repressive limitations of the *Kaiserreich*. See Ludwig Meidner’s paintings *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1912) and *Burning City* (1913).

to a thorough set of political convictions during the first half of the war, he failed to articulate them. His comrades recalled that he rarely spoke of politics. In 1932, former dispatch runner Balthasar Brandmayer claimed to remember the Corporal making off-hand comments about the culpability of Jews and Social Democrats for starting the war—but Hitler’s recent presidential campaign may have skewed Brandmayer’s memory.⁶⁶ Similarly, in 1947, a former sergeant remembered that Hitler complained occasionally “about the condition of Austria, that it was decayed.”⁶⁷ Yet even in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler noted: “At that time I was a soldier and did not want to discuss politics. It really was not the time for it.”⁶⁸ Although tangential to politics, Corporal Hitler maintained unusually zealous support for the German war effort, to the point that he condemned the famous Christmas Truce of 1914. When Hitler learned of the fraternization between frontline German and English troops on the holiday, he allegedly said, “Something like this should not even be up for discussion during wartime.”⁶⁹ Moreover, his wartime acquaintances were known to make jokingly defeatist remarks to send the Corporal into tirades.⁷⁰ But aside from this teasing, Hitler seemed to enjoy army life.

Service in the Great War provided the Corporal with a sense of belonging he failed to find in Vienna and Munich. Self-employed and arguably lazy for most of his pre-war years, Hitler took a liking to military discipline. He showed great deference and loyalty to his regimental officers, such as Staff Sergeant Max Amann, Reconnaissance Officer Adolf Meyer, and Regimental Adjutant Fritz Wiedemann. Decades after the war, Amann remembered the Corporal as “obedient,” “devoted,” and “always loyal,” and Wiedemann looked back on Hitler as

⁶⁶ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 94.

⁶⁷ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 144.

⁶⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 216.

⁶⁹ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 63.

⁷⁰ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 93.

a “dependable subordinate.”⁷¹ Additionally, Corporal Hitler’s fellow dispatch runners became some of the only friends of his youth. Former private Ernst Schmidt reported to a newspaper in 1933: “three of us in particular seemed to hang together: Hitler, Bachmann, and I.” According to Schmidt, he and Hitler “were always together.”⁷² In 1937, another runner named Adolf Mend alleged that the pair’s relationship was sexual in nature. Made in a report rife with glaring factual errors by someone who recently fell out with the *Führer*, however, the accusation was almost certainly baseless.⁷³ Although closer to his comrades than most other people, Hitler remained withdrawn. He took no interest in banter, women, or alcohol, and preferred to sketch and to read about history and architecture on his own.⁷⁴ He also spent much time caring for his adopted stray terrier named “Foxl,” whom the Corporal studied “as if he’d been a man.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Hitler claimed that this lifestyle at the regimental HQ taught him “the glorious meaning of a male community.”⁷⁶ This sense of fraternity encapsulated what some Germans in World War I referred to as “*Frontgemeinschaft*.” Ferdinand Tönnies presented “*Gemeinschaft*” – a society based on traditional values and personal interaction, usually in a rural setting – as the opposite of “*Gesellschaft*.” *Frontgemeinschaft* thus referred to the emergence of such a community through the military camaraderie found at the frontline.⁷⁷ The distance from the danger paired with this feeling of brotherhood allowed the Corporal to maintain an idealized perspective of the conflict even as many serving in combat grew disillusioned.

⁷¹ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 141.

⁷² Lothar Machtan, *Hidden Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 89-90.

⁷³ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 138.

⁷⁴ Timothy Ryback, *Hitler’s Private Library* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 14-16.

⁷⁵ Dinner party monologue given by Adolf Hitler, January 22-23, 1942, in *Hitler Table Talk*, ed. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2000), 232-233.

⁷⁶ Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 90.

⁷⁷ Eric Leed, “Class and Disillusionment in World War I,” *The Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 4 (December 1978), https://www-jstor-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/1876756?read-now=1&seq=9#metadata_info_tab_contents, 688; “*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.”

But the wounds Hitler received at the Battle of Somme threatened to separate him for this surrogate family. On October 5, 1916, only four days after the List Regiment arrived at the Somme, shrapnel punctured Hitler's left thigh when a shell struck the dispatch runners' hut in the middle of the night. The blast also injured Schmidt and Bachmann.⁷⁸ When Wiedemann rushed over to assess the men's condition, the wounded Corporal Hitler allegedly said: "It's not so bad, *Herr Oberleutnant*, eh? I can stay with you, stay with the regiment."⁷⁹ The medics disagreed. Hitler, Bachmann, and Schmidt went to hospitals in Germany for treatment. "At the moment of being wounded one has merely the sense of a shock, without immediate pain," the *Führer* mused in 1942, "The pain begins only when one is being carried away."⁸⁰ Unlike most others in his Beelitz hospital near Berlin, Hitler did not write any letters to his family or even to pre-war acquaintances such as Hepp or the Poppes during his two-month recovery. He wrote solely to other members of the List Regiment. In December, he asked Wiedemann to allow him "to return to my old regiment and old comrades," and ensured another friend that he would "report voluntarily for the field immediately."⁸¹ The conditions in Germany in the winter of 1916-1917 only made the separation more painful.

Hitler perceived a collapse of morale on the German Homefront. Medical leave provided him with an opportunity to visit Berlin for the first time. He enjoyed touring the *Unter den Linden*, the Brandenburg Gate, and several other monuments and museums throughout the capital.⁸² But as he recollected in *Mein Kampf*, "It was apparent that distress was very great

⁷⁸ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 52.

⁷⁹ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 87.

⁸⁰ Dinner party monologue given by Adolf Hitler, January 3-4, 1942, in *Hitler Table Talk*, ed. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2000), 171.

⁸¹ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Karl Lanzhammer, December 19, 1916, on Europeana Pro, <https://pro.europeana.eu/post/life-saving-bible-crucifix-hitler-postcard>.

⁸² Ryback, *Hitler's Private Library*, 24-25.

everywhere. The city of millions suffered hunger. Discontent was great.”⁸³ The Corporal’s time in Berlin coincided with the “Turnip Winter” – a famine between 1916 and 1917 that resulted from a poor harvest and the British blockade. Anywhere between 480,000 and 800,000 German civilians died of hunger-related causes throughout the war.⁸⁴ Similarly, when he visited Munich for Christmas several weeks later, Hitler reported that “anger, grumbling, and cursing met me on all sides.”⁸⁵ Around the same time Hitler was wounded, pan-Germanists began to blame Jews for sabotaging the war effort by seeding division in German society and fomenting anti-war sentiment. In October 1916, the German Army conducted a census to prove that a disproportionately large number of Jews served in administrative roles. When the survey revealed that Jews served in combat at a greater rate than normal Germans, Army officials censored the results.⁸⁶ The future *Führer* made similarly baseless claims about Jewish representation in *Mein Kampf* and argued that the discontent at home created the stagnation at the front. Realistically, the lack of German military success, compounded by famine, drove the public’s lack of enthusiasm for war—not *vice versa*.

No longer writing to his Munich acquaintances, Hitler left little record of his experiences in the second half of the war. He rejoined the List Regiment before it participated in the Battle of Arras in Spring 1917. Foxl disappeared during the List Regiment’s move from Flanders to Vimy Ridge.⁸⁷ Corporal Hitler made a second visit to Berlin during his leave in October 1917, which he described in a letter to Schmidt as “magnificent, a real metropolis.”⁸⁸ The Russian Revolution

⁸³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 249.

⁸⁴ Alan Kramer, “Naval Blockade (of Germany),” 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated January 22, 2020, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/naval_blockade_of_germany.

⁸⁵ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 249-250.

⁸⁶ Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 150.

⁸⁷ Dinner party monologue given by Adolf Hitler, January 22-23, 1942.

⁸⁸ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Ernst Schmidt, October 1917, in *Hitler’s Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 96.

brought a close to the Eastern Front that winter, and the Corporal—and many others—believed the German Army was poised to win the war in the new year. But General Erich Ludendorff's massive Spring Offensive failed to deliver victory and resulted in over a million German casualties for no strategic gain.⁸⁹ Hitler forever blamed the failure of the *Kaiserschlacht* on a munitions strike in Berlin in January 1918, but the incident hardly made an impact compared with Germany's crippling disadvantages to the Allies in matériel and manpower. At this point in the war, hundreds of thousands of fresh American 'doughboys' were arriving in France each month.⁹⁰ In the Summer of 1918, the List Regiment participated in the Second Battle of the Marne—the final German Offensive of the First World War. Along with Ypres and the Somme, Hitler claimed in 1925 that this final campaign made “the most enormous impression of my life.”⁹¹ The Corporal and another runner received the Iron Cross First Class on August 4 at the nomination of a Jewish lieutenant, Hugo Gutmann. Surviving documents hinted that Hitler received the medal for delivering a message under fire, but no contemporary account of the circumstances behind the award survived.⁹² But according to many Germans who served in World War I, the Iron Cross often signified one's connections with administrative officers rather than valor on the battlefield. After the war, a veteran from a different unit claimed: “Among real front-line soldiers it has never been a secret that the Iron Cross and, in particular, the Bavarian honors could be earned far more easily with the staff's behind the front than in the trenches.”⁹³ Additionally, Hitler's officer friends, Amann and Wiedemann, tried to get Hitler the award on

⁸⁹ Graydon Tunstall, “The Military Collapse of the Central Powers,” 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated April 30, 2015, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/the_military_collapse_of_the_central_powers.

⁹⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 253-254.

⁹¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 259.

⁹² Kershaw, *Hubris*, 96.

⁹³ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 214.

several earlier occasions.⁹⁴ Regardless, Hitler felt immense pride in the commendation. But his war soon came to a bleak end.

The traumatizing final weeks of the Great War were integral to the Corporal's radicalization. Facing a major Allied breakthrough, and with hundreds of thousands of German soldiers defecting each week, supreme German generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff told Kaiser Wilhelm II the war was lost in late September 1918. They suggested that the German government seek peace.⁹⁵ Two weeks later, the British dropped a mustard gas barrage on the RIR 16 regimental HQ in the middle of the night. With the seal on his gas mask compromised, Hitler stumbled from his dugout and scratched at his eyes which "had turned into burning coals."⁹⁶ The field surgeons sent the Corporal, who suffered from temporary blindness and respiratory pain, to a hospital in Pasewalk. Hitler listened from his hospital bed as the German war effort collapsed. In early November, sailors of the German High Seas Fleet who took part in a left-leaning mutiny at the Kiel naval base pulled up in trucks and announced the beginning of a revolution. Hitler dismissed the sailors as just "a few Jew boys" but became uneasy when rumors of a general uprising in Berlin started to spread.⁹⁷ On November 10, the future *Führer* learned of "the greatest villainy of the century."⁹⁸ He provided a dramatized account of that day in *Mein Kampf*:

The dignified old gentleman seemed to tremble very much when he told us that now the House of Hohenzollern was no longer allowed to wear the German imperial crown, that the country had now become a 'republic,' and that now one should ask the Almighty not to deny His blessings upon this change and not to abandon our people in the time to come...The old gentleman tried to continue and began to tell us that now we had to end the long war, that even our fatherland would now be submitted to severe oppressions in

⁹⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁹⁵ Tunstall, "The Military Collapse of the Central Powers."

⁹⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 264.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 265.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the future, that now the war was lost and that we had to surrender to the mercy of the victors...that the armistice should be accepted with confidence in the generosity of our previous enemies...there I could stand it no more...I groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my cot and buried my burning head in the covers and pillows. I had not wept since the day I had stood at the grave of my mother...Was it for this that the German soldier had persevered in burning sun and in snowstorms, suffering hunger, thirst, and cold, tired by sleepless nights and endless marches? Was it for this that he had lain in the hell of drum fire and in the fever of gas attacks, without receding, always his sole duty in mind, to guard the fatherland against the distress from the enemy?⁹⁹

Like most of his fanatical manifesto, Hitler undoubtedly embellished parts of the story. But hearing the news of the Armistice was a devastating experience for someone upset by mildly defeatist jokes. Interpreting the capitulation as a betrayal, the Corporal could better justify his earlier prejudices against Germany's "inner internationalism." As leader of the Nazi Party, Hitler framed this moment as his political awakening. He claimed, "I became aware of my own destiny" and "resolved now to become a politician."¹⁰⁰ Too eccentric even for *Mein Kampf*, he claimed in several private conversations after the war that he received an otherworldly, mystical command that day to restore Germany's honor.¹⁰¹ Palpably fictitious, such claims nevertheless became central to the lore constructed around the *Führer*. The defeat put Hitler in the proper mindset for radicalization, but this transition occurred more gradually than he admitted.

For Hitler and many other Germans, the experience of the Great War did not end on November 11. Germany remained in a state of revolution and civil war for nearly a year. Contrary to Hitler's post-war claims that he became "aware of his destiny," the Armistice left the Corporal disoriented. He lost the "front family" he developed over four years, and with it, his sense of purpose. He walked out of the hospital on November 19, 1918, without a plan. After

⁹⁹ Ibid., 266-268.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 268-269.

¹⁰¹ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 103.

traversing nearly the whole length of Germany over two weeks by train and by foot, he joined Ernst Schmidt in Munich. According to his friend, the Corporal clung to life in the military (and the 40 marks salary it provided) for as long as possible. But the culture of the armed services changed considerably during the revolution. Soldiers' councils modeled on the soviets of the Russian Revolution now governed the German Army, which led to a breakdown of the hierarchical and disciplined structure Hitler was accustomed to. Nevertheless, the pair volunteered for a temporary assignment guarding a Russian POW camp in Traunstein until late January 1919 and then returned to work as laborers for the Munich garrison.¹⁰²

Contrary to Hitler's portrayal of himself as a resolute conservative and pan-Germanist by this point, his service in the Munich garrison signified his tacit acceptance of the government it represented. In Spring 1919, the garrison remained loyal to socialist revolutionary Kurt Eisner's new People's State of Bavaria. Socialist, Jewish, and one of the organizers of the wartime factory protests, Eisner matched the criteria of the so-called "November Criminals" that the Nazis blamed for sabotaging German victory in World War I. This perceived betrayal led conservative extremist Anton Graf von Arco to assassinate Eisner on February 22, 1919. But film of the leader's funeral procession showed Hitler and other members of the garrison marching beside Eisner's coffin in an act of reverence.¹⁰³ Furthermore, several documents from the garrison referred to Hitler as a *Vertrauensmann*—a position that involved disseminating the State's propaganda to the men of the unit.¹⁰⁴ Eisner's death led to the creation of a more radical communist regime in April 1919: the Bavarian Soviet Republic, or *Räterepublik*. Rather than defecting to the conservative paramilitary organizations known as the *Freikorps* like many

¹⁰² Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 94.

¹⁰³ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 251.

¹⁰⁴ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 118.

returning veterans, Hitler remained with the garrison and won a small election to become a deputy battalion representative on his unit's council. Possibly elected because he supported the old socialist government over the new communist leadership, Hitler urged his comrades to remain neutral when the forces of the *Freikorps* and the Weimar Republic's *Reichswehr* arrived to liquidate the revolutionary militia of the *Räterepublik* in May 1919.¹⁰⁵ Afterwards, however, he held a seat on a military commission investigating his comrades' conduct under the communist regime.¹⁰⁶ Once again, Hitler's political oscillations make it difficult to discern his pattern of beliefs at the time. He exhibited feelings of disenchantment and extremism, but they remained unchanneled and malleable. Hitler's position on the investigative commission not only allowed him to remain in uniform, it introduced him to ideas that furthered his ideological development.

The military served as the conduit that connected Hitler to his first political mentors and to precursor organizations to the Nazi Party. In May 1919, political officer and rightwing extremist Captain Karl Mayr took an interest in the Corporal because of the Iron Cross on his chest and his counterrevolutionary rhetoric on the commission. Intent on making Hitler an informer and military propagandist, Mayr assigned him to several brief courses on anti-Bolshevik political ideology at the University of Munich in June 1919.¹⁰⁷ Selected by Mayr, all the lecturers presented history and economics in a pan-Germanist, anti-Semitic framework. According to Hitler, these seminars allowed him to become "acquainted with some comrades who were of the same conviction and with whom I would then be able to discuss thoroughly the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ryback, *Hitler's Private Library*, 31.

situation of the moment.”¹⁰⁸ Lecturer Karl Alexander von Müller—who later became director of the Nazi Party’s Institute for Study of the Jewish Question—quickly identified Hitler as “a natural-born public speaker.”¹⁰⁹ Soon after, Captain Mayr ordered Hitler to teach his own indoctrination course at a military camp in Lechfeld. Over five days, Hitler hosted lectures that blamed Jews and Marxists for orchestrating not only German defeat but the entire Great War itself. One of the soldiers reported that Hitler, “through his fanaticism and his populist style in a meeting, absolutely compels his audience to take note and share his view.”¹¹⁰ The following month, Captain Mayr asked his pupil to draft a statement regarding “the Jewish question.” In his first surviving statement on the matter, Hitler concluded: “Antisemitism based on reason must lead to the systematic legal combating and removal of the rights of the Jew... Its final aim, however, must be the uncompromising removal of the Jews altogether.”¹¹¹ No longer responsible for carrying dispatches across the battlefield, the Corporal’s duties now included reporting on new political parties emerging in the Weimar Republic. Hitler was on military assignment when he walked into a meeting of the German Workers’ Party (DAP) for the first time on September 12, 1919. The corporal joined soon after.¹¹² Engrossed in his work for the organization’s propaganda wing, he no longer needed the military to provide him with a sense of direction. In March 1920, after 68 months in uniform, Hitler left the Army. He devoted himself to shaping the DAP—which soon morphed into the NSDAP: The National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) Party.

¹⁰⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 280.

¹⁰⁹ Ulrich, *Ascent*, 65.

¹¹⁰ Kershaw, *Hubris*, 124.

¹¹¹ Letter from Adolf Hitler to Adolf Gemlich, September 16, 1919, in German History in Documents and Images, German Historical Institute, http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=4809.

¹¹² Ulrich, *Ascent*, 68.

Chapter 6: Seeing the World Through “Glowing Coals”

The memory of the Great War loomed over every aspect of cultural and political life in the Weimar Republic. More than 13 million, or roughly one in five, Germans served in the armed services of the *Kaiserreich* between 1914 and 1918. Over 10.5 million held positions in the field. Of these, 2 million died and another 5 million suffered wounds—together representing 19 percent of the nation’s male population.¹¹³ Countless others left the war with unseen psychological trauma. Furthermore, the war polarized the German populace. Some returning soldiers aligned themselves with the naval mutineers at Kiel and the left-wing Spartacist movement. Others joined the ranks of the conservative *Freikorps* militia. Many veterans found themselves fighting people they considered comrades just months before. Divergent interpretations of the ubiquitous experience of the war developed in the following years. In 1929, former frontline lieutenant Ernst Jünger argued in his popular memoir, *Storm of Steel*, that the war prepared his generation “to venture boldly into friendship, love, politics, professions, into all that destiny had in store. It is not every generation that is so favored.”¹¹⁴ Shortly after, in his bestselling book *All Quiet on the Western Front*, combat veteran Erich Remarque conversely wrote of his generation: “We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost.”¹¹⁵ This disaffected and divided landscape did not make the rise of the Nazis inevitable. But Hitler and his cronies’ manipulation of the narrative of the conflict became an essential factor in their seizure of power.

¹¹³ Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8.

¹¹⁴ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), 317.

¹¹⁵ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York City: Little, Brown and Company, 1929), 123.

The understanding of the Great War as an ennobling experience of national rebirth stood as a central tenet of National Socialism. “It is no coincidence that National Socialism was conceived in the Great War,” Hitler said in 1939.¹¹⁶ According to the *Führer*, “What our party always sought to achieve” was “the building of a *Volksgemeinschaft* based on the experiences of the First World War.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, Reich Minister of Defense Werner von Blomberg explained in a 1934 article: “The fighting communities formed in the trenches of the World War, which Adolf Hitler made the foundation of the new *Volksgemeinschaft*, became the starting point for the great tradition which the *Wehrmacht*, as heir to the army of old, will carry on.”¹¹⁸ Clutching to the myth of *Frontgemeinschaft* that he and many other veterans believed in, Hitler claimed he would broaden this camaraderie to the entire German people through *Volksgemeinschaft*—or “people’s community.” According to Nazi theory, such martial solidarity would lead to the development of a classless society.¹¹⁹ This idea of unity, however, came at the expense of those Hitler blamed for Germany’s defeat in the Great War.

Although the “Stab-in-the-Back-Myth” or “*Dolchstoßlegende*,” which accused Jews, Social Democrats, and Marxists of betraying Germany during World War I, did not originate with Hitler and the Nazis, they became its most fervent proponents. The German High Command popularized the myth after the failure of the final German offensives in 1918.¹²⁰ General

¹¹⁶ Adolf Hitler, “Address at the First Greater German Reich Warriors’ Convention” (speech, Kassel, June 4, 1939), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 1632.

¹¹⁷ Adolf Hitler, “Volk Rally Opening the *Kriegswinterhilfswerk*” (speech, Berlin, September 20, 1942), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2582.

¹¹⁸ Excerpt from Werner von Blomberg’s article in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, June 28, 1934, in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 1, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 467.

¹¹⁹ Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 39.

¹²⁰ Boris Bath, “Stab-in-the-back Myth,” 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/stab-in-the-back_myth.

Ludendorff, for example, concluded that “not the enemy, but our political leadership broke down the power of our military command, and consequently of the nation.”¹²¹ The notes Hitler made in preparation for his 1920 DAP speeches revealed how he understood the matter. Writing in a disjointed, shorthand style, Hitler explained: “The instigators of the war, the instigators of the German defeat, the instigators of the revolution, the instigators of the Armistice, the instigators of the peace treaty are the same as the instigators of Russian Bolshevism: Western and Eastern Jews.”¹²² These theories had no basis in fact. Without the rationing organized by the War Raw Materials Department—founded by Jewish industrialist Walther Rathenau in 1914—the German military would have collapsed years before 1918.¹²³ The 1916 military census revealed that Jewish servicemen participated in combat roles at a higher rate than other Germans.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the sailors at Kiel did not revolt because of Jewish agitation but rather in retaliation to their officers’ plans to launch a final suicide mission against the combined Allied fleet to restore their honor.¹²⁵ But radicals such as Hitler and Ludendorff exploited existing prejudice to scapegoat Jews as so-called “November Criminals.” The idea that a Jewish conspiracy led to the Treaty of Versailles also became an important element of Nazi demagoguery.

Despite the divisions of Weimar Society, the Treaty of Versailles inspired universal dread among the German people. Ratified by the principal Allied powers—except the United States—without German input a year after the end of hostilities, the Treaty shrunk Germany’s borders,

¹²¹ Erich Ludendorff, “The New German Government,” in *Source Records of the Great War*, Vol. 7, ed. by Charles F. Horne (New York: National Alumni, 1923), 81.

¹²² Hitler’s miscellaneous speech notes, 1919-1920, in *Hitler’s Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 245.

¹²³ “Walther Rathenau,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walther-Rathenau>.

¹²⁴ Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 150.

¹²⁵ Mark Jones, “Kiel Mutiny,” 1914-1918 Online, *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, updated May 19, 2016, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/kiel_mutiny.

stripped it of its overseas colonies, and restricted the size of its armed forces. Additionally, Article 231 placed guilt on the Germans for starting the war and levied unprecedented financial reparations. Hitler approached the “monstrous peace” from a populist angle in his speech notes. He complained that reparations “were paid not in ‘money’ but in goods not by the capitalists but by the workers.” Thus, “the worker and the small man suffer twice over.”¹²⁶ Nazi rhetoric also sought to siphon outrage over the Treaty and redirect it towards the Jewish community. “The great question, what is the object???” Hitler wrote. His answer: “[The Treaty’s] object is to convert Germany into a colony of international capitalism” and “to soften Germany up for Bolshevism or rather for Jewish dictatorship.”¹²⁷ For this reason, the former Corporal stated that “the will, the aim of the German Workers’ Party” was “to break the Treaty.”¹²⁸ Since it conveyed both a sense of victimhood and the “Stab-in-the-Back” myth, retaliation to the Treaty of Versailles dominated Hitler’s early oration. Nearly half of his addresses in 1920 dealt explicitly with the Great War and its aftermath, but he also touched on these themes in many of his other remarks.¹²⁹ Many veterans found these ideas compelling, including Ludendorff, who aided the Nazis’ failed coup in Munich in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler distilled this patchwork of National Socialist principles, anti-Semitic tropes, and reactionary attitudes to the Treaty of Versailles by doctoring his own personal history.

The release of *Mein Kampf* in 1925 further entrenched Hitler’s interpretation of the war in Nazi thinking. Published with assistance from Max Amann—Hitler’s former sergeant who became the first business manager of the Nazi Party and the head of its publishing house—the

¹²⁶ Hitler’s miscellaneous speech notes, 1919-1920, 269, 271.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 337-339.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 277.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 217.

book generalized about how Germans responded to the war. Specifically, Hitler claimed that “the fight of the year 1914 was certainly not forced upon the masses but desired by the entire people itself,” and that most of his comrades volunteered for service as he did.¹³⁰ In reality, however, more than 70 percent of the men in Hitler’s regiment were either conscripts or reservists—not enlistees.¹³¹ Historian Jay Winter argued that despite enduring in German cultural memory for decades, the idea of “exhilarated patriotism in August 1914 as a collective phenomenon is a myth” that those in power consciously created through orchestrated “photos of student rallies or urban crowds in the capital.”¹³² Nevertheless, the illusion of national solidarity aligned with Nazi notions of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Hitler also used *Mein Kampf* to reiterate the culpability of the “November Criminals” for Germany’s defeat, writing of the Armistice:

Would [the graves] not open up and send the silent heroes, covered in mud and blood, home as spirits of revenge, to the country that had so mockingly cheated them of the highest sacrifice which in this world man is able to bring to his people? Was it for this that they had died, the soldiers of August and September 1914, was it for this that boys of seventeen sank into Flanders Fields? Was that the meaning of the sacrifice which the German mother brought to the fatherland when in those days, with an aching heart, she let her most beloved boys go away, never to see them again? Was it all for this that now a handful of miserable criminals was allowed to lay hands on the fatherland?¹³³

The passage implied that while “a handful of miserable criminals” carried out the betrayal, the German people bore responsibility for failing to stop the conspiracy. The Nazi demagogue thus placed the burden of redeeming the sacrifice of the two million German soldiers who died on his readers. One could either accept the meaninglessness of his or her sacrifice or give it purpose by

¹³⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 210.

¹³¹ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 18.

¹³² Jay Winter, *Remembering War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 105; Winter notes that this glorification of the war became a common practice in the culture of Weimar Germany. Several times between 1916 and 1941, for instance, German poetic scholar Philipp Witkop edited and republished a popular anthology of letters from German soldiers who died in the Great War entitled *Kriegsbriefe deutscher Studenten*. Many historians believe Witkop edited out parts of the source letters that revealed soldiers’ disillusionment or that depicted the obscene elements of combat (Ibid.).

¹³³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 267-268.

supporting Nazi efforts to “revitalize” the Reich. As part of this vengeful appeal, the future *Führer* justified the persecution of those he deemed traitors. “If, at the beginning of the war and during the war,” Hitler argued, “twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebraic corrupters of the nation had been subjected to poison gas... then the sacrifice of millions at the front would not have been in vain.”¹³⁴ But such a simple “solution” could never solve the material, strategic, and industrial deficiencies that led to German defeat. He used similar deception in *Mein Kampf* to establish his own personal mythology.

Hitler frequently embellished details of his career in the Great War for political gain. In *Mein Kampf*, for instance, he never revealed that he served as a dispatch runner. Instead, the former Corporal hinted that he continued to fight in the trenches through 1918. After sustaining his shrapnel wound at the Somme, Hitler claimed he “had the luck of being able to get *back* to our lines,” which suggested that he fought in No Man’s Land.¹³⁵ In reality, the incident occurred at the regimental HQ 2 kilometers behind the German line. Hitler also refrained from describing the events that led to his two Iron Cross medals in *Mein Kampf*. Party officials even expunged the original documents regarding his nomination from the military archives.¹³⁶ The secrecy did not prevent Nazi propagandists from speculating. One Party account claimed that during the Second Battle of the Marne, the Corporal took a dozen British soldiers prisoner using only a pistol.¹³⁷ Party literature exaggerated Hitler’s soldierly exploits regularly to uphold the façade of the *Führer*. A 1935 Nazi children’s book, for example, claimed that Hitler “was always one of the bravest soldiers in every battle” and that “because he was so brave and dependable, he was

¹³⁴ Ibid., 984.

¹³⁵ Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (James Murphy translation), 247.

¹³⁶ Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 92.

¹³⁷ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 216-217.

made a dispatch runner.” Additionally, it claimed he “courageously and quietly” performed this “very dangerous job.”¹³⁸ The measures the Nazis took to craft his wartime story revealed its importance to his image. When fewer than 700 copies of the second volume of *Mein Kampf* sold in 1926, Hitler planned to publish a nonpolitical book about his war experiences, expecting that it would have broader appeal. He wrote enough of the manuscript for his publisher to set a 1927 publishing date, but Hitler abandoned the project for unknown reasons.¹³⁹ Nazi officials believed that Hitler’s service in the Great War resonated with the public enough for them to begin financing and publishing the memoirs of those who had served alongside the Corporal. In 1931, former List Regiment dispatch runner Hans Mend—with help from a Nazi ghost-writer—released *Adolf Hitler im Felde 1914-1918*. The memoir described the Corporal as a “courageous, fearless, outstanding” soldier who “performed superhuman feats in a dangerous and responsible position.”¹⁴⁰ These idealized accounts of heroism strengthened Hitler’s credibility as he accumulated power.

Nevertheless, Hitler’s service record remained a matter of personal insecurity. After the former Corporal announced his candidacy in the 1932 German presidential election, many started questioning his experiences in the war. Several frontline veterans of the List Regiment disparaged the candidate, calling him an “*Etappenschwein*,” or “rear-area pig.”¹⁴¹ These conflicting perspectives filtered into the mainstream press. Austrian journalist Ewon Kisch, for instance, wrote:

Every old soldier knows that the (somewhat derided) rank of lance corporal is only brief and temporary, only a preliminary to (more senior) noncommissioned rank.... The

¹³⁸ Ibid., 93.

¹³⁹ SS agents burned the manuscript along with the *Führer*’s other personal documents in Spring 1945; Ryback, *Hitler’s Private Library*, 79-84.

¹⁴⁰ Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 74-75.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Weber, “Hitler, Adolf,” 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated January 11, 2015, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/hitler_adolf.

nonpromotion of this eternally unpromoted lance corporal would seem still more grotesque if he had really been awarded the Iron Cross First Class, no evidence of which was found in his paybook aside from a scribbled entry; neither the recommendation nor the citation. Hitler...never breathes a word about the feat of arms for which he won the order.¹⁴²

The Corporal's illusion threatened to collapse. Hitler not only saw the mockery of his military exploits as a personal slight but as a political liability. The candidate also tried to silence dissenting List Regiment veterans with legal action, which prompted an objection from his friend and former dispatch runner Ferdinand Widman. In a letter to his comrade, Widman urged restraint: "It cannot be ignored that life was indeed better at regimental headquarters than with a company.... You are not to be held responsible for your residence in the basement of the monastery in Messines, or in the secure shelters in Fromelles and Fournes."¹⁴³ Hitler did not listen.

Nazi propagandists churned out campaign literature to counter the rumors. With hundreds of thousands of copies circulating throughout the Weimar Republic during the first electoral round in March 1932, one pamphlet entitled, *Adolf Hitler: German Worker and Front Soldier*, discounted claims that the candidate shirked his duty in the Austrian military and reaffirmed his service record.¹⁴⁴ A few weeks later, during the second round, the Party passed out another flyer regarding "*Facts and Lies about Hitler*." It included a section with testimonials from eight List Regiment veterans—all of whom were members of the regimental HQ, personal friends of Hitler, or had preexisting ties to the party—that corroborated the Corporal's war stories.¹⁴⁵

Ultimately, incumbent President Hindenburg beat Hitler by 16 points. The former Field Marshal

¹⁴² Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 91-92.

¹⁴³ Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 106.

¹⁴⁴ Pamphlet entitled "Adolf Hitler: German Worker and Front Soldier," March 1932, from German Propaganda Archive, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/adolfhitler-frontsoldat.htm>.

¹⁴⁵ Pamphlet entitled "Facts and Lies about Hitler," April 1932, from German Propaganda Archive, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/tatsachenundluegen.htm>.

and head of the German Army brushed off Hitler's demand for the chancellorship as a request from a mere "Bohemian corporal."¹⁴⁶ After a less successful election the following year, Hindenburg relented and made Hitler chancellor with the belief that he could control the Corporal.

As Hitler solidified control over Germany, he continued his efforts to glorify the Great War. In a ceremony on March 12, 1933, for Germany's annual *Volstrauertag*—a "Day of National Mourning" for those who perished in the Great War—the new Chancellor declared his intention to strengthen the German military. He also renamed the holiday "*Heldengedenktage*," meaning "Heroes' Memorial Day."¹⁴⁷ Nine days later, thousands of uniformed members of the nation's largest veteran's organization, *Stahlhelm*, marched alongside SA stormtroopers and SS personnel in a torchlight parade celebrating the opening of the new Reichstag building.¹⁴⁸ Hitler understood the power that symbols of the Great War had over his constituency. In an attempt to reach out to the industrial working class after the Nazis abolished all labor unions in May 1933, the Chancellor invoked his military service at the first congress of the new, Party-controlled German Labor Front:

I have now come to know these poorest sons for four and a half years as musketeers in the Great World War; I came to know those who perhaps had nothing to gain for themselves, and who were heroes simply by virtue of the call of their blood, out of a belonging to their Volk....This unshakeable Guard which stood firm in countless battles, which never wavered and never yielded, which gave us a thousand demonstrations of tremendous courage, of faith, of willingness to sacrifice, of discipline, and of obedience, is one we must conquer for the State, one we must win over for the coming German

¹⁴⁶ "Paul Von Hindenburg," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/paul-von-hindenburg>.

¹⁴⁷ Appendix in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 2, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 1280.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Reich.... [The German Labor Front] is perhaps one of the most valuable things we can give this Guard.¹⁴⁹

Once again, Hitler presented his policies as a means of redeeming the sacrifices of the Great War. The fact that he emphasized the need to “win over” this “unshakeable Guard” captured the enduring importance of World War I veterans in the Third Reich. Hitler’s annotations in his copy of Ernst Jünger’s *Fire Blood* and his letters of praise to the author indicated his preference for a glorified portrayal of the war.¹⁵⁰ By contrast, because of its pacifist commentary on the conflict, copies of *All Quiet on the Western Front* burned in bonfires at Nazi rallies in May 1933. Nazis also released white mice and sneezing powder in movie theaters to disrupt screenings of the film version of the novel. Furthermore, unable to silence Remarque after he fled the country in 1939, the Nazis convicted the author’s sister of defeatism and beheaded her in 1943.¹⁵¹ Gaining additional authority when he became *Führer* upon Hindenburg’s death in 1934, Hitler treated those who undermined his war record with similar ruthlessness. In 1936, Mend began to contradict his earlier praise for the *Führer* and started to spread rumors that Hitler had a sexual relationship with Schmidt. At Hitler’s direction, the *Gestapo* framed Mend for pedophilia and imprisoned him in an insane asylum, where he died under suspicious circumstances in 1942.¹⁵² Not only did Hitler promote his veteran persona within the Third Reich, he used it in international diplomacy.

The *Führer* referenced his experiences in the First World War often to mask his expansionist foreign policy that eventually sparked the Second World War. Ironically, he

¹⁴⁹ Adolf Hitler, “Address to the First Congress of the German Labor Front” (speech, Berlin, May 10, 1933), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 1, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 321-322.

¹⁵⁰ Ryback, *Hitler’s Private Library*, 80-81.

¹⁵¹ “Erich Maria Remarque: In Depth,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/erich-maria-remarque-in-depth>.

¹⁵² Machtan, *Hidden Hitler*, 82, 86.

adopted a similar tone to the pacifists he silenced. In his first address of 1934, for example, Hitler tried to assuage international concerns over Germany's resurgence and claimed that above all he wanted to avoid "future bloodshed, which we former soldiers of the World War can envision only as a new catastrophe of the nations in a Europe which has gone mad."¹⁵³ He reiterated this claim in a speech before the Reichstag four weeks later, explaining that as a "witness of the horrors of the Great War," he had no "desire to once more put the forces of the nations to the test on the battlefield, an act which necessarily would result in international chaos."¹⁵⁴ The memories of these "horrors," however, did not stop Hitler from reinstituting mass conscription the following year in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler also reflected on the years 1914-1918 when he received the British Minister of Aviation in 1936 amid controversy over the growing *Luftwaffe*. Referencing the Germanic ancestry of the Anglo-Saxons, the *Führer* said: "How often did I say to myself during the World War...lying across from the English troops, that it was absolute madness to combat these people who could be members of our own Volk....Such a thing must never be repeated!"¹⁵⁵ Through the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938, and the Sudetenland Crisis a few months later, Hitler reiterated that no veteran of the Great War would risk starting another global conflict. When the *Wehrmacht* appeared to be preparing for an invasion of Poland in the summer of 1939, French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier tried to remind Hitler of his pledge to avoid another war. Appealing to the *Führer* as a fellow "soldier in the last war," Daladier wrote in an August 26

¹⁵³ Adolf Hitler, "New Year's Proclamation to the National Socialists and Party Comrades" (speech, Berlin, January 1, 1934), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 1, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 411.

¹⁵⁴ Adolf Hitler, "Reichstag Address" (speech, Berlin, January 30, 1934), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 1, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 428.

¹⁵⁵ Adolf Hitler, "Remarks at Meeting with Lord Londonderry" (speech, Berlin, February 4, 1936), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 2, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 748.

letter: “If the blood of France and of Germany flows again, as it did twenty-five years ago...the most certain victors will be the forces of destruction and barbarism.”¹⁵⁶ The former Corporal did not heed Daladier’s warning. Six days later, German tanks rolled into Poland.

From its beginning, Hitler treated the Second World War as a continuation of its predecessor. In his first wartime message to the *Wehrmacht* on September 3, 1939, the *Führer* addressed his men not only as their “Supreme Commander” but also “as an old soldier of the World War.”¹⁵⁷ He assured them that their “plutocratic opponents will soon learn that another Germany faces them today than in the year 1914.”¹⁵⁸ The Germans defeated the Poles with ease before pivoting west in May 1940. Many Germans feared a repeat of the static trench warfare on the Western Front, but new *Blitzkrieg* tactics and poor French morale allowed the *Wehrmacht* to conquer France in just six weeks. The first two days of June, followed by photographers and film crews, Hitler, Schmidt and Amann made a pilgrimage to the graves of List Regiment men in the Langemarck Cemetery near Ypres and to several World War I battlefields. Hitler spent more time touring these old Western Front sites than he did in Paris three weeks later. The Corporal later said of his visit to Vimy Ridge:

In the present campaign I got my greatest surprise when I revisited Arras. In the old days it was just a mound of earth. And now! Fields filled with blossom and waving corn, while on Vimy Ridge the scars are much as they were, shell holes and all. I believe it is much the same in the Champagne. The soldier has a boundless affection for the ground on which he has shed his blood. If we could arrange the transport, we should have a million people pouring into France to revisit the scenes of their former struggle.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Édouard Daladier to Adolf Hitler, August 26, 1939, in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 1699.

¹⁵⁷ Adolf Hitler, “Appeal to the *Wehrmacht*” (speech, Berlin, September 3, 1939), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 1784-1785.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Bob Caruthers, *Private Hitler’s War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2014), 124.

The propaganda that developed around the visit sought to remind the soldiers of the Third Reich that their leader risked his life to defeat the same enemy they now faced. He demanded they do the same. Each mile the panzer divisions covered as they encircled Paris and Dunkirk alleviated some of their nation's humiliation from 22 years before.

To Hitler, victory over the French in 1940 vindicated his defeat in 1918. He made this sentiment clear at the surrender ceremony on June 22, 1940. The *Führer* selected the same venue for the signing of the second armistice as the first: a clearing in the Compiègne Forest. Members of the SS took the same train car in which German diplomats signed the 1918 Armistice from a museum and placed it on the same section of track.¹⁶⁰ Sitting in the same chair that Supreme Allied Commander Ferdinand Foch sat in at the end of the Great War, Hitler presented his preamble for the new armistice:

Trusting in the assurances extended to the German Reich by the American President Wilson and affirmed by the Allied Powers, the German Wehrmacht laid down its arms in November 1918. Thereby the war was brought to an end that neither the German Volk nor its Government had desired... With the very arrival of the German armistice delegation began the breach of the solemnly given promise. Also, on November 11, 1918, a time of suffering for the German Volk began. From here on, what could be done to a people in terms of degradation and humiliation, of human and material suffering, was done. Broken promises and perjury raised their ugly heads against a people who after a four-year-long heroic resistance, had succumbed to just one weakness: believing in the promises of democratic statesmen. On September 2, 1939—twenty-five years after the outbreak of the World War—Britain and France once more declared war on Germany without reason. Now the weapons have decided. France is vanquished.... When the historic Forest of Compiègne was selected for the presentation of these terms this happened so that this act of atoning justice would erase a memory—once and for all—which composed no page of glory in the history of France and which the German Volk felt to be the greatest disgrace of all time.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 741-743.

¹⁶¹ Armistice Preamble, June 22, 1940, in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2025.

Once his general finished reading the preamble, Hitler walked out of the car—just as Foch did in 1918.¹⁶² The preamble represented the former Corporal's attempt to redefine the narrative of the Great War permanently. It absolved Germany for starting the war. According to this new rendering, the Entente Powers never defeated the Reich. Instead, they deceived the German people into a temporary cease-fire. The second armistice aimed not just to “erase” the grief of the Germans but to reverse it. The *Führer* wanted the French to suffer the same pain he felt in the Pasewalk hospital.

Although the setting and preamble of the second armistice revealed how Hitler understood the World Wars as a single event, he also explicitly stated the idea in his public addresses. Hitler explained in a speech at the Munich Löwenbräukeller on November 8, 1941, “[The Great War] was only the beginning, the first part of this drama. The second part and the end are now being written.”¹⁶³ Once again, he invoked the memory of the 2 million German soldiers who died during the Great War: “The hour will come when we can step up to the graves of the fallen of the Great War and we can say: Comrades, you did not die in vain...! We will be able to pronounce with a thousandfold greater right in front of the graves of our World War soldiers: Comrades, you won after all!”¹⁶⁴ With this goal in mind, the *Führer* sent a new generation of young Germans “to rest in the same graves in which their fathers have rested since the Great War.”¹⁶⁵ Whether he truly believed in these sentiments or saw them merely as a rhetorical tool, these remarks helped popularize a narrative of continuity.

¹⁶² Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 743.

¹⁶³ Adolf Hitler, “Address on the Anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch” (speech, Munich, November 8, 1941), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2514.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Adolf Hitler, “Reichstag Address” (speech, Berlin, July 19, 1940), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2063.

The former Corporal often pointed out that the Germans faced not only the same countries as they did in 1918, but also the same leaders. In several speeches in 1940, he argued that those who controlled Britain in World War II—namely Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper, Anthony Eden, and Neville Chamberlain—were “capitalist war agitators” in 1914.¹⁶⁶ Hitler, by contrast, noted that he was an “inconspicuous, ordinary soldier” who was “in no way responsible for the Great War.”¹⁶⁷ He claimed to “know what it means to be fired at by others without being able to shoot back,” as well as “what it means to always be beaten by the other side.”¹⁶⁸ This analysis was imprecise considering Eden, Cooper, and Churchill all fought in the Great War, ironically, near Ypres around the same time as Hitler. Furthermore, Eden did not hold any government office until five years after the Great War. Nevertheless, the *Führer* claimed that his “wholehearted faith in the German people” came from this knowledge “of the ordinary man in the trenches”¹⁶⁹ Conversely, his opponents merely sought self-enrichment. He made the same argument about Franklin Roosevelt after American entry into World War II in 1941. When he declared war on the United States in a speech before the Reichstag, Hitler claimed that Roosevelt experienced the Great War “from the point of view of the profiteer.”¹⁷⁰ Consequently, the American president only knew “the pleasant consequences of the confrontation of people and states, reserved for the man who makes deals where others bleed to death.”¹⁷¹ By comparison,

¹⁶⁶ Adolf Hitler, “Address at *Hofbräuhaus*” (speech, Munich, February 24, 1940), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 3, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 1937.

¹⁶⁷ Adolf Hitler, “Address at Rheinmetall-Borsig Works” (speech, Berlin, December 10, 1940), Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/TheSpeechesOfAdolfHitler19211941/page/n105/mode/2up/search/to+have+any+ammunit ion>.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Adolf Hitler, “Address Declaring War on the United States” (speech, Berlin, December 11, 1941), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2542.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Hitler “did not belong to the men who make history or deals” and returned home poor.¹⁷² The former Corporal argued that he “shared the fate of millions of others,” whereas “Mr. Roosevelt shared the fate of the so-called upper ten thousand.”¹⁷³ Similarly, in a November 1942 address, Hitler said: “The enemies are the same as before; the same enemies as in the past.”¹⁷⁴ In both wars, he argued, Germany faced a “Jewish-infected” American President: “Back then, his name was Wilson; today, it is Roosevelt.”¹⁷⁵ In reality, Roosevelt was Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the Great War—not the industrialist war profiteer that Hitler imagined. But Hitler used these attacks to undermine the credibility of the Allied leaders while simultaneously strengthening his own.

Just as the war factored into his public image, it also manifested in his private life. Hitler’s personal adjutant and former List Regiment veteran Fritz Wiedemann claimed that the *Führer*’s entourage always avoided bringing up his time in the Great War after his nightly movie screenings because it meant they would have “to listen to him until 3:00AM.”¹⁷⁶ Regardless, the former Corporal often broached the topic himself. Usually these monologues romanticized his four years on the Western Front. Late in the evening of January 22, 1942, for instance, he went into a long rant about his wartime dog, Foxl. “It was crazy how fond I was of the beast,” Hitler mused.¹⁷⁷ He remembered studying the dog’s “clouded eyes” and thinking “that images of the past [were] chasing each other through [Foxl’s] memory.”¹⁷⁸ Similarly, the Second World War

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Adolf Hitler, “Address on the Anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch” (speech, Munich, November 8th, 1942), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2696.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 294.

¹⁷⁷ Dinner party monologue given by Adolf Hitler, January 22-23, 1942, 232-233.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

made “images of the past” chase through the *Führer*’s mind. After watching a newsreel that depicted the German advances on the Eastern Front in 1941, Hitler told his dinner guests:

The revelation that her encounter with her first man is for a young woman, can be compared with the revelation that a soldier knows when he faces war for the first time. In a few days, a youth becomes a man. If I weren’t myself hardened by this experience, I would have been incapable of undertaking this Cyclopean task which the building of an Empire means for a single man. It was with feelings of pure idealism that I set out for the front in 1914. Then I saw men falling around me in thousands. Thus, I learnt that life is a cruel struggle, and has no other object but the preservation of the species.¹⁷⁹

Even in this private setting, Hitler indulged in his personal mythology. Just as he did in *Mein Kampf*, he described the Great War as his point of personal genesis—the period of his coming of age. Fighting in battle, the *Führer* claimed, provided him with the enlightenment necessary to build the Third Reich singlehandedly. Such claims reinforced the interpretation of combat as a sacred experience that granted unique wisdom. As Hitler’s conduct in World War II demonstrated, however, this belief could also lead to arrogance.

More important to the outcome of World War II, the memory of the Great War affected Hitler’s decisions as commander-in-chief of the *Wehrmacht*. He looked to the exploits of the Imperial German Army between 1914 and 1918 as a metric for the performance of his own forces in World War II. This tendency fostered his ego during the early successes of the *Wehrmacht* in Poland, France, and the Soviet Union. “I should not wish to criticize the past unless I have myself done a better job,” Hitler stated in a speech on January 30, 1941, “however, as a man who has done a better job, I can critically appraise the past and judge it. And I can only say: the success of the year 1918 is the exclusive result of a rare accumulation of personal

¹⁷⁹ Dinner party monologue given by Adolf Hitler, September 25-26, 1941, in *Hitler Table Talk*, ed. Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2000), 43-44.

incompetence in the leadership of our *Volk*.”¹⁸⁰ No longer were the supposed “November Criminals” solely responsible for the collapse of the Second Reich, so too were the Kaiser and his generals. But the legacy of the Western Front misguided Hitler when his forces lost momentum. After the 2nd Panzer Army’s assault on Moscow stalled in December 1941, General Heinz Guderian asked Hitler to allow for a retreat to a better winter position. Instead, the *Führer* ordered him to repeat the strategy of blasting defensive craters used at Flanders in World War I. Although Guderian explained the tactic would not work on five feet of frozen topsoil and would cost many German lives, Hitler brushed him aside and said he was “entitled to ask any German soldier to lay down his life.”¹⁸¹ The former dispatch runner often overrode his advisors, claiming his experience in the trenches gave him special knowledge of strategy. When the Chief of Staff of the Army High Command, Franz Halder, urged Hitler to make another strategic retreat near Rzhev on the Eastern Front in 1942 or risk a collapse in morale, the *Führer* refused, shouting: “What can you who sat in the same chair in the First World War, too, tell me about the troops?”¹⁸² These poor decisions further weakened the *Wehrmacht*’s effectiveness in the field. Additionally, Hitler’s delusion regarding the “November Criminals” reemerged as he orchestrated the Holocaust. In a 1941 meeting regarding the “Final Solution,” he told Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich: “This criminal race has the two million dead of the World War on its conscience...It’s good when the horror precedes us that we are exterminating Jewry.”¹⁸³ As many as twelve out of the 49 Jewish veterans of the List Regiment died in the former

¹⁸⁰ Adolf Hitler, “Address on the 8th Anniversary of the *Machtergreifung*” (speech, January 30, 1941), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2360.

¹⁸¹ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 454.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁸³ Weber, *Hitler’s First War*, 331.

Corporal's camps.¹⁸⁴ The persecution of millions of Jews across Europe, however, did not prevent Hitler's defeat.

As he clung to hopes of victory as Allied armies closed in on the Third Reich, the *Führer* again looked back on the years 1914-1918. To justify the *Wehrmacht*'s stagnation at Stalingrad in November 1942, Hitler claimed: "I do not want a second Verdun. I prefer to do it with very small assault parties. Time makes no difference here."¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, after three months, the German Army suffered one of its biggest defeats of the war along the banks of the Volga. But whereas the Kaiser gave up at a "quarter to twelve" – meaning before full exhaustion – Hitler said he ended "in principle always at five past twelve."¹⁸⁶ Hitler declared in a 1942 speech:

I do not doubt for one second that we will win. It was not in vain that Providence has had me stride forth along the long path from the unknown soldier of the World War to the *Führer* of the German nation, to the *Führer* of the German *Wehrmacht*. It has not done this only in order suddenly to take away again all we had to struggle so hard for, as if it were only for the fun of it.¹⁸⁷

The address reasserted that service in the Great War marked the beginning of the *Führer*'s fate-ordained trajectory. The former Corporal internalized a myth of his own creation. He refused to imagine a repeat of 1918. "The National Socialist state leadership is therefore determined to wage this war with the utmost fanaticism to the bitter end," Hitler told his Reich on January 1, 1944, "In this, it will differ from the weak and cowardly leadership of the German nation in the

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Adolf Hitler, "Address on the Anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch" (speech, Munich, November 8th, 1942), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2701.

¹⁸⁶ Kershaw, *Nemesis*, 540.

¹⁸⁷ Adolf Hitler, "Address to Officer Candidates" (speech, Berlin, May 30, 1942), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2640.

[First] World War.”¹⁸⁸ That summer, he tried to salvage his triumph by unleashing V-1 and V-2 missiles on Allied cities. Expensive and few, these “Victory Weapons” failed to make a strategic impact. German General Günther Blumentritt saw a similarity between this terror-bombing and Ludendorff’s final campaigns in 1918, writing, “When the documents of this period are carefully studied, it seems likely that Hitler will be seen to have been thinking in terms of the great March offensive of 1918 in the First World War.”¹⁸⁹ But the Germans’ final efforts in 1945 proved just as frivolous as they did 27 years prior. But unlike in the First World War, the Allies fought for an unconditional surrender.

The former Corporal could not tolerate a third armistice. In March 1945, Hitler ordered SS operatives to blow up the train carriage used for the surrenders of 1918 and 1940.¹⁹⁰ The symbolic gesture did not stop the advancing Red Army. Within the *Führerbunker* beneath the Reich Chancellery at 4:00AM on April 29, 1945, Hitler dictated his final will and political testament. He began: “More than thirty years have passed since 1914 when I made my modest contribution as a volunteer in the First World War, which was forced upon the Reich. In these three decades love and loyalty to my people have guided all my thoughts, actions, and my life... In these three decades I have spent my strength and my health.”¹⁹¹ Even as he announced the end of his personal story, he presented his service in the Great War as its beginning. He also argued for the last time that he never “wished that, after the appalling First World War, there would be a second against England or America” – an ironic claim considering how often he spoke of the two

¹⁸⁸ Adolf Hitler, “New Year’s Proclamation” (speech, Berlin, January 1, 1944), in *The Complete Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, vol. 4, ed. Max Domarus (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1990), 2860.

¹⁸⁹ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 317.

¹⁹⁰ “The Armistice Carriage,” Mémorial de l’Armistice, accessed April 26, 2020, <https://armistice-museum.com/the-armistice-carriage/>.

¹⁹¹ Political Testament of 1945 written by Adolf Hitler, April 29, 1945, in *Hitler’s Letters and Notes*, ed. Werner Maser (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 346, 349.

wars as the same conflict.¹⁹² Hitler's inclusion of these reflections in his final piece of writing demonstrated the Great War's enduring sway over the former dispatch runner's psyche. The following day, with the Soviets only several hundred yards away, Corporal Hitler swallowed a cyanide tablet and shot himself.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Part Three

The Farmer

“I have done as you would do in the field when the Commander falls. My duties and responsibilities are clear. I have assumed them. These duties will be carried on in keeping with our American tradition. As a veteran of the First World War, I have seen death on the battlefield. When I fought in France with the 35th Division, I saw good officers and men fall, and be replaced... I know the strain, the mud, the misery, the utter weariness of the soldier in the field.”

-President Harry S. Truman, First Broadcast to American Armed Forces, April 17, 1945

On May 22, 1917, roughly 1,000 national guardsmen of the 2nd Missouri Field Artillery gathered for the first time in the Kansas City Convention Hall. Inspired by the congressional declaration of war against the Central Powers in response to German commencement of unrestricted submarine warfare, nearly half of the men volunteered for service within the previous month.¹ Among those who helped assemble the loose association of civilian soldiers was Corporal Harry Truman. Over 33-years-old with a thick pair of spectacles, several years of experience as a peacetime guardsman, and a belief in the American cause, the Corporal recruited many of the men present in the auditorium that day himself. As customary in the National Guard at the time, members of each newly formed artillery battery elected their officers. Given his role in organizing the regiment and his previous experience, Truman hoped to become a sergeant. Much to his surprise, the men instead selected him to serve as the commissioned junior first lieutenant of Battery F.² On the first day of his participation in the Great War, the future President of the United States won the first election of his life.

The ensuing two years proved one of the most influential periods in Truman's life for several reasons. Confined to farm life in rural Missouri before the war, the future president had ambitions and a desire for adventure but lacked the opportunity to pursue them. Military service not only allowed him to see more of the world than he ever imagined, it placed him in a position of leadership for the first time. Furthermore, the friends and personal connections he forged in combat contributed to his early political rise and remained his closest associates through his presidency and the end of his life. Memories of the Great War also frequently reemerged in his

¹ Jay Lee, *The Artilleryman: The Experiences and Impressions of an American Artillery Regiment in the World War* (Kansas City: Spencer Printing Company, 1920), 14.

² Harry Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, *Year of Decisions* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1965 [1955]), 128.

personal reflections as well as in his political rhetoric and policies. Analyzing these phases before, during, and after the war reveals how a brief period of two years of active service and only three months of combat became a pivotal component of the President's identity.

Chapter 7: “Stirred in Heart and Soul”

Unable to participate in athletics or schoolyard games as a child because of his fragile glasses, Harry Truman found solace in the study of history. He allegedly read all the books in the Independence Library by the time he turned 13, including several encyclopedia series. His favorites, he later recalled, focused on the “lives of soldiers and statesman,” ranging from Caesar and Alexander the Great to the First Duke of Marlborough and Robert E. Lee.³ The future President noted how so many of these monumental figures “left empires and kingdoms to be destroyed and fought over by unworthy descendants.”⁴ One of Truman's favorite books was *Life of Napoleon*—the true story of a lowly artillery officer on the fringes of his country who later became emperor of France.⁵ At the time, Truman did not know his life would follow a similar trajectory. Referring to himself in third person decades later, Truman wrote that because of this study of history, “he made up his mind that he would be a military man although he was afraid of a gun and would rather run than fight.”⁶ Some of his peers shared the same desire for glory. “Most young Americans at some period or other between the ages of infancy and discretion have a strong desire to be soldiers,” Senator Truman remembered, “The Spanish American War came on and every boy from ten to sixteen was either in a company of would be soldiers or wanted to

³ A selection of historical photographs and a reprint of a handwritten manuscript by Truman entitled “The Military Career of a Missourian,” 1982, 1983.97.0, Battery D/129th FA file, 35th Division History subsection, The National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, Missouri.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ D.M. Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009), 9.

⁶ Truman, “Military career of a Missourian,” 2.

be in one.”⁷ For the few months of the Spanish American War, 14-year-old Harry and a dozen other boys romped through the forest north of Independence, hunting stray chickens and cooking them over an open fire.⁸ After the war ended, most of his friends lost interest in the military, but Truman continued to read about soldiers and statesmen. He later explained, “I hoped for a chance to go to West Point or Annapolis and perhaps imitate one of ‘em when I was old enough.”⁹ He dedicated nearly all his teenage years to this goal.

Many obstacles stood between Truman and his dream of attending West Point. Historically one of the most competitive schools in the nation, the service academy required an exquisite academic record. Undeterred, throughout high school Truman and a friend interested in the Naval Academy went to their teacher’s house at least two nights a week for tutoring in history and geography. At the urging of his father, the young Missourian also quit his day job and to study Latin and Algebra after school.¹⁰ More pressing for Truman, however, was the task of convincing his family to allow him to join the military. Even though his maternal grandmother, Harriet Young, and her family did not own slaves and publicly declared their support for the Union during the Civil War, Union cavalry burned down her house and even held a mock execution of her 15-year-old son. Consequently, both Truman’s grandmother and mother had reservations about him joining an army they still associated with the men who terrorized their family. Additionally, one of Harry’s cousins sustained wounds in the Spanish-American War, which led the rest of the family to worry about Truman’s safety.¹¹ Nevertheless, his parents said he could do as he pleased once he turned 21.¹² Ultimately, however, a medical

⁷ Giangreco, *Soldier from Independence*, 9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Truman, *Year of Decisions*, 142.

¹¹ Giangreco, *Soldier from Independence*, 9-10.

¹² Harry Truman, *Autobiography of Harry Truman*, 27.

disqualification prevented Truman's admission to West Point.¹³ With uncorrected vision of 20/50 in his right eye and 20/400 in his left, Truman's poor eyesight derailed his best chance at receiving a college education.¹⁴ Although he tried to earn enough money to attend a regular university, the opportunity never arose, making Truman the last president who did not earn a college degree.

Though a step down from wearing the distinguished West Point gray, the National Guard allowed the future president to indulge his dream of military service. When he turned 21 in May 1905, Truman joined the newly formed Battery B of the Missouri Light Artillery as a part-time guardsman. Recruiters overlooked his poor vision because they struggled to find enough members.¹⁵ That summer he received rudimentary training at a camp in southeast Missouri, learning "to ride horses and caissons across potato rows" and practicing "firing the pieces into the Mississippi."¹⁶ Singing songs, pulling pranks, and only worrying about saddle sores and the occasional lightning strike, the men seemed more like kids at a summer camp than military trainees. Nevertheless, referring to himself in the third person, Senator Truman remembered that sitting in his saddle, "he considered himself rather well along on his proposed emulation of Napoleon."¹⁷ Indeed, after helping his captain out of his tight service boots on several occasions, Truman received a promotion to corporal. In the opening weeks of 1945, the former guardsman wrote, "I still have the warrant framed. It was the biggest promotion I ever received and I've had

¹³ Kathleen Vest, "A Future President Grows Up," Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/student-resources/trumans-youth/a-future-president-grows-up>.

¹⁴ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 105, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ Truman, "Military career of a Missourian," 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

‘em all up to colonel and vice president of the U.S.A.’¹⁸ His new rank and his involvement in the National Guard became a source not only of excitement but also immense pride for Harry. But not everyone in his family felt the same. Wanting to show off his new uniform to his grandparents, Truman arrived at their doorstep dressed in “beautiful blue with red stripes down the trouser legs and red piping on the cuffs and a red fourragère over shoulder.”¹⁹ He later recalled how “she said ‘Harry, this is the first time since 1863 that a blue uniform has been in this house. Don’t bring it here again.’ I didn’t.”²⁰ His passion for the National Guard diminished over time. In 1906, Truman’s family experienced enough economic hardship that he decided to quit his banking job in Kansas City to work on his family’s farm a dozen miles away in Grandview. The distance and the grueling farm schedule made it difficult for the Corporal to attend drill sessions.²¹ Furthermore, Truman was wary of a growing number of artillery accidents, writing a friend in 1911, “I have been a member for six years and have had lots of fun, learned a little bit, and made some friends, so I guess I’d better quit while I am all in one piece.”²² Truman did not reenlist after his second service term expired later that year. It seemed his military career had reached its conclusion.

The conflagration that erupted on the other side of the Atlantic in 1914 went largely unnoticed on the Truman family farm—as it did across much of the United States. Truman’s only letter in the opening week of the war did not include an analysis of global events but rather

¹⁸ Harry Truman, *The Autobiography of Harry S. Truman*, edited by Robert Ferrell (Boulder: Colorado University Press, 1980), 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

²¹ McCullough, *Truman*, 73.

²² Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 17, 1911, Box 1, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/may-17-1911>.

detailed his encounter with two cars in one night that both had flat tires.²³ In fact, Truman did not leave any written record of his thoughts on the war until American entry in 1917. The only hint about his thoughts regarding the early years of the war came from a diary entry in 1934, in which he wrote: “I’d studied history to some extent and was very much interested in politics both at home and in Europe. When Germany invaded Belgium my sympathies were all on the side of France and England. I rather felt we owed France something for Lafayette.”²⁴ But for the young Missourian, the most significant event of 1914 was the passing of his father, which made him the primary breadwinner for his family and the manager of the farm.²⁵ As Churchill directed his fleets and planned for the Dardanelles, Truman’s responsibilities were “to plant the corn, sow the wheat, and run the binder to cut the wheat and oats.”²⁶ While Hitler and the German people struggled to find nourishment amid the Turnip Winter, Truman enjoyed his mother’s fried chicken, baked ham, hot biscuits, and custard pie.²⁷ The future President embraced this pastoral life for years.

To Truman, American entry into the Great War presented an opportunity for excitement unavailable in rural Missouri. “The day has come,” President Woodrow Wilson said to Congress as he called for a declaration of war against Germany on April 2, 1917, “when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness

²³ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, July 28, 1914, Box 3, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/july-28-1914-postmark>.

²⁴ Harry Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, in Soldier to Senator Collection, President’s Secretary’s Files, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/longhand-note-harry-s-truman?documentid=6&pagenumber=13>, 13.

²⁵ McCullough, *Truman*, 95.

²⁶ Truman, *Autobiography*, 30.

²⁷ Truman, *Year of Decisions*, 145.

and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.”²⁸ Wilson’s words left Truman “stirred in heart and soul,” and he sought out his old connections in the National Guard to help him get back into a uniform immediately.²⁹ As a farmer and a man not only outside of the Selective Service Act’s age bracket but also with disqualifiable vision, Truman was exempt from conscription.³⁰ Truman had every opportunity to remain at home, and there was incentive to do so. Joining the fight required Truman to find someone to manage the farm in his absence and forced him to sell a large stake he recently purchased in a new oil operation with a lot of financial potential.³¹ Requiring initiative and persistence, Truman’s decision to serve was an ideological one. Inspired by Wilson’s speeches, he concluded, “if ever Sir Galahad was moved by higher motives it is not so recorded.”³² Moreover, President Truman later claimed that he “was a true patriot” who “wanted really to fight for his country.”³³ Consequently, he entrusted the farm to his sister and a farmhand and sold his shares in the oil company, which coincidentally tapped a massive oil field not long after the sale. Had Truman stayed in Missouri he would have become a millionaire.³⁴ But leaving one particular girl in Independence proved far more difficult than leaving his farm and fortune.

Truman’s greatest ambition—even greater than his thirst for military glory—was to win over his unrequited love, Bess Wallace. His courtship began 27 years before, when Truman, only

²⁸ Woodrow Wilson, *War Messages*, 65th Cong., 1st Sess. Senate Doc. No. 5, Serial No. 7264, Washington, D.C., 1917, pp. 3-8.

²⁹ Truman, *Autobiography*, 41.

³⁰ McCullough, *Truman*, 100.

³¹ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 7.

³² In Arthurian legend, Galahad was a notoriously pure and principled knight who found the Holy Grail; *Ibid.*, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Truman, *Autobiography*, 37.

six-years-old, met a “beautiful curly haired girl” in his Sunday school class.³⁵ If Bess felt the same way about her shy admirer in those early years, she did not provide any indication. The two gradually became friends through elementary and high school. “If I succeeded in carrying her books to school and back home for her I had a big day,” the President later recalled.³⁶ Yet the two drifted apart when Truman left Independence to take a job in Kansas City and later to work on his family’s failing farm in 1906. Only by a chance encounter in 1910 did Truman reconnect with Bess, after which he tried to continue his courtship by writing her letters. The content of these letters remained largely innocuous until Harry sent one bold letter on June 22, 1911:

Speaking of diamonds, would you wear a solitaire on your left hand should I get it?... You may not have guessed it but I’ve been crazy about you ever since we went to Sunday school together. But I never had the nerve to think you’d even look at me. I don’t think so now but I can’t keep from telling you what I think of you.³⁷

Bess politely turned down the proposal, but the two were able to recover their friendship. Bess gradually grew more receptive to Truman’s affections over the next several years, but the First World War became the pivotal moment of the courtship. When Bess learned of Truman’s decision to serve, she proposed they marry before his departure, but Truman refused. He explained later, “I didn’t think it was right to get married and maybe come home a cripple and have the most beautiful and sweetest girl in the world tied down. So we waited until I came home.”³⁸ But the Lieutenant still savored the moment. “I’ll never forget how my love cried on my shoulder when I told her I was going,” President Truman later reminisced, “That was worth a

³⁵ Raymond Geselbracht, “The First Proposal: What a Future President of the United States Did When He Was Rejected by the Woman He Loved,” *Prologue Magazine* 39, No. 4 (Winter 2007), <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/winter/proposal.html>.

³⁶ McCullough, *Truman*, 49.

³⁷ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, June 22, 1911, Box 1, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/june-22-1911>.

³⁸ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934.

lifetime on this earth.”³⁹ Shortly after he reported for duty, he wrote Bess, “I’ll have the finest, best-looking...girl in the world to make the happiest home in the world with... I’ll have just that in the not far off future, unless it is necessary for me to get myself shot in this war—and then I’ll still find you somewhere.”⁴⁰ Although he left his family, his livelihood, and the woman of his dreams behind that spring of 1917, an underlying sense of romance pervaded both his writing at the time and his recollections of this period later in life. Although millions died in the first years of the war, the Missourian still saw the conflict as a grand adventure.

Chapter 8: “The Strain, the Mud, the Misery”

It took nearly a year and a voyage of over 4,500 miles for Truman to reach the Western Front. On August 5, 1917, the 2nd Missouri Field Artillery Regiment was activated for federal service in the regular Army and became the 129th Field Artillery.⁴¹ Federal mobilization, however, posed a challenge to the future president: a more stringent medical exam. It remains unclear how Truman’s vision did not result in his disqualification, but his brother later asserted that the future President memorized the eyechart in advance of his physical.⁴² Truman wrote Bess, “I am accepted and have to go. I will have to confess that I am not very sorry because I have been crazy to be a military man almost since I can remember.”⁴³ In late September, the Lieutenant and his fellow guardsmen encamped at Camp Doniphan in Oklahoma for training. As

³⁹ Truman, *Autobiography*, 41.

⁴⁰ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 28, 1917, Box 4, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/may-28-1917-postmark>.

⁴¹ Lee, *The Artilleryman*, vi.

⁴² McCullough, *Truman*, 104.

⁴³ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, August 11, 1917, Box 4, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/august-11-1917-postmark>.

an officer, Truman not only received instruction in “gunnery, close order drill, mounted drill, care of horses, [and] pistol shooting,” he simultaneously taught these skills to enlisted men.⁴⁴

Because of his experience with bookkeeping, he also received an assignment to manage the regimental canteen. Truman brought on Sergeant Edward Jacobson—an aspiring Jewish businessman—to help manage the store. To set up business, they collected \$2 per guardsmen from the individual funds of each of the six batteries, amounting to \$2,200 of capital.⁴⁵

Establishing an attached barbershop and tailor shop and making frequent trips to Oklahoma City to restock soda, cigarettes, candy, and a variety of other goods, the duo ran the only successful business in the camp. They raised \$15,000 in dividends and paid back all their investors within six months.⁴⁶ The success of the canteen caught the attention of the commanders of the 129th, who decided to put Truman up for a promotion to captain.⁴⁷ After months of rigorous officer training, Truman completed his captaincy exam and awaited the final word of his promotion. He also learned that he would join an advance detail that would travel to France ahead of the regiment to practice French artillery tactics.⁴⁸ Truman’s mother and sister made a final visit, and he remembered how his mother “smiled at me all the time and told me to do my best for the country.”⁴⁹ But as he later noted, the farewell “was quite a blow to my mother and sister,” and his mother cried the entire ride back to Missouri.⁵⁰ Soon after, Truman embarked for Europe.

Truman saw more of the world in the month it took him to get to France than he saw in the first 33 years of his life combined. With only a 20-minute stop at 4:00 AM in Kansas City,

⁴⁴ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 8.

⁴⁵ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 8.

⁴⁸ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ McCullough, *Truman*, 103; Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 21.

however, the Missourian could not make it to Independence to see his girlfriend for a final time. As the train took on water, Lieutenant Truman sprinted along the tracks, searching for a phone to call Bess. He found one in the station's office with only five minutes to spare. Even decades later, Truman never forgot the gracious switchman who listened to his plea and said "son, call hell or heaven if you want and charge it to the company."⁵¹ Harry and Bess did not hear each other's voices again for another year and two months. A few days later, on March 23, 1918, the advance detail arrived in New York City. Site-seeing, attending shows, and perusing shops throughout America's largest city, the Lieutenant wrote his fiancée, "we are having the time of our innocent young lives lookin' out the window up Broadway."⁵² Nevertheless, the men remained eager to get to France. As his letter to Bess on March 25, 1918, demonstrated, Truman's enthusiasm was still rooted in Wilson's ideological justification for the war:

I am crazy to leave because I know that if the British stem this tide there'll not be another and I do want to be in at the death of this 'Scourge of God.' Just think what he'd do to your great country and our beautiful women if he only could. This is the reason we must go and must get shot if necessary to keep the Huns from our own fair land. I am getting to hate the sight of a German and I think most of us are the same way. They have no hearts or no souls. They are just machines to do the bidding of the wolf they call Kaiser. Old Julius Caesar's description of the [illegible] exactly fits the Germans of today and to think that Wilhelm should call himself Caesar. Attila or Tamerlane would be nearer the truth.⁵³

This analysis of the Americans' purpose in the Great War coincided with official propaganda campaigns produced by the U.S. government. One such poster depicted a German ape wearing a *pickelhaube* labeled "militarism," wielding a bloody club which read "*kultur*," and carrying a

⁵¹ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 8.

⁵² Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, March 24, 1918, Box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/march-24-1918-postmark>.

⁵³ ⁵³ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, March 25, 1918, Box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/march-25-1918-postmark>.

topless woman in a tattered dress as he stepped out of the Atlantic and onto American soil.⁵⁴

Although unclear whether Truman saw this particular poster, his letter certainly resembled its portrayal of the German enemy. Of course, the future President's prediction that "there'll not be another" war proved false, but he still made it to France early enough in 1918 to fight the "Hun." He was desperate to take part in what he described to Bess as "the greatest history making epoch the world has ever seen."⁵⁵ Near midnight on March 29, 1918, Truman and his comrades boarded the S.S. *George Washington* in New York Harbor and embarked on their transatlantic journey. He and another officer leaned over the railing to watch the Statue of Liberty pass by and shared "some very solemn thoughts."⁵⁶ As Senator Truman recalled, "there we were, watching the New York skyline diminish, wondering if we'd be heroes or corpses."⁵⁷ The young Missourian had never seen the ocean before. Now he was crossing it.

After two weeks of seasickness and U-boat scares, the detail landed in Brest, France. They proceeded to Chaumont for more artillery training. There the men found luxury as they had never experienced before. Truman and his comrades were quartered in a silk merchant's château. Centuries old, the manor featured marble stairs, carved woodwork, a garden with a creek passing through it, a moat, and a garage with three cars and six carriages.⁵⁸ According to Truman, it was so nice it "would make some American millionaire green with envy to own if he could get it."⁵⁹ He also described his visits to a "picture-book village" nearby, as well as a castle "said to have

⁵⁴ Allison Rudnick, "Humor and Horror: Printed Propaganda During World War I," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, December 28, 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2017/printed-propaganda-world-war-i>.

⁵⁵ Margaret Truman, *Bess W. Truman* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 67.

⁵⁶ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 9.

⁵⁷ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 22.

⁵⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 12, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/may-12-1918>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

been started by old man Julius Caesar himself.”⁶⁰ “We couldn't be more comfortably situated anywhere in the world,” the Lieutenant reported to his fiancée.⁶¹ Their sumptuous lodging aside, the officers faced a grueling training schedule. They started at 7:00 AM every morning and participated in classroom lectures and physical exercises for 13 hours a day.⁶²

These classes covered a variety of subjects. To learn how to figure artillery barrages, they received schooling in geometry, astronomy, and trigonometry.⁶³ Most importantly, they became acquainted with the French 75mm field artillery piece—the regiment's primary weapon. On May 26, 1918, Lieutenant Truman wrote Bess, “I've studied more and worked harder the last three weeks than I ever did before in my life. It's just like a university only more so; right out of one class into another and then examinations and thunder if you don't pass.”⁶⁴ Without a college degree, this instruction constituted Truman's only advanced education. The training also broadened Truman's ambitions. He told his sweetheart, “when I come home I'll be a surveyor, a mathmatitian [sic], a mechanical draftsman, a horse doctor, a crack shot, and a tough citizen if they keep me here long.”⁶⁵ After he passed his exams, the young officer rendezvoused with the rest of the 129th in early June at Camp Coetquidan—an artillery academy founded by Napoleon a century before.⁶⁶ Truman learned from the list of promotions in an old copy of *The New York*

⁶⁰ Ibid; Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, May 7, 1918, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 5, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/may-5-1918-0>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 26, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/may-26-1918>.

⁶⁵ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, May 5, 1918.

⁶⁶ Harry Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 12.

Times brought by one of his comrades that he had unknowingly been a captain for the previous six weeks.⁶⁷ The promotion, however, did not mean placement as a battery commander. Once again, he found himself responsible for teaching skills that he was still in the process of learning himself to newly arrived officers. The new captain confided to his future wife, “It's rather funny for an old rube to be handing knowledge (of a sort) to the Harvard and Yale boys, but it's happening now. The hardest work I ever did in my life too... You can never tell what will happen to you in this war.”⁶⁸ The work only got harder when he received his battery.

Although they eventually became Truman's most intimate circle of friends, the men of Battery D initially posed a challenge to the young captain and his leadership abilities. On July 10, 1918, he received word that he would assume command of the battery the following morning. The abrupt assignment left Captain Truman feeling conflicted. He admitted to Bess that his “one ambition” in the war was “to be a battery commander.”⁶⁹ But the “wild Irish and German Catholics” who constituted the battery had developed a reputation for malfeasance.⁷⁰ The list of their offenses was long but included trying to sell the battery's horses to purchase liquor, stealing 1,600 pounds of cocoa from a YMCA canteen, and punching a chaplain in the

⁶⁷ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, June 14, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/june-14-1918>.

⁶⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, June 27, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/june-27-1918>.

⁶⁹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, July 14, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/july-14-1918>.

⁷⁰ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 26.

face.⁷¹ They burned through four commanders before Truman, driving the colonel of the 129th to consider dissolving the battery entirely.⁷² To make matters worse, according to battery bugler Albert Ridge, Truman's predecessor "had been well loved by all the men in the battery.... When it was learned that Captain Truman had been assigned to Battery D, there was a good deal of talk about mutiny, about causing trouble."⁷³ Former Sergeant Fred Bowman remembered that even on the day "when Truman took us over, the whole battery was under arrest-in-quarters for raising so much hell the night before."⁷⁴ But the 194 men of Battery D assembled on the parade field at 6:30AM to meet their new captain. Truman stood before the men in silence. One of the artillerymen noted that "you could feel the Irish blood boiling."⁷⁵ Recalling the encounter, Truman wrote, "[I] was so badly scared [I] couldn't say a word and [I] could feel the battery sizing [me] up and wondering how much they could put over [me]."⁷⁶ He believed he was the "most thoroughly scared individual in that camp," and later claimed, "never on the front or anywhere else have I been so nervous."⁷⁷ Putting it more bluntly, he wrote: "I could see my hide on the fence when I tried to run that outfit."⁷⁸ He surveyed the battery through his thick pince-nez and then yelled "dismissed," to which some of the men responded with a hostile "Bronx cheer."⁷⁹ Even decades later, veterans of the battery remembered how they deemed the "small,"

⁷¹ Clipping from the *Los Angeles Times* article entitled "Battery D's Last March for Capt. Harry," December 28, 1972, box 1, Scrapbook of President Harry S. Truman State Funeral file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

⁷² Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 11-12.

⁷³ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 94.

⁷⁴ "Battery D's Last March for Captain Harry."

⁷⁵ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 94.

⁷⁶ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 13.

⁷⁷ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 26-27.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 95.

“nasal-voiced,” and Baptist captain “unredeemably [sic] prissy,” as they left the parade ground that morning.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Captain Truman sought to establish his authority.

Sorting out the hooligans of Battery D was the future president’s first trial in executive leadership. He began immediately after the parade field encounter by calling a meeting of his non-commissioned officers (NCOs). He told them, “I didn’t come over here to get along with you. You’ve got to get along with me. And if there any of you who can’t, speak up right now and I’ll bust you right back now.”⁸¹ But some of his subordinates were determined to make a fool of their new commander. Later that day, as Captain Truman rode his horse through camp, some of the men set other horses loose and incited a stampede to throw him from his mount. An experienced horseman and farmer, however, the Captain had no difficulty maintaining control of his horse and calming the chaos.⁸² Although the Captain found this episode amusing, another incident that night drew his ire. A group of plastered Battery D men returned to the barracks long after curfew, and a drunken brawl erupted when a comrade cautioned them to keep quiet. The fight landed four artillerymen in the infirmary. As Truman promised, the following morning the men found an order posted on the battery bulletin board demoting half the NCOs and almost all the first-class privates—some men were transferred out of the battery completely. As Private Vere Leigh observed, the punishment demonstrated to everyone “that maybe this guy wasn’t to be trifled with.”⁸³ Similarly, Corporal Donald Martin remembered Truman as a “tough disciplinarian,” but also noted that “his first interest was invariably the welfare of his men.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Clipping from *Daily Advocate* article entitled, “Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain,” August 16, 1950, box 1, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri; “Battery D’s Last March for Captain Harry.”

⁸¹ McCullough, *Truman*, 117.

⁸² Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 96.

⁸³ Vere Leigh, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, March 4, 1970, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/leighvc#note>.

⁸⁴ “Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain”; “Battery D’s Last March for Captain Harry.”

Indeed, the Captain put a lot of trust in his NCOs and did what he could to improve the food in the mess hall.⁸⁵ Additionally, he referred to each man by his first name and took the time to learn about their background before the war.⁸⁶ “You soldier for me, and I’ll soldier for you,” the Captain often told his subordinates.⁸⁷ According to Leigh, “it took him about a week or ten days to convince everybody he was boss.”⁸⁸ This understanding of how to motivate others through discipline and encouragement benefited Truman when he began his political career years later.

Despite the early mishaps with the unit, Truman took pride in his battery even before it arrived at the front. The battery, once known for its impropriety, began to demonstrate mastery in marksmanship and even set regimental records in several drills. In a letter to his cousins on August 5, 1918, Captain Truman explained:

It’s some satisfaction...to see all the kinks unwind themselves and have the battery pull out of the park on time and get into position and shoot the best problem on the row... You’ll probably be terribly bored listening to me rave about myself and my battery but when you consider that I’ve been going to school practically one year and have pulled triggers and worked mines to keep from being kicked out because I can’t see... you can see that I feel right well to be a battery commander and have the privilege (almost) of taking a battery to the front.⁸⁹

In his letters during those final weeks of training—and throughout the remainder of the war—the Captain gushed with excitement about leading “Dizzy D.” He boasted to Bess about how “an infantryman can only shoot one bullet at a time with his little pop gun but I can give one command to my Irish battery and put 848 bullets on the way at once.”⁹⁰ But as the captain’s

⁸⁵ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 97.

⁸⁶ “Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain”; “Battery D’s Last March for Captain Harry.”

⁸⁷ McCullough, *Truman*, 117.

⁸⁸ Vere Leigh, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs.

⁸⁹ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, August 5, 1918, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

⁹⁰ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, July 31, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/july-31-1918>.

confidence in his battery grew, so too did his self-doubt. “I have my doubts about my bravery when heavy-explosive shells and gas attacks begin,” he confided to his fiancée, “I have the bravest kind of head and body, but my legs won’t stand.”⁹¹ According to the Captain, good leaders had to conceal their own hesitations and insecurities to preserve the morale of those under their authority.

On August 17, 1918, the men of the 129th Field Artillery received the order to deploy to the Western Front. “You cannot imagine the excitement that comes along with such an order,” wrote First Lieutenant Vic Housholder of Battery D, “At last we were going to engage the ‘Boche’ in battle.”⁹² Although excitement prevailed among the men, another captain in the 129th recalled a speech that a battle-seasoned officer gave to the regiment shortly before its departure:

[The veteran] told us that we had heard many times that we were fighting to make the world safe for democracy and for the women and children back home. From a long-range viewpoint, he said, this was true. But, he said, he just wanted to tell us what we really would be fighting for once we were in battle. In a loud voice he said: ‘It will be either him or you! Now, which is it going to be?’⁹³

If this speech made any impact on Truman’s understanding of the conflict, he left no written indication. He focused on loading Battery D’s 194 men, roughly 130 horses, two Hotchkiss machine guns, four field guns, four caissons, and eight supply wagons into train cars labeled: “Hommes 50 – Chevaux 8.”⁹⁴ The battery completed the task in record time.⁹⁵ The train wound through the French countryside for two days. Skirting around Versailles, the men could just barely see the top of the Eiffel Tower looming over the horizon. They watched vegetable fields

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Written summary of Battery D’s wartime service by Vic Housholder, c.1952, box 1, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

⁹³ Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was,” ~1975, Papers of Keith Dancy, personal archive of the author, 396.

⁹⁴ French for “50 men, 8 Horses”; Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was”; Written summary of Battery D’s wartime service by Vic Housholder.

⁹⁵ Written summary of Battery D’s wartime service by Vic Housholder.

gradually give way to the silver spruce and pine of Alsace-Lorraine. As they proceeded into the Vosges Mountains, one officer aboard the train reported entering an “ever-narrowing valley of a beauty that is beyond description.”⁹⁶ The mood shifted, however, as they disembarked in the village of Saulxures late in the night of August 19. “We were suddenly startled by a big thunder like boom and rumble,” recalled Lieutenant Housholder, “we realized that we were hearing the fire of the big cannons at the front. It was indeed a strange and indescribable feeling of realization.”⁹⁷ Though it took over a year, the 129th had finally reached the front.

For nearly all the Americans in the 129th Field Artillery—and the entire 35th Infantry Division—their first encounter with the enemy occurred in the Vosges. Explaining the situation in the region, Sergeant Bowman said:

The Vosges Mountains came down [in] kind of a V-shaped affair. The Germans on the one side and the Americans were on the other... You couldn't advance anywhere, no place to go. You start going up the hill and get the hell shot out of you, go up that hill either side. Well, it was just a quiet sector to give the boys a little indoctrination in the trench warfare and so on.⁹⁸

Lieutenant Housholder similarly recalled, “What, in history, is generally considered as a quiet sector, for Battery D the Vosges Mountains fighting was a living hell.”⁹⁹ Late on August 28, 1918, Battery D and several others received orders to take temporary advanced positions and execute their first fire mission at 8:00PM the following day. At calculated intervals over a span 36 minutes, four batteries would each shoot 166 shells of hydrogen cyanide gas and 334 shells of phosgene gas. These 2,000 shells would saturate five German batteries with a cloud of poison so potent that it would eat through the enemy’s gas masks. Another captain recalled that the battery

⁹⁶ Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was.”

⁹⁷ Written summary of Battery D’s wartime service by Vic Housholder.

⁹⁸ Frederick Bowman, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, March 24, 1970, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/bowmanfj>.

⁹⁹ “Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain.”

commanders “first felt that this type of warfare was all wrong,” but ultimately concluded that “some people don’t understand anything but a superior strength or force.”¹⁰⁰ Truman arrived at his position after hours of night-marching. Whether because of the nature of the mission or the fact that it was his first, Truman wrote shortly after the war that that night gave him “a real creepy feeling, one I shall never forget although I’ve gone into some real positions since then.”¹⁰¹ They fired off the barrage without any complications right at 8:00PM.

That night endured in the future president’s memory not because of the mission itself, but because of what happened shortly after. A rainstorm churned up mud along the steep mountain roads as Battery D prepared to fall back. Two guns sank into the sludge up to their axels. A sergeant came with more horses to pull out the artillery pieces, but while he could hear his comrades, he could not see them in the darkness. He started waving a flashlight to point out his position. The others shouted for him to turn it off, but it was too late.¹⁰² Enemy artillerymen spotted the light and began to drop sheets of shrapnel upon the guardsmen. Lieutenant Housholder explained: “The German shell fire was very heavy—it was a dark night; the only light we had was from the bursting shells and flares.”¹⁰³ The men panicked. The same sergeant with the flashlight yelled: “Run fellas, run, they got a bracket on us!” causing dozens of men to flee.¹⁰⁴ Simultaneously, a shell fragment 14 inches long and 2 inches wide impaled the stomach of Truman’s horse. The Captain fell to the ground, pinned under the writhing animal. Amid the

¹⁰⁰ Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was,” 364-365.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 23, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-23-1918>.

¹⁰² Eugene Donnelly and Edward Meisburger, oral history interview by William Stilley and Jerald Hill, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, December 27, 1970, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/donnelly>.

¹⁰³ “Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain.”

¹⁰⁴ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 15.

flashes, Housholder spotted his commander's yellow raincoat wriggling beneath the horse. The Lieutenant rushed to Truman's aid and found him "gasping like a catfish out of water; all the breath had been 'squashed' out of his lungs so he couldn't utter a sound."¹⁰⁵ Housholder pried the carcass off the future President. Truman got to his feet, surveyed the situation, and unholstered his .45 automatic pistol. Waving the sidearm over his head, the Captain ran between his men sheltered in shell craters and yelled, "I'll shoot the first son-of-a-bitch who leaves his gun," among other curses.¹⁰⁶ Spurred by their normally well-mannered commander's string of expletives, enough men regrouped to camouflage the two guns for recovery the following day. Somehow Battery D emerged with four dead horses as their only casualties.¹⁰⁷ The artillerymen dubbed the engagement "the Battle of Who Run?"¹⁰⁸ Although impossible to determine everyone who ran, Truman demoted the sergeant responsible for the incident, shifted him out of the battery, and promoted those who remained calm.¹⁰⁹ "[My] men decided [I] wasn't afraid and that [I] was lucky because none of them were hurt," Truman later recollected.¹¹⁰ At the time, however, he wrote Bess a few days later: "The men think I am not much afraid of shells but they don't know. I was too scared to run and that is pretty scared."¹¹¹ Nevertheless, he noted, "when a High Explosive shell bursts in fifteen feet and does you no damage, you can bet your sweet life you bear a charmed life and no mistake."¹¹² Though far from the butchery of other battlefields in

¹⁰⁵ "Columbus Man Saves Missouri Captain."

¹⁰⁶ "Battery D's Last March for Captain Harry."

¹⁰⁷ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 15.

¹⁰⁸ Vere Leigh, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs.

¹⁰⁹ Walter Menefee, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, May 28, 1970, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/menefeew>.

¹¹⁰ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 15.

¹¹¹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, September 8, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/september-8-1918>.

¹¹² Ibid.

the Great War such as the Somme or Verdun, the Vosges tapered many of the Americans' enthusiasm for combat. The Captain also developed greater confidence in his ability to lead under pressure.

After two weeks of artillery fire between German and American batteries, the men of the 35th Division cycled out of the Vosges. But they found no respite. Instead, the troops embarked on a 100-mile march through the clogged roads of the Western Front to their next assignment near the Argonne Forest in northeastern France. The trek strained relations between Captain Truman and the regiment's commander, Colonel Karl Klemm. A West Point graduate who dropped out of the cavalry as a second lieutenant to marry a wealthy heiress, only to finagle his way into his current post upon American entry into the war, Klemm made an unfavorable impression on Truman. Decades later, Senator Truman wrote that the Colonel held "German ideas about discipline and a superiority complex because of his education and his wife's money. He'd never associated with volunteer troops and didn't understand that nearly all of them were from good families."¹¹³ Perhaps more important to Truman, Klemm was the officer who wanted to dissolve Battery D. The artillerymen had hardly departed the Vosges when the Colonel rode along the column snatching their overseas caps and throwing them down the mountain, believing they should wear their helmets instead.¹¹⁴ Klemm's severity grew with the men's exhaustion. They moved primarily at night, soaked by a rainstorm that lasted nearly the entire 27-day journey. Regular traffic jams lasting hours prevented any momentum. Some soldiers fell asleep standing. Most carried packs upwards of 80 pounds. When Captain Truman allowed a sergeant with a twisted ankle to ride one of the battery horses, Klemm berated him and demanded that the

¹¹³ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 23.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

sergeant walk.¹¹⁵ Truman stated that so long as he commanded Battery D, the sergeant would remain in the saddle.

Klemm made his disdain for Captain Truman apparent. Truman wrote in his journal, “The Colonel insults me shamefully. No gentleman would say what he said. Damn him.”¹¹⁶ Additionally, he claimed that “everyone was of the opinion that the Colonel was either drunk or crazy.”¹¹⁷ Other captains in the 129th reported similar episodes. They derided Klemm for often delivering rations days late and for trying to make them demote NCOs for trivial infractions.¹¹⁸ The breaking point for Truman came towards the end of a particularly grueling stretch of marching. Colonel Klemm chastised the men of Battery D for their straggly appearance, not caring that they were unable to bathe or change their uniform in over a month. Furthermore, he ordered them to double their pace up the next hill. Infuriated, Truman acknowledged the command, but as soon as Klemm was out earshot, the Captain instructed his men to pull off the road and encamp. He then galloped after the Colonel to voice his anger. “When [Truman] returned,” Sergeant Meisburger explained, “he brought word that the order had come ‘from on high’ that the entire regiment would rest for the day. The news of how Mr. Truman had stood up for his men, even risking his rank, not only solidified his stature in the battery but spread throughout the regiment.”¹¹⁹ The men admired their captain’s empathy, especially in comparison with Klemm’s merciless demeanor. Many recalled how Truman also volunteered his own horse

¹¹⁵ McCullough, *Truman*, 126.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 24.

¹¹⁸ Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was,” 421.

¹¹⁹ Eddie Meisburger, “World War I Buddies to Honor ‘Captain Harry,’” *The Indianapolis Star*, May 7, 1970, in box 1, Battery D Historical Items file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

to help pull the guns, opting to march alongside the battery—unusual behavior for an officer.¹²⁰ This camaraderie with his men and rivalry with Klemm defined the final months of the war for Truman.

The most dramatic days of Truman's service in the Great War unfolded along the banks of the Meuse River near the Argonne Forest in northeast France. In a meeting at 5:00PM on September 25, 1918, the battery commanders learned they would take part in an offensive stretching "from the North Sea to the Adriatic."¹²¹ They had less than 12 hours to prepare. Truman spent the entire night running calculations, creating firing sheets, and preparing his gun sergeants to execute the barrage. At 4:20AM hundreds of Allied artillery pieces fired their first salvo. "The sky was red from one end to the other from the artillery flashes," Truman wrote. "It was like a continual play of lighting or the flashes of that artillery preparation—a continual explosion of guns and shells interspersed with the typewriter staccato of machine guns further up the front."¹²² Thus began what veterans of the Meuse-Argonne campaign called "The Seven Red Days of the Argonne."¹²³ Because field artillery provided close-fire support to the infantry, Truman and his comrades followed within 500 meters behind the advancing American troops as they pushed miles into the German line. The Captain himself was pinned down in a roadside ditch by a German machine gun later that day during a reconnaissance mission.¹²⁴ Eventually, the regiment crossed No-Man's-Land, which Truman wrote was "nothing but a bog. Mud, mud,

¹²⁰ Manuscript by Eddie Meisburger entitled "History of Battery D," July 6, 1957, box 1, Battery D Historical Items file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

¹²¹ Truman, "Military Career of a Missourian," 27.

¹²² Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 166.

¹²³ "History of Battery D."

¹²⁴ His mission was to find a young tank officer named George S. Patton to coordinate artillery support. He was unable to track down Patton amid the chaos of the offensive, but they eventually met after Captain Truman became Senator Truman (Giangreco, *The Soldier From Independence*, 181).

mud. The mud was worse than the guns and canon firing at them.”¹²⁵ Nevertheless, these German barrages killed and wounded men in nearly every battery but Truman’s. After another sleepless night, the men of Battery D witnessed even more carnage. The captain recorded one somber scene he and his men saw during their advance on September 27:

[The trees] had evidently been used to conceal a Boche machine gun because there was a pile of dead American soldiers in all sorts of ghastly positions at the fork of the road. There were seventeen of them and nearly a dozen more and a line of them lying head to heel down the road shot in the back. It was evident that the Hun had let them go by and then sprayed them with bullets. One or two had their heads completely severed and one was simply sawed in two at the waist. The battery had been clattering and carrying on as they usually did when on a road march and when they saw this spectacle everything became as quiet as a church, and a hard boiled sergeant remarked, ‘Now, you so-and-sos, I guess you’ll believe you’re in a war.’¹²⁶

Such sights led some to name the Meuse-Argonne battlefield “the Cemetery of Unburied Dead.”¹²⁷ The maimed doughboys overshadowed the sanitized portrayals of warfare in American propaganda and the ideals Wilson articulated in his speeches. For the first time, the men of Battery D saw the mutilation that modern technology could create. They marched forward in silence.

The 129th Field Artillery’s fiercest fighting occurred once it caught up with the infantry later that day. German aircraft strafed and bombed Truman’s men as they took position outside the town of Charpentry, killing two horses and destroying the Battery’s telephone station.¹²⁸ The Captain and one of his lieutenants then set out to mend communication lines and establish a forward observation post. Setting up in a shell crater, the two men were so focused on their task that they failed to see the Germans repel the Americans from the town. One of the last retreating

¹²⁵ Truman, “Military Career of a Missourian,” 32.

¹²⁶ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 179.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, XIV.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

infantrymen poked his head into the hole to warn them they were now nearly 200 meters *in front* of the new American line—placing them in the immediate path of enemy. Unarmed, the pair sprinted back to safety.¹²⁹ Around 6:00PM, from his new observation post, Truman spotted an Allied plane drop a flare over an unnoticed German battery preparing to fire into the flank of the advancing Americans. But the targets lay outside of the 35th Division’s firing zone. With little time and without orders, the Captain commanded his battery to fire outside its sector—a serious protocol violation—and watched the destruction of the German guns through his binoculars.¹³⁰ When Klemm heard of the action, he castigated the future President and threatened him with a court martial.¹³¹ But the barrage’s success—and Battery D’s destruction of another German battery and observation post the following day—shielded Truman from the threat.¹³² On the September 29, American intelligence learned that the German command mustered several elite Prussian units with experience fighting on the Eastern Front to mount a counterattack. The Americans took Charpentry and established a line uphill, but now they did not know whether they could hold it. As the artillerymen fired their guns as fast as possible, they saw large groups of dazed and wounded infantrymen retreating down the hill. The battalion major eventually said, “well men, get ready and we’ll give them direct fire” – meaning that if the enemy crested the hill, the men should continue to fire point-blank until killed or captured.¹³³ The command, however, proved unnecessary, partially because of the 129th’s efficiency that afternoon. Despite sustaining wounds in gas and shrapnel attacks, some gun crews in the regiment recorded shooting at rates as

¹²⁹ Lee, *The Artilleryman*, 128; Harry Truman, *Mr. President: The First Publication From the Personal Diaries, Private Letters, Papers, and Revealing Interviews of Harry S. Truman*, ed. William Hillman (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), 167.

¹³⁰ Lee, *The Artilleryman*, 129.

¹³¹ Truman, *Mr. President*, 167.

¹³² Booklet by Major James Huston regarding Truman’s military service, 1949, 1980.1.6, Battery D/129th FA file, 35th Division History subsection, The National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, Missouri.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 167.

high as 21 shells per minute; normally they fired six.¹³⁴ “We expected nothing else but to be captured or blown to pieces,” Truman later wrote his cousin.¹³⁵ The 129th finally rotated out of the front three days later. The 35th Division sustained roughly 50 percent casualties.¹³⁶ Resulting in 26,000 American deaths and another 100,000 wounded, the campaign remains the deadliest in American history.¹³⁷ Although most of the batteries suffered casualties, including men killed, Battery D emerged once again without even a single severe wound to report.¹³⁸

The move to the regiment’s final posting outside of Verdun provided the Captain with time to mull over his experiences in the Meuse-Argonne. “The great drive has taken place and I had a part in it,” Truman wrote Bess on October 6, 1918, “The experience has been one that I can never forget, one that I don’t want to go through again unless the Lord wills, but I’d never have missed for anything.”¹³⁹ Unlike most of his fellow battery commanders, the Captain of Battery D did not have to reconcile his excitement for the battle with the pain of losing people under his command. His only potential source of consternation—the threat of court martial for his unsanctioned barrage—never gained traction. Truman wrote again to his fiancée two weeks later:

I doubt very much if I'll get to come home before the war is over, and much as I'd like to, I want to see the finish. I am so pleased that I was lucky enough to get in on the drive that made the Boche squeal for peace that I sometimes have to pinch myself to see if I am dreaming or not. It really doesn't seem possible that a common old farmer boy could take a battery in and shoot it on such a drive and I sometimes think I just dreamed it.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Lee, *The Artilleryman*, 165.

¹³⁵ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, March 25, 1919, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

¹³⁶ McCullough, *Truman*, 131.

¹³⁷ “The Meuse-Argonne Offensive,” The National Archives, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww1/meuse-argonne>.

¹³⁸ Lee, *The Artilleryman*, 347-349.

¹³⁹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, October 6, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/october-6-1918>.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, October 20, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence,

He had finally participated in combat, achieving the greatest ambition of his childhood. But conditions near Verdun dispelled some of the war's allure. Chemical attacks were frequent. They came late at night so often that Truman claimed he was able to sleep while wearing his gas mask. Before turning out the light, he would remove the picture of Bess that he kept in his left breast pocket and succumb to homesickness.¹⁴¹ The surroundings at Verdun also made him long for home. Two years prior, hundreds of thousands of French and German soldiers died in the battle for the famous French town. Tens of millions of shell craters scarred the landscape. Truman reported to his cousin:

There are Frenchmen buried in my front yard and Dutchmen buried in my back yard and gobs of both scattered over the whole landscape, which by the way is the most dreary outlook I've ever seen. There is one field over west of me here a short distance where every time a shell lights it plows up a piece of someone. I guess it must be Le Mort Homes... The trees evidently once beautiful forest trees are mere trunks and stumps.¹⁴²

Claiming the surrounding fields made the deserts of the western United States look like the Garden of Eden, he told Bess, "When the moon rises behind those tree trunks I spoke of a while ago you can imagine that the ghosts of the ½ million Frenchmen who were slaughtered here are holding a sorrowful parade over the ruins."¹⁴³ These sights forced Truman to grow accustomed to the death and devastation that industrial warfare entailed. Among the debris of the famous Fort Douaumont, however, the Captain found two poppies growing, one of which he sent to Bess and

Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/october-20-1918>.

¹⁴¹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 5, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-5-1918>.

¹⁴² Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 1, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-1-1918>.

¹⁴³ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, October 30, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/october-30-1918>.

the other to his cousin.¹⁴⁴ As October turned to November, Truman and his men waited to see whether the rumors of peace that circulated through the trenches would prove accurate.

Battery D was at the front during the final minutes of the Great War. On November 10, 1918, before it was clear whether the Germans would agree to the Armistice, Truman began drafting a letter to Bess. It read:

The Hun is yelling for peace like a stuck hog and I hope old daddy Foch makes him yell louder yet or throttles him one. Throttling would be too easy. When you see some of the things those birds did and then hear them put up the talk they do for peace it doesn't impress you at all. A complete and thorough thrashing is all they've got comming [sic] and take my word they are getting it and getting it right.¹⁴⁵

At 8:00AM the following morning, Sergeant Meisburger came across his captain in the officers' dugout eating a slice of blueberry pie with a grin on his face. Truman passed him a piece of paper and instructed him to read it to the Battery. It was the order from Allied command confirming the Armistice. Thinking Meisburger was trying to pull a prank, the rest of the artillerymen pelted him shoes and mud when he read the announcement.¹⁴⁶ But at 10:45AM Battery D fired four shells east at the 75mm guns' maximum range (with streamlined shells) of 11,500 meters—their final salvo of the war. Truman recalled how everything went silent at 11:00, and then “the men at the guns, the Captain, the lieutenants, the sergeants and the corporals looked at each other for some time and then a great cheer arose all along the line. We could hear the men in the infantry a thousand meters in front raising holy hell.”¹⁴⁷ At that moment, he

¹⁴⁴ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, November 1, 1918, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁴⁵ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 10, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-10-1918>.

¹⁴⁶ Meisburger, “World War I Buddies to Honor ‘Captain Harry.’”

¹⁴⁷ Harry Truman, longhand note from November 11, 1954, box 275, post-presidential file (1953-1955), President's Secretary's Files, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

reported breathing “the most agreeable sigh of relief” he had ever known.¹⁴⁸ Scratching a note to Bess shortly after 11:00AM, Truman mused, “It is a shame we can't go in and detonate Germany and cut off a few of the Dutch [sic] kids hands and feet and scalp a few of thier [sic] old men but I guess it will be better to make them work for France and Belgium for fifty years.”¹⁴⁹ Although likely an attempt at dark humor, the second half of the letter demonstrated that Truman still harbored little love for his former enemy. The festivities continued all night. Soldiers on both sides of No-Man’s-Land fired off surplus flares of every color in a makeshift firework display that illuminated the sky for miles.¹⁵⁰ Truman nearly fell asleep when a drunken group of French artillerymen from the neighboring battery surrounded his pup-tent and chanted “Vive Président Wilson! Vive Capitaine Artillerie Américain!”¹⁵¹ Although he was exhausted, the future President did not blame them for their joy—they had been at war far longer than he had. He wrote his cousins not long after the First World War’s conclusion: “I am most awful glad it's over and I hope I never have to fight in another one.”¹⁵² Indeed, many of those on the front that evening were told they just witnessed the end of all wars.

Although Truman and his comrades were eager to return home, they had to remain in Europe for nearly six months. But with no more barrages to figure or German shells to dodge, the Captain had time to explore France. He received leave to go to Paris for a few days, where he toured Notre Dame, the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Élysées, the Grand Opera, and the Eiffel

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, December 18, 1918, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 11, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-11-1918>.

¹⁵⁰ Unpublished manuscript by Keith Dancy entitled “Telling It Like It Was.”

¹⁵¹ Truman, *Mr. President*, 172.

¹⁵² Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 23, 1918.

Tower. Truman, however, believed that Paris' greatest attraction was the Hotel d'Invalids. While there, the young officer admired Napoleon's red granite sarcophagus beneath the building's golden dome. Truman reported home that Paris "is as wild as any place I ever saw."¹⁵³ He then went south to visit the casinos of Marseilles and Monte Carlo and to relax on the beaches of Nice.¹⁵⁴ Without the war, the Missouri farmer never would have seen such a distant corner of the world. No longer surveilled by Allied censors, he wrote long letters to Bess and his family detailing everything he went through in the previous year. These accounts, like his earlier letters, revealed Truman's adoration for his men. In one letter he wrote:

I love 'em all and if anybody wants a fight or a quarrel he can get it suddenly and all he wants if he says anything derogatory about my battery or one of my men. I wouldn't trade off the "orniest" one I've got for any other whole battery. While I'm not a braggart I believe I can take my outfit and beat any other one in the A.E.F. shooting or doing any other kind of battery work... I recommended one of my kids to go to West Point and he was one out of 7 in the A.E.F. to go. I was as proud of him as if I done it myself. You know I have succeeded in doing what it was my greatest ambition to do at the beginning of the war. That is to take a battery through as B.C. and not lose a man.¹⁵⁵

Despite the initial gaffs, Truman developed a paternalistic relationship with those under his command. He did not lose any men in combat, but he lost several to disease—including to the rapid spread of Spanish Influenza. Thinking of one man who passed away of appendicitis after the Armistice, Truman wrote home: "I felt exactly like I'd lost a boy of my very own... It's peculiar how you get to feel toward a bunch of men when they belong to a battery you are responsible for."¹⁵⁶ Like sons, however, the Irishmen could still test his patience. One day, for

¹⁵³ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, March 25, 1919.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 15, 1918, box 5, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-1910-1919/november-15-1918>.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, January 20, 1919, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

example, Supreme American Commander John J. Pershing and the Prince of Wales¹⁵⁷ reviewed the men of the 35th Division. When he arrived at Battery D, Pershing shook Truman's hand and said, "I hope you will take them home as clean morally and physically as they were when they came over so that the people at home can be as proud of them as I am."¹⁵⁸ The Captain felt immense pride until, as the pair walked away, he heard one of his privates loudly say of the Prince: "Captain, ask that little son-of-a-bitch when he's going to free Ireland."¹⁵⁹ Fortunately, the future Duke of Windsor did not hear the comment.

As the future President prepared to voyage home, he also thought more about his future. Initially, he ruled out remaining in the peacetime Army. He no longer dreamed of becoming a renowned general. As he told his cousin in a January 1919 letter:

Next time they want a war fought I reckon the same kind of a bunch will fight it that fought this one and after it's over they'll give the professional fighters nice soft jobs just as they've done now. For my part I don't care a hoot because I'm going to be happy following a mule down a corn row for the rest of my happy existence [sic].¹⁶⁰

Beyond his mule and corn row, he thought maybe he could become "a Congressman or something where I can cuss Colonels and Generals to my heart's content."¹⁶¹ On April 9, 1919, the 129th Field Artillery departed Brest aboard the S.S. *Zeppelin*. After eleven days of illness from seasickness and Spanish Flu, the artillerymen arrived in Hoboken.¹⁶² The Captain made a pact "that if old lady Liberty in New York harbor wanted to see me again she'd have to turn around."¹⁶³ Crowds packed Kansas City's Union Station to welcome home their returning doughboys on May 3, 1919, and cheered as they marched in a parade through the downtown

¹⁵⁷ The Prince later became King Edward VIII until he abdicated to his rother in 1936.

¹⁵⁸ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 253.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, January 20, 1919.

¹⁶¹ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, December 18, 1918.

¹⁶² Lee, *The Artilleryman*, vi.

¹⁶³ Truman, *Autobiography*, 51.

streets. Dressed in civilian clothes, former Colonel Klemm—who had been home for months after finessing his way aboard an early transport home—watched from the crowd in accordance with a request that the men he left behind in France made to the City’s welcome committee.¹⁶⁴ But he did not seem to have any persistent ill-will towards the Captain of Battery D. His account of the regiment’s service published in the *Kansas City Post* several months earlier provided a favorable portrayal of Truman. Perhaps because he no longer felt the stress of combat or because he wanted to make amends with his subordinates, Klemm wrote: “I want to mention here the splendid work done by the batteries under the command of Captain Truman and Captain Dancy. They both wreaked tremendous havoc in several batteries of enemy artillery.”¹⁶⁵ None were more appreciative of Truman, however, than the men of Battery D. By setting aside funds from every round of poker they played on the journey home, they raised \$400 to buy him a silver chalice inscribed: “Captain Harry S. Truman. Presented by the members of Battery D in appreciation of his justice, ability, and leadership.”¹⁶⁶ Many members of the 129th gathered just a few weeks on June 28, 1919, for another occasion: the wedding of Harry Truman and Bess Wallace. Bess faced her own challenges over the previous year; as her fiancée galivanted around France after the Armistice, for instance, she nearly lost a month-long battle with Spanish Flu. The disease left her with partial deafness, just as the sound from the initial Meuse-Argonne bombardment left her husband with permanent hearing damage.¹⁶⁷ The ceremony ended a courtship spanning nearly 30 years. Their only daughter, Margaret, later said, “Sometimes I think that if World War I hadn’t come along, he might not have married [Bess] until he was forty or

¹⁶⁴ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 256.

¹⁶⁵ Clipping of *Kansas City Post* article by Karl Klemm entitled “Story of the 129th Artillery,” winter 1918-1919, Papers of Keith Dancy, personal archive of the author; Sadly, in 1925, Klemm shot himself in his Kansas City office (McCullough, *Truman*, 126).

¹⁶⁶ Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, 257.

¹⁶⁷ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), 74.

fifty, and I might never have gotten here.”¹⁶⁸ With uncertain financial prospects, shifting ambitions, and a new wife, Truman’s bond with his fellow veterans of the Great War became a comfort as he started a new life.

Chapter 9: The Captain Who Would Be King

The comrades Truman made fighting in France played an influential role in his life after the conflict ended, beginning in the years immediately following the Armistice. In 1919, determined not to return to the family farm, the future President went into business with his former canteen sergeant, Eddie Jacobson. The pair opened a haberdashery on Kanas City’s Twelfth Street. With Americans still arriving home from Europe with their Army pay in pocket and a need for civilian clothes, Truman and Jacobson enjoyed early success. The store became a gathering point for the veterans’ community in Jackson County. As Truman’s biographer Jonathan Daniels wrote, the store was also an “unemployment agency, schoolroom, small loan center, confession booth, and club” for the Irishmen of Battery D—who always addressed the owner affectionately as “Captain Harry.”¹⁶⁹ Former Private Albert Ridge, for example, came to the store nearly every day to do his law school homework; he later became a Federal Judge.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, Truman enrolled in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and helped found the Missouri chapter of the newly formed American Legion.¹⁷¹ He also remained active in the Army Reserve,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1950), 116, 107-108.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹⁷¹ “September 29, 1899 – September 29, 2019,” Veterans of Foreign Wars, September 29, 2019, <https://www.vfw.org/vfw120>; “President Harry Truman,” The American Legion, accessed March 29, 2020, <https://www.legion.org/distinguishedservicemedal/1949/president-harry-truman>.

rising to the rank of colonel.¹⁷² Battery reunions occurred each year—usually on St. Patrick’s day—and Captain Harry typically picked up the tab.¹⁷³

The transition back to a peacetime economy, however, led to a brief economic recession between 1920 and 1921. Because of deflation, Truman and Jacobson’s \$35,000 inventory fell to \$10,000 overnight. The future president tried to save the haberdashery by selling his portion of the family farm and his farming equipment but to no avail.¹⁷⁴ Ultimately, he lost \$28,000 dollars with the haberdashery—debt he did not finish paying off for more than a decade because he refused to declare bankruptcy.¹⁷⁵ Yet during this tumultuous period, a veteran of Battery D nudged the former Captain towards his next calling: politics.

Truman’s military record defined his entry into the political arena. His former lieutenant, Jim Pendergast, was the nephew of Thomas Pendergast, the notorious party boss of a local faction of Democrats known as the “Goats.” James raved about “Captain Harry” to his father, Mike Pendergast—second-in-command of the Goats’ party machine—and brought him to the store for an introduction in spring 1922. The failed haberdasher was planning to accept an offer for a new job at an insurance company, until Mike came up to the counter, glanced him over, and asked: “how’d you like to be county judge?”¹⁷⁶ In Missouri politics, county judge was not a judicial position but rather an administrative office akin to a county commissioner responsible

¹⁷² Giangreco, *The Soldier from Independence*, xii.

¹⁷³ Invoices, receipts, and other items related to 1929 Battery D Banquet, 1920, box 22, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri; these reunions could turn into raucous affairs. One gathering in 1921 devolved into a barfight that led someone to call to the police. The officer who arrived to break it up, however, was none other than a former noncom in the Battery. His comrades jeered him and proceeded to take his pistol and strip him down to his undergarments (McCullough, *Truman*, 149).

¹⁷⁴ Truman, *Autobiography*, 55.

¹⁷⁵ Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 108.

¹⁷⁶ Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 109.

for roads and local government buildings and agencies.¹⁷⁷ Though Captain Harry was hesitant at first, Mike persuaded him to run. At a meeting of local Goats, Mike stood up and said, “Now I’m going to tell you who you are going to be for for county judge. It’s Harry Truman. He’s got a fine war record. He comes from a fine family. He’ll make a fine judge.”¹⁷⁸ In the same remarks, he described the candidate as “a returned veteran” and “a captain whose men didn’t want to shoot him” – likely a hint at the Baptist officer’s ability to win over Irish Catholics.¹⁷⁹ Having failed at farming and business, Truman’s military service became the foundation for his political credibility. The Pendergasts capitalized on this attribute when Truman announced his candidacy at Lee’s Summit outside of Independence. Over 300 Great War veterans attended the event.¹⁸⁰ Edward Stayton, one of Truman’s friends from training and a former commander of the 110th Engineers—one of the regiments in Charpentry that the 129th Field Artillery supported—introduced the “American Legion” candidate by describing Truman’s war record.¹⁸¹ With no experience speaking in public, Truman stammered through his remarks. The speech would have sunk his campaign, but the numerous members of Battery D in the crowd salvaged it by clapping and shouting, “three cheers for Captain Harry!” whenever the candidate lost his place in the address.¹⁸² The men not only of Battery D but of the entire 129th Field Artillery came to the Captain’s aid throughout his first campaign. Eddie McKim, Edgar Hinde, and Tom Murphy of Battery D, as well as Ted Marks—former captain of Battery C—canvassed for Truman on his first campaign. They explained to voters that the candidate was “the best liked and the most

¹⁷⁷ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 62.

¹⁷⁸ Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 114.

¹⁷⁹ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 64.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸¹ Truman, *Autobiography*, 57.

¹⁸² Roy Jenkins, *Truman* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 20.

beloved Captain, officer in France or elsewhere.”¹⁸³ The support of the 129th became more crucial as the campaign progressed.

Without the circle of friends he gained in the Great War, Truman would not have weathered his first political controversies. Seeing that the Pendergasts were trying to pass them over for the nomination, a rival faction of Democrats known as the “Rabbits” ran their own candidate in the primary election and sought to discredit Truman. For instance, they smeared Truman for voting for the Republican John Miles—former major of the 1st Battalion of the 129th Field Artillery—for county marshal in 1920. But Captain Harry stood by his decision in a speech on the campaign trail:

I’ll have to plead guilty to that charge along with some five thousand other ex-soldiers. I was closer to John Miles than a brother. I have seen him in places that made hell look like a playground. I have seen him stick to his guns when Frenchmen were falling back. I have seen him hold the American line when only John Miles and his three batteries were between the Germans and a successful counterattack. He was of the right stuff, and a man who wouldn’t vote for his comrade under circumstances such as these would be untrue to his country. I know that every soldier understands it. I have no apology to make.¹⁸⁴

Truman benefitted from the same loyalty among veterans of the Great War. They represented a formidable voting bloc. More than 166,000 lived in Missouri after the war; over 2,200 had circulated through the 129th Field Artillery alone, and because of the geographical nature of the National Guard, many of these former artillerymen still lived in Jackson County.¹⁸⁵ As a local journalist explained in 1922, “if [the veterans] want to mix in politics... they will settle affairs of state as they settled the Kaiser’s in France.”¹⁸⁶ Even still, both the Goats and the Rabbits knew it would be a close race. Consequently, on election day, a band of armed Rabbits went to a precinct

¹⁸³ McCullough, *Truman*, 162.

¹⁸⁴ Daniels, *The Man of Independence*, 118.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 118, 122.

¹⁸⁶ McCullough, *Truman*, 161.

station in Mount Washington, intent on stealing its ballot box. Their plans were foiled, however, when Deputy John Gibson appeared and pressed his .45 automatic pistol against the chest of the ringleader. Gibson was a former private in Battery C. Moreover, he stopped the perpetrators on direct orders from Marshal John Miles—who overlooked party differences to help his fellow artilleryman. This camaraderie proved decisive in an election that Truman won by only 282 votes.¹⁸⁷ Many members of the 129th stood by the former captain through later controversies, such as when the false rumor that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan started spreading in 1924. The charge made little sense considering that Truman adored his battery composed mostly of Irish Catholics, went into business with his Jewish friend, and had the support of the Pendergasts—prominent figures in the Irish Catholic community that the Klan so despised. Nevertheless, 25 Catholic members of Battery D signed a petition dismissing the rumor and supporting their Captain.¹⁸⁸ Truman never forgot this support, just as he never forgot their service of the Great War.

As Truman became more involved with politics on the federal level, he honed his understanding of the First World War's place both in his personal story and in world history. Indeed, he wrote one of his most thorough accounts of his service in the hours before the sun rose on May 14, 1934—the day he declared his candidacy for the United States Senate. Alone in a room in the Pickwick Hotel in Kansas City, Truman wrote, “the World War made a tremendous impression on me,” and recorded all of his exploits between training in 1917 and returning home in 1919.¹⁸⁹ Truman also likely wrote his brief manuscript, “The Military Career of a Missourian,” which detailed his service in the Great War, sometime during his first term as

¹⁸⁷ Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 122.

¹⁸⁸ Eugene Donnelly and Edward Meisburger, oral history interview by William Stilley and Jerald Hill.

¹⁸⁹ Truman, Longhand Note from May 14, 1934, 13.

Senator—though the precise date remains unclear.¹⁹⁰ Truman did not write these longhand notes for public consumption, and they deal more with his personal experiences rather than with the conflict's broader implications.

Understandably, his reflections on the Great War's effect on world affairs first started to emerge in his annual speeches on Armistice Day. In 1937, for instance, he delivered a short speech to public school children in Independence on November 11. After explaining what he believed were the causes of World War I, he told them that “No one who has seen war wants to see it or take part in it again,” and that “war is not necessary to disagreements between nations and peoples, any more than mob violence is necessary to settle individual misunderstandings.”¹⁹¹ The senator explained that unlike individual peace maintained by courts, police, and the rule of law, nations were “still savages.” “World peace will never come,” Truman argued, “until those nations wanting peace force it to come about, just as courts and law enforcement authorities, maintain our individual rights.”¹⁹² With the world drifting into another conflict, the former Captain elaborated a year later in an Armistice Day address at Kansas City's Liberty Memorial—erected in honor of the Missourians who died in the First World War. He reflected on his feelings 20 years before, remembering that 11:00 “meant we'd no longer have to dodge German 77's and 150's, nor duck our heads for *minenwerfers* and machine gun bullets.”¹⁹³ He continued:

It gave all of us a wonderful chance to appreciate the meaning of peace. We all hoped that wars were ending as a means of the settlement of international disputes. Some of us even looked forward to the dawn of a new day in world affairs. But we were doomed to a sore disappointment. Those of us who were a part of that great conflict are the strongest

¹⁹⁰ Editor's introduction, “Military Career of a Missourian.”

¹⁹¹ Harry Truman, “Speech to Public school Children” (speech, Independence, MO, November 11, 1937), in box 282, Harry S. Truman Papers: Papers as U.S. Senator and Vice President, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Harry Truman, “Speech at Liberty Memorial” (speech, Kansas City, MO, November 11, 1938), in box 282, Harry S. Truman Papers: Papers as U.S. Senator and Vice President, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

advocates of world peace. None of us want another war. But the situation in Europe may so develop that war will be the outcome.¹⁹⁴

Sounding more like a historian's lecture than a politician's speech, Truman delved into the 2,000 years of history that culminated with the Great War. He claimed that four leaders had tried to create a system to end international conflict on the European peninsula: Julius Caesar, King Henry IV of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Woodrow Wilson. He devoted the most time to Wilson's plan and why it failed. According to the Senator, Wilson proposed his Fourteen Points with the belief that Europe could only attain peace if "economic barriers could be torn away," and the "races be made to understand each other" with "a will to live in peace."¹⁹⁵ Truman argued that Wilson's plan failed because of Clemenceau and Lloyd George's punitive demands for "a pound of flesh" from Germany in the form of the Treaty of Versailles. Such criticism did not account for his own amusement on November 11, 1918, at the prospect of making Germany work for France and Belgium for decades and his joke about how the Allies should cut off the hands of German men. Nevertheless, he also thought that "[America's] failure to take our place in world affairs upset the whole applecart, and we are right back where Julius Caesar left off."¹⁹⁶ He deemed agreements such as the Kellogg-Briand pact and American neutrality laws as symbolic rather than binding, continuing:

Japan, Italy, Germany all signed the pact to outlaw war. Does it do that? Japan invades and attempts to destroy China... Italy does the same thing to Ethiopia... Now the German dictator is following the example set by Italy and Japan. Where will it end?... Eventually it will have to... or our civilization will end as all other great civilizations have, and we'll just start over from another Dark Age.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

The United States do not enter World War II for another three years, but the senator already laid the rhetorical foundation for his interventionist stance. After facing the Germans not long before, Truman found the Nazi invasion of Poland disheartening. On November 11, 1939, shortly after war broke out in Europe, Truman wrote Bess, “You know it makes some of us who went on the Crusade...wonder sometimes just what fate really holds in store for us.”¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the former Captain still viewed World War I as a “crusade” – as an ideological struggle in which democracy supposedly prevailed. Such a belief only made the start of the World War II more painful.

Anticipating American involvement in another global war, Truman wanted to participate as an artillery officer—not as a senator. In 1940, shortly after he helped pass the first peacetime draft and won another six-year term in the Senate, Truman arranged a meeting with the Chief of Staff of the Army, George C. Marshall. He said he wanted to resign from the Senate in order to train new artillerymen just as he had in the First World War and in the Army Reserve. Marshall pulled his glasses onto his nose, looked the Senator up and down, and asked, “How old are you?” Truman responded, “well, I am 56.”¹⁹⁹ Marshall chuckled and explained, “you are too old for this one” and “we don’t need old stiffs like you—this will be a young man’s war.”²⁰⁰ He told Truman, “you had better go on back and do your duty in the Senate.”²⁰¹ The exchange hurt Truman’s feelings, but he tried to find a way to apply his military background in Congress. He recalled the inefficiency of Army camp construction during the First World War and started

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, November 11, 1939, box 11, Papers of Harry S. Truman Pertaining to Family, Business, and Personal Affairs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/truman-papers/correspondence-harry-s-truman-bess-wallace-truman-1921-1959/november-11-1939>.

¹⁹⁹ Truman, *Autobiography*, 74.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 75; Harry Truman, “Rear Platform Remarks” (speech, Price, UT, September 21, 1948), in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry Truman, 1948* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1964), 524.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

traveling around the country to uncover wastage and corruption in the \$10 billion of defense contracts appropriated in 1940. He presented his findings to Congress in early 1941, and on March 1, received an appointment to chairman of the newly formed Senate Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program—which quickly became known as the Truman Committee.²⁰² Saving the United States an estimated \$15 billion throughout the war, Truman's work as chairman eventually propelled him onto the cover of *TIME Magazine* in 1943 and onto the ballot as Roosevelt's running mate in 1944.²⁰³ But just a week after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Truman confided to his cousin: "I wish I was 30 and in command of a Battery. It would be a lot easier. They may let me run a regiment yet although they say not."²⁰⁴ Marshall remained firm; Truman could not return to the military. Nevertheless, the former captain proudly displayed his doughboy helmet in his Senate office and always showed up to the Capitol wearing a World War I service pin on his lapel.²⁰⁵

Much like Hitler and Churchill, Truman understood World War II as an extension of the conflict that supposedly ended in 1918. In a stump speech supporting Democrats in the 1942 midterm elections, he argued that "the war we are now fighting is a continuation of the one we fought in 1917 and 1918." According to Senator Truman, "the victors of that war had the opportunity to compel a peace that would protect us from war for many generations," but blinded by "the spirit of isolationism," a Republican Senate "jettisoned the League of Nations and kept

²⁰² "Truman Committee," United States Senate, accessed March 28, 2020, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/The_Truman_Committee.htm.

²⁰³ McCullough, *Truman*, 286-287; "Time Magazine Cover Featuring Harry S. Truman, March 8, 1943," United States Senate, accessed March 28, 2020, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/image/TrumanHarryS_TimeCover.htm.

²⁰⁴ Letter from Harry Truman to Ethel Noland, December 14, 1941, box 1, Mary Ethel Noland Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰⁵ McCullough, *Truman*, 271, 281.

the most powerful nation in the world out of an international effort to prevent future wars.”²⁰⁶ He made similar references to the Great War to help justify the United Nations and a post-war plan for peace. In a 1943 speech, he said:

Some twenty-four years ago when we men of America returned to this nation’s shores, we dedicated ourselves to the principles for which our comrades had laid down their lives. In our hearts was a consuming hatred for the forces of oppression which had sought to crush the free people of the world. In our memory was an undying horror of war. We laid aside our weapons and turned to the pursuits of peace. But we knew we could never keep our trust with those who had given their lives on the battlefields of Europe, unless we undertook to bring into actual being the liberty and freedom for which we had fought... Today, again, we find the forces of oppression seeking to crush the free peoples of the world... We shall—we must—be a might force at the peace conference. We failed before to give a genuine peace—we dare not fail this time.²⁰⁷

Not unlike Hitler, Truman sought to justify the sacrifice of his fellow Americans during the Great War through policy. Additionally, he spoke in a way that made it seem as though all Americans who fought in the war shared his opinions of the conflict. For Truman, however, invoking the interconnected nature of the two wars was not merely a useful rhetorical tool. He reflected on the idea in letters to his comrades. Noting how many of his Battery D friends were now sending their sons off to fight in Europe and the Pacific, Truman wrote to Meisburger, “I really think we could take the sons of the organization and start out another Battery if we could get all the boys to believe the Field Artillery is the right place to go.”²⁰⁸ He longed to take their place, telling his former sergeant in a later letter, “I wish you and I were doing it all over again as we did in 1917 and 1918 but of course it isn’t possible.”²⁰⁹ These musings illuminated the

²⁰⁶ Harry Truman, “Jackson County 1942 Speech” (speech, Jackson County, MO, November 2, 1942), in box 283, Harry S. Truman Papers: Papers as U.S. Senator and Vice President, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰⁷ Harry Truman, “United Nations” (speech, Des Moines, MO, July 30, 1943), in box 283, Harry S. Truman Papers: Papers as U.S. Senator and Vice President, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Edward Meisburger, July 27, 1942, box 1, Correspondence – Truman, Harry S. file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁰⁹ Letter from Harry Truman to Edward Meisburger, February 5, 1944, box 1, Correspondence – Truman, Harry S. file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

generational dimension of the World Wars. People born in the immediate wake of 1918 now went to fight in place of their parents.

The memory of the Great War influenced Truman's thinking as he ascended to the vice presidency, and eventually, to the Oval Office. Truman's diaries from the brief period he served as vice president included several autobiographical notes regarding his time in the Great War.²¹⁰ Although these writings focused primarily on the facts of his experience rather than his impressions, they demonstrated that the First World War still occupied a prominent place in his thoughts even during a stressful period in his life. In one such entry, Truman claimed, "I've been very badly frightened several times in my life and the morning of July 11, 1918, when I took over that battery was one of those times."²¹¹ Watching his commander-in-chief's health deteriorate by the day inspired the same fear. Nearly three decades later, his Battery D friends remained some of his closest confidants. In late 1944, he took Battery D veteran Eddie McKim with him to a White House screening of a movie about Woodrow Wilson. As they walked away after the event, the former sergeant stopped and said, "Hey, bud, turn around and take a look. You're going to be living in that house before long." Truman sighed, "Eddie, I'm afraid I am. And it scares the hell out of me."²¹² According to Truman's press secretary, this was the first instance that Truman openly admitted that Roosevelt would die before the end of the term and that he would need to take his place.²¹³ On April 12, 1945, his prediction proved correct. Just like when he assumed his captaincy, Truman had to replace a beloved leader at the climax of a World War. He no longer commanded 194 artillerymen but rather the greatest industrial power of the

²¹⁰ Truman, *Autobiography*, 46.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 255.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

Allies and its millions of servicemembers around the world. He felt fear when given control of Battery D, but when he learned FDR was dead, he said it “felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me.”²¹⁴ The former Captain became Commander-in-Chief.

The 33rd President recognized the symmetry of his experiences in 1918 and 1945. Late in the night of April 17, 1945, in a speech that crackled through U.S. standard-issue radios in war-torn European villages and distant Pacific jungles, Truman addressed the combined American Armed Forces for the first time, saying:

I have done as you would do in the field when the Commander falls. My duties and responsibilities are clear. I have assumed them. These duties will be carried on in keeping with our American tradition. As a veteran of the First World War, I have seen death on the battlefield. When I fought in France with the 35th Division, I saw good officers and men fall, and be replaced... I know the strain, the mud, the misery, the utter weariness of the soldier in the field. And I know too his courage, his stamina, his faith in his comrades, his country, and himself. We are depending upon each and every one of you.²¹⁵

The speech reflected important lessons he learned in 1918. Although he worried that he could not live up to Roosevelt’s legacy and feared that the pressures of his office would crush him, Truman feigned confidence. He knew that maintaining the illusion of self-assuredness gave him the best chance of inspiring the loyalty of his constituents, just as it helped him take command of Battery D 27 years before. But as president, Truman had to make decisions far more challenging than any of those he made as an officer. Perhaps the hardest one came only a few months after he took office.

Truman’s combat experience alone does not explain why he ordered the use of atomic weapons on Japan at the conclusion of World War II, but some evidence from the weeks leading

²¹⁴ McCullough, *Truman*, 353.

²¹⁵ Harry Truman, “Address Broadcast to the Armed Forces” (speech, Washington D.C., April 17, 1945), Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/5/address-broadcast-armed-forces>.

up to the attack on Hiroshima suggested that the Western Front remained on his mind. In July, Truman mulled over the decision as he returned to Europe for the first time since 1919. On July 9, aboard the U.S.S. Augusta, Truman recorded in his diary: “Maneuvers and firing at 8:30. Eight-inch, five-inch, and 40mm. Most interesting to me because of field artillery experience. I’d still fire a battery than run a country.”²¹⁶ When he arrived in Antwerp, the president requested that the Chief of Army Chaplains in the European Theater, Colonel Curtis Tiernan, stay with him at his temporary residence at the Potsdam Conference. The Catholic priest served as the chaplain of the 129th during World War I. Truman recalled how during the Great War, the ‘Padre’ used to “ride with me at the head of the outfit, and we would discuss all the ills of the world, both political and religious.”²¹⁷ Similarly, Truman described him as “one of the best-informed” and “kindest” men he ever knew.²¹⁸ Tiernan spent several days with Truman at Potsdam in the week after the first successful Trinity nuclear test on July 16, 1945. No record of their long conversations during this period exists, but they often occurred on the same days as discussions between Truman, Churchill, and Stalin regarding the atomic bomb.²¹⁹

Around this time, learning the new President served near their city during the First World War, officials in Verdun bestowed honors upon Truman. When he received this news, he recalled watching men of the 81st “Wildcat” Division take losses in some of the final infantry assaults of the Great War during the final hours before the Armistice. He explained:

I can remember that on November 10, 1918, we’d got our orders to move down the following afternoon into the valley of Verdun. That next morning some units did move

²¹⁶ Harry Truman, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Robert Ferrell (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 49.

²¹⁷ Truman, *Year of Decisions*, 404-405.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Truman, *Off the Record*, 53, 55-56.

down. Some men I knew and that I thought a lot of got killed that morning. If we had moved down that morning some of us would have got it. Those are the chances of war.²²⁰

Truman rarely spoke of this detail in his other post-war writings. Perhaps thinking of these final casualties of the Great War and the several Battery D comrades who already lost sons in the Pacific, Truman believed dropping the bomb would save 250,000 American lives that an invasion of the Japanese homeland supposedly required.²²¹ Whether or not such an impression of the situation was accurate, it was the rationale he used.²²² The captain who fired phosgene gas at the Germans in the Vosges unleashed nuclear devastation on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, killing 135,000 Japanese—mostly civilians.²²³ The Japanese issued their unconditional surrender within a week, thus ending Truman's second war.

As president, Truman honed his understanding of the First World War's place in his self-narrative. Perhaps the clearest distillation of how the President understood the conflict's impact on his life came in a diary entry on September 26, 1946—the 28th anniversary of the first day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Much like his “Military Career of a Missourian,” Truman wrote about himself in the third person. He explained that on the morning of September 26, 1918, “a serviceman of my acquaintance was standing behind a battery of French 75's at a little town

²²⁰ Josephus Daniels, *The Wilson Era: Years of War and After* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1946), 176.

²²¹ Letter from Harry Truman to Edward Meisburger, December 11, 1948, box 1, Correspondence – Truman, Harry S. file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 5.

²²² A growing number of historians contend that the Japanese would have surrendered before any American invasion of the Japanese home islands—making the decision to drop the bombs unnecessary (see Gar Alperovitz's *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)). Though initially excited by the success of the bombs, Truman quickly understood the human cost of his decision. When asked whether to drop a third bomb on another Japanese city, Truman allegedly refused, saying he could not stomach “killing all those kids” (Mara Wilson, “Harry Truman Explains Why He Dropped the Bomb,” *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/letters/archive/2018/06/archival-letters-when-harry-truman-weighed-in-on-the-atlantics-nuclear-counterfactual/560348/>).

²²³ “Fact File: Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” WW2 People's War, British Broadcasting Company, accessed March 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/timeline/factfiles/nonflash/a6652262.shtml>.

called Neuville...At 8:00AM the artillery including the 75 battery referred to moved forward.

That forward movement did not stop until Nov. 11, 1918.”²²⁴ Then he described coming home to a hero’s welcome amid an air of glory. But he also noted:

The home people forgot the war. Two years later, turned out the Administration which had successfully conducted our part of the war and turned the clock back. They began to talk of disarmament. They did disarm themselves, to the point of helplessness. They became fat and rich, special privilege ran the country—ran it to a fall... Then another European war came along. We tried as before to keep out of it. We refused to believe we could get into it. The great leader (FDR) warned the country of the possibility. He was vilified, smeared, misrepresented, but kept his courage. As was inevitable we were forced into the war. The country awoke—late, but it awoke and created the greatest war production program in history.²²⁵

After describing how the United States not only deployed millions abroad to fight the Axis but also furnished the other Allied powers with the hardware necessary for victory, Truman continued:

Unfortunately, the great leader who had taken the nation through the peace time and war time emergencies passed to his great reward just one month before the German surrender... My acquaintance who commanded the 75 battery on Sept. 26, 1918 took over. The same elation filled the home people as filled them after the first world war... Then the reaction set in. Selfishness, greed, jealousy raised their ugly heads. No wartime incentive to keep them fall. Labor began to grab all it could by fair means or foul, farmers began black-marketing food, industry hoarded inventories, and the same old pacifists began to talk of disarmament.²²⁶

Fearing that the American government and the international community would repeat the same mistakes they did after World War I, the President questioned whether he could “continue to outface the demagogues, the chiselers, the jealousies.”²²⁷ Although he believed that human nature remained static for thousands of years, he argued that humanity now had to change or face “absolute and complete destruction and maybe the insect age or an atmosphereless planet.”²²⁸

²²⁴ Truman, *Off the Record*, 98-99.

²²⁵ Truman, *Off the Record*, 98-99.

²²⁶ Truman, *Off the Record*, 98-99.

²²⁷ Truman, *Off the Record*, 98-99.

²²⁸ Ibid.

That Truman chose the first day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive as the starting point of this private narrative of his path to the presidency captured the lasting sway the Great War had over the former Captain. Not only did the entry reinforce the idea of the two world wars as a contiguous event, it hinted at the idea of World War I as America's "forgotten war." Unlike other conflicts before and after, the Great War never inspired a robust memorial culture in the United States. With the nation's complex motives for involvement and brief participation, the conflict did not fit neatly into popular narratives of American history.²²⁹ The frustration Truman expressed in the entry may explain why he frequently referenced the Great War—and his service in it—to justify the measures he believed would prevent the same failures that followed the 1918 Armistice.

The 33rd President continued to invoke the lessons he learned from the Great War to support his policy agenda after World War II. Truman, for example, cited his time in the National Guard as part of the reason why he favored universal military training and a gradual demobilization after World War II—though neither policies materialized.²³⁰ In his first State of the Union address, Truman proposed domestic policies that he argued would prevent another post-war recession like the one that sank his business in 1922. He also warned that the nation could not return to the isolationism that squandered peace after the Great War: "It is the hope of all Americans that in time future historians will speak not of World War I and World War II, but of the first and the last world wars."²³¹ In a speech at a reunion of the 35th Division in 1948—one

²²⁹ Jennifer Keene, "Remembering the 'Forgotten War': American Historiography on World War I," *The Historian* 78, no. 3 (2016).

²³⁰ Truman, *Off the Record*, 81.

²³¹ Harry Truman, "Second State of the Union" (speech, Washington D.C., January 14, 1946), American History from Revolution to Reconstruction, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/harry-s-truman/state-of-the-union-1946.php>.

of many he attended after 1918—Truman elaborated on the connection between the Great War and his foreign policy plans. He said:

In time of war, we worked together for victory. Now we must work together to secure the peace and the blessings which that victory has made possible. This time, we must make sure that the tragic events that followed the First World War are not repeated... After the First World War, the chief hope for keeping the peace was the League of Nations—the great dream of Woodrow Wilson. But shortsighted men in the United States Senate blocked our entry into that League, and it never recovered from that blow. This time, the United States took a leading part in organizing the United Nations.²³²

Such references to the war of his youth became a common refrain in his speeches that supported the United States' commitment to the UN, and later the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Campaign strategists also used the President's military service to boost his patriotic image in the 1948 presidential election. Delegates to the 1948 Democratic National Convention, for example, received comic books entitled *The Story of Harry S. Truman*, and nearly a quarter of the comic's pages highlighted Truman's exploits during World War I.²³³ In 1918, Truman wrote that "the battery commander is the man to whom 'the buck' is passed both going up and down."²³⁴ As commander-in-chief, Truman kept a plaque on the Resolute Desk that famously read, "The Buck Stops Here." Indeed, the former captain still had little patience for insubordination. During the Korean War, he relieved General Douglas MacArthur of his command for trying to escalate the conflict into a third world war. Truman told one of his former artillerymen shortly after that the principles of discipline he learned during World War I informed the decision.²³⁵ Finding himself leading the nation through another war, Truman once

²³² Harry Truman, "Address at Reunion of the 35th Division" (speech, Omaha, NE, June 5, 1948), in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry Truman, 1948* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1964), 292.

²³³ "The Story of Harry Truman," Truman Library Institute, July 25, 2016, <https://www.trumanlibraryinstitute.org/trumancomicbook/>.

²³⁴ Letter from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace, October 30, 1918.

²³⁵ Clipping of *Army Magazine* article entitled "Harry S. Truman, Cannoneer," May 1984, Battery D/129th FA file, 35th Division History subsection, The National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, Missouri.

again looked back on his time as an artilleryman. Truman justified his decision to invade Korea in his final public address as president on January 15, 1953, by saying, “I was a soldier in the First World War, and I know what a soldier goes through. I know well the anguish that mothers and fathers and families go through. So I knew what was ahead if we acted in Korea.”²³⁶ Ultimately, he told the American people to “think of the difference between our course now and our course 30 years ago.”²³⁷ Once again mentioning the failed League of Nations, he concluded that the nation had successfully “avoided those mistakes” after World War II.²³⁸ But these decisions captured an ideological, abstract link to World War I. The president maintained a human connection to the conflict that proved equally strong.

Even as commander-in-chief, Truman honored his promise to “soldier” for those who soldiered for him during the Great War. Truman’s friends from Battery D and the 129th Field Artillery represented one of his strongest bastions of personal support. He cared for their well-being with utmost sincerity. In a drawer of the Resolute Desk, he kept a journal filled with the names of all his artillerymen and notes about how they and their families were faring.²³⁹ And Truman went to great lengths to help them whenever possible. In May 1945, Vic Housholder—the man who dragged a suffocating Truman out from under a dead horse in the Vosges 27 years prior—wrote the President asking for information regarding a son who was missing in action. He explained that his eldest son, William, served as a fighter pilot but was shot down over eastern Germany in the fall of 1944. Although William’s base commander heard him say he was bailing

²³⁶ Harry Truman, “Farewell Address to the American People” (speech, Washington D.C., January 15, 1953), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-farewell-address-the-american-people>.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Harry Truman, “Remarks at the Battery D Breakfast” (speech, Washington D.C., January 20, 1949), *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry Truman, 1949* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1964), 111.

out over radio, no one had heard him since. Vic begged Truman to help, attaching a picture of his son's wife and 14-month-old son—whom William never met.²⁴⁰ Truman summoned General Marshall to the Oval Office in person and ordered him to investigate the matter.²⁴¹ Army officials tracked down William's wingman, who reported seeing him deploy his parachute and give the signal he was okay. Still, even two years later, no one knew what happened to William after he floated below the clouds.²⁴² Truman invited Vic to stay in the White House for two days in February 1947. Moreover, he housed Vic in Abraham Lincoln's former bedroom. Although he did not have any news regarding William, Captain Harry spent every meal and free moment with his former lieutenant. One of the president's secretaries told Vic, "the President has a lots of guests and friends come visit him here at the White House, but there are never anyone he looked forward to seeing and talked about as much as you."²⁴³ A month after the visit, Housholder informed Truman that he knew a judge working in Berlin who offered to conduct an on-site investigation at the coordinates provided by William's wingman. The judge, however, needed permission from Soviet authorities in eastern Germany. Although negotiations between Truman and the Soviets failed to produce results, the President learned that a British repatriation team had identified William's grave outside the town of Merseburg.²⁴⁴ Truman arranged for the British to reclaim the remains, and Vic reinterned his son in an American military cemetery in

²⁴⁰ Letter from Vic Housholder to Harry Truman, May 31, 1945, box 1, Correspondence with Harry Truman (1945-49) file, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁴¹ Manuscript by Vic Housholder entitled "My Visit to the White House," 1947, box 1, Correspondence with Harry Truman (1945-49) file Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁴² Letter from Vic Housholder to Harry Truman, August 17, 1945, Correspondence with Harry Truman (1945-49) file, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁴³ "My Visit to the White House."

²⁴⁴ Memorandum from General Vaughan, May 19, 1948, Correspondence with Harry Truman (1945-49) file, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

Belgium.²⁴⁵ Housholder was not the only member of the 129th who benefitted from Captain Harry's loyalty.

A favor Truman performed for Eddie Jacobson revealed how the President's commitment to his comrades could influence policy. Motivated by the plight of Jewish refugees after World War II rather than Zionist convictions, the former canteen sergeant wrote Truman several times in 1948 to urge him to meet with Dr. Chaim Weizmann—a leading Zionist and future first president of Israel—and to entertain his plan to create a Jewish state. The President, however, was conflicted about the implications such a decision would have on the Cold War struggle with the Soviets, who were also trying to expand their influence in the region, and with the Arab nations that supplied large amounts of oil to the United States.²⁴⁶ Additionally, Truman grew frustrated with the Zionists' aggressive efforts to lobby him. He also harbored the concern that “when [the Jews] get on top they are just as intolerant and as cruel as the people were to them when they were underneath.”²⁴⁷ Consequently, Truman explained to his former business partner that he simply could not fulfill such a request.²⁴⁸ On March 13, 1948, Jacobson went to the White House without an appointment to make another appeal to the President. What began as friendly small talk in the Oval Office devolved into a stern argument between former comrades. Jacobson brought up the historical figures that Truman looked up to as a boy and explained that he admired Weizmann in the same way. “He has traveled thousands of miles to see you,” Jacobson argued, “now you are putting off seeing him. That's not like you.”²⁴⁹ After pausing to look out

²⁴⁵ Letter from Harry Truman to Vic Housholder, November 1, 1951, Correspondence with Harry Truman (1950-52) file, Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁴⁶ Letter from Harry Truman to Eddie Jacobson, February 27, 1948, Harry Truman Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/harry-s-truman-eddie-jacobson>.

²⁴⁷ McCullough, *Truman*, 598.

²⁴⁸ Letter from Harry Truman to Eddie Jacobson, February 27, 1948.

²⁴⁹ Harry Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 160-161.

the window, Truman turned to his friend and said, “You win, you baldheaded son-of-a-bitch.”²⁵⁰ Because Jacobson never asked anything of him in the past, Truman agreed to meet with Weizmann five days later. Without informing even his own state department, Truman talked with Weizmann in private for 45 minutes and emphasized his continued support for the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, which provided for the creation of separate Jewish and Palestinian states. Similarly, he listened to Weizmann’s plans for building the Israeli economy and for aiding Jewish refugees.²⁵¹

This mutual understanding helped the two leaders maintain good relations through a crisis that emerged the following day. When the American ambassador to the United Nations submitted a proposal for a temporary UN trusteeship of Palestine to quell political unrest, many Zionists misinterpreted the move as a betrayal of Jewish efforts to establish a state. But Weizmann maintained his confidence in the assurances Truman provided him in their meeting.²⁵² Although Truman did not make a final decision on the fate of Israel for another month, he identified the meeting with Weizmann as a crucial step towards his choice to recognize Israel in May 1948. Furthermore, Truman claimed that Jacobson’s role of “decisive importance” in this decision stood as “a fact of history.”²⁵³ That Truman allowed his feelings of personal duty to Jacobson to influence such an important policy hinted at the strength of his World War I loyalties.

Like Jacobson, many members of the 129th Field Artillery had the opportunity to witness important historical events firsthand because of their former captain. Truman, for example,

²⁵⁰ McCullough, *Truman*, 607.

²⁵¹ Harry Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 161.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁵³ McCullough, *Truman*, 599.

invited Ted Marks—an immigrant from England who served as captain of Battery C during the Great War—to accompany him to an event at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946. Marks rode the train from Washington D.C. to Fulton with Truman and Winston Churchill. Marks informed the former Prime Minister that he, too, had served in the Grenadier Guards prior to immigrating. Together the trio played cards for hours, and Marks sat in the audience as Churchill delivered his famous Iron Curtain speech.²⁵⁴ In 1948, the men of Battery D enjoyed similar prestige when their battery commander invited them to serve as his honor guard in the inaugural parade. Nearly 100 of the artillerymen and their families chartered a train from Kansas City to the Capital to attend. Captain Harry ate breakfast with his battery the morning of Inauguration Day.²⁵⁵ Monsignor Tiernan opened with a prayer and then a moment of silence for their comrades who had passed away since 1918. The men then presented their commander with a gold and ebony walking stick engraved with the battery's sigil.²⁵⁶ Next, to the tune of "It's a Long Way from Tipperary," the Irishmen sang:

It's a long time since 1918,
 It's a long time, we know
 To this great day for the bat'ry
 It's the best we'll ever know;
 So it's hello, Captain Truman
 We're the boys you led so well,
 You're a great guy, Harry Truman
 For you, we'd march through hell.²⁵⁷

According to Truman, they then "fought the war again, as veterans always do, and reminded each other of endless happenings that would no doubt have seemed very unimportant to anyone

²⁵⁴ Ted Marks, oral history interview by J.R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, September 19 and November 27, 1962, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/markst>.

²⁵⁵ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 225.

²⁵⁶ Newspaper clipping, January 1949, box 6, Frank Kunz file 3, Records of the Thirty-Fifth Division Association, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁵⁷ Newspaper clipping of a *Kansas City Star* article entitled "Battery D Members to Present Walking Stick to Their Chief," January 20, 1949, box 6, Frank Kunz file 3, Records of the Thirty-Fifth Division Association, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

but ourselves.”²⁵⁸ After the President was sworn in for his second term a few hours later, the artillerymen marched alongside his car down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House amid cheering crowds. They maintained the same 120 strides-per-minute pace as their march from the Vosges to the Argonne.²⁵⁹ For many, it was the most monumental moment of their life since the Armistice less than 31 years before.

Truman never underestimated the impact that the Great War—and his comrades—made on his life. The period between 1917 and 1919 remained vivid in Truman’s mind even after his presidency. In 1958, the former Commander-in-Chief confided to a friend that in addition to his wedding day, the birth of his daughter, the surrender of the Japanese, and his electoral upset in 1948, “the end of World War I while I was firing a battery of field artillery on the front of Verdun” stood out as one of “several moments of great joy” in his life.²⁶⁰ He also claimed that his “moments of greatest sorrow” were the loss of his mother and father and “when I had to officiate the burial of some of my soldiers in World War I.”²⁶¹ After her father passed away, Margaret Truman wrote, “I didn’t really know the man who went to France, but I have heard from his own lips the admission that the war changed him enormously.”²⁶² Not only did the war bring Truman some of his happiest and saddest memories, it provided him with new opportunities. “I’ve always been sorry I did not get a university education in the regular way,” Truman said near the end of his presidency, “but I got it in the Army the hard way—and it stuck.”²⁶³ Not only did Truman learn the math and science necessary to direct four 75mm guns, he learned how to lead the men who fired them. These comrades pushed him onto his path to the

²⁵⁸ Truman, *Year of trial and Hope*, 225.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Truman, *Off the Record*, 369.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 370.

²⁶² Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 59.

²⁶³ Truman, “The Military Career of a Missourian,” (Editor’s epilogue).

White House and helped him maintain momentum during his turbulent first years in politics.

President Truman once told an aide, “My whole political career is based on my war service and war associates.”²⁶⁴ And for that reason, he continued to look after his men as president—just as he did in France. Captain Harry’s son-in-law, Clifton Daniel, shared his understanding of the battery’s bond when his newborn son received a card declaring him an honorary member of his grandfather’s unit. Clifton wrote his father-in-law:

The boys of Battery D are right. Whatever belongs to you does belong to them. They have a claim on you—you and your heirs and assigns—that can never be forfeited. It is the most valid of all claims—the claim of comradeship in times of joy and sorrow. Some day your grandson will be very proud of his Battery D membership card. To him the First World War will seem like the Middle Ages. But we want to try to make him understand what he owes to history.²⁶⁵

Truman tried to preserve the memory of the Great War in his presidential library. He personally oversaw a campaign to collect artifacts for the archives and museum from veterans not only of the 129th Field Artillery but the entire 35th Infantry Division.²⁶⁶ He served as a custodian of the Division’s history until he passed away on December 26, 1972. On his desk in his office in the presidential library, his family found the same photograph of Bess—now framed—that Truman carried in the left breast pocket of his doughboy uniform and looked at through the foggy eyepieces of his gasmask during late nights in 1918.²⁶⁷

Each of the surviving 57 members of Battery D received an invitation to Truman’s private funeral ceremony. Of those, 32 managed to attend the service along with 210 of the President’s closest friends and family. With ailments and reduced mobility from old age, six of

²⁶⁴ Daniels, *Man of Independence*, 116.

²⁶⁵ Letter from Clifton Daniel to Harry Truman, July 12, 1957, box 1, Correspondence – Truman, Harry S. file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁶⁶ Personal Data Form for the 35th Division Historical Committee, box 6, Frank Kunz file 3, Records of the Thirty-Fifth Division Association, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁶⁷ Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 59.

the veterans left their homes for the first time in several years just to say goodbye to Captain Truman.²⁶⁸ Many wept upon seeing their commander's casket. "He was kind of a father to us," Meisburger explained.²⁶⁹ The young National Guardsmen who served in the modern Battery D used their artillery pieces to fire a 21-gun salute during the funeral.²⁷⁰ Two months later, on St. Patrick's Day, 15 veterans of Battery D and several former officers of the 129th gathered at Truman's grave in the courtyard of his presidential library for their annual reunion; their captain only missed several over the previous 55 years. The reverend of Truman's local church gave a prayer. Notably, he said that the President "truly served his generation and is now fallen asleep."²⁷¹ Former Corporal Eugene Donnelly placed a wreath of evergreen holly on Truman's tombstone and said quietly: "Captain, Battery D is present or accounted for."²⁷²

²⁶⁸ Newspaper clipping from *The Kansas City Star*, February 2, 1972, box 1, Scrapbook of President Harry S. Truman State Funeral file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁶⁹ Clipping from *The Kansas City Times* entitled "Battery D Loses Captain Harry," December 27, 1972, box 1, Scrapbook of President Harry S. Truman State Funeral file, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁷⁰ Funeral plan for the Honorable Harry S. Truman, box 3, Records relating to the Funeral of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁷¹ Newspaper clipping of article entitled "Truman Honored by Unit," 1973, box 1, Edward P. Meisburger Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

Conclusion: The Echoes of 1914-1918

Whether they emerged from the trenches victorious or defeated, unscathed or gravely wounded, the Great War altered the trajectory of these three leaders' lives. The conflict forced them to reevaluate their understanding of the world and their place within it. As historian Robert Wohl once noted, a generation "is like a magnetic field at the center of which lies an experience or a series of experiences," and thus it creates "a system of references and identifications that gives priority to some kinds of experiences and devalues others."¹ Memories of 1914-1918 influenced these leaders' decisions and attitudes for decades. Their journeys from the Western Front to the principal seats of power during the Second World War helped shape the historical narrative of continuity between the two global catastrophes. But many others also fell within the "magnetic field" of this generation.

Churchill, Hitler, and Truman were not the only leaders in World War II who saw action in World War I. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (b.1883 - d.1945) first gained notoriety as a fierce advocate for Italian intervention in the First World War. After Italy took up the Allied cause in 1915, he joined the ranks of the Italian Army's elite *Bersaglieri*. In his letters from the front—published in his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*—he articulated his desire to build "a 'trenchocracy,' a new and better elite which will govern the Italy of tomorrow."² He served nine months of active combat in the Italian Alps and reached the rank of corporal before sustaining critical wounds in 1917 from the detonation of a mortar in his trench. Removed from the front, he used his newspaper to spread anti-pacifist propaganda—efforts supported by the British Secret Service. After the war, many of the men who served in the elite units of the *Bersaglieri*

¹ Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 210.

² Paul O'Brien, *Mussolini in the First World War* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), Kindle e-book location 2626 of 5022.

and the *Arditi* formed the nucleus of Mussolini's fascist movement.³ Much like Hitler, he argued that fighting at the front provided him with special enlightenment about "the essences of mankind."⁴ The Italian demagogue praised his nation's victory, but also railed against the other members of the Entente who he believed cheated the Italians of rightful territorial gains during the Paris Peace Conference. As he claimed in a 1920 speech on the fifth anniversary of Italy's entry into the War, "When a certain period of time has elapsed, things will change, and a large part of the Italian people will recognize the moral and material value of victory, they will honor those who fought and will rebel against those Governments which do not guarantee the future of the nation."⁵ Corporal Mussolini eventually became prime minister in 1922 and later, *Il Duce*. Hitler admired Mussolini's fascist rise, and later the two former corporals came together as natural allies to form the Axis alliance with the Japanese.

The two individuals who claimed leadership over France in 1940 also served in the Great War. General Philippe Pétain (b.1856 - d.1951) organized the defense of Verdun against a German onslaught in 1916 and became a national hero. The following year during his brief tenure as French Army Chief of Staff, he suppressed a series of mutinies throughout the French line that emerged under his predecessor.⁶ Following the French surrender in 1940, however, the former war hero collaborated with the Nazis to become the leader of Vichy France.⁷ Simultaneously, General Charles De Gaulle (b.1890 - 1970) fled to Britain to lead the Free

³ Brian Sullivan, "Mussolini, Benito," 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated November 6, 2017, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/mussolini_benito.

⁴ Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 58.

⁵ Benito Mussolini, "Address Commemorating the Fifth Anniversary of the War" (speech, Milan, May 24, 1920), Biblioteca Fascista, <http://bibliotecafascista.blogspot.com/2012/08/speech-in-milan-may-24-1920.html>.

⁶ Georges Blond, "Philippe Pétain," Encyclopedia Britannica, updated April 20, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philippe-Petain>.

⁷ Olivier Cosson, "Pétain, Philippe," 1914-1918 Online, International Encyclopedia of the First World War, updated October 2, 2019, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/petain_philippe.

French Forces. Ironically, Pétain first promoted De Gaulle to first lieutenant in 1913. De Gaulle served under Pétain for most of the First World War, and when the Lieutenant was presumed dead after his disappearance during the Verdun campaign in March 1916, General Pétain spoke of his subordinate's "great intellectual and moral worth" and his "sense of military honor."⁸ In reality, a German squad wounded the Lieutenant and made him a prisoner for the remainder of the war. Although De Gaulle later claimed that Pétain taught him "the meaning of the gift and art of command," he harbored little sympathy for his former superior when the Allies liberated the country in 1944.⁹ In the summer of 1945, a provisional government tribunal convicted Pétain of treason and sentenced him to death—later commuted to life imprisonment because of his service in the Great War. The French government refused to honor the former Vichy leader's request for burial in Verdun's military cemetery upon his death in 1951.¹⁰ Although both Pétain and De Gaulle were largely symbolic leaders during the Second World War, their credibility rested on their service in the First World War.

Although not heads-of-state, many high-ranking military officials between 1939-1945 exemplified the same connection between the World Wars. Among those in the highest offices of American bureaucratic power during World War II were generals George C. Marshall, George S. Patton, Douglas MacArthur, and Dwight D. Eisenhower—all veterans of the Great War. Similarly, in Nazi Germany, Hermann Göring—a famed fighter ace in the First World War—commanded the *Luftwaffe*, while fellow veteran Heinrich Himmler served as the head of the SS. The same was true of Britain in World War II, as Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, and many of their colleagues had all mobilized for

⁸ Don Cook, *Charles De Gaulle* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983), 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Olivier Cosson, "Pétain, Philippe."

war in 1914. The two Soviet generals who raced each other to Berlin in 1945, Georgy Zhukov and Ivan Konev, also fought in the Great War for the Imperial Russian Army and later for the Red Army in the Russian Civil War. Even a few Japanese commanders in World War II, such as Tomoyuki Yamashita, participated in small skirmishes against German colonial forces in China during the Great War. Given the 21-year difference between 1918 and 1939, a large proportion of middle and upper-level officers in both Allied and Axis militaries naturally were World War I veterans.

Nevertheless, Churchill, Hitler, and Truman's roles in the public sphere and the impact of their decisions on the course of the Second World War made them an ideal sample for a study of this scope. They shared other noteworthy similarities. All three developed a passion for history as early as grade school. Perhaps because of this interest, they each became conscious of their relevance to history at some point in their lives and attempted to craft favorable legacies—albeit at different times. Churchill's letters to Clementine from the trenches in 1916 revealed his calculated efforts to shape a heroic public image. For Hitler, this moment most likely came around the time he wrote *Mein Kampf* during his imprisonment in Landsberg Prison following the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. Truman did not undertake these efforts until making his shorthand notes on the stationery of the Pickwick hotel the night before he announced his candidacy for Senate in 1934. Although Truman's public reflections on the war accumulated over the years, they remained limited compared to those of his two counterparts because he never imagined becoming president and initially rose to power through the death of his predecessor. Few veterans ever developed such an awareness, and many who did lacked the same platform.

Churchill, Hitler, and Truman also welcomed the war with enthusiasm, and all three volunteered for service. Though hardly uncommon, this excitement was far from universal.

Nevertheless, these three veterans often claimed that their reactions to the war were representative of the population at large. From portrayals of the young intellectuals from Oxford and Cambridge who died on the beaches of Gallipoli and on the Somme, to the German student-soldiers who died—allegedly as they sang *Deutschland über alles*—in the *Kindermord* of 1914, there emerged a tendency for societies to martyr their fallen volunteers. The naivete of these young volunteers granted them purity and added to the tragedy of their “sacrifice” in the eyes of the public. Historian George Mosse argued that “it was the accounts of the volunteers which were most apt to become part of the national canon” because they were usually more vocal than those who begrudgingly went to war.¹¹ Churchill, Hitler, and Truman may have volunteered for service, but they did not match all the hallmarks of this popular conception of the “Generation of 1914.” Their age, for example, set them apart. Churchill was 39 years old at the outbreak of the war; meanwhile, the British Army recruited as many as 250,000 boys under the enlistment age of 18, including some as young as 15, throughout the First World War.¹² Fairly average for the German Army, Hitler’s age of 25 was still slightly older than the public’s conception of the teenage students who died at Ypres in 1914. Similarly, Truman’s age of 34 made him older than most of the doughboys who went to France. Although this age difference led Churchill to write about the wartime generation from a slightly “removed” perspective, Hitler and Truman identified more closely with the cross-section of society that fought in the trenches. But as generational theorists like Wohl contend, their shared experiences rather than their age demographic united them.

¹¹ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.

¹² “The Teenage Soldiers of World War One,” BBC News, November 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29934965>.

Additionally, these three individuals presented the war as an enlightening experience. They often invoked their time in the First World War to explain their personal political philosophies as well as to justify specific policies both to the public and to themselves. They also pointed to the Great War as a period of immense personal growth. Not insincere, these claims still played into the public's tendency to view combat as a "sacred experience" impossible for civilians to understand.¹³ Churchill, Hitler, and Truman all claimed that their wartime service gave them a better appreciation for peace, yet none of them emerged from the conflict as pacifists. Nevertheless, none of them greeted the Second World War with same blind enthusiasm they did the First. World War II posed new challenges to these three individuals but also made them reflect on those they faced in the past. Often, the friends and associates who surrounded them in 1914-1918 resurfaced to discuss these memories. Sometimes the lessons of the Great War benefitted these leaders, such as when Churchill streamlined the British war bureaucracy in 1940. On other occasions, such as Hitler's strategic obstinance on the Eastern Front, these memories led to disaster. Regardless, such decisions demonstrated how the Great War represented a common source of guidance to these leaders.

As this study revealed, however, the overarching conclusions they drew from this framework proved drastically different. Historian Jay Winter once observed that individual veterans tend to present the story of their war experiences in a manner that "is particular, localized, and mostly regional or national in form."¹⁴ These leaders were no different. Like many British aristocrats, Churchill blamed the war for killing the most promising young Britons and thus destroying his noble nineteenth century world. In truth, the decay of this aristocratic way of

¹³ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (Providence: Yale University Press, 2006), 110.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117, 116.

life began long before 1914. Corporal Hitler understood Germany's defeat as a betrayal and subscribed to the same feelings of victimhood and vengeance pervasive among Germans in Weimar society. Truman viewed the war as a crusade against an anti-democratic regime determined to infringe upon American values, but he blamed the forgetfulness of the American people and the ignorance of isolationists for allowing victory to go to waste. This influence did not end when these leaders died. For example, fearing that another demagogue would take advantage of iconography honoring Germany's war dead, Allied officials occupying the country after 1945 removed certain inscriptions they deemed militant from World War I memorials.¹⁵ Additionally, most belligerent nations hosted parades and public ceremonies to celebrate the centennial anniversary of the First World War, but Germans largely refrained from the festivities because of the legacy of Hitler and the Nazis.¹⁶ Although a robust memorial culture surrounding the Great War did not develop in the United States after the Armistice, the centenary rekindled American interest. In 2013, Congress passed legislation that established the World War I Centennial Commission and allocated funds for the construction of a national memorial to the conflict in the Capital. The bill, H.R.6364, specifically mentioned President Truman's service as a reason to create the commission.¹⁷ Just as the Great War had an enduring influence on these leaders, they continue to shape the memory of 1914-1918 today.

No three stories could convey the tens of millions that came out of the First World War, but those covered in this study illustrated broader patterns of collective memory. They also conveyed the notion of the two World Wars as a generational ordeal. One should not, however,

¹⁵ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 212.

¹⁶ Akita Shubert et al., "Why World War I is Germany's forgotten conflict," CNN, November 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/09/europe/world-war-one-centenary-germany-intl/index.html>.

¹⁷ "H.R.6364 Enrolled Bill," Congress.gov, United States Congress, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/6364/text/enr>.

conflate the idea of continuity with inevitability. The Second World War was not a definite outcome of its predecessor. The unpredictable carnage so many found disheartening about the Great War indicated the opposite. Had Churchill remained in his dugout rather than gone to meet his superior the day his orderly was killed, had the seal on Corporal Hitler's gasmask broken earlier or his shrapnel wound severed an artery, had Housholder not spotted Truman's yellow raincoat squirming beneath his dead horse, World War II—and history broadly—may have looked quite different. Similarly, if different interpretations of the war prevailed after 1918, maybe it would change the course of the twentieth century and thus the development of the modern world.

One can look, for example, to German expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz (b.1867 - d.1945). The World Wars shaped her life just as it did those of Churchill, Hitler, and Truman. On September 30, 1914, not long after her 18-year-old son, Peter, enthusiastically volunteered for service, she wrote in her diary: "In such times it seems so stupid that the boys must go to war. The whole thing is so ghastly and insane... At once the cold shower: they *must, must!* All is leveled by death; down with all the youth! Then one is ready to despair.... But how can one maintain such a state?"¹⁸ Twenty-two days later, Peter died near Ypres in the *Kindermord*. The loss devastated Käthe. She viewed the death of her son as a betrayal orchestrated not by Jews or Marxists but by the political and economic elite who saw war as an opportunity for personal gain. She tried to convey her grief through two statues of grieving parents that still sit over her son's grave in Belgium today. "What has happened?" she wrote on March 19, 1918. "After the sacrifice of the boys themselves, and our own sacrifice—will not everything be the same?"¹⁹ She

¹⁸ Käthe Kollwitz, *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*, ed. Hans Kollwitz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

did not realize the accuracy of this prediction. Twenty-four years later, her grandson, Peter (named for his uncle), died fighting near Stalingrad. Looking back on the past three decades, Käthe also saw continuity: “the worst of all is that every war already carries within it the war which will answer it. Every war is answered by a new war, until everything, everything is smashed. The devil only knows what the world, what Germany will look like then.”²⁰ For her, the World Wars had no meaning beyond pain. She remained a committed pacifist until her death 16 days before the German surrender in 1945. Käthe’s anti-war message did not prevail in time to save her grandson, but now her statue, *Mother with her Dead Son*, sits at the center of Germany’s Memorial for the Victims of War and Dictatorship in Berlin.

The contrast between the experiences of Kollwitz and the three leaders connect to the teachings of yet another member of the same generation: French historian Marc Bloch (1886-1944). Raised in a Jewish family, Bloch advanced from private to captain in the Great War and received the *Croix De Guerre* and membership in the *Légion d'honneur* for his heroism. He later became a distinguished professor of medieval history at the Sorbonne and a founder of the *Annales* school. Despite his old age in 1939, he reenlisted and fought in the Battle of France. He evacuated with the BEF at Dunkirk but willingly returned to France to protect his family. After Bloch helped his family escape, he joined a French Resistance cell in Lyon in 1942.²¹ He wrote his book about why France lost the war, *Strange Defeat*, around the same time. In it, he mused: “Destiny decided that I, with most of my generation, should, on two separate occasions, separated from one another by a stretch of twenty-one years, be jerked violently from the ways

²⁰ Ibid., 183-184.

²¹ Mike Dash, “History Heroes: Marc Bloch,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 10, 2011, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-heroes-marc-bloch-134082792/>.

of peace.”²² Although Bloch normally sought to understand broad changes over the centuries, some historians suggest that his resistance activities taught him the importance of individual people as well.²³ The Gestapo arrested the historian in March 1944, and Klaus Barbie—known as the “butcher of Lyon”—oversaw Bloch’s torture. On June 16, 1944, just ten days after the Normandy landings, a firing squad executed Bloch and 27 other members of the resistance in a clearing outside Saint-Didier-de-Formans.²⁴ But his impact on the study of history did not end that night.

Bloch’s associates later recovered his incomplete manuscript entitled, *The Historian’s Craft*, which he wrote during the Nazi occupation. From best practices on historical observation and analysis to the role of logic and evidence in the study of history, the brief book provides guidance to anyone seeking to understand the past. He argued that “historical facts are, in essence, psychological facts” and that both deserve the attention of the historian. “Even where the intrusion of these external forces seems most brutal,” Bloch explained, “their action is weakened or intensified by man and his mind.”²⁵ Such consideration for human experience is essential to understanding the Great War. One can create a chronology of the ultimatums of the July Crisis or count the number of dreadnoughts sunk at the Dardanelles, but to comprehend the impact of the Great War—or any historical event—one must consider the human mentalities it generated. According to Bloch, even this inquiry is insufficient. Whenever faced with a paradigm, the historian must ask: “why, out of all the imaginable psychological attitudes, these particular ones should have imposed themselves upon the group?”²⁶ The answer to this question

²² Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1968), 2.

²³ Bryce Lyon, “March Bloch: Historian,” *French Historical Studies* 15, no. 2 (1987), <https://www-jstor-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/pdf/286263.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A6d8a81ba3308ab6a335e4ccf7c8d63e7>, 205-206.

²⁴ Mike Dash, “History Heroes: Marc Bloch.”

²⁵ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 194.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

often proves elusive. But those who endeavor to answer it should find comfort and confidence in one of Bloch's final lessons: "Behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp."²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

Appendix

Plates

1.



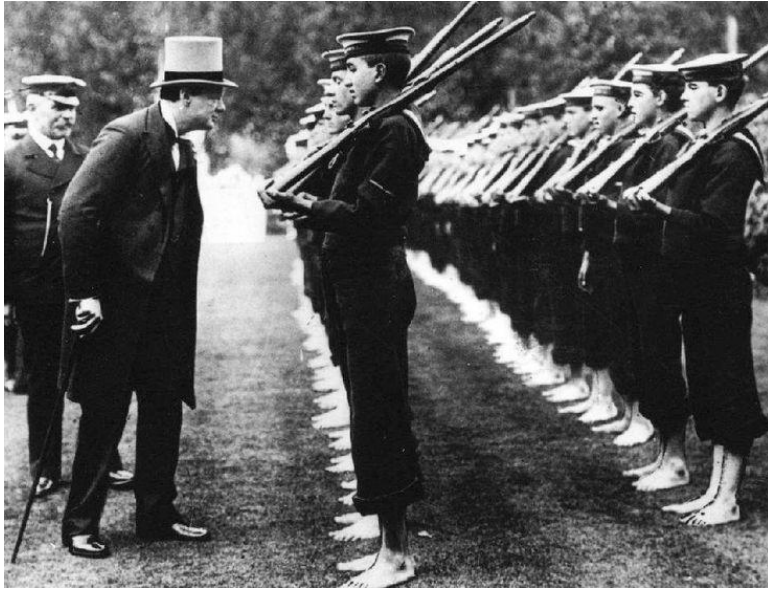
Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, ~1911 (Source: *The Telegraph*)

2.



Winston Churchill with his advisor, Admiral Jacky Fisher, ~1912 (Source: Hillsdale College)

3.



Winston Churchill inspecting Royal Naval Division recruits shortly before their departure for Antwerp, ~Fall 1914 (Source: *Libertad Digital*)

4.



Winston Churchill (center) sometime during his stint on the Western Front, ~1916 (Source: Imperial War Museum)

5.



Minister of Munitions Winston Churchill with troops of the 47th Division in Lille, ~October 1918 (Source: Imperial War Museum)

6.



Adolf Hitler celebrating the outbreak of war at the *Odeonsplatz*, August 2, 1914 (Source: United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum)

7.



Corporal Adolf Hitler (seated far right) with his fellow dispatch runners in regimental headquarters at Fournes on the Western Front, 1915, (Public Domain Photo)

8.



Adolf Hitler visiting the former 1915 Fournes HQ with fellow dispatch runners Max Amann and Hans Schmidt during the Fall of France, June 1940 (Heinrich Hoffman, *With Hitler in the West*)

9.



Adolf Hitler visiting graves of German dead from the Great War in Langemarck Cemetery, near where he fought in the First Battle of Ypres in 1914. June 1940 (Heinrich Hoffman, *With Hitler in the West*)

10.



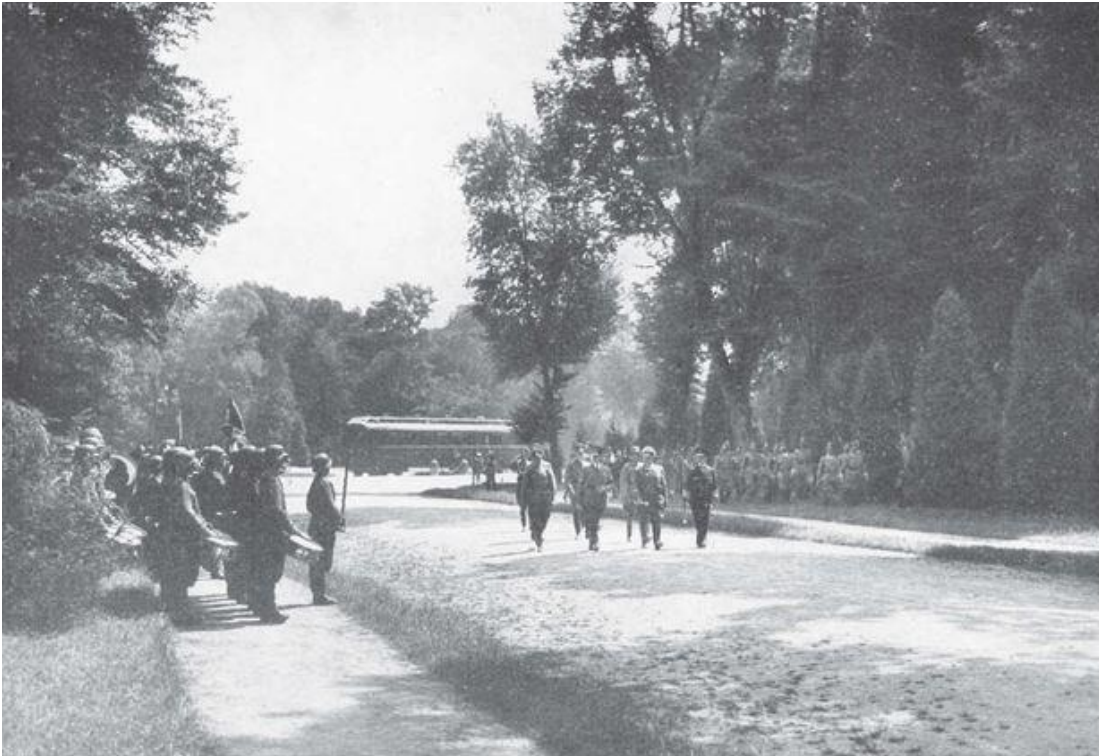
Adolf Hitler touring the World War I battlefield at Vimy Ridge, where the List Regiment fought in 1917. The sign to his right reads: "German Front Line 1917." ~June 1940 (Heinrich Hoffman, *With Hitler in the West*)

11.



Adolf Hitler (second from the right) dictating the terms of the 1940 Armistice in the same train car used for the November 11, 1918, Armistice. June 22, 1940 (Heinrich Hoffman, *With Hitler in the West*)

12.



Adolf Hitler walking away from the Armistice train car just as General Foch did in 1918. June 22, 1940 (Heinrich Hoffman, *With Hitler in the West*)

13.



Harry Truman as a 1st Lieutenant shortly before departing for France, ~1917 (Source: National World War I Museum)

14.



Captain Harry Truman on horseback during training in France, summer 1918 (Source: National World War I Museum)

15.



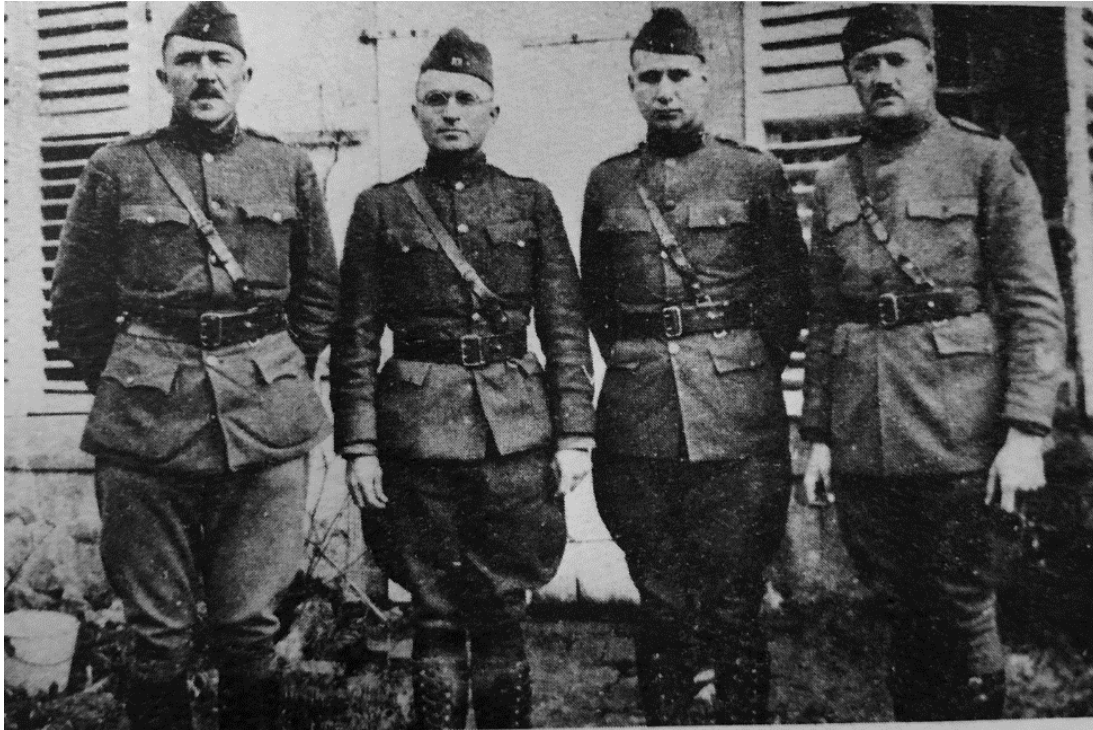
Captain Truman in combat dress somewhere in France, autumn 1918 (Source: National World War I Museum)

16.



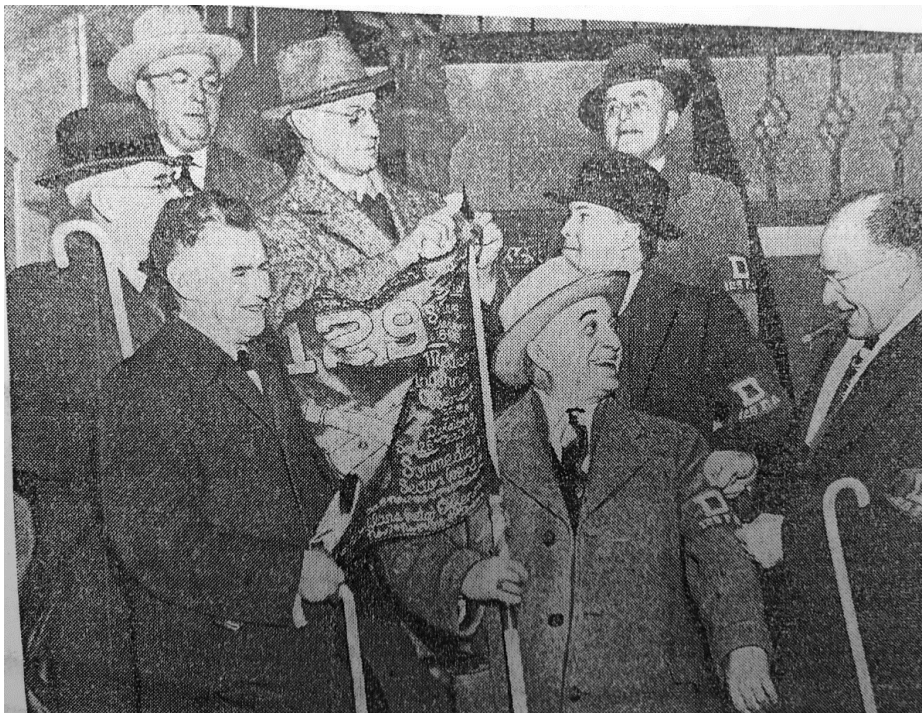
A 75mm Battery from the 35th Division firing a mission during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, ~October 1, 1918 (Source: National World War I Museum)

17.



From Left to Right: Lt. Vic Housholder, Cpt. Harry Truman, Lt. Gordon Jordan, and Lt. Leslie Lerner in France, 1918 (National World War I Museum)

18.



Veterans of Battery D prepare to carry their unit's guidon in Truman's inauguration parade, January 20, 1949 (Source: Frank Kunz Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)

19.



Two columns of Battery D veterans marching alongside their Captain's presidential motorcade as it travels down Pennsylvania Avenue for his inauguration parade, January 20, 1949 (Source: Frank Kunz Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)

20.



Truman with the man who saved his life in 1918, Vic Housholder. Truman went to great lengths to recover the remains of Housholder's son whose plane was shot down over eastern Germany in 1944. ~1950 (Source: Vic H. Housholder Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)

21.



Truman with Fred Schmidt and Gene Donnelly at a Battery D reunion, 1954 (Source: Frank Kunz Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)

22.



Dressed in their doughboy uniforms, Battery D veterans Edward Meisburger, Eugene Donnelly, Frank Kunz, Arthur Bell surprise their former captain at a National Guard Association Event in Washington D.C., 1959 (Source: Frank Kunz Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)

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