

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

When The Allies Went Through Another Dark Hour

From a broadcast by the Rt. Hon. D. LLOYD GEORGE, published in the English "Listener"

[Twenty-four years ago, the Allies were passing through another dark hour. Not only the Germans, but also many neutrals anticipated or feared a victory for the Central Powers; and, says Lloyd George, they had every apparent reason for coming to that conclusion. The task which the Allies successfully faced then, and the measures they took, were described by Lloyd George in a radio talk last December, on the anniversary of the day in 1916 on which he became Prime Minister. We reproduce a condensation of his talk because, in several respects, it offers a striking and encouraging parallel or comparison with the situation to-day]

WHEN I surveyed the task which at the request of the King I had undertaken in the dark winter days of 1916, this was the prospect with which I was confronted. Three of the Allied countries—Belgium, Serbia and Rumania—had been trampled to the ground by the legions of the Central Powers. The conquest of Rumania, with her rich grain and oil fields, had temporarily broken a blockade which had been gradually but surely depriving both Germany and Austria of essential supplies. The immense armies of Russia had at last been broken by the hammer strokes of the German artillery. Throughout Russia there was complete disorganisation, despair and disaffection at the front and behind. That great country was seething with the spirit of revolution, and could not be depended upon to make any further effective contribution to the winning of the war for the Allies.

Within 40 Miles of Paris

The north-eastern section of France, with its important coal mines, industries and corn-fields, was still in the hands of the Germans. Their armies were firmly entrenched within forty miles of Paris—they were almost as near Paris as Reading is to London. A series of most sanguinary battles in 1914, 1915 and 1916—battles which cost the Allies millions of casualties—had failed to dislodge them. On the eastern front we had suffered signal defeat at the hands of the Turks on the Dardanelles where, to save our army from utter destruction, our troops had to escape to our ships in the dead of night. We had been repulsed in a pitched battle on the borders of Palestine, and in Mesopotamia a British army had been forced to surrender to the Turkish troops. In Salonika the Allies were too late to save Serbia from being over-run, and to prevent Bulgaria from joining the Central Powers. Notwithstanding the indomitable courage displayed by the Italian army in scaling formidable mountain ranges, they had made but slow progress against the Austrian forces owing to the difficulty of the terrain and the superiority of the Austrian artillery.

But the most serious menace of all to the Allies was at sea. The Germans had recently intensified their submarine campaign, with terrifying results. . . .

What Was Wrong?

Taking all these things into account, it was altogether a dark and well-nigh desperate prospect at the end of 1916. There was a general and well-founded feeling throughout the country that a more vigorous and effective prosecution of the war on all fronts was essential in order to retrieve us from disaster. What was wrong? There was first



LLOYD GEORGE strikes a characteristic pose

of all an obvious lack of co-ordination between the various departments and services at home. There was also the absence of any real unity between the Allies in their military, naval, aerial and economic efforts. This state of things had so far prevented us from making full use of the superiority in men, materials and strategic positions which the Allies either had or could have attained.

I had for some time come to the conclusion that to entrust the direction of the war to a Sanhedrin of some twenty Ministers chosen largely for party reasons, and all engaged in the administration of departments which demanded their whole attention, was worse than worthless. After attending to their urgent and important departmental duties, they had no spare time, nor strength, to master the main

problems of the war. I therefore picked out the best men available from all parties, who were not charged with any departmental responsibilities, but whose sole duty would be to survey the whole field of action with a view to grappling effectively with the tangle of difficulties which confronted us on all sides. . . .

Call for War Aims

After setting the new Ministers to their various duties, the first concerted measure we undertook as a Cabinet was to give the nation and the neutrals a clear idea as to the concrete aims for which we were fighting—the kind of peace we sought to achieve. The absence of any clear definition of our peace objective was dividing the neutrals, and spreading a feeling of disunion and apathy amongst considerable sections of our population at home.

An Inter-Allied Conference, therefore, was summoned, and met in London on Christmas morning, 1916—a most appropriate day—to formulate the peace objectives for which the Allies were contending. The Germans were seeking to win neutral opinion on their side by a professed anxiety for a peaceable termination of the war. We decided that this peace campaign could only be countered, not by vague phrases, but by a full detailed and frank statement of our concrete plans for a peace settlement. We published it to the world. Our outline made a favourable impression on neutral countries, and won many of them to our side, but more especially it had its effect in America and contributed materially to that great country's historic decision to throw in her lot with the Allies. Having made it clear that we were fighting, not merely for victory over our enemies, but for the purpose of establishing beyond challenge certain definite principles of eternal justice and right, we proceeded with our task of winning that victory which alone could enable us to vindicate those principles. Henceforth there was an unintermittent and untiring drive all along the line of victory right to the end. . . .

Other Measures

We initiated a new campaign for the relentless chasing of the submarines. It was carried on with renewed vigour and more conspicuous success than ever. . . .

To increase our food supplies a great campaign of increased cultivation of our soil and production of food was inaugurated—machinery and manure being supplied by the Government for this purpose. The home-grown food supply of the country was thus substantially increased in spite of the shortage of labour. In the field of military action we had formidable difficulties to encounter in making the most effective use of Allied resources. In the end we were able to attack the enemy on his most vulnerable flanks, and above all, we secured unity of direction and command in the armies of all the Allies and their navies and also in the distribution of the essential supplies for the Allied Powers. It is acknowledged that unity of command played a determining part in achieving the final overthrow of the Central Powers.

I have no time to dwell upon matters like the setting up of the first Imperial Cabinet in the Empire—not for discussion, but for deliberation and for action. I have confined myself to summarising briefly what happened in the crisis of 1916, and endeavoured to give some idea of its effect upon the fortunes of the war.