

## THE DANGER TO CIVILIZATION.

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IN the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, men commonly congratulated themselves that they lived in an era of enlightenment and progress, very far removed from the ignorance, superstition and barbarity of the dark ages. Progress in civilization came to seem natural and certain, no longer needing deliberate effort for its realization. Under the influence of a fancied security, men gradually came to value less consciously the effort after mental advancement. But history gives no justification for the sense of security, and the present war, to those who view it as an historical event, not simply as a vehicle for their own passions, affords grave reason for fear that the civilization we have slowly built up is in danger of self-destruction. This aspect of the war has been too little considered on both sides, the fear of defeat and the longing for victory have made men oblivious of the common task of Europe and of the work which Europe had been performing for mankind at large. In all that has made the nations of the West important to the world, they run the risk of being involved in a common disaster, so great and so terrible that it will outweigh, to the historian in the future, all the penalties of military defeat and all the glories of military victory.

Over and over again, in the past, the greatest civilizations have been destroyed or degraded by war. The fighting which Homer has taught us to regard as glorious swept away the Mycenaean civilization, which was succeeded by centuries of confused and barbarous conflict. The speech of Pericles to the Athenians at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war has been thought worthy of a place among recruiting appeals in the London Underground Railway; yet the war which he recommended by recalling the greatness of Athenian civilization proved in fact to be its end, and Athenians born after the war added almost nothing to the world's permanent

possessions. It is impossible to imagine a more sinister precedent than that war, in which the most fruitful and splendid civilization the world has known was brought to an end for ever by pride of power and love of battle. The Roman civilization which succeeded it, though less productive, might have seemed secure by its great extent, yet it perished almost completely in the barbarian invasion. The remnants out of which the modern world has grown were preserved, not by the men who fought against the barbarians, but by monks who retired from the strife and devoted their lives to religion. And in modern times, the Thirty Years' War had an influence, impossible to overestimate, in brutalizing the German character and making the level of humane feeling lower than that of nations less subject to the degrading influence of invasion and rapine.

When we consider the world in a broad historical retrospect, it is what nations have added to civilization that makes us permanently honor them, not what they have achieved in conquest and dominion. Great conquerors, such as Attila, Timur and Zenghis Khan, trample across the pages of history full of noise and fury, signifying nothing: like an earthquake or a plague, they come and pass, leaving only a record of destruction and death. The Jews and Greeks, the Roman, and the modern nations of Western Europe have contributed almost everything that has been added in historical times to creation and diffusion of what is permanently valuable in human life. The Romans spread throughout their empire what had been created by the Jews in religion, by the Greeks in art and science; on this foundation, after a long interval of barbarism, the Italians, the French, the English and the Germans built the world in which we have hitherto lived. The progress in which we have rejoiced has not grown up by itself: it has been created and sustained by individual and collective effort. What great men have done in literature, in art, in natural knowledge, has been made available to large numbers by education. Private violence has been suppressed: the rudiments of learning have become more and more accessible to all classes; and mental activity has been continually stimulated and broadened as the progress of science liberated more and more men from the need of manual labor.

It is this achievement, imperfect as it has hitherto been, which chiefly entitles the Western nations to respect. It is the furtherance of civilization which makes us admire the Roman Empire more than that of Xerxes, or the British Empire more than that of China. It is this service to mankind that is being jeopardized by the present war. Whether, when it ends, the English, the French, or the Ger-

mans will have the energy and will to carry on the progress of the past, is a very doubtful question, depending chiefly upon the length of the war and the spirit fostered by the settlement. Of all the reasons for desiring an early peace, this is, to my mind, the strongest. The danger, great and pressing as I believe it to be, is obscured amid the clash of national ambitions, because it requires us to fix our attention on individuals, not on States. There is some risk of forgetting the good of individuals under the stress of danger to the state: yet, in the long run, the good of the state cannot be secured if the individuals have lost their vigor. In what follows, I shall ignore political issues, and speak only of the effect on separate men and women and young people; but a corresponding effect on the state must follow in the end, since the state lives only by the life of its separate citizens.

This war, to begin with, is worse than any previous war in the direct effect upon those who fight. The armies are far larger than they have ever been before, and the loss by death or permanent disablement immensely exceeds what has occurred in the past.<sup>1</sup> The losses are enhanced by the deadlock, which renders a purely strategical decision of the war almost impossible. We are told to regard it as a war of attrition, which means presumably that victory is hoped from the gradual extermination of the German armies. Our military authorities, apparently, contemplate with equanimity a three years' war, ending only by our excess of population: when practically all Germans of military age have been killed or maimed, it is thought that there will still remain a good many English, Russians and Italians, and perhaps a sprinkling of Frenchmen. But in the course of such destruction almost all that makes the Allied nations worth defending will have been lost: the enfeebled, impoverished remnants will lack the energy to resume the national life which existed before the war, and the new generation will grow up listless under the shadow of a great despair. I hope that the men in authority are wiser than their words: but everything that has been said points to this result as what is intended by those who control our fate.

The actual casualties represent only a small part of the real loss in the fighting. In former wars, seasoned veterans made the best soldiers, and men turned from the battlefield with their physical and mental vigor unimpaired. In this war, chiefly owing to the nerve-shattering effect of shell-fire and continual noise, this is no

<sup>1</sup> According to Mr. Balfour, Great Britain, which has suffered far less than France, Russia, Germany or Austria-Hungary, has had more casualties in the first year than Germany had in the war of 1870.

longer the case. All troops gradually deteriorate at the front: the best troops are those who are fresh, provided they are adequately trained. In all the armies, a number of men go mad, a much larger number suffer from nervous collapse, becoming temporarily blind or dumb or incapable of any effort of will, and almost all suffer considerable nervous injury, causing loss of vitality, energy, and power of decision. In great part, no doubt, this effect is temporary; but there is reason to think that in most men something of it will be permanent, and in not a few the nervous collapse will remain very serious. I fear it must be assumed that almost all who have seen much fighting will have grown incapable of great effort, and will only be able, at best, to slip unobtrusively through the remaining years of life. Since the fighting will, if the war lasts much longer, absorb the bulk of the male population of Europe between 18 and 45, this cause alone will make it all but impossible to maintain and hand on the tradition of civilization which has been slowly acquired by the efforts of our ancestors.

We are told by advocates of war that its moral effects are admirable; on this ground, they say, we ought to be thankful that there is little prospect of an end to wars. The men who repeat this hoary falsehood must have learnt nothing from the reports of friends returned from the war, and must have refrained from talking with wounded soldiers in hospitals and elsewhere. It is true that, in those who enlist of their own free will, there is a self-devotion to the cause of their country which deserves all praises; and their first experience of warfare often gives them a horror of its futile cruelty which makes them for a time humane and ardent friends of peace. If the war had lasted only three months, these good effects might have been its most important moral consequences. But as the months at the front pass slowly by, the first impulse is followed by quite other moods. Heroism is succeeded by a merely habitual disregard of danger, enthusiasm for the national cause is replaced by passive obedience to orders. Familiarity with horrors makes war seem natural, not the abomination which it is seen to be at first. Humane feeling decays, since, if it survived, no man could endure the daily shocks. In every army, reports of enemy atrocities, true or false, stimulate ferocity, and produce a savage thirst for reprisals. On the Western front at least, both sides have long ceased to take prisoners except in large batches. Our newspapers have been full of the atrocities perpetrated by German soldiers. Whoever listens to the conversation of wounded soldiers returned from the front will find that, in all the armies, some men become

guilty of astonishing acts of ferocity. Will even the most hardened moralist dare to say that such men are morally the better for their experience of war? If the war had not occurred, they would probably have gone through life without ever having the wild beast in them aroused. There is a wild beast slumbering in almost every man, but civilized men know that it must not be allowed to awake. A civilized man who has once been under the domain of the wild beast has lost his moral self-respect, his integrity and uprightness: a secret shame makes him cynical and despairing, without the courage that sees facts as they are, without the hope that makes them better. War is perpetrating this moral murder in the souls of vast millions of combatants; every day many are passing over to the dominion of the brute by acts which kill what is best within them. Yet, still our newspapers, parsons, and professors prate of the ennobling influence of war.

The war, hitherto, has steadily increased in ferocity, and has generated a spirit of hatred in the armies which was absent in the early months. If it lasts much longer, we may be sure that it will grow worse in these respects. The Germans, hitherto, have prospered, but if the tide turns, it is to be feared that their "frightfulness" in the past will be child's play compared with what will happen when they begin to anticipate defeat. They have already aroused among the Allies a hatred which is the greatest danger that now menaces civilization; but if the war lasts much longer, and if the Germans are driven by fear into even greater crimes against humanity than they have hitherto committed, it is to be expected that a blind fury of destruction will drive us on and on until the good and evil of the old world have perished together in universal ruin. For this reason, if for no other, it is of the first importance to control hatred, to realize that almost all that is detestable in the enemy is the result of war, is brought out by war, in a greater or less degree, on our side as well as on the other, and will cease with the conclusion of peace but not before. If the terrible deeds that are done in the war are merely used to stimulate mutual hatred, they lead only to more war and to still more terrible deeds: along that road, there is no goal but exhaustion. If universal exhaustion is to be avoided, we must, sooner or later, forget our resentment, and remember that the war, whatever its outcome, is destroying on both sides the heritage of civilization which was transmitted to us by our fathers and which it is our duty to hand on to our children as little impaired as possible.

When the war is over, the men who have taken part in it will

not easily find their place again among the occupations of peace. They will have become accustomed to act under the strong stimulus of danger, or in mere obedience to orders; and they will be physically and mentally exhausted by the terrible strain of life in the trenches. For both reasons, they will have little will-power, little capacity for self-direction. It will be hardly possible to find room for them all in the labor market, and the first impulses of patriotism in their favor will probably soon die down. We cannot hope that very many of them will ever again be as useful citizens as they would have been if the war had not occurred. The habit of violence, once acquired, however legitimately, is not easily set aside, and the respect for law and order is likely to be much less after the war than it was before. If this state of mind concurs, as is likely, with serious distress and labor troubles ruthlessly repressed by a government grown used to autocratic power, the effect upon the national life will be disastrous and profound.

In the minds of most men on both sides, the strongest argument for prolonging the war is that no other course will secure us against its recurrence in the near future. In the opinion of Englishmen and Germans alike, their enemies have such a thirst for war that only their utter overthrow can secure the peace of the world. We are an essentially peace-loving nation—so both contend—and if we had the power, we should prevent such a war as this from occurring again. On this ground, it is urged by both that the war must continue, since both believe that their own side will ultimately be completely victorious.

I believe that in this both sides are profoundly mistaken. I shall not discuss the question from a political point of view, though I believe the political argument is overwhelming. What I wish to urge is the effect of war upon the imaginative outlook of men, upon their standard of international conduct, and upon the way in which they view foreign nations. Individual passions and expectations in ordinary citizens are at least as potent as the acts of governments in causing or averting wars, and in the long run it is upon them that the preservation of peace in future will depend. It is commonly said that punishment will have an effect that nothing else can have in turning the thoughts of our enemies away from war and making them henceforth willing to keep the peace. This argument assumes, quite falsely, that men and nations are guided by self-interest in their actions. Unfortunately this is not the case, and the motives which do guide them are often worse than self-interest. It is as clear as noonday that no one of the nations involved

in the present war would have fought if self-interest had been its principle of action. Pride, prestige, love of dominion, unwillingness to yield a triumph to others or to behave in a way which would be thought dishonorable, these are among the motives which produced the war. Each motive, no doubt, wove a myth of self-interest about it, since people do not wish to think their actions harmful to their own interests; but if self-interest had been genuinely operative, the nations would have made friends and cooperated in the works of peace. And if self-interest has not prevented this war, why should we expect that it will prevent future wars? Yet it is only by an appeal to self-interest that punishment can hope to be effective.

It is peace, not war, that in the long run turns men's thoughts away from fighting. No doubt when a great war ends there is a weariness which ensures a number of years of peace and recuperation; however this war may end, and, if it ended to-morrow, no matter on what terms, it would not break out again at once, because the impulse to war is exhausted for the moment. But for the future every additional month of war increases the danger, since it makes men increasingly view war as a natural condition of the world, renders them more and more callous to its horrors and to the loss of friends, and fills their imagination, especially the imagination of those who are now young, with war as something to be expected and with the thought that some foreign nations are so wicked as to make it our duty to destroy them.

If the war is brought to an end by reason, by a realization on all sides that it is an evil, it may be possible to combat the imaginative outlook which it is engendering and to bring about an effective will to peace. But if only exhaustion ends the war, any revival of energy may lead to its renewal, especially if the positive ideals which make for peace have perished meanwhile in the universal death of all humane and civilized aspirations.

Through the effects of the war upon education, the mental calibre of the next generation is almost certain to be considerably lower than that of generations educated before the war. Education, from the highest to the lowest, is in constant danger of becoming a mere mechanical drill in which the young are taught to perform certain tasks in the way that is considered correct, and to believe that all intellectual questions have been decided once for all in the sense declared by the text-books. The education inspired by this spirit destroys the mental activity of the young, makes them passive in thought and active only in pursuing some humdrum ambition. It is this spirit which is the most insidious enemy of progress in an

old civilization, since it inculcates constantly, with a great parade of knowledge and authority, a Byzantine attitude of superstitious respect for what has been done and contempt for the credit of what is attempted in our own day. The mental life of Europe has only been saved from complete subjection to this spirit by a small percentage of teachers, more full of vitality than most, and more filled with a genuine delight in mental activity. These men are to be found almost exclusively among the younger teachers, the men whose hopes have not yet faded, who have not yet become the slaves of habit, who have enough spring of life to take lightly the weariness and expense of spirit in their daily task. It is this comparatively small number of teachers who keep alive the mental vigor that leads to new discoveries and new methods of dealing with old problems. Without them, there would be no progress; and without progress, we could not even stand still. What is known bears now such a large proportion to what our own age can hope to discover that the danger of traditionalism is very great; indeed it has only been averted by the continual triumph of the men of science.

After the war, the number of teachers with any power of stimulating mental life must be enormously diminished. Many of the younger teachers will have been killed, many others incapacitated; of those who remain, most will have lost hope and energy. For a number of years, teaching will be much more in the hands of the old and middle-aged, while those teachers who are still young in years will have lost much of the spirit of youth in the strain of the war. The result will be that the new generation will have less expectation of progress than its predecessors, less power of bearing lightly the burden of knowledge. It is only a small stock of very unusual energy that makes mental progress; and that small stock is being wasted on the battle-field.

What is true in the purely intellectual sphere is equally true in art and literature and all the creative activities of our civilization. In all these, if the war lasts long, it is to be expected that the great age of Europe will be past and that men will look back to the period now coming to an end as the later Greeks looked back to the age of Pericles. Who then is supreme in Europe will be a matter of no importance to mankind; in the madness of rivalry, Europe will have decreed its own insignificance.

All the difficulties of restoring civilization when the present outburst of barbarism has passed will be increased by economic exhaustion. Hitherto, in England, most men have hardly begun to feel the economic effects of the war, and if peace were to come



this autumn it is possible that the economic effects in this country would not be very profound or very disastrous. But if the war drags on after the period of easy borrowing is past, great and general impoverishment must result. Those who still have capital will be able to exact a continually increasing rate of interest; probably it will become necessary to borrow largely in America, and the interest will represent a perpetual tribute which Europe will have to pay to America as the price of its indulgence in war.

The enormous production of munitions will either cease suddenly with a violent dislocation of the labor market, or will be continued out of deference to vested interests, causing a constant stimulus to new wars and to mutual suspicions and fears on the part of the rival states. The reabsorption of the men who have been fighting will be difficult, especially as their places will have been largely taken by women at lower wages, and casualties will have increased the number of widows and single women anxious to earn their own living. The men who return from the front will have grown accustomed to a higher standard in food than that of the ordinary workingman, and will feel themselves heroes; both causes will make it difficult for them to settle down to a poorer living than they had before the war, yet it is almost certain that that is what they will have to do. The government, having grown accustomed to almost absolute power during the war, having unlimited soldiers under its orders, and having no organized opposition to fear, will be far more ruthless than it has hitherto been in suppressing strikes and enforcing submission. This will probably lead to much revolutionary feeling, without the energy or the ability that could make revolution successful.

In these circumstances, there will be little money available for education or the promotion of art and science. In order to be able still to keep up huge armaments, the governing classes will diminish expenditure on the objects they consider least important, among these, education is sure to be included. Their object will be to produce a proletariat unskilled in everything except shooting and drill, docile through ignorance and formidable through military discipline. This must result in either apathy or civil war. Unless the war ends soon, it is apathy that will result; but in either event our civilization is imperiled.

There are some who hold that the war will result in a permanent increase in the rate of wages. But there are several broad grounds for thinking that this view is mistaken. To begin with, many young and vigorous workers will have been killed or disabled

in the war, and the population will contain a larger proportion than before of old men, women and children. The more productive sections of the population will be diminished, and the production of goods per head will be less than it was when the war broke out. As there will be less to divide, some one must suffer. The capitalist is not likely to suffer, since the demands of war enable him to secure a good rate of interest now, and the reconstruction of what the war has destroyed will cause a great demand for capital for some time after the war. It is unlikely that the land-owner will suffer, since he will be able to impose tariffs on the plea of revenue and protection against German competition. It seems inevitable that the loss must fall upon wage-earners. In bringing about this loss, capitalists will find the growth of cheap female labor during the war a great help, and this opportunity will be improved by the enormous numbers of discharged soldiers and munitions workers seeking employment. I do not see how this situation can result otherwise than in a great fall of wages.

To sum up: the bad results which we have been considering do not depend on the question of victory or defeat: they will fall upon all the nations, and their severity depends only upon the length and destructiveness of the war. If the war lasts much longer, very few healthy men of military age will have failed to be injured physically to a greater or less extent in any of the nations involved; the moral level everywhere will be lowered by familiarity with horrors, leading, in most men, to an easy acquiescence; the mental efficiency of Europe will be greatly diminished by the inevitable deterioration of education and by the death or nervous weakening of many of the best minds among the young; and the struggle for life will almost certainly become more severe among all classes except the idle rich. The collective life of Europe, which has been carried on since the Renaissance in the most wonderful upward movement known to history, will have received a wound which may well prove mortal. If the war does not come to an end soon, it is to be feared that we are at the end of a great epoch, and that the future of Europe will not be on a level with its past.

Is there any conceivable gain from the continuation of the war to be set against this loss? It is difficult to imagine any gain which could outweigh so terrible a loss, and none of the gains which are suggested can compare with it for a moment. But in fact even the gains which are suggested are illusory. It is fairly clear now that neither side can hope for the absolute and crushing victory which both expected at the outset, except at a cost which cannot be seriously

contemplated. Sooner or later, negotiation will have to end the war. The claims of Belgium, which are for us an obligation of honor, will, it is known, be recognized by Germany in return for compensation elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The argument that, if we do not crush Germany, we cannot be safe from a recurrence of the present war in the near future, is probably the one that carries most weight. But in fact it will not bear a moment's examination. In the first place, most military authorities are agreed that it is impossible to crush Germany. In the second place, there have been wars before in which Germany was not our enemy, and there may be such wars in future: unless the spirit of rivalry is checked, the removal of one rival is only the prelude to the growth of another. In the third place, if the war lasts much longer we shall incur now all the evils which we might incur in the future if the war broke out again, and the present evils are certain while the future war is open to doubt. Germany has suffered appalling losses, and is in a very different mood from that in which it began the war, as may be seen by the growing condemnation of the Hymn of Hate. A peace now, giving no definite victory to either side, would probably leave Germany, for many years, determined not to go to war again; and no peace can insure us against wars a generation hence. In continuing the war, we are incurring great and certain evils for a very doubtful gain. The obligation of honor toward Belgium is more fully discharged if the Germans are led to evacuate Belgium by negotiations than if they are driven out at the cost of destroying whatever they have left unharmed. Both on their side and on ours, the real motive which prolongs the war is pride. Is there no statesman who can think in terms of Europe, not only of separate nations? Is our civilization a thing of no account to all our rulers? I hope not. I hope that somewhere among the men who hold power in Europe there is at least one who will remember, at this late date, that we are the guardians, not only of the nation, but of that common heritage of thought and art and a humane way of life into which we were born, but which our children may find wasted by our blind violence and hate.

<sup>2</sup> See e. g., *The Times*, Sept. 4, 1915.