WAR LITERATURE II.

THE ROLE OF BRITAIN

Is Britain's frontier on the Rhine or on the Straits of Dover? Since July, 1940, this question has been a poignant one. It has a more than military significance, however, for it comports great moral issues, the duty or indifference which Britain owes to the Continent of Europe. That it owes only indifference is the theme of one of the most interesting books which the war has produced in English. *Sea Power*, by T 124, is a book lucid in its composition and extremely compelling in its conclusions. Briefly, the author sets out to show that the original Anglo-French Entente, which first caused us to send great armies to the Continent, arose out of the threat to British sea-power when the Germans began to build a large navy in the first years of this century. This German construction was the result of the appreciation by the Kaiser and his advisers of the doctrine elucidated in Mahan's classic work on sea-power, that 'Great Britain, the wealthiest country in the world, possessor of the world's greatest empire,' had achieved that position through her naval supremacy. The author maintains that, as the threat was a naval one, it was paradoxical to contribute a great *land-army* to the struggle on the Continent, and successfully shows that the responsibility rests chiefly upon two men; these were Sir Edward Grey and Sir Henry Wilson, two men whose reputations become more questionable year by year. An expeditionary force, he says, was no more necessary to our interests in 1939 than it was in 1914. Given, in those earlier days, adequate naval power and, in these later times, sufficient air-power as well, we had nothing to fear. The great bogey of the Channel ports falling into enemy hands, he shows conclusively, was never considered in 1914, and he maintains that it is not necessary to keep them in friendly hands now. Events, he points out, will before long conclusively prove or disprove his thesis, and there can at least be no doubt about that.

Sea Power is a book which every serious student of British policy, and every serious constructor of British policy—that is, every serious voter—should read. Its thesis is one which admits of criticism; for the author disregards, in relating the events leading to the sending of the B.E.F. to France in 1914 and 1939, the joint dispositions made by the Royal and French Navies for these two emergencies. In maintaining that Britain has no call to intervene in the political strife of the Continent, but should remain content with the society she enjoys with the Empire across the navy-controlled seas, the author neglects the moral repercussions throughout the world of a state of disorder in Europe. He also disregards the double threat to the Empire of a German (or Russian) domination of Europe which would at once threaten to turn the whole resources of the Continent against this island, and menace on a line of interior communications, the Suez Canal through the Bosphorus. This is precisely the menace we have to face to-day. Even if we survive it, we shall scarcely be blameworthy for attempting to avert the repetition of such a menace.

There is yet another element to consider, the intolerance of public opinion in England generally of the idea that what happens to Poland or Czecho-Slovakia is no business of ours. The behaviour of Nazi Germany to its own citizens and to its easily-bullied neighbours has unquestionably aroused a general sense of responsibility, whether to Christendom or to humanity in general, of those brought up in the liberal tradition of England. The contention of T 124 is that the British nation has no divine mission to punish the sins of erring Germany (though not apparently of erring Russia) and of upholding against all transgressors (Russia always excluded) the ideals of justice, liberty, and international morality. 'Such persons,' he says, 'will assuredly stigmatise the suggestion that we should look after ourselves and leave Europe to sort itself out by itself as selfish, un-Christian and altogether shameful. Nevertheless, shameful or not, it is precisely how our forefathers used to act in parallel circumstances.'

This last sentence begs the question. If the issue is a moral one, then what our ancestors did is irrelevant.

Another book of vital importance, which cannot be too widely read, Professor Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis*, declares that 'the ideals of justice, liberty and international morality,' of which T. 124 speaks, are not valid ideals at all. This learned, invaluable and detestable book has as its theme the conflict of Utopian and power politics since 1918. In a sense, Professor Carr reduces all policy to the one category of power policy, for he asserts that all ideals like those of the League of Nations, disarmament schemes, and arbitration agreements, are not the result of political high-mindedness but are the attempt of weakness to bluff strength in order to retain the great possessions which it is unable or unwilling to maintain by force At Great Britain and the United States in particular Professor Carr points the finger of scorn as being the great advocates of Utopian policies and the maintenance of the *status quo* in the last twenty years. They allege, he says, morality for a policy which is, in reality, purely selfish. His book and *Sea Power* thus, in a sense, cancel out, the one accusing Britain of entering Continental leagues out of an idealism harmful to its self-interest; the other maintaining that all idealism *is* self-interest disguised. It is for this reason that we have called Professor Carr's book detestable, for, though it performs an inestimable service in demonstrating the role of force in politics and in debunking such ideas as that 'the world court of public opinion will be a deterrent to aggressors,' it none the less denies, implicitly, the possibility of an objective international morality, of a justice based on metaphysics. In an illuminating paragraph Professor Carr himself denies his premise, when he expresses preference for a British or American hegemony of the world rather than a German or Japanese one, because the former two powers, 'profiting by a long experience and some hard lessons in the past,' treat their subject races better than do the other two. But why is this preferable if not more moral? Professor Carr is almost ludicrously hasty to state that 'any moral superiority which this may betoken is mainly the product of long and secure enjoyment of superior power.' But what he has succeeded in showing is the importance of being politically grown-up and the metaphysical-moral importance of 'hard lessons.'

When Mr. J. B. Priestley spoke in a recent broadcast of 'our common human nature and its relation to things,' he was exactly defining the moral and metaphysical bases of politics whose existence Professor Carr denies.

Another writer, whose services to sane thinking on international subjects can hardly be over-emphasised, has dealt with the same problem of the relation of power to morality in politics. Professor Zimmern, in his *Spiritual Values and World Affairs,* has shown how the policy of seeking peace by merely material disarmament 'ascribed to dead materials a potency which could only spring from human minds and wills'; and he points out that the possession by the British Empire and the United States of seventy-five per cent. of the world's raw materials and sixty per cent. of its industrial resources imposes on those two polities the duty of maintaining world order. 'Our position in the world,' he says, 'if we retain it, entails certain responsibilities, which we cannot shuffle off on to the shoulders of an international authority or any other form of special providence for weary Great Powers.' There must be some world policemen, and the choice lies between 'power exercised irresponsibly by a victorious autocracy . . . or power exercised under the safeguards of responsible governments.' When T. 124 says that 'Europe must find its own salvation for itself . . . European freedom from domination, assuming it to be desirable, must be won by Europeans,' he is going against not only the internationally-minded intelligentsia, not only against those who believe that we owe a duty to politically-immature neighbours because we have ourselves become fairly grown-up in these matters by constant 'hard knocks': but he goes against the common opinion of ordinary people who, in the words of Mr. Priestley, have always felt that the Nazi leaders 'were evil, and that the time must come when either we must destroy them or they would destroy us.'

Mr. Priestley's *Postscripts,* as originally given on the wireless, have been, with the exception of the Prime Minister's speeches, the most important *literary* event in English connected with the War. The adjective 'literary' is important, because it is essentially by literary power that Mr. Priestley makes his impressions. He cannot mention

anything without magically transforming it. The Channel paddle-steamers of Dunkirk 'made an excursion to Hell and came back glorious.' The toy boats on the Whitestone Pond 'when there's a wind blowing across the Heath . . . have to battle with enormous waves—about three inches high.' He is an adept, as he says, at 'slinging a few artful phrases together.' But, of course, the magic is not entirely contained in that, for Mr. Priestley is a man who feels deeply and has strong roots in the ground. Like other deeply-rooted men in these menacing days, he has 'the sound countrymen's habit of relating everything intimately to their own familiar background. Now of course this doesn't take away any of the real menace, but what it does is somehow to put all this raiding and threatened invasion in their proper places. The intellectual is apt to see these things as the lunatic end of everything, as part of a crazy Doomsday Eve, and so he goes about moaning, or runs away to America. But the simple and saner countryman sees this raiding and invading as the latest manifestation of that everlasting menace which he always has to fight—sudden blizzards at lambing time, or floods just before the harvest.'

It is when Mr. Priestley moves from this literary field to more directly controversial topics that his excellence becomes debateable. This does not mean that his political views are unsound; indeed, though necessarily expressed in very general terms, they are as generous and humane as one would expect from him, and one airman's letter, which he quotes, should be read for its peace aims as much as that other famous airman's letter was read for its attitude to the War. 'I shall never go back to the old business,' it says, 'that life of what I call the survival of the slickest . . . If to-morrow the war ended and I returned to business, I would need to cheat and pry in order to get hold of orders which otherwise would have gone to one of my R.A.F. friends . . . Instead of co-operating as we do in war, we would each use all the craft we possessed with which to confound each other. I will never do it.'

That is nobly stated; but, without in any way calling the airman's desire Utopian, it will be exceedingly difficult

to achieve, and we must realise that wide circles of public opinion still need educating in the conception that a fundamental change ought to be made in our economic life. Meanwhile, as the Prime Minister has more than once said, we are fighting for our lives. That issue takes precedence over any other, however important and just. To win the War we must retain our social and national unity, the loss of which caused the ruin of Carthage. When, on another occasion, we speak of the role of France, we shall have to notice the fundamental divisions left in that country, in any country, by a revolution, from which we in Britain have been spared so far. There are grave weaknesses in the British polity, grave failures in function of some of the highest organs of the State; but the ability to point clearly to these things must, at times, be subordinated to more urgent duties and remain unexpressed in action. Some of these weaknesses, by no means confined to any one stratum of society, clearly appear in Mr. John Kennedy's *Why England Slept*, an excellent description, by the son of the late American Ambassador, of the reluctant change from disarmament to rearmament in this country during the 'thirties. The two volumes of the *Penguin Hansard* point to the same weaknesses; to preserve peace within this country is no less urgent a task than to wage war outside it.

Social justice, however, will in the end only spring from the educated moral sense of the whole community, and the actual moral standards of Britain which is taking so startlingly prominent a part in the world's destiny to-day are the subject of several recent religious works. *The Dacre Papers,* in their general introduction, say that ' this present series of papers starts from the conviction that a man's religion is a very public affair.' This is a refreshingly new note to hear struck in England, though the first Dacre Paper seems a disappointingly nebulous composition. In some reprinted broadcast addresses called *Were You Listening,* Dr. Heenan says: ' I am under no illusions about the unworthiness of Britain to fight a Christian Crusade.' But, ' do you realise,' he says, ' that in this strange war the leaders of Catholic Italy have betrayed the Pope, and Protestant England has supported him? ' On the other hand,

he points out how paradoxical it is that, while fighting for Christian ideals, we allow our youth to grow up as pagans. These excellent addresses serve as an introduction to a book by one of the great luminaries of British public life, the Archbishop of York. In the pages of *The Hope of a New World* this notable man has set out in language which could hardly be bettered, and with a width of vision rare in our times, the thoughts of a great Christian on our present discontents. The reviewer's own copy of the book is heavily scored throughout; he can only say that he would wish to see every thoughtful person in the country with a copy as freely annotated. Without losing sight of his primary spiritual aim, the Archbishop is imposingly practical and covers almost the whole range of urgent contemporary problems, education, peace aims, social justice, international responsibility and, most especially, our forgotten duties towards God. It would be impossible to quote from what should be read in full.

There is only one note of caution to be sounded—where the Archbishop speaks of international co-operation after the War. In his verdict on Lord Robert Cecil's Autobiography, Mr. Christopher Hollis has said that 'Lord Cecil demanded of this country that it pursue a continental policy. At the same time his every activity was devoted to seeing that we did not have a continental army to pursue it with. Such men are dangerous.'* In the present state of political immorality and immaturity the signatures of States to general, and even particular, international agreements are not worth the paper they are written on. There is only one hope of future peace in the world, upon which Professor Carr, Sir Alfred Zimmern and many others are agreed. 'Overwhelming power,' said the late Lord Lothian, 'a predominance of military striking power,' says Mr. Herbert Morrison, in the hands of the British Empire and the United States. It will be to our interest in the long run to devote sufficient of our wealth, strength and leisure to making world peace unprofitable to break; but we shall never be able to bear this sustained effort unless our State is socially just and sound in religion. Three

* *The Tablet,* March 1st, 1941.

statements emerge from the material we have examined. 'We have neglected God and His laws,' says the Archbishop. 'I will never do it,' says the airman of the idea that he should return to the old commercial war. And of those who would make us accept responsibilities without power we must all say, 'Such men are dangerous.'

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The following books are mentioned or reviewed in the preceding article:

Sea Power. By T. 124. (Jonathan Cape; 8/6.)

The Twenty Years Crisis. By E. H. Carr. (Macmillan; 10/6.)

Spiritual Values and World Affairs. By Sir Alfred Zimmern. (Oxford University Press; 7/6.)

Postscripts. By J. B. Priestley. (Heinemann; 2/6.)

Why England Slept. By John Kennedy. (Hutchinson; 3/6.)

The Penguin Hansard. Two vols. (Penguin Books; 6d. each.)

The Tragedy of France and the Testing of England. Dacre Paper I. By Julia de Beausobre. (Dacre Press, Westminster; 6d.)

Were You Listening? By the Rev. John C. Heenan, D.D. (Sands & Co.; 2/-.)

The Hope of a New World. By William Temple, Archbishop of York. (Student Christian Movement Press; 3/6.)