

THE SPECTRE OF EVACUATION

TWO recent facts without precedent in the history of the world are worthy of being considered by the readers of BLACKFRIARS.

1. BY ORDER OF HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT MILLIONS OF GAS-MASKS WERE DISTRIBUTED TO CITIZENS.
2. BY ORDER OF HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT PLANS WERE MADE (AND EFFECTIVELY BEGUN) FOR EVACUATING MANY OF THE CITIZENS FROM THE TOWNS TO THE COUNTRY.

FROM LONDON ALONE 2,000,000 (INCLUDING 500,000 CHILDREN) WERE TO BE EVACUATED.

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The proper psychological approach to these two unprecedented and official facts may be secured by the following two incidents:

(a) About twenty years ago some of a little group, who have long since forgotten many of their nick-names, proposed as a matter of urgency that the population of London should be decreased 100,000 a year for the next twenty years.

So accustomed were we to the nick-name of "fanatic" and "idealist" that the contempt offered to our proposal roused pity rather than anger. We were not ashamed to be accounted idealist with the man who saw the oak in the acorn or who foretold that the snows on the mountain peaks would one day be rivers in the plain.

(b) The second incident is worthy of a Shakespearean play, though we doubt if the writer of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* would feel equal to its subtle tragedy. This is the incident:

Some twelve or fourteen years ago the little group of

Catholics who have carried the name of Ditchling *Urbi et Orbi*, were discussing a proposal to migrate from Ditchling further west and further inland. Their chief argument in favour of quitting a settlement they had made at great cost was that it no longer gave them what they needed for their desired home-life. Suburbia was upon them with its almost greater menace to their desires than unalloyed life in the towns.

Suddenly one of the group, whose authority counted with them, ended his silence by saying: "I quite agree that if you had to think of yourselves alone, you would at once leave Ditchling. But you must not think merely of yourselves. One day you will have to think of the war-refugees from London."

I cannot say whether or not the speaker's words were decisive. But the little group decided to stay in Ditchling.

And a few weeks ago agents of the British Government came to Ditchling to arrange for war-refugees from London!

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These two incidents are not coupled in the telling with the two unprecedented facts, for the mere satisfaction of being able to say: "I told you so." They are a last and almost hopeless effort to get our modern world to know the time of its visitation and things that are to its peace. Only concessions, which some English folk think unpardonable, have driven the spectre of evacuation from our towns.

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But let us begin meditation on the spectre raised about us by the two great official acts and facts.

1. The Government must have spent millions of money in providing gas-masks against the indiscriminate gas-bombing of civilians. Only a military authority could be ultimately responsible for such expenditure; which may or may not be justified.

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2. When it was proposed as a matter of urgency that the population of London should be decreased by 100,000 a year for twenty years the proposers were treated not merely as fanatics, but almost as lunatics. So little did this nick-name throttle their truth-telling that they went on renewing the proposal every year, knowing that a year would come to authenticate their proposal. Yet they never dreamt that this year of authentication would come so soon and so convincingly. Timidly they suggested that the refugees would be blocking the roads from London before the end of the century. But now Whitehall was beginning the terrible evacuation before the middle of the century.

3. Now, in anguish, we ask our readers on what side is the folly and on what side the worldly-wisdom. Is folly on the side of those who proposed to evacuate 2,000,000 citizens of London in 20 years, and is worldly-wisdom on the side of those who thought that what could not be done in twenty years could be done in perhaps a third of twenty days?

4. Have any of your readers considered the problem of moving even 500,000 civilians in times of peace? Have the London railway-stations on the eve of Bank Holidays nothing to teach us? Almost inconceivable would be the chaos of evacuating 2,000,000 civilians (including 500,000 children) who are being gas-bombed—at a time when the military might need the free use of the railways.

5. But if the Government (Whitehall) scheme has dealt with getting London citizens out of London and townfolk out of the towns has it even considered what is likely to be the plight of the 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 evacuated?

The England that we have in 1938 is less able to absorb a war-scared people than was the England of 1838—or even the England of 1815, which saw the close of the Napoleonic wars. England of the small holdings has almost ceased to exist. Yet as anyone with eye-knowledge of the small holdings and of the large holdings knows, it is the countryside of small holdings that can absorb and employ the greatest

number of refugees. A countryside with large holdings, like the hop-fields of Kent or the orchard-lands of Lincoln, provides neither food nor housing for a group of town-refugees.

This fundamental fact was borne in upon me years ago whilst I was helping the Cambridge fruit-picker mission near Wisbech. What I then saw has been confirmed by what was told me lately by a Russian exile who had returned from a few days stay in the Kent hop-fields. As she had lived all her life in a Russian countryside with its violent climatic conditions and moderately fertile soil, she was in wonderment at the rich soil of Kent. She expected that with soil so fertile and a climate so mild and moist almost every kind of produce would be raised in abundance. She recalled the many things good and wholesome to eat which her own Russian countryside yielded under conditions less favourable than in Kent.

But she added almost heart-brokenly: "When I went into the one village shop which seemed to sell any of these things to cook and eat, I could get no other Kent-grown products but potatoes, tomatoes and onions! I came back to my husband with a bag full of foreign tins!"

6. Someone has suggested that the evacuation-plan, which would end in chaos, was a deliberate design of a Red group in Whitehall. My informant added that the resultant chaos was the result desired; as it would give the very alert and adroit group of Communists the opportunity of seizing the effective government of the country.

Not being a scare-monger, and not being in possession of further facts than the ordinary citizen, I do not know whether this suggestion is or is not true.

When first I heard it from my friend Fr. A—— B——, who is usually even-keeled, I seemed to think it was something of a difficulty to that back-to-Nazareth policy which alone seemed redemptive.

But when I thought still more about it, considered not as a fact but a possible fact, I saw it not as a difficulty but as a further argument. I saw in the records of recent European

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and American history that the Communistic leap into the saddle has always been most successfully countered in a country of small holdings, where families who are the unit of the State have a homestead guaranteeing the stability of a home.

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We have called this article "the Spectre of Evacuation"—because the two official acts of the Government are evidence which cannot be denied or ignored. It is not the present writer who has made certain prophecies—it is a responsible Government that has made certain almost incredible and unworkable proposals. Had these proposals been our prophecies and had they been published in BLACKFRIARS five years ago they would have brought down upon the writer's head the title of "fanatic." But unless we think that Whitehall is now handed over to a band of fanatics the "Spectre of Evacuation" cannot be ignored.

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