

THE NEW DECLINE AND FALL

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EVER since the war, Europe has been fighting a losing battle with the forces of dissolution. The world supremacy that European civilization possessed in the last century is a thing of the past and today its very existence is threatened.

It is not merely that Western industry and finance have lost their old monopoly in the world market, or that the political supremacy of Europe is being challenged by the insurrection of Oriental nationalism. Far more serious is the disappearance of the moral prestige of Western civilization and the denial of its spiritual and intellectual standards of value. The superiority of European culture has come to be regarded as a Victorian prejudice, and we are no longer convinced that our civilization is worth saving, even if it is still possible to save it. Faced by a situation that demands vigorous and heroic remedies, the average European intellectual seems prepared only to lie down and die.

Actually, although the material situation of Europe is difficult enough, it is far from hopeless. If Western Europe is considered as a unity, it is still the strongest, the most civilized, the richest and (with the exception of China) the most numerous society in the world. It still leads the world in science and thought and material culture. Even the United States, for all their wealth and prosperity are in a very real sense dependent on the civilization of Western Europe, and if the latter were to disappear, it is at least highly doubtful whether American civilization would be able to carry on.

Unfortunately, Europe is neither spiritually nor materially united. Apart from the external feuds that divide the Western nations and the class conflict that destroys the inner unity of every European state, there is a still more profound disunity of spirit that divides the European mind against itself. The greatest enemies of Europe are the leaders of European public opinion. Whenever a fresh attack is made by the external enemies of Europe, it is sure to find apologists and sympathizers within the camp. And these are not necessarily traitors, but more often well-meaning enthusiasts who have no clear conception of what is at stake.

The present situation in Spain is typical. The minority of atheists and social revolutionaries, whose activities are so much in evidence, would not be formidable if they were not able to take advantage of the passive complicity of the leaders of public opinion, who are more intent on the building of democratic castles in Spain than on preserving the foundations of social order. In the same way, if the British Empire falls, it will be due not so much to the efforts of Russian Bolsheviks and Indian nationalists or to the competition of her economic rivals, as to the misguided idealism of her own political and intellectual leaders.

The latter, in so far as they are imbued with the current Liberal-Socialist ideology, pay very little attention to the concrete dangers that threaten Western civilization. Their energies are absorbed in denouncing capitalism and class privilege, imperialism and militarism, religious obscurantism and traditional morality; and these abstractions tend in practice to be identified with the whole existing order of European society. Hence they look with tolerance on all the forces that are in revolt against it. To them Bolshevism is a great social experiment, not perhaps wholly suited to English conditions, but, nevertheless, deserving of our general appreciation and sympathy. Oriental nationalism stands for the same ideals of liberty and social progress as Western democracy. Our economic difficulties are due not to external causes, but to the exploitation of our own capitalists. There is no need to worry about the dangers of war and revolution. All we have to do is to disarm and meet our enemies with a generous gesture of renunciation, and all will be well.

To the Conservative this alliance of Liberal humanitarianism with the forces of destruction appears so insane that he is tempted to see in it the influence of political corruption or the sinister action of some hidden hand. It must, however, be recognized that it is no new phenomenon; in fact, it has formed part of the Liberal tradition from the beginning. The movement which created the ideals of Liberal humanitarianism was also the starting-point of the modern revolutionary propaganda which is equally directed against social order and traditional morality and the Christian faith.

Even the anti-imperialist propaganda of the modern Oriental nationalist, which represents the history of European colonial expansion as a series of crimes against humanity, can trace its pedigree back to the Abbé Raynal; and the religious policy of Russian Communism is but the practical application of Voltaire's famous maxim, "Ecrasez l'infame."

No doubt the worthy who looked forward to the day when "the last king should be strangled in the bowels of the last priest" would no more approve of the present order of things in Russia than did the late M. Clemenceau; but it was he and his like who first started the conflagration that is now spreading from one end of the world to the other.

But though this subversive element forms part of the original deposit of the faith in Liberalism, it has never been predominant save in the first delirious years of the French Revolution. Throughout the nineteenth century the extremists were in exile in Swiss pensions and Bloomsbury boarding-houses, and the ideals of English Parliamentary Liberalism were in the ascendant. Under the leadership of men like Bentham and the two Mills, Guizot and de Tocqueville, Cobden and

ideas shape world

Gladstone. Liberalism shed its revolutionary associations and became almost aggressively respectable. Far from being anti-religious or antinomian, it allied itself with the strictest sect of Protestant Evangelicalism. Indeed, the great social and humanitarian reforms of the nineteenth century, at least in this country, owe even more to the influence of religion than to that of political Liberalism. As M. Halévy has pointed out, the political idealism of the French Liberals was powerless to free the slaves of the Antilles; it was the religious inspiration of Wilberforce and his friends that carried the day.

No doubt these nineteenth-century philanthropists with their moral solemnity, their religious prejudices and their personal mannerisms, appear highly ridiculous in the light of the modern Stracheyan intelligence. But for all that, they did more to reduce the sum of human suffering than any body of men before or since.

They abolished the slave trade and reformed the incredible injustices of the penal code. They brought light into the dark places of the earth—the prisons and madhouses and slave barracoons. They freed the children from the mines and the factories and inaugurated the social control of the conditions of industry in an age when organized labor was still powerless to help itself.

The success of the humanitarian movement was primarily due to a working alliance between the forces of political reform and religious idealism. But it was not confined to any single group or party; it was essentially the common achievement of Western society. It appealed to every element of European culture, not only to Liberal freethinkers like Bentham and Godwin, but to orthodox Conservatives like Shaftesbury and Michael Sadler, to Wordsworth and Southey, no less than to Shelley and Lamartine, to Catholic prelates such as Ketteler and Manning, as well as to visionary enthusiasts like St. Simon and Pierre Leroux. Indeed, so universal was the acceptance of the humanitarian ideal that the average Englishman takes it for granted as something inevitable and fails to realize how recent and exceptional a phenomenon it is. After all, it is hardly more than a century since an English king abolished the use of judicial torture in Hanover, it is less than a century since Parliament abolished slavery and introduced the first Factory Act, while the emancipation of Russian serfs and slaves of the American plantations only dates from the sixties of the last century.

Consequently, it is still too early to judge whether the humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century represents a permanent gain or whether it is a temporary achievement, like that of Greek democracy. Certainly since the war there are ominous signs of an anti-humanitarian reaction. We have seen the revival of political terrorism and religious persecution, the massacre and intimidation of minorities and the emergence of the gunman and the professional assassin. Torture seems to have become an accepted part of police methods alike in Eastern Europe and in America, while in

Russia a large part of the population has been reduced to a condition hardly distinguishable from serfdom.

No doubt it may be said that this reaction is mainly confined to the outer lands which had never really assimilated the ideals of Western humanitarianism. But even in so far as this is true (for it is only partially true), it does not go to the root of the matter. The significant fact in the present situation is not that certain countries have failed to reach the higher standards of Western Europe, but that Western Europe has lost the prestige by which it was once able to impose these standards on the rest of the world.

To the modern Russians and Indians and Chinese, Western Europe stands not for Liberal ideas and humane institutions, but for tyranny and cruelty.

The fantastic Russian posters and films which depict Frenchmen burning Negroes at the stake and Englishmen driving coolies to work under the lash are but the most extreme instances of the anti-Western propaganda that has convinced the more backward peoples of their own moral superiority, and has taught them to regard the humanitarian standards of European civilization as a mere sham.

Hence the disadvantage under which Western Europe, and most of all Great Britain, labors in its dealings with Oriental peoples. The Englishman's hands are tied by his own principles, as we see in India today, so that he cannot in good conscience suppress Oriental unrest by Oriental methods. But the Russian and the Oriental are fettered by no such inhibitions. They can act with all the ruthlessness of their own pre-humanitarian traditions and yet feel that they are morally superior to the Western peoples. This is strikingly exemplified in the attitude of the Russian government in its dealings with the kulaks. When Western critics protest against the atrocity in the wholesale "liquidation" of millions of peasants, they reply with an air of injured innocence that their behavior is at least more humane than that of capitalist societies, which in similar circumstances would not merely "liquidate" but would "physically annihilate" their disloyal minorities. And it is quite possible that they believe what they say, since they have entirely lost sight of the real conditions of Western society in their concentration on the iniquities of that mythological Mumbo Jumbo—the capitalist system. Actually it is impossible to conceive of any Western government dealing with its unemployed as the Bolsheviks have dealt with the kulaks, and were they to do so, there would be such a universal outburst of indignation as would inevitably lead to international action and perhaps to foreign intervention.

But in the case of the kulaks there has been no such outburst. The Socialists and the Liberal intelligentsia have shut their eyes to the vast tragedy of human suffering that is involved in the policy of "liquidation." They regard it as a necessary step toward the creation of a new order which will put an end to the exploitation of man by man. It is, of course, necessary to un-

derstand the term "exploitation" in a Socialist or Pickwickian sense. A Western artisan, who earns high wages under good conditions of work, is always a wage slave and a victim of exploitation. But the kulak who is deported from his village, together with his wife and children, and sent to compulsory labor in the peat bogs and forests of the far North is not being exploited; he is merely a reformed exploiter.

No doubt their attitude can be justified by the principle which Prince Mirski, one of the latest converts to Communism, has laid down in his recent book on Lenin, namely, that "the one standard of human behavior is whether it contributes to or hinders the cause of Socialism." But what then is left of the humanitarian principles to which Socialism formerly appealed? If humanity can be outraged in one class simply because its existence is an obstacle to the Five-Year Plan, the majority can also be treated in the same ruthless fashion when the needs of the economic system require it. We are back again in the world of Oriental ideas in which human suffering and the sacrifice of individual personality are of no account before the impersonal and inhuman forces that govern the state and the world.

These ideals, whether represented by the old autocracy of a god-king or the new absolutism of a mass dictatorship, are in absolute contradiction to the characteristically Western ideal of a society based on moral principles, and on the rights of the human personality. And, however confident we may be of the intrinsic superiority of this idea, we cannot be as certain of its power to prevail as were the men of the last century. Its future is bound up with the future of Western civilization, and today there can be little doubt that that civilization is in very grave danger. Another European war on the scale of the last one—above all, a war in which Russia and Germany and Italy were ranged against France and Poland and Yugoslavia—would almost undoubtedly consummate the ruin of Europe. And, even if we avoid this catastrophe, there is no less danger of a gradual collapse under the increasing pressure of economic strain, anti-European propaganda and social disaffection.

If the forces of order continue to follow their present flaccid policy of passive resistance, the case is hopeless. Europe can be saved only by a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of all the loyal elements of society in defense of our common civilization and of the spiritual principles on which it rests.

A movement of this kind is not easy, since any pro-European policy comes into conflict at once with the forces of Socialist internationalism and cosmopolitan finance, and with those of militant nationalism. Hitherto we have had nationalism and internationalism, but no third alternative. Socialism bases its appeal on international class-consciousness—on the common interests that unite the proletariat of every land against their exploiters. The nationalist, on the other hand, feels, as Mr. Wyndham Lewis puts it in his recent book on Hitler,

that the fact that a man is a sorter at the post-office or a metal worker is not of such importance as that he is English, German, French or Chinese. Take a Chinese metal worker and a German metal worker, for instance. The fact that both were metal workers would not be so important as that the essential nature of one came out of all the past of China, and the essential nature of the other out of all the past of the white Northern races.

This is true enough; unfortunately, the pure nationalist—the Fascist or the Nazi—fails to recognize what is implied in the second part of this passage. He concentrates on the national consciousness and ignores the existence of that common culture which has made us what we are. He is prepared to let Europe go to hell, in the interests of his own political unit. And yet Europe is not a mere abstraction or a geographical expression, it is a true society; and it is only through their communion with it that the nationalities of Europe are what they are. Germany or France, apart from Europe, is nothing. They draw their life from their membership of the European society. And thus every great European war is of the nature either of a civil war or a revolution, as we see in the wars of religion, the wars of the revolutionary era, and the wars in which a particular nation—the Spain of Philip II, the France of Louis XIV, or the Germany of William II—attempts to assert its hegemony over the other members of the European state system.

The true basis of this European community is a spiritual one. Europe has been formed by Christianity in the same way that Moslem culture has been formed by Islam, or China by Confucianism. No doubt European civilization is a more complex growth, and it owes a great deal to other factors, such as the classical culture and the Renaissance, or the scientific tradition. But it is Christianity which is at once the original bond of European unity, and the source of the spiritual ideals and the attitude to life which inspired our civilization.

The enemies of Europe recognize this fact more clearly than we do ourselves, and that is why Christianity is everywhere the first object of Communist attacks, and why the creation of a materialist ideology and a new moral attitude is regarded by the Russian government as essential to the success of the Communist experiment. Whatever their faults, the Communist leaders are men of principle, and this gives them an immense advantage over the Western democratic politician who has been taught to put interests—his own interests, or those of his party, or those of his state—in the place of principles. The salvation of the West depends on the reversal of this tendency—on the return to the spiritual tradition and the subordination of class and national interests to absolute principles. If this can be accomplished, the recovery of Western civilization is still possible. If not, we must resign ourselves to the victory of a lower culture and a less humane social order that can yet inspire a stronger moral conviction and a higher standard of disinterestedness than can our own.

Europe saved only w/ spiritual princ. / Christ is the bond →