

LONDON LETTER.

THE DISARMAMENT PROBLEM.

The chief difficulty that faces the writer of a "London Letter" is to think of some subject which will be topical when the letter is written without being hopelessly out of date when it is read. From this point of view the question of disarmament seems to offer a safe choice. All Europe is talking about it, and there is every reason to think that this topic will continue to hold the centre of the stage for the rest of the present year.

Some excuse, indeed, is needed for adding even a small contribution to a literature that is already excessive, and the excuse for these notes must be found in the general tendency to ignore the historical side of the disarmament problem. It is too often forgotten that the safest guide to the future is commonly to be found in a right interpretation of the past. In political science there is little that is really new. From time to time the old drama is presented afresh with new actors and new dresses, but the characters and the essentials of the plot remain the same.

The question of disarmament, or rather the question of the limitation of armaments, has now been officially under discussion for 115 years. Unofficially the debate is much older, but the official debate may be taken to begin with the letter which the Tsar Alexander I. addressed to Lord Castlereagh on the 21st March, 1816.¹ Castlereagh replied that the first move might well be made by Russia herself, since the Tsar was maintaining in readiness for action an army much larger than that of any other power. In the course of the subsequent discussion he went on to point out that the British forces had already been reduced to the lowest point compatible with the internal security of the Empire and the maintenance of its communications. This was perfectly true then, as indeed it is now, and the whole debate seems strangely modern. The essential points were exactly the same then as they are to-day.

Except for the interruptions caused by various wars the discussion goes on almost continuously for nearly a hundred years. It may be taken to end with the failure of Mr. Haldane's visit to Berlin in 1912. The objective remains the same, and the obstacles remain the same. Everybody wishes to reduce armaments, but nobody can afford to go beyond the safety limit. Each country has its own individual problems, and it is impossible to find a

¹ The history of the discussions is admirably summarised in the late Sir James Headlam-Morley's *Studies in Diplomatic History*.

common formula which can be applied *semper, ubique, et ab omnibus*.

Within the limit of these notes we cannot attempt to discuss all the practical difficulties, but one fundamental difficulty calls for special mention, and that is the impossibility of defining "armaments," whether in terms of material or in terms of money. In the last resort war is waged by means of men—perhaps in these days we should add women—, and it is carried on with the aid of all the material resources that a nation can command—ships, weapons, food, railways, chemicals, money, and everything else. Between the things which are "armament" and those which are not no true line can be drawn. This point was quite rightly taken by the Germans in 1899 in reply to the Russian proposal for a limitation of military expenditure for a term of years. General Schwarzhoff observed that the adoption of this scheme would debar Germany from spending more money upon her army, but it would not debar Russia from building the railways which she urgently needed for the efficient mobilisation and concentration of her immense numbers. The experience of 1914 sufficiently proved the soundness of this argument, and its essential validity remains the same to-day. If anything, it has only been reinforced by the modern development of air power. For example, the restriction of distinctively "military" aircraft would in effect mean the restriction of the means of defence, while leaving untouched the means of attack. Any big passenger aircraft can be easily adapted for bombing, but the defence against bombers is provided by the small "fighter" machines which serve no commercial purpose.

The Preparatory Commission has adopted the principle of budgetary limitation, but without overcoming this fundamental difficulty of definition. Furthermore, the refusal of certain important States to sign the Preparatory Convention, and the far-reaching reservations made by others, make it clear that we are not justified in building too much hope upon this preliminary agreement, even if it should prove possible to obtain some agreement upon the figures with which the blanks are to be filled in. Nor is the spiritual atmosphere too favourable at the present moment. Whatever may be the merits of the proposed scheme for an Austro-German customs union, there can be no doubt that the time and the manner of its presentation were singularly unfortunate. It has provoked intense resentment in France and other countries, and the election of M. Doumer to the Presidency of the French Republic undoubtedly represents a strong nationalist reaction in the movement of French public opinion. How far this will go no man can tell. Much depends upon those with whom rests the guidance of German policy.

The tone of German public utterances has become noticeably more aggressive of late, and it is marked by a distinctly hostile attitude towards the League of Nations. Undoubtedly the strength of the League is going to be severely tested during the next few months. For the first time it will be called upon to deal with really vital conflicts of policy between the major powers of Europe. If, as we all hope, it can survive this ordeal, then the question of disarmament by agreement will become relatively unimportant. In the last analysis armaments are measured by the sense of security that obtains between nations. They are a barometer which rises as the sense of insecurity grows greater. The sense of security in its turn depends upon the elimination of the possible causes of conflict. Here is the real task of the statesmen. If this cannot be achieved, then conventional limitations of armaments are likely to prove both meaningless and worthless. If it can be achieved, then such limitations will become unnecessary, for no country will willingly maintain larger forces than it thinks it needs. Recent history is sufficient to make this clear. It is the elimination of the German naval menace that has made possible the immense reduction in the British fleet that has taken place since the war. During the same period it is a keen sense of insecurity which has impelled the new States of Europe to spend what seem to us wholly disproportionate sums upon their land forces.

Finally, it may be suggested that a little historical reflection may help us to appreciate more truly the meaning of what has been done in recent years. What is the true significance of the agreements for naval limitation signed at Washington in 1922 and at London in 1930? Surely we can see here in a new dress a very old friend, namely, the principle of the "Balance of Power." This principle, which may perhaps be traced back to Lorenzo de Medici, has governed the international relations of Europe for centuries. Until very recent times its application has usually been expressed in terms of territory. An acquisition of territory by Utopia had to be "compensated" by the award of other territory to Arcadia. To-day we are attempting to express the same principle in terms of armaments. The Washington and London treaties are a partial attempt to state an equation of five States in terms of naval strength. Should the Conference of next year unexpectedly succeed in filling up the blanks in the Preparatory Convention, the result would be the statement of an equation of all armed forces applicable to the whole world. The difficulty will be, as it has always been, that the balance thus struck may not always remain equally acceptable to all concerned.

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