

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY SINCE THE WAR (I)

I

‘England is an international burglar turned householder, and now wanting a strong police-force to protect his house full of swag.’ (MR. ANEURIN BEVAN.)

‘One of the most serious counts against British statesmanship in the post-war years is that it failed to accept whatever risk there might have been, and that it used the prospective neutrality of the United States as a cloak for British reluctance to bear the responsibility of leading the nations towards the effective outlawry of war.’ (MR. WICKHAM STEED.)

A war to end war. So they said in 1918, and at Versailles was planned a new settlement and a new start. This, they said, would involve a peace based on forbearance and sacrifice all round. But the peoples, said the statesmen, were not ready for such an enlightened peace. And so the pips had to be made to squeak, and in England there was a khaki election.

We should do well to remember the voices that were raised, even before and during the Versailles Conference itself, in prophecy of what would happen within twenty years unless the new order, enshrined in a League of Nations, were erected on foundations of justice, acknowledged freely by victors and vanquished alike. The key to the future lay in London and Washington. Britain and the United States had neither of them been territorially ravaged by the war. They at least might be expected to think with some detachment from the bitter revenge that was so naturally rife in Europe. And moreover, as the creditors of the whole world, Britain and the United States, had they conceived a soothing tune, could have called it. Men like C. P. Scott, of the *Manchester Guardian*, realised

this. Lord Haig himself spoke in just such a vein to the war correspondents. And J. M. Keynes resigned from the British Delegation to the Peace Conference rather than be a party to the alternative. 'Senseless greed over-reaching itself The spokesmen of the French and British peoples have run the risk of completing the ruin which Germany began, by a Peace which, if it is carried into effect, must impair still further, when it might have restored, the delicate, complicated organisation, already shaken and broken by war, through which alone European peoples can employ themselves and live.' Documents available to-day have proved that the surrender of Germany was a *contract*—made on the agreed basis of President Wilson's Fourteen Points. Yet it is now a routine exercise in University Schools of International Law to trace how those Points were squeezed out of the Versailles clauses between first and final draft. In short, men realised, even at the time, that no Power was willing to make any sacrifice in the interests of future peace; and it was already being said that a lead from the Anglo-Saxon peoples could have saved that peace.

Perhaps the deepest insight shown into what happened at Versailles is that of Harold Nicolson. He found that the chief feature at Paris was an 'amazing inconsequence' and lack of purpose. A peace based on righteousness was probably not possible so soon after the cessation of hostilities. The Four had to accommodate the inflamed wishes of their peoples, their own wisdom, and the lessons of history. To do this meant compromise—and compromise meant the betrayal of Wilson's principles. In the treaty, 'men genuinely forgot the contract of the Fourteen Points.' Indeed, how could they do otherwise, in an atmosphere characterised by such phenomena as the famous telegram of 226 Members of Parliament to Mr. Lloyd George?

Mr. Lloyd George had spoken as follows on the night after the Armistice: 'No settlement which contravenes the

principles of eternal justice will be a permanent one. Let us be warned by the example of 1871. We must not allow any sense of revenge, any spirit of greed, any grasping desire, to over-ride the fundamental principles of righteousness. Vigorous attempts will be made to hector and bully the Government in the endeavour to make them depart from the strict principles of right, and to satisfy some base, sordid, squalid ideas of vengeance and avarice’ But at Paris, in the words of Colonel House, ‘each nation put forward a solution which was coloured by self-interest. This was, in a sense, just as true of the United States as of France, Italy or Great Britain. We sacrificed little in announcing that we would take no territory (which we did not want), nor Reparations (which we could not collect). Our *interest* lay entirely in assuring a regime of world tranquillity . . . Wilson’s idealism was in line with a healthy *Realpolitik*.’ The best commentary on both statements is a glance, to-day, at an atlas of 1920.

It was, then, a bad treaty. But, nevertheless, and here is the greatest tragedy of all, in the light of the next fifteen years, it was possible to say at the time (as Harold Nicolson has urged, in extenuation), ‘The Covenant will put it right.’ For the League Covenant contained a revision-clause: the safety-valve of Article 19. There in a sentence is the charge against those who made and subsequently administered the Peace and the League. The safety-valve was never allowed to work, and to-day it is too late. How far is our own country to blame?

II

British responsibility for the collapse of the post-war system will be determined by how far the conception of an International Community was made the effective, as well as the official, basis of British policy.

A ‘Family of Nations’ had been a political aspiration for a long time. During the nineteenth century a series of

international good habits, such as arbitration, conciliation procedures, conferences on everything from postage to politics, had grown up and made the aspiration less chimerical. What the framers of the Covenant tried to do was to integrate these pieces of machinery into a working machine—to integrate the habits into a settled way of life. To this extent the Covenant is a landmark. But there was poor visibility ahead of it. While it had been possible even before 1914 to show that the 'community of nations' was a fact economically, the years since 1870 had been dominated politically by nationalism and imperialism. Economic interdependence has long been a class-room platitude. 'The phosphates of Chile,' says Professor Toynbee, 'were exported as far afield as the cereals of the United States or Russia; and Switzerland and Belgium drew the raw materials for their industries from the same distant sources as Germany or England.' But political disunity had been running counter to all this for generations.

Hence the very form and machinery of the League of Nations. The League was a recognition of shortcomings, and an attempt to foster the desired political harmony in several specific ways. There was, first, the machinery for the peaceful settlement of disputes. There were, secondly, the prescribed means of positive co-operation in a multitude of non-political common interests, such as health and transit and drugs and the traffic in women. Thirdly, the principle of trusteeship became explicit in the Mandates System. Lastly, there was the provision for collective defence against a Covenant breaker. The conception that lies behind all this is still being illustrated, in slogans which have now become retrospective and disillusioned—'The strength of all for the security of each'; 'The law must be armed'; and Professor Zimmern's definition of Internationalism, 'harmony of understanding in a world of unassailable diversity.'

But the implication is inescapable. To this extent the Covenant meant a fresh start. In criticising foreign policy

after 1919 it is no longer *necessary* to look back earlier for precedents or parallels by which to justify or condemn. For, if the Peace Settlement gave a 'clean sheet' cult that is as old as wars themselves, it gave also two things that were quite new. One of these was the framework of an International Community. This became for the first time explicit, and was the declared basis of the whole settlement. The other thing was a set of pledges (in the Covenant) that were reciprocal, freely given, and individually and jointly guaranteed by all. If these mutual pledges meant anything, therefore, the new system was, for each member-State, the greatest single *national* interest. It is hardly possible to study the Covenant and the contemporary documents without concluding that, for us, the League of Nations was either the greatest single British interest or a scrap of paper. To argue any other situation is to try to live in two worlds, the old and the new. The whole of British policy was pledged up to the hilt to the new. Here, then, are the terms in which British policy since the War must fundamentally be judged.

The difference between the old outlook and the new was well reflected in a remark of the United States President during the Peace Conference. 'President Wilson said that it was a matter of complete indifference to him what France and Great Britain had decided in the form of secret treaty; they had since then accepted the Fourteen Points; they were thus obliged, whatever their previous engagements, to consider only the wishes of the populations concerned'

III

The twenty years since the War fall into three clearly marked periods. In the first, down to 1925, the machinery was set going. These were the years of the Washington Naval Disarmament Conference—the most successful of all the post-war conclaves, of the Geneva Protocol, and the

Locarno Treaty; and during this period the States of Central Europe were restored to economic health—Austria, Greece, and (after the disaster of the Ruhr invasion) Germany. Locarno was the climax of these years, and came to be regarded as the herald of a settled peace based on Anglo-Franco-German collaboration.

The next five years, down to 1930, form a second period in which Locarno bore fruit. Germany entered the League in 1926. In the following year the World Economic Conference was held at Geneva, and its miserable failure was offset by the reflection that never before had international understanding allowed so ambitious a project to be even thought of. In the next year, 1928, came high-water-mark: the Pact of Paris, whereby virtually the whole world renounced war as an instrument of national policy. Here was a treaty, as M. Briand declared, that (for the first time in history) was not bound down in time and place, and did not start from a territorial *status quo*. And finally, in 1928, all the machinery of peaceful settlement so laboriously forged since 1815 was consolidated into one text, the General Act.

The third period, since 1930, has been one of remorseless, accelerating disintegration, until nothing is now left of the new morality beyond the fact that, out of deference to the Kellogg Pact, wars are called by other names. Manchuria, the Four Power Pact, the Chaco War, Hitler's advent, Abyssinia, Spain, Rearmament, the resumed war in the Far East, all these made up a crescendo of disruption, until, while as early as 1935 men were saying that the political future of the League of Nations was dubious, to-day no man can look to any likely political future without dread. The flight from the League began when sanctions were taken off in June 1936. In September 1937 a leading article in *The Times* spoke of the League in the past tense. Already there was talk of 'League Reform'; and this meant one of two courses. At one extreme there was a cry for giving the League the overwhelming backing of

force that it had had in President Wilson's original scheme; for 'putting teeth into the Covenant.' At the other, there was the cry that its teeth must be drawn, since the idea of international trust backed by force was a contradiction and a snare, and since the threat of collective war as a means of preserving the peace was illogical and dangerous. A stand was to be made on the long-distance efficacy of 'moral authority.' Finally, during that same year, 1937, an attack was published not only against the record of the League's Areopagus of Anglo-French hegemony, but against the whole principle on which the Covenant itself had been erected. The Comte de Saint Aulaire's *Geneva versus Peace* is one of the saddest books, and yet one of the most salutary, that the study of international relations has ever provided.

In the light of all this, it becomes imperative to ask what has been the part of Great Britain in aiding or resisting the collapse? Have we thrown our whole vitality into the post-war system? Have we put the international community, and the long view of an international future, *first* in our policy? Are there any real and undeniable risks that we have taken for it? Can we point to any real sacrifice that we have made in its name?

The answer to these questions depends upon two kinds of fact: on the actual record of British policy—the nature of the diplomatic achievements themselves; and, throughout the seventeen years before the crash, the state of mind that was revealed beneath what was actually done by British Governments. To some extent this second point is the more illuminating.

IV

On October 22nd, 1926, the British Colonial Secretary was addressing the Imperial Conference in London. In the course of his speech he said: 'The whole thing is a trusteeship, a mandate; though the mandate is, in the main,

not to an international commission sitting at Geneva, but to what I believe is an even more effective body—the Parliaments and public opinions of this country and the Empire.' Anyone who reads Article 22 (the Mandates article) of the Covenant, and sees there the precise obligation, legal and moral, of the Mandatory Power to the Mandates Commission, can hardly fail to assess that remark as an international crime. But quite apart from that, a Government that speaks in such a vein has little grace in condemning Poland when (later) she flouted her own Minority Treaties, or Japan when, in leaving the League, she took her Mandates with her. The episode is all the more unfortunate since the record of Great Britain as a mandatory is the cleanest in the world.

In September of the following year, 1927, the British Foreign Secretary addressed the League Assembly. His speech was a warning, necessary at the time, against the danger of "general" obligations and hypothetical commitments. He had in mind the Geneva Protocol of three years earlier. But what disturbed the delegates was not the warning, nor his hint that his country might, if Geneva persisted in general projects, revert to 'That smaller but older League' (the British Commonwealth). The fatal circumstance was the detached tone of the whole address, and particularly his reference to the League as 'your League,' a remark which does not even suggest personal membership, and certainly does little to reassure a cynical European doubtful of British League-mindedness.

The same sort of detachment, making plausible the report that Great Britain was all along thinking more in terms of her individual national strength in emergency rather than the collective support of her fellow-members, was revealed at the opening of the Naval Conference in London in January 1930. The speech of welcome addressed to the delegates by their host dwelt on two points. One was a plea for disarmament down to 'the lowest level compatible with national safety.' The other was a spirited assurance

that Great Britain would continue to 'co-operate with the League of Nations.' As to the first, to think in terms of national safety if armed defence has *indeed* been internationalised is reactionary; while if armed defence has *not* been internationalised, talk of disarmament at all is idle. As to the second, to say you will co-operate *with* (rather than *in*) something of which you are a full member is as gratuitous, and accordingly as suspicious, as for a footballer to say he will co-operate with his team. It suggests an uneasy detachment and a mental reservation.

Perhaps the most staggering revelation of a state of mind at variance with action is that reported in Professor Zimmer's book, *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law*, at the opening of the Manchurian question in 1931. 'The Council meeting on Friday, September 25th, was the crucial moment. It was at this meeting that the British member referred to the Japanese member, who was sitting beside him, as "my Japanese colleague," and he spoke of the other party to the dispute, seated at the extreme end of the horse-shoe table, as "the representative of China."'

Such citations as these are really of vital importance. They are words that speak louder than actions. It would be specious to stress them if they stood alone; but they are only examples of many, and they are all official utterances. Moreover, three of them are taken from peak-moments in post-war history, and from the period when the cause of the Covenant was said to be gaining in both enthusiasm and momentum. Above all, statements such as these show their true import, small or great, when read against the background of the actual diplomatic record. If the British record is sound, these quotations are unimportant. But if the record is vulnerable, they are, perhaps, the reason. An examination of the record leaves one seriously disturbed.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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