AUTOCRACY AND WAR

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JOSEPH CONRAD

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FROM the firing of the first shot on the banks of the Sha-ho the fate of *the* great battle of this war hung in the balance for more than a fortnight. The famous three-day battles, for which history has reserved the recognition of special pages, sink into insignificance before the struggles in Manchuria engaging half a million men on fronts of sixty miles, struggles lasting for weeks, flaming up fiercely and dying away from sheer exhaustion, to flame up again in a desperate persistence, and end—as we have seen them more than once—not from the victor obtaining a crushing advantage, but through the mortal weariness of the combatants.

We have seen these things, though we have seen them only in the cold, silent, colourless print of books and newspapers. In stigmatising the printed world as cold, silent, and colourless, I have no intention of putting a slight upon the fidelity and the talents of men who have provided us with works to read about the battles in Manchuria. I only wished to suggest that in the nature of things the war in the Far East has been made known to us, so far, in a pale and grey reflection of its terrible and monotonous phases of pain, death, sickness; a reflection seen in the perspective of thousands of miles, in the dim atmosphere of official reticence, through the veil of inadequate words. Inadequate, I say, because what had to be reproduced is beyond the common experience of war, and our imagination, luckily for our peace of mind, has remained a slumbering faculty, notwithstanding the din of humanitarian talk and the real progress of humanitarian ideas.

Direct vision of the fact, or the stimulus of a great art, can alone make it turn and open its eyes heavy with blessed sleep; and even there, as against the testimony of the senses and the stirring up of emotion, that saving callousness which reconciles us to the conditions of our existence will assert itself under the guise of assent to fatal necessity or in the enthusiasm of a purely esthetic admiration of the rendering. In this age of knowledge our sympathetic imagination, to which alone we can look for the ultimate triumph of concord and justice, remains strangely impervious to information, however correctly and even picturesquely conveyed. As to the vaunted eloquence of a serried array of figures, it has all the futility of precision without force. It is the exploded superstition of enthusiastic statisticians. An overworked horse falling in front of our windows, a man writhing under a cart-wheel in the street, awaken more genuine emotion, more

horror, pity, and indignation than the stream of reports, appalling in their monotony, of tens of thousands of decaying bodies tainting the air of the Manchurian plains, of other tens of thousands of maimed bodies groaning in ditches, crawling on the frozen ground, filling the field hospitals; of the hundreds of thousands of survivors no less pathetic and even more tragic in being left alive by fate to the pitiable exhaustion of their pitiful toil.

An early Victorian, or perhaps a pre-Victorian, sentimentalist, looking out of an upstairs window, I believe, at a street—perhaps Fleet Street itself—full of people, is reported, by an admiring friend, to have wept for joy at seeing so much life. These arcadian tears, this facile emotion worthy of the golden age, comes to us from the past, with solemn approval, after the close of the Napoleonic wars, and before the series of sanguinary surprises held in reserve by the nineteenth century for our hopeful

grandfathers. We may well envy them their optimism of which this anecdote of an amiable wit and sentimentalist presents an extreme instance, but still, a true instance, and worthy of regard in the spontaneous testimony to that trust in the life of the earth, triumphant at last in the felicity of her children. Moreover, the psychology of individuals, even in the most extreme instances, reflects the general effect of the fears and hopes of its time. Wept for joy! I should think that now, after eighty years, the emotion would be of a sterner sort. One could not imagine anybody shedding tears of joy at the sight of much life in a street, unless, perhaps, he were an enthusiastic officer of a general staff or a popular politician, with a career yet to make. And hardly even that. In the case of the first tears would be unprofessional, and a stern repression of all signs of joy at the provision of so much food for powder more in accord with the rules of prudence: the joy of

the second would be checked before it found issue in weeping by anxious doubts as to the soundness of these electors' views upon the question of the hour, and the fear of missing the consensus of their votes.

No! It seems that such a tender joy would be misplaced now as much as ever during the last hundred years, to go no further back. The end of the eighteenth century was, too, a time of optimism and of desperate mediocrity in which the French Revolution exploded like a bomb-shell. In its lurid blaze the insufficiency of Europe, the inferiority of minds, of military and administrative systems, stood exposed with pitiless vividness. And there is but little courage in saying at this time of the day that the glorified French Revolution itself, except for its destructive force, was in essentials a mediocre phenomenon. The parentage of that great social and political upheaval was intellectual, the idea was elevated;

but it is the bitter fate of the idea to lose its royal form and power, to lose its " virtue " the moment it descends from its solitary throne to work its will among the people. It is a king whose destiny is never to know the obedience of his subjects except at the cost of degradation. The degradation of the ideas of freedom and justice at the root of the French Revolution is made manifest in the person of its heir ; a personality without law or faith, whom it has been the fashion to represent as an eagle, but who was, in truth, more like a sort of vulture preying upon the body of a Europe which did, indeed, for some dozen of years resemble very much a corpse. The subtle and manifold influence for evil of the Napoleonic episode as a school of violence, as a sower of national hatreds, as the direct provocator of obscurantism and reaction, of political tyranny and injustice, cannot well be exaggerated.

The nineteenth century began with wars which

were the issue of a corrupted revolution. It may be said that the twentieth begins with a war which is like the explosive ferment of a moral grave, whence may yet emerge a new political organism to take the place of a gigantic and dreaded phantom. For a hundred years the ghost of Russian might overshadowing with its fantastic bulk the councils of central and western Europe sat upon the gravestone of autocracy, cutting off from air, from light, from all knowledge of themselves and of the world, the buried millions of Russian people. Not the most determined cockney sentimentalist could have had the heart to weep for joy at the thought of its teeming numbers! And yet they were living, they are alive yet, since through the mist of print we have seen their blood freezing crimson upon the snow of the squares and streets of St. Petersburg, since their generations born in the grave are yet alive enough to fill the ditches and cover the fields of Manchuria

with their torn limbs, their maimed trunks; to send up from the frozen ground of battlefields a chorus of groans calling for vengeance from Heaven, to kill and retreat, or kill and advance, without intermission or rest for twenty hours, for fifty hours, for whole days, for whole weeks of fatigue, hunger, cold, and murder—till their ghastly labour, worthy of a place amongst the punishments of Dante's Inferno, passing through the stages of courage, of fury, of hopelessness, sinks into the night of crazy despair.

It seems that in both armies many men are driven beyond the bounds of sanity by the stress of moral and physical misery. Great numbers of soldiers and regimental officers go mad as if by way of protest against the peculiar sanity of a state of war: mostly among the Russians, of course. The Japanese have in their favour the tonic effect of success; and the innate gentleness of their character stands them in good stead. But the

Japanese grand army has yet another advantage in this nerve-destroying contest, which for endless, arduous, toil of killing surpasses all the wars of history. It has a base for its operations; a base of a nature beyond the concern of the many books written upon the so-called art of war, which, considered by itself, purely as an exercise of human ingenuity, is at best only a thing of well-worn, simple artifices. The Japanese army has for its base a reasoned conviction; it has behind it the profound belief in the right of a logical necessity to be appeased at the cost of so much blood and treasure. And in that belief, whether well or ill founded, that army stands on the high ground of conscious assent, shouldering deliberately the burden of a long-tried faithfulness. The other people (since each people is an army nowadays), torn out from a miserable quietude resembling death itself, hurled across space, amazed, without starting-point of its own or knowledge of the aim,

can feel nothing but the horror-stricken consciousness of having mysteriously become the plaything of a black and merciless fate.

The profound, the instructive nature of this war is resumed by the memorable difference in the spiritual state of the two armies: the one forlorn and dazed on being driven out from an abyss of mental darkness into the red light of a conflagration, the other with a full knowledge of its past and its future, " finding itself " as it were at every step of the trying war before the eyes of an astonished world. The greatness of the lesson has been dwarfed for most of us by an often half-conscious prejudice of race-difference. The West having managed to lodge its hasty foot on the neck of the East, is prone to forget that it is from the East that the wonders of patience and wisdom have come to a world of men who set the value of life in the power to act rather than in the faculty of meditation. It has been dwarfed by this, and

it has been obscured by a cloud of considerations with whose shaping wisdom and meditation had little or nothing to do ; by the weary platitudes on the military situation which (apart from geographical conditions) is the same everlasting situation that has prevailed since the times of Hannibal and Scipio, and further back yet, since the beginning of historical record—since pre-historic times, for that matter ; by the conventional expressions of horror at the tale of maiming and killing ; by the rumours of peace with guesses more or less plausible as to its conditions. All this is made legitimate by the consecrated custom of writers in such time as this—the time of a great war. More legitimate in view of the situation created in Europe are the speculations as to the course of events after the war. More legitimate, but hardly more wise than the irresponsible talk of strategy that never changes, and of terms of peace that do not matter.

And above it all—unaccountably persistent—unaccountably, unless on the theory that there is no evidence—subduing awe like the fear inspired by the appearances of brute force—the decrepit, old, hundred years old, spectre of Russia's might still faces Europe from above the teeming grave of Russian people. This dreaded and strange apparition, bristling with bayonets, armed with chains, hung over with holy images, that something not of this world, partaking of a ravenous ghoul, of a blind Djinn grown up from a cloud, and of the Old Man of the Sea, still faces us with its old stupidity, with its strange mystical arrogance, stamping its shadowy feet upon the gravestone of autocracy, already cracked beyond repair by the torpedoes of Togo's fleet and the guns of Oyama, already heaving in the blood-soaked ground with the first stirrings of a resurrection.

Never before had the Western world the opportunity to look so deep into the black abyss which

separates a soulless autocracy posing as, and even believing itself to be, the arbiter of Europe, from the benighted, starved souls of its people. This is the real object-lesson of this war, its unforgettable information. And this war's true mission, disengaged from the economic origins of that contest, from doors open or shut, from the fields of Korea for Russian wheat or Japanese rice, from the ownership of ice-free ports and the command of the waters of the East——its true mission was to lay a ghost. It has accomplished it. Whether Kuropatkin was incapable or unlucky, whether or not Russia issuing next year, or the year after next, from behind a rampart of piled-up corpses will win or lose a fresh campaign, are minor considerations. The task of Japan is done; the mission accomplished; the ghost of Russian might is laid. Only Europe, accustomed so long to the presence of that portent, seems unable to comprehend that, as in the fables of our child-

hood, the twelve strokes of the hour have rung, the cock has crowed, the apparition has vanished —never to haunt again this world which has been used to gaze at it with vague dread and many misgivings.

It was a fascination. And the hallucination still lasts as inexplicable in its persistence as in its duration. It seems so unaccountable, that the doubt arises as to the sincerity of all that talk as to what Russia will or will not do, whether it will raise or not another army, whether it will bury the Japanese in Manchuria under seventy millions of sacrificed peasants' caps (as her Press boasted a little more than a year ago) or give up to them that jewel of her crown, Saghalien, together with some other things; whether, perchance, as an interesting alternative, it will make peace on the Amur in order to make war beyond the Oxus.

All these speculations (with many others) have appeared gravely in print; and if they have been

gravely considered by only one reader out of each hundred, there must be something subtly noxious to the human brain in the composition of newspaper ink; or else it is that the large page, the columns of words, the leaded headings, exalt the mind into a state of feverish credulity. The printed page of the Press makes a sort of still uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something exciting to talk about.

The truth is that the Russia of our fathers, of our childhood, of our middle-age; the testamentary Russia of Peter the Great—who imagined that all the nations were delivered into the hand of Tsardom—can do nothing. It can do nothing because it does not exist. It has vanished for ever at last, and as yet there is no new Russia to take the place of that ill-omened creation, which, being a fantasy of a madman's brains, could in

reality be nothing else than a figure out of a nightmare seated upon a monument of fear and oppression.

The true greatness of a State does not spring from such a contemptible source. It is a matter of logical growth, of faith and courage. Its inspiration springs from the constructive instinct of the people, governed by the strong hand of a collective conscience and voiced in the wisdom and counsel of men who seldom reap the reward of gratitude. Many States have been powerful, but, perhaps, none have been really great—as yet. That the position of a State in reference to the moral methods of its development can be seen only historically, is true. Perhaps mankind has not lived long enough for a comprehensive view of any particular case. Perhaps no one will ever live long enough; and perhaps this earth shared out amongst our clashing ambitions by the anxious arrangements of statesmen shall come to an end

before we attain the felicity of greeting with unanimous applause the perfect fruition of a great State. It is even possible that we are destined for another sort of bliss altogether: that sort which consists in being perpetually duped by false appearances. But whatever political illusion the future may hold out to our fear or our admiration, there will be none, it is safe to say, which in the magnitude of anti-humanitarian effect will equal that phantom now driven out of the world by the thunder of thousands of guns, none that in its retreat will cling with an equally shameless sincerity to more unworthy supports to the moral corruption and mental darkness of slavery, to the mere brute force of numbers.

This very ignominy of infatuation should make clear to men's feelings and reason that the downfall of Russia's might is unavoidable. Spectral it lived and spectral it disappears without leaving a memory of a single generous deed, of a single

service rendered—even involuntarily—to the polity of nations. Other despotisms there have been, but none whose origin was so grimly fantastic in its baseness, and the beginning of whose end was so gruesomely ignoble. What is amazing is the myth of its irresistible strength which is dying so hard.

Considered historically, Russia's influence in Europe seems the most baseless thing in the world; a sort of convention invented by diplomatists for some dark purpose of their own, one would suspect, if the lack of grasp upon the realities of any given situation were not a characteristic in the management of international relations. A glance back at the last hundred years shows the invariable, one may say the logical, powerlessness of Russia. As a military power it has never achieved by itself a single great thing. It has been indeed able to repel an ill-considered invasion, but only by having recourse to the extreme methods

of desperation. In its attacks upon its specially selected victim this giant always struck as if with a withered right hand. All the Turkish campaigns prove that, from Potemkin's time to the last Eastern war in 1878, entered upon with every advantage that a well-nursed prestige and a carefully fostered fanaticism can give. Even the half-armed were always too much for the might of Russia, or, rather, of the Tsardom. It was victorious only against the practically disarmed, as, in regard to its ideal of territorial expansion, a glance at a map will prove sufficiently. As an ally, Russia has been always unprofitable, taking her share in the defeats rather than in the victories of her friends, but always pushing her own claims with the arrogance of an arbiter of military success. She has been unable to help to any purpose a single principle to hold its own, not even the principle of authority and legitimism which Nicholas the First had declared so haughtily to

rest under his special protection ; just as Nicholas the Second has tried to make the maintenance of peace on earth his own exclusive affair. And the first Nicholas was a good Russian ; he held the belief in the sacredness of his realm with such an intensity of faith that he could not survive the first shock of doubt. Rightly envisaged, the Crimean war was the end of what remained as absolutism and legitimism in Europe. It threw the way open for the liberation of Italy. The war in Manchuria makes an end of absolutism in Russia, whoever has got to perish from the shock behind a rampart of dead ukases, manifestoes, and rescripts. In the space of a short fifty years the self-appointed Apostle of Absolutism and the self-appointed Apostle of Peace, the Augustus and the Augustulus of the *régime* that was wont to speak contemptuously to European Foreign Offices in the beautiful French phrases of Prince Gorchakov, have fallen victims, each after his kind, to their

shadowy and dreadful familiar, to the phantom, part ghoul, part Djinn, part Old Man of the Sea, with beak and claws and a double head, looking greedily both East and West on the confines of two Continents.

That nobody through all that time penetrated the true nature of the monster it is impossible to believe. But of the many who must have seen, all were either too modest, too cautious, perhaps too discreet, to speak ; or else were too insignificant to be heard or believed. Yet not all.

In the very early 'sixties, Prince Bismarck, then about to leave his post of Prussian Minister in St. Petersburg, called—so the story goes—upon another distinguished diplomatist. After some talk upon the general situation, the future Chancellor of the German Empire remarked that it was his practice to resume the impressions he had carried out of every country where he had made a long stay, in a short sentence, which he caused

to be engraved upon some trinket. "I am leaving this country now, and this is what I bring away from it," he continued, taking off his finger a new ring to show to his colleague the inscription inside: "La Russie, c'est le néant."

Prince Bismarck had the truth of the matter, and was neither too modest nor too discreet not to speak out. Certainly he was not afraid of not being believed. Yet he did not shout his knowledge from the house-tops. He meant to have the phantom as his accomplice in an enterprise which has set the clock of peace back for many a year.

He had his way. The German Empire has been an accomplished fact for more than the third of a century—a great and solid legacy left to the world by the ill-omened phantom of Russia's might.

It is that last that is disappearing now—unexpectedly, astonishingly, as if by a touch of that

wonderful magic for which the East has always been famous. The pretence of belief in its existence will no longer answer anybody's purposes (now Prince Bismarck is dead) unless the purposes of the writers of sensational paragraphs as to this *Néant* making an armed descent upon the plains of India. That sort of folly would be beneath notice if it did not distract attention from the real problem created for Europe by a war in the Far East.

For good or evil in the working out of her destiny, Russia is bound to remain a *Néant* for many long years, in a more even than a Bismarckian sense. The very fear of this spectre being gone, it behoves us to consider its legacy—the part (no phantom that) accomplished in Central Europe by its help and connivance.

The German Empire may feel at bottom the loss of an old accomplice always amenable to confidential whispers of a bargain ; but in the first

instance it cannot but rejoice at the fundamental weakening of a possible obstacle to its instincts of territorial expansion. There is a removal of that latent feeling of restraint which the presence of a powerful neighbour, however implicated with you in a sense of common guilt, is bound to inspire. The common guilt of the two Empires is defined precisely by their frontier line running through the Polish provinces. Without indulging in excessive feelings of indignation at that country's partition, or going so far as to believe—with a late French politician—in the "imminent justice of things," it is clear that a material situation, based upon an essentially immoral transaction, contains the germ of fatal differences in the temperament of the two partners in iniquity—whatever it is. Germany has been the evil counsellor of Russia on all the questions of her Polish problem. Always urging the adoption of the most repressive measures with a perfectly

logical duplicity, Prince Bismarck's Empire has taken care to couple the neighbourly offers of military assistance with its merciless advice. The thought of the Polish provinces accepting a frank reconciliation with a humanised Russia and bringing the weight of homogeneous loyalty within a few miles of Berlin, has been always intensely distasteful to the arrogant Germanising tendencies of the other partner in iniquity. And, besides, the way to the Baltic provinces leads over the Niemen and over the Vistula.

And now, when there is a possibility of serious internal disturbances destroying the sort of order autocracy has kept in Russia, the road over these rivers is seen wearing a more inviting aspect. At any moment the pretext of armed intervention may be found in a revolutionary outbreak provoked by Socialists, perhaps—but at any rate by the political immaturity of the enlightened classes and by the political barbarism of the Russian

people. The throes of Russian resurrection will be long and painful. This is not the place to speculate upon the nature of these convulsions, but there must be some violent break-up of the lamentable tradition, a shattering of the social, of the administrative—perhaps of the territorial —unity.

Voices have been heard saying that the time for reforms in Russia is already past. This is the superficial view of a more profound truth that for Russia there has never been such a time since the memory of mankind. It is impossible to initiate any sort of reform upon a phase of blind absolutism, and in Russia there has never been anything else to which the faintest tradition could, after ages of error, go back as to a parting of ways.

In Europe the monarchical principle stands justified in its struggle with the growth of political liberty by the evolution of the idea of nationality as we see it concreted at the present time, by

the inception of that wider solidarity grouping together around the standard of absolute power these larger agglomerations of mankind. This service of unification, creating close-knit communities, possessing the ability, the will, and the power to pursue a common ideal, has prepared the ground for the advent of a still larger understanding: for the solidarity of Europeanism, which must be the next step towards the advent of Concord and Justice; an advent that, however delayed by the cowardly worship of force and the evil passions of national selfishness, has been, and remains, the only possible goal of our progress.

The conceptions of legality, of larger patriotism, of national duties and aspirations have grown under the shadow of the unlimited monarchies of Europe, which were the creations of historical necessity. There were seeds of wisdom in their very violences and abuses. They had a past and a future;

they were human. But under the shadow of Russian autocracy nothing could grow. Russian autocracy succeeded to nothing; it had no historical past, and it cannot hope for a historical future. It can only end. By no industry of investigation, by no fantastic stretch of benevolence, can it be presented as a phase of development through which a Society, a State, must pass on the way to the full consciousness of its destiny. It lies outside the stream of progress. This despotism has been utterly un-European. And neither has it been Asiatic in its nature. Oriental despotisms belong to the history of mankind; they have left their trace on our minds and our imagination by their splendour, by their culture, by their art, by the exploits of great conquerors. The record of their rise and decay has an intellectual value; they are in their origins and their course the manifestations of human needs, the instruments of racial temperament, of

conquering force, of faith and fanaticism. The Russian autocracy as we see it now is a thing apart. It is impossible to assign to it any rational origin in the vices, the misfortunes, the necessities, or the passions of mankind. The despotism has neither an European nor an Oriental parentage; more, it seems to have no root either in the institutions or the follies of this earth. What strikes one with a sort of awe is just this something inhuman in its character. It is like a visitation, like a curse from Heaven falling in the darkness of ages upon the immense plains of forest and steppe lying dumbly on the confines of two continents; a true desert harbouring no spirit either of the East or of the West.

This pitiful fate of a country held by an evil spell, suffering from an awful visitation for which the responsibility cannot be traced either to her sins or her follies, has made Russia as a nation so difficult to understand by Europe. From the very

first ghastly dawn of her existence as a State she had to breathe the atmosphere of despotism; she found nothing but the arbitrary will of an obscure autocrat at the beginning and end of her organisation. Hence arises her impenetrability to whatever is true in Western thought. Western thought, when it crosses her frontier, falls under the spell of her autocracy and becomes a noxious parody of itself. Hence the contradictions, the riddles of her national life, which are looked upon with such curiosity by the rest of the world. The curse had entered her very soul; autocracy, and nothing else in the world, has moulded her institutions, and with the poison of slavery drugged the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism. It seems to have gone into the blood, tainting every mental activity in its source by a half-mystical, insensate, fascinating assertion of purity and holiness. The Government of Holy Russia, arrogating to itself the supreme

power to torment and slaughter the bodies of its subjects like a God-sent scourge, has been most cruel to those whom it allowed to live under the shadow of its dispensation. The worst crime against humanity of that system we behold now crouching at bay behind vast heaps of mangled corpses in the ruthless destruction of innumerable minds. The greatest horror of the world—madness—walked faithfully in its train. Some of the best intellects of Russia, after struggling in vain against the spell, ended by throwing themselves at the feet of that hopeless despotism as a giddy man leaps into an abyss. An attentive survey of Russia's literature, of her Church, of her administration, and the cross-currents of her thought, must end in the verdict that the Russia of to-day has not the right to give her voice on a single question touching the future of humanity, because from the very inception of her being the brutal destruction of dignity, of truth, of rectitude, of

all that is fruitful in human nature has been made the imperative condition of her existence. The great governmental secret of that imperium which Prince Bismarck had the insight and the courage to call *Le Néant,* has been the extirpation of every intellectual hope. To pronounce in the face of such a past the word Evolution, which is precisely the expression of the highest intellectual hope, is a gruesome pleasantry. There can be no evolution out of a grave. Another word of less scientific sound has been very much pronounced of late in connection with Russia's future, a word of more vague import, a word of dread as much as of hope—Revolution.

In the face of the events of the last four months, this word has sprung instinctively, as it were, on grave lips, and has been heard with solemn forebodings. More or less consciously, Europe is preparing herself for a spectacle of much violence and perhaps of an inspiring nobility of greatness.

And there will be nothing of what she expects. She will see neither the anticipated character of the violence, nor yet any signs of generous greatness. Her expectations, more or less vaguely expressed, give the measure of her ignorance of that *Néant* which for so many years had remained hidden behind this phantom of invincible armies.

Néant! In a way, yes! And yet perhaps Prince Bismarck has let himself be led away by the seduction of a good phrase into the use of an inexact term. The form of his judgment had to be pithy, striking, engraved within a ring. If he erred, then, no doubt, he erred deliberately. The saying was near enough the truth to serve, and perhaps he did not want to destroy utterly by a more severe definition the prestige of the sham that could not deceive his genius. Prince Bismarck has been really complimentary to the useful phantom of the autocratic might. There is an awe-inspiring idea of infinity conveyed in the

word *Néant*—and in Russia there is no idea. She is not a *Néant,* she is and has been simply the negation of everything worth living for. She is not an empty void, she is a yawning chasm open between East and West ; a bottomless abyss that has swallowed up every hope of mercy, every aspiration towards personal dignity, towards freedom, towards knowledge ; every ennobling desire of the heart, every redeeming whisper of conscience. Those that have peered into that abyss, where the dreams of Panslavism, of universal conquest, mingled with the hate and contempt for Western ideas, drifted impotently like shapes of mist, know well that it is bottomless ; that there is in it no ground for anything that could in the remotest degree serve even the lowest interests of mankind—and certainly no ground ready for a revolution. The sin of the old European monarchies was not the absolutism inherent in every form of government ; it was the inability to alter

the forms of their legality, grown narrow and oppressive with the march of time. Every form of legality is bound to degenerate into oppression, and the legality in the forms of monarchical institutions sooner, perhaps, than any other. It has not been the business of monarchies to be adaptive from within. With the mission of uniting and consolidating the particular ambitions and interests of feudalism in favour of a larger conception of a State, of giving self-consciousness force, and nationality to the scattered energies of thought and action, they were fated to lag behind the march of ideas they had themselves set in motion in a direction they could neither understand nor approve. Yet, for all that, the thrones still remain, and what is more significant, perhaps, many of the dynasties, too, have survived. The revolutions of European States have never been in the nature of absolute protests *en masse* against the monarchical principle; they were the uprising of the

people against the oppressive degeneration of legality. But there never has been any legality in Russia; she is a negation of that as of everything else having its root in reason or conscience. The ground of every revolution had to be intellectually prepared. A revolution is a short cut in the rational development of national needs in response to the growth of world-wide ideals. It is conceivably possible for a monarch of genius to put himself at the head of a revolution without ceasing to be the king of his people. For the autocracy of Holy Russia the only conceivable self-reform is—suicide.

The same relentless fate holds in its grip the all-powerful ruler and his helpless people. Wielders of a power purchased by an unspeakable baseness of subjection to the Khans of the Tartar horde, the Princes of Russia who, in their heart of hearts, had come in time to regard themselves as superior to every monarch of Europe, have never risen to

be the chiefs of a nation. Their authority has never been sanctioned by popular tradition, by ideas of intelligent loyalty, of devotion, of political necessity, of simple expediency, or even by the power of the sword. Its only sanction has been by the fear of the lash. Thus debarred from attaining to the dignity of chiefs, they have remained mere owners of slaves, asserting with half-mystical vanity the divine origin of the evil thing which had made them and their people its own. In whatever form of upheaval Autocratic Russia is to find her end, it can never be a revolution fruitful of moral consequences to mankind. It cannot be anything else but a rising of slaves. It is a tragic circumstance that the only thing one can wish to that people who had never seen face to face either law, order, justice, right, truth about itself, or the rest of the world, who had known nothing outside the capricious will of its irresponsible masters, is that it should find in the approach-

ing hour of need, not an organiser or a law-giver, with the wisdom of a Lycurgus or a Solon for their service, but at least the force of energy and desperation in some as yet unknown Spartacus.

A brand of hopeless mental and moral inferiority is set upon Russian achievements ; and the coming events of her internal changes, however appalling they may be in their magnitude, will be nothing more impressive than the convulsions of a colossal body. As her boasted military force that, corrupt in its origin, has ever struck no other but faltering blows, so her soul, kept benumbed by her temporal and spiritual master with the poison of tyranny and superstition, will find itself on awakening possessed of no language, a monstrous full-grown child having first to learn the ways of living thought and articulate speech. It is safe to say tyranny, assuming a thousand protean shapes, will remain clinging to her struggles for a long time before her blind multitudes succeed at last in trampling

her out of existence under their million bare feet.

That would be the beginning. What is to come after? The conquest of freedom to call your soul your own is only the first step on the road to excellence. We, in Europe, have gone a step or two further, have had the time to forget how little that freedom means. To Russia it must seem everything. A prisoner shut up in a noisome dungeon concentrates all his hope and desire on the moment of stepping out beyond the gates. It appears to him pregnant with an immense and final importance; whereas what is important is the spirit in which he will draw the first breath of freedom, the counsels he will hear, the hands he may find extended, the endless days of toil that must follow, wherein he will have to build his future with no other material but what he can find within himself.

It would be vain for Russia to hope for the

support and counsel of collective wisdom. Since 1870 (as a distinguished statesman of the old tradition disconsolately exclaimed): "il n'y a plus d'Europe!" There is, indeed, no Europe. The idea of a Europe united in the solidarity of her dynasties, which for a moment seemed to dawn on the horizon of the Vienna Congress through the subsiding dust of Napoleonic alarums and excursions, has been extinguished by the larger glamour of less restraining ideals. Instead of the doctrine of solidarity it was the doctrine of nationalities much more favourable to spoliations that came to the front, and since its greatest triumphs at Sadowa and Sedan there is no Europe. Meanwhile till the time comes when there will be no frontiers, there are alliances so shamelessly based upon the exigencies of suspicion and mistrust that their cohesive force waxes and wanes with every year, almost with the event of every passing month. This is the atmosphere Russia will find

when the last rampart of tyranny has been beaten down. But what hands, what voices will she find on coming out into the light of day? An ally she has yet who more than any other of Russia's allies has found that she had parted with lots of solid substance in exchange for a shadow. It is true that the shadow was indeed the mightiest, the darkest that the modern world had ever known—and the most overbearing. But it is fading now, and the tone of truest anxiety as to what is to take its place will come, no doubt, from that and no other direction, and no doubt, also, it will have that note of generosity which even in the moments of greatest aberration is seldom wanting in the voice of the French people.

Two neighbours Russia will find at her door. Austria, traditionally unaggressive whenever her hand is not forced, ruled by a dynasty of uncertain future, weakened by her duality, can only speak to her in an uncertain, bi-lingual phrase. Prussia,

grown in something like sixty years from an almost pitiful dependant into a bullying friend and evil-counsellor of Russia's masters, may, indeed, hasten to extend a strong hand to the weakness of her exhausted body, but if so it will be only with the intention of tearing away the long-coveted part of her substance.

Pan-Germanism is by no means a shape of mists, and Germany is anything but a *néant* where thought and effort are likely to lose themselves without sound or trace. It is a powerful and voracious organism, full of unscrupulous self-confidence, whose appetite for aggrandisement will only be limited by the power of helping itself to the severed members of its friends and neighbours. The era of wars so eloquently denounced by the old Republicans as the peculiar blood guilt of dynastic ambitions is by no means over yet. They will be fought out differently, with lesser frequency, with an increased bitterness and the savage tooth-

and-claw obstinacy of a struggle for existence. They will make us regret the time of dynastic ambitions, with their human absurdity moderated by prudence and even by shame, by the fear of personal responsibility and the regard paid to certain forms of conventional decency. For, if the monarchs of Europe have been derided for addressing each other as " brother " in autograph communications, that relationship was at least as effective as any form of brotherhood likely to be established between the rival nations of this continent, which, we are assured on all hands, is the heritage of democracy. In the ceremonial brotherhood of monarchs the reality of blood ties entered often for what little it is worth as a drag on unscrupulous desires of glory or greed. Besides, there was always the common danger of exasperated peoples, and some respect for each other's divine right. No leader of a democracy, without other ancestry but the sudden shout of a multitude, and

debarred by the very condition of his power from even thinking of a direct heir, will have any interest in calling brother the leader of another democracy—a chief as fatherless and heirless as himself.

The war of 1870, brought about by the Third Napoleon's half-generous, half-selfish adoption of the principle of nationalities, was the first war characterised by a special intensity of hate, by a new note in the tune of an old song for which we may thank the Teutonic thoroughness. Was it not that excellent *bourgeoise*, Princess Bismarck (to keep only to great examples), who was so righteously anxious to see men, women, and children—emphatically the children, too—of the abominable French nation massacred off the face of the earth? This illustration of the new war-temper is artlessly revealed in the prattle of the amiable Busch, the Chancellor's pet "reptile" of the Press. And this was supposed to be a war

for an idea! Too much, however, should not be made of that good wife's and mother's sentiments any more than of the good First Emperor William's tears, shed so abundantly after every battle, by letter, telegram, and otherwise, during the course of the same war, before a dumb and shamefaced continent. These were merely the expressions of the simplicity of a nation which more than any other has a tendency to run into the grotesque. There is worse to come.

To-day, in the fierce grapple of two nations of different race, the short era of national wars seems about to close. No war will be waged for an idea. The "noxious idle aristocracies" of yesterday fought without malice for an occupation, for the honour, for the fun of the thing. The virtuous, industrious democratic States of to-morrow may yet be reduced to fighting for a crust of dry bread, with all the hate, ferocity, and fury that must attach to the vital importance of such an issue.

The dreams of sanguine humanitarians raised almost to ecstasy about the year 'fifty of the last century by the moving sight of the Crystal Palace —crammed full with that variegated rubbish which it seems to be the bizarre fate of humanity to produce for the benefit of a few employers of labour—have vanished as quickly as they had arisen. The golden hopes of peace have in a single night turned to dead leaves in every drawer of every benevolent theorist's writing-table. A swift disenchantment overtook the incredible infatuation which could put its trust in the peaceful nature of industrial and commercial competition.

Industrialism and commercialism—wearing high-sounding names in many languages (*Welt-politik* may serve for one instance), picking up coins behind the severe and disdainful figure of science whose giant strides have widened for us the horizon of the universe by some few inches—stand ready, almost eager, to appeal to the sword as soon as the

globe of the earth has shrunk beneath our growing numbers by another ell or so. And democracy, which has elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interests, will have to fight their battles to the bitter end, on a mere pittance—unless, indeed, some statesman of exceptional ability and overwhelming prestige succeeds in carrying through an international understanding for the delimitation of spheres of trade all over the earth, on the model of the territorial spheres of influence marked in Africa to keep the competitors for the privilege of improving the nigger (as a buying machine) from flying prematurely at each other's throats.

This seems the only expedient at hand for the temporary maintenance of European peace, with its alliances based on mutual distrust, the preparedness for war as its ideal, and the fear of wounds, luckily stronger, so far, than the pinch of hunger, its only guarantee. The true peace of the world

will be a place of refuge much less like a beleaguered fortress and more, let us hope, in the nature of an inviolable temple. It will be built on less perishable foundations than those of material interests. But it must be confessed that the architectural aspect of the universal city remains as yet inconceivable—that the very ground of its erection has not been cleared of the jungle.

Never before in history has the right of war been more fully admitted in the rounded periods of public speeches, in books, in public prints, in all the public works of peace, culminating in the establishment of the Hague Tribunal—that solemnly official recognition of the Earth as a House of Strife. To him whose indignation is qualified by a measure of hope and affection, the efforts of mankind to work its own salvation present a sight of alarming comicality. After clinging for ages to the steps of the heavenly throne, they are now, without much modifying

their attitude, trying with touching ingenuity to steal one by one the thunderbolts of their Jupiter. They have removed war from the list of heaven-sent visitations that could only be prayed against; they have erased its name from the supplication against the wrath of war, pestilence, and famine, as it is found in the litanies of the Roman Catholic Church; they have dragged the scourge down from the skies and have made it into a calm and regulated institution. At first sight the change does not seem for the better. Jove's thunderbolt looks a most dangerous plaything in the hands of the people. But a solemnly established institution begins to grow old at once in the discussion, abuse, worship, and execration of men. It grows obsolete, odious, and intolerable; it stands fatally condemned to an unhonoured old age.

Therein lies the best hope of advanced thought, and the best way to help its prospects is to provide in the fullest, frankest way for the conditions of

the present day. War is one of its conditions; it is its principal condition. It lies at the heart of every question agitating the fears and hopes of a humanity divided against itself. The succeeding ages have changed nothing except the watchwords of the armies. The intellectual stage of mankind being as yet in its infancy, and States, like most individuals, having but a feeble and imperfect consciousness of the worth and force of the inner life, the need of making their existence manifest to themselves is determined in the direction of physical activity. The idea of ceasing to grow in territory, in strength, in wealth, in influence—in anything but wisdom and self-knowledge—is odious to them as an omen of the end. Action, in which is to be found the illusion of a mastered destiny, can alone satisfy our uneasy vanity and lay to rest the haunting fear of the future—a sentiment concealed, indeed, but proving its existence by the force it has, when invoked, to

stir the passions of a nation. It will be long before we have learned that in the great darkness before us there is nothing that we need fear. Let us act lest we perish—is the cry. And the only form of action open to a State can be of no other than aggressive nature.

There are many kinds of aggressions, though the sanction of them is all one and the same—the magazine rifle of the latest pattern. In preparation for or against such a form of action the States of Europe are spending now such moments of uneasy leisure as they can snatch from the labours of factory and counting-house.

Never before has war received so much homage at the lips of men, never has it reigned with less undisputed sway in their minds. It has harnessed science to its gun-carriages, it has enriched a few respectable manufacturers, scattered doles of food and raiment amongst a few thousand skilled workmen, devoured the first youth of whole genera-

tions, and reaped its harvest of countless corpses. It has perverted the intelligence of men, women, and children, and has made the speeches of Emperors, Kings, Presidents, and Ministers monotonous with ardent protestations of fidelity to peace. Indeed, it has made peace altogether its own, it has modelled it on its own image: a martial, overbearing, war-lord sort of peace, with a mailed fist, and turned-up moustaches, ringing with the din of grand manœuvres, eloquent with allusions to glorious feats of arms; it has made it so magnificent as to be almost as expensive to keep up as itself. As if it were the prophet of a new faith, it has sent out apostles of its own, who at one time went about (mostly in newspapers) preaching the gospel of the mystic sanctity of its sacrifices, and the regenerating power of spilt blood, to the poor in mind—whose name is legion.

It has been observed that in the course of earthly greatness such a day of culminating

triumph is often paid by a morrow of sudden extinction. Let us hope so. Yet the dawn of that day of retribution may be a long time breaking above a dark horizon. War is with us now ; and, whether this one ends soon or late, war will be with us again. And it is the way of true wisdom for men and States to take account of things as they are.

Civilisation has done its little best by our sensibilities for whose growth it is responsible. It has managed to remove the sights and sounds of battlefields away from our doorsteps. But it cannot be expected to achieve the feat always and under every variety of circumstance. Some day it must fail. Then we shall have a wealth of appallingly unpleasant sensations brought home to us with painful intimacy, while the apostles of war's sanctity will crawl away swiftly into the holes where they belong, somewhere in the yellow basements of newspaper offices. It is not absurd

to suppose that whatever war comes to us next it will not be a distant war of *revanche* waged by Russia either beyond the Amur or beyond the Oxus.

The Japanese armies have laid that ghost for many a year. They have laid it for ever, because the Russia of the future will not, for the reasons explained above, be the Russia of to-day. It will not have the same thoughts, resentments, or aims. It is even a question whether it will preserve its gigantic frame unaltered and unbroken. All speculation loses itself in the magnitude of the events made possible by the defeat of an Autocracy whose only shadow of a title to existence was the invincible power of military conquest. That it will have a miserable end in harmony with its base origin and inglorious life does not seem open to doubt. The problem of the immediate future is posed not by the eventual manner but by the approaching fact of its disappearance.

The Japanese armies, in laying the oppressive ghost, have not only accomplished what will be recognised historically as an important mission in the world's struggle against all forms of evil, they have also created a situation. They have created a situation in the East which they are competent to manage by themselves; and in doing this they have brought about a change in the condition of the West with which Europe is not well prepared to deal. The common ground of concord, good faith and justice is not sufficient to establish an action upon; since the conscience of but very few men amongst us, and that of no single Western nation as yet, will brook the restraint of abstract ideas as against the fascination of a material advantage. And eagle-eyed wisdom alone cannot take the lead of human action, which in its nature must for ever remain short-sighted. The trouble of the civilised world is the want of a common conservative principle abstract enough

to give the impulse, practical enough to form the rallying point of international action tending towards the restraint of particular ambitions. Peace tribunals instituted for the greater glory of war will not replace it. Whether such a principle exists—who can say? If it does not, then it ought to be invented. A sage with a sense of humour and a heart of compassion should set about it without loss of time, and a solemn prophet full of words and fire ought to be given the task of preparing the minds. So far there is no trace of such a principle anywhere in sight; even its plausible imitations (never very effective) have disappeared long ago before the doctrine of national aspirations. *Il n'y a plus d'Europe*—there is only an armed and trading continent, the home of slowly maturing economical contests for life and death, and of loudly proclaimed world-wide ambitions. There are also other ambitions not so loud, but deeply rooted in the envious acquisitive

temperament of the last-comer amongst the great Powers of the Continent, whose feet are not exactly in the ocean—not yet—and whose head is very high up—in Pomerania, the breeding-place of such precious Grenadiers that Prince Bismarck (whom it is a pleasure to quote) would not have given the bones of one of them for the settlement of the old Eastern Question. But times have changed, since, by way of keeping up, I suppose, some old barbaric German rite, the faithful servant of the Hohenzollerns was buried alive to celebrate the accession of a new Emperor.

Already the voice of surmises has been heard hinting tentatively at a possible re-grouping of European Powers. The alliance of the three Empires is supposed possible. And it may be possible. The myth of Russia's power is dying very hard—hard enough for that combination to take place—such is the fascination that a discredited show of numbers will still exercise upon

the imagination of a people trained to the worship of force. Germany may be willing to lend its support to a tottering autocracy for the sake of an undisputed first place in such a combination—and of a preponderating voice in the settlement of every question in that south east of Europe which merges into Asia. No principle being involved in such an alliance of mere expediency, it would never be allowed to stand in the way of Germany's other ambitions. The fall of autocracy would bring its restraint automatically to an end. Thus it may be believed that the support Russian despotism may get from its once humble friend and client will not be stamped by that thoroughness which is supposed to be the mark of German superiority. Russia weakened down to the second place, or Russia eclipsed altogether during the throes of her regeneration, will answer equally well the plans of German policy—which are many and various and often incredible, though the aim of them all

is the same; aggrandisement of territory and influence, with no regard to right and justice, either in the East or in the West; for that and no other is the true note of your *Welt-politik* which desires to live.

The German eagle with a Prussian head looks all round the horizon not so much for something to do that would count for good in the records of the earth, as simply for something good to get. He gazes upon the land and upon the sea with the same covetous steadiness, for he has become of late a maritime eagle, and has learned to box the compass. He gazes north and south, and east and west, and is inclined to look intemperately upon the waters of the Mediterranean when they are blue. The disappearance of the Russian phantom has given a foreboding of unwonted freedom to the *Welt-politik*. According to the national tendency this assumption of Imperial impulses would run into the grotesque were it not

for the spikes of the pickelhaubes peeping out grimly from behind. Germany's attitude proves that no peace for the earth can be found in the expansion of material interests which she seems to have adopted exclusively as her only aim, ideal, and watchword. For the use of those who gaze half-unbelieving at the passing away of the Russian phantom, part Ghoul, part Djinn, part Old Man of the Sea, and wait half-doubting for the birth of a nation's soul in this age which knows no miracles, the once-famous saying of poor Gambetta, tribune of the people (who was simple and believed in the " immanent justice of things ") may be adapted in the shape of a warning that, so far as a future of liberty, concord, and justice is concerned : " Le Prussianisme—voilà l'ennemi ! "

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