

## MILITARY SERVICE OR MILITARY SLAVERY

AS much as any other single factor, conscription or enforced military service lies near the root of the military mentality and the atmosphere of war which weigh down on a world the vast majority of whose inhabitants hate the very idea of war. Yet the abolition of conscription has hardly figured at all in the various disarmament proposals, and no serious effort has been made to relegate it to the category of social abuses to which it belongs, serfdom, feudal service, and certain kinds of industrial wage-slavery.

Before discussing the question of whether and when conscription is ethically justifiable, it will be worth our while to examine the reason for the mischievous part it must play in the modern world. One of the oddest characteristics of the post-war world which still claims to be democratic in spirit if not always in political organisation is the divorce between what political philosophers have called the general will of the people of a State and the actual will of the State as manifested in the policies and activities of its rulers. We may imagine, for example, the average Englishman or the average Frenchman or the average Italian opening his morning paper. He will read of this financial crisis or that, of this political squabble or the other, of the reports of the various countries' unsympathetic reception of some disarmament proposal. What link, what nexus is there between his mind and these items of news? Practically none, unless we call *fear* a nexus. He may be afraid for his money, his property, still more afraid of being personally dragged into some disastrous consequence of the mismanagement of the powers that be. Anyhow his interest is for the most part a hostile one, and always critical. In nothing is it more hostile than in the question of war. The masses do not want war, and unlike their rulers they are prepared to sacrifice much to the assurance that war will be a practical impossibility. The

## MILITARY SERVICE OR MILITARY SLAVERY

rulers may be equally sincere in their desire to avert war, but they are more aware of their responsibility for the safety of the country's so-called interests. If it comes to a question of choosing between some new safeguard against war and possibly imperilling their country's interest, they always sacrifice the former. They cannot see what the ordinary man with no personal responsibility sees that the safeguard is in itself a better protection for the country than any step which may bring war with all its disasters for friend and foe.

At the beginning of August, 1914, the ordinary citizen in England who had had no experience of war was caught by feelings which had been steadily worked up in him for many years. He wanted war. To-day the experience or memory of modern war is quite enough to guarantee that until a new generation completely ousts the war generation the English nation as a whole will not fight. There for the time is the deepest guarantee against war. It is a rock against which the rulers will hurl themselves in vain. Unfortunately time will wear the rock away. But while it would be difficult to deny that the ordinary man in countries with conscription feels the same, the fact of conscription totally alters the state of affairs. There a system of forestalling the natural response of the citizen obtains. The nexus between the population as a whole and the rulers has been created by the use of legal force. The citizen is made into a soldier. The mentality of the responsible rulers is immediately translated in effect into the action of the citizen. What he thinks does not matter. He knows that as a soldier he must not think, and since men are so largely the creatures of their habits and environment he does not tend even to think as a citizen in the way he knows he ought to act as a soldier.

This may all seem rather obvious. But I do not think that it is at all realised. If it were, there would surely be more outcry against the very idea of conscription in a modern, democratic world. Essentially conscription is directly opposed to the very idea of democracy. Whatever

## BLACKFRIARS

be the demerits of democracy, its merit at least lies in making it impossible for the rulers to act in direct opposition to the sense of the citizens. That is a poor guarantee of good and just government, for it is so easy to fool the people. But the idea of conscription goes even further. It does not fool the people, it enslaves their mind by imposing on them singly the training and mentality of a soldier, a training and mentality which is opposed in its very essence to political freedom. A soldier is a man specialized to obey orders for the specific purpose of adequately defending his country by force. He may be an essential ingredient in every State, but to make every citizen into a soldier is to pump into every man a fixed idea, a fixed type of behaviour on the subject of war. On that one subject at least he is trained not to be free, not to think.

This means that on the supreme question of war and on the related questions of national honour, security, protection, a democratic country which enforces military service on its citizens not only is certain that what its rulers demand on the subject shall be done, but that a large number of them will willingly support them. The common divorce between rulers, whose function must make them lead and often oppose the general will of the citizens, and the ruled, who only care about what the rulers are doing when their money or lives are imperilled, is overcome by artificial means on that one subject which above all at the present time is the concern of the world. It comes to this: countries with a system of conscription are the opposite of democratic in the one instance when it may be said that the will of the people is definitely opposed if not to the will of the rulers, at least to the temporizing, inadequate and over-cautious measures of those rulers. No one wants war, yet war is a near possibility. Why? Because the word has but to be spoken and a nation in arms is ready to hand.

If we glance at the history of various nations since the war, it will be seen that this view is well borne out. Contrast the behaviour of France and Germany. France is not naturally a militaristic country. Frenchmen are greatly

## MILITARY SERVICE OR MILITARY SLAVERY

pained if it is suggested that they want another war. On the contrary, they are terrified of war. They know what it means. The average Frenchman is the most peaceful, home-loving, unadventurous person imaginable. Yet France has in fact been the most militaristic nation since the war. She has been the rock on which all disarmament proposals have been wrecked. She has not given way an inch. She has been consistent in her attitude despite the rapid change of ministries. The reason is that her citizens are soldiers first and citizens after. Whatever their private views may be, they stand almost as one man behind their rulers, who in their turn are stiffened by the consciousness of this backing. When it is a question of France's security and defence all the so-called inefficiency of democracy fades away. Lord Bryce many years ago cited the consistency of France's foreign policy as an example of the efficiency of democracy. The truth is that France in this matter is not and never has been democratic in spirit.

It is sometimes said, and with some speciousness, that democracy with its inevitable nationalistic consciousness is responsible for the character of modern warfare. War no longer means a fight between two professional armies, but between the massed and organised energies of two peoples. It is true that it is now possible to rouse a whole nation as never before, but it is equally true that, but for conscription, it would not be possible any longer to force a country to fight against the desires of the people. Conscription, the product not of democracy but of the militaristic utilitarianism of Napoleon, weighs the scales against this possible anti-militaristic consequence of democratic organisation.

The history of Germany since the war again illustrates the point I wish to make. There still exist people who hold that the Treaty of Versailles and the treatment of Germany since the war have been fair measures, but it is at least true that never in modern history has a great nation been so severely punished. In fact every year has proved more clearly not only the great harshness of the Versailles settlement, but its practical impossibility. The Germans

## BLACKFRIARS

themselves are naturally intensely conscious of this. They feel themselves a defeated and humbled people held down by force. But those who have travelled in Germany know well the truly extraordinary patience, the remarkable reasonableness of nearly all the Germans they meet. I have stood outside a great German University and watched an army of strong, finely-built, proud-looking students pouring out of the building and I, as a foreigner, have stood amazed at the friendliness and peaceableness of these young men who had, as I thought, such strong reasons for hating the foreigner who had defeated their nation and who was engaged in doing everything to prevent that nation from ever holding its head up again. These men are probably by temperament and race more naturally militaristic than the French, yet I could discern no hatred, no desire to fight a war of revenge, at most a bewildered resentment, a passionate desire that justice should be peacefully accomplished. It has taken fifteen years to arouse part of the youth of Germany to a war and revenge mentality, and that only by the efforts of a great demagogue, himself not a German, and by a well-thought out quasi-militaristic organisation. The very excesses of Hitler and the Nazis prove the latent bitterness and militarism of the defeated German people. But because there was no conscription, no turning of the young German citizen into a soldier, his natural desire to be left in peace, to be allowed to do his work and live his little life prevailed for long and still prevails with many over that latent nationalistic spirit in spite of the strongest provocations. The contrast with the behaviour of the French is remarkable. One would have imagined that the rôles would have been exactly the opposite of what they have proved to be. The natures and circumstances of the two peoples would have led one to expect militarism from Germany and an intense willingness on the part of France to ensure peace at all costs. The fact that there is conscription in France and no conscription in Germany, even though that prohibition is forcibly imposed by the foreigner, must surely account in

large part for the unexpected behaviour of the two countries.

If it is true that conscription is so largely responsible for the maintenance of the war mentality in Europe, it is worth while asking whether it is ethically justifiable. To answer this one has to speak for oneself. All I claim to do is to suggest certain reasons why it may be argued that conscription not only is in fact the greatest danger in the modern world but also sins against a proper conception of the rights of the human personality.

It would be generally admitted that the human being has a right to choose the kind of work which he wishes to perform. This right does not merely arise from any superficial understanding of human freedom, from the type of statement: 'I am my own master and I can do what I like.' It is only rarely that a man can say this and be justified in saying it, since duties are undertaken whenever any choice is made. It arises from the fact that the choice of a state of life is a deliberate expression of man's will to be a special kind of person. He chooses or should choose some state of life which he believes will harmonise with his desires and talents and which will develop and complete those characteristics which he feels to be the best expression of himself. If this be the case the answer is clear to the obvious objection that a year or two's military service with certain periodical weeks of training for a number of years does not interfere with a man's choice of the kind of life he wishes to lead. It may not do that, but it forces on him against his will a way of looking at certain fundamental issues in modern civil life, it imposes a type of conduct in regard to those issues and it makes him at any time liable under pain of exile or severe punishment to act as a soldier, that is, as the opposite of a free, normal citizen. All this clearly has the same effect on his personality as would have the forced choice of a state of life displeasing and unnatural to him. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it makes him a mental slave in regard to these issues, which may happen, as they do at present, to be among the most

important matters for the will of a democratic people to decide about.

Whether in time of actual war a State may justifiably enforce conscription for the period of war is another matter. It might be argued that the extreme danger of the country and therefore the extreme danger to the interests, property, even freedom of the citizens would demand in their own interest that they should be compelled to fight for the common good. But that view is in itself so doubtful that it cannot fairly be extended to peace time, more especially if it be true, as I have argued, that the very idea of conscription is in itself the greatest danger to the peace of the nations.

It is a real tragedy that during these post-war years when a definite desire for world-peace has thrived on the still vivid memories of modern war there should not have been a greater outcry against conscription. The last year or two have brought Europe much nearer to war. Germany has been allowed to fall into the hands of irresponsible militarists who will certainly attempt to bring back conscription when they have the chance and the power. If and when that happens the danger of another European war will be formidable indeed. France in this matter as in many others has been the chief culprit. No doubt her attitude is understandable. She is terrified of a Germany potentially twice as strong as herself, but the more fundamental reason for her rock-like attitude in a sea filled with the drifting wrecks of pacts, treaties and disarmament proposals lies in the fixity of purpose and maintenance of a militaristic mentality due above all to the conscripting of her manhood at the impressionable age when the determination of life is made.

The voluntary abolition of conscription by the European powers is the one genuine and practicable step which will really avert the danger of war. Moreover unlike many other steps the demand for which is due to a sense of what is useful, the abolition of conscription is demanded by a

## THE CITY OF GOD

sense of moral justice and freedom, a moral sense to which in other respects a great democracy like France is very much alive.

MICHAEL DE LA BEDOYERE.

## THE CITY OF GOD

NOT of the future—see, our dead do stand  
About the common present of our lives:  
Mind, prayer—the unencumbered spirit drives  
Rock down to rock; beneath what wastes of sand  
Makes contact; grips reality, a land  
In certain cities stalwart, whence derives  
Christ's vigour that in human torment strives  
And in hands guided by an unseen hand.

For here amid the sift of time's decay  
Eternity lies under all we know:  
Change shall not bear our heritage away,  
Nor centuries the peopled city hold  
Whose King goes down an earthly suburb, lo!  
With foot to altar in a cup of gold.

BERNARD KELLY.