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The Future of Imperialism

By M. J. BONN

IMMEDIATELY after the outbreak of the war, exponents of more advanced opinion in this country described it as a war between two imperialist groups.

It cannot be denied that Germany, Italy, and later on Japan were bent on founding or widening empires. Some of their victims, like Denmark, Norway, and Yugoslavia, neither owned a square inch of empire nor had made an effort to acquire one. The two leading Western powers, Great Britain and France, as well as the Netherlands and Belgium, fought for security and national existence rather than for distant possessions.

A large number of progressives had accepted at its face value Lenin's masterly misinterpretation of history, which defined imperialism as the last stage of capitalism. Yet Czarist Russia, which had scarcely reached the threshold of capitalism, was the most penetrating and perhaps the most effective imperialist power in the nineteenth century. But for Russian imperialist expansion in the Far East, the Middle East, and the Near East, the chances of an imperialist revival, especially in Great Britain, would have been slight.

Russia's entry into the war stopped anti-imperialist talk based on the doctrines of bastardized, posthumous Marxism. Russia was fighting for her life and her so-called possessions, the same as Great Britain had done. The Finnish war and the annexation of the Baltic States, moreover, had shown very clearly that Communist Russia was prepared to pursue by military force the policy of protective imperialism in the west which its despotic predecessors had followed at least since Peter the Great.

ANTI-IMPERIALIST OPINION

The coming of the war to the United States revived the anti-imperialist campaign. The United States is traditionally anti-imperialist; it was the Declaration of Independence that started the "Crumbling of Empire" which I have discussed elsewhere. Its own policy has frequently been imperialist; yet even when its actions looked like imperialism, its platforms were generally permeated with abolitionist recollections.

The people of the United States do not live in the same danger zone as their allies, who are daily confronted with personal and national destruction; they are fortunate enough to wage an "absentee war." To do this effectively, a nation must be animated by more lofty motives than people who are forced to fight for their lives. Wars which have to be waged in alien lands must be holy crusades.

As it happens, the battle front stretches today through the colonial possessions of the non-American Allies. From Morocco to the Dutch East Indies, the war is waged in dependencies. The line is broken in a few cases by independent states—Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Thailand—whose fate is, however, closely bound up with that of their less independent neighbors.

Conditions in these areas are of prime importance to the United States as a partner in the armed efforts of the United Nations. The United States has been injected, so to speak, into colonial problems of a type with which it has had little experience. It has had to deal with these problems in a practical, provisional way. From this point of view, it is quite understandable that its representatives consider the avoidance of

Arab unrest for the duration as more important than the deprivation of Algerian Jews of the undoubted rights they possessed under the Crémieux decrees.

Governments and men on the spot have generally no difficulty in understanding the limitations under which the application of simple principles must take place in very complicated circumstances. But public opinion (especially those articulate groups which pose as public opinion) is inclined to see the only justification of the war in the destruction of imperialism, which would be equivalent to the dissolution of empire.

HORIZONTAL EMPIRES

With his customary felicity of expression, President Roosevelt has described imperialism as the exploitation of one people by another. This type of imperialism is doomed, if it is not already dead in the great modern empires. Nobody will mourn for its disappearance. But empire and exploitation are not identical. An empire is a large state, covering vast areas inhabited by different nations (ethnical groups) and possessing different climatic conditions and various economic resources. It is always a composite state. Where all the peoples comprised within it have reached a fairly identical level of civilization, it is a horizontal, or lateral, empire. Where the cultural distance between the ruling group and the subject nationalities is very great, the empire is vertical, or perpendicular. Imperialism might be defined as the policy of founding and holding an empire—presumably by force.

When the principle of self-determination posed by President Wilson was applied to the peace treaties ending the last war, three horizontal empires in eastern and southeastern Europe were destroyed. The Habsburg Empire was completely disintegrated; the Turkish

Empire was shorn of its non-Turkish populations and transformed into a homogeneous national state; the empire of the Czars lost all the western regions claimed by Polish, Baltic, and Rumanian populations. The German Reich, which was rather homogeneous, had to give up its non-German border provinces.

The only great lateral empire which survived, the British, completed, by the Statute of Westminster, the transformation from a coercive to a co-operative empire on which it had been engaged for nearly a hundred years. It conceded the former Dominions and the Irish Free State complete independence. The British Commonwealth of Nations is far more loosely organized than the United States; its architects were conscious of such (ideologically, no doubt, unimportant) factors as geography.

The British Commonwealth has solved the problem—which no other federation has yet solved—of the permanent minority. The minority among its members cannot be coerced by the majority. The minority can contract out—it can even separate without being guilty of high treason. The price for this flexibility is high; the neutrality of Eire in the present war indicates it. Yet it is much wiser to let Eire stand apart in somewhat humiliating selfishness than to provide her with a grievance by a provocative attempt at federal execution, for which the constitutional foundations are wanting.

VERTICAL EMPIRES

As far as the Western powers are concerned, the problems of imperialism which remain are those of vertical empires. Is it possible to give the peoples which have been politically backward, when measured by Western standards, a Western constitution and to incorporate them as free members in a co-operative empire?

The case most in view is India. British policy in India has been tragically successful. Great Britain has succeeded in impregnating a very small—by no means always the most important—but very articulate Indian stratum with the doctrines of British democracy and the desire for self-determination. She has failed to destroy Indian traditionalism, the mouthpiece of which is Mahatma Gandhi, who believes in neither democracy nor economic progress. And she has managed to bring about an unholy coalition between radical modernism, the representatives of which talk like Patrick Henry, and hoary conservatism, to whose adherents the cow is a sacred symbol and whose beliefs range from dumb and dense superstition to sublime, transcendental mysticism. The tragedy of India is not "For East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet," but that the two have met, physically and spiritually, for over three hundred years, and do not yet know how to live together or how to separate.

Long before the outbreak of the present war, Great Britain attempted to draft a constitution which would be acceptable to India. The offer was refused; so was Sir Stafford Cripps's recent proposal, even though it contained the right to secession. The traditionalists of the Gandhi type evidently hoped that a Japanese invasion would settle the matter, while the modernists put their faith in the rise of American anti-imperialism. The Indian question will be settled when the war is won. Proof has been furnished that even at the lowest ebb of British military fortunes in the East, the British Government could not be compelled to hand over the control of the war to a group of self-appointed leaders under the sway of the greatest appeaser the world has ever known. Indian statesmen will have to learn the value of compromise. They

will have to understand that the only way to test the sincerity of an offer is acceptance, not refusal.

THE MOSLEM COUNTRIES

But India is not the only country within a vertical empire, in which there are violent nationalist movements demanding self-government. Nearly all Moslem nations have been affected by such agitations. The presence of Americans in the battle zone will probably strengthen them. Americans will not have much contact with the common man, who does not speak their language and whose mind they can scarcely fathom. But they will meet the semi-Europeanized effendi who wants a job, or at least a salary, in return for the trouble he has taken in picking up the externals of Western civilization and who no longer has a place among those of his own people who cling tenaciously to their primitive traditions. His European masters have not found an appropriate niche for him. His position is not unlike—only very much worse than—that of the minor intelligentsia of the West, who feel that their capabilities are neither sufficiently appreciated nor adequately remunerated.

Here, too, Great Britain has blazed the trail and made impossible a return to traditionalism. Her treaties with Egypt and Iraq have not only given sovereignty to these countries; they have provided the platform from which nationalists, especially those in the French-held Moslem areas in Africa and Asia clamor for similar concessions. In two of these regions, Palestine and Algeria, problems are particularly delicate. In both countries, numerous settlers have been located by the ruling power among the Arab population. The way to permanent symbiosis has not yet been found.

In North Africa the United States is acting as trustee for Republican France.

Will she be able to withstand the pressure of anti-imperialism and hand back the mandate without destructive interference? Self-government is not unknown to the Moslem state. It need not be of the Western type. The Moslem people are much freer from class or race feeling than the Western nations. Under their own rulers they have practiced democratic ways of their own. But their favorite type of government has been that of a benevolent, strong, and wise despot. They prefer Harun-al-Rashid to Thomas Jefferson, and understand Joseph Stalin's methods of administration better than Woodrow Wilson's principles of government.

COLONIAL AFRICA

The huge rump of Africa between the Moslem fringe in the north and the Union of South Africa is a black man's country. It is divided among four colonial powers—France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Portugal—with Spain holding a small area. It forms the bulk of present-day vertical empires. It may not be a permanent colony; it is certainly not yet sufficiently advanced to be left to its own devices.

Had this area never been invaded, it might have been different. It has been drawn into the vortex of what is called Western civilization. The war will drag it in far deeper. The native frameworks of government, slender as they were and mostly of alien Arab origin, have been broken by the colonial powers. The natives have been in permanent contact with European civilizations, which, frequently against their will, have given them peace. The old governments cannot be remade; the ancient ascendancy of warlike tribes over their more gentle neighbors must not be restored. The white settlements which have been planted in the highlands cannot be given up—though it might have been wiser not to establish them. In

colonial affairs, a hit-and-run policy is not permissible.

INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATION?

The more moderate of the anti-imperialists recognize these conditions, but they suggest that these colonies should be taken from their present owners and pooled under an international administration.

National administrations in most parts of Africa have not been blameless in days gone by. Deeds have been done which were rightly called atrocities. They generally were put right long ago by the pressure of public opinion on national parliaments. I look back with great satisfaction to these struggles many years ago, in which I played a very minor part. At that time we were fighting powerful brutal actualities—not mere phantoms stuffed with textbook quotations.

The Mandates Commission of the League of Nations did a very useful work of inquiry and supervision. By its very structure, it could not provide the public platform which the meetings of the International Colonial Institute had formerly offered. It would be a useful contribution to the solution of postwar problems if they could be revived on a broad international basis.

A great deal might be said in favor of international colonial co-operation, co-ordination, and supervision; but not much for international administration. If it is to serve the native people, administration must be diversified, for within each national colonial empire, nay, often within a single national colony, conditions vary considerably. There must be uniformity on a few fundamental principles; this exists today in every national administration, since all countries realize that the days of rapacious colonialism have gone forever. No doubt the impact of the war

on native populations will make administration more difficult; their standards will be raised and their demands for ampler opportunities will have to be heeded. The somewhat timid parsimony of the mother countries will have to cease. They have, to a certain degree, been guilty of what might be called considerate neglect. All this can easily be worked out within each national administration. Since public works have become the shibboleth of financial salvation; the opportunities for raising the standards of the native populations by spending money on expensive public undertakings have been greatly widened. After all, backward colonies offer the best chance for public works; they can even be made "self-liquidating" in many instances.

The task of raising native populations would not be facilitated by an international administration. There is no international society in existence that could serve as a pattern for international education. It is unwise to level up a native society and fashion its organization not after a distinct, concrete metropolitan society in being, but after an abstract international phantom. Populations in the several colonies have begun to model themselves in some ways after their national masters. A change of methods, even if it were in some ways an improvement, would greatly unsettle them.

THE OPEN DOOR

Yet there has always been a kind of international system in force in most African colonies. They were, with very few exceptions, subject to the regime of the open door, the benefits of which were reserved to the members of the League of Nations and the United States. After Germany and Japan left the League, they were not deprived of these privileges.

This system must be improved. An Economic Council for Africa—excluding North Africa and South Africa—might be formed, on which all nations, both colonial powers and others, would be represented, and which would regulate the commercial policies of Africa. To this equality of opportunity, only those nations should be admitted which practice a fairly liberal commercial policy at home and do not try to snatch particular advantages for themselves by ruthless tariff manipulations at home and abroad. There is no reason why the colonial powers should offer equality of opportunity to those who deny it to them whenever they are in a position to do so.

The Council would have no difficulty in securing free access to raw materials to nonpossessory powers, for it never was denied to anybody. The so-called raw materials problem in times of peace is a myth. It becomes a reality only in times of war. And the greater the opportunity of withholding valuable raw materials from aggressive powers, the better it is for the peace of the world.

The real colonial problem of the future is a quite different one. Tropical commodities are faced today by a steadily increasing competition of synthetic products which come from the chemist's laboratory. It will be impossible to develop native populations without offering them markets for their wares, and to do so at remunerative prices may be difficult.

The regime of the open door has frequently been contravened by evasion and subterfuge. This might be remedied by giving any businessman who was unfairly treated by a colonial government a right to claim compensation. There could be a special court in which complaints could be lodged. The fines should be heavy, and part of them should be set aside for the cultural development of the natives.

FOREIGN CAPITAL

Some imperialist activities will survive outside Africa. It has been the fashion of late to consider loans granted to native governments and foreign investments in relatively backward countries as peculiarly poisonous forms of imperialist exploitation and domination, irrespective of the terms imposed on the debtors. There have been numerous transactions of this sort in the past, yet they were the exception rather than the rule. Most of these operations created a kind of international co-partnership, under which the sleeping partner provided the sinews of growth without which the less advanced countries would have remained stationary.

On the whole, this type of absenteeism was beneficial. If there was exploitation in the past, it has been offset by counter exploitation in the present. It is quite possible that the capital value of foreign investments confiscated without just claims, and of loans repudiated, fraudulently and otherwise, has reduced the actual pecuniary profits derived from such investments to very moderate dimensions.

The less developed countries need foreign capital participation on a very large scale if they are to be modernized—de-tribalized or de-feudalized. The present-day problem is the disinclination of investors to risk this sort of venture in countries where power policies support the debtor, not the creditor. It is quite likely that the governments of the more advanced states will have to step in and, either directly or by guarantees, provide the moneys needed by their less advanced friends. The future will show whether financial transactions between governments are less "imperialist" and less subject to frictions than loans from private investors to governments.

Here, too, imperialism will survive;

let us hope that it will be purely cooperative.

SOVIET IMPERIALISM

The greatest firmly knit surviving empire is Soviet Russia. It embraces a multiplicity of nationalities conquered by its Czarist predecessors and a few annexed during its own short span of life. The different republics in which they are organized have the right to secede—on paper. Yet the Soviets would not permit the separation of any group the departure of which would endanger their own security. Their attitude toward Poland and the Baltic States shows this clearly enough. In this respect their policy does not differ very much from that of any other country. Most states have grown by conquest. Puerto Rico, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and, last but not least, the Panama Canal Zone have been won by aggressive imperialist methods. No sensible person would insist that the principles of the Atlantic Charter must be applied to them. Even if the people of the Canal Zone desired reunion with Panama and Colombia, the United States would refuse to subordinate the vital interests of a great society to the fancies of small, disgruntled groups.

Though the social principles of the Soviet Union are in conflict with those of the United States and the British Empire, the outlook of that country is at least as realistic as that of any British or American imperialist. Russia, the natural protector of Asiatic races, very carefully refrained from complicating the problems of her British ally in India; for she is an imperialist power, and she has not the slightest intention of releasing any of her important component parts. She would never tolerate the adoption of a capitalist system by any of the Soviet Republics. None of them possesses sovereignty like Canada or Australia. Russia is slowly trans-

forming her empire into a superstate by imposing economic uniformity on all its parts. She permits the continuation of their cultural distinction, yet she is systematically Russianizing them all. Trotsky, who was an anti-imperialist of some sort, reproached Stalin with this impious policy.

COERCIVE OR CO-OPERATIVE IMPERIALISM?

Under the impact of democracy and nationalism, imperialism has lost ground in nearly all lateral empires. After an Allied victory it will lose more ground in what may be called the slightly vertical empires, where fairly advanced

populations desire to set up house for themselves. It may be expected that the self-denying declarations of the Allies will be respected, though there is some underground talk of "grab."

In any case, a good many problems inherent in imperialism will remain. Let us hope that they will be solved by constructive and not by destructive methods, and that everywhere empires will continue to move from coercive to co-operative foundations.

In the past these problems have frequently been approached in a spirit of ignorant arrogance; let us beware of handling them in a mood of well-meaning but equally dangerous arrogant ignorance.

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