

Geography in History

BY MARK STARR.

The greatest disservice of the old teaching in ordinary schools has been its utter failure to connect the various studies as a whole. To most of us the word geography does not conjure up, as it should, a picture of the wonderful stage of the activity of man or the important back-ground to all history. What the world does recall is a painful effort of memorising long lists of important towns with their respective chief manufactures or such-like brain-leading tasks. Generally the only survivals of such an ordeal are a hazy notion of the earth's shape gathered from Mercator's projection, a memory of the many red portions it contained, and perhaps of the names of the towns of the Isle of Wight, because the school-master's oft-repeated joke made one remember "Newport riding cows (Coves)." Maps were things that ended with one's schooldays.

However, in recent times this has been altered. The fact that war-flags dotting battle areas have been followed anxiously by many persons, and that the old maps of Europe and of the world are still undergoing rearrangement, have taught us geography. In our Labour movement we are being influenced by the writings of such well informed writers as Brailsford. The undisguised domination of politics by coal, iron, oil, and trade routes, forces us to read our newspapers with a world Atlas before us. Otherwise we cannot understand what is happening in Mesopotamia and Poland. To replace the mind-saving generalisation about the misdeeds of capitalism, which repels rather than convinces the non-Socialist, a newer generation is able to unveil and explain the concrete doings of capitalism about whose doings the daily papers give ample evidence. The present needs of capitalism are forcing it to study the map to plan its railways and its expansions and its "spheres of influence," and obtain the very necessary control over supplies of fuel and raw material for its iron and steel production. While Maekinder is teaching Economic Geography at the University of London, the Labour Colleges in London and Scotland, too, have recognised the value of the subject.

My purpose here, then, is to suggest to a somewhat prepared audience that not only do geographical conditions influence modern Imperialist policies, but that they help to explain human development in the past—and to a greater extent than is generally recognised. Whether we examine the stuff of the ancient myths or the defence afforded to the Bolsheviks by the ample space for retreat provided by the huge land mass of Russia, coupled with its native supplies of food, or whether we try to anticipate the results of a revolutionary change in Britain—80 per cent. of whose workers are engaged in working up raw materials—in each case, at either end of history, we are forced to take into account the natural environment.

Economic geography deals with the surface relief of the earth and its influence upon society. In modern times it is forced to trench upon geology, for it deals with the location of the minerals below the surface of the earth. We call it Economic Geography because it studies not so much the influence of geographical conditions upon life in general, but upon the life of man. And in distinction from Anthropo-Geography it does not so much seek to explain bodily individual differences in colour and shape, but treats man not only as a being living in nature, but also in society, studying not the relations and differences of individuals, but of the social groups. Not that it can ignore the fact that man's life is bound up with animal life, or forget that society is not something absolutely divisible from the individuals who compose it.

The most superficial observation of human development forces home the great influence exercised by the geographical factor. Colour, shape of the body and its limbs, and all the facial and other dif-

ferences between racial types are plainly largely due to the interlocking factors of heat, climate, and diet accentuated or lessened to some degree by sexual selection. The blackness of the coloured race is the easiest example of where the fierce rays of the sun produce a protective pigment in the skin. The shape of the face and the flat nose and other similar features are also to be partly explained from like factors. Even if agreement has not yet been made between rival explanations in particular cases, all agree that such things cannot be said to be mere chance or, as the ancients believed, a supernatural freakish design.

In addition to physical results from geographic control, psychical and temperamental differences can often be explained in the same way. The industrious nations are to be found in the temperate zones, because in the warmer climes persons are less inclined for energetic sustained labour, for there is no struggle to retain warmth or win subsistence. The eternal summer of the Tropics provides no stimulus to the invention of new tools to result in new modes of life. Nature there is too lavish, and keeps man "in leading strings."

Before proceeding further, however, let us very roughly summarise the chief relations which arise in geographical conditions:

(a) There is the relation between land and water formed by their relative distribution on the surface of the earth.

(b) Inseparable from this are the climatic relations produced by the sun and the winds.

(c) Then comes the relation between human society and its natural environment.

From the ocean-covered part of the surface of the globe the sun evaporates water into moisture. By the fact that the expanding air of the hot countries lessens its pressure, and consequently the air from the colder lands rushes in to the relieved space, winds are caused. These winds affect the temperature and bring the moisture clouds against the mountain lands. The consequent rain makes the earth fertile and fills the rivers running back to the ocean again. Sun, wind, rain, and temperature react upon vegetation, and this in its turn makes organic life possible. These complex processes are universal and interminable, and they condition human development.

A few thousand feet up or down movement of the surface of the earth, a relatively small change in the temperature and men's dwellings would be submerged, or they would perish on the uninhabitable mountain-tops, and life would be impossible. The consequences of the Ice Age illustrate well the dependence of man upon a congenial natural environment. To take a smaller example: at a thousand feet above sea-level in Gt. Britain, wheat growing is impossible without special artificial aids. The premise of the existence of man is the fertility of the soil. And while more and more geographical conditions are being controlled—for example, canals are being made to divide continents, and the terrors of cold climates can be overcome by new sources of heat—their accumulated results and their influence are still so immense as to be worthy of consideration. Man is the active factor, but he can only act in these channels formed by the relations and processes we have outlined. To change the metaphor, as players we can better utilise the stage if we recognise the great effect it has had in the past, and how it has not only stamped itself upon the physical and psychic characters of the players, but it has conditioned forms of social organisation, and aided their retention or destruction. So much impressed by this was Semple that she described history as being "geography set in motion."

Civilisation begins in the river valleys. The green strip of the Nile Valley is the example that comes quickest into the mind. Here in a sheltered retreat, protected on each side by deserts, Egypt began a similar course to the other already developed

river valley Empire across in Mesopotamia. Because she was dependent on the flooding of the Nile, and as this was the supposed work of the gods, it was the priest class, and not the warrior caste which first dominated. In the various Babylonian and Assyrian Empires natural protection was not so complete, and hence the social system was ruled by the warrior. The tribal organisations of nomadic life never survives for long in the river valleys and early history is largely composed of the invasions of the sheltered and enervated peoples by the daring and hardier pastoralists of the steppes and the desert. That invasion of Jenghis Khan in the thirteenth century is the last great example before capitalist colonial expansion changes the order of history.

Passing on to the inland sea civilizations, it is impossible to escape the connection between the politics of the Greek City States and the deep valley and dividing isolating mountains of Greece, combined with the easy access to liberty elsewhere in some other colony across the connecting seas. Again and again in explaining British industrial development, the advantages of insularity, the favourable position on the main street in the ocean civilisation period (when the inland Mediterranean, formerly really the centre of the earth that mattered, had become a mere backwater), and the available rich supplies of coal and iron—all these factors have to be repeatedly remembered.

For the purpose of fully appreciating "geographic control," however, it will be well to leave scattered references to many different civilisations and take one ancient example with only occasional references to others for parallels. Compared to the European, Chinese civilisation has been for many years at a standstill, and this static state of the sleeping East has always aroused the curiosity of thoughtful persons and provoked various explanations. Modern canons of historical investigation rule out supernatural intervention as a cause. This slumber of 4,000 years cannot be explained as an accident, and so there have been many ingenious attempts to explain the riddle. The bound feet which impeded travel on the part of the women folk; ancestor worship which caused the Chinaman to see his future in the past, and kept him in the old ways when Europe was stirring and finding new ones; the peculiar elaboration and the difficult character of the Chinese script which, expounded by a conservative and hide-bound dominating literary caste, further imprisoned the Chinese mind—these are a few of the proposed reasons. While these are contributory factors they cannot be regarded as sufficient. In Europe new national languages came as a result of the breakdown of feudalism and its chief support, the Latin-speaking Church. Language and religion could not prevent change here. What has to be explained is the absence of an impelling need which would in a like manner have driven the Chinese to revolutionise their ideas and banish the hindrances to movement in their fashions and institutions. The domination of the literary class, instead of, say a military class as elsewhere, and the long maintenance of patriarchal despotism must have arisen from something peculiar to Chinese development. Why is it that the Chinese did not sail across the Pacific and discover America before the Europeans? Why is it that Europe has not been static and endeavoring to keep Chinese influence at bay instead of the contrary? The factors summed up in the phrase "geographic control" will throw a very much needed light upon these problems.

To be continued.

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