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French Peace Aims

An Open Letter to Time and Tide

FROM ODETTE KEUN

SIR: There is no satisfaction in being a Cassandra, and no exhilaration, when the disasters of which one was certain have come to pass, in saying to the world at large: "I told you so." I think sadly of the fate of the books or articles I wrote on the inconsistencies of the well-meaning Menshevist régime in Georgia, which was doomed to failure; on the essential evil, the systematic cynicism and ineradicable savagery of Russian-Communism, as far back as 1922; on the ignorance and tepidity of the incompetent makers of the Spanish Republic, in 1931; on the terrible, the unprecedented menace to the whole of Europe that Hitler and Nazism represented, as early as 1935. (It is true that in regard to the latter work I have now been vindicated, and by no less a Personage than the B.B.C., for, listening in some days ago, I was agreeably astounded to hear a lecturer say that he had been browsing for the second time in *Darkness from the North*, which was "the nearest to prophecy" of any book he had read on the Third Reich. Let me add, though, so as to re-establish the balance, that I found no publisher in England who would finance my little volume five years ago; they all said that the public would either ignore the book or feel that, being a Continental, I was pathologically suspicious of Germany and wildly exaggerated the danger of National-Socialism; so at last I made a gift of my manuscript to a printer, who lost money in bringing it out on his own.) I remember that nothing I stated in all those earnest pages impressed anyone as an accurate estimate of events and their results.

Never did a cause for which I fought succeed in influencing even an infinitesimal portion of any public. Yet all the political tragedies that my horrified brain divined have, up to date, occurred. It is such a melancholy experience that I have turned superstitious, and will no longer allow myself to get hunches, for fear they should materialize in the future just as they did in the past.

In spite of all this, however, I find it impossible to refrain from a new—not prediction, but warning. It will indubitably go the way of all my other warnings, but it must be given, and given now. The necessity for it was driven home to me by the recent correspondence in TIME AND TIDE concerning peace aims. I had been feeling very uneasily, for some time already, that in them lies the seed of what may become later on a major split between public opinion in France and public opinion in England, and the discussions in this review brought my uneasiness to a head.

It appears more and more as though France and England will be, for several years at any rate, allies working so closely together on political, military, and economic lines as to justify the hope of creating at least one basic "federal unit" in Europe. But it would be a redoubtable, even a mortal mistake, to imagine that the two countries can fuse their national temperaments as successfully as their social and material interests. Their philosophy of life, their reactions to life, are immensely different. Their psychological values are not the same. Their experience, both of history and of *la vie quotidienne*, have little in common. The fundamental qualities of their intelligence are as the poles apart: realistic in the French, practical in the English. As soon as the cardinal question of peace aims definitely arises, it is these dissimilarities which will inexorably come into play.

There are already signs that on this issue thought in France and England is not identical, and it would be wise to heed these signs. To the best of my knowledge only Mr Harold Nicolson, whose

admirable lucidity of ideas and exposition is procuring him a steadily increasing political authority on the Continent and in America, has drawn attention to ultimately perilous divergences. (But then Mr Nicolson is one of the very few notable Englishmen who thoroughly understand the French, and who never ascribed to hysteria or pure revengefulness their efforts to disarm Germany permanently.) In general, little trouble has been taken here to study the actual trends in France, or their implications, though they are all very significant: the suppression of the Communist Party, the arrest of the deputies who concocted a manifesto for peace, the abjuration of the class struggle—a declaration signed by the Confédération Générale du Travail—plenary powers granted to the Government, President Lebrun's speech after the peace appeal launched by Holland and Belgium jointly (a speech half as long and twice as clear as the British answer), M. Daladier's discourse of November 30th, the demand, long before Finland was attacked, to settle the intolerably illogical situation vis à vis Soviet Russia by an open break, the while weirdly "pragmatic" Ministers in England courted awkwardly—and vainly—the growling Slav bear.

Above all, one must note the perfectly legitimate refusal of French public opinion to dissociate the bulk of the German people from the crimes of the régime they put in, and supported, and fanatically acclaimed during the persecution of the Jews, the tortures in the concentration camps, the annexation of Czechoslovakia, the destruction of Poland, and for which they are now fighting. There is no scrap of evidence to show that the masses were ever shocked by any of the perfidious or bestial acts of their masters.

The English proclaim—they have, unfortunately, even proclaimed it officially—that one of their chief objectives is to "rescue" the German people from the tyranny of a Government that has "misled" them (though for ten years before that Government took power the unexpurgated *Mein Kampf* was there for all the Germans to read, informing them with the utmost contempt that they were to be ruled by force and lies, the only fit way, revealed the book, to rule a people as imbecile as they) and that this war is a sort of crusade to Win Germany Back to Democratic Civilization. The French, having had the Germans on their backs for centuries, and seen themselves invaded three times in less than seventy years, think that the Germans have not modified their nature since Froissart called them "a covetous people above all other, forever ferociously threatening and aggressive, who had no pity when they got the upper hand, and were hard and evil handlers of their prisoners." Moreover, they cannot be Won Back to Democratic Civilization, for they never practised Democratic Civilization, and have not yet even begun to outgrow, as a nation, the mentality of the early medieval barbarians who put their faith in the Tribe, the autocratic Leader, might, arms, ruthless domination, and treachery whenever it seemed expedient. It is not possible, say the French, to educate forcibly a European race that organically loves to be savage; the thing to do is to reduce it to military impotence once and for all.

I do not believe for a moment that France will wish to exact crushing penalties from Germany after victory, if only because the consequences of Versailles proved conclusively the futility of "Reparations"; but most certainly she feels that a system must be found by which German imperialism and the preponderant German vices will not have the slightest chance to function again. That system once established, and unassailably maintained, the Germans can evolve as they choose. There is no great hope that they will all immediately become civilized—one has to reckon with their indisputable strains of perversion, their capacity for envy, their liking for brutality, and the foul education the young have lapped up during the last seven years—but savages progress if they do die out, and so one day the Germans, too, may change.

Everything I come across bears me out in this summary of the extremely resolute French views—conversations, letters, the press,