

Materialist Conception of History

FOR BEGINNERS

LESSON 10.

TOWNS arose through the convenience of their site as ports or trading centres, others, around the fortified camps of the invaders or the small havens of fishermen. The town gained Charter of Freedom from the power of the Barons by purchase. The chief cause of the willingness of the nobles and kings to grant charters, from the Conquest to Henry 3rd's time, was their lack of money to enable them to carry on the Crusades and to pay ransome if taken prisoner. Some of the towns received their charter for supplying vessels for the Crusades. The nobles' pecuniary difficulties profited the towns in obtaining their charters. Foreign trade received a stimulus also from the Crusades, and thus helped to develop industry.

Loria says: "The Crusade was put forth as a desire to recapture the holy sepulchre from the heathen, but this is only the view of the superficial historian, who would attribute the phenomenon to the exhortation of Peter the Hermit. The science of history is to find out the deeper interpretation of things, and we find the underlying influence is to be found in the economic conditions of feudalism. It was the conquering impulse to extend their power, precisely as in our day, the instinct of accumulation thrown out of normal employment at home seeks an outlet in overseas enterprise and speculation." The economic character of the Crusades comes out very clearly, if we take the trouble to examine the various phases of the strange enterprise; according to one historian, they were inspired solely by cupidity and the desire for booty. At the time of the 4th Crusade, the Venetians only consented to carry the warriors on the condition they should be richly remunerated and share in half of the booty secured, and as some of the Crusaders were unable to pay the Republic of Venice, the Republic of Venice proposed that they should acquit themselves of the obligation by undertaking a crusade against St. Marc and other Christian towns. It is a significant fact that the Conquest of the Holy Sepulchre, which was to have crowned an enterprise that had apparently no other end in view, was made but an episode in the affair, and finally became an incident in the attempted colonization of Asia on the feudal principle of Europe. No longer did Christians fight against infidels, but also against Christians. Emperor Frederick in 1234 sailed across the sea, more to obtain lordship over Jerusalem than for any particular advantage of Christianity. His purpose was indeed very clear; when he landed in Cyprus he undertook to wage a war against the Christians only. An Italian poet paints a vivid picture in one of his poems of the avarice that actuated the Crusaders."

The invasion of the Turks had blocked the merchants' free access to the Eastern trade routes, the Italians having their source of wealth destroyed. The feudal fighters needing more land to conquer, the church feeling her prestige would be destroyed if the infidels success was permanent, united and formed a strong combination, and as the Crusaders proceeded, their economic causes became more manifest.

Not only internal wars, but the Crusades had the same effect in weakening feudalism. The strong hand of the Norman kings kept the barons in check for a while in England. In King Stephen's time the barons became again lawless and powerful. They fortified their castles and cast men and women into prison, stealing their wealth. Between 1135 and 1153 there was terrible anarchy and misery. The barons tortured the prisoners by breaking their bones and placing snakes and adders in the cells. The barons lost their power under Henry II. 1154, who introduced a military law by which all free men had free armour to protect the king. This was the origin of the militia. The barons, instead of supplying men had to supply money for the upkeep of the militia. This made it a necessity to grant towns the freedom charters and also to charge

money rent for their land. The civil strife retarded the development of trade, but in the reign of Henry III., trade became prosperous and peaceful.

In the reign of King John, a quarrel arose between him and the Pope over the choosing of a Chancellor. John refused the Pope's nominee, and as John remained obstinate, the whole country was put under an interdict in 1208, forbidding the priest to marry the people or bury them in the church ground, or to read any of the church services, unless the baptismal service and prayers for the dying. For four years no church bells rang, and the people were buried in ditches and meadows without services. John was indifferent, and seized the goods of the bishops and clergy; when the barons withdrew, he seized their castles. The Pope excommunicated John. This had the effect of turning the people against him. Through fear of losing all, he actually gave up the crown to the Pope's legate, and received it back as a vassal of the Pope. In doing this he gave rise to the long struggle between the Pope and the English kings, which lasted more than 300 years.

The development of trade, with its merchant guilds and craft guilds, and their many privileges bought from the king, united the people and barons against their tyrannical king. The town bells called them to meetings of discussion on public affairs. The king's robberies through taxation united the bishops, barons and merchants' guilds, and forced John to sign the Magna Charta, 1215. The support of the traders can be seen in two of the enactments by which they secured to foreign merchants, freedom of journeying and of trade throughout the realm, and the other an uniformity of weights and measures to be enforced throughout the country. It was during this time that Pope Gregory IX. filled the churches with Italian priests and sent over for money to carry on his continental wars. The enormous money to the Papal See through bribes and taxes drained the country, which caused much misery and a feeling of revolt. When Pope Innocent wanted to drive Emperor Conrad out of Sicily, he offered the crown to Henry III.'s son, who was just nine years old. Henry accepted the offer, but Innocent died. His successor, Pope Alexander, made war on Conrad in Henry's name, and at his expense. The king had to confess to parliament that he owed the Pope £90,000. The barons rose in rebellion, and only paid one-third of this debt, making the king sign the Provisions of Oxford, 1258. Thousands were dying of starvation because of a bad harvest.

The Provisions called for three parliaments a year, and the foreigners to be driven from the castles, but the barons were satisfied when they obtained the castles. The king asked the Pope to absolve him from the promise of keeping the Provisions of Oxford. This was granted, and the barons' war of 1264 was the result. Henry renewed the Provisions after three years' civil war.

In 1279, Statute of Mortmain land law was passed, preventing men from pretending giving their land to the church to escape or avoid giving feudal service. King Edward I. called parliament because it was an easier method to obtain grants of money than the old method of asking separately from each baron, or from the clergy, citizens or shire. By summoning two knights from each shire or county, two clergy from each diocese, these members could make promises for the people who chose them, and grant money. Kings never called parliament unless it was an economic necessity.

The civil wars kept the country in confusion, which enabled Henry VIII., 200 years later, to become an absolute monarch, taking possession of the landlord's estates, extorting money from them to fill his treasury.

King Edward I., in 1297, was in Flanders helping the Flemings to fight the French, who were seiz-

ing English wool in Flemish ports. The woollen trade was the economic cause of the 100 years' war with France. The duty on wool was raised to six times what it had been, to carry on the war. Knighted country gentlemen who were paid good fees ordered the counties to send in food supplies, and landholders to bring soldiers for the war. Parliament rebelled, and when they accused the king of levying unjust taxes, Edward owned he had done it for England's honor and appealed to their loyalty to help him. Then they gave their consent to the war.

This war became popular because of the belief that more subjects under the king would help to lighten taxation. The clergy refused to give what was demanded of them by orders of the Pope, but the king forced them to submit by refusing them protection in the law courts until they paid up.

Rogers says: "No wonder the king, knowing the profits of the clergy, insisted on liberal contributions towards public revenue, and the clergy should have striven to obtain the powerful aid of the Pope to escape from these exactions." . . . "The enormous revenue going to the Pope was paid with wool to Flanders and cross exchange to Italy. . . ." "An examination of the commercial relations existing between England and Flanders reveals the economic basis of this alliance. English wool was largely exported to Flanders, and it was consequently indispensable for England to maintain friendly relations with the Flemish towns which formed the principal market for English wool. For this reason English monarchs devoted every effort to maintain friendly relations. This was especially necessary as the war expenses were usually met with the special tax on wool, and this part had to be redeemed by exportation of wool to Flanders."

The enormous revenues exacted from England by the Papal Court and Italian ecclesiastics living on English benefices, from the 13th to the 15th century, was from the sale of English wool to Flanders. The extent of this revenue may be gathered from the fact that a petition against papal appointments to English ecclesiastical vacancies in parliament, 1343, asserted that the Pope's revenue from England alone, was higher than of any prince in Christendom.

This woollen trade inaugurated the scheme to enclose the common lands for sheep farming, and the beginning of the creation of a proletariat class, which we will have occasion to deal with in some future lesson.

In King Edward III.'s reign, the people of Flanders, who had now a large woollen trade with England, wanted protection from Count Louis of France. King Edward was called to help them, and take the title of "King of France."

The knights and barons needed money for their costly armour, and were willing to lease their land for money rent called *feorm*. This was the beginning of the independent farmer; even the king sent commissioners to his estates to raise money by allowing serfs to buy their freedom. Serfs also became free if they escaped to a town, and dwelt one year and one day without being caught.

King Edward III. brought and encouraged Flemish weavers to England, who taught the people to weave. Industry began to flourish and towns grew more numerous. Previously, Henry II. endeavored to stimulate English manufacture by establishing a "cloth fair" in the churchyard at St. Bartholomew. From the time of this Flemish immigration England changed from a purely agricultural country, exporting wool, to the exporting of cloth, the manufacture of which became the basis of England's national wealth.

The increase of weavers, made a scarcity of laborers, and high wages ensued. In 1348 the Black Plague swept over about one half of the population. There was a dearth of labor. The landlords could not find enough laborers, and there was a consequent