

Current Topics: The Near East.—A Problem for the Near Future

Article 6. BY ROBERT KIRK.

Note to the reader: In the first July issue of the "Clarion," I made an assertion that the area in which capitalism can expand is constantly growing smaller, while, inversely, the proportion of surplus capital is growing larger. The loss of some notes containing approximate figures of recent date prevents me from substantiating the latter part of that statement. But you will recall the phenomenal conditions governing trade and production from 1914 to 1919: the interruption of the exchange system with its regulating effect on prices in the world market and the substitution for this of arbitrary prices. Under such conditions it was comparatively easy to obtain contracts at prices allowing the contractors a wide margin of profits, and through ordinary practices—the use of low-grade material for high-grade, sometimes reaping a much greater profit than the contract price allowed for.

That more new millionaires were made, and more fresh capital produced, during those five years of trade than was ever possible in any similar period in the history of capitalism is beyond dispute—when you remember that the Scandinavian countries, Holland and Denmark, Britain and the colonies, the United States, France and Japan took part in this orgy of trade.

The conditions of trade and production today are no less phenomenal: the exchange system, between several countries in Europe and the rest of the world, is still interrupted; the credit-standing of these is that of "bankrupts." Unable to procure gold in order to buy much needed material to start industry with, they cannot produce goods to exchange in the world market for those they need. Since no solution offered by bourgeois economists satisfies the various national groups of capitalists, it becomes more imperative than ever, that they find new fields to exploit their surplus capital, or consume it without profit. A procedure contrary to all their ideals, and most destructive of all to a system based on profit, and kept alive by profit.

Of these fields there are but two that can reasonably be supposed to offer such opportunities—the Near East with its hitherto unexploited oil fields, and the Far East with its teeming population and vast storehouses of untouched wealth, providing a market that can consume the surplus production of the western world. It is the first of these two which we will discuss here.

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The Near East is a somewhat vague term; popular usage defines it as the area covered by such countries and territories as Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia,—until lately outposts of the Turkish empire,—Turkey, as it is now, and Persia. The geographical environment, climatic conditions, the wide waste lands and deserts, the scarcity of water and cheap power, prevent these communities from developing into a capitalist stage of production such as the western world has reached, quantity production or machine production, as you choose. Consequently their economic resources, rich in use-value as some are, on the whole are very limited.

Despite these unfavorable circumstances much development work has changed the industrial character of Egypt, since the occupation of this community by Britain in the days of Gladstone, and increased the output of labor. We read that the Nile is stirred today by steamboats, where, but a short while since, the only things that disturbed its surface, other than the winds, were the prows of Arab dhows. Railroads, long ribbons of concrete, deeply imbedded in the sands of the desert carry freight and passengers from Alexandria to Cairo, and from

Cairo to Bagdad, along routes once exclusively used by merchants with their canal trains loaded down with wares for small and widely scattered markets. Electric street cars carry the sweating slaves to and from work as in less ancient cities of the West. And the Nile,—wise old river! is made to carry her waters to remote spots of the delta cultivated by the fellahin.

Adjacent to this land of the Pharaohs is another resting place of an ancient civilization, that is about to be revived by capitalism, Palestine. This region is now occupied by British troops since the evacuation of it by the Turkish forces in 1917. The first step of the British Government in this country was to revise its tariff system to meet new development work, and enable the British tobacco trust to break a Turkish monopoly. Then to appoint Albert Hjorth, an eminent Norwegian engineer, to draw up plans for a great water and power system, by driving tunnels from the Mediterranean to Jerusalem. To this land the British Government hopes to attract some two million or so of Jew adherents to the Zionist movement. True, all of these developments completed in Egypt, and those contemplated in Palestine, represent rent, interest and profit to the financiers of Great Britain and revenues to the State. But these developments are incidental to the maintenance of an open road for British goods to and from the Far Eastern markets of India and China rather than a direct policy of helping the native population to conquer the forces of nature.

At all times during a century and a half, it has been necessary for Britain to hold the balance of power in the Near East as well as in Western Europe. That result was usually achieved by compromise with Turgey, whose power in the Moslem world is too well known to require any mention here. And so long as the Turk was content to follow in the footsteps of his forbears, India was safe, from this quarter. During all that time, prior to 1914, only once was the monopoly right of Britain in India seriously challenged. This was when Napoleon entered Egypt, 1798; the doorway to the Far East was opened with comparative ease: the rest of the road would have offered little difficulties. Yet, wise as he was, the "man of destiny" gathered up his troops and departed. It was a fortunate whim of circumstance that led to the development of textiles in Britain, for it was the absence of a cheap, useful commodity like cotton in the industrial output of France which prevented Napoleon's dream from materializing. It is one task to conquer a country for exploitative purposes, and another one to provide the people of that country with something they need.

But from 1914 up to the present, the position of Britain in the Near East, as in the Far East, is not so secure. The late Entente countries, Russia, France and Britain, decided Turkey's alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany. The old Russian regime long desired an easy route to western markets, and recognised that these claims could be met by turning Constantinople into a Russian terminal on the Mediterranean side—whether Turkey was an ally of Germany's or not. We all know what happened, after the Armistice was signed; after the "Peace" conference at Paris, and the signing of the treaty of Sevres. Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and Arabia were taken away from the ruling class of Turkey by the terms of the former; and Thrace, Smyrna and St. Sophia, the ancient seat of the Caliphate, by the latter. The disjointed members of the empire were divided between France, Italy, Greece and Britain.

But it is one thing to smash up the domain of another nation and quite a different task to guard against the counter-activities of its people.

The drastic policy of the British Government awoke the smouldering embers of nationalism and fanned them into a fierce living flame, which burned its way clear from the Nile to the Ganges; from Egypt to India, Islam was in revolt against the dismemberment of the Moslem empire; race riots in Palestine, where the ancient grudge of the Arab against the Hebrew people was revived: Moplah uprisings, and the Ghandi movement in India received a stimulus from the action of Britain.

France, who had been fighting the Turks up to 1920, changed her tactics, and hurriedly withdrew her troops; signed a secret treaty with the Turkish nationalists; relinquished her mandatory privileges in the Near East, and quickly French ships lay abreast the British, in the harbor of Smyrna, loaded down with supplies and munitions for her new ally. Why the sudden change in front to an ancient enemy? Where could France, who today is one more competitor among the world's iron and steel producers, exploit the products of Alsace Lorraine—in the United States, Britain, Belgium, China or Germany? They are also iron and steel producers. But the Near East has ever stood in need of such products, had it not been for the scarcity of such the course of history would, long since have changed, and the people of the East would have overthrown the western powers and rid themselves of the baneful influence of western intrigues.

Earlier in this article I spoke of a scarcity of power for industrial purposes; the immense territory not yet explored in the East may yet yield unlimited power for all purposes, if oil can be found in abundance; and the rapid changes in oil-burning engines could then effect the most wonderful changes in the industrial character of those communities. But, while this is still problematical, the needs of Turkey and the vital nature of oil is not to be disputed.

When the British decided upon the occupation of Palestine, and the exercise of mandatory powers in Mesopotamia, France saw her old ally grabbing every available source of this most precious mineral, in Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Persia. The significance of this can only be appreciated when you consider the far-reaching changes in airships and airplanes as fighting machines in future wars. They are slowly but surely outstripping from their place in national defence, the more costly cruisers and dreadnoughts. Swifter than an eagle in nervous flight, and as silent, they can approach their victims, pause, and drop with deadly accuracy a bomb of high explosives, enough to leave even post-war super-dreadnoughts at the mercy of wind and tide, and sink the smaller craft.

Since Britain can no longer remain the chief exporting nation, it is imperative that she guard with greatest care her ever increasing foreign assets. On the other hand there is France, with an awakened interest in the East, where lies the richest of Britain's possessions, and with claims which she will advance by every means in her power so that friction between these two is most likely to remain constant, unless they can agree upon some kind of co-operation in this matter of oil. They fought each other for the rule of the seas, and judging by late activities, the character of either remains the same, a character which can never arrange a lasting compromise. Above all else at the present moment, oil is of the utmost importance to the great imperialist powers, and if they can not share the world's supply between them according to their respective commercial needs, then war for this mineral is certain; and the explosive nature of it will bring down the tottering social structure, and perhaps carry with it every vestige of civilization.