

Standing Armies.

It is an indisputable fact, which all thoughtful observers cannot fail to note, that the surest falsifier of all doctrines is time. The theories which govern the political or social life of one generation are seldom sustained with equal vigour by that which succeeds it, and are often unconsciously violated or abjured by its successors. The England of to-day, in whatever aspect it be regarded, is no more comparable with the England of the past century than the prevalent French "idea" is identical with that of 1789. It cannot be said that either civilisation or enlightenment is accountable for the shifting scenes of every age, inasmuch as in many senses we are losers rather than gainers by change and both those influences are currently believed to be favourable to absolute progress. The simple truth is that the governing principle of our existence consists in the accommodation of our theories to the exigencies of the hour, and that those exigencies are created by the varying phases of human thought, and the restless impulses of human ambition. The current doctrine is that which subserves the current interest. The standard by which we judge men and things is with individuals rarely, and with nations never, that of an unbiased judgment and hence it is that statesmen whose prescience is not one whit less keen than that of their predecessors, are to be found in every age, subordinating all abstract considerations of the highest good to the furtherance of projects which ambition may dictate or popular clamour may demand.

The statesmen who in the reign of William III. denounced standing armies as a menace to the liberties of the people, with a persistence of iteration which for a time secured its ends, have doubtless received more credit for the sincerity of their professions than they could justly claim, seeing that their policy was fraught with danger to the country in succeeding wars. The tyrannical pretensions of James II., to whom our permanent regular Army may be said to owe its real origin, gave possibly, some colour to the system of repression, although it is well to remember that it was the standing Army, numbering in those days some 20,000 men all told, which hailed the acquittal of the Bishops, and in a true spirit of the highest patriotism declined to serve its Sovereign when he would have employed it as a means of aggression against popular liberties. This fact is so well known to all students of our annals, and to all who have traced the history of our Army up to the present date, that it needs no insistence. The attack upon the standing Army which was promoted by the fit of jealousy of the Crown which supervened after the final fall of the Stuarts; but the doctrine propounded was destined to be speedily falsified, for the force which in the early days of the Hanoverian dynasty renewed its existence at a minimum of 17,000 men, has attained its present ample proportions with out danger to the national liberties. The interested outcry against a standing Army raised by the Whig politicians which thronged the Court of William III., and largely echoed by the Tories, was, therefore, supported by pleas which were controverted by the experience already obtained when the Army was absolutely under the Crown, and which have never received a shadow of evidence from succeeding events. The fact is that in England a standing Army, whatever may be its instincts, can never be a menace to popular liberty, because neither the Sovereign nor the Third Estate has absolute

and undivided control over it, and because both those powers can never be allied against the people. An Army which draws its sustenance from the commons is naturally dependent for its very existence upon a Parliamentary vote, and this condition, united to its allegiance to its Sovereign, binds it to both Crown and Parliament. Nothing can more stimulate the patriotism for which our troops are deservedly famed than this duality of direct and indirect allegiance, owing to the consciousness which it inspires of their complete identity with the people, and nothing, therefore, can be more conducive to its loyalty to the popular cause.

There is a liberty, however, to which a standing Army, as the Europe of 1874 understands the designation, is disastrously inimical, but from which England has never been severed. Civil liberty is a cause which, in this country, is identified with many names that will not readily be forgotten, and, despite the contagious examples of surrounding nations, it is a cause which having dearly earned we shall not lightly abandon; yet complete civil liberty can never exist where a standing Army is the creation of anything but a voluntary system. In those days contagion is so rapid in its flight, and the annexation of successful ideas so thoughtlessly indulged in, without regard to their adaptability, that they are but indifferent patriots who neglect to caution the popular apprehensions against schemes whose similarity is only equalled by their danger. There is a seductiveness about compulsory service which is apt to allure those who, amidst the difficulties with which Army recruiting is surrounded, might favor its adoption. We have said that the governing principle of existence consists in the accommodation of theories to the exigencies of the hour. Compulsory service, as the means to a standing Army of dimensions equal to the exigencies which ambition has created, is just such a theory. It is, nevertheless, not only a gigantic retrogressive but a pernicious elaboration of a system long obsolete amongst ourselves, for when every man was liable to serve there was no standing Army, and whatever other causes may have operated to the infringement of civil liberty, the creation of a colossal force, permanently disfranchised, so to speak, of half its rights without its own consent, was not amongst them. What enlightenment long ago condemned, enlightenment (for no other term can be allowed) has revived, but the glamour which success has cast over it abroad must not blind us to its evils. A man who is compelled to fight, whether he will or not, and to abandon his profession or trade for a term of service under the colours in violence to his predilections and interests, is not in the enjoyment of personal liberty. Similarly, a man who is violently subjected to laws other than those which govern civil life, is not in the possession of civil liberty. In England a man enters the army because he loves the profession. He is a free agent, and whatever he may surrender in exchange for that profession, he surrenders gladly of his own choice, for in the army as elsewhere, nothing is esteemed a loss which is forfeited as the price of obtaining an object more dearly prized. It is very doubtful whether for purposes of aggression a standing Army, formed of reluctant elements, is an efficient instrument. All men will fight for their homes. It was the cry of French designs upon Germany which gave the necessary stimulus to the German invasion of France. It is the exceptional military instinct of the French

people which enable them in former times to unite conscription and conquest. In more remote times, the patriotism, or the promptings of cupidity, have always been found indispensable incentives to the exertions of armies constituted by means of enforced service. We feel well assured that a system of compulsory service would not have produced the armies which carried the British colours from the Ganges to the Punjab, and from Vimiera to Waterloo; for it must be remembered that Englishmen are more intolerant of compulsion than any people on the face of the globe.

The difficulty of recruiting our Army invests these considerations with peculiar interest, as it is in the expedient of a standing army formed after the continental system that doctrinaires amongst ourselves have pretended to discover the readiest solution. Much as it is the custom to speak slightingly of our Army, we make bold to affirm that, notwithstanding all obstacles, it is more than a respectable testimony to the efficiency of the voluntary system. There is a bad habit which is becoming common with Englishmen of ridiculing our own resources and absurdly over estimating those of our neighbors. To indulge in jeremiads over our incapacity to place fifty thousand men in line at any point of the empire, and to point at the same time to the masses of continental troops, is only to show, not the smallness of our army but rather our strength is dissipated over a frontier compared with which that of the largest military Power on the continent, Russia excepted, is pitifully circumscribed. Measured by the extent of the dominions it is raised to protect, it may be conceded that our Army is small, but nothing short of revolution would precede, either in England or elsewhere, compulsory enlistment for long foreign service of such a character as English troops are required to undertake. The numerical strength obtained by compulsion is therefore not to be compared with that created under a voluntary system which is exposed to different conditions; and, these circumstances considered, it must appear that, whilst compulsion as applied to foreign and tropical service would be wholly impracticable with us as with others, the voluntary principle produces an aggregate which, if below the colossal figures that have sprung into fashion within the last decade, is still formidable, and, as far as experience goes, adequate to our wants.

The abnormal growth of the armies of Europe, with the consequent depression of civil and personal liberty, has found many admirers in that very class of politicians whose predecessors were the loudest in their clamour against the principle of standing armies at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Not because the system has commended itself any more to their fastidious tastes, but because the results of the system happen to have proved favourable to their views. From the fulsome adulation which has been offered to the most successful of modern armies has sprung the usual antithesis; and the British Army is now harried by two opposing parties, one of whom would improve it away altogether by the application of empirical schemes of reform whereby, as they believe, it would attain the highest standard of efficiency, whilst the other would abolish it as a barrier to the millenium of universal peace. Between these extremes, as in every other case, lies the mean of safety, though abolition itself were better than the nostrums which each enthusiast for reform is so eager to advance.