

Rage, Despair, and a Little Hope

"A Searchlight on the European War." By C. H. Norman.
(Labour Publishing Company, 6s. net.)

TEN years ago last August, the whole world sat up and gasped. That which all had prophesied with varying degrees of conviction had happened. War had come—but come in a way and form such as nobody had conceived, releasing terrors undreamt of. The whole ideology of the world transformed itself in a rapid succession of paroxysms. Every principle that had seemed fixed collapsed into dust; and ideologies that had lain long in the tomb stalked forth to riot and triumph over the wreck.

It was in keeping with the rest of this phantasmagoria that the opposition to the crudest and most blatant Jingo tribalism in this country found at first its loudest public expression in the form of an opposition of the right of the individual conscience to resist the collective insanity fostered by the State. Men too cowardly to resist the opinion of their neighbours volunteered and became legally brave. Women knowing that their sex demanded that the mere thought of blood should be insupportable to them, hounded men on to the slaughter until the streams of blood grew into rivers, and the rivers into a sea. To manufacture corpses the whole nation, led and exhorted by capitalist captains of industry, arm-in-arm with "Socialist" leaders of labour, rose to heights of collective organisation and enthusiasm which the one had proved to be impossible, and the other had hardly dared to hope for. It was an enthusiasm for death and destruction; but he or she who dared even hint at so much was cursed as a coward, lampooned as a freak, or laid by the heels as an enemy of the Light, Truth, Justice and Mercy embodied in the person and cause of the newly-resurrected tribal god—"Our Country."

Taking a leading place in the ranks of the "conscientious objectors," who refused to submit their bodies to the State and their minds to Horatio Bottomley, was C. H. Norman. He played a brave and a conspicuous part and paid the penalty accordingly—in prison often and "bruised with many stripes." It was inevitable that he should become enraged and that he should desire to get revenge. This book is the bludgeon with which he hits back at the thing which battered him.

C. H. Norman for all his individuality is so representative of the class of humanitarianism, intellectuals of the lower middle and

superior working class that his conclusions from the episode are worth noting. They fall, naturally enough, under the three heads: the Causes of the War, the Conduct of the War, and the Consequences of the War.

By his appraisal of all three we may discover to what extent the class whose spokesman he is has been emancipated from its characteristic illusions.

THE HUMANITARIAN ILLUSION.

An objective estimate of the War must begin with a firm grasp of the paradox that—the War which changed everything changed nothing. The Jingo who blames it all upon “Germany” and the pacifist who attributes it all to Soviet diplomacy, and Edward Grey, are agreed upon one thing—that the War was a deviation from the normal course of European history which could have been avoided if only “Germany” or “Edward Grey” had been less wicked. Hence each of them is agreed that, now that the war is over, every effort should be made to get back to the “normal” line of progress from which this calamitous accident drove us. They propose it is true, differing ways in which to get back to Normality—since the one looks for danger in “Germany” or some potential imitator thereof, and the other in Diplomacy of the Grey school. Each is agreed that the war wrecked things, and each insists that the wreck must be repaired before we can start to “progress” again.

The fundamental fallacy of this theory is the supposition that “progress” is a matter of purely intellectual achievement and that, therefore, any cultural gain or loss in the upper strata of society must necessarily be a gain for the whole community. Because a “good” government is better for Cultural Society than a bad one—since the disturbances attending a bad government are bad for culture, the holders of this theory naturally suppose that universal good will result if their sort of “good” government can be made perpetual. It is the spirit of the dear old soul who having derived pleasure from reading a pious tract encourages the distribution of tracts among the heathen at home and abroad as a cure for every discontent.

Proceeding from this starting point, it is easy to intellectualise the whole of history, past and present. The difference between one age or one nation and any other is merely a question of degree of intellectual development. Morality, religion, politics—all are questions of how much a given people know. All social problems resolve themselves into problems in pedagogics. Improve the efficiency of the teaching staff at Eton and Harrow, and the quality of our rulers will rise correspondingly. Improve the rulers and

the people will improve. Utopia will rise into view at the wave of the schoolmaster's pointer.

THE CAUSES OF THE WAR.

To do him justice, C. H. Norman struggles valiantly to escape from the meshes of this illusion. He sees that society as at present constituted permits the exploitation of class by class, and nation by nation. He notes the economic antagonisms which contributed to create the *occasion* for the war; he notes the economic chaos which the war has left as its aftermath. He sees (as he must) in the Soviet Revolution the uprising of the Russian proletariat, and he sees (more or less clearly) that the fight of the future is between capitalism and Communism.

For all that, the main contents of his book is a series of facts that have their chief importance only when viewed from the Humanitarian-intellectual standpoint. He traces the "political ambitions" of the various States involved, a good way back. He demonstrates the rival intrigues of Austria, Turkey, Russia and France in the Balkans (much to the discredit of the two latter). He indicates that economic interests played a part in determining these antagonisms. But he gives at least equal importance to purely personal considerations such as the vigorous reactionary tendency of Edward VII., the dislike of the King of Italy for the Kaiser, and the triangle of hostilities between the Grand Orient of France, the Catholic and the Greek Orthodox Churches.

That these things played their part as incidentals none would wish to deny. But to suppose that they were essential and prime causes of equal profundity with the antagonism of interests between British and German capitalism is to wander from the world of objective reality to that of subjective illusion. The Russian Tsar did not scheme against Catholic Austria, because he was a loyal son of the Greek Church, desiring its victory over the Papal schismatics: the Tsarist State needed things which the Austrian State also needed. Were it otherwise, how could the Tsar have allied himself with France of the Grand Orient and Protestant Britain to fight (with assistance from Catholic Italy) a combination of Catholic Austria, Lutheran Germany, Greek Bulgaria, and Mahometan Turkey.

THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR.

Similarly in his treatment of the conduct of the war. He makes much of the fact that Grey and Asquith cannot escape the charge of wilfully deceiving the House of Commons; that the department of Propaganda deliberately invented lying atrocious stories to inflame passion against the Germans; that the "indignation" worked up about Nurse Cavell and the *Lusitania* was all

humbug; that Lloyd George had so little knowledge of what the war meant that he seriously thought it would be over in three months; that the Generals were stupid, incompetent, and brutal, and that the common soldiers were terrorised into facing the horrors of war; that by the suppression of plain facts, the wholesale suggestion of falsehoods and the drastic exercise of dictatorial power, every critical mouth was stopped and the working mass led to endure the slaughter for years.

All these things he sees and sets out with a mass of irrefutable evidence. But all these things are to him merely crimes against "Humanity"—evidence of the appalling consequences of the lack of culture in high places and low.

He misses what is the essential fact from which all these proceed—the fact that war, an inevitable consequence of capitalism, places every capitalist State before a critical dilemma.

The capitalist State is even more than its predecessors a machine for securing the rule of a minority at the expense of an immense majority. It has the special weakness peculiar to itself that it must rely for its physical power of defence and coercion upon armies, navies and police forces, recruited in the main from the very class whom it needs must hold in subjection.

The feudal aristocracy could afford to leave their serfs in possession of bows and bills. They had the better equipment, they monopolised the cavalry and the best defensive armour. War was their pastime and their trade. Their immediate retainers looked to them and their victories as a sure and certain means of reward and advancement. To the feudal aristocracy, therefore, war was the normal and peace the abnormal.

Capitalism on the contrary, only reaches a state of war as a rebound from one contradiction to another. Nothing in the nature of capitalist enterprise fits a member of the capitalist class for war. Even the organisation and training of large bodies of men has passed as a special function into the hands of a superior and expensively paid class of subordinates. Capitalism, therefore, which has in the course of its development ever more thoroughly effected the total disarmament of its exploited victims, faces in a war the dilemma that it must to defend itself against its rivals *arm the slaves whose enslavement is essential to its existence.*

War places a capitalist State before the problem—how to reduce to a nullity the risk of giving the slaves the means of self-liberation?

Mr. Norman notes with every intensity of disgust the part played in winning the support of the masses to the prosecution of the war by such demagogues as Bottomley and whole shoals of Trade Union and Labour leaders.

"One day (he says) the working class movement of this country may learn the amount of money distributed among working class leaders in the shape of fees for recruiting speeches and expenses for propaganda tours; the shock of the disclosure would be terrible."

This is no doubt true—and true also that, whatever they got, their work was worth ten times the money to the capitalist class.

But it is equally true that had any adequate degree of class consciousness and understanding of capitalism prevailed in the mass of the workers, neither the bribery of the leaders nor the brutality of the military commanders would have availed to do more than intensify the determination with which the workers seized the difficulty of capitalism as their Great Opportunity.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR.

Mr. Norman rightly sees in the Soviet Revolution the one tangible gain of the war. He is, however, pessimistic about all else. He cannot see that although in the then circumstances, resistance to conscription was justifiable and valuable, as a gesture it was none the less a confession of despair from the outset, and as such foredoomed to futility. From the proletarian point of view, conscription is perfectly sound *in principle*—given a working class of the requisite maturity it will be perfectly welcome in practice also. Everything depends upon the degree of development of the workers' class struggle; and every estimate of the consequences of the war must start from this as a basic fact.

To Mr. Norman it is a calamity that one-time "conscientious objectors" now find it possible to vote for cruisers and naval bases, and to use E.P.A. and the forces of the Crown to coerce workmen on strike. To us it is only what was to be expected. If the sole question involved in "progress" is whether a given set of individuals is in or out of office, naturally, once in office, these individuals will treat all resistance to them as hostility to "progress" and "good government."

Only when the world and its historical development is conceived in terms of class conflicts and their culminating crises is it possible to see in the war, at one and the same time the culminating triumph of capitalism and the release of the forces which will duly overthrow it.

The war distinguishes the genuine fighters for the working class from the Pacifist Humanitarian, Radical, Ideologues who till then had been indistinguishable from them. The war enabled capitalism to develop more in five years than otherwise it would have done in fifty. The war, therefore, intensified and accelerated the workers' class struggle—that is the one great fact of the war. When the mass of the workers grasp it—the end of capitalism will have come.

THOS. A. JACKSON.