Chapter XXIX

The Idea of a League of Nations

The ONLY means that readily suggests itself by which a necessary group-freedom can be preserved and yet the unification of the human race achieved, is to strive not towards a closely organised World-State, but towards a free, elastic and progressive world-union. If this is to be done, we shall have to discourage the almost inevitable tendency which must lead any unification by political, economic and administrative means, in a word, by the force of machinery, to follow the analogy of the evolution of the nation-State. And we shall have to encourage and revive that force of idealistic nationalism which, before the war, seemed on the point of being crushed on the one side under the weight of the increasing world-empires of England, Russia, Germany and France, on the other by the progress of the opposite ideal of internationalism with its large and devastating contempt for the narrow ideas of country and nation and its denunciation of the evils of nationalistic patriotism. But at the same time we shall have to find a cure for the as yet incurable separative sentiments natural to the very idea to which we shall have to give a renewed strength. How is all this to be done?

On our side in the attempt we have the natural principle of compensating reactions. The law of action and reaction, valid even in physical Science, is in human action, which must always depend largely on psychological forces, a more constant and pervading truth. That in life to every pressure of active forces there is a tendency of reaction of opposite or variative forces which may not immediately operate but must eventually come into the field or which may not act with an equal and entirely compensating force, but must act with some force of compensation, may be taken as well established. It is both a philosophical necessity and a constant fact of experience. For
Nature works by a balancing system of the interplay of opposite forces. When she has insisted for some time on the dominant force of one tendency as against all others, she seeks to correct its exaggerations by reviving, if dead, or newly awakening, if only in slumber, or bringing into the field in a new and modified form the tendency that is exactly opposite. After long insistence on centralisation, she tries to modify it by at least a subordinated decentralisation. After insisting on more and more uniformity, she calls again into play the spirit of multiform variation. The result need not be an equipollence of the two tendencies, it may be any kind of compromise. Or, instead of a compromise it may be in act a fusion and in result a new creation which shall be a compound of both principles. We may expect her to apply the same method to the tendencies of unification and group-variation in dealing with the great mass unit of humanity. At present, the nation is the fulcrum which the latter tendency has been using for its workings as against the imperialistic tendency of unifying assimilation. Now the course of Nature's working in humanity may destroy the nation-unit, as she destroyed the tribe and clan, and develop a quite new principle of grouping; but also she may preserve it and give it sufficient power of vitality and duration to balance usefully the trend towards too heavy a force of unification. It is this latter contingency that we have to consider.

The two forces in action before the war were imperialism — of various colours, the more rigid imperialism of Germany, the more liberal imperialism of England, — and nationalism. They were the two sides of one phenomenon, the aggressive or expansive and the defensive aspects of national egoism. But in the trend of imperialism this egoism had some eventual chance of dissolving itself by excessive self-enlargement, as the aggressive tribe disappeared, for example, the Persian tribe, first into the empire and then into the nationality of the Persian people, or as the city state also disappeared, first into the Roman Empire and then both tribe and city state without hope of revival into the nations which arose by fusion out of the irruption of the German tribes into the declining Latin unity.
In the same or a similar way aggressive national imperialism by overspreading the world might end in destroying altogether the nation-unit as the city state and tribe were destroyed by the aggressive expansion of a few dominant city states and tribes. The force of defensive nationalism has reacted against this tendency, restricted it and constantly thwarted its evolutionary aim. But before the war, the separative force of nationalism seemed doomed to impotence and final suppression in face of the tremendous power with which science, organisation and efficiency had armed the governing States of the large imperial aggregates.

All the facts were pointing in one direction. Korea had disappeared into the nascent Japanese empire on the mainland of Asia. Persian nationalism had succumbed and lay suppressed under a system of spheres of influence which were really a veiled protectorate, — and all experience shows that the beginning of a protectorate is also the beginning of the end of the protected nation; it is a euphemistic name for the first process of chewing previous to deglutition. Tibet and Siam were so weak and visibly declining that their continued immunity could not be hoped for. China had only escaped by the jealousies of the world-Powers and by its size which made it an awkward morsel to swallow, let alone to digest. The partition of all Asia between four or five or at the most six great empires seemed a foregone conclusion which nothing but an unexampled international convulsion could prevent. The European conquest of Northern Africa had practically been completed by the disappearance of Morocco, the confirmed English protectorate over Egypt and the Italian hold on Tripoli. Somaliland was in a preliminary process of slow deglutition; Abyssinia, saved once by Menelik but now torn by internal discord, was the object of a revived dream of Italian colonial empire. The Boer republics had gone under before the advancing tide of imperialistic aggression. All the rest of Africa practically was the private property of three great Powers and two small ones. In Europe, no doubt, there were still a few small independent nations, Balkan and Teutonic, and also two quite unimportant neutralised countries. But the Balkans
were a constant theatre of uncertainty and disturbance and the rival national egoisms could only have ended, in case of the ejection of Turkey from Europe, either by the formation of a young, hungry and ambitious Slav empire under the dominance of Serbia or Bulgaria or by their disappearance into the shadow of Austria and Russia. The Teutonic States were coveted by expanding Germany and, had that Power been guided by the prudently daring diplomacy of a new Bismarck, — a not unlikely contingency, could William II have gone to the grave before letting loose the hounds of war, — their absorption might well have been compassed. There remained America where imperialism had not yet arisen, but it was already emerging in the form of Rooseveltian Republicanism, and the interference in Mexico, hesitating as it was, yet pointed to the inevitability of a protectorate and a final absorption of the disorderly Central American republics; the union of South America would then have become a defensive necessity. It was only the stupendous cataclysm of the world war which interfered with the progressive march towards the division of the world into less than a dozen great empires.

The war revived with a startling force the idea of free nationality, throwing it up in three forms, each with a stamp of its own. First, in opposition to the imperialistic ambitions of Germany in Europe the allied nations, although themselves empires, were obliged to appeal to a qualified ideal of free nationality and pose as its champions and protectors. America, more politically idealistic than Europe, entered the war with a cry for a league of free nations. Finally, the original idealism of the Russian revolution cast into this new creative chaos an entirely new element by the distinct, positive, uncompromising recognition, free from all reserves of diplomacy and self-interest, of the right of every aggregate of men naturally marked off from other aggregates to decide its own political status and destiny. These three positions were in fact distinct from each other, but each has in effect some relation to the actually possible future of humanity. The first based itself upon the present conditions and aimed at a certain practical rearrangement. The second tried to hasten into
immediate practicability a not entirely remote possibility of the future. The third aimed at bringing into precipitation by the alchemy of revolution — for what we inappropriately call revolution, is only a rapidly concentrated movement of evolution — a yet remote end which in the ordinary course of events could only be realised, if at all, in the far distant future. All of them have to be considered; for a prospect which only takes into view existing realised forces or apparently realisable possibilities is foredoomed to error. Moreover, the Russian idea by its attempt at self-effectuation, however immediately ineffective, rendered itself an actual force which must be counted among those that may influence the future of the race. A great idea already striving to enforce itself in the field of practice is a power which cannot be left out of count, nor valued only according to its apparent chances of immediate effectuation at the present hour.

The position taken by England, France and Italy, the Western European section of the Allies, contemplated a political rearrangement of the world, but not any radical change of its existing order. It is true that it announced the principle of free nationalities; but in international politics which is still a play of natural forces and interests and in which ideals are only a comparatively recent development of the human mind, principles can only prevail where and so far as they are consonant with interests, or where and so far as, being hostile to interests, they are yet assisted by natural forces strong enough to overbear these interests which oppose them. The pure application of ideals to politics is as yet a revolutionary method of action which can only be hoped for in exceptional crises; the day when it becomes a rule of life, human nature and life itself will have become a new phenomenon, something almost superterrestrial and divine. That day is not yet. The Allied Powers in Europe were themselves nations with an imperial past and an imperial future; they could not, even if they wished, get away by the force of a mere word, a mere idea from that past and that future. Their first interest, and therefore the first duty of their statesmen, must be to preserve each its own empire, and even, where it can in their view be
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legitimately done, to increase it. The principle of free nationality could only be applied by them in its purity where their own imperial interests were not affected, as against Turkey and the Central Powers, because there the principle was consonant with their own interests and could be supported as against German, Austrian or Turkish interests by the natural force of a successful war which was or could be made to appear morally justified in its results because it was invited by the Powers which had to suffer. It could not be applied in its purity where their own imperial interests were affected, because there it was opposed to existing forces and there was no sufficient countervailing force by which that opposition could be counteracted. Here, therefore, it must be acted upon in a qualified sense, as a force moderating that of pure imperialism. So applied, it would amount in fact at most to the concession of internal self-government or Home Rule in such proportion, at such a time or by such stages as might be possible, practicable and expedient for the interests of the empire and of the subject nation so far as they could be accommodated with one another. It must be understood, in other words, as the common sense of the ordinary man would understand it; it could not be and has nowhere been understood in the sense which would be attached to it by the pure idealist of the Russian type who was careless of all but the naked purity of his principle.

What then would be the practical consequences of this qualified principle of free nationality as it would have been possible to apply it after a complete victory of the Allied Powers, its representatives? In America it would have no field of immediate application. In Africa there are not only no free nations, but with the exception of Egypt and Abyssinia no nations, properly speaking; for Africa is the one part of the world where the old tribal conditions have still survived and only tribal peoples exist, not nations in the political sense of the word. Here then a complete victory of the Allies meant the partition of the continent between three colonial empires, Italy, France and England, with the continuance of the Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese enclaves and the precarious continuance for a time of the Abyssinian
kingdom. In Asia it meant the appearance of three or four new nationalities out of the ruins of the Turkish empire; but these by their immaturity would all be foredoomed to remain, for a time at least, under the influence or the protection of one or other of the great Powers. In Europe it implied the diminution of Germany by the loss of Alsace and Poland, the disintegration of the Austrian empire, the reversion of the Adriatic coast to Serbia and Italy, the liberation of the Czech and Polish nations, some rearrangement in the Balkan Peninsula and the adjacent countries. All this, it is clear, meant a great change in the map of the world, but no radical transformation. The existing tendency of nationalism would gain some extension by the creation of a number of new independent nations; the existing tendency of imperial aggregation would gain a far greater extension by the expansion of the actual territory, world-wide influence and international responsibilities of the successful empires.

Still, certain very important results could not but be gained which must make in the end for a free world-union. The most important of these, the result of the Russian Revolution born out of the war and its battle-cry of free nationality but contingent on the success and maintenance of the revolutionary principle, is the disappearance of Russia as an aggressive empire and its transformation from an imperialistic aggregate into a congeries or a federation of free republics.\(^1\) The second is the destruction of the German type of imperialism and the salvation of a number of independent nationalities which lay under its menace.\(^2\) The third is the multiplication of distinct nationalities with a claim to the recognition of their separate existence and legitimate voice in the affairs of the world, which makes for the strengthening of the idea of a free world-union as the ultimate solution of international problems. The fourth is the definite recognition by the British nation of the qualified principle of free nationality in the inevitable reorganisation of the Empire.

\(^1\) Not so free in practice under Bolshevik rule as in principle; but still the principle is there and capable of development in a freer future.

\(^2\) Unfortunately this result seems destined to disappear by the formidable survival of a military Germany under the Führer.
This development took two forms, the recognition of the principle of Home Rule\(^3\) in Ireland and India and the recognition of the claim of each constituent nation to a voice, which in the event of Home Rule must mean a free and equal voice, in the councils of the Empire. Taken together, these things would mean the ultimate conversion from an empire constituted on the old principle of nationalistic imperialism which was represented by the supreme government of one predominant nation, England, into a free and equal commonwealth of nations managing their common affairs through a supple coordination by mutual goodwill and agreement. In other words, such a development could mean in the end the application within certain limits of precisely that principle which would underlie the constitution, on the larger scale, of a free world-union. Much work would have to be done, several extensions made, many counterforces overcome before such a commonwealth could become a realised fact, but that it should have taken shape in the principle and in the germ, constitutes a notable event in world-history. Two questions remained for the future. What would be the effect of this experiment on the other empires which adhere to the old principle of a dominant centralisation? Probably it would have this effect, if it succeeded, that as they are faced by the growth of strong nationalistic movements, they may be led to adopt the same or a similar solution, just as they adopted from England with modifications her successful system of Parliamentar-"y government in the affairs of the nation. Secondly, what of the relations between these empires and the many independent

\(^3\) Now called Dominion Status. Unfortunately, this recognition could not be put into force except after a violent struggle in Ireland and was marred by the partition of the country. After a vehement passive resistance in India it came to be recognised there but in a truncated form shifting the full concession to a far future. In Egypt also it was only after a struggle that freedom was given but subject to a controlling British alliance. Still the nationalistic principle worked in the creation of a free Iraq, the creation of Arab kingdom and Syrian republic, the withdrawal of imperialistic influence from Persia and, above all, in the institution of Dominion Status substituting an internally free and equal position in a commonwealth of peoples for a dominating Empire. Yet these results, however imperfect, prepared the greater fulfilments which we now see accomplished as part of a new world of free peoples.
non-imperial nations or republics which would exist under the new arrangement of the world? How are they to be preserved from fresh attempts to extend the imperial idea, or how is their existence to be correlated in the international comity with the huge and overshadowing power of the empires? It is here that the American idea of the League of free nations intervened and found a justification in principle.

Unfortunately, it was always difficult to know what exactly this idea would mean in practice. The utterances of its original spokesman, President Wilson, were marked by a magnificent nebulous idealism full of inspiring ideas and phrases, but not attended by a clear and specific application. For the idea behind the head of the President we must look for light to the past history and the traditional temperament of the American people. The United States were always pacific and non-imperialistic in sentiment and principle, yet with an undertone of nationalistic susceptibility which threatened recently to take an imperialistic turn and led the nation to make two or three wars ending in conquests whose results it had then to reconcile with its non-imperialistic pacifism. It annexed Mexican Texas by war and then turned it into a constituent State of the union, swamp ing it at the same time with American colonists. It conquered Cuba from Spain and the Philippines first from Spain and then from the insurgent Filipinos and, not being able to swamp them with colonists, gave Cuba independence under the American influence and promised the Filipinos a complete independence. American idealism was always governed by a shrewd sense of American interests, and highest among these interests is reckoned the preservation of the American political idea and its constitution, to which all imperialism, foreign or American, has to be regarded as a mortal peril.

As a result and as the result of its inevitable amalgamation with that much more qualified aim of the Allied Powers, a League of Nations was bound to have both an opportunist and an idealistic element. The opportunist element was bound to take in its first form the legalisation of the map and political formation of the world as it emerged from the convulsion of the
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war. Its idealistic side, if supported by the use of the influence of America in the League, could favour the increasing application of the democratic principle in its working and its result might be the final emergence of a United States of the world with a democratic Congress of the nations as its governing agency. The legalisation might have the good effect of minimising the chances of war, if a real League of Nations proved practicable and succeeded,—even under the best conditions by no means a foregone conclusion. But it would have the bad effect of tending to stereotype a state of things which must be in part artificial, irregular, anomalous and only temporarily useful. Law is necessary for order and stability, but it becomes a conservative and hampering force unless it provides itself with an effective machinery for changing the laws as soon as circumstances and new needs make that desirable. This can only happen if a true Parliament, Congress or free Council of the nations becomes an accomplished thing. Meanwhile, how is the added force for the conservation of old principles to be counteracted and an evolution assured which will lead to the consummation desired by the democratic American ideal? America’s presence and influence in such a League would not be sufficient for that purpose; for it would have at its side other influences interested in preserving the status quo and some interested in developing the imperialist solution. Another force, another influence would be needed. Here the Russian ideal, if truly applied and made a force, could intervene and find its justification. For our purpose, it would be the most interesting and important of the three anti-imperialistic influences which Nature might throw as elements into her great crucible to reshape the human earth-mass for a yet unforeseen purpose.

4 The League was eventually formed with America outside it and as an instrument of European diplomacy, which was a bad omen for its future.