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HOW TO HELP ANNEXATION

BY

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HOW TO HELP ANNEXATION.

THE practical proposal that the war should end, substantially with a German evacuation of Belgium and Serbia, is certainly not so impossible, at least in the physical sense, as some might suppose. Nay, it might well be regarded as an example of history repeating itself. It might be said that the Germans have proved in the past that they possess the magnanimity and sagacity to withdraw their armies from lands in which they were in armed occupation. Thus it is a fact to be gravely noted that after 1870 the Germans did not continue to occupy the whole of France for ever. Although the King of Prussia was so satisfied with the taste and comfort of the Palace of Versailles that he selected it among all his country residences for the scene of his coronation as German Emperor, yet he good-naturedly withdrew after a time and exiled himself from these familiar scenes, retiring to some modest and unpretentious home in Potsdam or Berlin. The conquerors were even then too temperate and merciful to impose upon all the citizens of France that admirable system of German education, necessarily accompanied by the imposition of the German language, which they have imposed on that fringe of more fortunate Frenchmen whom they found living in Alsace. Notre-Dame de Paris has not; after all, become in any sense a German cathedral in the same fashion as Cologne; and the quaint old symbol of the French flag, as well as a quite distinctive dress for French policemen and soldiers,

still remain to attest to the wise limitation laid by the victors on themselves. In short, it is an admitted fact of history that the Germans in 1871 bestowed upon France every one of the benefits and concessions which (according to the peace proposal now before us) they would bestow upon Belgium or the Balkans.

Those, therefore, who hold the historical thesis that Germany suffered defeat and a diminishment of power in 1870, will naturally accept the view now offered to us that the present punishment of Germany has been enough. They will naturally believe that a Germany evacuating Belgium will be a Germany as chastened, sobered and reminded of her own weakness as was the army of Moltke when it marched out of France. But those who do not think that a repetition of 1870 can be regarded merely as a lesson to the Germans, will be equally logical if they draw the opposite deduction. If Germany was in any way triumphant or exuberant after emerging undamaged from that short but dangerous adventure, it is obvious that she will be more triumphant and more exuberant after emerging from this much longer and more dangerous one. Any seeds of anything suggestive of self-satisfaction that could be detected in the German Empire for the last forty years must necessarily shoot and blossom in a more fragrant and flowery manner; any faint hints of racial ambition which anyone may have heard whispered in Germany, having been tully justified, will be plainly expressed. Any counteracting Teutonic elements of self-distrust or self-depreciation will naturally be overbalanced;

any shyness or morbid self-criticism we may hitherto have remarked in the Prussian officer will be warmed by such encouragement into something almost suggestive of pride.

In plain words, if we can take at all seriously the proposal of a mere peace of evacuation, this is the only serious thing to be said of it. It will be a peace of which the Germans will talk, and of which they will even be logically justified in talking, precisely as they talk of the peace of '71. Now there is only one detail of differentiation upon which this plain fact might be challenged. It may be objected that in '71 the new German Empire forcibly annexed two French provinces on the fanciful pretext that centuries ago they admitted the feudal and very formal suzerainty of an old and utterly different German Empire. It may be urged, by those who profess to combine their care for peace with a care for justice and the liberation of peoples, that this at least will not now be repeated. The Germans will not, as might naturally be expected, declare the whole of Normandy and Picardy to be parts of Germany. This magnanimity is the more striking, and even surprising, because the annexation would be quite in accordance with those philological and ethnological discoveries which German science has always been so fortunate in making, at the very moment when they could be confirmed and embodied by German Imperialism. The Prussian professors, upon their own principles, might easily take Normandy on the ground that it is named after the Northmen. For that matter, the Prussian professors, upon the same

principles, would be quite willing to take France on the ground that it was named after the Franks.

To-day, however, the Teutons are content with something less than this full logic of Teutonism; and this alone marks a difference between the two cases. Even intrinsically, this argument could be answered by adducing the Pacifist or Prussian proposals about Poland; for if Prussia not only retains Posen but completes her task of turning the other Polish fragments into a fictitious state under her own protection, she will have added something to her power as much more important than Alsace-Lorraine as the annexation of the United States would be more important than the annexation of one of the smallest South American republics. Nevertheless, it will be well to concentrate here on the case of Alsace-Lorraine, and to leave the case of Poland for consideration in another context. In one very real sense, the example of the lost French provinces really is the mark and test of this war, in comparison with the other aggressive wars of Prussia; and it is certain that public opinion everywhere will regard the fate of these provinces as the register of Prussian victory or defeat.

The writer of these lines is an Englishman; but he is Anti-Prussian primarily because he is a European. He also happens, however, to be vividly convinced of, and vitally concerned for, certain ideals not always associated with Anti-Prussianism; ideals by no means common to all Europeans and, if anything, rather uncommon among Englishmen. The two most directly concerned here are the dogma of democracy and, what is perhaps a negative de-

duction from it, the distrust or even detestation of what is called Imperialism. It is, at this point, particularly to those who agree with him in being democrats and Anti-Imperialists, that the consideration of a certain plain fact is here commended very urgently indeed. It concerns the absolute and adamant necessity of restoring these provinces as the lawful possessions of the French Republic; and of refusing any proposal for Germany retaining them upon any pretext, or even any proposal for neutralising them in the manner of Belgium (an ominous parallel), or for confusing the issue by an impossible and intrinsically inconclusive scheme of voting. And I believe that the point, in the most extreme degree that is possible in politics, can be proved with the clarity of mathematics.

If there were an Imperialist Primer or a Grammar of Land-Grabbing, the first and simplest exercise in the encouragement of the art would be this example of the refusal of the provinces to France. It is an exercise in the encouragement of territorial theft; it is annexation made easy; it is a military model for invasion. But it is, from the standpoint of a democrat and Anti-Imperialist, something yet more than that. It not only smooths the path of invaders, but it quite specially smooths the path of despotic invaders. It not only leaves all lands helpless at the mercy of the land-grabber, but it leaves democratic lands particularly helpless. It not only gives an advantage to anyone who wishes to conquer, but another and quite special advantage to anyone who is ready to enslave. This is the thesis to be proved; and I think it can be proved.

For what was it, after all, that Prussia did after the Franco-Prussian War? She forcibly took over two great populations of passionately patriotic Frenchmen, about whose allegiance and affections there was at the time literally no doubt whatever. They not only personally felt, but they publicly declared, that they were being carried into captivity against their will. If voting is so very important, the vote was overwhelming. Large masses of them, having expressed their feelings thus, expressed the same feelings further by leaving the country at great sacrifice, that they might continue to live under the French flag. For the last forty years a continuous stream of them has poured over the frontier: men who deliberately left their native province in order to live in their native land. In their place came Germans, many of them planted there officially, nearly all of them planted artificially; according to the same principle by which Prussia was making artificial plantations in Poland.

Now for this sort of official colonisation despotic power is obviously useful, is often necessary. A tyrannical Government can manage such things infinitely more easily than a free Government. If the French Republic told a Breton who was fond of Brittany to go and live in Alsace, he would not go. But Prussia can always command a type of tame population which will go anywhere to which the route is officially organised. She will never lack colonists equipped with every convenience, except the capacity to colonise. It is, therefore, simply as plain as a pikestaff (a very appropriate figure for the staff of the Teutonic pilgrim) that if we accept

a Teutonic transformation in Alsace as settling the matter, we simply hoist a signal to say that such matters can always be settled by annexation, so long as it is annexation by an autocracy. We offer a permanent prize and provocation to conquerors, so long as they are also despots. The military ruler has only to send in one body of his slaves in uniform and then another body of his slaves in mufti; and lands will be perpetually added to the possessions of pure despotism, amid Pacifist cheers for the principle of pure democracy.

To take a working model: suppose the Germans landed in Essex and succeeded in annexing that county. The justification of the act, by the recognised German philosophy of history, would, of course, be the easiest part of the matter; there could be no reasonable doubt that the county in question is "old German land." It is self-evident that Essex is only a degenerate version of East Saxony. It is merely the more eastern portion of the King of Saxony's dominions which, in some convulsion of the Dark Ages, has been so dislocated as to turn up at a considerable distance to the west.

It is unfortunate that the military acquisition of the territory would certainly present difficulties which are absent from this logical establishment of a claim to it; and even if it were successful, a problem of the population would remain. The Essex country folk are proverbially slow and conservative; and few of the rustics have any close acquaintance with anthropological and ethnological hypotheses. It is probable that an almost ineradicable prejudice, to the effect that they are an

English and not a German population, will lead nearly all of them to assert the English character of Essex, and even lead many of them to migrate into Middlesex. A despotic German officialism has then only to send a crowd of official colonists in the track of her official armies; and Essex is secured for ever by what is solemnly described as a popular vote. The invader then proceeds to fix the same imperial eye upon Middlesex; and the game is continued at the option of the player.

Clearly, then, the upholders of "no annexation" have here invented an ingenious trick, first for making annexation incessant, and second for making it safe. And the annexation, it is equally clear, will be most incessant and most safe when it is done by rulers who are imperial Princes and not popular magistrates. Considered as a principle applicable over long and varying epochs of the past (as it would certainly, if accepted, be applied over long and very varying epochs of the future), it would have meant that in every case a wave of slavery and savagery could wash out all that had preceded it. It would, for instance, have encouraged and completed the work of every one of those Asiatic inundations from which our culture barely escaped. It would have helped the Persians to dispossess the Greeks; for the Persians, admittedly, enormously outnumbered the Greeks; and all the Persians would have obeyed the great King, while the Athenians were generally rather too republican to obey the great republic. The German Emperor told his soldiers to behave like Huns; and we have in this another incidental instance of the

beauty of a smooth and symmetrical obedience. But the principle upon which the German Emperor's favourite Socialists are claiming Alsace is a principle which would have favoured the ancient Huns as much as it favours the modern ones. And it would give a final victory, over all Europeans, to any such invasion as the Emperor himself used to prophesy as the Yellow Peril.

But if the proof from the prime calamities of Europe be vaguely regarded as too much a thing of the past, it is easy to show that it has every sign of being also a thing of the future. I can even give an example which, coming from an Englishman concerned to prove the Prussian pre-eminence in evil, will at least be disinterested and detached. One of the most recent adventures of that Imperialism, which I regret in all countries, occurred in the policy of my own country; and I was myself bound in consistency to regret it. The South African War, by which the two Boer Republics were annexed, was generally regarded in Europe as a wrong. But it was in no sense whatever wrong if the theory of an Alsatian plebiscite is right.

Lord Milner and Cecil Rhodes actually conquered the Boer country upon the identical principle which our Pacifists propose as a fair settlement of the Alsatian country. Indeed, their case for annexation (with which I wholly disagree) was nevertheless a far fairer and clearer one; for there was already a majority of Outlanders or aliens to outvote the Boers, before their presence was made a pretext for war. British Imperialism at least first flooded the territories with citizens, before it

flooded them with soldiers. It did not base its argument on what might happen forty years afterwards; or announce itself unanimously elected by the votes of a multitude of babes unborn. But though the principle of the imperialist settlement in Africa was more democratic than that of the internationalist settlement of Alsace, it contained this same unique falsity, which must necessarily be the fountain of any number of such annexations. It used the fact of unfairly colonising a country as a reason for unjustly conquering it. Once admit that principle, and there need be no end to such colonisations and conquests, so long as they are conducted by powers with rich resources, with large populations and especially (if they are to be specially lucky in such work) with reactionary constitutions.

Now anybody who will look at the modern world with his eyes open will know perfectly well that this sort of expansion and progress is one to which the modern world is especially prone. In every quarter of the globe, especially in South America and Africa, there is a perpetual pressure of colonial ambition which would at any moment take advantage of this principle. Germany especially is known to keep herds of tame exiles browsing on foreign pastures; and the mere counting of so much head of such cattle could always create this sort of international quarrel. The worst version of the South African War will only make it a mere sample of the sort of claim which the more plutocratic powers will always be ready to push, where there is any sort of cosmopolitan confusion. What the principle would have meant touching Asiatic immi-

grations into Europe in the past, that alone it will mean touching European immigrations into America in the future. It will mean simply the final superiority of the master of many slaves.

There is only one way to arrest annexation; only one way in which such a stampede of sophistry and spoliation can be stopped. The opportunity for it is now, and will never return; the test case is lit with a limelight of concentrated publicity that will never hold the attention to such a test case hereafter. Rightly or wrongly, Alsace-Lorraine has become this test case, which the whole world is watching. Let it revert to France, and the whole world will know that the rush of annexations has been reversed; that civilisation has determined to return to its boundaries. Let it remain to Germany or under the shadow of Germany, in whatever form, upon whatever pretext, and the whole world will know that such annexations are always ultimately justified and can be safely imitated.

It is simply obvious that the refusal to return the provinces to France will mean the complete victory of Germany; but it will mean much more than that. It will mean the victory of an annexationist policy as such. It will mean that the trend towards Imperialism in all the nations will not be curbed, far less cured, but will be directly encouraged. The only way to cure such grab and go-as-you-please is to make a public exhibition of the restoring of stolen goods. If that is done, everyone will know that the epoch of annexation is over. Everyone will know that henceforward even successful land-grabbing will not ultimately

succeed. No one will steal what he will know that he cannot keep; no one will again commit the crime first and make up the excuses afterwards, if he knows that those excuses will not be heard.

But there is a final and farcical fact which crowns the argument. It is equally obvious that this Pacifist compromise about Alsace not only gives a special advantage to external aggression, but also gives a special advantage to internal misgovernment. It will not only be to the interest of a prince to seize a province by war, but it will also be to his interest to oppress it when he has got it. For, supposing for the sake of argument that there is now a German majority in Alsace, how was that majority attained? Even German citizens are not sufficiently tame to troop into a strange country in sufficient numbers for that. Even German officials are not sufficiently numerous to overbalance a population without assistance. The process was admittedly accelerated and completed by the continuous exodus of the original French inhabitants. That exodus in its turn was accelerated and completed by German tyranny, or what they regarded as German tyranny.

So that even if we were in any doubt about whether the Germans ruled badly, we could not (in common reason) have any doubt that it was to their interest to rule badly. If they did not, we can only suppose that they refrained from pursuing their most obvious advantage through some oversensitive modesty in the German character, or some suicidal unselfishness in the Prussian policy. But even then we should have no guarantee that the next

aggressor, having modelled himself upon Moltke and the successful Alsatian annexation, would necessarily share the characteristic Teutonic bashfulness or the typical Teutonic self-effacement. The commonsense of the crux would remain what it is; and it is that, in this particular position, it is obviously better policy to set up a bad government than a good one. Make the lives of the old inhabitants intolerable, and they will not remain to resist the new inhabitants; anybody can see that and (by all accounts) the German rulers have seen it very clearly.

To sum up, therefore, these are the three consequences of testing the claims to Alsace by an official counting of heads at the moment. First, it will quite obviously set up a principle which is a permanent provocation to war. Second, it will provoke quarrels in which a rigid despotism will always have a better chance than a free country. Third, it will actually make a malevolent despotism more probable and practical than a benevolent despotism. The best man will always be the aggressor; the best aggressor will be the autocrat; the best autocrat will be the tyrant. Such is the goal, or golden age of republican idealism, towards which we apparently travel.

All this is the plainest rationality and policy, and applies to all the politics of all the peoples; in that sense it does not matter to what particular nation this disastrous policy is applied. But what, when all is said, is the nation to which we are applying it? Against what community are we specially asked to deal this stroke of folly and bad faith? We are asked to commit this treason especially at the expense of France; of the one nation with whom

all European and American democracy has always sympathised in her self-defence, and whom even Prussian despotism has hardly dared to accuse of mere aggression. We are to do this wrong to the one people whom almost everybody admits to have been in the right. Nay, we are not only to disregard a justice which even the Germans can hardly deny, but a gratitude which we ourselves have incessantly asseverated.

Everyone knows that France could have had Alsace-Lorraine ten times over, if she had listened to the ten-fold flatteries of Germany during the present war, offering her every kind of concession to betray her Allies. Ever since she took the first rush and won the whole war for us in the passages of the Marne the Germans have been bribing her with both hands. If she had not so stood, England would never have had time to create an army, and most certainly Russia would never have had time to create a revolution. Now that England is at leisure to elaborate discipline, and Russia at leisure to enjoy liberty, it is pleasantly proposed that they should desert their first line of defence; that they should throw away the broken shield behind which they have done all things.

It is an agreeable proposal that England, having thus been able to increase her own armies, should throw over that historic army of which she at first formed a small part. But indeed it is not more quaint than the larger conception, that the ultimate work of the Russian Revolution should be the undoing of all the work of the French Revolution. France had stood upon the Meuse in the eighteenth

century exactly as she stood upon the Marne in the twentieth; but she was even more solitary, and of the peoples there was none to help her. From that stand, and from that alone, came all that we call democracy to-day.

What shall an instructed disciple of democracy say to the democrats who wish to complete an experiment in Petrograd or an inquiry at Stockholm by extinguishing in darkness and disappointment the lights of Paris? Where were they when the foundations of the republic were laid, or when was fixed the corner-stone thereof, when the men about to die sang together, and the boys who fell in thousands shouted for joy? We know where were the Russians, where were the Swedes, where were the English, in that first and fearful crisis when none knew whether liberty should live. Now we have learned better; and can make an end of our teacher. Let us wear the red cap and never reveal from whose head we have plucked it; let us shout "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," so long as we translate them out of the language in which we learnt the words. The very name of France shall be a guilty secret for us. The very emblem of France shall insult us like a caricature. We shall go forth gravely into the streets as the disciples of democracy; and we shall be ashamed to hear a cock crow, because we have denied our master.