

THE CAUSES OF WAR

by

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LORD BEAVERBROOK

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IV

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IT is fashionable at the present time to say that the causes, not only of war, but of practically every other human activity, from mystical religion to higher mathematics, are economic. At an earlier epoch it was fashionable to say that the course of historical events was entirely determined by the actions of outstanding individuals. The desire to simplify, to reduce all diversity to a fundamental identity, is present in every human mind. Without it, there would be no science, no philosophy—indeed, no rational explanation of any kind. But like all other good things, this tendency can be abused. The impatient desire to simplify too soon, to find explanations at an insufficient depth of generalisation, leads to enormous errors.

The causation of historical events is a multiple causation.. Many forces are acting simultaneously on different planes. In their eagerness to find a simple explanation for what occurs, men are tempted to select only one of these forces and say : "This is the only force at work ;

all that happens can be explained in terms of it." If we wish really to understand our world, we must resist this temptation and patiently investigate all the forces. I propose to talk of the so-called psychological causes of war. But this does not mean that I believe that these are war's only causes. Geography and climate play their part in the production of wars. So do racial differences, and, still more, differences in language and culture. So do the intellectual gifts of great men. So, still more, do their passions and sub-conscious tendencies. The battle of Waterloo, a psychoanalyst has said, may have been won on the playing fields of Eton, but it was prepared in the nurseries of Corsica. Finally, of course, there are the economic causes of war—the needs and greeds of individuals, classes and peoples.

Strictly speaking, all the causes of war are psychological. Humanity, it is true, may be impelled towards warlike action by non-human influences, such as the change of climate that drove the Turks out of Central Asia and precipitated their hordes on to Europe. Similarly, certain kinds of economic or political systems may facilitate the outbreak of war. But wars are not fought by climates or systems ; they are

fought by human beings ; and wherever there are human beings, the question of psychology inevitably arises. In his latest book, Mr. Bertrand Russell has passed judgment on the dispute between psychologists and economists in a single sentence. "It is true," he says, "that the conflicts between nations are largely economic, but the grouping of the world by nations is itself determined by causes which are in the main not economic." Causes, he might have added which are largely psychological. The world is grouped into nations, because, among other reasons, this grouping gives deep psychological satisfactions to the men and women who constitute nations. I shall confine my remarks to the psychology of civilised men, in so far as they are not concerned with economic matters. The distinction between man as an economic being and man as a non-economic being is quite arbitrary ; but it happens to be convenient.

War, we are all agreed, is a catastrophe. And yet, for every hundred people who kill themselves in peace time, only about seventy kill themselves in war time. This fall in the suicide rate was observed during the Franco-Prussian War and again, more markedly, during the

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World War. The greatest fall, during the World War, was in the belligerent countries ; but even among the neutrals a perceptible decline was registered. We say, and with our conscious minds we firmly believe, that war is a catastrophe ; but our sub-conscious selves, it is evident, do not agree with our conscious selves. The suicide statistics seem to show that, for non-combatants at any rate, life in war time is about forty-five per cent more worth living than life in times of peace. In the next war, of course, there will be no non-combatants to enjoy this more valuable life ; but this, unfortunately, is the sort of fact that the sub-conscious cannot be expected to learn, much less to act upon.

What are the reasons for the enhancement of the value of life in war time ? Here are a few plausible suggestions. Man is a profoundly social being and derives enormous satisfactions from feeling himself at one with the other members of his group. War strengthens all the ties that bind the individual to the group and heightens his sense of group solidarity to the pitch of intoxication. Another point : most of the tasks in our modern world seem dull and pointless ; war comes along and dignifies even

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the dreariest routine with the name of patriotic work. War, moreover, produces a certain simplification in the social structure ; and there seems to be no doubt that men are on the whole happier in a simple than in a complicated society. Finally, war begets and justifies all manner of emotional excitement. People like excitement and are grateful for any excuse to express their feelings—particularly those feelings which education has taught their conscious minds to disapprove of. War justifies hatred, hallows violence, sanctifies delight in destruction—baptises with the sacred name of patriotism all the anti-social tendencies we have been so carefully trained to repress. Anti-social tendencies are dangerous when put into practice ; but the non-combatant has been able, up till now, to be anti-social by proxy, and therefore without risk. The barbarian and the unconscious sadist are strong within us. So strong, that even in peace time newspaper proprietors find it worth their while to devote a large proportion of their available space to the description of crimes. In war time half of every morning's paper deals with slaughter and most of the rest consists of incitements to hatred on the one hand and group solidarity on the other.

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Provided with such rich spiritual sustenance, the would-be suicide postpones self-murder to a duller moment. It is interesting in this context to note that the suicide rate fell off less sharply during the Franco-Prussian War than during the Great War. One reason for this may be that more people could read in 1914 than in 1870. Where education is universal and compulsory, more people are able to get excitement at second hand than in societies where education is reserved to a few. Literacy and cheap printing would account, at least in part, for the fact that the Great War caused the suicide rate to decline even in neutral countries.

We see, then, that, for non-combatants and so long as material conditions remain tolerably good, war actually makes life seem more worth living. To some extent this is true of the peace-time preliminaries and conditions of war. The first condition of war is that the population of the planet should be divided into organised groups and that each individual should be conscious of his own group's separateness from and superiority to all other groups. To-day, these potentially war-making groups are nations. Nationalism can be made to yield the individual immense psychological satisfac-

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tions. There is the satisfaction, to begin with, of feeling yourself at one with your fellows. This is intensified almost to ecstasy during war. By means of propaganda and patriotic displays it can be kept at a very high pitch even in times of peace. The dictators of modern Europe are all past-masters in the art of keeping it continuously simmering almost at boiling point. But, of course, this feeling of solidarity is not the only one they encourage; nor, indeed, is it the only one that their subjects love to experience. Like war itself, nationalism justifies the individual in giving expression to those anti-social impulses and emotions which he has always been taught to repress. The patriot is allowed to indulge with a good conscience in vanity and hatred—vanity in regard to his own group, hatred in regard to all other groups. In times of peace, vanity is more often and more loudly expressed than hatred. But hatred is always the actual or potential complement of vanity. You cannot have delusions of greatness without at the same time suffering from persecution mania. And you cannot have persecution mania without hating your persecutors. The pleasures of hatred are certainly not greater than the pleasures of love; but for

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most people, I am afraid, they are greater than the pleasures of abstract and impersonal benevolence. People can get more pleasure out of hating foreigners they have never seen than out of vaguely wishing them well and trying, through their official representatives, to cooperate with them. The number of men and women who feel wildly enthusiastic about the League of Nations is very small. The number of those who whole-heartedly loathe the foreigner, or the Jew, or the capitalist, or the Communist, is enormous. Hatred and vanity pay a higher dividend in psychological satisfaction than do impersonal benevolence and reasonableness.

So far from discouraging nationalistic hatred and vanity, all governments directly or indirectly foment them. At school, children are taught to boast about their own nation and look down on all other nations. In dictatorial countries, this education in jingoistic sentiments is continued by the State throughout adult life. In liberal countries, it is left to the voluntary labours of the Press. Our rulers profess to desire peace, but do their utmost to make their subjects think and feel in such a way that, the moment a crisis arises, they will all

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acquiesce in or even actively clamour for war.

My subject is the psychological causes of war. But I cannot conclude without saying a few words about possible psychological cures. The first problem is that of the groups into which humanity is divided. The tendency to form groups is not only natural ; it is also ethically desirable, the basis of all morality. The trouble as history constantly shows, is that hate is nearly as exciting as love and much more exciting than rational benevolence. One of the pleasures of belonging to a group is precisely the pleasure of despising other groups. Moreover, nothing brings men together more effectively than a common dislike of someone else. There is only one certain way of creating the Utopian world-state, and that is to invite an aggression from Mars. Confronted by these non-human enemies, humanity would immediately unite. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on the Martians. It is quite possible that, for lack of a common enemy, the union of humanity will never be achieved. But meanwhile we should be grateful enough for the union of all Europeans—even if, as seems probably, that union were achieved only as the result of an increased dislike and fear of Asiatics. But no union of any kind can be achieved unless

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governments first renounce their present policy of teaching vanity and hatred, and employ all the devices of propaganda at present used for separating us from our neighbours to make us feel at one with them.

But this, of course, would not be enough. Anthropologists have often pointed out that it is very unwise merely to abolish an ethically undesirable institution. If it provides psychological satisfactions—and no institution can survive for long unless it does—those who found pleasure in it must somehow be compensated for its loss. Nationalism is harmful, but satisfying ; and even war itself, if we may judge from what happens to the suicide rate, may be for many individuals a source of substantial pleasure. The problem is to find substitutes for these two institutions—in other words, to sublimate the impulses which at present find satisfaction in nationalism and war. Sport and other competitive activities can doubtless be made to fill at least a part of the gap. Much, too, could be done by making civilised life less monotonous. It is boredom that makes the emotional orgies of group feeling, vanity and hatred seem so delightful. Abolish boredom and you abolish one of the main psychological

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reasons for nationalism and so, indirectly, for war. Nor must we forget the individual ruler. Eminent psychologists, like Dr. William Brown, have often pointed out the danger we run in entrusting our destinies to men who may be suffering from mild or acute forms of neurosis, and who are, psychologically, so ignorant that they are quite unaware of the nature of their own motives. History shows that madmen and neurotics have been responsible for an enormous amount of mischief. The sooner we make a habit of psycho-analysing our politicians and newspaper proprietors the better.

Some listeners may feel surprised that I have not spoken before of the need for a campaign of religious and ethical preaching against war. That such a campaign is desirable and would do some good is certain. But history, it seems to me, affords us no grounds for believing that it could effect the desired cure unaided. Religious and ethical preaching appeals only to the conscious mind. But man is not entirely or even mainly a conscious being. The psychological causes of war have their root in the unconscious. If we want to prevent them from having their ordinary and disastrous effects, we must first discover exactly what goes on in the

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unconscious, then provide the wholly irrepressible primitive impulses with a less dangerous outlet.

The psycho-analysts profess to have explored the unconscious to a greater depth than has been reached by other investigators. Perhaps it is for this reason that they are so pessimistic about the immediate prospects of abolishing war. Read, in this context, Dr. Edward Glover's *War, Sadism and Pacifism*. It is an acute and interesting book ; but, for those who look for quick results, also rather a depressing one. Dr. Glover asks for fifty years of intensive research into the human mind. Only then, he thinks, shall we know enough to be able to act with any real prospect of getting rid of the tendencies that make for war.

What is to happen in the interval ? We must be content, I suppose, to prescribe such political economic and psychological sedatives as shall prevent the patient from going completely out of his mind and committing suicide. If we can keep him alive long enough, the doctors may at last agree on the diagnosis and discover a cure.