

DEATH AGAINST LIFE

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THE psychological factors in the chain reaction which threatens the world are more mysterious than atomic fission and more dangerous than cancer. They would repay unlimited study if anyone could be found to study them. Psychologists, anthropologists, diplomats, and military men are indeed engaged in examining these psychological phenomena. The military men are perhaps the only ones who deal with them objectively. As participation in a conference of psychoanalysts and political scientists would indicate, most of us today will use such scraps of knowledge as we possess in defense of some hunch or prejudice that goes back to the earliest days of infancy or before.¹

Most of us brought up in this country believe in our case against the Russians. With good conscience and a show of reason, we argue that if atomic energy is to be used to destroy people and their works, it had better be the Russians and their works. The Russians and their friends, in obscure and varying combinations, have been promoting revolutions and rebellions in Greece, Iran, and China. Acting through determined minorities, they have taken over practical control in Hungary and Rumania. In Bulgaria, whatever support the Communists may have won was so insecure that they have been driven to control the opposition by persecution and force. While they started with some claim to a majority government in Poland, their treatment of the principal opposition leader makes it impossible to know whether a willing majority now backs a Polish government or not. The influence of a Communist-controlled police force apparently contributed to the creation of a parliamentary majority in Czechoslovakia; and again no one will know from here on whether or not there is willing majority support for any Czechoslovakian Government in power.

When Mr. Truman speaks about a threat to democracy and the values

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¹ The opportunities for collective study, which compare with the opportunities for the study of cancer or atomic energy, have been suggested, for example, in the author's *Aggression, A Study of Values and Law*, 57 *Ethics* Part II, 1 (1947) and *The Management and Control of Aggression*, a paper read on January 31, 1948, at a symposium in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Community Service Society of New York, reprinted as a supplement to *What Terms Can End the Cold War?* (Senators Ferguson, Flanders, and Pepper, and Professor Walter Johnson), University of Chicago Round Table of May 23, 1948. See also *Is a Peace Parley Possible?* (Max Beloff, Frederick Kuh, and Malcolm Sharp), University of Chicago Round Table of May 16, 1948, where the present writer argued the affirmative answer, suggesting subjects for discussion differing somewhat from those outlined by Mr. Wallace.

associated with democracy, he doubtless has all these things in mind. He has in mind also the danger to recovery and employment in western Europe, in case there is an effective boycott of the Marshall Plan on the part of the Russian bloc. The Russian bloc is moreover by any test representative of a minority, and is itself a minority, in the United Nations. With all its limitations we are convinced that voting is a better means than general strikes, shooting, or bombing for the adjustment of political institutions to changing circumstances. The Federal Convention acted without constitutional authority in proposing the Constitution of the United States. The validity of Lincoln's constitutional theory was established only by the success of the northern armies. Whatever lawyers' doubts there may be, majority rule in the United Nations will be accepted by all except a contesting minority, as a justification for any use of force which may prove a feasible means of enforcing or strengthening a rule of law.

Moral, ideological, economic, political, legal, and military arguments and instruments are thus available for conflict of any degree of intensity between the western nations and their Asiatic allies, on the one hand, and the Russian bloc, on the other. To a surprising extent, so soon after our common victory in the last war, public hostility seems prepared for release, and indeed to be pressing for release, at the appropriate word of a national leader.

Those of us who are not disposed to lack of confidence in our country are ready to accept what comes. At the same time there may be some use still for an occasional skeptic who tries now and then to look at the chain of events as an astronomical or biological phenomenon. Where did our array of emotions, ideas, judgments, and plans, and the corresponding array on the other side, come from? The creatures who participate tell each other, at any rate, that they do not like what they are doing. In view of the enthusiastic activity which has always gone with such assertions in the past, the skeptical observer may have some doubt about what these people say. If most of them do not enjoy what they are doing, it is hard to see why they should keep it up, particularly in view of the serious risks to which it exposes them under modern conditions.

The detached observer is bound at times to be reminded of the activities of creatures which are on the whole less complicated than we. No one who has seen two unacquainted dogs making the maneuvers which may lead quickly to a fight will forget them when reading about Mr. Byrnes and Mr. Molotov or Mr. Baruch and Mr. Gromyko. Mr. Baruch indeed reminds one of a friendly dog; but he seems to have been pretty much entangled with the other three.

The other animals differ greatly in their habits. Whole species are characterized by rather uniform though somewhat varying patterns of behavior. Why should it not be true of us? The hawk strikes at the small bird, and the lion at the antelope. Some of our cousins among the South American monkeys are gentle and avoid fighting so far as possible. On the other hand, the baboons, who are more closely related to us, will fight each other with a minimum of stimulus.

Though anthropologists, themselves perhaps influenced by the psychological conditions of the culture in which they live, have tended to put great emphasis on the few dubious cases of peace among primitive peoples which they constantly cite, they must admit under questioning that these cases are a minority, if they exist at all. There are few or no cases of consistently peaceful life over long periods of time among either primitive or civilized peoples. The apparent exceptions turn out to be sick societies or societies which are being kept in order by some manifestly superior force.

We have not forgotten Switzerland or the Scandinavian countries. The reader who wishes to urge them upon us may reflect upon the division of loyalties in Switzerland, and upon the characteristic nationalistic impulses on both sides in the conflict between Denmark and Prussia in 1864. The history of Sweden and Norway is not as peaceful as is sometimes supposed. A year or so ago reference was sometimes made to the relatively peaceful dispositions of "eastern" peoples. Since the recent savage outbreaks in India it is no longer necessary to remind ourselves of the great Chinese, Indian, Arabic, Mongol, Iranian, and Turkish conquerors of history.

It is not simply an exercise in masochism to remind ourselves of our savage qualities. It is doubtful whether we should have come as far as we have, if we did not have somewhere within us that extraordinary and mysterious energy which expresses itself in both building and fighting. At any rate the individual who handles his hostile impulses unskilfully, as by repressing them in fear, may find his vitality impaired, and his hatreds increased by his very success in concealing them from himself and others. A possible interpretation of the experience of some primitive and civilized societies indicates that the same thing may happen, as one would expect, in a considerable group living together in association.

Reflection on these matters may lead us eventually to understanding and so to cure, if we desire cure. It has been suggested that hostile aggression is a biological trait characteristic of us as of some related species. Whatever difficulties there may be with the suggestion, the evidence is consistent with this account of the matter.

Another account is, however, also consistent with the evidence. The

survival value and physiological source of hostile aggression are not by any means as apparent as are the survival value and physiological source of nutritional and sexual propensities. Moreover, no one has been able to catch the human young acting with a complete human nervous equipment before a time when conditioning influences of all sorts have begun to play upon the organism. Frustration, guilt, and fear are complex interacting factors which may be quite sufficient to explain the propensity to hostility and destruction which appears in human history.

A society, and particularly a civilized society, without frustration, is inconceivable. If conditioning factors explain the quarrelsome and pugnacious habits of the human species, the persistence of the habits is itself an indication of the difficulty of eliminating the conditioning factors from the human environment.

For the present we cannot solve the mystery of the psychological chain reaction with which we started our discussion. The physicists themselves apparently do not claim to understand fully the chain reaction which they have released for destructive and constructive purposes alike.

Perhaps, however, what little we can learn from history about the psychological sequences which lead to war will help us in our effort to reach the agreements which, in spite of all our disposition to fight, we still try to reach until the last minute before a modern war. The most useful thing we can learn is perhaps that we ourselves, as well as those foreign devils, are subject to the same influences as they.

Mr. Baruch and Mr. Gromyko and the Atomic Energy Commission of the United Nations might by themselves have composed their differences. Mr. Baruch advocated the most daring experiment in international socialism that has ever been suggested, an international agency for the development of atomic energy for peaceful purposes and the prevention of its use for destruction. Mr. Gromyko, on the other hand, is an old-fashioned individualist and nationalist who objected to this plan as visionary and an interference with national sovereignty. He seems also to have feared that the existence of atomic bombs would make warfare so unsafe that it could not be practiced. He therefore insisted energetically on the destruction of existing bombs and an old-fashioned agreement not to make any more.

The alignment between Mr. Baruch and Mr. Gromyko and their supporters in the Atomic Energy Commission cannot of course be explained at all by the proceedings in the Commission itself. Its source lies far back in history, perhaps farther than anyone can see; and it is a feature of the chain reaction to which we referred at the beginning of these observations.

This chain reaction is, moreover, one among countless variations on a theme which, as we have seen, has appeared again and again, persistently, throughout human history.

We might break off the sequence with Michael Romanoff in the seventeenth century or Peter the Great or Nicholas the Second, and the American Admiral Mahan's satisfaction in thwarting his plans for extending the arbitration of international disputes. We might linger on Theodore Roosevelt's policy of aiding the British to build up Japanese strength as a counterpoise to Russia in the first years of this century. We might consider the Kaiser's fear of Russian expansion in 1914, and his co-operation with Austria to defeat Russian and Serbian ambitions in eastern Europe, in the first World War.

It would perhaps be easier to start with events of this generation. The present generation of Russian Czars can recall the military intervention of the powers whom they now fear, in an effort to destroy their young and struggling communistic state. They were outcasts from Geneva in the 20's and early 30's. When they were invited to play at Geneva, they found that the other children there were still forming gangs against them.

To the horror of the British, whose leaders apparently wanted to do much the same thing themselves first, the Russians, by their alliance with the Germans in 1939, made sure that they would not be the only victims of a Nazi war. Though any sane American administration would have done exactly the same thing in case of a corresponding threat in the Caribbean, the American and British publics were shocked by the Russian attack on Finland, in whose country there was reason to fear intrigue a few miles from one of the two principal cities of Russia.

The self-righteous American and British attitude, so strong and constructive a characteristic in a race of empire builders, may mislead us if we desire not a new empire but peace. Forgetting our own failings, we dwell constantly on those of the Russians. We recall all their past sins in interpreting the events of which we reminded ourselves at the beginning of this comment.

We are indeed on the whole right in the judgments which we have expressed. But there is another side to the matter as well. This generation of Russian rulers has good reason to be suspicious of the western powers. Mr. Byrnes and his advisers fed this suspicion when they themselves decided to begin with suspicions in the London Conference starting September 11, 1945.² Mr. Byrnes and his advisers may for example have exaggerated greatly the significance of the Russian fury in Rumania, in February,

* See particularly Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly* 92 (1947).

1945. This fury reminds one of the fury of the new master who was once a serf, upon the acquisition of the cherry orchard, in Chekov's play. The Rumanians have not been the most popular of European peoples, and their popularity can hardly have been increased with the Russians by the jackal role which they played in the invasion of Russia. We are likely to forget that the first Russian change of government in Rumania occurred before our armies had crossed the Rhine, and before we knew surely how the war was going to end.

It seems certain that Mr. Byrnes and his advisers were affected by near-sightedness when they suspected the concern which led Molotov to speak of our occupation of Japan at this first London conference, whose business it was to begin the drafting of treaties to settle the peace of the world. While concerned ourselves about Russian pressure toward the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, we Americans have constantly tended to forget how the Anglo-American occupation of western Germany and the American occupation of Japan must look to the Russians in between.

The story is an ancient one and often repeated. All the lunatic characteristics of mankind are permitted free expression in the solemn forms of international affairs: suspicion, fear, the bad faith that goes with suspicion and fear, the lust for power, paranoid hatred, cruelty. Though there is good reason to question his formulation of the matter, Freud's thesis of a death instinct, an instinct or drive for destruction, finds here its strongest support. The psychological forces at work, combined with the atomic forces newly discovered and released by the physicists, present us with the most interesting problem of history.

No student of society in that brief moment of detachment when he imagines he is thinking like an astronomer or a biologist can have any doubt as to the outcome. If we can learn anything from history, and a detached examination of the characteristics of the human being, we may expect new wars, no matter how destructive they may appear in prospect. Two years ago a detached student might have thought that our disposition to stay alive would actually find support in the new weapons, and that atomic energy, for example, would make its contribution not only to medicine and to industry, but to the preservation of peace as well. The experience of the last two years seems, however, to indicate that we and our leaders are disposed to think in traditional terms about international relations and perhaps to conceal from ourselves, as people have always done to some degree, the precise character of the new warfare. In a moment of detachment, then, the student of society today must anticipate

another war, within the next years, with many familiar characteristics and some striking novelties.

This observation, however, shows the absurdity of supposing that any one can be scientific about human affairs. Another war, whatever its outcome, would be a defeat for us and our friends. It would mean—for the time being—a victory of death over life. As human beings, we will not accept such a defeat until the alternative looks to us worse. Today we and our statesmen perhaps resemble most closely the people of Europe and their statesmen in August, 1914. We shall go on to the last moment working out our hatreds, indeed, but trying also to find means of agreement and peace.

The new factor in history, so far as we are aware, is atomic energy. Its peculiar characteristics will influence contemporary manifestations of both the desire to fight and the desire for peace. It is possible that a formula will be found, more elusive than any known to physicists, which will direct the new combination of forces to the persistent biological purpose of preserving and enriching human life.

The will to live characteristic of healthy animals is one constructive force in the world. The love of existence, of life, of rich and complex life, if it can have its way, will save us from needless self-imposed suffering and destruction. The human appreciation and affection for each other, a part of our love of life, create a special force which seems at times to be at work among nations. When we remember the Battles of Moscow, Leningrad, and Stalingrad, we remember that four or five years ago we were admiring our Russian comrades. We put less value on the machines that we were sending them than on the skill, devotion, and courage which turned the course of the war. Though the skeptical observer cannot expect it, the human being may still hope that such human forces as these will again surprise us and gain a greater victory than any ever won before.