AN AGE OF REPUDIATION

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CANNING, when Foreign Secretary, declared that Britain should not "contract obligations lightly" because of "the scrupulousness with which she is in the habit of fulfilling them." That was just over a century ago. Today it seems like a millennium ahead. For in the quarter-century since 1914, and more particularly in the four and a half years since a National Government first took office, Britain has been lightly disregarding obligations most scrupulously contracted.

There was, for example, the matter of a war debt to the United States. It had become, perhaps, in ultimate morality, an unjust debt. It was, perhaps, a debt which should never have been contracted. It was without doubt a debt which harmed him who received as well as him who paid. But no one has ever contested the fact that it was a debt solemnly contracted in due form; and that, by shelving the question of payment on it since 1931, Britain has in effect repudiated—"unilaterally repudiated," in the barbarous tautology of modern diplomacy—a contract freely negotiated.

Then, in 1932, there was a Japanese invasion of Manchuria. It was precisely the kind of eventuality foreseen in the Covenant of the League of Nations, a document intended by precise definition to preserve the territorial integrity of States members of the League. China was a member of the League, and her territory had been violated. Britain was a member of the League, and therefore by covenant bound immediately to sever all economic and financial intercourse with Japan; later, if a League committee reported adversely on Japan's action, to take such military action against Japan as the League Council might deem necessary. She did not, immediately or since, sever economic and financial relations with Japan; nor, when a League committee had made a report as adverse to Japan as any official report well could be, did she take any military action against her. True, she was not alone in this. No other member of the League fulfilled its covenant. Neither did the United States, which, though not a member of the League, had undertaken to cooperate with the League in this instance. But, however "multilateral" (to use the diplomatists' language) British repudiation of the League Covenant may have

been, it was not for that any the less a repudiation than British repudiation of war debts.

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More recently an attempt has been made to retrieve British prestige—prestige apparently being, in the politician's opinion, something which can be dropped at will in the gutter and picked thence unsoiled when needed again—by fulfilment of covenanted obligations in the Italo-Abyssinian dispute. But here fulfilment of the letter of the League Covenant was followed by a repudiation of the spirit so flagrant that a human sacrifice was needed to appease the British conscience. The repudiation was, of course, the now dishonourably dead and buried Hoare-Laval plan for the partition of Abyssinia; the human sacrifice, Sir Samuel Hoare himself. There was an extenuating side to the Hoare-Laval plan; for it is an open secret that at the time of its devising there was, in the mad mood of the Italian people and their leader, a very real danger of a Mediterranean war whose consequences to European civilisation would have been at least as serious as the consequences of an Italian victory in Abyssinia. There was a dignified side, too; for of Sir Samuel Hoare it may be said, as it was said in different circumstances of a more tragic figure, that nothing in his official life became him like the leaving of it. Lastly, there was a comic side in the spectacle of Mr. Baldwin—"Trust-me Baldwin" he is called, since the Hoare-Laval plan followed closely on his "You know you can trust me" during the election campaign of last November—playing bogy-bogy with a British public before whom, he said, he could have justified his every action were it not that "my lips are sealed."

In spite, however, of all extenuating circumstances, of the uncomplaining dignity with which Sir Samuel Hoare resigned his office, of the comic relief incongruously provided by a British Prime Minister in the Mother of Parliaments, the final feeling of the British public was a feeling of humiliation. The feeling was general—among those who call themselves idealists because they had seen wanton betrayal of their ideal by men whom they believed to be serving it; among those who call themselves realists because, however much they might like the reality of a partition of Abyssinia, they disliked equally the indignity of a British Government caught in the act of murdering its professed ideals of yesterday—and in that it was in contrast with the feeling aroused by the last and greatest of British repudiations.

This last repudiation is of the Locarno Treaties, treaties freely signed just over ten years ago by the Allies and the enemy in the

Great War. The particular Locarno Treaty which especially concerns Britain, France and Germany provides, in explicit terms, that in the event of Germany sending troops into the zone of the Rhineland demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles, Britain shall immediately come to the aid of France. Therefore, when Herr Hitler three days ago sent troops into the Rhineland demilitarized zone, Britain should immediately have offered France whatever troops and money France desired. She did not do so, and instead promised France aid in the event of an invasion which had not been threatened. She could not have done so without provoking another European war. That she did not do so was a fact welcomed, that she could not have done so was a fact appreciated, by every daily newspaper in Britain with one exception, and by every Sunday newspaper with one exception. There was greater spontaneous agreement to approve than in the case of the Hoare-Laval plan there had been spontaneous agreement to disapprove.

It was a natural agreement. Most British people, whatever they might think about a habit of tearing up treaties which is more patent, if not in fact more frequent, in Germany than in Britain, were prepared at any rate to test the sincerity of Herr Hitler's accompanying offer to make a new treaty and rejoin the League. Most British people have had, ever since the war, an uncomfortable feeling that something less than justice has been done to Germany. Most British people, lacking the Frenchman's keen memory of two invasions in fifty years, are inclined to wonder what their own feelings and actions would be if they were by treaty forbidden, say, to send a battalion of the Scots Guards into the County of Kent. Most British people, finally, have little faith in the theory of "preventive war", even when they know war to be imminent, and no faith at all in the theory when they are not certain that war is on the horizon. Yet, whatever the moral rights and wrongs of the situation, whatever its expediencies, the legal obligation on Britain was clear, and clearly repudiated by the Government, and the repudiation clearly approved by the public.

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What the outcome of this series of British repudiations will be, we may never know. There is no electoral need now, as there was presumed to be at the beginning of the Italian-Abyssinian war, to play to the gallery; and it is therefore possible that an *ad hoc* policy may carry Europe over this present crisis in peace. But while French and German troops are massed either side of the Rhine, and demands for sanctions are being made at Geneva, we feel in England as we did in the first three days of August 1914,

though without the accompanying elation that ignorance of the nature and duration of modern warfare then permitted.

If war should come again, then, most Englishmen believe, what British Governments have done or failed to do in the immediate past will be a question of as remote consequence as the deeds and misdeeds of the Pharaohs. For it is the unexpressed, but tragically certain, belief of a majority of the inhabitants of the British Isles that another large scale conflict will set European civilization as far back as did the Thirty Years War, and reduce London to ashes. In its British aspect the matter was recently summed up in a series of four questions by a former Cabinet Minister. They were:—"If there were another war in Western Europe, could Britain avoid joining a coalition on one side or the other? If Britain joined such a coalition, at which member of the coalition would an enemy strike first—at the weakest or at Britain, the strongest? If the enemy struck first at Britain, would she strike otherwise than from the air? Is there any real defence against air attack? Would an enemy today have any moral scruple about the use of any means of attack?" His five questions he himself answered in the negative. His last question was sufficient without the answer to indicate to what moral level European civilization has already fallen.

There is, however, as yet no certainty that war will come this time. A continent that in the last two years has survived the assassination of kings and prime ministers may survive a frontier massing of troops. And if war does not come this time, there will be long controversy in Britain in the months to come about desirability or undesirability of Governments committing peoples to obligations which, when called upon, they will not or cannot fulfil. Except that then the question arose out of proposals to guarantee the security of Central European nations *against* France, it will not be unlike the controversy on treaties of guarantee which arose in England after the Napoleonic Wars. In 1815 no permanent solution of the problem was found. In 1936 there is not much more hope of a permanent solution. The lessons of the past year have made the question more urgent; but the traditional inability or unwillingness—the two are not unrelated—of the Englishman to work out the practical implications of a theory is as strong now as it was a century ago. There is only one certain outcome of the present crisis, and that is that the armamenteers will profit. Either way, they have it. If Britain is to give guarantees, then she must have the military means to fulfil them. If she is not to give guarantees, then she must have the military means to stand by herself.

How far rearmament is to go, is a disturbing question. It is disturbing in two ways. First, the creation of big armament profits, whether in the name of the League or of nationalism, by government factories or by individual shareholders, means the creation of a big vested interest in wars. Secondly, the expectation of military orders—an expectation always greater than the reality—may create a sudden prosperity in heavy industry whence there will be in, say, a year's time a sudden descent to misery, with all the psychological dislocation of trade that collapse of one industry tends to create for industry as a whole. There was a brief "boom" of this kind in iron and steel shares just before the Boer War. A similar "boom", perhaps to be equally brief, is on the way in iron and steel shares now.

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The reign of King Edward VIII begins with these problems. They will not be alone. For a most interesting social problem that the reign of King George V deferred will soon be demanding solution. King George V was admired personally as few British monarchs can have been. The extent of that admiration was reflected along the whole political line of British newspapers the day after his death. From the national *Times* through the Conservative *Daily Mail* to the Labour *Daily Herald,* tribute was paid to his character. Even the Communist *Daily Worker* relegated to an after-thought its customary reflections on the essential nature of British capitalism. In general, there was little of the sentimental slush in which British people delight on such occasions, and in some quarters a realistic appreciation of the change wrought in British constitutional practice by King George's personal intervention in the crisis which led to the formation of a national government in 1931. But the influence of his home life on the home life of the nation was emphasised only in its positive aspect. This was misleading, because it is the negative aspect which will become increasingly evident during the next twenty-five years.

When King George came to the British Throne, the family was the unquestioned centre of social life, and each family in greater or lesser degree self-contained. With the necessary variations occasioned by unequal distribution of wealth, the father provided for the family and ruled it with legal authority. The mother administered the home and, except for visits to friends, remained in it. The children, except for the comparatively few who went to those private schools which we still call public (just as we label our railway carriages First and Third though we long since ceased to have a Second to justify the Third)—the children went to

schools near their home, and took their recreation in or near it. The War brought some changes. A father on foreign service might indirectly be providing for his family, but directly the provision seemed to come from the State; a father on foreign service could not directly rule his family (some members of which he might never have seen) and that task devolved on the mother, who perforce developed some spirit of independence. A daughter, working at man's trade in the absence of the man, developed even greater independence. A son, growing up in a world in which adult authority was shared not by mother and father, but by mother and schoolmaster, became accustomed to what was in the last resort communal rather than family authority. So much the War did. Other changes, such as the War had not introduced but had intensified, did as much more. Large-scale organisation of industries, exemplified particularly in the growth of London, made for larger-scale communal living. Schools, factories, blocks of flats were bigger; state control of all became ever greater. Instead of being only the provider for the dependents of those directly in its service, the state by unemployment insurance made itself ultimately responsible for providing for everyone.

Whether these changes have been for good or for evil, is a matter of violently diverse opinion. It is, however, certain that their cumulative effect has been to make a revolutionary change in the psychology of the British people, to make that people more conscious of the state and less conscious of the family. But, although this change had to some extent been embodied in the law—of such matters as women's property, for example—a visitor to England at the end of King George's reign would have found little outward difference in family life from what he might have seen at the beginning of the reign. And that was in large part because King George, setting a pattern to British life, set a pattern of the family as he and his father and his grandmother had known it. He was a brake on rapid change, because he was himself a family man of the old type, with the tastes of the English middle-class family of the old type. His successor is not a family man, and is a man interested in the mechanical and industrial changes which have affected family psychology. It will be interesting to see whether in his reign the hidden changes of King George's reign will come to the surface.