

DEFENCE OR ATTACK?

THE FUTILITY OF AGGRESSION

III.—WAR AND POLICY

From Our Military Correspondent

Our Field Service Regulations rightly insist at the outset that the conduct of war as a whole, and of every operation, should be governed by the aim which the use of force is intended to attain. Is the body of our present military doctrine consistent with its first principle? Military action should be ruled by its head: the national object. We may be drawn into war to defend our interests and ensure, in face of an aggressor, the continuance of liberal civilization; those larger ideals which we epitomize when we speak of "England." To attain that object, however, need not imply on our part a war *à outrance*. For the aggressor, aiming at conquest, the complete overthrow of the opposing forces and the occupation of the opponent's territory may be necessary to his success. But not for ours. Our object is fulfilled if we can convince the enemy that he cannot conquer. This is much easier of attainment, especially under modern conditions.

The only decisive victories in recent wars have been gained against opponents greatly inferior in equipment and industrial resources. That advantage cannot be expected by either side in any major war. So long as we are adequately armed for true defence and do not, by abandoning our friends, become isolated there is nothing to support the idea that an aggressor can defeat us. Neither is there anything to warrant the belief that we can defeat him, in the military sphere at least. So why prepare to waste our strength in the vain attempt? Surely it would be wiser to confine our military aim to what is possible—to convincing any opponent that he cannot defeat us. The most serious risk to its fulfilment, as experience has shown, lies in overstraining ourselves in pursuit of decisive victory through the offensive. Modern conditions of war strengthen the case for returning to our traditional policy and strategy.

THE FRENCH IN 1914

It may be argued that, while the defensive fulfils our policy, we may be forced to take the offensive to redeem territory that allies may lose, as in 1914. But the deeper one probes into the facts of the War the clearer it becomes that the Germans only gained a footing in Belgium and France because the French temporarily crippled themselves at the outset in a reckless offensive and left the Belgians unsupported. If the French had devoted their energies to defence and provided the Belgians with the comparatively small reinforcement they needed to enable them to hold the short and strong Antwerp-Namur line, it is probable that the German invasion would have been brought to a halt and the trench deadlock

still, because of the greater ratio of defensive weapons. It becomes our responsibility to dissuade any allies from endangering their defensive prospects by embarking on the offensive. And to that end the first need is to make it clear that any force we lend shall not be wasted in an offensive gamble that has now longer odds against it than ever before.

While defence by defence may seem like a new heresy to those who have been nourished on the mere century-old doctrine of Clausewitz—or rather, adulterated extract of Clausewitz—its practicability is attested not only by our six centuries of experience, but by the still greater duration of the East Roman Empire, heir to a continuous military tradition of over 2,000 years, whose imperial defence problem for half that time was analogous to ours of to-day. Its military policy was essentially defensive, and was maintained with consummate judgment. The Byzantine army had to protect the richest, most scattered, most envied, and thus most menaced state of the ancient and medieval world. That this empire collapsed eventually, after the longest life of all, was due to internal corruption and economic decay, not to any inherent fault in a defence system which came nearer to true economy of force than any the world has yet seen. It should be much easier nowadays to follow such an example, since military conditions are so much more favourable. Modern weapon development has been predominantly defensive. It was the machine-gun which, above all, established the superiority of the defensive in the last War; and to-day there are more machine-guns than ever. The anti-tank and the anti-aircraft gun, weapons which have seen the most improvement since the War, are purely defensive. Mustard gas, the most effective chemical agent, has the same bias.

ARMoured MOBILE TROOPS

There is also a possible guide in later Roman experience to the most suitable composition of the land forces charged with the fulfilment of the policy. The Byzantine army relied in the main on the combination of archers with heavy mail-clad horsemen. The modern equivalent would appear to be the combination of machine-guns with tanks. The adoption of a defensive method does not imply that infantry only are needed. For the counterstroke, which is an essential card in the hand, unarmoured troops on foot are far less effective and slower in operation than armoured mobile troops. Again, while the tactical offensive is moribund, a defensively employed army may still attempt the strategic offensive as far as it can be pushed—to gain ground where possible, both for its own security and with a view to provoking the enemy into attacking at a disadvantage. For the strategic offensive of this kind mobile forces are, again, better suited than infantry forces.

This new-old and strength-conserving strategy of imperial defence does not imply a purely passive resistance. Its aim is to convince the enemy that he has nothing to gain and much to lose by pursuing a war. Its guiding principle is to eschew the vain pursuit of a decision by the offensive on our own part. Its method is not merely to parry, but to make the enemy pay as heavily as possible for his offensive efforts. This implies in the military sphere an active and mobile defence, in which the effect of direct resistance is extended by *ripostes* both strategic and tactical as well as by continual harassing action. In this offensive-defensive strategy there is a part for mobile land forces as well as for the sea and air forces. And economic pressure in turn will be used to extend the wearing down process in the military sphere. It is, in sum, a super-guerrilla form of war, of scientific design. It is also a national evolution from our historic strategy, adapted to new conditions and applying new means.

The recognition of this new basis of military policy would also provide a clearer basis for foreign policy. There is a general fear that to take any part in collective action towards resisting an aggressor, or even helping his victim, might involve us in war. And there is an