

## Chapter 16

### War: the useless remedies

*The world organization debates disarmament in one room and, in the next room, moves the knights and pawns that make national arms imperative.*

E.B. White.

**W**E have already seen Tolstoy inveighing against the vested interests, and the States supporting them, that had led to both the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War within a few years of each other (Ch.6). But he did more than comment on the international affairs current during the last decade of his life: he ventured on predictions for the future, comparing the Christian world of his time with a man who has missed the right turning and carried on regardless, but becomes conscious of a precipice ahead:

That is where Christian humanity stands in our time. It is quite evident that if we continue to live as we are doing – guided in our private lives and in the lives of our separate states solely by desire for personal welfare for ourselves or our states, and think, as we now do, to ensure this welfare by violence – then the means for violence of man against man and state against state will inevitably increase, and we shall first ruin ourselves more and more by expending a major portion of our productivity on armaments, and then become more and more degenerate and depraved by killing the physically best men in wars.

If we do not change our way of life this is as certain as it is mathematically certain that two non-parallel straight lines must meet. And not only is it certain theoretically, but in our time our feeling as well as our intelligence becomes convinced of it. The

precipice we are approaching is already visible, and even the most simple, naïve, and uneducated people cannot fail to see that by arming ourselves increasingly against one another and slaughtering one another in war, we must inevitably come to mutual destruction, like spiders in a jar.

A sincere, serious, and rational man can now no longer console himself with the thought that matters can be mended, as was formerly supposed, by a universal empire such as that of Rome, or Charlemagne, or Napoleon, or by the medieval, spiritual power of the Pope, or by alliances, the political balance of a European concert and peaceful international tribunals, or as some have thought by an increase of military forces and the invention of new and more powerful weapons of destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Universal empires and the spiritual power of the Pope are probably no longer under serious consideration as solutions to the problem of the peaceful governance of the world, and need not concern us here. Alliances, however, are another matter, and are worth some careful thought. Was Tolstoy right? As he delivered this judgment of their uselessness for the purpose of preventing war, he was probably thinking of an effort that he himself had once made in a small way to discourage the negotiations leading to the one between France and Russia that contributed so largely to the fatal events of July 1914. We owe our knowledge of this incident to the record kept by Anna Seuron, a Frenchwoman who was governess to the family from 1882 to 1888.

It was in 1886 that Paul Déroulède, who had come to Russia to arrange the preliminaries, decided, out of a spirit of curiosity, to visit the literary giant at Yasnaya Polyana. The meeting between the apostle of non-violence and the author of *Chants du Soldat* (*The Soldier's Songs*) was friendly enough; but the visitor had nobody on his side when he said that he hoped another war would soon bring about the reunion of Alsace/Lorraine with France. He was further disappointed when he expressed a wish to hear what the peasants had to say on the subject of the projected alliance. Tolstoy introduced him to

some of them out in the fields, and asked them to say what they thought of the idea of fighting the Germans as allies of the French. 'What for?', replied one of them, named Prokopy. 'Let the Frenchman come work with us, and bring the German along with him. When we've finished we'll go for a walk. And we'll take the German with us. He's a man like all the rest'.<sup>2</sup> D eroul edewas decidedly not pleased.

The French had another motive, besides the recovery of Alsace/Lorraine, to fight a successful war with Germany – namely, the growing German commercial ambitions in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Past differences with Britain were settled in 1904 by an agreement that, in return for French consent to a predominantly British influence in Egypt, a considerable source of raw material for the cotton industry, the British would not interfere with French interests in Morocco, largely to do with the mining of iron ore. Besides this, it is noteworthy that Britain was Morocco's most considerable trading partner, and would not wish to see German influence there on the increase.

The new-found solidarity, not defined by a formal alliance, but reinforced by army and navy staff talks, was first put to the test in 1911, two years after a Franco-German agreement intended to secure the 'political interests' of France in Morocco, so long as France would safeguard Germany's 'economic equality'. The German firm of Mannesmann Brothers had acquired certain mining rights, which the French did not recognise, because they conflicted with the claims of the international Union des Mines Marocaines. At the same time, the French continued to tighten their grip on the country with police and soldiers, who probably had little comprehension of what was at stake. Things came to a head in 1911 with a revolt by Moroccan chieftains, during which Fez was occupied by French troops.

The Germans chose to regard this action as an abrogation of the two-year-old agreement, and sent the gunboat *Panther* into the port of Agadir. Their ostensible reason was to protect German 'interests'; but their real reason was to have a strong bargaining position from which to demand compensation elsewhere if the French were to establish a protectorate over

Morocco. Here the British trading 'interests' came to the rescue, using Lloyd George as a mouthpiece. He made it clear, in his famous Mansion House speech, that, in any contest, Britain would side with France. After digesting this information, the Germans assumed a more conciliatory attitude, and accepted the idea of the French protectorate in return for compensation in the form of more than 100,000 square miles of the French Congo. War had been narrowly averted on this occasion; but one feels that, if Tolstoy had still been alive, he would have been entitled to point out that, despite his public warnings, the same forces that he had identified as causes of war were still operating, but even more dangerously, and that, on the next occasion, the Franco-British informal alliance would have fatal consequences.

The Russo-Japanese war had not affected Russian imperialist ambitions far to the south-west, also based on the exploitation of other peoples' land, as Tolstoy had observed. One project was a concession to build a railway from the Russian border to Teheran, the Persian capital, and to prospect along it for oil and coal.<sup>4</sup> This kind of effort would have been a natural object of suspicion to British imperialists, for whom the whole Middle East was of the utmost importance as a first line of defence to shield their Indian interests – chiefly the sale there of cotton and iron – from European rivals. Nor was the suspicion without foundation. In 1906, however, it so happened that Russian foreign affairs were taken over by Alexander Izvolski, who believed that Russia and Britain should be allies rather than enemies. He had good reason for this, granted the assumptions of the multi-handed game of 'national interests'; for, after the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II, it became apparent that German 'interests' were bent on monopolising Turkey as a sphere of influence. So in 1907 there was signed an agreement between Britain and Russia, effecting a settlement of their rival interests in Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet.

Of more immediate relevance to the outbreak of the First World War was the Russians' long-standing aim of gaining control of the Dardanelles, and, as a consequence, obtaining access to the Mediterranean for their Black Sea fleet. This, from

the point of view of the rulers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, would have been a disaster to be averted at all costs, even that of a war, in which, after all, they would have the Germans on their side. They were also deeply involved in the repression of their subject peoples, and the retention of that valuable asset, tempting to the Russians, of the oilfields of Galicia.

It must have been a realistic assessment of the probability, amounting to certainty, of Germany's supporting Austria that led the Russian administration and General Staff to order and formulate a plan of mobilisation directed against both countries simultaneously. A last minute attempt at a partial mobilisation against Austria alone would, as a result, have caused inextricable confusion. So the Russian general mobilisation, set in motion on the 30th July 1914 as a counter-move to the Austrian invasion of Serbia, brought about the suspension of German efforts to restrain their allies, and the immediate implementation of the German war plan for an initial rapid campaign against France. Izvolski's reported exclamation of 'C'est ma guerre!' (*It's my war!*) must have been substantially true. Is it possible to doubt, in the light of these calamities, that Tolstoy was right about alliances? Far from preventing wars, they help them to spread.

If Paul Déroulède had taken the trouble to explain to Tolstoy's peasant-friend Prokopy what he knew of the economic and political background to the proposed alliance, would the latter have been more interested in the idea of joining the French to fight against the Germans? It is hardly likely. Nor, it is to be imagined, would the run-of-the-mill Englishman, burdened with the same knowledge, have rushed to join the colours with quite the same enthusiasm that in fact he showed, unless indeed it was the prospect of regular square meals that constituted the main inducement. Luckily for the British authorities, there was no need for them to reveal the true facts, namely that they were defending, and perhaps even hoping to augment, British interests in Africa and elsewhere. They made the most instead of the German infringement of Belgian neutrality.

When the war was over, the real motives on the allied side

were revealed by the recovery of Alsace/Lorraine and the confiscation of the German colonies. This last had already been provided for, while the war was still in progress, by a secret agreement that also was to permit a Russian occupation of Constantinople, and the long hoped-for freedom of access to the Mediterranean. The Russian defeat and the separate peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, however, put an end to this hope.

In the meantime, the former fighting men themselves were entertaining doubts about the validity of the causes for which they had fought. The most notable of them was the German Erich Maria Remarque, of whose novel *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) 300,000 copies were printed in England in the one year of 1929. Here are the narrator Paul Bäumer's reflections on a group of Russian prisoners of war – were they not the counterparts of Tolstoy's peasant-friend Prokopy? – on whom he is standing guard:

I see their dark forms, their beards move in the wind. I know nothing of them except that they are prisoners; and that is exactly what troubles me. Their life is obscure and guiltless; – if I could know more of them, what their names are, how they live, what they are waiting for, what are their burdens, then my emotion would have an object and might become sympathy. But as it is I perceive behind them only the suffering of the creature, the awful melancholy of life and the pitilessness of men.

A word of command has made these silent figures our enemies; a word of command might transform them into our friends. *At some table a document is signed by some persons whom none of us knows, and then for years together that very crime on which formerly the world's condemnation and severest penalty fell, becomes our highest aim.* But who can draw such a distinction when he looks at these quiet men with their childlike faces and apostles' beards! Any non-commissioned officer is more of an enemy to a recruit, any schoolmaster to a pupil, than they are to us. And yet we would shoot at them again and they at us if they were free.<sup>5</sup>

The italicised portion could have been written by Tolstoy

himself: the offhand contemptuous reference to the political processes would have been typical. So would have been the implication that war is murder. Perhaps Remarque did read some of Tolstoy's anti-State, anti-war writings. What is certain is that the inter-war Nazi Germany became too hot to hold him, and that he took refuge in the United States, eventually marrying Paulette Goddard, the former wife of Charles Chaplin, another free-thinker. He became an American citizen in 1947.

Alliances had been shown to be no guarantee of world order; but would 'the political balance of a European concert and peaceful international tribunals' fare any better? The experiment of the former is only just (1991) being set up; and the idea of a common monetary system is already causing much disagreement. However, we can only wait and see. The precise concept of a tribunal to replace war has never actually been put into practice, though one cannot but agree with Tolstoy's comment that immediately follows the passage quoted: 'But who would impose obedience to the tribunal's decision on a contending party that had an army of millions of men? Who indeed! However, the Covenant of the League of Nations, established after the First World War, was a plan along the same lines, and deserves some detailed attention.

These were its provisions. First and foremost, each member nation had to 'undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all members of the League'. After accepting this undertaking, they had as individuals the right to report to either the Council or the Assembly any happenings likely to threaten peace, and the obligation not to resort to war themselves until at least three months after the completion of arbitration proceedings. Collectively, it was their duty immediately *to sever all commercial, financial and personal relations with any aggressor*, and await the Council's decision on what further action was necessary. This was the application of 'sanctions'. It was clear enough that, if any member of the League were attacked, *all other members* would be expected to come to its aid in this way. Fine words; but would the action match up to them?

The first test came on the 18th September 1931 with the surprise attack of Japanese troops at various points along the South Manchurian Railway, and the subsequent setting-up of the puppet State of 'Manchukuo' in the north-east provinces of China. The motives included the familiar imperialist one, which had led to the earlier contest (1904-5) between Japan and Russia, opposition to communism in both China and Russia, and the diversion of the attention of the Japanese working classes from their existing economic plight by giving them false hopes for the future.

There could be no doubt that this aggression constituted a threat to the 'territorial integrity and existing political independence' of China. In fact the League Assembly declared it to be so after some insistence by the less powerful States; but no attempt was made by any State at all to apply sanctions to Japan. There was a good excuse for this. Great Britain was the only member of the League, besides Japan itself, that could be considered to have much influence in the Far East; for the U.S.A. was not a member. They were all waiting for Britain.

The British attitude soon became apparent. Japan had real grievances, and was setting about rectifying them in the only possible way. China should enter into direct negotiations on the basis of respect for Japan's treaty rights in Manchuria. Why, for heaven's sake? Japan should withdraw on receiving satisfaction for her grievances. Why not immediately? In the meantime, the British would not associate themselves with any action against the Japanese so long as they undertook *to respect British trade interests in China*. So nothing was done.

The second test came in March 1935, when Italian preparations for an attack on Abyssinia were the subject of a formal request by Abyssinia for League intervention. Mussolini's intentions were made perfectly clear in an interview that he gave to a French journalist later on in the same year:

The new Italy needs space for her millions of children, too numerous for her soil; and there, on the high plateaux of Africa, in an immense territory twice as big as France, is one of the last spots in the world that is still free, and where the white race can be

acclimatised and find a place to live.<sup>6</sup>

Once again the British attitude was to be decisive; for Britain was the dominant sea power in the Mediterranean, and held the key positions of Gibraltar and Suez. To have stopped the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, which ran into difficulties that were resolved only by the use of mustard gas, would have been relatively easy; but then, Mussolini's fascisti stood in the way of social revolution within Italy itself, and a possible spread of the dreaded communism, by distracting the attention of the poorer classes in the direction of the imagined glories of colonial conquest. Sanctions were not even considered until it was too late. Once again, nothing was done.

After these two fiascos, it is doubtful whether sanctions were considered at all when Hitler embarked on his forward policies – the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia. All the talk was of 'collective security' by means of alliances; but the only alliance worth having after the fall of Czechoslovakia, namely one with the U.S.S.R. (as events during the war that followed were to show), was avoided – for, after all, was not the communist U.S.S.R. the real enemy? So one with Poland was sought and obtained. In any case, the experience of a quarter of a century before should have made it clear that alliances do not prevent wars, but cause them to spread.

The end of the Second World War brings us, in all essentials, to the brink of the world situation that confronted us until December 1991; and we are faced with the final question: 'Does Tolstoy's philosophy offer any clues to take us back to the turning we have missed?' Certainly nobody else's looks like doing so; and the precipice against which he warned us is now imminent. Surely it would be worth while to spare Tolstoy some thought!