

## Chapter 17

### Towards the precipice

*The human race's prospects of survival were considerably better when we were defenceless against tigers than they are today when we have become defenceless against ourselves.*

Arnold Toynbee.

**H** ITHERTO we have been considering one by one the main elements of Tolstoy's philosophy, and demonstrating the baselessness of the adverse criticisms that have been levelled against them. Now, however, the time has come to consider the philosophy as a whole, and its relevance to the world of today. It will therefore be convenient to have a summary of it; and what better summary could be found than one couched in Tolstoy's own illuminating style?

Here he deals with the State in its relation to Christianity:

Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified. It has always been so understood by people who were not under the necessity of justifying a Christian State. Only since rulers adopted a nominal external Christianity have men begun to devise all those impossible, cunningly spun theories which pretend to make Christianity compatible with the State. But to every serious and sincere man of our time the incompatibility of true Christianity (the doctrine of humility, forgiveness and love) with the State and its pomp, violence, executions, and wars, is quite obvious. The profession of true Christianity not only excludes the possibility of recognizing the State, but even destroys its foundations.

But if so, and if it is true that Christianity is incompatible with the

State, then the question naturally arises: 'Which is more necessary for the good of humanity, which better secures men's welfare: the political form of life, or its downfall and replacement by Christianity?'.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere he connects war and land monopoly:

It would seem clear that during the last century fourteen million people were killed, and that the labour and lives of millions of men are now spent on wars necessary to no one; that the land is mostly in the hands of those who do not work on it, and that the produce of human labour is mostly consumed by those who do not work, and that the deceits which reign in the world exist only because violence is allowed for the sake of suppressing what to some people seems evil, and that we should therefore endeavour to replace violence by persuasion. That this may become possible it is first of all necessary to renounce the right of coercion.<sup>2</sup>

Those to whom persuasion is to be directed are probably not the people who wield power within the State; for, as Tolstoy had discovered experimentally, they are seldom if ever accessible to it – though they may in time repent under the influence of the law of love – but their victims, who, Tolstoy was confident, will one day bring about a new world order, not by violence, but by abstracting themselves from the existing one.

Finally, he puts into a few words the reason usually advanced for the need for the State:

All men in power assert that their authority is necessary to keep bad men from doing violence to the good, thus assuming that they themselves are the good who protect others from the bad.<sup>3</sup>

Where this is leading to is quite obvious; and in fact he goes on to explain that the reason is totally false; for it is the men in power who are themselves the bad men. The review of evidence already presented should suffice to enable the reader to decide whether Tolstoy was right about his own and previous eras. Whether everything is now different – an argument that is

sometimes advanced – is something that we must proceed to examine.

At this point there arises a difficulty of scale. A comprehensive account of the world situation at the present time would fill several libraries; and nobody would have either the time or the inclination to read it. Luckily another method is available. Here is a part of the blurb from the dust jacket of the World's Classics edition of Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. It was probably written by the editor, Sir Richard Livingstone, a great advocate of the *practical advantages* of a classical education:

Thucydides wrote the story of the first democracy in history, and of the fortunes and fall of its empire, but his pages contain the modern world-scene in miniature. Ancient Greece is twentieth-century Europe, incapable of union, tearing itself to pieces in wars which it did not desire but could not avoid. Here are familiar modern phenomena – democracy and imperialism, the class struggle, the revolutionary spirit, the technique of aggression, cynical Real-politik, the importance of sea-power, even quislings and evacuation problems – together with a brilliant account of campaigning in Sicily.

It is possible, in other words, to learn about the problems of modern Europe by studying the history of ancient Greece, because there they are encapsulated in a simpler form. A similar idea pervades modern biology teaching. There is no need to bother with a vast collection of observed facts: students have years ahead of them to collect and assimilate these. If only enough of them are chosen to illustrate undoubted principles, the students will have the best possible start. I shall therefore adopt this method, selecting, as the most apt example for our present purpose, the recent history of the Middle East, the age-old trouble spot of the world, and in particular of Iraq.

Once the scene of the beginnings of two of the earliest known civilisations, those of Sumer and Akkad, Iraq was for centuries until the end of the First World War subject to the domination of the Turks. It was released from that only to fall into the grip

of the victorious allies, Britain, France and the United States of America. Its subsequent history, in conjunction with theirs and later on in conjunction also with that of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, sums up the major problems whose solution appears to elude the statesmen of the present day. If Tolstoy's philosophy has applications in the Middle East, then it has applications throughout the world.

When the time came after 1918 for the implementation of secret agreements on the fate of the Turkish Empire, the stage was set for disagreements among the allied powers. The British were first to grasp at Middle East oil, having landed troops in Iraq, then known as Mesopotamia, immediately on the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1914. This *fait accompli*, which was probably part of their unacknowledged war aims from the very beginning, was later confirmed with the French and the Russians to the extent that the British were to be allotted control of the two former provinces of Baghdad and Basra; but, not content with these, Lloyd George entered into further negotiations with Clemenceau soon after the armistice, and obtained in addition Mosul, which originally was to have gone to France. In return France was either to receive twenty-five per cent of the oil secured in Iraq by Britain, or, if the development were carried out by a private company, to be allowed to buy twenty-five per cent of the stock.

At this point difficulties were raised by the United States of America, who lodged a stiff protest to the effect that this agreement between Britain and France would 'result in a grave infringement of the mandate principle, which was formulated for the purpose of removing in the future some of the principal causes of international differences'. Strictly speaking, this protest was without legal foundation; for the United States did not belong to the League of Nations, whose members were alone deemed to be competent to formulate the terms of mandates. Curiously enough, Lord Curzon, in his reply, did not take this line, but, reminding the Americans that they already controlled eighty per cent of the oil production of the world, proceeded to tell them that 'the nervousness of American opinion concerning the alleged grasping activities of British oil

interests appears singularly unintelligible'. As a result of further complicated negotiations, American companies were nevertheless promised a quarter-interest in the oil of Iraq, and American involvement in the affairs of the Middle East was well and truly under way. The vital importance of oil to modern European civilisation, even at this early date, needs to be constantly borne in mind.

Arguments with the Americans were as nothing compared with the continuing internal problems of Iraq. Arab nationalists had hoped, after their efforts to help the British during the war, for a unified Arab State, or at least for something better than the set of mandates that they actually got. After experimenting with direct rule, and suppressing one revolt by force, the British decided on a compromise. The word 'mandate' was forgotten and replaced by the idea of a treaty of alliance, which Winston Churchill, then Colonial Secretary, promised to see carried out. He had as his principal adviser Colonel T.E. Lawrence, the British link with the Arab uprising of 1916, author of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and known for his sympathy with the Arab cause. In addition, a constitutional monarchy was established, with Amir Faisal, son of the Sharif Hussein who had led the uprising against the Turks, as the first King. The treaty in fact reproduced most of the provisions of the mandate. Iraq promised to respect religious freedom and the rights of foreigners, to treat all provinces equally, and to cooperate with the League of Nations. Britain retained the right to advise on military, judicial and financial affairs. The treaty was signed in 1922, and was intended to last for twenty years.

It lasted for eight. The nationalists considered that the situation it created impeded, not only their political aspirations, but also the economic development of the country. They were probably right: the British would have so arranged matters as to suit British, rather than Iraqi interests. A new treaty was therefore negotiated and signed in 1930. Iraq would be responsible for internal order, and would defend itself against foreign aggression, with British support. Disputes likely to lead to war would be discussed with Britain, and common action would be taken in accordance with the procedures laid down in

the Covenant of the League of Nations. The British Army and R.A.F. were to maintain bases near Basra and west of the Euphrates, but, contrary to any normally intelligent person's interpretation of their presence, were not supposed to constitute an occupying force, or an interference with Iraq's sovereign rights.

The period of relative independence that began with the new treaty and Iraq's admission to the League of Nations in 1932 as an independent State was marred by internal dissensions, beginning with an Assyrian uprising in 1933, and continuing with a military *coup d'état* in 1936. The army was henceforth to exercise a decisive influence in politics; but even the army was divided in its loyalties between a faction of older politicians and a group of younger ones who wanted to initiate projects and reforms based on socialism and representative government. Some material progress was in fact made. The Kut al-'Amarah irrigation scheme was completed, and others, to do with oil pipe-lines and railways, to be financed by oil royalties, were begun. The latter method of paying for public works is interesting as a move in the direction of the single tax on the rental value of the resources of nature.

The Second World War brought political differences to a head; and some Arab nationalists in Iraq and elsewhere began secret negotiations with Germany and Italy. The danger became so threatening that British reinforcements were despatched; and a brief contest with the Iraqi forces during May 1941 ended in a British victory and an Iraqi declaration of war on Germany and Italy. This easily settled crisis makes an interesting contrast with what was to follow fifty years later.

The political history of Iraq from 1950 onwards would provide a good detailed case study for the verification of Tolstoy's pronouncements on the subject of violence and the State, were it not for the probability that the reader's state of mind would soon pass from horror to boredom in the face of the damnable iteration of military *coups d'état*, mass executions of defeated rivals and doubtful friends, and reigns of terror backed by the secret police. Saddam Hussein would have ranked as the most successful of the seizers of power, at least in

retaining his position by means of the armed force of his Republican Guard, if he had not over-reached himself and gone to war, first with neighbouring Iran (1980-1988), and then in 1991, probably to his surprise and dismay, with the U.S.A. and her allies, over his seizure of the oilfields of Kuwait.

While all this was going on, considerable changes were being made in the administration of Iraq's vast oil reserves. The original agreement between the Iraqi authorities and the Iraq Petroleum Company, which yielded relatively small royalties to the State, was revised in 1952 in favour of one that provided for a fifty/fifty division of receipts after production costs had been met. In other words, the State would collect half the economic rent (Ch.11). Further dissatisfaction in the early 1960's with the State's share in the oil royalties led to Public Law 80, in accordance with which control over all matters connected with oil was transferred to a publicly-owned Iraq National Oil Company, and the granting of concessions to any foreign company was prohibited.

The spending of these oil royalties was partly in the hands of a Development Board, set up in the 1950s, which was responsible for irrigation, flood control, water storage, transportation, and industrial and agricultural expansion. This body incurred much criticism for the attention it gave to long-term projects such as dams and irrigation, bridges and public buildings, while neglecting many short-term ones of more direct use to the population at large. This policy, claimed the critics, was for the benefit mainly of landowners; for the infrastructural investments raised the value of their land. These critics should have followed Henry George and Leo Tolstoy, and pointed out that the introduction of a generalised tax on land values would have siphoned off the economic rent, including that part of it attributable to public works, and made it available, with the oil royalties, for other work of universal benefit. The State's potential income from oil reached a peak in 1973, when, under cover of the fourth Arab-Israeli war, American and Dutch companies were nationalised, as were, two years later, the remaining foreign interests in the Basra Petroleum Company.

By a curious coincidence, the year 1973 saw also a change in

the arms trade policies of the 'super-powers', the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., both of whom had been willing beforehand to give arms away. The U.S.A. had been anxious to combat world-wide communism, both by assisting régimes of the old persuasion, and by supporting counter-revolutionary movements in countries where communists had gained control. On the other side, the Soviet leaders, while still aiming at an eventual world-wide revolution, had probably also decided that their best chance of future security lay in the Americans' anxiety for their own. These considerations had been sufficient to overcome any motive based on commercial gain.

From 1973 onwards, however, both parties saw things a little differently. The wealthy oil-producing States had begun to charge much more for their oil; so the Americans, whose main customers for arms they were, saw no reason why they should not begin to pay for them. The Russians, on the other hand, were self-sufficient where oil was concerned, but badly needed American dollars to finance their acquisition of western technology. So they began to demand dollars in payment for their arms. From the same period dates the treaty between Iraq and the U.S.S.R., which country, except for the brief period between November 1980, soon after the outbreak of the Iran/Iraq war, and July 1981, when the Israelis bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak, became Iraq's main source of arms.

It must not be imagined that the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. were the only suppliers of arms to the Middle East. On the contrary, twenty-four other countries that sold them to both Iran and Iraq during the war of 1980-8 were Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, France, West Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Korea, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. Sixteen more countries supplied arms to either one side or the other. In view of all this, what are we to make of the repeated appeals for a cease-fire issued by the United Nations Organisation? No whole can be better than its parts. Britain supplied both sides, claiming that only 'non-lethal' equipment was being sold. Here is the official excuse for selling any at all. It comes from a



Ministry of Defence letter dated the 17th May 1982 and quoted in a Campaign Against Arms Trade publication:

Our policy is one of neutrality in the conflict between Iran and Iraq. ... We are prepared to consider requests for the supply of defence equipment from either side on a case by case basis, taking into account our neutrality obligations, our relations with the countries concerned, and the need to work for a peaceful solution to the conflict.<sup>4</sup>

One can easily imagine Tolstoy's scornful denunciation of the miserable euphemism 'defence', and a sarcastic enquiry about how it was imagined that a supply of ancillary equipment for murder could contribute to any 'peaceful solution'.

We have laid great stress on the open and violent seizures of power, and wrong-doing while in power, of the various Iraqi administrations; but further consideration needs to be given to the actions of those others who had helped to supply the armaments without which the Iraqis and their enemies would have had to live comparatively blameless lives. Take for example the British Cabinet. True, it was not put in its place by a military *coup d'état*, but by means of a procedure of election that is commonly described as 'democratic' (i.e. pertaining to rule by the people). A little consideration, however, of party finance, of how candidates are chosen *before* an election, and of periodic revelations of consultancy fees paid to Ministers and M.P.s by organisations with axes to grind, should convince thinking people that their own part in the conduct of public affairs is negligible. The success of 'genial humbug' (Ch.5), in fact, makes the use of force unnecessary. Furthermore, British administrations, particularly in their early days, are able to act in a manner that would run contrary to the inclinations of a large majority of the electorate. Permitting the sale of military equipment, even 'non-lethal', to both sides in the Iran/Iraq war is a case in point.

But they did more than permit it: they gave it positive encouragement. In 1983, for example, when Iraq's failing oil revenues began to cause payment problems, they came to the

rescue by arranging for a £250m. loan to Iraq by the merchant bankers Morgan Grenfell to be backed by the Export Credits Guarantee Department (E.C.G.D.). It would be backed, in other words, by the British taxpayer. Further such credits were arranged in 1988 (£340m.) and 1989 (£250m). This sudden drop was caused not only by the arrest of the *Observer* reporter Farzad Bazoft by the Iraqi authorities on a trumped-up charge of spying, and that of the British nurse Daphne Parish for having given him a lift in her car, but also by the fact that Iraqi repayments were nearly £80m. in arrears.

These export credits were the subject of further questions in both Houses of Parliament. In the House of Lords a member wanted to know, in 1989, why it was that the administration was willing, despite that country's deplorable record in the matter of human rights, to continue to run considerable financial risks in guaranteeing its payments. Lord Trefgarne, Trade Minister, replied as follows:

'If we cut off our trading relations ... we would lose many opportunities to convey our views on other matters'.

Then, after asserting that trade sanctions – with which the question had nothing to do – had never worked, he went on to say:

'Iraq is sitting on oil reserves second only to those of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, I think that that makes it the second largest possessor of oil reserves in the world'.<sup>5</sup>

What kind of an official scale of values do such replies reveal?

The dangerous situation thus created by Saddam Hussein and his foreign arms suppliers came to a head on the 2nd August 1990, when Iraq, having at that time an army 955,000 strong, 5,500 tanks and 689 combat aircraft, marched into neighbouring Kuwait, where the army numbered 20,300, tanks 245 and combat aircraft 35. An unsatisfactory boundary was alleged; but the real reason was that Kuwait's oil reserves amounted to 97.1 billion barrels, not far short of Iraq's own 100

billion barrels. The eight-year war with Iran had left Iraq short of ready money. Kuwait, in contrast to nationalist and socialist Iraq, had retained the original social structure left by the allies after the First World War, namely government by large landowners. This structure had been maintained, not by arms and repression, but by one of the world's most complete welfare systems for its citizens, and the importation of many foreign workers (60 per cent of the total) for the least pleasant occupations. Neither system can be guaranteed to last.

Both, in fact, found themselves in the melting-pot during the early part of 1991. Saddam Hussein failed to meet the deadline imposed by the Security Council for his withdrawal from Kuwait; and the 15th January 1991 passed by with no promise from him but that any attempt to remove him would result in a 'blood-bath'. It did. George Bush, President of the U.S.A., gave the word for military action to 'liberate Kuwait'; and six weeks ensued of the most intense and horrific aerial bombardment short of the nuclear that the world had ever seen. After this the land war was over within a week. Casualties on the allied side did not exceed three figures; but it has been estimated that the number of Iraqis killed or wounded ran into hundreds of thousands.

A lenient verdict on this catastrophic chain of events involving Iraq would be one of total irresponsibility on the part of all the States involved. Tolstoy would have gone further, and pronounced them guilty of robbery and murder.

The example of Iraq has been selected because it is typical. Study of any serious newspaper over a period of time will confirm this. All over the world, local landed *élites* in the former subject countries arrange to satisfy the special requirements of 'developed' countries in the way of either mineral deposits, as in the case of Iraq, or of consumer goods such as coffee, rice, tea, soya beans and spices, unsuitable for growing in a northern climate. They are thus enabled to buy the products of industrial countries, notably armaments, with which they proceed to keep their mainly landless populations in a state of subjugation, and, according to perceived needs, to set one oppressed people to fight against another.

The 'developed' countries in their turn still feel the pressure to export by reason of astronomical differences in wealth, caused by gross maldistribution of land. Too few working people receive as monetary wages anything approaching the natural level, namely an equivalent to the value they have added to the products they help to make; and they are therefore unable to buy as much as they have produced. Production so rendered apparently surplus to general needs at home will then take the form, either of luxury articles for the rich, or of goods saleable abroad, including those same armaments, the trade in which, as we have seen, the State is willing to assist at the taxpayers' expense.

The remedy of the single tax, as prescribed by George and Tolstoy, goes to the heart of this dangerous situation. Applied in the 'developed' countries, it would enable wages to rise to their natural level as just defined, increase the effective demand for goods in general use, and eliminate the most urgent motive for exporting. Applied in the 'developing' countries, it would, for the first time since the onset of the colonising drive, make it necessary for agricultural land to be put to its most productive use per unit of area, instead of per person employed. Cash crops for export, as favoured by the owners of vast estates, would gradually be replaced, as in California from 1887 onwards (Ch.15), by more varied, labour-intensive and smaller-scale cultivation favouring the people at large. With the *élites* would disappear the need for arms.

Mineral deposits, as for example the oil in Iraq, are a special case. In all other instances, the proceeds of the single tax would be for local spending; but, if conflict is to be avoided, royalties from mining and oil drilling need to be distributed world-wide. After all, the United Nations Organisation has declared the minerals on the deep-sea bed to be the 'common heritage of mankind'. Why not the dry-land ones?

The case history that has just been set out in detail should be a sufficient demonstration of the deadly danger that could now be very close. What needs to be steadily borne in mind in the face of it is the progression of events that has brought us into our present predicament: land monopoly – poverty – huge

States with insufficient popular control – territorial and trade wars – imperialism – post-imperialism – administrations ruled by monopoly interests, the most immediately dangerous of which is the arms industry. The situation as Tolstoy described it has worsened; but the remedies he proposed still cry out for a fair trial.