MENTAL HEALTH IN WAR-TIME*

BY SIR WALTER LANGDON-BROWN

IF there is one thing which is certain about the outbreak of wars, it is that the ostensible reason is not the real one. Emotional causes are always transformed into ones alleged to be rational. We know that when a quarrel blazes up between two individuals over a trivial matter, there are deep-seated and hidden causes of antagonism at work. In the same way, no one to-day believes the shooting of an archduke by an insignificant conspirator was the real cause of a war which devastated a large part of the globe for more than four years and cost millions of lives. The cause lay deeper.

Sir Flinders Petrie, in his delightful little book, "The Revolutions of Civilization", maintains that each civilization goes through a cycle, waxing, flourishing and waning in turn. He plotted this out in curves, based on certain recurring features in each civilization. Now the interesting point is that, whether one agrees or disagrees with his views, in this book published in 1911, his curve for the present civilization cut the base line in about 1914. In my Maudsley lecture for 1936 I directed attention to Sir Arthur Keith's dictum that there are two opposing tendencies in life—one the general demand for the enlargement of the social unit—the other the species-making impulse which attempts to segregate a particular type. I ventured to point out that in human life the first makes for internationalism, the second for nationalism. The fierce fanatical outbreak of nationalism which this century has witnessed becomes comprehensible as a frightened response of the species-making segregating impulse against the imperious, resistless demand of the ever-widening evolutionary process towards internationalism.

Now amid all the differences between schools of psychology, there is general agreement on this point—if a normal healthy impulse is forcibly repressed it is apt to come to the surface again in an abnormal pathological form. If this evolutionary demand comes into opposition with a nation that is at once convinced that its culture is the only one really worth having, and is filled with the spirit of aggression, the result is not difficult to predict; and though that spirit of aggression was temporarily checked, the consequences to civilization proved more serious than was realized at the time of the Armistice in 1918.

We now see that the years 1918–1939 were but a troubled armistice between two wars, during which

the building up of vertical walls between nations was countered by horizontal lines of cleavage, which threatened to divide Europe into Fascists and Communists. This to my mind represented the pathological form of internationalism resulting from repression of its normal expression. The well-intentioned League of Nations was quite inadequate to deal with the resulting situation. Then extremes met in the Russo-German pact which indicated a new orientation, the division now being between those nations which considered that the individual existed for the State, even though "the State" meant a few autocrats, and those which thought the State existed for the individual. Meanwhile, amid these pathological manifestations an internationalism was arising, and one which seems to us normal and healthy, in the free association of nations within our own dominions. Since the military, political and moral collapse of France, the United States has been thrown into closer relations with that association, and there are clear indications that this process is likely to extend.

This, then, seems to me the background against which the present War is being waged; a moral and spiritual disease in Europe as the result of attempts to stem the tide of the evolutionary process. Also we can admit that on our side the idea of liberty has been too negative, and that we have not formulated a positive conception that is sufficiently adequate for the situation.

Let us now turn to the effect of all this on the mental health both of the community and the individual. One is rather tired of the platitude that the child is father to the man, and yet to-day I am forcibly reminded of it. Watch a child playing with his bricks and carefully constructing an elaborate edifice. Then suddenly his mood changes and with a scream of delight he knocks the whole thing over with a sweep of his arm. It makes us realize that from the first both constructive and destructive impulses are present in the human mind and that there appear to be epochs when the destructive one simply runs amok. Such an epoch we are now passing through. Of course this impulse is rationalized, and it is claimed that the old state of affairs was so bad that it had to be destroyed before anything better could take its place. I do not believe that applies to a complex civilization; but, then, I believe in evolution and not in revolution.

The common man wants to be left in peace with his wife and family and carry on his ordinary

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avocations. Unless those are threatened, only the adventurous want to fight. Therefore it has always been a common device of absolute rulers to distract attention from internal difficulties by telling their peoples that some other nation is trying to deprive them of their heritage. As we are gregarious animals, we close our ranks at a hint of danger. The thrill of alarm brings also a new sense of unity; men cannot bear to feel isolated, and barriers break down. A new spirit of tolerance and good will springs up with a readiness to sacrifice to a common end. All this is to the good, but these earlier effects are not always lasting.

Nations at war look instinctively for a leader. Whatever else he does or lacks he must capture the imagination. He must be regarded as a super-man, but with some appealing traits. It does not matter if the leader is credited with characteristics he does not possess; the virtues of Kitchener and Hindenburg were great, but not identical with the popular estimate of them.

Prof. Jung must have been prophetically inspired when he said in a lecture in Vienna as long ago as 1932 (and I am only condensing his remarks without adding to them):—

“Everything could be left as it was if a new way of life were not absolutely demanding to be discovered and was not visiting humanity with all the plagues of Egypt until it is found. Instead of being exposed to wild beasts, tumbling rocks and inundating waters, man is exposed to-day to the elemental forces of his own psyche, and so he seeks with more intensity than ever for personal leadership. This is an indestructible human need, but once tradition has been sufficiently lopped off by the revolutionary, unhistorical and therefore uneducated inclinations of the new generation, leadership is the more fanatically defended the more unsuitable it is.”

Leadership, then, is a necessity, and as in so many aspects of war mentality, the emotional predominates over the intellectual assessment of the value of the leader. From the South African War onwards I have been struck with the ‘writing-up’ of leading generals, obviously to inspire confidence in them, a confidence which in several instances was proved by subsequent events to have been misplaced. A leader who can both arouse emotion and appeal to reason is indeed an asset—and we believe that we have such a one.

In ancient times the supremacy of the emotional over the rational attitude expressed itself in consultation of augurs and omens and of ritual observances before going to war, as an attempt to allay inner anxiety and guilt. When war comes, each side firmly and fiercely denies its responsibility, however obvious the facts may be. Indeed, the guilty party is usually the more vociferous in its

denials because deep down it feels the truth of the indictment. Then in times of national anxiety there is a regression to certain primitive mental traits. This was well illustrated in Germany by the ritual of driving nails into the gigantic wooden image of Hindenburg, a totem figure of the tribe. A commoner tendency is the making of myths—an escape from reality into fantasy. In the early days of the War of 1914–18, the myths of the angels at Mons, and of the Russian troops passing through England, were widely believed. War had seemed incredible, and these consequences seemed no more incredible. This time war has been threatening for so long that there was not the suitable atmosphere for the propagation of such naïve myths, and people have more sense of reality now. Local rumours exaggerating the damage done by air raids have, however, been abundant. Curiously enough, spreading bad news appeals to vanity. Where facts are few, rumours are rife. The best cure for rumour is information. From the frequency with which Virgil refers to rumour, we may surmise that the Romans were plagued by it. Rumour, he said, “has a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths, a voice of iron”. Again, “Rumour, than which no evil thing of any kind is more swift, increases with travel and gains strength by its progress.” Since then a swifter method of spreading false reports has been bestowed on the world by science in wireless. Thereby the power of the lie has been enormously enhanced. Truth seems to be a very plodding tortoise compared with the racing hare of lies.

Now all those traits—the demand for leadership good or bad, the reliance on myth and rumour—arise from the same cause; as gregarious animals we are always suggestible, and never more so than when we are in danger. As Mr. Wilfred Trotter pointed out, the physical dependence of the infant develops later into suggestibility which is psychic dependence, a necessary pre-requisite of group life and activity. The dependence of infantile life thus develops into the inter-dependence of social and communal life. It was the greatest weakness of Thomas Hobbes’ philosophy that he tried to deal with man as a separate unit—in *vacuo*, as it were. This is impossible. The right course is to canalize this inevitable suggestibility, heightened as it is in war-time, into co-operation.

The greatest enemy to be overcome is fear. For years insidious propaganda has skilfully instilled fear like a creeping poison until, as we have seen, nation after nation has just waited its turn like a rabbit paralysed by terror at the stealthy approach of the stoat that will presently seize it by the throat. It may well be that this could never have happened if at the very moment when nationalism seemed at its very height, there had not been a

subconscious feeling that nationalism itself would prove to have been decaying at the roots. It is worth while, then, to inquire into the genesis of fear. It is the survival, and sometimes the perversion, of a defensive mechanism of great antiquity and real value; alertness in the presence of danger, by which the whole organism is keyed up, ready for action. It is activated through the sympathetic nervous system, which prepares the body for fight or flight. But if action be prevented, the same mechanism produces fright. Then, as Crile puts it, we become like motor-cars with the clutch thrown out; petrol is consumed, and the whole car may tremble from the violent action of the engine, but the car does not move. This is the scientific explanation of the fact that the best corrective of fear is action.

Psychologists tell us that an unconscious persistence of an infantile sense of guilt is a large element in exciting fear. That may be so, but it does not help when the sirens sound; there is no time then to be analysed and have our infantile fantasies exorcised! A distressing form of fear is that which comes from being afraid of being frightened. This is clearly due to a conflict between two powerful instincts—the instinct of self-preservation and the herd instinct, which strongly condemns what seems like cowardice. Action as a member of a community, especially if under suitable leadership, is the best antidote.

Dr. W. R. Bion, who has recently written helpfully on community feeling in war-time, considers that the civilian is at a disadvantage compared with the soldier, in that he has not had the disciplinary training. The soldier can form a tolerably accurate picture drawn from experience of similar conditions; the novice tends to be flooded with emotions which he cannot check by appeal to facts. There is even a chance that the aggressive component of these emotions will be directed towards his own side rather than towards the enemy.

The soldier is a member of a close unit expressly designed for facing tasks which involve the possibility of death, whereas the civilian has no really powerful check to his natural desire for self-preservation and may be isolated in a way which causes a loss of social sense. The strain will be diminished for those civilians who are serving in some organization which has definite clear-cut aims, with powerful emotional appeals and a discipline. It is necessary to find some modification of the disciplinary framework that exists in a fighting service and to adapt its organization to the needs of the civil population.

Dr. Bion quotes from Tacitus a description of the conduct of the German tribes warring against the Roman troops of the Emperor Trajan—of the way that they inflamed their minds with barbarous

poetry (in a hymn of hate), the furious uproar, their uncouth and harsh vociferation, interrupted at intervals by the application of their bucklers to their mouths, so that the noises burst out with redoubled force. Students of infant behaviour have noted that the earliest fear a child experiences is that excited by noise, and the Germans, true to their own tradition, have actually added devices to their shells, whereby the screaming noise of them may be still further increased, so as to arouse a primitive type of fear. This could reasonably be countered by the use of ear plugs, which would be both physically and psychologically protective.

We can understand why pessimism and fear are chiefly prevalent among those who are doing nothing, or at any rate not contributing to our war effort.

The best antidote to fear is action; and we need an antidote, for we cannot expect to be entirely free from fear. The Emperor Charles V, seeing on a Spanish nobleman's tomb the epitaph, "He never knew fear", remarked, "Then he never tried to snuff a candle with his fingers!" Sir Philip Sidney expressed the same idea in more serious style when he wrote, "Fear is more pain than is the pain it fears".

The general experience, however, so far, bears out the report of a conference of medical men convened by the Minister of Pensions before the active stage of war began. They stated that a very exaggerated estimate had been formed of the liability of war to produce nervous breakdown. This has been amply substantiated since the intensified air raids on Great Britain have been in progress, and that in spite of all the suffering and loss that have resulted. A writer in the *British Medical Journal* explains this in an interesting way thus: "With the constant threat to the existence of the entire community constituted by repeated and indiscriminate bombing, a superb scapegoat is at hand. . . . The facility with which one can now project one's fears and anxieties is likely to be the most important one" in preventing such breakdowns. "The herding together of individuals in shelters in the face of common danger and the levelling-out process in society which is consequent upon universal hardship have no doubt been essentially responsible. Further, the opportunity for dramatization afforded by narrow escapes, etc., is a decided factor."

During the Spanish Civil War it was found that in Barcelona, a particularly heavily bombed city, nervous breakdowns were neither numerous nor severe. An interesting comment on this was made by a German refugee professor, now in Great Britain, to the effect that in a civil war everyone fanatically takes one side or the other, while in a war between nations the individual is less

personally involved. As this professor served in the German army in the War of 1914-18, this view is specially interesting, because if individual Germans felt that way then, it is almost certain they feel more so now. It is also reassuring to have confirmation of our belief that confidence in the justice of a cause is a splendid preventive of nervous breakdowns. That confidence we possess.

The danger underlying herd feeling is panic, for we are suggestible in a wrong as well as a right direction. Therefore anyone who goes about suggesting that an epidemic of nervous breakdown is likely, for which there is really no warrant, is doing what he can to produce panic. In the War of 1914-18 the populace was singularly free from panic, as it is now under much more trying conditions, and it was rather surprising that before Munich there were symptoms of this dangerous response to danger. The intervening eleven months seemed to steady the nerves of the people of Great Britain and to transpose the liability to panic on to some of our administrators.

By what other methods besides co-operative action can we help to preserve mental health in war-time? Physical fitness undoubtedly helps. I remember in the War of 1914-18 a man telling me that it was his duty every night to take supplies up to the front line, which he did without fear, until one night when he had a severe cold; on that night he experienced acute fear.

To obtain sufficient sleep is also essential to maintaining physical fitness. Rather than disturbing rest by a flight to a shelter, in many cases it is sufficient to arrange bedrooms on the ground floor or in the basement. I am reminded of the old controversy whether to shelter under a tree in a thunderstorm or not. You have to put the remote prospect of that tree being struck by lightning against the much greater chance of a severe chill from getting soaked. Poincaré, the mathematician, and brother of the politician, said during the air raids on Paris during the War of 1914-18: "I sleep securely under the shelter of the laws of probability." However, the probabilities are less favourable now than in that war.

It is clear from the report of Lord Horder's Committee that the conditions obtaining in many shelters are not conducive to physical fitness, to put it very mildly. If we are to be condemned to revert to the cave man's existence, there is no reason why we should also revert to his primitive ideas of sanitation.

Cheerful surroundings help to banish fear. The Germans proclaimed a war of nerves months before hostilities began, and they have gained considerable success by the menace of air raids which has necessitated the 'black-out' with its depressing effect. If there must be darkness without, there

can be and should be light within. You absorb more from rooms furnished and decorated to your taste than perhaps you imagine. You think you have ceased to notice a charming picture on your walls until it is taken away. Then you miss it at once, which shows it was always exerting its effect, although you were apparently unaware of it. That is where life in shelters is apt to have an evil effect in this war of nerves.

Books are a great solace these dark nights. I am enjoying renewing my acquaintance with that fine English literature of the last century which this restless age has been neglecting to its own disadvantage.

Do not omit to meet your friends, and if rationing compels simpler hospitality, remember that in the eighties of last century this was generally the custom, and we were certainly not less happy. Then there is the radio. Needlework reached artistic heights during the Napoleonic Wars; the creation of beautiful things always has a cheering influence. If you are feeling too geared up, lie down, close your eyes, breathe deeply and relax all your muscles. Do it for twenty minutes at a time. This is a great help, for you can waste a lot of nervous energy by just uselessly tightening up your muscles if you are feeling frightened. But the main thing to do is to change useless muscular action into some useful activity.

We have reserves of tenacity and endurance, inherited and maintained through generations of stable and equable ancestors. Boswell once said of some behaviour of Dr. Johnson to his College tutor, "That, sir, was great fortitude of mind", to which Johnson replied, "No, sir, stark insensibility." I do not think our national fortitude is based on insensibility. We may well scoff at pretentious and unjustified claims made elsewhere to racial purity. We are the product of the fusion of many tribes, from which something new emerged, differing from its original constituents as much as an amalgam of metals differs from its separate ingredients; a people liberty-loving, tolerant, humorous but reticent, steadfast but quite unwilling to look unpleasant facts in the face until compelled to do so. Thus, though a peace-loving nation, when we do get roused we become the more fierce precisely because we resent the necessity for it. Just a century ago de Tocqueville said of democratic peoples, "The same passions which made them attach so much importance to the maintenance of peace will be turned to arms. . . . Hence it is that the self-same democratic nations which are so reluctant to engage in hostilities sometimes perform prodigious achievements when they have taken the field."

In the interests of our mental health we must be determined to carry on in the same liberty-loving spirit into the peace, which will have its own special

difficulties. Prof. R. B. Mowat, in an interesting article, has pointed out that, from the French Revolution to the Battle of Waterloo, the whole of Europe was in the melting-pot before the impetus of that revolution was exhausted. In the same way it has been again in the melting-pot since 1914, and again we may expect the impetus of this revolution to die down. Then, as before, will come the period of reconstruction. What kind of world will arise depends much on our attitude now—it will decide whether the melting-pot is to be a witch's cauldron or a refiner's fire.

If we are to escape future disasters we must learn more about ourselves and our own nature. The ancient Greeks, and in our time Thomas Hardy, regarded man as the sport of inevitable fate; the modern psychologist shows us that fate is the outcome of individual and national temperament. The future is ours to redeem, and this can only be achieved by self-knowledge and mutual sympathy. One of the direst aftermaths of war is an inevitable hardening of the boundaries between nations and the withdrawal of feelings towards international sympathies. That is why the League of Nations failed, and why for the present federal union can only remain a dream. Nevertheless, it is an excellent thing to talk about federal union; it took years of talk to accustom men's minds to something so obviously right as the abolition of slavery.

Yet a more international spirit will have to arise if civilization is to be saved. Isolation in thought and ideals is absurd at the very time when wireless has joined up the whole world and it has become increasingly clear that even material prosperity depends on commerce being international. Peace must mean more than simply the cessation of war; it must be based on a new spirit of co-operation and we must hope for its emergence from the refiner's fire. H. G. Wells has said that the only chance of ever becoming more reasonable is by realizing how unreasonable we are; to which one might add—and by trying to understand why we are so unreasonable. Recent events have proved that, under the superficial crust of civilization, the age-long forces of savagery and brute instinct are still alive. To recognize their existence is the first step to canalizing their energy in right directions. "In man's very flesh and bones is the impulse towards closer and closer union in larger and larger fellowship. To-day he is fighting his way towards that goal." The path is difficult and will be fraught with many disappointments as in the past. It was recently remarked that the problem of the future is to combine individual freedom with collective responsibility. On whether we can achieve this or not depends the future of civilization. The world stands at the parting of the ways.

THE OIL/WATER INTERFACE

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A JOINT meeting of the Faraday Society and the Physical Society was held in London on January 9 to discuss the oil/water interface. In spite of adverse conditions which prevail at the moment for such meetings, and the impossibility of the meeting taking on its usual international atmosphere, the room was quickly filled beyond capacity. There were also some of our Dutch, Belgian and Greek colleagues present to keep alive the spirit of international collaboration in science, fostered by the Faraday Society discussions. The discussion, which was opened by the president, Prof. E. K. Rideal, was at times very animated. The president stressed the implications this subject has on a very large number of scientific and industrial fields, and the papers read were divided into biological, physical, chemical (emulsions), and theoretical sections.

The chief aspects dealt with in the papers read were the influence of the chemistry and structure

of the interface on the adsorption and diffusion of ions and molecules on to and through the interface and on the kinetics of reactions taking place at the interface; likewise also, the influence the chemistry and structure of the ion or molecule has on the above factors.

Dr. A. E. Alexander (Cambridge) started the discussion by giving a review of the monolayer technique applied to both the air/water and oil/water interfaces, and stressed the use which a combination of the two methods has on elucidating and predicting phenomena occurring at the interfaces. Attention was directed to the fact that surface potential measurements at an oil/water interface can be made if the ionizing air electrode is in the air above, and not if the ionizing electrode is in the oil layer just above the interface. The oil layer has to be of the order of only 1 mm. or 2 mm. in thickness.

The discussion then centred on the fact that