

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION.

HC Deb 24 October 1935 vol 305 cc357-69357

§Motion made, and Question proposed, "That this House do now adjourn."—[Captain Margesson.]

§3.59 p.m.

§Mr. CHURCHILL When we separated in August, the House was concerned about the scale and rapidity of German rearmament. What has happened in the interval? The process has continued remorselessly. The incredible figure of more than £800,000,000 sterling is being spent in the currency of the present year on direct and indirect military preparations by Germany. The whole of Germany is an armed camp. Any Member of the House who has travelled there can add his corroboration of that statement. The industries of Germany are mobilised for war to an extent to which ours were not mobilised even a year after the Great War had begun. The whole population is being trained from childhood up to war. A mighty army is coming into being. Many submarines are already exercising in the Baltics. Great cannon, tanks, machine guns and poison gas are fast accumulating. The Germans are even able to be great exporters of munitions as well as to develop their own enormous magazines. The German air force is developing at a great speed, and in spite of ruthless loss of life. We have no speedy prospect of equalling the German air force or of overtaking Germany in the air, whatever we do in the near future.

We had a speech yesterday—it was a very welcome episode—from the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George). He gave us some advice. But I must remind the House that he was very slow to recognise these tremendous developments in Germany. When I pointed out two or three years ago what was then beginning, getting on the move, he derided the idea; and he was not the only one. But neither he nor His Majesty's Government will, I imagine, disagree to-day with the statement that Germany is already well on her way to become, and must become incomparably, the most heavily armed nation in the world and the nation most completely ready for war. There is the dominant factor; there is the factor which dwarfs 358all others, the factor which we find affecting the movements of politics and diplomacy in every country throughout Europe; and it is a melancholy reflection that in the last hours of this Parliament we have been the helpless, perhaps even the supine, spectators of this vast transformation in Europe to the acute distress of Europe, and to our own grievous disadvantage.

I do not, of course, suggest that German re-armament is directed against us. It may well be that we are the last people the Germans would wish to attack. Certainly it would be in their interest to have our goodwill while they decided their deep differences with other countries. There is even a theory that the Germans are re-arming only out of national self-respect and that they do not mean to hurt anyone at all. Whatever you believe, whatever you think, however it may be, I venture to submit to the House that we cannot have any anxieties comparable to the anxiety caused by German re-armament. The

House will pardon me if I continue to press that anxiety upon it. I bear no grudge, I have no prejudice against the German people. I have many German friends, and I have a lively admiration for their splendid qualities of intellect and valour, and for their achievements in science and art. The re-entry into the European circle of a Germany at peace within itself, with a heart devoid of hate, would be the most precious benefit for which we could strive, and a supreme advantage which alone would liberate Europe from its peril and its fear, and I believe that the British and French democracies, the ex-Service men, would go a long way in extending the hand of friendship to realise such a hope.

But that is not the position which exists to-day. A very different position exists to-day. We cannot afford to see Nazidom in its present phase of cruelty and intolerance, with all its hatreds and all its gleaming weapons, paramount in Europe at the present time. In the shadow of German re-armament other dangers have taken shape on the Continent. We have, for instance, **this war between Italy and Abyssinia**, of which the newspapers are so full and which has occupied a good deal of our attention during this Debate. It is a very small matter compared with the 359 dangers I have just described. I do not believe that Signor Mussolini would have embarked upon his Abyssinian venture but for the profound pre-occupation of France in German re-armament, and, I must add, but for the real or supposed military and naval weakness of Great Britain. It was the fear of a re-armed Germany that led France to settle her differences with Italy at the beginning of this year, and very likely when these matters were being settled what is called a free hand in Abyssinia was thrown in. We may regret it, but we must first see and consider the forces operative upon France before we presume to utter reproaches. At that time, in January of this year, neither France nor Italy knew the length to which Great Britain was prepared to go in support of the League of Nations. They knew our views but they did not know with what vigour we should press those views. The whole world has been astonished at the energy and vehemence displayed by His Majesty's Government, and I think we have been astonished ourselves.

I am very glad that the right hon. Member for Carnarvon Boroughs—I see he is not in his place to-day—recognised yesterday the difficult position of France. He told us, and I have very reason to believe he is correct, that the French agreement with Italy achieved in January of this year, was worth 18 divisions, that it meant a relief of 18 divisions to the French army by releasing all those additional troops for the defence of France in manning the long range of fortifications which, with their far smaller population, the French have found it necessary to erect against the terrors of a potential third Teutonic invasion. All these years we have urged France to make friends with Italy. It is a very grievous thing for them to be forced to choose between the League of Nations and Great Britain on the one hand, and their newly contracted arrangement with Italy on the other. Let us see what it means to France. The shadow of not merely two, but even of three years' compulsory military service begins to fall once again upon the threshold of the homes of France.

We have had to insist on our point of view, but it is of the utmost importance that we should understand, and show that we understand, the difficulties of 360France. The right hon. Member for Carnarvon Boroughs has said at one time or another many harsh and wounding, and some unjustified, things about France, but I think his words in yesterday's Debate will be read with relief throughout what is at the present time—it is no exaggeration to use the word, which appears most often in their own newspapers—almost an angonised State. We all know that the French are pacific. They are quite as pacific as we are. They want to be left alone, as we do, and, I would add, as the people of Soviet Russia also wish to be left alone. But the French seem much nearer to the danger than we are. There is no strip of salt water to guard their land and liberties. We must remember that they are the only other great European country that has not reverted to despotism or dictatorship in one form or another.

In all the circumstances I submit that the efforts that France has made to give effect to the Covenant of the League of Nations, and the decision which France has come to to aid the British Fleet in certain remote contingencies—these efforts and that decision deserve the warmest recognition from all parties in the House. Whether it was necessary or not to put this hypothetical question to the French Government, at any rate in such a public fashion, is a matter for argument. It seems to me that when such assurances are obtained there must necessarily be a very far-reaching reciprocal engagement, however that may be defined. A debt of honour is the most commanding of all debts. It is also often the most indefinite. My dislike of vague and indefinite commitments was ingrained in me by the experience through which I passed in the years before the War and at the moment of its outbreak. Personally I believe that it always is very much safer, and in the long run very much cheaper, to rely on your own strength as far as possible in any case where you can do so, where you have the strength. However, I dare say that the handling of the matter, which at first seemed to me somewhat questionable, may in the conclusion be found helpful as far as the immediate case is concerned.

It is upon this basis of German rearmament and French apprehension that the Italian-Abyssinian war and the dispute between Italy and the League of 361Nations can alone be properly considered. We are all agreed that we should walk soberly and warily and discreetly and peacefully, and even humbly, through this dangerous world. Most of us have abstained from truculent or provocative language, though there were, I think, a few relapses at Margate. But we are all agreed as to the peaceful demeanour to adopt and the abstention from violent speech which we should observe. Then there is a division. Some people say: "Put your trust in the League of Nations." Others say: "Put your trust in British re-armament." I say we want both. I put my trust in both. We have to run risks for both, and we have got to make exertions for both. I see no antagonism between the two. Neither is there any antagonism between those who would defend the Covenant of the League of Nations with their lives and those who would defend the British Empire. I believe these two ideas are at present the only practical counterparts of one another.

It is quite certain that the British Empire will never fight another war contrary to the League of Nations. Any attempt to embark upon a war of aggrandisement, or pride or ambition would break the British Empire into fragments and any Government that was even suspected of such a motive would be chased from power long before its machinations could become effective. Therefore, if ever the British Empire is called upon to defend itself, its cause and the cause of the League of Nations will be one. Where, then, is the difference? The fortunes of the British Empire and its glory are inseparably interwoven with the fortunes of the world. We rise or we fall together. Indeed, if we survive to-day the extraordinary situation it is because even in bygone times our ancestors so managed that in the main the special interests of Britain conformed to the general interests of the world. [Interruption.] Read history and find there anything which can contradict what I have said. I, therefore, make no secret of the fact that personally I regard the British Navy and its sister services and all that is implied in the Covenant of the League of Nations as allied insurances for our peace and safety, and I am sure we need them both, and we need, besides, all our wit and wisdom, and all our patience and common sense in order to escape ourselves and to help the modern world out of the dangers which encompass us.

What is the great new fact about the League of Nations? What is the change that has taken place since we separated last August? It is this. The League of Nations is alive. It is alive and in action. It is fighting for its life. Probably it is fighting for all our lives. But it is fighting. **No one can ever pretend that without the United States the League of Nations could be a supreme authority, but the question has been for a long time whether it, was not dead and a sham.** People were despairing of the League of Nations. They pointed, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook (Mr. Amery) still points, with accusing and wounding finger to its powerlessness in the Far East and to its indifference in the Chaco War. When we separated in August the League of Nations was becoming a byword. Look at what has happened since. **Here are 50 sovereign States solemnly sitting down together to devise and concert hostile economic action against a great Power, prohibiting the export of arms to Italy, encouraging such export to Italy's enemy, taking concerted measures to destroy Italian credit and financial strength in every quarter of the globe, laying an embargo on many kinds of exports to Italy and even attempting a complete boycott of Italian imports into each country.** When we are told that there are leakages and loopholes, that difficulties will arise and disputes will break out between the boycotters and so forth, that may all be true, but these are, to anyone who views things in their due proportion, only the exceptions which are proving a most impressive rule. Such a system of pains and penalties has never been proclaimed against a single State, as far as I am aware, in the whole history of the world. If we could get away a little further from the scene and take a more general view than is possible to us living through events from day to day, I am sure we should see that we are already in the presence of a memorable event.

Still more remarkable is the Italian acceptance of these sanctions. When we separated in August, the story was, when these matters were viewed in an academic light, that

economic sanctions meant war, and certainly the original attitude of Italy was that any attempt to apply sanctions would be treated as an unfriendly act and an affront. But what has happened? All this has proved to be untrue. Signor Mussolini—I think it is a sign of his commanding mind; to my mind it is one of the strongest things he has done—has submitted to these invidious sanctions and still preserved his contact with the League of Nations. Instead of saying "Italy will meet them with war," he says "Italy will meet them with discipline, with frugality and with sacrifice." That is a great saying in the setting, in the difficulties, in which he stands. So I say that we are not only in the presence of an assertion of the public law of Europe but of its recognition by the State affected and by the historic figure at the head of that State. That is also a truly remarkable fact, and one that is full of hope.

What does the House suppose has been the underlying cause of the transformation in the activity and force of the League of Nations which we have seen operative in the short time that we have been absent from this House? The right hon. Gentleman the Member for Darwen (Sir H. Samuel) seemed to be entirely unconscious of it. He seemed to suppose that it is simply the moral force of public opinion and the many good arguments used by the Liberal party and by Liberal writers which have produced this transformation. One is quite sorry to undeceive him. One would like him to have nursed his delusion for a little longer. But the reason is so apparent that it cannot be concealed. The reason why the League of Nations is now a reality and is now gripping all men's minds and inspiring loyalties in we know not what other countries which have hitherto regarded it as an academic apparition is because there has been behind it, as there was behind so many causes vital to human progress and freedom, the Royal Navy.

How did this arise? Let us see exactly in what context it arose. As I understand it, when the Government determined to take a strong line upon the League of Nations Council it was certain that it would bring us into antagonism with Italy in the Mediterranean. We have ancient and valuable naval and military establishments in the Mediterranean. We have a fleet, a vital part of our own main fleet, in the Mediterranean. No doubt, all these have been allowed to fall into a very easy peace-time state and the Government would have been greatly to blame if they had pursued the course on which they had decided at Geneva without at the same time making our defences safe in the Mediterranean. So the great machine was set in motion, and after an interval of a few weeks the impressive effect of superior sea power became manifest. That power has not been transferred to the League of Nations. Nevertheless it lies in a certain sense behind it, and it has invested every decision and every debate at Geneva with a gravity and a significance which it never otherwise could have possessed.

The right hon. Gentleman the Member for Darwen was interrupted in his speech on Tuesday and asked a question which, apparently, disconcerted him. He was asked whether he would use force in support of the Covenant of the League of Nations. I did not think very much of the answer that he gave on the spur of the moment. I suppose many of us will be asked that question in the country. I can only say the answer that I am

going to give. If I am asked, "How far will you go in support of the Covenant of the League of Nations?" I shall say we ought to go the whole way with the whole lot. But what would have happened if this trouble had arisen not now but three or four years hence, as other trouble may arise three or four years hence? Consider our position if to-day there was a German fleet a third as large as our own and, being entirely new, equal to two-thirds in modern quality, and if at the same time the two Italian 35,000-ton Dreadnoughts which are advanced in building were actually in commission. Could England have dared to speak her mind upon the Council of the League of Nations as she has done? Certainly she could not have done it without the deepest anxiety lest most grievous reprisals would have been taken against her establishments in the Mediterranean, upon Egypt, upon Palestine, upon the Suez Canal, upon the route which joins us with our possessions in the East. If there is one practical moral to be drawn from our present experience it is that we must, without delay, and apart from any obligations that may arise in the North Sea, provide for the secure and lasting command of the Mediterranean.

365 I am not going to detain the House more than a very few minutes because we all feel, with a sense of approaching Dissolution, that we must not put too great a strain upon the fortitude of Members who are, no doubt, bracing themselves for the supreme ordeal, but I must make some remarks, or my arguments would lack completeness, about Abyssinia. I share the feeling common throughout the country of sympathy for this primitive, feudal people who are fighting for their hearths and homes and for the ancient freedom of their mountains against a scientific invader. The native independence of Abyssinia cannot be made a matter for compromise or barter. But no one, least of all the Liberal party, can justify the conditions that prevail in that country. The Abyssinian Government themselves do not pretend to do so. Whether they have the power to correct them is another matter, but they cannot justify them. No one can keep up the pretence that Abyssinia is a fit, worthy and equal member of a league of civilised nations. The wisdom of the British policy was shown in our opposing their admission and the unwisdom of Continental countries, who now bitterly regret what they did, was shown in its admission. It was a mistake. Steps must certainly be taken to make sure that the oppression by the dominant race in Abyssinia of the tribes which they have recently conquered is not perpetuated as the result of League of Nations action. Even in their own home and centre, now that they have appealed to the League of Nations, now that the searchlights of the world are beating their glare upon the history and conditions of this region, the Abyssinians must be made to put their house in order.

I understand that proposals of this character were contained in the Anglo-French suggestions which were put forward some months ago, and which were so unceremoniously turned down. I hope that the Foreign Secretary was right when he indicated that there was still a possibility, a hope, of a satisfactory settlement being reached. I think we can trust him. Perhaps I put it too strongly—that the hope of a satisfactory settlement being reached was not completely dead. Not even that?—that the

hope of a satisfactory settlement being reached would always spring eternal in his breast—

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§The SECRETARY of STATE for FOREIGN AFFAIRS (Sir Samuel Hoare) I am obliged. §Mr. CHURCHILL —and that the days through which we are passing at the present moment were the days when that hope would burn the brightest. Well, I am sure we should all share the strait-jacketed optimism of my right hon. Friend. It is of the utmost importance to the House and country to realise that the League of Nations cannot take one-sided action in a matter of this kind and only look at the faults of one side without considering its responsibility for putting right abuses and great evils on the part of the other party which has appealed to them for their jurisdiction. But we must not put too much confidence in any hopes of that character of a settlement. It is quite clear from the replies of the Foreign Secretary that he realises the fact that the differences are very real and very serious, and I have no doubt that he is determined to maintain an unflinching hold upon the realities of the controversy.

Then we must consider those economic sanctions. It was said yesterday that the economic sanctions will not really embarrass the Italian dictator, and he knows they will not embarrass him or else he would never have bowed to them. That all depends upon the length of time they are maintained. We live in such a febrile and sensational age that even a month or two is enough to make people not merely change their views, but forget the views and feelings they entertained before. I agree with the Chancellor of the Exchequer that this matter will be one involving a long strain which will require a cool and phlegmatic temperament.

§Sir HERBERT SAMUEL From the Abyssinians?

§Mr. CHURCHILL They are fighting for their lives. But the limitations of the action which can be taken by the League of Nations are defined and well known to the right hon. Gentleman, and no one has suggested that we could do more than we have done, or that we should take isolated action. As far as we are concerned, one of the causes and circumstances which make the strain painful to us is the prolongation of the spectacle we shall have to witness in Abyssinia—the painful spectacle of the desperate
367resistance of these people barely armed against all the resources of science. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Certainly. But still do not let us suppose that the measures which are being taken are not most formidable. must not only look a month or two ahead. Where will the Italian dictator be at this time next year? He may be far into Abyssinia with an army of a quarter of a million men, wasting rapidly by guerilla warfare and disease, and all the time Italy, under the boycott and censure of practically the whole world, will be bleeding at every pore, her gold reserve melting away, her prices rising, her credit gone. Do not let us under-value the extreme importance of the long, slow pressures which are being applied, and do not let us under-estimate the dangers which necessarily they excite in increasing the tension which prevails throughout all Europe.

I listened, like others in the House, with the very greatest attention and respect to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook yesterday. No one who heard him will ignore the strength of the case he unfolded, and we are indebted to him for placing it so clearly before us. But it is quite plain that his view is not the view of this House of Commons, nor will it, I believe, be the view which the country will express in the forthcoming election. My right hon. Friend rendered a service in showing us so clearly where we used to stand, and where the League of Nations used to stand until a few months ago. But we have now moved on. Anyone can see that. We have moved on and we are not going to move back. The League of Nations has passed from shadow into substance, from theory into practice, from rhetoric into reality. We see a structure always majestic, but hitherto shadowy, which is now being clothed with life and power, and endowed with coherent thought and concerted action. We begin to feel the beatings of a pulse which may, we hope, and we pray, some day—and the sooner for our efforts—restore a greater measure of health and strength to the whole world. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sparkbrook dwelt upon the dangers of our acts, and the right hon. Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George) dwelt, unduly I thought, upon their difficulties. We can see these difficulties and dangers for ourselves, but if we confront them, and when we confront them, with a steady eye, I believe the House and the country will reach the conclusion that the case for perseverance holds the field.

§4.37 p.m.

§Mr. ARTHUR GREENWOOD We have listened to a characteristic speech from the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Epping (Mr. Churchill). There are few people in this House who possess his powers of oratory and that highly florid style with which he has succeeded in boxing the compass. **a speech which in some parts it appeared that he was doing lip-service to peace and in other parts he was breathing war.** He strove by some curious argument, which I failed to understand, and which, I hope, one day the right hon. Gentleman will adumbrate, to prove that the might of the British Empire and the power of the League of Nations depend one upon the other. He has tried to plead for supreme naval power for this country in the Mediterranean and, on the other hand, has uttered very noble sentiments in support of the League of Nations. The right hon. Gentleman has been trying to have it both ways. I have no doubt that he has perhaps succeeded in justifying his appointment to high office if the worst happens, and the National Government is returned.

During the two days' Debate we have heard a great variety of views expressed on the Government benches. We have heard the most discordant voices of the Tory party, from the wavering treble of those who say that they support the League of Nations to the thunderous bass of the frank and open militarists whose interventions by their cheers proved that they care nothing about the League. They care primarily about the military power of the British Empire. I have heard it said that my hon. Friends on this side of the House are divided, but we have never spoken with so many voices as have supporters of the Government during these two days. They have been the speeches of men living in **a Tower of Babel**, of people praying for peace and people believing that war was

inevitable; people who were trying to pay lip-service to all for which the League of Nations stands but are prepared to pursue a 369national policy which is in direct conflict with every principle on which the League of Nations is based.

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