

CURRENT OPINION

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A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S INDICTMENT OF WAR



HE KNOWS WAR AND HE HATES IT

Frederick Palmer, for seventeen years a military correspondent, says that the alleged "values" of war are as much out of date as bleeding for anemia and touching the king's robe to heal the plague.

IN a book, "The Folly of Nations" (Dodd, Mead), which appears as the Disarmament Conference meets, Major Frederick Palmer, famous war correspondent, tells how he looked down from a gallery on the first meeting of the Assembly of the League of Nations at Geneva. He counted the nations present. There were forty-three. Then he counted those whom he had seen at war at least once in the seventeen years between his baptism of fire and the outbreak of the World War. The number was thirteen; including the World War it was eighteen. This sum in addition might well have made him seem superlatively old at the age of forty-seven. On the contrary, after a moment's reflection, he felt young and hopeful. The record of the next quarter of a century could be hardly worse than that of the previous quarter of a century, and it might be better.

Friends whom he met in the gallery thought that he had missed his direction and arrived at the wrong address; and they informed him that this was a gathering of peacemakers. His answer was that "to cure a disease you must first know the disease." He knew war. He had come to Geneva as a specialist in one disease, to gain further knowledge of his subject by observing an experiment for its cure.

Major Palmer calls "The Folly of Nations" a successor to his story, "The Last Shot," published in 1914. The story gave a thrilling account of soldiers of opposing armies who, inspired by a sense of the insanity of war, refused to fire upon one another. The new book carries the same message in more prosaic fashion. It is addressed to the average reader and, in particular, to the rank and file of the men who fought in the Great War.

The arguments in behalf of militarism are as familiar to Major Palmer as his A B C. He knows them all and can state them all like a soldier. In fact, he does this very thing in chapters of his book entitled "Old Values" and "The Lure." Then he turns round and demolishes these self-same arguments.

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Take the physical argument. Is it true that only militarism can properly develop the physique of a nation? Let us hear what the Major has to say:

"Picture a battalion of lusty men in the prime of life, representing the investment of maternal nursing in their childhood and of paternal earnings and sacrifices, the product of the doctor's oversight, of municipal sanitation, of schoolroom calisthenics and of the fresh air of the playground, going into the trenches! Picture the survivors of that same battalion, who have not been buried in the muck of destruction or borne back in the procession of wounded, as they returned from the trenches, ashen-faced, staggering and exhausted, to a quiet spot behind the lines away from the sound of shells, where they might be inspirited and fattened to face the ordeal again and have the strength to bear its labors! In this contrast you have the contrast of the physical value of war and of peace. It was a contrast that we might not mention while the war was in progress lest it should discourage the people at home. I saw it hundreds of times, and to some purpose, if I may burn the truths that the censorship excluded into the minds of readers who were too young or too old to be at the front.

"Every man who served in long tours of the trenches on stabilized fronts or in any one of the long grinding battles drew on his reserve store of physical energy to an extent which he will more and more realize as he grows older. Did those fine physical types of free and upstanding men from Canada and Australasia require war to improve their physiques? The permanently disabled youth, looking forward to a deliberated and cramped existence, whose numbers in the first war of 'every man a soldier' terrify us with their appeal and their burden, represent only a small portion of the whole of physical vitality lost to each combatant nation. Whether Frenchmen, Americans, Britons, Italians or Germans or Austrians, I saw twenty men demobilized as sound who had been physically weakened by the war to one who had been physically improved, and this one gained nothing physically which he might not have gained in peace.

"There was no physical advantage in service at a training camp for which there was not a peace substitute."

Passing on to speak of the moral aspects of war, Major Palmer asks: "What is it to be moral? Is it moral to foul your mind with lies and hates? To plot the killing of fellow human beings? To surrender your freedom of thought to the drill master and the propagandist of war?" Then he says: "If so, the late war was a true promoter of morality; and let us have another and then another war in perfect confidence that in two or three generations we can undo all that civilization has achieved."

With the same kind of indignation, Major Palmer dismisses the claim that war is necessary in the interest of national solidarity. "We did not need the late war," he declares, "to teach us to think and act together. All the five-mile circles within the nation had come to realize their common interest. The increasing sense of communal and national self-preservation had been the outstanding sociological development of the epoch."

It is sometimes urged that war is justified on economic grounds. Major Palmer holds that exactly the opposite is true. He writes:

"The value of the economic expansion which was won by the colonial wars of the last century would hardly be duplicated by further wars in the conquered territories where peace and order now reign. As man has become richer in goods and structures through the blessings of peace, the economic value of war has continued to decrease. We are living in the time of the devastated regions in France and Central Europe and a harassed Reparations Commission. . . .

"Was Alsace-Lorraine worth the economic asset of France's dead if they had lived? Will it pay the interest on the French war loan? Was the territory which Britain won worth her dead, or will it pay the interest on her war debt?

"The economic value of war among the progressive nations of to-day is that of using a hammer blow to repair a valuable watch

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which keeps time for your enemy as well as yourself."

Major Palmer speaks with special emphasis of the perversion of truth in wartime. He knows whereof he speaks because he was chief censor of the A. E. F., as well as an officer, in France. Lying, he says, became a fine art. Month after month he watched "the deterioration of minds and character under the censorship and our return to the days of the lickspittle herald." Under military rule he saw "the increase of intrigue, of lackeyism, hanging on a superior's nod, of devious instead of direct means to an end, of the weakening of individual intelligence and of the capacity for independent and straight thinking." These effects the victors shared with the vanquished.

"What mattered my compunctions? What mattered one lie more or less when all our lies were a means to a noble end? I had allowed my personal illusion to influence me in performing my official duty which was to encourage the war spirit in every one else through strengthening the illusion which most appealed to him.

"The thing was to teach the public to rejoice in the brutality of our own soldiers, applaud them for not taking prisoners and incite them to all the bad practices which we hailed as atrocious in the enemy and as justifying our own excesses. We brutalized the public at the same time that we brutalized our soldiers, while we protested that we were not making war on the German people whom we would deliver from bondage into better ways. If the Germans exhibited chivalry or kindness, if we found their doctors in German thoroughness of detail gently caring for our wounded when a counter charge swept over lost ground, these facts must be censored out lest they weaken the war lust necessary to keep our determination steeled to our task. Logically, we should have rejoiced over these individual exceptions to German depravity as encouraging the Germans to mend their ways and as a proof of our faith in a new Germany once her people were freed from the blight of Kaiserism.

"The German censors were taking the same attitude on their side of the line as we on ours. They were dealing in the brutality of a blockade that was starving their babies as an incentive for their soldiers to fight to the death; not in the brutality of submarines stabbing passenger or hospital ships or planes bombing women and children in Paris and London."

The alleged "values" of war, Major Palmer asserts, are as much out of date as bleeding for anemia and touching the king's robe to cure the plague. He speaks of "so pleasant a possibility as that an efficiency chart and common sense, instead of folly, should govern the relations among nations," and adds: "I hope to live to see nations exchanging teachers between high schools." In the meantime he calls the League of Nations "a valiant experiment" and finds the accounts of the second meeting of the Assembly "most encouraging." The idea of world peace is gradually penetrating to the common mind. It needs to be accelerated and to be presented with more intelligence and more thoroughness than it has been presented in the past. Major Palmer says:

"As I draw together the ends of my scattered thoughts, which refuse to be bound in a compact bundle, I am reminded again how difficult it is to be always on guard against the emotions which lure us into war. Only a few nights ago, when I saw on the screen our submarines, seaplanes, destroyers, cruisers and battleships appearing in turn, and then together in battle order in a majestic and dramatic climax of naval power, I found myself thrilling in true 'Let 'em all come' fashion. Then I thought of the threat which a foreigner would visualize in that demonstration and how it would lead him to desire that his nation should arm in answer to what he would call our aggressive military ambition; and I thought of what the money spent on all this preparation might achieve if spent for other things.

"Why not the Answer as dramatically visualized as the Lure? Where were our Carnegie and other peace foundations with their retaliatory propaganda? Where were our millionaires who seek worthy objects for their

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benefactions? Why not the censored pictures of some of the war horrors in France? Why not the pictures of other triumphs of human organization? Why not pictures of children of all nationalities, showing how much alike children are? It is the children who will have to shoulder the burden."

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