

# CURRENT MAGAZINES

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## "BACK TO BARBARISM"

**Is This a Moral World?**—Mr. R. B. Mowat, in the *Hibbert*.

**The Score in Spain:**—Mr. M. Williams, in *Current History*.

**Apologia for Anarchism:**—Mr. F. Urales, in the *Review of Reviews*.

**The Jews in Poland:**—Mr. I. Cohen, in the *Contemporary*.

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If our morning paper announced that in certain countries (unnecessary to name) the thumb-screw and the rack, the boot and the slow fire had been restored to action, the news would no doubt still cause surprise. But there would no longer be any such presumption against believing it, no longer such "antecedent improbability", as everyone would have felt even a few years ago. Healthy scepticism, based on what we know of journalistic practice, would probably make us wonder how far the real news had been adjusted for the thrill of a headline, and people would exchange assurances in the street car that "Of course it must be exaggerated". But unless things change quickly and profoundly for the better, the generation now growing up in British and French and American society will never realize how German and Italian life used to be regarded as on a level similar to their own. They know that in Francis Bacon's time English witnesses were examined by torture, and that in the France of Catherine de Medici people were massacred for differing from the Queen in religious belief: but they know also that a massacre of Protestants in Paris for their convictions, or putting a Catholic priest in London to the rack that evidence against Jesuits may be extorted from him, would now be quite impossible. Have we a like assurance regarding what is possible and impossible in Munich or Milan? To put such a question is to answer it. Like Macbeth, who had murdered sleep, the Dictators of Italy and Germany have introduced a new moral climate, in which we must keep continuously awake, prepared for almost anything.

Still more remarkable than the return of barbarous practice is the development of a theory in its defence. What the French call a *protestation des intellectuels* is now by no means always against the ruthless; an appeal for the calmness of reason against violence and outrage. It is often the reverse. From a group facetiously calling itself "intellectual", one hears in many countries a plea not only to palliate but to approve the cruelties which, a generation ago, very few rulers would have perpetrated and none would have

dared to justify. How far this has yet to proceed, no one can tell. It would indeed be rash, in the light of experience for the last five years, to set limits to the horror that might be reinstated with the acquiescence and even with the eulogy of "eminent publicists". I see no reason to doubt that if the torture chamber were reorganized, with an intimation from Rome or Berlin that it had been found "the only effective safeguard against Bolshevism", a group of agile writers would soon be at the service of the Ministry of Propaganda, to pour scorn—in epigrams of Nietzschean versatility—on the sentimental scruples of an objector. Long established ways of valuing conduct have been changed in deference to "success". Mussolini and Hitler, having presented the world with a *fait accompli*, can boast that they have not only overawed many a foreign government into practical submission, but have likewise disconcerted many a foreign thinker into speculative approval, scrapping the old "ideology" like the old battleship, and imposing such new methods of moral calculation as will yield a predetermined result. Among the many rumors of Nazi purpose, one that circulated widely some months ago was about a contemplated return to forms of punishment with slower and hence more exquisite suffering than either the rope or the headsman's block. We were told that a survey of old instruments, stored in a museum at Nuremberg, would soon be undertaken, to discover which could most readily be adapted to the purpose. No doubt the tale was invented. But it was at least *ben trovato*, and as an indication of what I have called our new moral climate it was not the less significant for being fictitious.

I propose to consider in turn, at the prompting of contemporary journals I have here cited by name, how this movement "Back to Barbarism" has shown itself of late in thought and feeling quite as much as in act.

## I

In Germany, for example, disinterested pursuit of truth has now been abjured, and free publication of opinions, designed to promote this through contact of mind with mind, has been abolished.

The great bonfire, in which under Nazi direction so much that was finest in the literary and scientific work of German writers was committed to the flames, might have passed out of memory as an isolated act of mania, done before revolutionary tempers had time to cool. One hoped that, like the Soviet "war on the anti-God front", with its burlesque of Christmas and Easter celebrations, it would before long be held unmentionable—a thing

thought of with shame, if not by those who had instigated it, at least by those whose tolerance had made it practicable. Revolutions have always what Theodore Roosevelt used to call "a lunatic fringe", and sympathisers with their general purpose succeed as a rule in securing an act of indemnity from the courts of public opinion to make one overlook an initial excess. They plead, like Coleridge for the fanatics of the French Reign of Terror:

The sun was rising, thought ye hid his light.

But in five years of settled rule the main lines of government policy should have disclosed themselves, and the plea of revolutionary inebriation for the Nazis has by this time lost its point.

Last spring, in Heidelberg, they kept the 550th anniversary of the university's foundation. When we were reminded that so notable a secular epoch had come, the minds of scholars everywhere went back to reconstruct imaginatively the intellectual and social life of 1386. They thought of the turmoil of the Great Schism, in the very midst of which that papal bull of the Great interlude in the storm of fulminations against one another by Pope and anti-Pope, from Rome and Avignon. They thought of the England of Richard II, of the relentless feuds between noble and noble destined in another half-century to develop into that senseless horror known as *Wars of the Roses*, of Wycliffites and Hussites, of peasant risings, and executions for witchcraft, and that such a time saw the founding of an institution such as Heidelberg would prove to be, for it would yet nourish and protect the intellectual refugees of many countries in the raging period of religious intolerance and dynastic ambition.

In normal times the keeping of such an academic birthday would have brought together with delight the representatives of learning from every part of the world. But these times are not normal, and the tribute one is impelled to pay to the Heidelberg of the past sounds like a biting satire on the Heidelberg of the present.

What now prevails there is the rule of force; studies dictated and conclusions prescribed to the scholar by the master of steel helmets; racial discrimination and persecution where there was once a brotherhood of culture; the martyrdom of every bold and sincere enquirer, that the complaisant may take his place. Invitations to send representatives for the celebration were declined by many a foreign university, on the ground that having lately

extended relief to German academic exiles, it could not share in congratulating Heidelberg on a régime which called for such compassionate efforts abroad. From Great Britain no one was authorized to carry even a fraternal greeting.

The reports of the anniversary proceedings showed how wise was the British decision, and how apt was the ironic letter, in Latin, sent by the University of Oxford. A well known method of escape from certain embarrassing situations has been resort to "the decent obscurity of a learned language", and Latin was here found useful for a very difficult enterprise in passable combination of the polite with the sincere. The academic representatives of other countries, which did not similarly protect themselves, had at least an experience of the sort no man of learning had ever expected to encounter again. In solemn silence, and courteously simulated acquiescence, they had to listen to an official opening speech of which the burden was that to pursue truth for its own sake is an obsolete fanaticism, and that in future the only permissible research will be such as serves German national advancement. They will now better appreciate how bygone leaders of thought must have felt when ordered under State penalty to deny what they knew to be the fact and to affirm what they knew to be absurd. To the native German scholars, compulsorily present, one may apply the description in Gibbon of Roman senators at the Court of Tiberius—"balancing terror against mutual shame."

One might quote many farther illustrations of this amazing revolt against truth. Six weeks ago Dr. Paul Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, announced that censorship of authors will be supplemented by censorship of *criticism*. The freedom of literary and artistic reviewing, which German magazines have hitherto shared with those of all other countries that serve any educative purpose, is now at an end. Henceforth a book, a play, a piece of music or a motion picture, if it is allowed by the German authorities to appear at all, is guaranteed against hostile comment, and the "critical notice" of the future will be known to proceed from one who dares not find fault, no matter what he may think of the performance before him. Doubtless the consequence for cultural standards will be like that which befell the mark when action "by decree" superseded the normal process of exchange, and such debasement of the literary coinage has indeed already become apparent. With what a mingling of sorrow and disgust are the "learned" magazines of the Third Reich examined by friends of the Germany that once was!

Hardly a week passes without thus adding some fresh item of news by which the laughing philosopher and the weeping philosopher

of antiquity might well have been stimulated alike. One day it is in the story of a demonstration by some *sehr gelehrter Herr* that the Jews in so far as their publications are of value have been plagiarists, and that their independent researches have been not only useless but evil. Next we hear that the statue of Mendelssohn has been destroyed by official order, because no degree of musical eminence—in a country once so famous for its music—can now atone for the disgrace of Semitic birth. On similar grounds the name of Spinoza must never again be mentioned in a German academic thesis, and the Christian Faith itself has to be so redefined as to obliterate the historic setting indispensable for its interpretation. The climax was reached when threats of a sort to suggest the imminence of war were uttered over the decision of the Nobel Committee to award the prize for Peace Promotion in 1935 to Carl von Ossietzky. That the most notable promoter of peace should be found in a German hostile to the Nazi government, seems in Berlin a perfect paradox. Elsewhere it will seem an estimate with considerable intrinsic probability. If Germans are notorious for lack of wit, they may at least claim credit for the second half of Falstaff's endowment: without being witty themselves, they are an unfailing provocative of wit in other men.

## II

For a generation that mocks intellectual honesty and extolls patriotic self-deception, the other axioms of days gone by must share the fate of the axiom about Truth. We had supposed it by this time inconceivable that mankind would ever repudiate, once it had been definitely acquired and understood, either the value of the principle of self-government or the reign of law (rationally developed and defined by general consent) as against the capricious direction of a despot. It is needless to tax the patience and try the temper of readers in a British country by rehearsing the reasons which make this choice so clear, or by recalling the experiments with bygone tyrants which have long since been much more than enough. Of the wretched sophistry put forward just now to defend under the new term "leadership" what fell into such disrepute under the old term "dictatorship", I shall content myself with observing that the same sort of thing was much better done long ago in Carlyle's defence of Frederick the Great, in Mommsen's exaltation of Julius Caesar, even in the dithyrambic paeans of the court of Napoleon III during the first half of his régime. Why and how the Nazi or Fascist theory of government should

be regarded as an intellectual advance, when it merely repeats the worn-out phrases of propagandism for a despot, without taking notice of the critical objections so long and effectively urged against them, the pamphleteers of Rome and Berlin have never made plain. And if the theory of despotism is thus as we have always known it, so too is much of the practice: particularly in respect of good faith.

A sufficient illustration may be found in Marshal de Bono's recent book describing how Italy won the war in Ethiopia. He tells how the enterprize was planned long ahead, how he was himself sent to Eritrea as far back as 1932 to begin—with precautions for the utmost secrecy—the construction of military roads. Plans were laid for vast reinforcement of Askari troops, for ensuring the water supply, for the provision of military hospitals, in short for all that could be foreseen as needful in the coming campaign, while no artifice was omitted to conceal what was afoot, only native workmen being employed, and the uniform for the Askari levies being imported in raw material from India to be tailored in Eritrea. According to this very outspoken narrator, no small part was played by systematic bribery of Ethiopians: some 200,000 of them, in eighteen different provinces of the country, were corrupted in advance by Italian agents. All this was happening years before the incident at the Wal-Wal wells which, in the story told to the world by Italian spokesmen, drove the Duce with such reluctance to strong action. The *Twenty-Year Pact of Friendship and Arbitration*, concluded by Mussolini with the Emperor Haïlé Selassie, was still in force—with fourteen years yet to run before it should be reconsidered! "After reading this", says the *Manchester Guardian*, "one remembers with admiration the warmth with which Baron Aloisi protested to the League that his country was being forced unwillingly into a defensive war".

There is indeed nothing to surprise the reader in the narrative itself: most of it was known or conjectured long ago, and Fascist mendacity had long ceased even to be news. It was seldom recalled, except when Mussolini made some fresh proposal for a "Gentlemen's Agreement", which strained the reader's gravity too far, and afforded fresh material to a satiric journalist. What is really novel is that the Duce has written a preface to such disclosure of his policies! He has reached the stage at which this sort of state-craft is not only admitted but proclaimed. Most aptly did he inaugurate his régime with the issue, in a gorgeous *édition de luxe*, of the collected works of Machiavelli. And when we observe in a considerable section of the London press the cynical



mockery directed against those who denounce Mussolini's ways, we can understand how *Il Principe* so long passed without censure as no more than a shrewd reduction to theory of what all wise rulers attempt in practice. There was an interval, lasting at least two centuries, during which an ideal of international justice and honour—however inadequately followed in conduct—was at least loudly professed. Now, under the leadership in particular of the "anti-Communist" press, this has been relegated to a museum of curiosities. How far these anti-Communists will find it good strategy (and hence "justifiable" by the only criterion they acknowledge) to argue so, time must be left to tell. Not seldom have the too-clever discovered that they had sore need in an emergency of their own for the principle they had repudiated lest it serve the turn of another. We have watched not only a Mussolini but also a Lenin, and while it is reasonable to be shocked by the methods of each, it seems most unreasonable that either should be shocked by the other.

One has had to endure again, in support of these barbarous novelties, much tiresome reiteration of what is obvious but irrelevant: about the superior efficiency of concentrated power, about the foibles of democratic legislative procedure, about examples of rapid and sensational progress under a daring autocrat when the "collective folly" of the multitude had brought things to the verge of ruin. A popular history of despotisms, presenting in rapid survey what in general they had meant for mankind until by a decisive effort in all progressive countries they were overthrown, would be just now a useful contribution to public enlightenment. One would like to see in short, readable form an expansion of the thesis laid down a few months ago by the President of Harvard: that the surrender of all personal liberties is a price too high to pay for the improvement now said to be visible in Italy—more punctual train service, and better hotel accommodation!

### III

The last proof I shall notice that we have reached an epoch of "Back to Barbarism" is in the revived and explicit glorification of War, proclaimed in Fascist centres with such defiance, and heard elsewhere with an acquiescence not seldom amounting to approval.

Falstaff deplored "the cankers of a long peace", and Sir Lukin Dunstane in George Meredith's romance expressed the opinion that peace "breeds maggots in the heads of the people". Such products of British humour naturally came to mind when, twenty-

two years ago, our attention was so forcibly drawn to the writings of Teutonic war-lords about the verdict of the battlefield as "biologically just". It was not the first occasion when German and English ways of thinking were found to have this in common, that what furnished Englishmen with a joke served Germans for grave and anxious brooding. But it is not, this time, from Germans that the revived philosophy of war as an ideal comes with most strident note. Hitler, in general, is careful to intimate that his party loves peace, and that again to draw the sword would be its choice only under stern compulsion. Mussolini, on the other hand, has taken up the apostolate of war for its own sake just where it was left by a Treitschke or a Bernhardi. This champion of "interventionism", this organizer of Italian cooperation with the Entente in a "war to end war", now stands out as advocate of military ideals at which his German foes of yesterday would have shuddered. The article "Fascism" over his own signature in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* tells us how every Fascist must despise doctrines of human equality, schemes of internationalism, guarantees against war;—such follies as "eternal peace" and "the universal embrace." And to anyone duped with the delusion that this was mere rhetoric to keep warm the enthusiasm for dictatorship, the language of action into which within the last few months it was translated must have come with a revealing shock. Not in the piping times of peace, but with his armies in deadly conflict on the fields of Abyssinia, did the Dictator speak as follows:

Fascism does not believe in the possibility, or the utility, of perpetual peace. . . War alone brings to their maximum tension all human energies, and stamps the seal of nobility on those peoples which have the virtue to face it. . . Though words are very beautiful things, rifles, machine guns, ships, aeroplane and cannon are more beautiful things. . . The judges of our necessities and the guarantors of our future are we; only we, and nobody else. . . The Italo-Abyssinian problem admits—with Geneva, without Geneva, against Geneva—but one solution.

For this mood of the Italian mind it is impossible to advance, in mitigation of judgment, the plea ever available on certain propagandist lips for a like passionate excess in Germany. At least it cannot be said that the Duce's nature, essentially peace-loving, was driven to desperate courses by the *Treaty of Versailles*!

What are we to make of our British journals in which such reversal of the values we have so slowly established and so deeply prize is treated with complaisant indulgence? To what purpose



the affectation of being shocked by the overturn of Christian ecclesiastical institutions, actual in Russia and threatened in Spain, while admiring tributes are showered upon the men who in Italy and in Germany have struck at the very roots of the Christian religion—not at its external form, but at the principle of its life? It is felt as an outrage to have assailed the fabric of the Church's institutional system, under which incidentally the rights of private property have found shelter. But no such reaction is shown when the brotherhood of man is denied, the Golden Rule is cancelled, the war gods of Teutonic and Ancient Roman mythology are summoned back to displace the religion of the Cross, and the Christmas message is rewritten in terms of recurring war on earth, with feuds amongst all mankind!

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Lately, in England, we witnessed a curious spectacle. Those journalistic and parliamentary forces which, for some time back, have been challenging public opinion as far as they dared in support of the Fascist Powers of Europe decided to act together in another reference. Sir Oswald Mosley, Sir Arnold Wilson, the organs of the London press known as "yellow", were found in suggestive combination on the side of Edward VIII. Presumably what brought together parties otherwise so different was the attraction of a bid for personal autocratic power. If this was the bond of attraction, it should now be clear to all of them that they made a false step. Nothing else, perhaps, worked so fast and so effectively to decide the British public against the late king as the sight of the forces rallying to him in vociferous support. In Great Britain at least, the motto "Back to Barbarism" is not yet effective. And all that is needed to ensure the recoil is that the significance of the movement should be appreciated. December 10, 1936, will long remain a red-letter day in the annals of British freedom.

But the resurgent barbarism, which attempted to cut through at one bold stroke the fabric of British family and domestic tradition, had other aims in which it might long have been successful if it had not united them with this one. British readers had been very tolerant, and British audiences singularly patient, when the virtues of international good faith were ridiculed, the exploits of a "strong man" were extolled as clearing the stain from his character by the completeness of his "success", and every impulse of national disinterestedness—not to speak of national generosity—was daily presented as fit only for simulation by rogues in the despoiling of simpletons. The Archbishop of Canterbury has called upon his countrymen to take the series of events which found their

climax on December 10 as a summons to national repentance. This call elicited, as anyone could foresee that it would elicit, a fusillade of jests meant to be witty and of satire meant to be mordant at a prelate who thus bethought himself so soon of making professional capital out of the national misfortune. But what the Archbishop expressed in the language of religion many another observer has put, and will put often again before this controversy is closed, in language of mere social and political insight. It was a single venture of barbaric insult which produced last month the recoil of the British people, the movement which swept so fast in the first week of December over the whole country, leaving the "press barons" of the capital so chagrined because for once at least they had completely misjudged the temper of Englishmen. Quick with all the arts of the sensational publicist, ready with tongue and pen to draw lessons from the "spontaneous" pro-Edward demonstration so soon organized for the entrance to Downing Street, the apostles of a new social order were apprized before long that they had this time gone a step too far. In full and precipitate retreat, apologizing to the public, explaining themselves confusedly away, they have now to indulge their genuine feeling with occasional recrimination against the Archbishop. But the big barrage is over: all of it still heard is the distant and random gun that the foe is sullenly firing. What we now particularly need to appreciate is the close interconnection among the impulses, at first sight so various, by which the attack on our British ways of thinking and valuing had been directed. The temper which could risk and the temper which was ready to defend this last bid for personal power, this attempt to transform social and moral ideas by the prestige of great office and the dominance of a single influential personality, are the same which we had seen at work in other concerns. They are the same which in certain London newspapers have been for months hectoring and dragooning the British public into silence if not admiration before Nazi and Fascist "novelties" at home and abroad, everywhere contemptuous of the traditional restraints of a British, not to say a Christian, civilization. The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke a penetrating truth when he urged that the change needful is not in one department of life alone. If we prefer to avoid his devout phrases about a national re-dedication, the same may be expressed in terms sufficiently arid for the most austere political scientist who has the future of England at heart. Not one renascent barbarism only, but several of the same generic type should be extirpated, together. Their root is one and the same.

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