

Hon. L. S. Huntington.

1876

NATIONAL HONOUR.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND LARGE ARMIES.

A LETTER (*Reprinted from the Montreal Gazette.*)

BY

KUKLOS.

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1876
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The EDITH *and* LORNE PIERCE
COLLECTION *of* CANADIANA



Queen's University at Kingston

[Harris, John.]

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(1860)

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND LARGE ARMIES.

(Reprinted from the "Montreal Gazette.")

In the article which commences the number of the *Saturday Review* for January 29th, entitled "Armed Peace," we find the subject treated in a manner which shows that the writer of the article has endeavoured to rise above popular prejudice and to look at the beneficial as well as the baneful consequences entailed by the large armies now supported by certain of the European nations. He has, however, as we opine, omitted altogether one of the most important elements belonging to an impartial consideration of the case, and, consequently, his conclusion, if not altogether wrong, must be pronounced undemonstrated and not entitled to acceptance as a sound application of political economy to the actual circumstances.

The conclusion to which we refer and object, is stated at the commencement of the second part of the article in these words: "It is, however, so painful to think of the waste of money and energy and happiness which large armies involve, that, etc." This statement, taken together with those which precede it, seems to show that the writer has succumbed to the popular prejudice which looks upon a large army as a necessary evil; necessary as a weapon of offence and defence, but in itself extremely costly and injurious. Now, what we are desirous to do in this relation, is briefly to indicate the application to this subject of the views recently explained by us, in your journal, on the labour question.

Let us take one of the European countries, for exam-

ple England, and suppose it to be decided by Parliament that the standing army of England shall be one million soldiers. A large proportion of this force to be sustained by subjection to compulsory military service of the whole population. The ordinary militia soldier to pass three years in full active service ; to be afterwards subject to occasional service for the purpose of keeping up his efficiency, and liable to be called upon to take part in the defence of his country.

It is certain that, at the present time, such a proposition would be met by an adverse judgment on the part of a great many persons supposed to understand the principles of political economy. "A million men," it would be said, "subtracted from the wealth-producing power of the nation ; that is, virtually, so much of the wealth of the nation wasted and lost ; and for what ? To keep the neighbouring countries under a continual menace and oblige them to commit the same frightful waste. And, besides this, look at the actual outlay ; the enormous cost of thus keeping a vast multitude of men in idleness, and so on." Now in respect to the subtraction from the wealth-producing power of the nation, the first question the political economist is required to consider carefully, in this relation, is :—What are the circumstances of the country in respect to its capacity of fully employing all its labourers ? If we suppose the actual number of labourers to be two millions in excess of the number required to do all the work the country can furnish, it is evident that the withdrawal of one million men would, instead of subtracting from the wealth-producing power of the country, assist in removing an element of disturbance, and in mitigating the evils occasioned by the over-competition of labourers in excess of work. In the next place, the men have in any case to live. Each of the superfluous labourers must be supported ; for the country is too far advanced in civilization

to allow him to actually starve; so that the direct cost and outlay is reduced to the difference between the expense of keeping a soldier, and the expense of keeping an unemployed or half-starved labourer, or pauper. Against this difference in expense, whatever it may be, is, independently of the sense of security conferred upon the nation by the possession of a large and efficient army, the difference between a man who has had the advantages which an enlightened system of military training for three years or longer can confer upon him, and the crude untrained labourer or peasant. Now, this difference, if it be admitted that there is a difference in favour of the well-trained soldier, is a gain in wealth to the nation of so much per man; it is an economical product, so to speak, which the nation obtains for its outlay. We are not proposing now to enter into the general question, which is a very large one, nor are we to be understood as positively advising that England should keep an average number of a million soldiers. Our object in writing this notice is to point out, as already stated, the importance of taking the actual circumstances of the country, in respect to the proportion between the labourers and the quantity of productive or useful work to which their labour can be applied, as one of the essential elements in the consideration of the case.

Nearly at the close of the same article a subject of an entirely different character is brought particularly under consideration, and in regard to which, also, the judgment expressed by the writer is, we opine, open to grave objection. That subject is the question whether England ought, or ought not, under particular circumstances, to protect and help a weak state against aggression and injustice on the part of a stronger nation. To decide this question with certainty in its application to any particular case, there would have to be a sufficient and correct knowledge as to the circumstances, and if such

sufficient knowledge cannot be obtained, the decision or conclusion must be a matter of opinion. The case, however, which is here presented, is not whether the special circumstances justified such and such a decision, but whether England, having come to a certain decision, ought or ought not to act on that decision.

The following quotation states the assumed conditions of the case, and expresses the judgment to which we object:—"The only case, in fact, in which the writer thinks we ought to have gone to war when we did not, was in 1864, when Denmark was threatened by Prussia. He says the aggression of Prussia was without the shadow of a pretext. This is, perhaps, a mere matter of opinion, although we believe that, if Parliament had been really invited to sanction a war on behalf of Denmark, and the question had been fairly debated, the English public would have been much surprised at the strength and validity of the German case. However, as it happened, in this case the English ministry was willing to go to war, but it had a juster sense of what was possible than to undertake the struggle without an ally; and, as France would not co-operate except on the understanding that victory was to give it an extension of territory, England, disliking this, was obliged to abandon Denmark to its fate." We have herein an opinion expressed that the public of England was not so well acquainted with the actual merits of the case as it supposed itself to be. But that, however this might be, the public of England had come to a decision on the case, adverse to Germany, and that, moreover, the English ministry had come to the same decision so strongly that they were willing to go to war. Why, then, did they not go to war? Because they considered it more prudent not to do so, or, in other words, because they were afraid of the possible consequences to England of doing so. Now we are not about to argue as to the facts, nor to offer an

opinion one way or the other about them ; but we are going to say a few words on the case thus presented by the writer in the Review. England, as a nation, comes to a decision that Denmark is in the right, and Germany in the wrong. England feels that it is her duty to protect and assist Denmark, the weaker, which is in the right, against Germany, the stronger, which is in the wrong. But England abstains from doing so, because she is not sure what the result and consequences to herself of her interference might be. In the manner of presenting the case to the reader and in the remarks by which it is accompanied, there appears to be a mode of commending national neglect of a recognized duty, on the ground of prudence. But prudence is on the side of a courageous performance of duty. If there had been no room for doubt as to the result of going to war, because success was quite assured and certain, it would have required no exercise of courage to go to war. There was no such apparent disproportion of strength against England as to justify her, supposing her convinced she ought to go to war if strong enough, in abstaining from doing so. Whether she was, in fact, so convinced ; whether she was satisfied that she so understood the merits of the case as to come to any clear decision, are questions which, as we have already said, we are not arguing, and upon which we do not desire to offer an opinion. But do not let us try to agree that, having known as a nation we ought to act in a particular manner under certain circumstances, we did right in abstaining from so acting. Because to wilfully abstain from doing right . . . is to do wrong, in the life of a nation just as much as in the life of an individual man. It is not politic and expedient, but impolitic and inexpedient. To do right is to do what the man or the nation, after diligent enquiry, reasonably believes to be right. When "England expects every man to do his duty." She expects every

man to do what he reasonably believes to be his duty. Nelson was not deterred from fighting a battle which he believed it his duty to fight because the number of ships and guns arrayed against him was greater than of those he had to confront them with. But, however, let us, if this episode in the life of the nation is to be brought up again and again for consideration, remember that the record of history has been written for our learning, and we have everything to gain by reading it fairly. If, on the occasion alluded to, we, as a nation, made a great and lamentable mistake, let us acknowledge to ourselves that such is the fact. The argument as to a disproportion of strength so great as to make it, in the opinion of the reviewer, reasonably impossible for England to have acted alone, should be considered and estimated by itself. On this point we do not hesitate to express a conditional opinion. If it would have been right, under the circumstances, for England to have acted in conjunction with France, it would have been right for England to have acted, and would have been better for her to have acted, alone. The supposition that the condition of England compared with that of armed Germany (or with a part of Germany) was of such weakness that she could not reasonably venture to interfere, will not, we think, if directly stated, be entertained or even patiently listened to by many Englishmen. But, if we assume for a moment that such was actually the case, the question immediately presents itself: Has England, the nation claiming to be foremost in the ranks of civilization, a right to be in such a condition of weakness?

If, again, we take the reviewer's second assumption, that the public of England came to a wrong decision and actually did what was best through ignorance and by endeavouring to avoid what they ignorantly supposed their duty, it is one which cannot be contemplated with satisfaction by those who take a pride in England's his-

tory. Or, once again, if we fall back on a third possible assumption, that the public mind of England was so ill-informed, mystified and confused on the subject as to be incapable of forming any distinct decision or taking action in the matter, this can scarcely be considered more creditable than the preceding.

A mistake, even a great mistake, may be utilized by a nation as well as by an individual, and become of much value. If it be clear that on a great occasion, England acted wrongly, or, through ignorance, did not know how to act, surely it will be well for her to see to it that on the next great occasion she is well informed of the circumstances, and strong enough to do what she, being well informed, reasonably believes it right for her to do.

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