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The Coming War

Pëtr Kropotkin

1913

If I were asked to give my opinion, as a geographer, on the pending conflict on the Afghan frontier, I should merely open the volume of Elisée Reclus's *Geographie Universelle L'Asie, Russe*, and show the pages he has consecrated under this head to the description of the Afghan Turkistan. Summing up the result of his extensive careful and highly impartial studies of Central Asia, Reclus has not hesitated to recognize that, geographically, the upper Oxus and all the northern slope of the Iran and Afghan plateaux belong to the Ural-Caspian region, and that the growing influence of the Slavonian might cannot fail to unite, sooner or later, into one political group, the various parts of this immense basin. And, surely, nobody who has studied these countries -without being influenced by political or patriotic preoccupations will deny that the Afghan Turkistan cannot be separated from the remainder of the Ural-Caspian region. Afghanistan proper may remain for some time the bone of contention between England and Russia; and if it be divided, one way or the other, into two parts by the two rivals-no geographical or physical reasons could be alleged for the partition; but the vassal Khanates of Maimene, Khulm, Kunduz, and even the Badakshan and

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The Nineteenth Century: A monthly Review, online source
RevoltLib.com.

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Wahkran certainly belong geographically and ethnographically to the same aggregation of tribes and small nations which occupies the remainder of the basin of the Amu-daria. Arrangements concluded by diplomatists may provisionally settle other frontiers: these frontiers will be, however, but provisional ones; the natural delimitation is along the Hindoo-Kush and the Paropamisus; Afghan Turkistan must rejoin the now Russian Turkistan.

The necessity, in Central Asia, of holding the upper courses of rivers which alone bring life to deserts, and the impossibility of leaving them in the hands of populations which to-morrow may become the enemies of the valleys; the necessities of traffic and commerce; the incapacity of the population, settled on the left bank of the Upper Amu to defend themselves against raids after they have lost in servility their former virile virtues; nay, even the national feelings of the Uzbek population, however feeble—all these and several other reasons well known to the explorers and students of those regions contribute to connect the whole of the basin of the Amn and the Murghab into one body. To divide it for political purposes would be to struggle against physical, ethnographical and historical necessities. As to the Wakhran, the Shugnan the Badakshan and even the small khanates west of the Pamir, perhaps they could struggle some time for their independence if they were able to rise in arms like the Circassians; but they would necessarily succumb before the power which already holds the high pasture-grounds of the Pamir, since it has taken a footing on the Trans-Alay and about Lake Kara-hul. The fact is, that the Roof of the World already belongs to the generals of the Russian Czar. As soon as the Russian Empire had stepped into the delta of the Amu, the conquest of the whole of the basin of the Oxus with its thinly scattered oases, with its populations which have not yet succeeded in constituting themselves into national units, became a said necessity. The march on Khiva already implied the occupation of Merv; and, as soon as a footing was taken

the bushels of corn exported. It is time to examine what the creation of the class of zamindars, followed by the sub-infeudation and subdivision of rights, which is so well described by Sir John Phear, has produced in Bengal. It is time to ask ourselves whether the millions of Bengal have, each of them, even the handful of rice they need to live, upon. It is not enough to admire at the Indian Museum in London the ivory chairs and chess-boards brought from India by Mr. A. and Mr. B., and each piece of which represents a human life. It is time that the English people should consider and meditate over the model of an Indian bazaar exhibited at the same Museum, and ask themselves how it, happens that, the incredible riches exhibited in the rooms were brought about by the same naked and starving people who are represented in the bazaar around a woman whose whole trading-stock consists of a few handfuls of rice in a bowl. Perhaps they will discover that the very origin of the above riches must lie sought for in the nakedness of the starving human figures whose portraits were exhibited in 1877 at the doors of the Mansion House. And perhaps they will agree then that, before carrying our present civilization to Central Asia and India, we might do better to carry it to the savages who inhabit the den-holes of Moscow and Whitechapel.

on the eastern coast of the Caspian, the conquest of Geok-Tepe, of Merv, and of the last refuges of the Saryks at Penj-deh were unavoidable. The advance no longer depended on the will of the rulers: it became one of those natural phenomena which must be fulfilled sooner or later. Notwithstanding its seeming incoherence its floating population its small tribes now at war with one another and to-morrow allied together for a common raid; notwithstanding the continuous wars between the desert which besieges the oasis-the whole of the Steppe is one organism. The separate parts are perhaps still more closely united together than the settled populations of valleys separated by low ranges of hills. Owing to the impressionability of its populations, the Steppe may remain for years together as quiet, is an English village; but suddenly it will be set on fire, be shattered in its farthest unapproachable Parts, be covered with outbreaks stopping all intercourse for thousands of miles. African travelers know well how rapidly the physiognomy of the desert changes: the same is true with the Central Asian Steppe. Its internal cohesion cannot be destroyed by frontiers colored on our maps. Those who have entered the Steppe with their military forces have no choice; either they must retire immediately, or they will be compelled to advance until they have met with the natural limits of the desert. This is the case with England in the Soudan, and so it is with Russia. She cannot stop before she has reached the utmost limits of the Steppe in the Indian Caucasus and the Hindoo-Kush.

Such is the opinion which a geographer, whatever his nationality, ought to give, and which I should give, but with sadness of heart. For, during the years I spent in Eastern Siberia I was enabled closely to appreciate what the anomalous, monstrous extension of the frontiers of the Russian Empire means for the Russian people. One must have stayed in one of our colonies to see, to feel, and to touch the burden, and the loss of strength which the population of Russia in Europe have to support in maintaining it military organization on the absurdly

extended frontiers of the Empire; to reckon the heavy costs of the yearly extension of the limits of the Empire; the demoralization which repeated conquests steadily throw into the life. (if our country; the expense of forces for assimilating ever new regions the loss resulting from emigration, as the best elements abandon their mother-country instead of helping her to conquer a better future. The expansion of the Russian Empire is a curse to the metropolis We must recognize that. But life in our Asiatic colonies teaches us also that this continual growth is taking the character of a fatality: it cannot be avoided; and even if the rulers of Russia (lid nothing to accelerate it, it still would go oil until the whole of the process is fulfilled.

Of course the expansion might have been slower; it, ought to have been slower. When the St. Petersburg Geographical Society was besieged in 1870-73 with schemes of exploration of the Amu basin, it was in the power of Government either to labour them or to abandon them to their proper destiny. Abandoned to itself, private initiative would have done but very little; and none of the scientific expeditions which used to be the precursors of military advance, would have started at all were they not literally, very literally, supported and patronized by Government. While geologists, botanists engineers, and astronomers came to us every day to offer themselves for penetrating further and further into the Transcaspian region; while we naively interested ourselves in discussions about the testimonies of Greek and Persian writers as to the old Jled of the Amudaria and planned detailed explorations, the Government took advantage of this scientific glow for planning its advance into the Turcoman Steppes. never refusing either money or Cossacks and soldiers to escort the geographers who dreamed of resolving the long debated question as to the Uzbeks. While the Irkutsk geographers and geologists were compelled to start with a few hundred rubles and a broken barometer for the exploration of the great unknown Siberia, thousands of rubles were immediately voted by all possible Ministries for pushing

with regard to agrarian questions is continually changing. For tell years the St. Petersburg rulers may favor self-government in villages, they may take the village communities under their protection; but for the next twenty years they wilt abandon the peasants; they will rely in the newly-conquered region, upon an aristocracy they will try to create at the expense of the laborer. The history Of the Caucasus is nothing but, a series of such oscillations, which resulted in the growth of the Kabardian feudal system and file servitude of the Ossetians.

In Russian Turkistan, too, the reckless confirmation of imaginary Tight,; in land which was carried on on a great scale at the beginning (we do not know if it, continues) endangered the very existence of the Uzbeg villages. And one cannot, but remember, when speaking on this subject the scandalous robbery of Bashkir lands which was carried oil for years at Orenburg and became known only when the Bashkir people were deprived of their means of existence. Of course, the cruelties of a khan at Khiva, or of a Persian shah, will. Dot ,be repeated under Russian rule; but the creation of a Turcoman, a Khivan, and a Bokharian aristocracy, adding the temptations of European luxury to Asiatic pomp, surely will be a much greater evil for the Central-Asian laborers than the atrocities of a khan. With regard to Russian administration itself itself, we must certainly admit, that during the first years after a conquest the choice of administrators is not very bad; but as time goes oil and all enters into smooth water one will be perplexed to make his choice between them; and the officials of a khan. Finally, the time is not far off when Russia will send to Central Asia her merchants, who will ruin whole populations, of which we may see plenty of proofs in Siberia, and not only in Siberia, but also everywhere else where Europeans have made their appearance.

And what, on the other side, could England give? It is time, quite time, to cease repeating load words about civilization and progress, and closely to examine what British rule has done in India. Progress is not measured by the lengths of railways and

peans, more civilized themselves, will be able to come to them, not as conquerors, but as elder brethren, more instructed and ready to help them by word and deed to ameliorate their condition. Two years ago the benefits of Russian 'civilization' were ably enumerated before the London Geographical Society, and the fact was dwelt upon that Russia had liberated slaves wherever they were found. The statement is quite true, and we have good reason to believe M. Petrusevitch when he says that the slaves in the Turcoman Steppes immediately left their masters -as soon as a Russian traveler made his appearance, Surely the liberation of slaves is a great progress, but all is not yet done by saying to a slave, 'You are free; go away;' for the thus liberated prisoner will return to his former or to another master if he has nothing to eat. Let any one read the elaborate work published by

the Tiflis Geographical Society on the liberation of slaves in the Caucasus, and he will see how the Russian Government has accomplished it; and we have no reason to suppose that it has been accomplished better in Central Asia.

As to the agrarian relations, perhaps nowhere in Europe have they the same importance as in Central Asia, on account, of the necessities of co-operative work and common agreement for the digging out and utilization of irrigation-canals. In such countries, the slightest error of the administration in agrarian contests may have, and often has had on the Caucasus and in Russian Turkistan, countless consequences; a simple error, a confirmation of supposed rights, turns a rich garden into a desert. All European administrations are liable to such errors as soon as they come into contact with the Mohammedan agrarian law, and their consequences are too well known with regard to India to dwell upon. True that, as a rule, the Russian Administration, familiarized at home with village communities, does not interfere much with agrarian questions. The Mohammedan population which falls under its rule. But the direction prevailing at St. Petersburg

forward the learned pioneers into the Transcaspian. This willingness to support scientific exploration, precisely in that direction, was obviously the result of a scheme long ago elaborated at the Foreign Office for opening a new route towards the Indian frontier. Far from checking the advance -as it does on the Mongolian frontier- the Government favored it by all means.

Recently, we have been told by the enfant terrible what was the real meaning of this advance, I via I lei-at, to Constantinople -such, we are told, is the watchword of a group of Russian politicians; and when we consider the energy and consciousness displayed by Government in that matter, instead of the formerly quite unsystematical advance in Central Asia we cannot but recognize that the advance in the Transcaspian region has been really made with a determined aim -the seizure of Herat. But in this case, the Afghan frontier question is no more a geographical or ethnographical question. It is not a question of more or less rapidly aggregating into one political body the loose populations scattered north of the 'Indian Caucasus' and the Hindoo-Kush: it becomes a political question, and, as such, an economical one.

There was a time when so-called national jealousies were nothing more than personal jealousies between rulers. Nations were moved to war and thousands were massacred to revenge a personal offense, -or to satisfy the ambition of an omnipotent ruler. But, manners have changed now. The omnipotent despots are disappearing, and even the autocrats are mere toys in the hands of their camarillas which camarillas however personal their aims, still submit to some influence of the opinions prevailing among the ruling classes. Wars are no longer due to personal caprices, and still they are as numerous as, and much more cruel than, they formerly were. The Republican faith which said, 'Suppress personal power, and you will have no wars,' proved to be false. Thus, for instance, in the pending Conflict between England and Russia no personal causes are at work. The Russian Czar entertains personally quite friendly

relations with English rulers, and surely he dreads war much more than any of his soldiers who would be massacred on the battle-fields. As to the English Premier, it is a secret to nobody that he tenderly, much too tenderly, looks on the 'Czar of All the Russias,' and still both countries are ready to fight. Not, that the eighty millions of our peasants sing very warlike songs just now, as they are asking themselves how they will manage to keep body and soul together until the next harvest, the last handful of flour already having been swept up and eaten, together with dust and straw. Not that the English miners or weavers, who also ask themselves how to go through the industrial crisis, are inspired with much hatred towards the famine-struck Russian peasants. But it is so: gunpowder smells in the air, and a few weeks ago we were so near fighting that if we escape from war, it surely will be a very narrow escape. The reason is very plain. Wars are no more fought, for personal reasons, still less are they occasioned by national idiosyncrasies: they are fought for markets

What is, in fact, the chief, the leading principle of our production? Are we producing in order to satisfy the needs of the millions of our own countries? When launching a new enterprise, when creating a new branch of industry, when increasing an old one, and introducing therein the 'iron slaves' we are so proud of—does the manufacturer ask himself whether his produce is needed by the people of his country? Sometimes he does; but, as he produces merchandise only for selling, only to realize certain benefits on selling, he seldom cares about the needs of his own country—he merely asks himself whether he will find customers in any quarter of the earth or not. The English people need some less cottons, and want some cheaper shoes—for instance, for the 110,585 boys and girls under thirteen years of age employed in Great Britain's textile industries—less velvet and some more cheap clothing for the inhabitants of Whitechapel; less fine cutlery, and some more bread. His only preoccupation is to know whether the

themselves to the devil himself, provided he would promise to free them from the Turkish yoke. Once free, they would care little about Russian protection—as about Turkish rule. But apart from a few war correspondents, who eared in England about Selavonians?

Therefore, even the partial success of the Russian Empire during the last war brought about such sad consequences that several generations will hardly repair the evil already done. The Russian people gave the lives of their best children to help the oppressed Bulgarians, and they succeeded only in giving them new oppressors worse than the former. 'The intervention of the Russian autocracy in Serbia, its rule in Bulgaria, have killed in the bud all the excellent germs of healthy development which were growing up in Serbia, and even in Bulgaria, before the war. It has lighted up internal war, it has opened an era of internal discords, which will not be pacified for twenty or fifty years. The heart bleeds when one learns what it is; now going on in Serbia, since Russian generals, inspired by the Court and diplomatists struggle for 'influence.' Will it then be understood in Europe that the only way of resolving 'the Eastern question' is to guarantee a South Slavonic Federation a free life? As to the question of a free issue for Russian merchants, it is quit,—different from that of keeping Constantinople, and the former can be resolved without endangering anybody's liberty in Europe.

And now, to return to Afghanistan. After having said so much about European interests, is it not time to say a few words, at least, about the interests of the Mohammedan population of Central Asia and of the 250,000,000 inhabitants of British India, for the possession of whom we are—so ready to fight? Surely the loose aggregations of Central Asia will finally fall under the influence or the rule, of some European Power. But, at the risk of shocking some of my readers, I must avow that it seems to me most desirable to see them remain as they are, free of that influence, as long as possible—until the Euro-

in Europe and Asia until the problem has been solved it) One way Or another.

Three times during our century in 1828, 1853, and 1877 Russian statesmen have tried the direct, way –that of conquering the Balkan Peninsula. Happily enough for civilization, they have not yet succeeded; but it must be acknowledged that, if they failed, it was not on account of the obstacles put in their way by English diplomatists. These last, to speak frankly, have been very awkward. Lord Beaconsfield found nothing better to oppose to Russian advance than the disintegrating body of the Turkish Empire, or so fantastic a scheme—at least it is attributed to him—as that of uniting Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan into a common action ! As to the Liberal Ministry, they patronized the Russian Czar during the war and Opposed him only when his decimated armies were unable to move farther. The Liberal Ministry came into power, to some extent, in consequence of the sympathies with the revolted and massacred Slavonians which were awakened in the people of England. But the Slavonians were forgotten as soon as Mr. Gladstone was in office. Obeying the influences which represented to him the Russian Czar as a liberator, he confounded the cause of the Slavonians with that of the Moscow manufacturers and St. Petersburg diplomatists; as to the Servians, the Bulgarians, the Bosnians, and the herzegovinians they were banded over, manacled, to Russian despotism and Austro-Hungarian Militarism. Neither Conservatives nor Liberals perceived the only right way of preventing once for all any further attempt of Russia, and of Austria too, on the Balkan Peninsula: that of recognizing the rights of the South Slavonians to independence, that of helping them to conquer it, that of opposing to Russian autocrats—a South Slavonic Federation. Neither France nor England understood at that time that a South Slavonic Federation would be the best darn against Russian and Austrian encroachments; that if the Servians and the Bulgarians accepted Russian intervention surely it was not from mere sympathy: they would have sold

Indian, the CentralAsian, the Chinese markets will absorb the cottons, the velveteen, and the cutlery which lie will manufacture; whether new markets will be opened in Africa or New Guinea. And the producers themselves the laborers being reduced to live on twenty, on fifteen, and even twelve and ten shillings a week for a whole family’ are no customers for the riches produced in England; so dial English produce goes in search of customers everywhere: among Russian landlords and Indian rajahs, among Papuans and Patagonians, but not among the paupers of Whitechapel, of Manchester, of Birmingham And all nations of Europe, imitating England, cherish the same ambition.

To produce for exportation—such is the last word of our economical progress, the watchword of our pseudo-economical science. the more a nation exports of manufactured ware, the richer it is; so were we taught in school, so are we told still by economists. All this, however, was very well with regard to England as long as England’s manufacturing development was by a whole fifty years in advance of that of other countries of Europe, and all markets were open to her produce. But now, all other civilized countries are entering the same line of development; they endeavor, too, to produce their merchandise for selling throughout the world; they also produce for exportation; and, therefore, all our recent history becomes nothing but a steeple-chase for markets, a struggle for customers on whom each European nation may impose the produce which her own producers are rendered unable to purchase. The ’ colonial polities’ of late years mean nothing more. England has in India a colony to which she can export 20,000,000l. of cottons, and whence she can export 11,000,000l. of opium, realizing on both some twentymillions of profits. No wonder that the ruling classes of France, of Germany, and of Russia try in their turn to find anywhere advantageous customers, that they endeavor to their own manufactures, also for exporting—no matter that their own, people may go barefoot, or starve for want

of a Mehlsuppe or of black bread. Russia is now beginning to enter on the same road. Her manufactures being not yet sufficiently developed, she exports the corn taken from the mouths of her peasants. When the tax-gatherer comes, our peasant is compelled to sell so much of his harvest that the remainder hardly do to give him a scanty allowance of black bread for nine months out, of twelve. He will mix grass, straw, and bark with his flour; each spring one-third of our provinces will be on the verge of starvation; -Not the exports will rise, and the economists will applaud the rapid economical development (if the Northern Empire); they will foretell the time when the peasants, having been liberated from the burden of land, will gather in towns and feed the ever-growing manufactures; when Russian merchants also will send their steamers on the oceans in search of customers, and good profits. A new mighty runner joins thus the steeple-chase for markets and colonies.

Of course we may foresee that this anomalous organization of industry, being not a physical necessity, but the result of a wrong direction taken by production, cannot last for ever. Already we hear voices raised against this anomaly. We begin to perceive that, not to speak of countries so thinly peopled as Russia is, even the United Kingdom with its 300 inhabitants per square mile, could yield for the whole of its population the necessary agricultural produce, and give them, together with a healthy occupation, a wealth not to be compared with the actual poverty of the millions. Already Belgium nearly nourishes her 197 inhabitants per square mile with her own produce, and needs to add to her own yearly crops but one-twentieth of their amount, imported from other countries. Yet Belgian agriculture is still very far from the pitch which might be reached, even under the present conditions of agricultural knowledge, not to speak of further improvements. Those are surely not far from the truth who say that, if all Great Britain were so cultivated as some of her estates are, if all ameliorations of her machinery were employed, not for weaving cottons for the earthball, but

in producing what is necessary to her own people, she would give to all her children wealth such as only the few may now dream of. The time will come when it will be understood that a nation which lives on her colonies and on foreign trade is subject to decline, like Spain and Holland, and when applying their experience, their industry, their genius to the benefit of their own people, the civilized nations of Europe will no more consider the Far East and West as 'markets,' but as fields for diffusing the trite principles of humanity and civilization.

But we are still in that period when manufacturing for exportation is considered the only means of giving wealth to a country, and Russia's rising industry follows the example it has in its predecessors. Her manufactures are rapidly developing, and, notwithstanding many obstacles, her exports are steadily increasing. A free issue to the ocean becomes a necessity under these conditions; but this outlet in precisely what fails to the young competitor. The outlet of the Baltic may be shut up at a moment's notice, and that of the Black Sea depends on the good-will of those who will rule at Constantinople. At the same time Southern Russia is daily acquiring more and more importance, not only in consequence of the richness of the soil and the rapid growth of population, but, also on account of the development of industry. The commercial and industrial center of gravity of Russia slowly move, towards the south; but this south has no outlet to the ocean. Under more normal conditions the circumstance would be of no moment, though in foreign hands the Bosphorus still would remain open to pacific navigators. But with the actual nonsensical competition for markets the want of a free issue becomes a real danger. And it is obvious that the Russian Empire will never cease to struggle to conquer the outlet it is in need of. It will recoil before no sacrifices, no difficulties. It is already planning to reach this issue through Asia Minor, perhaps through the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates; it will bleed itself nigh to death, but it will still endeavor to reach its aim: and there will be no peace