GREAT BRITAIN'S AFTER-WAR NAVY

BY ARTHUR H. POLLEN

THE last naval estimates before the war amounted to £53,500,000; the first after the war to £149,000,000. No one, of course, supposed for an instant that this indicated the proposed scale of Great Britain's peace establishment for her sea forces. But, unfortunately, no official statement has been made to indicate how much is due to war commitments, how much a permanent charge. We do not know the government's estimate either of the scale of naval force, or of the sort of naval force this country will need in the future. But our expenditure must be got down to the lowest possible point compatible with safety. Is it possible to analyze the present strategic position and so to form some judgment of the naval strength we shall need? Is it further possible, in view of our experience of war, to indicate the kind of naval force that will be necessary? Can we guess what our minimum expenditure should be?

The first difficulty in answering these questions is that we have not at the present moment any authentic means of estimating the future naval strength of other countries. When the late Mr. W. T. Stead and Lord Fisher joined forces in the early 'eighties to din 'the truth about the navy' into the heads of the British public, they aimed at a fleet strength superior to the combined naval forces of any other two Powers. But in no real sense did we adopt one. In the years just before the war we were virtually building against Germany alone. And had the declaration of war been delayed until the autumn of 1915 our superiority would have been considerable. As things happened, however, in August 1914, the margin was insufficient. Had the Turkish battleship building in England been delivered in July, and some excuse found for bringing the Austrian battleships to Kiel, the Grand Fleet's margin of superiority would have been small indeed. And our naval strength outside of battleships was, as we all know now, woefully inadequate.

The war taught us one or two lessons we must neither forget nor misapply. Every sciolist has it by heart now that we underestimated the value both of small craft and of under-water craft. Let us see to it that we do not swing to the opposite extreme, and forget that battleships always have been, and must always remain, the chief constituents of sea power. The other lesson is that the fleets of your allies may prove far more formidable on paper than on the ocean. The battleship strength of France, Italy, and Russia was almost useless to us, and the American battle squadron joined us only after the German battleship strength had been destroyed by demoralization.

If, then, we seek a formula from the past for framing our naval policy of the future, we should begin by tabulating the naval strength of all our possible enemies; we, should allow a decent discount for the difficulties that stand in the way of their effective combination in war, and then we should propound our programme. But

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

this lands us in an immediate difficulty, for our late enemies have no naval strength at all. Our old feeling about ignoring the United States as a possible opponent not only remains, but is far stronger than it was. And it is to all of us quite inconceivable that, even without a League of Nations, Great Britain, France, and Italy should ever go to war among themselves. In short, if we apply the circumstances of the present to the principles on which we have been brought up, we are led to the disconcerting conclusion that there is a real difficulty in establishing a case for keeping up any navy at all. This, of course, is because these principles only stated part of the case; and it does not complete it to say that there are certain police duties which must be performed at sea, for there is really no reason why the American Navy should not discharge these functions just as efficiently as our own.

The justification of our maintaining the navy is really quite different, and is based upon the fact that whether we look upon ourselves only as an island commonwealth, or as parts of a scattered empire, the security of our sea communications is just — no more and no less than — a first condition of our national life. This security can, of course, never be made quite certain. No one who lived through the year 1917 can be under any illusion on this point. But such certainty as can be obtained follows from the possession, and the right use, of adequate naval forces. And such certainty can follow from nothing else. It sounds like a paradox, but it is just the plain truth, to say, therefore, that if every other country in the world gave up sea force altogether, it would still be impossible for Great Britain to follow their example.

We must, then, have a navy strong enough to secure the nation's and the Empire's sea communications. If they were threatened from no quarter at all, the necessary strength of that navy might well be very small. Are they threatened now? All men would agree in eliminating the United States as a source of naval danger. For the rest it is invidious to particularize. But it is self-evident that the strength of other navies must still afford a measure of the strength of ours. Looked at in this way it is, in a sense, for the United States, Japan, France, and Italy to set the pace. They know as well as we do that British dependence on sea supplies differs from any of theirs, not in degree but in kind. If, for instance, the United States were cut off from the ocean altogether in war, their loss might be considerable. But the fact, by itself, would not imply national surrender as an alternative to national extinction. But that Great Britain could not survive a month of effective blockade is a commonplace so obvious that it is never insisted on. I suggest, then, that the first step toward persuading the allied and associated nations to set a gentle pace in naval armaments, might well be the diligent propagating of this platitudinous but quite fundamental truth.

Yet not perhaps the first step. This surely should be a clear enunciation by the government that the elimination of the German and Austrian navies has already effected an immediate and drastic change in British naval policy. It will still be the policy of a supreme fleet, but we ought to say just how small a fleet we regard as necessary for supremacy. The public statements are either hopelessly vague or dangerously misleading. For instance, the navy estimates for 1914–1915 — when we had four battleships, one battle cruiser, nine light cruisers,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

30 destroyers, and 20 submarines passing into commission, and a far larger programme than this under construction — provided £26,000,000 for shipbuilding, repairs, etc., and £5,700,000 for armaments. In this year's estimates this £31,000,000 has grown to £86,000,000! Now, why should not the government tell the world precisely how much of this is for the completion of contracts made during the war, how much of it is allocated for new construction, how much for the repairs and maintenance of the ships which it is proposed to keep in commission? Why should it not be possible to say frankly what our programme is?

What is it that stands in the way of this being done? It is no doubt an exceedingly difficult thing to do. The personnel of the fleet has expanded from 151,000 to 280,000. We have doubled our battleship strength in the last five years, and as for cruiser and destroyer strength, the growth is enormous. We have about 80 more captains, more than 200 more commanders, 60 more lieutenant commanders, over 400 more lieutenants on the active list to-day than there were in August, 1914. The temptation to commission ships because we have them there, and to employ officers and men because they are available, is undoubtedly great.

It is similarly difficult to cut the loss on ships begun but not finished; to forgo repairing ships which will not be needed when they are repaired. Similarly, it is going to be a disagreeable job cutting down the Whitehall staff, the expense of which is nearly a million a year more than it was in pre-war days. The Admiralty, left to itself, will find the best of reasons for keeping things going on the greatest possible scale. To the onlooker it looks as if there never was a moment when the hand of the strong man was more needed, nor yet a moment when the strong man's hand was so little visible. It is all very deplorable, because, unless the Admiralty cuts its own expenses down they will be cut down from outside, and probably unintelligently. What we need at Whitehall is such a combination of knowledge, of statesmanship, and of technical authority as will convince both this country and foreign countries that we have cut our expenditure as low as it can go, and withal convince the navy that the essentials of naval strength have been maintained.

And this really brings us back to the position that followed on the armistice. At that time no person of sense doubted that there was only one man in the navy who was capable of guiding it from war to peace, while preserving in their integrity all the lessons of war. It was then notorious that the immediate succession of the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet to the post of First Sea Lord of the Admiralty was the policy of the War Cabinet, and was the policy adopted, not only with the consent, but by the advice of those at Whitehall whose business it was to represent such matters to the government. It was also notorious how the execution of that policy came first to be postponed, and now, seemingly, to be abandoned. The point is that it cannot safely be abandoned now.

If naval expenditure and, consequently, the navy, is to be drastically cut down, then the character of the force and of the organization that is to survive must be determined by the best and most authoritative naval guidance at the country's disposal. Had the new naval earl gone to Whitehall four months ago, when he ought to have gone, we should by now have had a programme of retrenchment that would

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have satisfied the two conditions of economy and the national confidence in naval safety. Without the authority of his name it is, I think, useless to expect the economists to be reconciled to essential expenditure, or their opponents to acquiesce in the pruning of our fleets.

And, what is more important than either, unless we bring the widest fighting experience to bear upon our naval policy, we may easily drift back again into making material the test of naval strength instead of the knowledge and spirit necessary for using it right. Never in our history was there less immediate need for a navy strong in ships and weapons, never a greater need for the practical enthronement of courage, wisdom, and scientific thought in control of our naval policy.

The Sunday Times

GEORGE ELIOT AGAIN

BY EDMUND GOSSE

In and after 1876, when I was in the habit of walking from the northwest of London toward Whitehall, I met several times, driven slowly homeward, a victoria which contained a strange pair in whose appearance I took a violent interest. The man, prematurely aging, was hirsute, rugged, satyr-like, gazing vivaciously to left and right; this was George Henry Lewes. His companion was a large, thick-set sybil, dreamy and immobile, whose massive features, somewhat grim when seen in profile, were incongruously bordered by a hat, always in the height of the Paris fashion, which in those days commonly included an immense ostrich feather; this was George Eliot. The contrast between the solemnity of the face and the frivolity of the headgear had something pathetic and provincial about it.

All this I mention, for what trifling value it may have, as a purely external impression, since I never had the honor of speaking to the lady or to Lewes. We had, my wife and I, common friends in the gifted family of Simcox — Edith Simcox (who wrote ingeniously and learnedly under the pen name of H. Lawrenny) being an intimate in the household at the Priory. Thither, indeed, I was vaguely invited, by word of mouth, to make my appearance one Sunday, George Eliot having read some pages of mine with indulgence. But I was shy, and yet should probably have obeyed the summons but for an event which nobody foresaw. On the 18th of December, 1880, I was present at a concert given, I think, in the Langham Hall, where I sat just behind Mrs. Cross, as she had then become. It was chilly in the concert room, and I watched George Eliot, in manifest discomfort, drawing up and tightening round her shoulders a white wool shawl. Four days later she was dead, and I was sorry that I had never made my bow to her.

Her death caused a great sensation,

PRODUCED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED