

‡Civilization is indestructible.

## A NEW WORLD IN THE MAKING

WE are always being told that if there is another great war it may mean the end of civilization. This looks and sounds well and may be useful in reminding people that war is no longer a remote and romantic incident. But it is not true. At least it does not seem to me to be true because I cannot imagine that the whole world will be fighting its hardest in this war.

It is quite possible that such a war would leave Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain in ruins and bankrupt. The mistake is to suppose that civilization is the private property of these Powers, and that it will perish with them. Clearly this is nonsense.

Indeed, I suspect that already, without another war, the main stream of civilization is flowing away from Western Europe. I suspect that the future historian, say, in a couple of hundred years' time, when he looks back at this period and gives his account of the world's progress, will not ask: "Now what were Britain, France, Germany, Italy, doing then?"

I have an idea that it will be quite plain to him that the new world movement born in this century, had passed from the comparatively small countries to the very big ones, from the people on islands or archipelagos to the people living in enormous continents.

In this matter it is not what has been done, but what *is being done* that counts. And obviously one of the signs of a great new civilizing movement is the spread of education. Where knowledge, however rudimentary, is replacing ignorance, there civilization is not merely holding its own, but definitely making headway.

I shall be told that this is not a fair test. A country that I point to as being in the van of progress may be only making up for past deficiencies.

To that I reply that if this making up for past deficiencies is not a gigantic scale, suggesting a colossal eager effort on the part of a whole people, then such a country is moving in the main stream of world culture. Whatever sort

of past it had such a country is one with an important future.

Thus it is that when I hear this talk about the end of our civilization, I try not to be parochial in my outlook but let my mind wander about the globe. I remember all those universities and colleges in the Middle West, where I was lecturing during the autumn before last. There are scores of them.

Some of these American universities that have sprung up on the great plains are of staggering size. The University of Illinois is one of the largest in the world, a whole town of professors and students.

It is easy to criticise these new institutions of learning. It will be a long time before they rival Oxford and Cambridge. They teach a curious hotch-potch of subjects and their standards are not high. But see them, as you must, against the background of these great plains, mostly uncultivated a hundred years ago, and they seem almost miraculous. Against the vast darkness, they are flaring beacons of learning.

I say I let my mind wander about the globe and I remember the accounts that are filtering through from China. Somewhere

in the remote interior of that colossal republic, in places that are not even names to us, professors and students, determined that the aggression of Japan shall not ruin their new way of life, have re-established centres of learning.

Far away from the ruins of their former universities, if necessary in shacks and caves, they are still teaching and learning.

And I also remember, with renewed astonishment and something like awe, what is happening in Russia. We hear a great deal about the size and formidable equipment of the Red Army. There is no harm—and perhaps much good—in that, but what really takes my breath away is the spread of education in these Soviet republics.

This will come to be seen as one of the most dramatic movements in human history. It is an epic of literacy.

I am a popular writer, who has produced what are called, always to my annoyance, "best-sellers." But I and my kind are mere pigmies addressing a coterie of pigmies when compared, in this matter of sales, with the popular Russian authors.

In the last twenty years the sales of the Russian editions alone

of Gorky's works have amounted to 33,000,000 copies. His novel, *Mother*, sold out a neat little first edition of 1,500,000 copies. Great non-Russian authors, such as Dickens, are consumed not in tens of thousands of copies, but in millions.

A distinguished poet in this country, England, will be fortunate if he sells a couple of thousand copies of any new book of verse. A young poet, though he may enjoy a very high reputation, is usually published at a dead loss. In Russia, where twenty-five years ago there was a vast population of completely unlettered peasants, they produce editions of new poetry that number hundreds of thousands of copies.

The theatre is on the same staggering scale. There are over eight hundred of them hard at work, not counting the innumerable amateur dramatic units. Performances of successful plays reach astronomical figures. The mind of the harassed English dramatist reels at them.

And the Soviet stage has presented plays in no fewer than fifty-seven languages. In the Anglo-Saxon communities it is only the tinned products of Messrs. Heinz that reach this significant number.

It is the same story with the Press. In 1937, 8,521 different newspapers were published, and 1,880 miscellaneous periodicals and magazines, with a total circulation of 250,000,000 copies. Let us have no more of these figures or we shall go mad.

Some of these reviews are written in English, and I regularly receive copies of them. What are they like? Paper and print are not as good as ours, but they are good enough. Much of the writing is, of course, somewhat naive and too "ideological."

I read recently in one of these periodicals typical extracts from Russian reviews of a novel of mine. The criticism was intelligent as far as it went, but it did not go much further than a cursory political and sociological examination. The *literary* qualities were almost entirely ignored. There was hardly any evidence that they were dealing with a novelist and his novel. It might have been a Blue Book.

But here again, though adverse criticism should not be silenced, it is necessary to stand back, use the imagination, and see this vast movement against its own background.

Here in this enormous territory

in East Europe and Asia, in what was regarded not so long ago as one of the most backward regions of the globe, a demand for education, the spread of learning, the beginnings of culture, have not merely developed—for that is far too tame—but have raged like a forest fire. Here is a cultural progress like a national stampe.

If the English had developed during the same period at the same rate we should be living in a new

Athens that stretched from Land's End to John o' Groats, instead of wallowing in one gigantic football pool.

So now I close my ears to this talk of a war ending our civilization. It is not only too pessimistic, but also too conceited. Civilization is taking its own road, and in both hemispheres it is not a road easily accessible to the bombers and obliterating tanks.—*J. B. Priestley, condensed from News Chronicle, London.*

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### ASSIMILATORS

THE Japanese are assimilators, not mere imitators. Nothing is taken over as it is. Not even the English language, so much in demand for the access it gives to Western technical knowledge.

With Japanese teachers predominating in its tuition an extraordinary brand of English has grown up. Students taught by Anglo-Saxons have difficulty in passing the University entrance examinations, their pronunciation being at variance with the accepted Japanese English.

The school system includes rigorous physical training, which becomes even more rigorous during military service. The training of the Japanese soldier is unique. In contrast with those of other nations, they are "trained to die." Military training may be said to begin at the age of six, and there is serious competition for entry into the Army, only one candidate in eight being enlisted.—*Oriental Affairs*