

Between East and West (II)

al-Balagh, 12 April 1945

People have not yet finished discussing what Russia actually intended when she decided not to renew her own treaty of friendship and neutrality with Turkey — a treaty which, in her own view, has become unsuited to the circumstances of the new world, and now stands in need of a great deal of amendment and change.

Speculation has abounded over exactly what amendments and changes Russia intends to propose — speculators sometimes restrained, sometimes carried to excess — to the point that certain English papers reported yesterday that Russia intends to demand of Turkey free passage through the Straits, the cession of two of her own border provinces, and an amendment to her own constitution making it genuinely democratic. It seems likely such speculation is not free of considerable exaggeration, and is, in any case, at odds with the declarations Russia has issued regarding the countries she has liberated from Germany. Russia has more than once declared she has no wish to interfere in these countries' own political and social affairs, and no wish to realize any territorial ambitions of her own — she declared this regarding Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, and declared it again just yesterday regarding Austria. It seems unreasonable that this should be Russia's stance toward countries she herself liberated by force of arms, while adopting an entirely different stance toward an independent, neutral country with whom she has had no war whatsoever. Closer to reason, perhaps, is what was reported some time ago: that Russia wants free passage through the Straits on the one hand, and a guarantee of military cooperation with Turkey — should the need for it ever arise — on the other.

But the important thing is that Russia had scarcely finished informing Turkey of her own withdrawal from this treaty, before taking exactly the same step with Japan, informing her too that she would not renew their own treaty of friendship and neutrality — and informing her of this, moreover, in a tone fierce enough to amount very nearly to a challenge and a warning. Speculators rushed to declare that Russia might well declare war on Japan before the treaty even reached its own expiry; others said it was Japan who might declare war on Russia before that same expiry. What is clear is that this Russian step carries real consequences for tomorrow, or the day after; Russia did not take it idly,

and clearly intended by it something with a far wider reach and a far deeper effect than what she achieved by simply cancelling her treaty with Turkey.

What is also clear is that Russia's new stance toward Turkey did not please her British and American allies, while her new stance toward Japan did please these same allies, at least on the surface. Turkey is Britain's own ally and America's own friend, while Japan is both their common enemy; Russian firmness toward the Turks displeases the Allies without doubt, while Russian firmness toward Japan pleases them without doubt. If all of this proves anything, it proves that the Russians have their own independent policy, which they manage and conduct according to their own independent methods as well. Russia had long felt constrained by the political and geographical circumstances governing the Straits and the Black Sea, and wishes to break free of that constraint. Russia had likewise felt constrained by the political and geographical circumstances governing the Far East — especially after Japan's own victory over her at the beginning of this century — and wishes to break free of that constraint too. In short, she wishes to fulfil her own traditional policy, dating back to the era of the Tsars: freedom of action in the Middle East and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and freedom of action in the Far East on the other. Russia will not rest until she possesses, throughout all these regions, the same freedom her two great allies, Great Britain and America, already possess.

The result of all this is that war between Russia and Japan is, without doubt, inevitable: the affairs of the Far East, and its own spheres of influence, ought not to be organized with Russia absent from the peace conference, and Russia must inevitably attend that conference alongside the British, the Americans, the French, and the Chinese. Russia must inevitably, too, avenge herself for the Russo-Japanese War fought at the beginning of this century.

Political circles in Britain and America have felt this Russian direction strongly and clearly. Observers noted that rejoicing in America, for instance, was not especially great over this step Russia took with Japan, and that Americans began asking themselves when war might be declared between the two powers; British rejoicing at this same step was similarly restrained. I am not aware that this step was even mentioned in the British House of Commons, but the British are a practical people, skilled at seizing opportunities, skilled at meeting events and crises as they come, and skilled at taking precautions for the future, and whatever

difficulties and problems it might raise. And although official British bodies have announced no particular plan regarding Russia's stance toward Turkey or her stance toward Japan, the Times published, two days ago, an article of real significance and import concerning the countries of the Middle East, and it seems most likely it will one day publish another article of similar significance and import concerning the problems of the Far East.

As for the article published two days ago, it is genuinely striking, and genuinely practical: the Times's own editor asks for nothing more than this — that Great Britain no longer bear, alone, the burdens of political, military, and economic security in the countries of the Middle East, as she did throughout this war, but that the four great powers share in all of it together. These four great powers, naturally, are Great Britain, France, Russia, and America. The meaning of this proposal is that the Times wants Great Britain to open the door to Russian and American cooperation in the affairs of this East. The affairs of the Near East had been, at the very least, a virtual monopoly of Great Britain and France; now, however, it appears this monopoly is no longer useful, or no longer possible, and it appears fitting, for the general good of humanity — or for humanity's own general needs — that these four significant powers cooperate in overseeing the affairs of this East. Had China possessed strength equal to these four powers, she too would have been invited to share in this oversight; but China's own reach falls short of the Middle East, having no naval or air fleets capable of reaching the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, or the Black Sea — it is enough for her to take part in the affairs of the Far East.

It proposes, too, that the Middle East Supply Centre not be dissolved, since experience has shown it of great use during wartime, and will, it is believed, prove of equally great use after the armistice and the peace itself, serving as a genuine instrument of cooperation between East and West.

You might well ask what stance the countries of the Near and Middle East themselves are meant to take toward this cooperation among the great powers, as the Times's own editor imagines it, and indeed as he portrays it. The stance assigned to these Eastern countries is a very simple, entirely clear one: the stance of minor wards, in need of guardianship, assistance, and guidance, until such day as they come of age. Their own strategically important military positions must be protected, since experience has shown this East holds tremendous

military significance, and that controlling it proves decisive in war. Great Britain has borne the protection of these military positions, backed in this by the Eastern countries themselves, in a manner of real value — but she ought no longer bear this burden alone, from now on. Oversight of this East's economic system is likewise indispensable, both because it lies along the trade route, and because it is itself a significant source of production — something that cannot be dispensed with, in peace or in war.

The Arab League has now been established, and its establishment is a genuinely fine step toward this cooperation between East and West.

All of this the Times depicted, two days ago, in a magnificent, moving fashion, and did not forget, in that same article, to mention the independence of these Eastern countries, and the preservation of their own dignity. And what could be easier than preserving dignity and independence, once protection of the military centres is secured, oversight of economic affairs is secured, and the provision of assistance and guidance to these states, until they can stand on their own, is secured? I do not know whether the Times, in this article, is merely depicting British public opinion as it actually stands, or whether the Times wishes to invite British public opinion to imagine the affairs of the Middle East along exactly these lines.

But the thing I do not doubt in the slightest is that Easterners themselves do not imagine the near future along these lines at all — indeed, they do not imagine it along anything even remotely resembling these lines. They have no wish to pass from the guardianship of a single power to the guardianship of four; they wish, rather, to be rid of guardianship altogether, whether exercised individually or collectively, and to be rid of it plainly, without any ambiguity whatsoever. They cannot tolerate occupation, whatever its reasons, its purposes, or its pretexts; they wish to take part themselves in safeguarding international security, and to bear, themselves, the protection of their own strategically significant positions. They do not want economic oversight — they want economic cooperation, one they themselves organize among their own states on the one hand, and organize between themselves and Europe and America on the other, organized as free, independent adults organize their own affairs, not as minors in need of guardians.

What I can affirm with real confidence is that I am depicting Eastern public opinion with the utmost precision, and that our British friends, and

other Europeans and Americans besides, are gravely mistaken if they imagine they can still address the East in this old language, now thoroughly worn out, which the East has become simply incapable of understanding, or of stomaching any longer.

All of this suggests that the San Francisco Conference is not, by itself, the only thing occupying world public opinion — it is, in fact, a relatively minor matter, measured against the problems that do, and should, occupy people's minds. I do not know which of the two is truly primary, and which merely marginal, but I am very nearly convinced that the problems I have been discussing here are the real substance, and that the San Francisco Conference will convene, and conduct its own business, on the margins of these very problems.

The American Secretary of State informed us, in a speech delivered some days ago, that the San Francisco Conference's own task is a very modest one: to establish a system of international security, to found an International Court of Justice, and to found an International Economic Council. All of these are genuinely fine things — but they form a structure that requires a foundation, and that foundation will not be laid at the San Francisco Conference at all; for the San Francisco Conference will not be a peace conference, will not settle the independence of states demanding independence, nor the completion of independence for states seeking to complete theirs. It leaves all these matters aside, and lays down, instead, an ideal system for achieving and safeguarding peace, once the world has completed the arrangements that will afford it some measure of stability. Egypt, I believe, has understood the conference correctly, grounded in real experience: she first imagined it something vast and gravely important, and assembled for it a correspondingly vast, weighty delegation; then, as the conference's own task grew steadily smaller in scope, our own delegation to it shrank steadily too — until, once the conference's task appeared for what it truly is, genuinely valuable but genuinely modest, our own delegation proved entirely suited to this valuable, modest conference. It has three members, not ten, and three are perfectly sufficient; its head is the Foreign Minister, not the Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister is perfectly adequate to the task.

Let us wish the conference success, and wish our own delegation triumph and good fortune — and let us wish, before all of this and after all of this, that Egypt obtain her own rights whole and complete, untainted by occupation, by guardianship, or by oversight of any kind.