

### **Friedrich von Bernhardi on the Right to Make War**

(Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, translated by Allen H. Powles, published by Edward Arnold, 1914, pages 16 & 18-22; first printed in German in 1911.)

Since 1795, when Immanuel Kant published in his old age his treatise on "Perpetual Peace," many have considered it an established fact that war is the destruction of all good and the origin of all evil. In spite of all that history teaches, no conviction is felt that the struggle between nations is inevitable, and the growth of civilization is credited with a power to which war must yield. But, undisturbed by such human theories and the change of times, war has again and again marched from country to country with the clash of arms, and has proved its destructive as well as creative and purifying power. It has not succeeded in teaching mankind what its real nature is. Long periods of war, far from convincing men of the necessity of war, have, on the contrary, always revived the wish to exclude war, where possible, from the political intercourse of nations.

This wish and this hope are widely disseminated even today. The maintenance of peace is lauded as the only goal at which statesmanship should aim. This unqualified desire for peace has obtained in our days a quite peculiar power over men's spirits. This aspiration finds its public expression in peace leagues and peace congresses; the press of every country and of every party opens its columns to it. The current in this direction is, indeed, so strong that the majority of governments profess—outwardly, at any rate—that the necessity of maintaining peace is the real aim of their policy; while when a war breaks out the aggressor is universally stigmatized, and all governments exert themselves, partly in reality, partly in pretence, to extinguish the conflagration.

...Everyone will, within certain limits, admit that the endeavors to diminish the dangers of war and to mitigate the sufferings which war entails are justifiable. It is an incontestable fact that war temporarily disturbs industrial life, interrupts quiet economic development, brings widespread misery with it, and emphasizes the primitive brutality of man. It is therefore a most desirable consummation if wars for trivial reasons should be rendered impossible, and if efforts are made to restrict the evils which follow necessarily in the train of war, so far as is compatible with the essential nature of war. All that the Hague Peace Conference has accomplished in this limited sphere deserves, like every permissible humanization of war, universal acknowledgement. But it is quite another matter if the object is to abolish war entirely, and to deny its necessary place in historical development.

This aspiration is directly antagonistic to the great universal laws that rule all life. War is a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the life of mankind which cannot be dispensed with, since without it an unhealthy development will follow, which excludes every advancement of the race, and therefore all real civilization. "War is the father of all things." (Heraclitus of Ephesus) The sages of antiquity long before Darwin recognized this.

The struggle for existence is, in the life of nature, the basis of all healthy development. All existing things show themselves to be the result of contesting forces. So in the life of man the struggle is not merely the destructive, but the life-giving principle. "To supplant or to

be supplanted is the essence of life," says Goethe, and the strong life gains the upper hand. The law of the stronger holds good everywhere. Those forms survive which are able to procure themselves the most favorable conditions of life, and to assert themselves in the universal economy of Nature. The weaker succumb. This struggle is regulated and restrained by the unconscious sway of biological laws and by the interplay of opposite forces. In the plant world and the animal world this process is worked out in unconscious tragedy. In the human race it is consciously carried out, and regulated by social ordinances. The man of strong will and strong intellect tries by every means to assert himself, the ambitious strive to rise, and in this effort the individual is far from being guided merely by the consciousness of right. The life-work and the life-struggle of many men are determined, doubtless, by unselfish and ideal motives, but to a far greater extent the less noble passions—craving for possessions, enjoyment and honor, envy and the thirst for revenge—determine men's actions. Still more often, perhaps, it is the need to live that brings down even natures of a higher mould into the universal struggle for existence and enjoyment.

There can be no doubt on this point. The nation is made up of individuals, the state of communities. The motive that influences each member is prominent in the whole body. It is a persistent struggle for possessions, power, and sovereignty, which primarily governs the relations of one nation to another, and right is respected so far only as it is compatible with advantage. So long as there are men who have human feelings and aspirations, so long as there are nations who strive for an enlarged sphere of activity, so long will conflicting interests come into being and occasions for making war arise.

"The natural law, to which all laws of nature can be reduced, is the law of struggle. All intra-social property, all thoughts, inventions, and institutions, as, indeed, the social system itself, are the result of the intra-social struggle, in which one survives and another is cast out. The extra-social, the super-social, struggle which guides the external development of societies, nations, and races, is war. The internal development, the intra-social struggle, is man's daily work—the struggle of thoughts, feelings, wishes, sciences, activities. The outward development, the super-social struggle, is the sanguinary struggle of nations—war. In what does the creative power of this struggle consist? In growth and decay, in the victory of the one factor and in the defeat of the other! This struggle is a creator, since it eliminates." (Claus Wagner, "Der Krieg als schaffendes Weltprinzip.") ["War as a world-creating principle."]

That social system in which the most efficient personalities possess the greatest influence will show the greatest vitality in the intra-social struggle. In the extra-social struggle, in war, that nation will conquer which can throw into the scale the greatest physical, mental, moral, material, and political power, and is therefore the best able to defend itself. War will furnish such a nation with favorable vital conditions, enlarged possibilities of expansion and widened influence, and thus promote the progress of mankind; for it is clear that those intellectual and moral factors which insure superiority in war are also those which render possible a general progressive development. They confer victory because the elements of progress are latent in them. Without war, inferior or decaying races would easily choke the

healthy budding elements, and a universal decadence would follow. "War," says A.W. von Schlegel, "is as necessary as the struggle of the elements in nature."

Now, it is, of course, an obvious fact that a peaceful rivalry may exist between peoples and states, like that between the fellow members of a society, in all departments of civilized life—a struggle that need not always degenerate into war. Struggle and war are not identical. This rivalry, however, does not take place under the same conditions as the intra-social struggle, and therefore cannot lead to the same results. Above the rivalry of individuals and groups within the state stands the law, which takes care that injustice is kept within bounds, and that the right shall prevail. Behind the law stands the state, armed with power, which it employs and rightly so, not merely to protect, but actively to promote, the moral and spiritual interests of society. But there is no impartial power that stands above the rivalry of states to restrain injustice, and to use that rivalry with conscious purpose to promote the highest ends of mankind. Between states the only check on injustice is force, and in morality and civilization each people must play its own part and promote its own ends and ideals. If in doing so it comes into conflict with the ideals and views of other states, it must either submit and concede the precedence to the rival people or state, or appeal to force, and face the risk of the real struggle—i.e., of war—in order to make its own views prevail. No power exists which can judge between states, and makes its judgments prevail. Nothing, in fact, is left but war to secure to the true elements of progress the ascendancy over the spirits of corruption and decay.

It will, of course, happen that several weak nations unite and form a superior combination in order to defeat a nation that in itself is stronger. This attempt will succeed for a time, but in the end the more extensive vitality will prevail. The allied opponents have the seed of corruption in them, while the powerful nation gains from a temporary reverse a new strength that procures for it an ultimate victory over numerical superiority. The history of Germany is an eloquent example of this truth.

Struggle is, therefore, a universal law of nature, and the instinct of self-preservation that leads to struggle is acknowledged to be a natural condition of existence. "Man is a fighter." Self-sacrifice is a renunciation of life, whether in the existence of the individual or in the life of states, which are agglomerations of individuals. The first and paramount law is the assertion of one's own independent existence. By self-assertion alone can the state maintain the conditions of life for its citizens, and insure them the legal protection that each man is entitled to claim from it. This duty of self-assertion is by no means satisfied by the mere repulse of hostile attacks; it includes the obligation to assure the possibility of life and development to the whole body of the nation embraced by the state.

Strong, healthy, and flourishing nations increase in numbers. From a given moment they require a continual expansion of their frontiers, they require new territory for the accommodation of their surplus population. Since almost every part of the globe is inhabited, new territory must, as a rule, be obtained at the cost of its possessors—that is to say, by conquest, which thus becomes a law of necessity.

The right of conquest is universally acknowledged. At first the procedure is pacific. Overpopulated countries pour a stream of emigrants into other states and territories. These submit to the legislature of the new country, but try to obtain favorable conditions of existence for themselves at the cost of the original inhabitants, with whom they compete. This amounts to conquest.

The right of colonization is also recognized. Vast territories inhabited by uncivilized masses are occupied by more highly civilized states, and made subject to their rule. Higher civilization and the correspondingly greater power are the foundations of the right to annexation. This right is, it is true, a very indefinite one, and it is impossible to determine what degree of civilization justifies annexation and subjugation. The impossibility of finding a legitimate limit to these international relations has been the cause of many wars. The subjugated nation does not recognize this right of subjugation, and the more powerful civilized nation refuses to admit the claim of the subjugated to independence. This situation becomes peculiarly critical when the conditions of civilization have changed in the course of time. The subject nation has, perhaps, adopted higher methods and conceptions of life, and the difference in civilization has consequently lessened. Such a state of things is growing ripe in British India.

Lastly, in all times the right of conquest by war has been admitted. It may be that a growing people cannot win colonies from uncivilized races, and yet the state wishes to retain the surplus population that the mother country can no longer feed. Then the only course left is to acquire the necessary territory by war. Thus the instinct of self-preservation leads inevitably to war, and the conquest of foreign soil. It is not the possessor, but the victor, who then has the right. The threatened people will see the point of Goethe's lines: "That which thou didst inherit from thy sires, in order to possess it, must be won."