

THE CRISIS OF BRITAIN
AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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THE CRISIS OF BRITAIN AND THE BRITISH EMPIRE

by

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New and Revised Edition



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PREFACE TO THE REVISED 1957 EDITION

THIS study of the contemporary problems of Britain and the British Empire was first published in 1953, and was based in part on an earlier study, *Britain's Crisis of Empire*, published in 1949. It has since gone through a series of reprints with minor revisions. The present new edition has been extensively revised, with some new chapters and considerable new material, and has been brought up to date to the beginning of 1957. At the same time the opportunity has been taken to revise in the light of further experience some of the particular political estimations in the first edition, especially with regard to the role of India since 1947 and the developments in West Africa.

Since the publication of the first edition the developments of the past half decade have considerably carried forward the whole situation described in this book. They have underlined and brought into the forefront of attention the problems discussed, which were still widely ignored in 1949 and even in 1953, and have increased the urgency of the lines of solution proposed.

In particular, the landmark of the Suez war in 1956 has made visible to all Britain's changed position in the world, and the necessity of a new approach, alike for Britain's international policy, and for Britain's internal problems.

It is now universally recognised that Britain's chronic crisis since the war reflects deeper and more permanent changes than post-war unsettlement or other temporary factors. The old privileged monopolist position of Britain in the world has vanished for ever; and the measure of precarious prosperity so far maintained on the reserves accumulated in the preceding period is built on an unstable foundation. A new basis for a free and prosperous Britain, no longer dominating or exploiting other nations, and living in peace and friendship with the rest of the world, needs to be established. This is the central problem which is the underlying theme of the present book.

It is no less universally recognised that colonialism is on the way out. The majority of former colonial and dependent peoples have established their independent states during the

past decade. It is true that colonialism is not dying without stubborn rearguard actions. Colonial wars have continued to stain the record of these years. The giant Western monopoly combines continue to hold and exploit vast colonial assets and draw fabulous profits from poverty-stricken peoples. The effective independence of the newly independent nations is in many cases considerably qualified by economic and strategic limitations or military occupation. Hence the battle against colonialism, whether in its old or new forms, is still intense. But the approaching victory of the peoples against colonialism all over the world draws ever more closely into view.

It is equally recognised that a new world has come into being during this past decade, on the basis of this advancing liberation of the majority of mankind from the bonds of former colonial or semi-colonial dependence. India and China, the two most numerous nations in the world, now stand in the forefront of independent world powers. The Afro-Asian nations, whose representatives met for the first time in independent conference at Bandung in 1955, without the participation of any imperialist power, and reached unanimous conclusions for peace and non-aggression and against colonialism and military blocs, constitute the majority of mankind. Increasingly close relations of friendship, of political co-operation for peace, and of economic co-operation to carry forward reconstruction and end colonial economy, have developed between the socialist world and the newly independent nations. Together, these constitute the overwhelming majority of mankind now outside the orbit of imperialism. The imperialist sector has become visibly the minority sector. This new world alignment has begun to receive a partial reflection also in the United Nations, and will be further reflected, when China receives its rightful representation in the United Nations.

All these new developments have profoundly changed the character and entire context of the questions of Britain and the British Empire considered in this book. The existing forms of the British Empire have become increasingly fluid and transitional.

What is to be the future of Britain, and of the wide array of countries, whether already independent or still subject, at present linked with Britain within the sphere of the British Commonwealth or Empire, in this new world situation? This

is the question which it is the purpose of this book to examine.

Two paths open out.

One path is for Britain to recognise the new world situation and to carry through a corresponding radical transformation of policy: that is, to abandon the ill-fated attempts to maintain the old doomed imperialist basis, with the consequent crippling rearmament, colonial wars and military alliances; to embrace wholeheartedly the aims of peace, peaceful co-existence and disarmament; to establish new non-imperialist relations of friendship and co-operation with all the countries of the existing Commonwealth or Empire on the basis of national independence and equal rights; and to reconstruct Britain's economy on a non-imperialist basis, so as to utilise Britain's resources for the needs of the people and to enable Britain to play a progressive part in the world.

The other path is for Britain ever more desperately to endeavour to maintain and shore up the crumbling imperialist basis; to incur the deepening hostility of the majority of mankind; to cripple home economy and depress the standards of the people with the burdens of crushing armaments and overseas military commitments; and thereby to hasten the further decline of Britain.

The choice between these two paths has still to be finally settled in the arena of political battle. During the most recent period partial steps have been attempted along either path in turn.

At the Geneva Conference of Heads of States in the summer of 1955 a preliminary initiative was taken in the direction of peaceful co-existence. The representatives of the four leading powers taking part agreed in principle on the aim of endeavouring to end the dangerous "cold war" period of international relations and to reach negotiated settlements on all outstanding issues. The measure of relaxation of tension which followed, and new hope of peace for the world, brought relief in every country and was universally acclaimed. There is no doubt that such a prospect would open out the best hopes for Britain, equally to fulfil a progressive and independent role in international relations, and to approach a long-term solution of the heavy economic problems of the present phase.

But the very success of the Geneva Summit Conference led to a reverse movement from quarters alarmed at its outcome.

In the improved international situation following Geneva the progressive confidence of the peoples in all countries rose high; the national liberation movement swept forward at an unprecedented pace; and the economic advance of socialism made possible increased socialist aid to the newly independent countries to reconstruct their economies on a basis independent of imperialism. After Bandung and Geneva it was clear that the whole balance of the world was changing at an accelerated pace. Nowhere was this more manifest than in the Middle East.

Alarmed at this prospect, the Conservative Government reversed the engines, and turned anew to the discredited "policies of strength", the cold war and military aggression. At the Foreign Ministers' Conference at Geneva in the autumn of 1955 the Western powers blocked the fulfilment of the Geneva Directive for a European Security Treaty as the framework for German unification, such as would have made possible the replacement of the North Atlantic Treaty and the Warsaw Pact and the withdrawal of occupying military forces from Europe. In the Middle East the British and French Governments turned to the methods of demonstrations of military power, culminating in the Suez war at the end of 1956.

The disastrous outcome of the Suez war demonstrated to all the bankruptcy of this line of policy. So far from restoring British power in the Middle East, the Suez war registered the collapse of British power in the Middle East. More. In the eyes of world opinion it registered the eclipse of Britain as a leading world imperialist power. At home its outcome dealt a further blow to the already shaken economic position, and deepened popular disillusionment with the policies of the ruling class and imperialism.

Hence the experience of the recent period has led to increasingly widespread recognition that a new policy must be attempted, and that such a new policy must face in a bold and realistic fashion the change in Britain's position in the world.

For the British people, who have so long played a leading part in the historical advance of humanity during the entire modern era, there can be no more urgent problem to-day—since it is intricately bound up with all their domestic problems—than to find the basis of relations with the new world that is arising. Britain has long been the centre of the largest colonial empire. Even with the restricted area of the present

direct colonial empire, this is still the largest remaining colonial empire. The entire economic and political structure in Britain has been built on this basis of empire; and this basis has also profoundly affected the conditions of development of the labour movement. To-day it is manifest that an impasse has been reached on the old basis. This impasse is reflected equally in the chronic difficulties of the economic situation, and in the deadlock and even contradiction manifest in the political situation. The time is ripening for a new advance.

It is the thesis of this study that the imperialist phase of Britain's development has never corresponded to the true interests of the British people, and that its inheritance, with the consequent policies pursued by Britain's rulers during the present period, underlies the problems of modern Britain.

The solution of Britain's internal problems, and of the future of the British labour movement, cannot be separated from the central necessity to advance to a new non-imperialist basis, which can alone make possible the radical reconstruction of Britain's economy and open the way to a new future for the British people.

At the time when the first version of this study appeared in 1949, and the fuller and more developed survey in 1953, there was still very little disposition to recognise these deeper problems of Britain's position in the modern world. In 1949 the supposed triumph of "recovery" under the Labour Government, and in 1953 the supposed triumph of "recovery" under the Conservative Government, blinded the general outlook to the deeper problems requiring to be faced. This book, which represented the first attempt to treat the problems of Britain and the British Empire taken as a whole (not of Britain separately, or of the Empire separately) was received with that almost complete silence in the general press which is the customary tribute of the contemporary press in this country to any work which endeavours to break new ground.

However, the facts themselves cannot be so easily exorcised. The facile dreams of "recovery" without facing the basic problems have now twice faded. It is to be hoped that the time is opportune for a more serious consideration of the problems which the British people are having to face and solve.

March, 1957

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THIS is a book about Britain's present problems. It is also about the British Empire. There is a reason why the two are treated here in combination in one book—although, to the best of the writer's knowledge, no book about the two together has so far been written by any other author.

There have been plenty of books about post-war Britain, Britain's economic problems, Britain's new legislative or administrative achievements, Britain's Second Elizabethan Age, Britain's political prospects, or the solution for Britain's ills.

There have been plenty of books about the modern developments of the British Empire or Commonwealth or Commonwealth and Empire, the decline of the Empire, the rebirth of the Empire, Empire trade, Empire economic problems, the development of under-developed territories, the colonial peoples' political prospects, or the relations of the Empire and Europe and America and the "Atlantic Community."

But there has been no book (apart from an earlier very short study by the present author) about the crisis of Britain and the British Empire—taken as a unity. Yet it is precisely this unity (a unity characteristically full of contradictions and conflicts) that is the secret of the understanding of Britain's crisis to-day.

The present book is based in part on an earlier short study entitled *Britain's Crisis of Empire*, which was originally published in 1949, passed through several editions, and has been translated and published in over a dozen countries and languages abroad.

The purpose of *Britain's Crisis of Empire* was to examine Britain's crisis against the background of the Empire. At the time when it was published, the prevailing fashion was still to ascribe Britain's difficulties to temporary short-term causes arising from the second world war and post-war disturbances of international equilibrium, and to seek the solution in the various short-term expedients which were being adopted. The argument of *Britain's Crisis of Empire* sought to show that the