WAR and the LIBERAL CONSCIENCE

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The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in the University of Cambridge, 1977

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In Memoriam

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

This book is an attempt to describe what might be defined as 'The Liberal Dilemma'. On the one hand the liberal tradition, as defined in these pages, is pacific if not actually pacifist. It regards war as an unnecessary aberration from normal international intercourse and believes that in a rational, orderly world wars would not exist: that they can be abolished, as slavery was abolished, by a collective effort of the conscience of mankind. On the other hand it accepts that wars may have to be fought, either to ensure the liberation of groups suffering under alien oppression, or to ensure the survival of those societies in which the liberal ethic has achieved dominance. The maintenance of 'peace' may involve the continued toleration of injustices against which the liberal conscience is the first to revolt; or it may make possible the incremental expansion of totalitarian societies bent on the destruction of the whole 'bourgeois' structure on which the liberal ethic is based.

Major war, in the sense of formal, deliberate and total conflict between sophisticated industrialised states, has today become so destructive that even the most bellicose and revisionist of régimes is unlikely to contemplate it except as a last resort. The 'great battle sword' described by Clausewitz in his study 'On War' has become almost too heavy to lift. But such conflicts do still occur between minor states such as Iraq and Iran, and the use of force short of war by major states, whether by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, the United States against Libya, or by the United Kingdom to reclaim the Falkland Islands, has become almost a standard feature of the international scene. But the principal armed conflicts which characterise the closing decades of the twentieth century have been those 'wars of libera-

tion' which, originating in Central and South Eastern Europe in the early nineteenth century, have since spread throughout the rest of the world.

These conflicts present the 'liberal dilemma' in a particularly acute form. On the one hand, the plight of peoples such as the Palestinians, deprived of their land or living in it under an alien hegemony, or of the 'black' majority in South Africa, deprived of basic 'political rights', is profoundly offensive to the traditional 'liberal conscience'. On the other, the methods of terrorism and intimidation used to pursue these 'just causes' are equally repugnant. The liberal solution is to demand that the insurgents should abjure violence and pursue their objectives by rational discussion – a solution based on the underlying assumption that all such conflicts arose from misperception and misunderstanding and can always be resolved by peaceful negotiation between people of good will. But very often, force is used only after peaceful negotiation has, over many years, ceased to produce any result except to prolong an unacceptable *status quo*. Sooner or later liberals may have to choose between acknowledging that *status quo* with all its injustices as the lesser of two evils, while consoling themselves with the hope that it will provide the opportunity for incremental change; or else accepting that the cause of the insurgents is so just that any violence is justified which holds out the prospect of forwarding it. The arguments of Norman Angell and others at the time of the Balkan Wars in 1912, that Turkish oppression itself constituted institutionalised war and that a struggle for its overthrow was justified in the cause of peace, find many echoes in the contemporary world.

This is not the only problem confronting the liberal today. All too often these 'struggles for liberation' result in the emergence of profoundly illiberal regimes. They may be Marxist, demanding total and uncritical acceptance by the entire population of the rule and doctrine of 'the Party'. They may be crude dictatorships. They may involve ethnic oppression little different in kind from that of the *ancien régime*. They may take

the form, as in Iran, of a fanatical theocracy. Cumulatively such régimes can add up to a substantial proportion of the world community which rejects that entire system of values derived from the Enlightenment which Western liberals have accepted as axiomatic. Under such circumstances the international institutions which those liberals created in order to universalise their ideals of freedom of speech, freedom of communication, freedom of uninhibited intercourse between the peace-loving peoples of the world – the creation, in short, of a global community in which nation would speak peace unto nation and neither would there be war any more – these institutions either become the instruments of an entirely different and hostile system of values, or cease to function altogether.

In the light of these developments it is not surprising if the basic assumptions of liberalism are being subjected to hostile scrutiny even in the country, the United States, which has most passionately embraced them. A 'new conservatism' has grown up in America which abjures the ideological universalism which inspired American policy for a generation after the Second World War and maintains instead that the United States should be guided, as states have normally been guided throughout history, by its own perception of its national interests. This is not the conservatism practised, if not preached, by Dr. Henry Kissinger between 1968 and 1974, which treated ideological adversaries as potential partners in the preservation of a mutually acceptable *status quo*. Rather it assumes that the United States and the Soviet Union are engaged in an endless and ineluctable conflict in which there can be no common interests and to which there can be no foreseeable resolution: a conflict arising out of precisely the liberal beliefs which the United States upholds and to which the principles and practice of Marx-Leninism pose a permanent challenge.

In such a conflict, according to those neo-conservatives, one cannot be too scrupulous in one's choice of weapons, or of allies. 'Wars of liberation' are certainly to be encouraged if they weaken the adversary, but not if they undermine the stability or threaten

the existence of friendly states. The internal régimes of those friendly states must not be too critically examined: few have the traditions and social structure in which a stable democracy can be expected to flourish, and so long as they remain open to Western influence a gradual process of improvement will take place which sooner or later will result in peaceful change, as it did in Spain, in Portugal, in Argentina and the Philippines. But in any case one must not shrink from the use, or threatened use, of force, whether to assist friendly régimes or to destabilise and intimidate hostile ones. The lesson of the twentieth century belies the promise of the eighteenth: the role of enlightened reason will not be disseminated throughout the world through the peaceful operation of some hidden hand. It needs muscle behind it.

Whatever one may feel about the principles and practice of these neo-conservatives, their teaching at least simplifies for a mass electorate the complexities of a highly diverse world. But traditional liberals who believe that war can and should be outlawed as an instrument of national policy, who have indeed seen their beliefs embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, but who are yet everywhere confronted by armed conflicts for which the protagonists can call in justification liberal principles whose pedigree is as impeccable as their own, will remain perplexed. The principles of political legitimacy may have been transformed since the eighteenth century, but the disputes over their application remain no less bitter, and the eruption of those disputes into armed conflict no less frequent.

The picture is not totally bleak. One of Kant's prescriptions for perpetual peace, that 'the Civil Constitution shall in every State be Republican' (i.e. fully representative of the plurality of interests within them) has been validated. Over the past two centuries such pluralist democracies have seldom fought one another, and the prospect of their doing so in the future remains very remote indeed. But democracies of this kind, which today collectively constitute what is loosely called 'the West', are none the less regarded with fear and hostility by the Soviet

Union and with resentment and hostility by much of the Third World. The liberal conscience enjoins that this hostility should be overcome so far as possible by continual rational action and discourse, but the dilemma remains unresolved. Can this peace-loving, prosperous and increasingly transnational community of liberal democracies preserve its interests and extend its influence if, in pursuit of its highest ideals, it abjures the use of armed force?

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Introduction

GEORGE MACAULAY TREVELYAN

If one were to play a game of 'free association' with the name of George Macaulay Trevelyan, in whose honour these lectures were delivered, one of the first ideas to rise to the surface of the mind would almost certainly be the concept, vague but splendid, of Liberalism. Trevelyan was the last of the great Victorian liberal historians – perhaps the last of the great Victorian liberals. For him history really was the tale of freedom broadening down from precedent to precedent. For him the seventeenth century was the era when Englishmen burst the bonds of monarchical tyranny, as the United States was to burst them a hundred years later; and the nineteenth century was the age when the people of Europe, pre-eminently the Italians, came to share the blessings of freedom and nationhood in their turn. After that everything went wrong. 'I do not understand the age we live in' he wrote in a private letter in 1926,[1] 'and what I do understand I do not like.' The signposts of the past as he understood it bore little relevance to the deepening confusion of the present. Other liberals, notably his brother Charles, who will figure largely in the following pages, strode boldly forward into the new age under the banner of socialism, seeing in the confusion of their times only new challenges and new opportunities for the old ideals. George Macaulay Trevelyan watched with puzzled sympathy, but could not bring himself to join them.

Closely associated with the concept of Liberalism, in our image of George Trevelyan, would be that of War. Trevelyan

[1] Transcribed by the Right Hon. the Lord Trevelyan K.G. in his unpublished memoir on the Trevelyan family, to which I am indebted for other family details.

was that not uncommon phenomenon, a profoundly pacific and kindly man with a passionate interest in military affairs. The floor of the family home in Northumberland was laid out with a vast war game to which the Trevelyan brothers devoted themselves whenever they had the opportunity. The two great trilogies on which Trevelyan's reputation rests, his study of Garibaldi and his work on *England under Queen Anne*,[2] were pre-eminently military histories in which lavish descriptions of military operations enjoyed pride of place. He had none of our contemporary inhibitions about writing 'drum and trumpet history'. War was for him the very stuff of history, and he found no difficulty in reconciling it with his Liberalism. How have men gained and preserved their liberties, he would have asked, except by fighting? John Bright, the peaceful (though by no means pacifist) Quaker, was one of his heroes, but Garibaldi was another, and he saw no conflict between the two. Nor indeed did they. Bright's journals report Garibaldi greeting him and his Quaker colleagues when he visited England with the words 'I am of your principles, for if I am a soldier I am a soldier of peace'.[3] He was not the last 'freedom-fighter' to make such a claim.

As a young man Trevelyan set himself against the militant imperialism of the Joseph Chamberlain era, and opposed the Boer War. He was, oddly enough, prominent as a 'pro-Boer' while his brother Charles was flirting with Liberal Imperialism. In 1914 the roles were to be reversed. Charles resigned his ministerial post at the Board of Education in protest against Britain's declaration of war. He helped to found the Union for Democratic Control; he laboured unceasingly for a negotiated peace with Germany, and in 1918 he joined the Labour Party; informing his brother Robert that 'the only way to internationalism is through revolution . . . it is only through unity among the socialists of the world that internationalism

[2] Garibaldi's *Defence of the Roman Republic* (London 1907). *Garibaldi and the Thousand* (London 1909). *Garibaldi and the Making of Italy* (London 1911). *England under Queen Anne*, 3 vols (London 1930-4).

[3] Quoted in G.M. Trevelyan, *John Bright* (London 1913) p. 332.

can begin.'[4] It was a course which was to lead him to the far Left of the Labour Party and indeed beyond it. In 1939, together with Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan, he was to be expelled from the Party for his continued advocacy of a Popular Front with the Communists. But his brother George had no qualms about the Great War. This conflict was not, he wrote to Charles, simply another manifestation of upper-class militarism such as Bright had attacked in the Crimea and he had himself opposed in South Africa. 'This war,' he told him, 'is life and death.' He was to serve with gallantry and enthusiasm among his beloved Italians in what he saw as the last stage of that struggle for unity whose early history he had chronicled with such loving care.

The Trevelyan brothers can be seen as embodying two distinct traditions in the liberal philosophy about war and international relations, and it is with the development and interaction of these strands that this work will be concerned. Both have a long and honourable lineage and remain strong sources of inspiration today. I have chosen the term 'the liberal conscience', for the word 'conscience' implies not simply a belief or an attitude but also an inner compulsion to act upon it. And by 'liberals' I mean in general all those thinkers who believe the world to be profoundly other than it should be, and who have faith in the power of human reason and human action so to change it that the inner potential of all human beings can be more fully realised. This excludes on the one hand those conservatives who accept the world as it unalterably is and adjust to it with more or less of a good grace; and on the other those disciples of Karl Marx and other determinists who see men as trapped in predicaments from which they can be rescued only by historical processes which they may understand but which they are powerless to control. It is a definition which today would probably cover almost the entire range of political thinkers in Britain and the United States. But it was a doctrine which sprang from obscure roots and took many centuries to grow to its present maturity.

[4] Trevelyan papers, loc. cit.