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FRANCE AND CROMWELL.

BY HERBERT HAINES.

WHETHER we do, or do not, accept Mr. Palgrave's¹ novel and somewhat daring estimate of Oliver Cromwell, as the drudge and tool of the army, we shall, at all events, probably agree with Von Ranke, that the Protector was personally responsible for the attack on Spain and for the French alliance.²

And, as Cromwell's foreign policy was peculiarly his own, so it was long held to constitute his especial glory; his admirers were never tired of parading its success and praising its vigour, and his heartiest haters admitted grudgingly that, tyrant and regicide as he was, no 'patriot king' could, in his dealings with foreign states, have proved himself more mindful of the interests and honour of England.

Recently, however, cultured public opinion seems to have changed in this matter. It is recognised that Cromwell, in assisting the rising power of France and in accelerating the fall of Spain, was really doing his best to bring about that state of things which compelled Europe, under English guidance, to wage a costly, and for a time dubious, war of independence against the France of 'le Grand Monarque.'

Compelled to admit the truth of this, the Protector's champions have chosen to vindicate his heart at the expense of his head; and to argue that, if unwise, if led away by religious animosities and conservative prejudices into viewing Spain as still the great enemy of Protestantism and freedom,

¹ *Oliver Cromwell the Protector.*

² *History of England*, vol. iii. page 213.

at all events, Cromwell gave splendid proof of his unselfishness, by engaging in a naval war, which would give strength and glory to a service in whose success he could have no selfish interest, instead of leading against France an army which he had created, and at the head of which he would have won a dazzling succession of brilliant victories.

But is this really the truth? Was Oliver Cromwell's policy really mistaken, was it really unselfish? The argument that Cromwell was misled in his foreign policy by conservative and religious prejudices, seems to assume that the man's whole nature changed when he examined the affairs, and estimated the condition, not of England, but of Europe.

Friends and foes alike will acknowledge that a most marked feature of Cromwell's character was the cool common sense with which he appreciated *existing facts*.

Whatever the reality and depth of his feelings, whatever the tenacity of his conservative instincts, they were, at all events in English affairs, never allowed to obscure his judgment, or to interfere with a success which he mainly owed to his faculty for seeing things as they were.

Surely, in the utter absence of evidence to the contrary, it is at least permissible to doubt, whether in the conduct of foreign affairs, Cromwell lost that dispassionate clearness of vision which served him so well, as a soldier, an intriguer, a ruler, and an old 'Parliamentary hand.'

Not only, indeed, is evidence to the contrary wanting, but evidence in favour of the *à priori* probable view abounds. Never did Cromwell show more common sense (and should we add enlightened selfishness?) than in his dealings with Holland; and the same robust, clear-sighted common sense is conspicuous in his correspondence with Charles Gustavus of Sweden.

But *if* Cromwell saw and realized the actual positions of Spain and France respectively, what motives urged him to adopt the apparently unselfish course of attacking the former by sea, instead of the latter by land? I shall attempt to show that the unselfishness of Cromwell's policy was apparent

only, and that in this matter the real interests of the Protector, and of his family, clashed with those of England, disastrously for the latter.

It will be granted that, while a war against Spain could, as the result showed, be successfully waged by sea, a war against the France of that day must have been a war of invasion.

The former was almost certain to be successful. As a matter of fact we know that the prospects of success it afforded were over-estimated ; it would be cheap, it was expected indeed that the capture of treasure ships, and the plunder of the West Indies, would pay its expenses, and if Cromwell could hope for no direct advantage from the strengthening of the fleet, it was certain that a strong fleet could never be a danger to his Government, and that its increase would tend to make the Commonwealth popular, and would be a strong guarantee against any Royalist invasion.

On the other hand, the objections to a land war on a great scale were, rightly looked at, insuperable.

First, as in all wars, there was the question of expense ; no small matter to a usurper, who had already been forced to tax unwilling subjects more heavily than their legitimate sovereigns had done. For a land war with France must be a war on a great scale. A small contingent of English troops answered Cromwell's purpose well enough, when employed against Spain in co-operation with Turenne's army, and in operations which were merely subsidiary to those of Blake in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean ; but since France, at that time, could not be conquered to much purpose at sea, the land must have been the main field of operations against her, and must not this have involved a large English army on the Continent ?

It might indeed be suggested that Condé and Spain would have furnished the bulk of an invading army, but how far could such allies have been trusted ? Spain has always refrained from fighting her own battles, when she could cajole

a friend into fighting them for her, and assuredly that most bigoted and conservative of Catholic monarchies would never have acted heartily with the equally bigoted Republicans of Puritan England, a power which 'the Dons' seem to have regarded throughout this period with a curious mixture of contempt and timidity. And if there could be no trustworthy co-operation to be expected from Spain, how did the case stand with regard to Condé? What could that prince and his followers, profligates and fine gentlemen, plunging into war and treason with a 'light heart,' and changing sides, as they changed horses, from considerations of convenience, have in common with the dogged, churlish, sanctimonious, but comparatively consistent and always earnest, English Puritans?

Assuming, then, that war with France meant the maintenance of a large English army on the Continent, it meant an increase of taxation from which an unpopular ruler, a ruler who could never coerce a Parliament into genuine support, might well recoil. Nor was this the worst: such a war must have cost not only money but men. It is true that England possessed a, for that time, large standing army, an army which Mr. Palgrave puts at 40,000 men, and which he tells us, 'if their England be compared with our England, represented a force of over 285,000 strong.'¹ But this army was not one whit too strong for its work; it was no trifling task to overawe the people of England into complete, if unwilling, obedience to the man who had slain her king and wrecked her liberties; if to this task was to be added that of carrying out a successful invasion of the military power of the Continent, a great increase of the army was absolutely necessary. And in addition to the expense of this, there were two other, and very serious, objections to such an increase.

Whatever we may think of the extreme theory which represents Cromwell as the 'drudge' and 'very kickshaw' of the army, it is certain that as Protector his policy was, as far as possible, to play off, from whatever motives, the army and the nation against each other; therefore he would naturally

¹ *Oliver Cromwell the Protector*, p. 29.

recoil from a measure which would increase enormously the already preponderating strength of the former.

Again, if the army had been suddenly increased by, say, 30,000 men, what would have been the temper and character of these new recruits? They would certainly have differed greatly from the veterans who had fought through the civil wars, whose religious and political opinions had been formed in that 'Sturm und Drang' period, and who had for 'the general' that feeling of half trust and half awe, with which good soldiers always regard the chief who has never failed to lead them to victory. Was it not probable that the politics of the new soldiers would either be those of the country at large, that is Royalist, or that they would be mere adventurers prepared to treat England as pirates might treat a captured argosy?

Let it be granted, however—and the assumption is one which a cautious ruler might well have hesitated to make—that by a judicious selection of recruits, and by a judicious blending of new with old soldiers, the character of the army, as a whole, would have remained unchanged, still to preserve the personal allegiance of such an army, it was necessary that the Protector should continue to command it in person, and should command it to victory.

Cromwell's admirers, when discussing these eventualities, may fairly be considered to state their case in the language of Macaulay. They assume that 'it would have been easy for him (Cromwell) to plunge his country into Continental hostilities on a large scale, and to dazzle the restless factions which he ruled by the splendour of his victories.'¹

But looking at the matter, not as a panegyrist, but as a practical man, not as an enthusiastic civilian, but as a soldier and a statesman, Cromwell may well have doubted, first, whether he could lead the army to victory, and secondly, whether he could lead it at all.

As to the former question, omitting the consideration which every soldier recognises, that there is a great element

¹ Macaulay, *Hallam's Constitutional History*.

of uncertainty in all military affairs,¹ what reason had Cromwell to expect any brilliant and decisive successes ?

It is true that the army he might have led would have been a magnificent one, the finest army, many qualified judges of such matters hold, that England has ever produced, but how about its opponents? Even then the French army of that day was a highly drilled and disciplined force, and in the 'Maison du Roy' 'the Ironsides' would, for the first time, have met cavalry not only as brave, but also as highly trained as themselves. And between the leaders of the two armies what comparison is possible? Even if Cromwell had, led his army himself, would that army have had a general to compare with Turenne? When a question as to the respective merits of successful commanders arises, it becomes the civilian to refrain from even thinking an opinion, and to be content to sum up, and, if it may be, balance the opinions of military critics; and however such opinions differ as to the exact rank among generals which should be assigned to Oliver Cromwell, I am not aware that any military authority has classed him in the same category with the great French marshal. Now it is true that there have been instances in which battles have been won by the inferior leader commanding the better army, and let us assume for the sake of argument that the English soldiers of the Commonwealth would, had it come to hard fighting, have compensated by their magnificent discipline and bulldog bravery for any comparative shortcomings in their leader's generalship; but what right have we to assume that Turenne would, in such a case, have allowed it to come to hard fighting?

In nothing is the superiority of a great, over a good, general more obviously shown than in the way in which the former avoids, when he chooses, the risk of a battle. Turenne, in the opinion of competent critics, was even greater in

¹ 'To eliminate all chances of failure from war is impossible. When you have done your best and have brought your army to the scratch under the most favourable conditions, . . . you will still in your heart, if you know war well, realise how uncertain is the game after all.'—Wolseley, 'War.' *Fortnightly*, Jan. 1889.

winning campaigns than in winning actions ; he could win a great victory, but, which is perhaps the rarer virtue, he could win the fruits of victory without risking a conflict, and delay and check the enemy he might not venture to engage. In the event of an English invasion, considerations which a civilian may venture to estimate would surely have induced the patriotic Frenchman to manœuvre instead of fighting. Time would cost the invaders money, and, in those days of unscientific commissariat arrangements, lives ; it would give Mazarin the chance of creating Royalist diversions in England, it would ripen the existing seeds of hatred and distrust between English heretics, French rebels, and Spanish 'catholicons,' and above all it would tarnish the military reputation of the usurper's Government. For it is the great weakness of every military despotism, that not only it cannot afford to fail in the field, but it cannot afford not to succeed quickly and decisively. Once, the only time that he had ever encountered a real general, Cromwell had only escaped disaster by the 'skin of his teeth.' May he not have apprehended that the marvellous luck which saved him at Dunbar might fail to repeat itself were he to dare to measure swords with a far greater warrior than David Leslie ?

But as a matter of fact, would the English army, as has generally been assumed, have been commanded by the Protector in person ?

Cromwell never said a truer thing than when he compared himself to a parish constable ; and he might have added, a constable always on duty. To rule by the army, yet to keep up as decent a pretence as might be of respect for the liberties of the subject ; to overawe where he could not conciliate and shrank from crushing ; to partially satisfy the greed of some and the fanaticism of others of the chief officers, yet to prevent their driving the English people into a revolt of desperation, this was the work which Cromwell did for the last five years of his life. But it was work which only Cromwell could do ; in his absence there would have been no one who could even have seemed to fill his place. It was probably

this knowledge that his work must die with him, which a little later caused the dying Protector to, for the first time in his life, consciously refuse to look a fact in the face, and to admit to himself that he was doomed. Had Cromwell gone to France, in those days of slow and uncertain communications, irrevocable mischief might have been worked in England, and whatever that mischief, once landed on the Continent, Cromwell must have served the campaign through with his army. A friend, had he possessed such a treasure, might have used the same argument to him which prevented Napoleon III. from joining his army in the Crimea, namely, that in such a case he must have come back crowned with laurels, or without a crown at all.

And if Cromwell could not afford to lead an English army in a Continental war, to whom could he afford to entrust one?

Failure in such a war, failure to triumph, must, it cannot be too often repeated, have meant ruin; but success, gained under any leader save himself, would have been hardly less fatal. The Protector held the army by the memory of how it and he had endured and conquered together; he controlled the nation through its belief that the army led by him was invincible. But what would have been his position towards an army, which, as has already been shown, must have been largely composed of men who had never served under him, and which had fought and conquered under another leader, towards a nation which would speedily have forgotten Cromwell's triumphs over English and Scottish Royalists, in admiration of another man's more recent triumphs over our hereditary enemies the French?

And if, in such a case, Cromwell's own position would have been more than precarious, surely that of his son, and hoped-for successor, a civilian who had never 'seen a shot fired in anger,' would obviously have been untenable.

Weighty as this objection may appear, to understand its full force we must consider to whom, failing himself, the Protector could have entrusted the army of the Common-

wealth. Now there were three, and only three, soldiers in Great Britain, whose past was such that it would not have been suicidal to oppose them to Turenne, and grotesque to expect them to co-operate with Condé ; these three men were Fairfax, Monk, and Lambert.

Each of these three would have been, from Cromwell's point of view, peculiarly dangerous as the victorious leader of an army which had fought England's battles triumphantly. Fairfax was a Presbyterian, married to a Royalist wife, living in unobtrusive, but marked, opposition to the established Government, and having the one great bond in common with the Royalist-Nationalist party, that he had shrunk from dipping his hands in the blood of 'the Blessed Martyr.'

Monk was a soldier of fortune, subtle and unreliable, a man whom even Cromwell could not fathom, and whom he was therefore too wise to trust ; a man of whom nothing was known except his past, and that past included marriage with a Royalist, and years spent in the King's service.

Lambert was, next to Cromwell, the most powerful, and, to the Protector, the most dangerous person in England.

Practically, it is almost certain that Lambert would have made good his claim to take Cromwell's place at the head of the invading army ; and if Cromwell could not safely trust any man in such a post, it is not too much to say he could have trusted any man in England there more safely than Lambert.

In conclusion, then, so far from a war with France promising advantage to Cromwell and his family, it would have been for him and for them pregnant with dangers of the gravest kind ; dangers which it is reasonable to suppose a man of the Protector's ability would thoroughly gauge and realise.

Is this to say that he refrained from such a war from selfish motives ? Not necessarily, since it is still open to his admirers to contend that he believed the best interests of the country to be bound up with those of a Cromwellian dynasty. But if the contention of this paper be admitted, the vindicators

of the great regicide must seek for other evidence of his disinterestedness in his conduct as an English despot, and must refrain from claiming our admiration for a foreign policy which may well have been one of enlightened, but anti-patriotic, selfishness, and of which we can say with certainty that it was injurious for England, and advantageous for her tyrant and his immediate successor.