



MAY SINCLAIR ON THINGS WORSE THAN WAR” (1920)¹

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Abstract

The challenges that Europe faced a century ago, after the Great War ended, were analysed and widely discussed by many contemporary intellectuals, including the English novelist, critic, and philosopher May Sinclair (1863–1946). This paper revisits her article “Worse than War” (1920), which is of a special interest today as it not only gives a vivid response of a woman writer to so-called unwomanly questions, but once again proves that unlearned history lessons tend to be repeated. Sinclair claims that the main evils Europe confronted after the five years of the war, which were “worse than war,” were epidemics, famine, and poverty. The writer gives an account of the situation in war-affected areas which she describes as catastrophic. She advocates lifting the blockade from Germany, which would save human lives and restore the political and economic balance in Europe. Also, she emphasizes that restoration and strengthening of depressed regions around Germany are especially vital to prevent them from further forcible acquisition by their powerful and hostile neighbour.

Key words: May Sinclair; “Worse than War” (1920); famine; food security; epidemic; hospital; the Great War.

The current Russian aggression against Ukraine, the threat of famine in Africa and Asia, and the humanitarian situation as a whole revive in memory the dramatic events of a century ago when Europe faced the drastic aftermaths of the Great War. The challenges that Europe faced then, and their possible solutions, were analysed and widely discussed by many contemporary intellectuals, including the English novelist,

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critic, and philosopher May Sinclair (1863–1946) (Honcharova, 2014). Her article “Worse than War”² (1920) published in the August issue of the *English Review* is of a special interest now as it not only gives a vivid response of a woman writer to so-called unwomanly questions, but once again proves that unlearned history lessons tend to be repeated. Sinclair’s appeal to the war theme was not occasional. She belonged to that part of society that supported the war, anticipating positive changes it might bring in future (Raitt, 2000). In September 1914 Sinclair, a fifty-one-year-old writer, enlisted as a volunteer to an ambulance unit and went to the Belgian front, where she spent about two weeks. Her war experience has been reflected in *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), “impressionistic and novelistic in form” (Bowler, 2016), several published and unpublished papers, and fiction. The article “Worse than War” stands out from the rest as it deals with the immediate practical consequences of the war rather than impressions of the war itself.

Sinclair claims that the main evils Europe faced after the five years of war, which were “worse than war,” were epidemics, famine, and poverty – i.e. “three hells of filth, of cold, of hunger,” as she calls them (Sinclair, 1920a, p. 150). She outlines the geographical borders of the humanitarian disaster, which swept “throughout Germany and German Austria and Hungary, in the Balkans, in Turkey and Armenia, in Poland and in Russia” (Ibid., p. 147). In order to avoid appearing sentimental on the one hand, or sensational on the other, she tries to keep an objective and unbiased tone from the very beginning of the narration and up to the end. To that end, she refers to the Commissions of Relief reports, quotes from witnesses’ letters, and provides statistics: “In the last years of the war in Austria alone at least 35,000 people died of tuberculosis, in Vienna alone 12,000. Today we have to reckon with a number of at least 350,000 to 400,000 people who require treatment for tuberculosis, and with at least 800,000 people who are subjected to the greatest risk through living with the invalids” (Ibid., p. 147);

² Probably because of printing space deficiency, more than one hundred and thirty lines were cut out in the typescript draft and remain unpublished. I am grateful to Dr. Rebecca Bowler (Keele University, UK) for providing the access to May Sinclair’s papers (PDF), and to the article typescript in particular.

“In Czecho-Slovakia, in 1919, our Allies were still dying from starvation and exhaustion” (Ibid., p. 148); “In Poland alone there were 3,000,000 starving Jews” (Ibid., p. 148); “In Serbia, typhus is very general. In Armenia, out of 300,000 refugees one twentieth die every month, and there, too, typhus is appearing” (Sinclair, 1920b, p. 5). She dwells on each of the denoted problems and accompanies them with detailed descriptions of real circumstances and places. Yet, the choice of the illustrative materials and their quantity, as well as the obsession with statistic data, betrays her eagerness and dedication to the subject.

As a person actively involved with the foundation and practice of the Medico-Psychological Clinic in London, Sinclair took a keen interest in medical matters. She viewed the immediate post-war situation in medical institutions of Central and Eastern Europe and the Near East as catastrophic: in most hospitals, including the military reserve hospital, maternal and children’s ones, there were no medicines, anesthetics, and disinfectors; most hospitals ran out of basic medical equipment such as surgical glasses, stethoscopes, and drainage tubes. The worse state of affairs was with total lack of sheets, body linen and clean bandages. Sinclair, who had her own life experience of caring for a bedridden parent, realized the scale and horror of the problem in full: “Everywhere even elementary cleanliness was impossible. If you have ever nursed a case of spinal paralysis where the clean linen is even beginning to run short, if you have ever gone into the houses of the very poor in the season of infantile disorders, and seen the piteous makeshifts of the mothers, you will have some faint, far-off idea of the horror of these wards [...] There is hardly one abomination of the war that can compare with the hospitals of Vienna and Prague and Buda-Pesth, not even the prison-camp at Wittenberg [...]” (Sinclair, 1920a, p. 149). People died not only of infections and insanitary conditions, but also of coldness and hunger. Sinclair points out to the absence of coal in hospitals and at homes that meant that it was even impossible to get boiling water. In hospitals, the patients were regularly malnourished, but beyond the hospital walls they faced the risk to die of starvation which was everywhere.

From accounts of the current situation in war-affected areas, Sinclair moves on to searching for a way out of the deep humanitarian crisis in which Europe had found

itself. Her main message is that infections, anarchy, famine, and industrial and economic collapse have “no respect to the frontiers” (Sinclair, 1920a, pp. 151–152). She advocates lifting the blockade from Germany, which would save human lives and restore the political and economic balance in Europe. Sinclair believes that neutral countries and Allies, irrespective of nationalities and languages, should join forces in matters of financial and humanitarian support for the regions affected by the war and the blockade: “It is a question of economic self-preservation. Without the blockade, we should not have won the war in 1918. Without the work of the Relief Commissions, we shall not win the Peace” (Ibid., p. 152). She emphasizes that restoration and strengthening of the depressed regions around Germany should be carried out as soon as possible, since Germany, even after such a long and exhausting war, remains strong economically and militarily and in no time will be able to absorb neighbouring territories and peoples. The following lines turned out to be prophetic, but, by the decision of the *English Review* editor or due to Sinclair’s own editing, the first of the two paragraphs was not included in the final version of the article:

“That is why, in plain English, we cannot afford³ to let them [countries around Germany] go under. Their individuality, their autonomy, their prosperity are the safeguards of our own. If we do not restore them to a state in which they can develop for themselves the industrial resources of their several countries those resources will ultimately be developed by Germany for Germany. She will then have at her disposal the raw materials of every instrument of war: the timber of thousand forests, the oil-fields of Roumania, and the mines of Siberia. She will be able to defy any future blockade by her command of the granaries of Middle Europe, of Central Russia and the Ukraine [...] The Pangermanic dream will be realized by industrial or military conquest – or both.” (Sinclair, 1920b, pp. 16–17).

“There is, therefore, the danger of a War more terrible than any we have yet seen. Nobody with the smallest intellectual prudence would assert that such a war is impossible or even very improbable.” (Sinclair, 1920a, p. 153)

The Nazi revanchism of 1939 and the events of the twenty-first century confirm the predictions made by the writer. She ends her article with a call to fundraising and

³ Hereinafter underlined by May Sinclair.

providing volunteering and outreach to relief commissions, to which she herself generously contributed (Raitt, 2000, p. 165).

By the 1920s, May Sinclair had already established herself as a successful, bestselling author, and her voice mattered. In “Worse than War,” it doubly mattered as it was the voice, loud and confident, of a female writer on issues that had always been the prerogative of men. And her voice was different. It was the voice of mercy and compassion, yet, of profundity, responsibility, and insight. Sinclair did not divide the post-war European space into the winners’ one or the defeated; instead, she used a universal humane approach to people’s sufferings regardless of their nationalities. She strongly believed that peace in Europe depended on the freedom and prosperity of every state, but especially vital was to care for the most vulnerable ones so as to prevent annexation of their territories by their powerful and hostile neighbours.

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