

WHAT IS BOLSHEVISM?

(By G. K. CHESTERTON, in the *New Witness*.)

The great Lloyd George Government, in moral fact, has already fallen. The only question is whether the whole historic pile of European civilisation, and the whole heroic work of the great European war, is to fall with it. Everybody now knows, what we have always asserted, the Nemesis of the plutocratic and truly parliamentary procedure of giving a very great work to a very small man; and then remedying the defect by deafening and incessant declarations that he was really a very great one. A writer in the *Saturday Review* says that this typical piece of democratic diplomacy has been a piece of bungling beyond all the bad diplomacy of the past. We entirely sympathise with the critic when he enjoys the candor of calling it bungling; but we cannot imagine why he should pay it the compliment of calling it democratic. We in England have no kind of control over Mr. George in Paris; any more than we have, for that matter, over Mr. George at Westminster. We cannot direct his actions, if he chooses to surrender the British claim to the cosmopolitan millionaires, any more than we direct his action when he tried to cut down the British Navy in deference to the cocoa millionaires. We can no more prevent his taking the advice of Isaacs and the international Jews about deserting Poland, than we could prevent his taking the advice of Isaacs about dabbling in Marconi shares. But one fact has already bulked too big in the landscape for the democracy to be kept entirely in the dark about it, even by a modern representative Government. That fact is a new form of the barbarian peril: an alliance between the mere tribes of the Teutonic world and the mere tribes of the Slav world against those great remains of the Roman Empire which are now the real nations of Christendom. The word which everyone is repeating everywhere, in however vague a fashion, is the word "Bolshevism." We think it highly desirable that somebody should say something about it a little more intelligent than the bare repetition of that word.

In this, as in most other important things, the fashionable press gives no guidance whatever to the people. Generally, we regret to say, it falls back on the familiar expedient of telling lies about the Bolsheviks; a method more consonant to its own motive; for it does not oppose them from the high motives of civilisation, but from the low motives of capitalism. And not having the shadow of a political philosophy for dealing with a coal strike in Wales or a Bill in committee at Westminster, it is not strange that it should have none for wild marches and massacres on the plains of Russia or round the cities of Hungary. In the absence of any intelligible teaching in the matter, the English people have fallen back on an attitude which is certainly very English and normally not unattractive, but unfortunately highly unsuitable to a peril that is practical and near. It is the habit of treating the thing as something distant and fantastic. They take a sort of poetical pleasure in the mere word, because it sounds a mysterious and extravagant word. As we say, this is a very national mood; and in itself, and in its place, the sort of thing that nationalism exists to protect. It is not unconnected with that romance of seamen and traders touching at remote islands, and seeking rather to roam than to rule; so that it would be a truer as well as a more human title if the British Empire could be called the British Adventure. It is not even unconnected with an English love of nonsense, as shown in the English talent for the literature of nonsense. There is something of the same pleasure in saying "Bolshevik" as in saying the word "Jabberwock": and our journalism merely stimulates the sort of interest felt in the wild landscapes of Edward Lear.

But the real case against Bolshevism is not founded on a view of its fantasticality, or even on a mere view of its falsehood. It is founded on the right of self-defence which belongs to a full philosophy as against an incomplete philosophy. It is of the very nature of

civilisation that it has, or at least attempts to have, a balance of ideas; of art and sacrifice, of enthusiasm and humor, of society and freedom, of equality and glory. And it is of the very nature of barbarism that it is swept from time to time, like a forest by a wind, by the wave of one idea. So the Prussian expansion was simplified to the single insanity of pride. Notions of a worthier if wilder sort may be native to the more Christian atmosphere of Russia; exaggerations of virtues, rather than of vices, may come against us out of the East. But it is not the first time they have come. So the Iconoclasts came out of Greece to destroy the art and sculpture of Italy; so innumerable sects have exaggerated purity into pessimism; and even Attila called himself the Scourge of God, as the Kaiser called himself the Ally of God. And all these examples, of course, are dwarfed by the one great historic example, now dying away in the deserts from which it came, or clinging to Constantinople with the clutch of despair. The chief doctrine that Islam preached was not a falsehood. It was a truth; and the whole case against it is that it was a truth, and not the truth. There may be a right ideal mixed up with the madness of the new movements in the Eastern lands. There always is. "Never was there heretic who spoke all false," said the great Sir Thomas More. Bolshevism may be, as regards its masses, a sincere vision of the equality of man; just as Islam certainly was, as regards its masses, a sincere vision of the unity of God. It is indeed not insignificant that when we look up to the high places where sit the rulers of both movements, we see the faces not of European but of Semitic princes or prophets.

Again, it is quite true that our own civilisation is corrupted with capitalism and poisoned with every cynical secret at the moment when Bolshevism moves against it. It generally is, at the moment when barbarism is able to move against it. When the Moslems were at the height of their military success, the name of the chief Christian outpost against them was one which has since positively passed into a proverb for decadence. When we wish to say that a thing is stiff with social death, we call it Byzantine. But Byzantium was degenerate and right, and Mecca was energetic and wrong. All the things we value, all the things for which we have already, in these last four years, fought the barbarians, the chivalric view of war and of women, the creative power in sculpture and painting, the personal pride of citizenship, the fruitful love of locality, were all saved by the failure of Mecca, and in spite of the failure of Byzantium. And if there be indeed those who hope to swamp us in the simplicity of Slavonic rage, let alone the subtlety of Semitic use of it, we think it well that they should understand, as early as possible, that there are others who can envisage the whole matter sanely, and still give an adverse verdict, without the smallest sympathy with the vulgar panic of the plutocratic press. We are quite willing, if only for the sake of argument, to take Semitic Socialism at its best and not at its worst. And at its best it is still a negative force for all our own very positive culture, and a destructive force for all our own truly creative hopes. It is still the foe of nationality, and rather specially of small nationality, of the little and living state where alone democracy can be truly direct and real; it is still the enemy of tradition, which is the soul of the guild, and property which is the protection of the freeman. There runs through it always that idea of desperate remedies, which is the end of all mellow and magnanimous civilisation. Abstinence is a desperate remedy for the abuse of wine; polygamy is a desperate remedy for the tragedy of sex; and so Collectivism is a desperate remedy for the wrong that has turned property into privilege. The roots and seeds of a saner revival are in our own soil, however they may have been trampled in our time. The good things, when they grow again, will not grow in any deserts, but in the gardens whose ancient names are Italy and Ireland and England and France and Flanders; and the wall of the garden is Poland.

Revolving such real considerations, one forgets our own politicians and diplomatists. We have often said