

# STABILISATION 2,000 YEARS AGO

*By way of contrast to the articles in this issue discussing contemporary events in Europe, we print this interesting study of economic causes and political effects in the Europe of two thousand years ago.*

OF four lectures by four University dons in a recently issued book\*, the first three are of trifling importance; the last is a grave and important study—a piece of work genuinely Marxist in character if not in form. It is with this one, “The Social Question in the Third Century,” by W. W. Tarn, that I shall deal exclusively.

The period known as the “Hellenistic Age” is a sort of no-man’s land in history. The history of classical Greece, in a sort of way, is very thoroughly known. So is the history of Rome. But in between the two there is something of a blank. After Alexander the Great dies, the historian slips across West, with a few well-chosen words, to consider Roman history, and does not return to what was still the centre of the world until the consul Flamininus arrives with the legions in Greece. But from 300 to 200 B.C. the social structure of the civilised world was changing. The death of Alexander had not removed the effects of his destruction of the Persian empire. This empire, though it fell in pieces, remained Greek in character. Greek “diadochoi” (successors) ruled in Egypt, Macedonia, Asia Minor, and as far east as the Indies. Greek commercial and other activities were spread over a far greater area than ever before.

The political effects of this have been treated before. But what were the economic results of this vast essay in imperialism? Two main factors came into play. The first was the Persian treasury. The descendants of Cyrus had for hundreds of years collected gold in their treasury. The actual amount of specie they had gained is uncertain, but it was vast. Within a very short while the quarrelling successors of Alexander had spilt this great treasure all across the Greek world. Of course, prices shot up, money being suddenly of so much the less value. Secondly, there was a great increase in the supply of slave labour. The wealth of the East came West, and a great part of that wealth has always been in slaves.

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\**The Hellenistic Age*: Four Lectures. 6s. Cambridge University Press.

Now the accounts of the temple of Apollo at Delos have been discovered for these years and partly published. The temple was the great international banking centre of those days. It was the solid conservative firm ; there were, of course, less well-established bankers such as Praxicles of Naxos, whose terms were generally more onerous. These temple records give certain clear records of prosperity, confirming what we knew of the life of Rhodes, Alexandria and Antioch in these years. Money is cheap ; the rate of interest declines. The price of real estate rises ; the rent roll of the temple's farms in 434 was 7,600 drachmae, and in 300 B.C. it had risen to 16,200 drachmae.

Or again, take wheat, the staple Greek food. The normal price was reckoned to be 5 dr. a bushel ; in 282 B.C. it touched 10 dr. in Delos and averaged 7 dr. 3 obols.\* Oil (which was the Greek worker's only fat, and an absolute necessity) rose from 12 dr. the metretes in the fourth century to 42 dr. in 305 at Delos. The Delos prices are as valuable an indication as Liverpool wholesale prices, and the island was regarded generally as a place of good living for the workers to migrate to.

And what of the Greek worker ? In earlier days prices had risen, but records show that wages had risen too. But in *this* period of rising prices wages fell ; moreover, there are records which show habitually irregular employment. Mr. Tarn produces figures which show clearly frantic attempts by the workers to keep up their level of living by speeding up and cutting rates. Finally wages fell precisely to the slave level ; that is, to two obols a day, the recognised "starvation rate" providing for food only. There is a record of one strike—one only.

Once we have realised this essential characteristic of the third century B.C. (and the twentieth A.D.)—that the rich grow richer and the poor poorer—the philosophical and other schools of thought fall into their places. No wonder Eratosthenes had time and leisure to calculate the measurement of the earth (very nearly exactly) and Aristarchus of Samos to discover that it went round the sun. This scientific advance, combined with scientific scepticism in religion, arose again under somewhat similar circumstances 2,000 years later. We can also see gradually forming the vast mingled mass of oppressed slave and free labour from which there arose later Mithraism and Christianity. More cultured circles adhered to philosophies, obviously induced by the misery and greed around them, which told them that wealth and rank were things to be disregarded and made light of by the reasonable man. Others taught

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\* 6 obols = 1 drachma. About 1s. in weight, but of course of far greater purchasing value.

that the world around (politics, we should say) was so completely beyond redemption that it was a man's duty to have nothing to do with it, to refuse any dealing in public affairs and be contented only with his own uprightness. Others (you will meet them in London any day) turned to a sentimental interest in the local history of decaying communities off the orbit of the vast cities; graceful tales (in verse) appeared, dealing with the disappearing customs and manners of "unspoilt" districts.

But in Greece itself, Mr. Tarn informs us, one definite and sustained attempt was made to reverse this process. In Sparta the whole country had fallen practically into the hands of a very small nucleus of wealthy and practically cosmopolitan owners. The rest of the population, both helots (serfs) and citizens, was very poor and in debt to the ruling nucleus. There were two kings, who, however, had little real power, the effective control having been seized by an oligarchic council called the ephors. In the year 244 the young King Agis IV. started upon a programme of drastic social reform containing two main planks—the redistribution of all cultivated lands, and the cancellation of internal private debts. His fellow king, Leonidas, was "got at" by the ruling clique and vetoed his proposals. Agis refused to bring in the army and force his reforms through; the ephors then assassinated him. Phase number one is over—constitutional reform.

Mr. Tarn observes that a sort of Holy Alliance fathered by Alexander makes clear what was the Greek social revolutionary programme. This "League of Corinth" agreed to prevent in any of its component states "confiscation of personal property, or division of land, or cancellation of debt, or liberation of slaves for the purposes of revolution." Agis had adopted two of these; thirteen years later Cleomenes, Leonidas' son, appeared to adopt them all. With him we enter the second phase of the revolution—the military adventurer. Cleomenes, as soon as he succeeded to the throne, picked a quarrel with a neighbouring state, received full military powers, turned on the ephors and drove them out. He re-divided the Spartan farms according to plan, resumed the war with an enthusiastic army of revolutionary citizens, and defeated his opponent handsomely.

Now Greece was astonished by an international revolutionary outbreak. In many cities risings in favour of Cleomenes occurred. State after state came over to him. And that was his ruin. His only aim was to carve himself a kingdom. His new subjects found he had little intention of getting on with the business of a social revolution; he was just a Spartan invader. The powerful king of Macedonia intervened; Cleomenes' empire burst up as quickly as it had arisen; he was defeated and fled to Egypt. The Mace-

donian king put things right again in Sparta. Phase two is over.

When we come to phase three—the whole-hearted revolutionary—we find ourselves hampered more than usual. Not only are our sources scanty and bitterly hostile, but it would appear that Mr. Tarn's lecture time was nearly up. Intimidated, perhaps, by shuffling of feet and young ladies' coughing, he gives the barest outline of the career of Nabis. All he tells us is that Nabis carried out in full the four points of the social revolution; that he inaugurated a system of state support (not clearly described); that he united Argos with Sparta and raised Sparta for the last time to her old heights of glory; that no one could stand up to him until Rome herself intervened.

The consul Flamininus came south after the conquest of Macedonia. He attacked Nabis with 50,000 victorious legionaries; Nabis' 15,000 beat him off. "One can see that they must have fought for *some* sort of an idea, anyhow." Consul Flamininus—a sentimental believer in the independence of small Greek states—in the end took Argos away, but left Nabis in Sparta, with his Red Army.

Nabis was later assassinated. Foreign interests accentuated the chaos that followed, and at last an Achaean conqueror entered Sparta. 3,000 of Nabis' citizens refused to obey his orders to emigrate to Achaea. He sold them as slaves. And it is curious to notice that orthodox historians (for other reasons) tacitly agree that Greek history after this does not matter much to anybody.

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