

WAS LORD ROBERTS RIGHT?

A LETTER FROM LORD HALDANE

LORD HALDANE writes to the *Times* with reference to its article on 'The Future of Military Service' as follows:

'Sir: To the main thesis of the leading article on the future of military service which appeared in your issue of Friday there will be general assent. That thesis is, in effect, that policy must lie at the foundation of military organization. But those who have had to give close study to this principle ask for its formulation in a fashion still more precise.

'They insist that before any attempt is made to organize an army the scientific purpose for which it is required shall be ascertained and exactly defined. This was sought, to take an example, in 1906, when the plans were first made for organizing the Expeditionary Force. It was, indeed, hoped earnestly that the existing peace would remain unbroken. But it was held as of high importance to insure against a conceivable conflagration. The Fleet was enlarged and the navy estimates were raised from thirty-six millions, at which figure they then stood, to fifty-one, the figure to which they were brought by Mr. McKenna and Mr. Churchill. If there were to be a war with Germany in which we stood alone, our security against invasion was decided by the Committee of Imperial Defense to be ample. This conclusion was come to after much consideration, and after investigating specific points brought before it in much detail by Lord Roberts and his advisers personally. But the paradox remained that if France also were attacked along

with us, instead of France being left alone, we might be in a less favorable situation. For if a successful invasion of that country should give Germany the Channel ports of France as naval bases, she might, by the use of submarines and long-range guns, seriously imperil the control of the Channel by our navy, and, as a consequence, our position as an island. Against this danger there was only one way of providing. If we had a large navy France had a large army. That army was not quite sufficient to guard against attack along the entire eastern frontier of France by the still larger army of Germany. But careful calculation made by the French General Staff and our own showed that the addition of a comparatively small but very highly trained and organized Expeditionary Army from Great Britain to coöperate by defending the northern portion of the French frontier in conjunction with the French armies would be sufficient, having regard to the coöperation which was certain of the armies of Russia in engaging the German armies in the East. To the margin which Great Britain might possibly be thus asked to provide an addition of about sixty per cent was made for greater security in the plan as carried out later on. We were thus to put in as our contribution, in the event of a war which we intended to avert by every step in our power, the greatest navy to command the seas that the world had ever seen, and six divisions in addition to a cavalry force, being the army required to make up the requisite margin of military strength. The Ex-

peditionary Force fashioned for this purpose was of a kind different from anything which this country had ever possessed before. It was organized for extremely rapid mobilization and concentration, to be at least as swift as that of the army of Germany; and as a means to this end its formations in time of peace were revolutionized by being given a divisional organization and by being made in time of peace exactly what they would have to be in time of war. Its commanders were also designated at once, so that they might in peace time train the units they would command should war unhappily break out. Besides this, all the accessories of these divisions were brought up to scientifically calculated war strength.

‘Contrary to what is popularly supposed, the strength in effective artillery, both horse and field, was greatly increased under the guidance of Sir Douglas Haig and other members of the General Staff, and the exact guns and munitions which the newly created General Staff then asked for were provided. By 1911 this had been accomplished, and the reason of its accomplishment having been possible was that the purpose for which the organization was required had at the outset been precisely defined. Expansion was provided for through the medium of a second-line citizen army — the Territorial Force, with its organ of county associations. In this way many, such as physicians and surgeons and women for nursing and V.A.D. services, were brought in who could not have been reached through compulsory methods.

‘The article in the *Times* suggests that we should have been better off if we had possessed, instead of these things, an army of a million men ready. Possibly! But did the writer ask himself the very serious question whether such an army could have been actually provided? For if the attempt had

failed, not only would the floor of the House of Commons have been strewn with the wreckage of another army scheme, but the failure would have been the occasion of danger. It takes, as those who have had actual experience of what it means to try to reform an army system know, a long time to raise and prepare an army. In Germany and France it had taken generations. With us the first thing we should in particular have had to do would have been to have recruited an enormous addition to our establishment of officers in time of peace. For these would have been required not only when war broke out, like the members of the O.T.C. who engaged to serve on mobilization, but as their profession in peace time to train the new men. They could only have been got together if the country had developed an unexpectedly novel disposition to send its sons in largely increased numbers into the profession of an army officer. With unlimited expenditure some stimulus could, no doubt, have been given to such a movement. But it would have required a very long time to develop to the extent required. War time, in which people will gladly throw over their prospects of wealth and material success in order to save their country from imminent danger, is a very different thing from peace time. And, then, buildings and equipment and a multitude of other requisites would have had to be provided, a process which also involved delay. If all this had been taken in hand soon after the war of 1870, no doubt it could have been carried out had the country been eager for it. But in those days the country did not even dream of it. Why should it have tried to do what no other nation had done — to provide an enormous army in addition to an enormous navy?

‘At all events it was, on purely military grounds, out of the question to run

the risks attending such an attempt between 1906 and 1914. The General Staff had advised to this effect, reluctantly, I think, but very firmly. They thought of a pounce on us by Germany when we were changing horses while crossing the stream, and of the excuse of preparations for encirclement which Germany would have made to her people. But they would not look as a possible alternative to Lord Roberts's plan. That was directed merely to home defense. Now, home defense was not the vital strategical question. It was adequately provided for otherwise, in their view. Moreover, Lord Roberts's scheme did not even profess to provide the Expeditionary Army for the Continent which they regarded as the only adequate instrument for the immediately possible strategical requirement. That scheme would, besides this, in all probability have affected seriously the recruiting for the actual Expeditionary Force and for our great oversea garrisons for India and our dependencies. For these had to be raised for long and, therefore, voluntary service. We were already so short in our voluntary recruits that we were driven to recognize that no more than 148 battalions of the line could be adequately kept up, instead of the existing 156, which were at full establishment on paper only. The latter were short of their establishment, and eight of them had actually to be reduced in order to enable the Adjutant-General to provide full establishments for the increased number of battalions which had to be kept at home in full strength and in constant readiness to form the main structure of the divisions of the Expeditionary Force. The difficulties, military as well as other than military, in the way of raising by compulsion an Expeditionary Force for instant use were, in the language of a memorandum given to me by the late Chief of

the General Staff, Field Marshal Lord Nicholson — words which lie before me as I write — “in my judgment insuperable.” And yet that very able man would personally have much liked compulsory service had it been practicable. Not a single additional division could, in the opinion of the Adjutant-General, be got by voluntary enlistment. That had reached its limit. The War Office had done the best it could when its scheme was fully carried out, and it had to concentrate on perfecting its work. Its view, of course, was that the real frontier which it had to defend was the northern frontier of France, and that it had to do its utmost within a limited time. In the case of France remaining intact the sands of the seas round these islands were for protection by the navy, and, in the event of chance raids escaping its net, for the Territorial Force. The objective so defined differed *toto cælo* from that of the National Service League, which based its scheme on the idea that the navy could not be relied on to make home defense secure, and did not direct its attention to the after-consequences in the Channel ports of France of what might happen on the Belgian frontier. For practical purposes the two objectives were wholly inconsistent, and we had to choose on which horse we should ride.

I am, therefore, unable to agree with the suggestion in your article that if at some time during the period of the Governments of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Mr. Asquith we had adopted compulsory service we should have been better prepared in 1914. For the reasons I have given I think that we should have been much worse prepared and might have lost the war. We accomplished exactly what we undertook. If the margin by which we succeeded was narrow, that was not our fault. There is at least one report on the expediency of attempting a com-

pulsorily raised army, larger than the Expeditionary Force could be made, a report which must be in the archives of the General Staff, and which was made and signed by certain of its most distinguished officers. It would be interesting to the public could this, which was dated about 1912, be made available to it to-day.

'No doubt we all of us have miscalculated in a great many details, military and naval alike. But I do not think that either the War Office or the Admiralty miscalculated on the main issues. On those issues it was the great

The Times

General Staff of Germany that made an astounding strategical blunder in failing to understand what it really meant to engage in war with a Power which had prepared to keep command of the sea. The second blunder of the German strategists lay in shrinking from the bold attempt which it was vital to them to make of using their submarines and destroyers to prevent the transport of the Expeditionary Force when it was mobilized on the morning of Monday, August 3, 1914.

'I am, Sir, yours obediently,
'Haldane.'

WORKING ON THE LAND

A WOMAN'S EXPERIENCES

BY E. S. WILKINSON

WHEN first the appeal for women to come out and work on the land was made, my only thought was—'Well, that is not a job that will ever find me at it, because it is n't going to be any good.' I was obviously just the person to volunteer, being tall and strong, and the right age! (Exactly what the 'right age' is I will not divulge, but I was not too old or too young.) Also, I had lived in the country all my life, and been good friends with all the farmers in the district. Perhaps this is why I was so full of pessimism. I knew enough about the conditions and hours of farm work to know that it was not *only* contrariness that made a man say, 'What's t' use of a lot o' women on t' pleace—what's t' foreman off t' deca wiv a lot

o' women when t' weather's rough?—women can't drave t' 'osses t' ploov', and wheer's off t' larn 'em? I'se seer I s'ant.' And though I always made a point of arguing that they had no reason for being so damping t' they had given us a trial, I felt that they were right. We *were* no use on the land if we could only do 'soft jobs,' and how many of us knew what we were in for, and were prepared to stick the rough jobs? So I went on taking my weekly turns at the V.A.D. Hospital.

Boots thought differently. She always had more courage about going for a thing than I had. I will introduce her, and the way she went for it, in the next paragraph.