

PLAIN TALES FROM SYRIA¹

BY PEOPLE ON THE SPOT

[LAST February the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations met at Rome and received and approved the reports of various mandatory Powers, including the one submitted by France for Syria. Representatives of the Syrians protested there against the administration of the mandatory authorities, to the intense indignation of certain French papers like *Journal des Débats*, which criticized the Commission bitterly for giving audience to 'these shameless agitators.' A different light from that which the public received from Rome is thrown upon the Syrian situation, however, by the two articles we print below. The first, by the Beirut correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, is confirmed vividly by the second, which is the substance of a private letter written by an American correspondent of undoubted veracity, then a resident of Damascus, about the time the Mandates Commission was in session.]

I

THE chance traveler who returns to Syria after two or three months' absence can see little apparent difference in the situation. The towns that one passes on the road — Homs, Tripoli, even Beirut itself — seem to be occupied with ordinary daily activities as though the war were miles away. Beirut is still busy with the re-laying of its tram-lines, Tripoli with the construction of its new municipal park.

¹ From the *Manchester Guardian* (Independent Liberal daily), March 11, and a private letter

Only the presence of the mass of obvious refugees — the experienced traveler in the Near East has become so used to similar sights since the war that he can 'spot' a refugee at first glance — would lead one to suspect that anything untoward was happening.

The people's attitude reminds one painfully of the mental atmosphere of the trenches in France in the mid-winters of the war. In Syria people seem to have forgotten that there really is such a thing as public security and law and order, and accept quite complacently the news that so-and-so's goods have been stolen by the Druses on the railway to Damascus, or that so-and-so's son has been murdered on the road to Homs. Public confidence in the Government has completely evaporated. Men say openly that the thing may go on for months and even years, and, considering that the Government, after six months, is still unable to police the short line of road and railway connecting Beirut and Damascus, there seems to be some foundation for the fear.

Although the French have a garrison of ten thousand in Damascus, the Druses still come in to the city almost daily. A party of Druse leaders recently attended a service at a leading mosque in the town, actually depositing their rifles and bandoliers, with their shoes, at the door, and remained inside for half an hour unmolested by the police! Within the last few days a train has been wrecked on the Beirut-

Damascus line and all the passengers deprived of their clothes and money. In Damascus itself the people, being unarmed and at the mercy of both the troops and the Druses, have pluckily settled down to carrying on their ordinary occupations in the best way they can. It is significant both of their courage and of their ingrained business instinct that an American who made the trip to Damascus on purpose to do business with a well-known Arab antique shop in the city — imagining, of course, that there would be good bargains going — found that the prices were unchanged. 'I'm doing no business now,' admitted the dealer, 'but things will come round again. I shall get my price later on.'

The obvious question arises, What are the French doing? And the answer is, Practically nothing at all. They have not yet admitted that the trouble is serious, and they are, probably for political reasons at home, unwilling to allow French soldiers to risk their lives. Consequently the French troops, who alone are capable of settling the situation, are kept in the background, and the fighting and dying is done by the Moors and other 'black fellows,' whose names don't have to appear in the casualty lists in France. That is why the Damascus garrison of ten thousand retires to the citadel whenever the Druses enter the city, and why there is no effective policing of the roads and railways. Meanwhile the new High Commissioner is thought here to have been sent out to 'talk,' with a view to preventing further military operations; but the painful fact remains that the rebels are now out of hand, and the French will have to 'talk' in a rather more accommodating way if they really wish to avoid fighting.

Meanwhile the Druses are conducting their campaign with considerable

skill. They have divided their fighting force into small bands, generally of not more than twenty-five men, and they calculate that each one of these is capable, with luck and in suitable country, of keeping busy a battalion of Government troops. Should an individual band be caught or wiped out — only twenty-five men have been lost. They appear to have plenty of arms and ammunition. They are using only rifles, and all artillery and machine-guns captured by them they destroy. They have, within limits, a large potential area for recruitment, their system being to come down on individual villages. The men, taken by surprise, usually join their ranks, and that village is thereafter compromised and forced to join their side. They have solved their medical problem by the ingenious method of kidnapping doctors in the villages and towns and forcing them to serve in their ranks. Several well-known Damascus doctors have been kidnapped in this way. Altogether their 'High Command' is not lacking in ideas, and, as they possess a small body of university-trained men of their own, they are probably not lacking in shrewd technical advice.

This is, of course, only one side of the picture — the most amusing side. The other is represented by the loss in industry and trade — the fields going out of cultivation, the steadily growing stream of refugees, the absence of the usual heavy and profitable winter tourist traffic, and, worst of all, the growing contempt for the Government and for the mentality of European politicians which make such a situation possible.

The Arab Government after the war did at least keep moderate order; but it was destroyed by the mandatory Power while the League of Nations, nominally the sovereign of the country,

looked on. What, then, does the League intend to do now that the occupying mandatory Power has proved its inability to keep the peace? The League so far has said or done nothing, and its credit in Syria is in consequence very low. Admirers and supporters of the League can hardly blame the Syrians for calling it rude names. Under the Covenant, as people living under a Class A mandate, the Syrians were promised a choice of the mandatory Power. That promise was broken. They were promised moral support and advice for a local government set up by themselves. That promise was broken. They were promised conditions of stability and law and order, guaranteed by the presence of a European Power; yet for five years the country has been in a state of continual unrest, and for the last six months one of the three leading cities has been cut off from the rest of the country by bands of rebels which the Government have shown no ability to put down.

II

I AM afraid you may think that I am exaggerating things in the following lines, but I shall try to tell you only a small portion of the truth. I have read in several papers that 'calm reigns in Syria and Damascus. Only a slight local uprising has taken place in Jebel Druse, and the rebels consist of only two men, Sultan Attrash and Emil Zein, and their followers.' Even the reports to the League of Nations are of a similar nature.

It all depends on the definition of the word 'calm.' If this is calm I wonder how real war would look. We may not call this a real war, but it is a 'guerrilla war,' plundering and looting. Not a day or a night passes that we do not hear some violent shooting and cannonading in the city. At the end of

almost every block there are fortifications built of sand and of rocks, even with tin roofs on the top, with machine-guns pointing in all directions. On many of the flat roofs are sandbag fortifications and light artillery. Barbed-wire entanglements are on practically every street-corner and on every public square. The city is under martial law, and in the evening the streets are completely closed. Furthermore, a barbed-wire entanglement has been made almost all round the city. To this has been added lately an electrified wire extending clear around the city. Yet the revolutionists enter every night and carry off some soldiers, attack the police stations and capture their ammunition, and very often kidnap prominent men and keep them until they get the demanded ransom. Thus far the victims taken in this manner have been only Moslems, because they are carefully avoiding any conflict between the Christians and the Moslems. Very often all communication with the outside world is cut. Trains are derailed and attacked. Traveling by automobile is an impossibility. Tourists are forbidden to come to Damascus.

Colored soldiers of all nationalities — Senegalese, Moroccans, Circassians, Tunisians, Armenians, and even Chinese — fill the streets. They are all hired butchers employed to kill the natives. Of course, you must not forget that there are some French soldiers too, and a great number of officers. In actual fighting it is the colored troops that are usually sent to the front, and for this reason the French have no losses. Five hundred or two thousand Circassians or Senegalese killed are no loss to the French because they do not have to answer for them in France. A great encouragement to the Circassians and Senegalese has been the privilege to loot. Hundreds of

villages have been destroyed and burned after they had been looted. And you see the heroes coming in afterward with articles of all kinds and descriptions — donkeys, cows, chickens, kettles, blankets. Afterward you see the poor peasants pouring into the city, thinly clad, shivering from cold and hunger, not knowing where to lay their heads and where to find their next meal. Women suffer the worst from the attacks of these savage, degenerate soldiers. From time to time tanks drive through the Moslem section of Damascus shooting right and left indiscriminately. On one such parade of tanks about three hundred houses were riddled with bullets, and many were killed.

On February 16 a Moslem section of the town was chastised for its sins in the following manner. A few hundreds of Circassians and Armenians were sent out under French officers to loot and pillage. They were not contented with what they found in the houses, but they tore off the ears with the earrings of the Moslem women. Many women's hands were cut off for the sake of the rings and golden bracelets the women wore [Belgian precedents?]. I saw four of them at the police station. I was told that the men went from house to house and asked, 'Are you a Christian or a Moslem?' The Moslems were mercilessly murdered. One eyewitness told me that he saw one Moslem woman trying to escape from her home when she was killed by a bullet. Her baby fell on the ground and the man crushed its neck with the heel of his boot. The houses were not destroyed this time by shell-fire, but they found a new way of destroying them by running into them with tanks and then burning them after putting some kerosene inside.

The Moslems were so infuriated that

they were all ready to leave their shops and kill every Armenian and Christian in the town, but the leaders managed to control the mob. The following day letters came from the revolutionary headquarters to Sheik Badri Dean, the head of the Moslem religious organizations, asking him to use all his influence in preventing a Christian massacre, and saying that this was the very thing that the French wanted, so that they might be able to spread the news in the world that the Moslems are massacring the Christians. Another letter was written to the Greek Patriarch telling him, among other things, that unless he and all the Christian leaders exerted themselves to keep the Christians (Armenians) from pillaging and massacring the Mohammedans they would not be responsible for what would happen in the future. They had done their best to protect the Christians thus far. Everybody felt uneasy and frightened, and even the French officers realized that they had to do something to quiet the people. Some Armenians were caught and the looted things were taken from them and then returned to some of the people. This was the first time that looted things were returned, although looting has been carried on ever since the war started. Some of the Circassians declared, however, that the more valuable things were in the hands of the French, and that they got only some of the worthless things, or rather the less valuable things. But I do not know how much truth there is in this statement. Among other things there was a sack of bloody bracelets and rings. Poor women, who had to lose their hands and their lives for a few glittering ornaments! Is not this a beautiful example of civilization and Christianity that the European nations are giving to the savage Arabs?

The prisons are filled with the better

class of men, such as writers, poets, and graduates of foreign universities. But many of them managed to escape and are now taking the lead in revolution. Several of them have been officers in the Turkish army and know something about war tactics. If they had the ammunition and the equipment that the French have, I wonder what the result would be. It is a struggle of life and death, a struggle for liberty and for their rights. One would think that after this terrible example the people would be as meek and submissive as lambs, but, on the contrary, the whole section of Medan (a portion of Damascus) that was so severely punished has become revolutionist. Nobody dares to enter it, and not a French soldier or a policeman is left there.

A few days ago one of the important sheiks, Emir Fahour, joined the so-called bandits with his eight thousand men because his only son was killed by the French soldiers. He also succeeded in persuading another sheik

to join with several thousand men. These alone would make more than Sultan Attrash and Prince Zein. The other day from forty to fifty airplanes were sent to the Druse mountains to bombard their villages, but the Druses had all hidden in the underground dwelling-places.

You have probably heard of the wonderful underground dwellings which their legends say were built about four thousand years ago by a giant race from which the Druses have supposedly descended. There are almost whole cities extending about sixteen miles in a stretch, with wells and a system of ventilation. The entrances and passages are known only to the Druses. Besides that, the mountains are almost inaccessible except on foot or horseback. It is impossible to reach them with tanks or heavy cannon. Although the cities and villages of the Druses have been destroyed by the airplanes, the Druses do not yet consider themselves conquered, but are still sitting like eagles in their nests.

GENEVA AND AFTER¹

A FRENCH ANALYSIS

HERE is M. Briand, back in Paris after ten days of laborious international negotiations. He has made his ministerial statement. According to him, the Locarno spirit is still alive. The European group that concluded the Accord of last October is still in agreement. If Germany's admission to the Council of the League has been ad-

journed until September, it is merely because certain revisions of that body's constitution have proved necessary.

But the general public, which as a rule is uninformed of the details of the Locarno treaties and their relations to the League Covenant, and which knows still less of the actual internal functioning of the League, does not understand the successive phases through which the discussions have

¹ From *L'Europe Nouvelle* (Paris Liberal foreign-affairs weekly), March 20