

CHAPTER IV

DOES RUSSIA NEED A NAVY?

A CHARACTERISTIC feature of our time is the technical improvement of all military apparatus. Hardly has a new rifle or a new gun been adopted before it is necessary to replace it by fresh weapons. Within a short time we may expect new improvements in powder, and this in its turn will require changes in all war material. In recent times these changes, consequent on new inventions, have taken place more and more swiftly. Of this, perhaps the building of fortresses is the best example. After fabulous sums had been lavished on the building of fortresses on a new system with all the latest technical improvements, the opinion has gained ground that modern strategy requires fortresses only to a limited extent, a view, the probability of which is increased by the fact that every army will be equipped with instruments for the construction of its own defensive works.

A similar process of change may be observed in the building of fleets. In the past one and the same type was employed in the course of three hundred years without essential change. After this began the building of ironclads, and in the course of thirty years the various types of ships may be counted by tens. In the present time opinions change so rapidly that no sooner is a vessel launched than it is found not to come up to the newest requirements. Meantime, every new ship costs more than the last. Even the richest nations have begun to groan under the burden.

In this relation Russia especially finds herself in a

difficult position. At a time when in Western countries a powerful social initiative heaped up wealth, when towns sprang up, not as centres of local authority, but as trading and industrial centres, and when in the country free labour, full ownership of land, and the accumulation of savings ensured the erection of good and durable buildings for man and beast, the construction of good roads, the regulation of water communications, and the building of factories, in that time in Russia the economic life of the people, their social initiative, and even the satisfaction of their necessities were paralysed by the existence of serfage.

The Crimean war resulted in disorder in the finances and in the money system which had only just been brought into order, and in addition to this, shook the faith of men in the old system of government. The reform of the administrative apparatus was all the more essential owing to the subsequent emancipation of the serfs. The necessity for building roads was recognised. The peasants received their freedom and occupied themselves with the working of their fields. Savings they could not have. They lived in poverty and the conditions of their lives were most primitive. Landowners had not the capital to carry on agriculture, and were forced to let their land to the peasantry for labour or on lease. The work of the peasantry, both on their own lands and on that of the landowners, continued to be most primitive. Meeting no support from industry in the utilisation of their products, agriculturists were compelled to export them in a raw form. Russia exported grain, cattle, and phosphates to improve the soil of foreigners, while Russian soil itself constantly deteriorated. Such, briefly, was the condition of the chief part of the Russian population at a time when Western Europe was advancing in industry and prosperity by bounds.

Meantime, the population rapidly grew. In a time when the population of the Empire was estimated at some hundred and ten and odd millions, the census of last year gave the figure at more than one hundred and

twenty-nine million souls. This yearly growth of the population, estimated approximately at two millions, undoubtedly constitutes an increase of wealth, but only in the event of there being sufficient resources for the feeding and training of the growing population. Otherwise it must only result in an increase of the proletariat.

In comparison with its revenue the Empire has an immense debt. Interest on the Imperial Debt occupies the second place in the Budget, and is only a little less than the expenditure of the Ministry of War (£40,800,000 and £43,200,000 in 1898). The finances showed a deficit even before the Crimean war. After the Crimean war the position was worse, and every attempt to diminish the extraordinary expenditure proved fruitless in consequence of the war of 1877-78. Meantime, fresh expenditure was entailed by re-armament, the construction of fortresses and strategical railways. Independently of these it was necessary for the development of industry to return to the construction of railways which had been suspended in 1875, although a great part of the railways promised only to pay, or even cover their expenses, in the future. It is natural that this increase in indebtedness had as inevitable consequence an increase in the burden of taxation.

To contend with such a position was very difficult, but thanks to twenty years of peace and the energetic efforts of the Ministry of Finances, the deficits vanished from the ordinary Budget, and it seemed that money could even be found for productive purposes. But in all circumstances the finances of a country depend on the economic condition of the people. We have already briefly pointed out, and shall hereafter show in greater detail, how badly Russia compares in this respect with the countries of Western Europe. The severity of the climate prevents agricultural work during a considerable part of the year, and involves greater demand for clothing, dwelling, food, heat, and light. The great number of holidays still further shortens production, even in the working season. With such conditions it is inevitable that savings for a

rainy day among the Russian people should be insignificant, and such they are shown to be in reality. Every famine, even a local failure of harvest, is the cause of a veritable disaster.

With such a state of affairs it is needless to point out the absolute necessity for great caution in the expenditure of money on military purposes. It is quite true that in this respect Russia cannot fall behind the other powers, but she must not follow blindly after them, and, above all, she must not attempt to outstrip them, for such a course might lead to the most disastrous consequences. In the struggle for money the rivalry is unequal. Russia is weaker for two reasons—first, she has less reserves; secondly, she gives orders abroad, pays more than other powers, and sends her money out of the country. While England, Germany, and France themselves construct and prepare all that they need at the lowest possible cost, keeping their money at home, Russia is compelled to take a less advantageous course. Thus, for instance, in ordering ships of war in England, or building them at home to a large extent with imported materials and machinery, Russia pays at least 25 per cent. more than the building of warships costs the English Government, and sends into that country money which England afterwards uses for the strengthening of her own fleet. By her orders Russia helps to keep up English shipbuilding yards, which in time of war would make it easy for England to repair quickly the losses she sustained.

Every effort put forth by Russia in the strengthening of her fleet calls forth corresponding activity in foreign countries. The recent assignation of £13,500,000 (ninety millions of roubles) to strengthen the fleet may serve as an example. As the direct consequence of this the project of the German Government to allot several millions of marks to increasing the fleet during a period of seven years, a project which had met with strong opposition in the Reichsrath, was agreed to without any further difficulty. As a natural consequence the French and Austrian Governments already demand from their

parliaments extraordinary credits for the same purpose. Thus, as the final result of this rivalry, the relationship of the naval powers will remain what it was before.

All this only confirms the necessity for greater caution and concentration of resources in the satisfying of those requirements which in a given time are most insistent. Precisely as climatic conditions in every country demand a suitable distribution of agricultural labour, in military affairs a definitive plan also is essential corresponding with needs and resources. The first question which would be asked after the adoption of such a system is: Must Russia be equally ready to carry on war on land and on sea?

In order to define the importance of naval power in a naval war two propositions must be made—first, that a war impends with the Triple Alliance, in the event of which Russia has the support of France; and secondly, that a war is probable with England. It is necessary, first of all, to observe the immense preponderance of armies and of operations on land over naval forces and possible operations at sea. The armies which would enter upon war on the Continent are numbered by millions of men. The armies of the first line of both alliances number more than six and a half millions. The armies of the second line would number almost six millions.

What *rôle* will be played by the fleet during the conflict of such masses? To this question we get the best answer by reverting to the war of 1870. Germany then possessed a fleet in no way fit to oppose the fleet of France. Yet the French fleet was compelled to abandon all plans of a landing upon the German coast, and did not even make an attempt to accomplish them. From the first, Moltke was so convinced of the impossibility of such a diversion that in his plan of military operations in 1870, relying upon the numerical superiority of the German army, he declared: "The superiority of our forces at the point where the decisive blow will be struck will be all the greater if the French undertake an expedition against the northern coast

of Germany." This is the best evidence of the disregard he paid to all projects of invasion.

From that time the organisation of the armies of the great powers has gone still further, so that, even if the whole of an army and its reserves were engaged in operations on the frontier or in the territory of the enemy, it would nevertheless not be difficult to oppose a superior force to any that could be landed on the coast.

From estimates made in Italy, the transport of an army corps fully equipped with provisions for a month, and corresponding train, would require a fleet with a displacement of 116,000 tons. Professor Deguis says that, in the first 15-20 days from the beginning of operations, France could despatch an expedition of not more than 30,000 men. But in the face of modern artillery, small arms, and coast defences, a landing could only be accomplished with great difficulty.

Only a change of wind, a sudden storm or a thick fog is needed to interrupt the operation of landing, and to place the forces already on shore in a critical position.

It is true that we hear talk of the possibility of warships holding the coast-line under their guns and keeping it entirely clear of the defenders' troops. In reality, it happens that warships of deep draught, in order to keep clear of rocks and shoals, are compelled to stand at a distance of 1100 to 1600 yards from the shore, and, incommoded in movement by their transports, they regulate their fire with difficulty. But the enemy, relying upon long-range artillery, does not show himself at all upon the open shore, but shelters himself behind dunes and eminences or keeps even farther in the interior. The fire from warships may be powerful, but it is scattered and for this reason cannot be effective. During the bombardment of the insurgents' camp in Crete the allied squadron fired seventy shells, with a resulting loss to the insurgents of three killed and fifteen wounded.

We will not speak of the possibility of a Russian descent upon the coast of Germany. But let us suppose that the Germans were to land troops, of course without

cavalry, on the Baltic coast, what could they effect? We have heard of course of the possibility of the Germans landing near Riga in order to cut the communications of the Russian army situated in Lithuania, or descending near Narva in order to operate against St. Petersburg. But this is almost a phantasy. Wherever they might be landed, an enemy's forces moving into the interior would be gradually weakened by the allotment of a considerable proportion for the purpose of preserving communications. Meantime the strength of the defence would continuously grow. With the aid of the telegraph and the railway, troops might be brought to the threatened locality in a very short time. Nor could their arrival at the scene of operations be interfered with by the destruction of the railways, for the invading army will be without cavalry.

The success of the allied armies in the Crimea may be adduced against this argument. Such an objection has been answered by Von der Goltz in his work "*Das Volk in Waffen.*" He says: "If the armies landed in the Crimea were victorious over the local forces the cause of this was that, however difficult communication by sea was for the allies, these conditions were more favourable than the land communications used by the defenders in their own country. If in 1854 Russia had had her present network of railways, the French, the English and the Turks, at first landing in the Crimea to the number of 120,000 men, would not have remained there long."

The undertaking of a descent in considerable force is improbable, if only for the reason that it weakens the strength of the army which must defend the frontier where superiority of forces is aimed at by both sides. In certain events Germany would be compelled to carry on war on two frontiers. Her enemies would only desire that she should make the mistake which Moltke expected from France.

Thus for the protection of her coasts, Russia has no need whatever to increase her fleet, for the descent of an enemy would place her in no danger whatever, even

if she did not dispose of her present fleet. This opinion is held even in Germany.

The bombardment of a coast town, however important it may be as a political, industrial, or trading centre, can only cause material losses to private individuals and to the state. But such operations can have no effect on the resources which a country possesses for the purpose of carrying on war. The destruction caused can have no influence whatever on the course of the war on land, and even if all the seaports of a country were bombarded it could in no way change the course of events. The essential fact is this, that a continental war will not be carried on merely with the object of causing losses to the enemy and beginning negotiations for peace on the basis of the losses caused. A future war will be a struggle between whole peoples, and each side will have as its object the total overthrow of the enemy. Therefore such bombardments of coast towns, however wealthy and important these latter may be, would only represent so much destruction with little influence on the issue of the struggle.

Even in this respect Russia is in a better position than Germany; the Russian coast being less thickly populated, the losses from bombardment would be less, and consequently a numerous fleet is less necessary for Russia than for Germany. With the exception of Riga, Revel, and Helsingfors, strongly fortified, there are no important towns on the Russian coast. And the Russian fleet, even as constituted now, represents a very considerable force.

Even the complete destruction of a fleet could have little influence upon a continental war. In commenting upon the experience gained from the last wars in Europe, we may point first to the destruction of the Italian fleet by the Austrians at Lissa in 1866. What benefit did this naval victory bring to Austria, beaten at Sadova? In 1870 a German fleet scarcely existed, while the French fleet had full freedom to act, yet Germany sustained no damage and her naval inferiority in no way influenced the

course of the war. The French sailors were far more needed for the defence of Paris. It is true that the maritime trade of Germany was arrested. But whatever the number of warships may be, communications by sea will be cut. Nowadays every power has sufficient cruisers, and merchant ships which might be turned into cruisers, in order to stop all trade by sea.

Battleships against this will be of little use. In speed they must give way to cruisers which will evade them and simply laugh at their unwieldy adversaries. Battleships will be valuable only for battle between themselves and for attack upon coasts.

But let us postulate that the Russian navy had a decided preponderance over that of the enemy, sending to the bottom many more of his ships than she lost herself. Even in such case the Russian fleet would at best be in the position of the French fleet in 1870, which not only gained no victories, but found no foe. The victorious fleet would steam along the coast and threaten certain localities. Suppose that the Russian fleet were to act more energetically than the French fleet in 1870 and bombard mercilessly a great number of the smaller coast towns of Germany. The great German cities, Bremen, Hamburg, Stettin, Kiel, Dantzig, and Königsberg would remain inaccessible, standing too far from the coast.

But to attain results, even in the case of the less important towns, would be no easy task for a fleet of ironclads. On approaching the coast they must meet with the torpedo-boats, submarine mines, and submarine boats of the enemy, and run very great risks. Modern science has contrived a very different system of coast defence from that which obtained in 1870. But we will suppose that the Russian fleet were uninjured. Yet if the fleet does not dispose of swift cruisers, hundreds of merchant vessels will escape from harbour and the blockade will be ineffective. In this respect one cruiser may do more than a whole fleet of unwieldy battleships, which consume immense quantities of coal, a material which the Russian fleet could obtain only with difficulty. Thus, if

the battleships cannot be devoted to the interruption of trade, their operations must be confined to the destruction of peaceful settlements, the slaughter of unarmed men, women and children, leading to an increase of savagery in the relations of the contending peoples.

Suppose that victory should remain on the side of Germany, acting, it might be, in co-operation with England, the results would be even less considerable, for the Russian coast is much more thinly peopled. We will even go farther and suppose that the German fleet proved victorious over the French. What influence could such a result have on the events of the war on land between the two states? In all probability no more than the superiority of the French fleet in 1870, for Germany would certainly not make the mistake of attempting a descent upon the French coast.

Prince Bismarck, in one of his speeches, drew the following comparison of the importance of successes on sea and land in a war between continental powers: "It must not be forgotten that the capture of every village represents a real success, the importance of which is immediately felt, while the capture of an enemy's vessel only goes into the general account, which must be settled at the conclusion of the war. The capture of a fortress ensures the possession of territory, while the capture even of a whole fleet at best represents only means for undertaking fresh conquests." But Russia, even if she aimed at conquests in Germany and Austria, would not need a fleet, for the land frontiers of both these countries are conterminous with hers for an immense distance.

Let us consider two hypotheses: (1) That the armies of Russia were defeated, while her fleet gained a complete victory: in the final result of course Russia would be beaten. (2) That the Russian army gained complete victory while her fleet was annihilated; the result would be that Russia would gain all the fruits of her victory on land. The conquered on land would be forced to pay contributions, and even their fleets might pass into the hands of Russia.

To this it may be replied that since France, Germany, and England increase their fleets we must do the same. Whether France is acting wisely in increasing her fleet we will not stop to consider, since France must bear in mind the possibility of a conflict with Italy, protect her interests in the Mediterranean and her colonial possessions, and, we may observe, the greater her naval forces increase the greater will be the security of Russia, although it must be noted that in France every expedition to distant countries gives cause for complaints as to unreadiness, disorder and defects in the *personnel*. It is enough to read the work of M. Lockroy, former Minister of Marine, to be convinced that the French fleet is far from being on a level with the English, and that the incessant attempts made to overtake England have only resulted in hindering the French fleet in its efforts to be fully ready for war. Even if we allow that there is much exaggeration in the complaints which have been made, it is impossible not to conclude that as France cannot rival England in the number of her ships, the French Government would do better to devote all its attention to preparing the fleet in its present composition for war.

For Germany an increase in the navy is not demanded by any interests in Europe, and if it had not been for the example of Japan, in all probability, the Emperor William would not have set himself so passionately to the increase of his fleet.

In a very different position is England. Her fundamental interests demand that she shall remain mistress of the seas, everywhere and against every possible enemy, preserving from all danger not only the British Islands, but her maritime trade, her immense colonies in all quarters of the globe, and those communications by which the riches of the Old and New Worlds are exchanged to her advantage, and from which depend the ebb and flow of her social life. Mistress of the seas, England can be at rest, both as concerns herself and as concerns her colonies. For her the mastery of the seas is no empty word, and she has every good reason to devote all her resources to the strengthening of her fleet.

In its turn this example of England may be instructive for other countries. England does not rely on the strength of her armies. A country composed of islands, having a commanding fleet is secure, and consequently it may wisely sacrifice all to the increase of its fleet. Russia is in a very different position, and her fleet can in no way guarantee her safety. A decisive blow can be struck only on land, and for Russia a navy has only an auxiliary importance, in proportion as it influences operations on land. If a naval war be carried on independently of these operations, and without influence upon them, it represents a mere waste of strength and money. Even in relation to England it is more important for Russia to be strong on land than to increase her fleet, which never can be made to rival the navy of Great Britain.

Not only is an increased fleet not essential for the safety of Russia, but an increase would produce very little moral effect on her possible enemies. Germany, as we have already pointed out, has no fear of a landing on her coast, and her fleet will always have the Northern Canal available as a means of refuge. In England an increase in the number of Russian battleships would produce no impression. There remains only Japan. But there is not one of Russia's vital interests which Japan could damage. The Siberian railway is important only as a means of transport, and neither Japan nor China has any interest in opposing transit across Siberia.

For England the competition of the Siberian railway is insignificant. The freight rate from Hankow to Odessa or to London is only about twopence per pound, and the great proportion of Asiatic trade will continue to prefer this cheaper route. It is true that transport by railway will be shorter in time, but this has little importance. The use of the Siberian railway for purposes of trade cannot assume large measures for many years. For this an immense development in China would be required, and China is above all things a country of stagnation.

In recent times Russia has made no small efforts to strengthen her fleet. In the course of the twenty years

period, 1876-96, the expenditure of the Russian Ministry of Marine grew at a much greater rate than other branches of expenditure—that is, from £4,050,000 to £9,000,000 (in 1896, £10,050,000), or 122 per cent. In the same period the expenditure on the army increased only 50 per cent. Now the maritime trade of Russia for one inhabitant only amounts to fourteen shillings and three-pence—that is, the trading interests of the Russian population are twenty-two times less than those of the population of the United Kingdom, and seven times less than those of France, Germany, and the United States. Thus maritime trade has for Russia less importance than for other countries, not only from its smaller value but owing to her geographical position; the land frontiers of Russia being immense, while her limited coast is icebound for a great part of the year.

A more important consideration lies in the fact that those very powers which could place obstacles in the way of Russian maritime trade are those which are most dependent upon it, for neither Germany nor England could manage without Russian products. The stoppage of Russian trade would cause great injury to both these countries. From this it results that the maritime trade of Russia will be defended by the very nature of things, and not by the number of her warships. Yet Russia spends for every ton displacement of her own ships more than any other European state: that is to say, £5 4s., while France spends £4 1s. 8d., Italy £2 13s., Austria £1 8s., Germany £1, and England only 12s. 9d.

Naval expenditure amounts to 7 per cent. of the total value of her maritime trade, while that of France is 6 per cent., that of England $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent., and that of Germany less than 2 per cent. From this we see how insignificant are the trading interests of Russia. In the East they are quite inconsiderable.

First of all it is necessary to consider what is the extent of that trade in China and Japan which so captivates the imaginations of Europeans. China imports goods of average value of £41,050,000, and exports her own

products to the average value of £23,850,000. The imports of Japan are valued at £6,750,000, and her exports at £8,700,000. These figures refer to a time before the war between China and Japan, since which those countries have permitted themselves such expenditure that they have undoubtedly impoverished themselves, and will not quickly recover from the consequences.

In this trade the share of Russia is quite inconsiderable. Of five hundred mercantile firms trading in China ten only are Russian. In the general export and import trade of China the share of Russia is as small as 4 per cent. The number of vessels entering Chinese ports in the year 1889 was 19,100, with a displacement of 15,800,000 tons. Of these vessels but 44, with a displacement of 55,000 tons, were Russian, or less than $\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of the total.

True, we may expect that the construction of the Siberian railway will lead to the increase of Russian trade with China. But it will be safer not to have any illusions in this respect. A comparison of the present freight from Hankow to Odessa with the railway freight from Odessa to Moscow, will show what transport by the Siberian railway even with the lowest possible freights will cost.

The political influence of a great fleet in the Far East may be of course adduced. We hear talk, for instance, of the acquisition of Corea. The possession of Corea could be of no possible advantage to Russia. Corea has a population of twelve millions, and the whole value of her trade, import and export, amounts to no more than £780,000. With the conquest of Corea, Russia would have another distant point for the defence of which she would have to provide, and the greater the number of such weak places in the state the more its power is weakened. The immense defensive strength of Russia lies in the fact that she is a compact continent with a short coast line on which attack could be made.

While Russia could draw no possible profit from the acquisition of Corea, she would suffer from the fact that the Coreans, becoming Russian subjects, would begin to

immigrate into Siberia, leading the Chinese after them. When we recall the case of the United States, compelled to prohibit the immigration of Chinese coolies, it will appear plain that Russia would be compelled to take liminary measures against her Corean subjects, measures which would not exactly tend towards the reconciliation of the Coreans with their new position. It is not to be supposed that Russia is spending half a milliard roubles on the Siberian railway in order to facilitate the competition of Coreans and Chinese with the Russian settlers in Siberia. The settlement of Eastern Siberia with Coreans would also give rise to difficulties from the political point of view. For all such reasons the acquisition by Russia of Corea is not to be desired.

In addition to this, from the direction of Japan there can be no serious danger. In her excessive armaments Japan is making efforts to follow in the footsteps of Europe, like the frog in the fable which, seeking to rival the size of the ox, blew himself out until he burst. Something of this nature must happen with Japan. The Amur territory of Russia is a wilderness which Japan cannot threaten. It is inconceivable that she would enter upon a war with Russia even though she were possessed of a preponderance in battleships.