

Letters to the Editor

MACHINERY OF DEFENCE

“COMPULSORY SERVICE”

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—I regret an unavoidable delay in replying to “Civilian’s” interesting letter. (*The Times*, November 10.)

The questions he asks are not easy to answer shortly. Full replies appear to require a treatise covering the economic position of Great Britain; the influence of air power on strategy; the role of the British Army in peace and war; the military, economic, political, and psychological effects of the Military Service Acts, 1916-18; food and raw material supply; the metal and chemical trades; the engineering and shipbuilding industries, and so on.

Once upon a time I was in favour of compulsory military service and toyed with the idea of preparing a comprehensive memorandum on “British Field Forces in Future Continental Wars.” After months of study and quiet thinking I came to the conclusion that British Field Forces on the grand scale had no future in Continental wars.

I could see many possibilities of our Air Force using bases on the Continent, protected and covered by mobile armoured forces and anti-aircraft units sent from this country. I could also envisage relatively small, high quality, mechanized forces being landed to help Allies. But I completely failed to make any strategic sense out of the employment of vast British conscript armies oversea. This is the basis of my opposition to the idea of compulsory service in the Army.

“Civilian” asks what “compulsory service” means, and suggests that it might mean raising a Kitchener Army forthwith, or, alternatively, preparing to raise one later by training every young man of 18 as a soldier. He then asks, do I condemn both of these plans. I do. In my view, the adoption of either would be a prelude to disaster.

If I were Chief of Staff of a foreign Power contemplating war against this country I should spend money lavishly to stimulate British “patriotic” societies to demand conscription, urging the duty of being prepared to stand by an ally or to march to —. Why? Because our adoption of conscription would inevitably diminish our naval and air preparations: it would also be certain to weaken our national moral through acute division of public opinion. Having secured these initial objectives, I should then try to produce a situation in which the British Government could be made to figure as opposing “self-determination” or “collective security” or some other popular formula and thus produce more perplexity in the honest but not subtle mind of the English. When I, in my imagined role, was quite ready, war would come and I should be very careful not to attack the British conscript field force too soon. My air force would have orders not to

press home its attack on transports until a large proportion of the British Army was on the Continent in position “to defend the Channel Ports.” Then given an air force approximately equal to the British, I should be perfectly happy, knowing that I had put an almost intolerable strain on the resources of the British Navy and Mercantile Marine. On land I should sit tight in prepared positions and defend myself against the attacks of the British Army in full confidence that they would fail. They would. This is one tradition which the British Army never departs from. Recall any of our more recent wars. We always begin by attacking in the manner of the last War modified slightly by wishful thinking, and we always are repulsed until we learn new methods.

While this was going on inland, I should direct my utmost offensive power by air and sea against the British Mercantile Marine. My raiders and submarines would be far out on the oceans: my air force would be used relentlessly against the transports, supply ships, and docks. I should have drawn a mass of shipping into the narrow seas where sea power is at its weakest. The more Great Britain reinforced its conscripts the more transports, the more supply ships would be crowded into coastal waters, the better my target would be and the heavier the loss of tonnage. The whale would indeed have got into the shallows where I could chop it to bits. Still pretending to be a hostile Chief of Staff, I should be satisfied as I realized how British military conscription had been used to weaken the one thing I feared, British sea power.

Air power has transformed the problem. If ever again we must participate in Continental war, I hope we shall be wise enough to use the Royal Air Force predominantly and ground forces only so far as they are required as ancillaries to it. These would be small in personnel but of the highest quality in moral, intelligence, training, and equipment.

In addition to the strategic objection to sending vast conscript armies oversea there is an economic one. I do not see how it can be financially possible for us to be supreme at sea, as strong as the strongest in the air, be secure from air attack at home, and raise and equip on the modern scale vast armies. If we were to try I think it might break us, and anyhow I am quite certain that long before we broke, naval, air, and home defence preparations would be skimped to find money for the Army.

Now for “Civilian’s” other points. May I suggest without offence that national organization for war and compulsory military service are wholly different things. General Ellison has already made this point, but it needs to be rubbed in, and not only into “Civilian.” I am quite clear in my own mind that we should have a national register under a Ministry of National Service organized on a regional basis. At the very root of democratic freedom is the universal obligation to defend the social fabric—the ancient fyrd. I see no case against compelling people, in times of emergency, to do here at home work which the State requires to be done. As a matter of fact it is quite clear that if war come we shall all have to do what we are told. I am wholeheartedly in favour of immediate registration and allocation of each of us to his or her war-time job. I am also in favour of compulsory training for the young, but not compulsory military training—so few of them are soldiers. My compulsory training

be an extension of our present educational system and would cover general education as at present; physical training much more than at present, and technical training for every one, but not the same technical training for every one. In country districts the emphasis would fall on agricultural and food production problems; in the towns on such things as the care and maintenance of internal combustion engines, wireless, fitting and turning, woodworking, and so forth. We should get something in return for the money spent in that way not only in war but in peace. That is my picture of the needs—the nation organized on the basis of a national register to produce food, make munitions, care for the sick and wounded, man all the services included under A.R.P., and have its anti-aircraft defences ready to the day. I should do all these things by voluntary enrolment and training if that would give the required results, but I should not hesitate to use compulsion for these things if it were necessary.

The Navy, the Army (Regular and Territorial), and the Air Force should, I am sure, remain as now on a voluntary basis. We stand for democracy, and I believe that the active fight for freedom will be best waged by free men. “Civilian” reminds me that a nation fighting for its life will have to do the unpredictable. I agree. What I object to and which appears to desire is to take action which infallibly predicts the dispatch of a conscript army to the front. “Civilian” has one more suggestion: always send forces to take part in continental wars. May I ask a question: many times have we sent our armies oversea? In the only sent conscripts in the last war, and I am of opinion that we did not do much. I am of opinion that we added little to the result of our military effort.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,  
11, Old Jewry, E.C.2.

one. sion will have many lines. been I The buildin years a tiation the site. Hollow Colonies