

As recorded
R.S.L.

ALLIES AGAINST DISEASE

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31 38' There is grim justice in the spread of typhus to Germany, but that will console nobody. This recrudescence of the epidemic in Europe is wholly disastrous. It recalls the appalling menace with which we were confronted twenty years ago, but it recalls, too, the way in which that challenge was met - and that ^{is} a story worth telling once more.

Twenty years ago, Western Europe was basking in the relief of victorious peace. Few of us were aware that the whole continent, and these islands, and (Dr Victor Helsen declares,) America ~~also~~, were ~~threatened~~ threatened by a combination of enemies much deadlier than the Central Powers - typhus, small-pox, malaria, cholera and typhoid fever. They were advancing, wave upon wave.

In Eastern and Southern Europe, before the war ended, whole populations had been reduced to sub-human conditions of life, without health organizations or sanitation of any kind. In these regions, and in contiguous parts of Asia, disease was bred.

War ended, and vast migrations began - millions of derelicts - refugees, released prisoners and lost legions streaming across frontiers towards their homes. To Russia, devastated by war, revolution and counter-revolutionary wars, came the exiles from Siberia. Typhus, a lice-born disease, came with them. Two million Russians died of it.

The plan worked: Poland and the Baltic States, and Poles also, had been exiled to Siberia by the Tsars; and hundred of thousands of Poles and nationals of the Baltic States had been cut off in Russia during the war. Now these were flooding westwards, returning home.

The League of Nations had already set up an Epidemics Commission. To this, the Polish Government appealed. Twenty-seven nations, including America, sent experts to a conference at Warsaw. They met in March 1922, and set a campaign in operation at once.

Dr Melville Mackenzie has described the measures - simple, practical and drastic, which the medical units took.

They set up a column of sanitary stations along the Russian frontier. Where trains crossed it to the west, they put up sheds equipped with paraffin (death to lice), and hot baths. Beside each of these, a long tunnel was dug and fitted with air-tight doors at either end. The tunnels were connected with tracks to the railway line. Daily, trains drew in with thousands of destitutes packed into cattle-trucks, each train a caravanserai of typhus-infected lice. The train was halted, the passengers were made to strip and enter the cleansing-sheds; their clothes were bundled into the trucks and the train was then backed down into the tunnel. The trucks were uncoupled from the engine, the tunnel doors shut, and prussic acid gas was turned on. Not a louse would escape with its life.

4 The plan worked: Poland and the Baltic States, and probably, all Europe, were saved.

From Asia Minor, in the same year, malignant malaria was carried to the famine-stricken regions of Russia, and cholera, small-pox and typhoid fever to Greece. When the war with Turkey ended Greek refugees returned, infected. They comprised a fifth of the population. They camped in the streets and fields. Athens was without drainage or sanitation; its streets ran with red mud in wet weather and, in heat, lay under clouds of red dust.

5 Experts were sent from the International Epidemics Commission to help the team of eighty Greek doctors. Drains were dug and sanitary stations set up. Half a million people were vaccinated and the epidemics were stopped.

Famine and malaria were appalling in the Balkans during and after the war. Disease-stricken people, too weak to plough, suffered hunger and fell easy victims to infection again. They were too poor to buy quinine, which was rare and costly then. Malaria spread through Bulgaria, Rumania, Greece, Yugo-Slavia and Albania and appeared in Italy.

6 The Malaria Commission which the League set up, fought the epidemic in these countries, then organised a permanent scheme of research, teaching, and preventive and curative measures. These covered nearly all the malarial areas of the globe. The scientists discovered, among other things, how a cheap form of quinine could be prepared.

Leprosy, cancer, rabies, tuberculosis, sleeping-sickness, trachoma, as well as the great epidemic scourges, are some of the diseases which the permanent Health Section at Geneva is combatting. Scientists and governments all over the world co-operate in research, the Rockefeller Foundation gives subsidies. In the decades between wars any government needing help had only to ask for it: whether to city, island or jungle, an international team of experts equipped for field work would go out. All the world's medical knowledge was at the service of all.

China made notable use of these international services, and, all through the thirties, great schemes were operated there with the aid of health experts sent out by the League. In nineteenthirty-two, the cases of cholera reported in Shanghai alone, numbered nearly four thousand: China was almost free from cholera by nineteen thirty-six. The traffic in opium, ~~which had~~ kept the nation debilitated for generations, was brought under control. Japanese aggression has put an end to all this; cholera is again raging in China and opium has been released. In Geneva, in thirty-seven, I heard the Chinese representative say - and there was no oriental detachment in his voice as he said it - "They are conquering us with drugs as well as with guns".

In Geneva, the work continues, although on a diminished scale. The health section keeps in close touch with Governments, research centres and the Red Cross, [which seek and receive advice on nutrition and the prevention of epidemics and other problems created by War.] The International Labour Office, from its new Canadian centre at MacGill University, collaborates, [It is making full use of opportunities for co-ordinating American experiments and research.]

All the time, quietly and steadfastly, preparations are being made to meet the situation which will exist when this war ends. The whole Health Section is keyed to this purpose now. We need not doubt that science and civilisation will triumph over destruction again.

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