THE ESSENCE OF THE CONTRACT

Spring, abnormally early, is spreading northwards in Russia; between Moscow and the Sea of Azov the whole front is reported to be already affected by thaw. These conditions are calculated to give the German armies a temporary respite. After nearly four months of an uninterrupted offensive the Russians have advanced a long way from their original bases; with mud now impeding the system of cross-country transport which they utilised with such astonishing effect during the winter campaign, they must rely more for maintenance of their forward supplies on a railway system which the retreating enemy must have seriously damaged; and troop movements off the roads must become slow and difficult, with the defence enjoying the balance of advantage. This does not mean that operations in Russia are wholly suspended; hard fighting continues on much of the front, and there is still scope this month for locally important moves north of Moscow (as witness the Russians’ recapture of Demjansk and Rehev) or even, if some frost recur, between Bryansk and Kursk. What it does mean in all probability is that the great offensive in the Ukraine has lost its impetus; for the next month slow Russian progress at best can be reasonably expected. Thus winter ends with the German armies in South Russia heavily defeated and forced to yield all last year’s territorial gains, but—despite enormous losses of German and satellite men and material—not yet routed or broken. In fact, on the most crucial sector of that front, between Kursk and the Donets, where a fortnight ago the Russian advance raised hopes that the German forces in the Donbas might be encircled or flung across the Dnieper, the Germans have apparently counter-attacked and regained ground with the aid—so Moscow asserts with emphasis—of powerful reinforcements from the West.

The arrival of these reinforcements, whose strength is put by Moscow at no less than thirty divisions, transferred from France and Germany, is bound to raise in Russian minds the question of the extent to which Anglo-American forces have so far made good the Roosevelt-Churchill pledge that everything possible would be done to take some of the weight off the armies of the U.S.S.R. The Russians, with less than justice to us, think less than we do in terms of naval warfare or “strategic” bombing, and much more in terms of land forces. What, they will ask, has been the effect so far of Anglo-American operations in North Africa? The answer, as they see it, is one which they will hardly regard as satisfactory. General Eisenhower’s landing resulted first in the German occupation of Vichy France, but that move seems to have been effected by spreading out more thinly the forces already in France; some more garrison troops have no doubt been brought into France from Germany, but there have been no reports of divisions being recalled from Russia for the purpose. Nor does it seem likely that when the Germans made their next move—the establishment of a bridgehead in Tunisia—it was necessary or possible for them to draw on the Eastern Front supreme importance that Germany should not have no doubt been brought into France from Germany, but there have been no reports of divisions being recalled from Russia for the purpose. Nor does it seem likely that when the Germans made their next move—the establishment of a bridgehead in Tunisia—it was necessary or possible for them to draw on the Eastern Front.

Aim for the purpose. Apart from reinforcements which would presumably in any case have been sent to Rommel, there has been no suggestion that the additional force, German and Italian, despatched to oppose General Eisenhower exceeded, say, half-a-dozen divisions. Finally, the Russians will argue, though the Allies have now been in North Africa for four months, the ineffectiveness from Moscow’s standpoint of this still somewhat remote “second front” can be judged from the fact that the enemy has felt able to transfer from the West to the East since December well over 250,000 men.

If we reply that we have on our hands an intensified U-boat campaign, that we are putting great and costly efforts into bombing German submarine bases and industrial centres, that the enemy has doubted less been compelled to replace from elsewhere part at least of the divisions moved eastwards from France, and that in one way and another we are containing a high proportion of the Luftwaffe, the Russians will still be unconvinced that our contribution is either adequate or, equally important, synchronised to meet their needs. Indeed, if we view the situation dispassionately, we shall find it difficult to deny that in their strategic plans the Western democracies are ignoring one essential factor—Time. In Washington there is still much talk of an elevating million army, without explanation of how to use the colossal force; in any case only a small part of it could be transported or supplied overseas before 1944 or 1945. The question remains whether the democracies can afford to fight a long war while the Soviet Union, rather naturally, wishes to fight a short one.

When the Russians launched their great offensive last November, it was obvious that the cardinal objective for Britain and the U.S.A. should be to prevent the enemy’s reinforcing the Eastern Front at the moment when, for climatic reasons or from increasing exhaustion, the Russian attack had reached its peak. That objective we have failed to achieve. Recriminations are now on the way and another we are containing a high proportion of the Luftwaffe, the Russians will still be unconvinced that our contribution is either adequate or, equally important, synchronised to meet their needs. Indeed, if we view the situation dispassionately, we shall find it difficult to deny that in their strategic plans the Western democracies are ignoring one essential factor—Time. In Washington there is still much talk of an elevating million army, without explanation of how to use the colossal force; in any case only a small part of it could be transported or supplied overseas before 1944 or 1945. The question remains whether the democracies can afford to fight a long war while the Soviet Union, rather naturally, wishes to fight a short one.

When the Russians launched their great offensive last November, it was obvious that the cardinal objective for Britain and the U.S.A. should be to prevent the enemy’s reinforcing the Eastern Front at the moment when, for climatic reasons or from increasing exhaustion, the Russian attack had reached its peak. That objective we have failed to achieve. Recriminations are now on the way and another we are containing a high proportion of the Luftwaffe, the Russians will still be unconvinced that our contribution is either adequate or, equally important, synchronised to meet their needs. Indeed, if we view the situation dispassionately, we shall find it difficult to deny that in their strategic plans the Western democracies are ignoring one essential factor—Time. In Washington there is still much talk of an elevating million army, without explanation of how to use the colossal force; in any case only a small part of it could be transported or supplied overseas before 1944 or 1945. The question remains whether the democracies can afford to fight a long war while the Soviet Union, rather naturally, wishes to fight a short one.

When the Russians launched their great offensive last November, it was obvious that the cardinal objective for Britain and the U.S.A. should be to prevent the enemy’s reinforcing the Eastern Front at the moment when, for climatic reasons or from increasing exhaustion, the Russian attack had reached its peak. That objective we have failed to achieve. Recriminations are now on the way and another we are containing a high proportion of the Luftwaffe, the Russians will still be unconvinced that our contribution is either adequate or, equally important, synchronised to meet their needs. Indeed, if we view the situation dispassionately, we shall find it difficult to deny that in their strategic plans the Western democracies are ignoring one essential factor—Time. In Washington there is still much talk of an elevating million army, without explanation of how to use the colossal force; in any case only a small part of it could be transported or supplied overseas before 1944 or 1945. The question remains whether the democracies can afford to fight a long war while the Soviet Union, rather naturally, wishes to fight a short one.

When the Russians launched their great offensive last November, it was obvious that the cardinal objective for Britain and the U.S.A. should be to prevent the enemy’s reinforcing the Eastern Front at the moment when, for climatic reasons or from increasing exhaustion, the Russian attack had reached its peak. That objective we have failed to achieve. Recriminations are now on the way and another we are containing a high proportion of the Luftwaffe, the Russians will still be unconvinced that our contribution is either adequate or, equally important, synchronised to meet their needs. Indeed, if we view the situation dispassionately, we shall find it difficult to deny that in their strategic plans the Western
You must never be over-sure. You must say, when reporting:
At five o’clock in the central sector is a dozen
Of what appear to be animals; whatever you do, Don’t call the bleeders sheep.

I am sure that’s quite clear; and suppose, for the sake of example,
The one at the end, asleep, endeavour to tell us
What he sees over there to the west, and how far
After first having come to attention. There to the west,
On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows bestow
Vestments of purple and gold.

The still white dwellings are like a mirage in the heat,
And under the swaying elms a man and a woman Lie gently together. Which is, perhaps, only to say
That there is a row of houses to the left of arc, And that under some poplars a pair of what appear to be humans
Appear to be loving.

Well that, for an answer, is what we might rightly call
Moderately satisfactory only, the reason being, Is that two things have been omitted, and those are important.
The human beings, now: in what direction are they, And how far away, would you say, and do not forget
There may be dead ground in between.

There may be dead ground in between; and I may not have got The knack of judging a distance; I will only say
A guess that perhaps between me and the apparent lovers, Who, incidentally, appear by now to have finished, At seven o’clock from the houses, is roughly a distance
Of about one year and a half.

Clive Bell

JUDGING DISTANCES
A Poem from the Forces

Not only nor far away, but the way that you say Is very important. Perhaps you may never get The knack of judging a distance, but at least you know
How to replot on a landscape: the central sector, The line of arc, and that, which we had last Tuesday.

And at least you know.

That maps are of time, not place, so far as the historian Happens to be concerned—the reason being, Is one which need not delay us. Again, you know There are three kinds of tree, three only, the fir And poplar, and those which have bushy tops to; and... Lastly

That things only seem to be things.

A barn is not called a barn, to put it more plainly, Or a field in the distance, where sheep may be safely grazing.

The New Statesman and Nation, March 6, 1943