

# Why peace may never establish a beach-head

AEGIR, the Nordic sea god, arches his watery claws and claims another victim. Briefly distracted, bathers look up as a rescue helicopter whirs overhead. The sounds of the ocean are blotted out as three Mirage fighters shriek along the beach from infinity to infinity. It is the Côte Sauvage.

In London, Paris, Bonn, even Washington and Moscow, political discourse is conducted as though it was subject to reason. The calculus of Star Wars, Trident and cruise, is finely tuned. It is also based on the necessary assumption that, whatever national vanities may complicate the issue, a shared desire to avert catastrophe provides the bottom line.

Hours spent on a hot French beach in August lead to a more sombre view. Partly, it is the cruel outlook: seven miles of white sand glare like an angry star. To the left, 20-foot rollers crash and pull; to the right, broken firs fight against the dunes. A knot of German pillboxes breaks the shimmering line, like giant dice tossed across the tidemark. It was the useless tip of Rommel's sea wall. Near here, in the spring of 1945, the Americans mopped up a final pocket of Nazi resistance, smashing into pieces the seaside town of Royan.

Mainly, it is the people: Dutch, Scandinavian, German, many British, a few French. Almost all are

young, white, and affluent. All are in the grip of a single compulsion in which rationality plays no part.

It is a primeval sight. At one moment, civil servants, bank clerks, secretaries; at the next, frenzied berserks, hurling themselves at a precipice of water. Head vanish and magically reappear, dots in a white swirl. Behind them, Valkyries dash in and out, shouting incitement. Close to the shore, children jump and scream, held and repelled by the weird alchemy.

When some retreat to sink into a sun-drunk daze, others thrust forward to replace them, row after row of demented, glistening savages. Thus forty thousand people spend the day, until the heat from the sun ceases to be painful. Then the procession back from the sea thickens. Inside the camps, enervated queues begin to form outside the communal showers.

Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists have often tried to explain the mysterious rite. The puzzle remains: to what purpose this rhythmic ritual? More ominously, what does it reveal about rituals in the world above the shoreline?

The Côte has no hierarchy, no economy, no communication. Land rights (set by towels and sandcastles) are loose and widely breached. It is not a positive state of anarchy, in the philosopher's sense for there is no co-

## COMMENTARY Ben Pimlott



operation. It is an anti-society, a human cloud in which each molecule shuns its neighbour, despite a silent physical intimacy, which, elsewhere, would count as exhibitionism or assault. One learns that breasts (in the naturist zone, breasts, buttocks and genitals) are heterogeneous. And, indeed, a mutual, unacknowledged pageant of the erotic and grotesque helps to create the sense of a Boschian inferno.

It is like a mock battlefield filled with mock warriors and strewn with mock dead — a huge amphitheatre of mimicked destruction.

Obviously the bodies on the sand have no direct knowledge of fireballs and mutilation. Westerners have largely forgotten the physical experience of war, almost as much time divides the holidaymakers of the Côte from the tanks and bombs and gas chambers of the second world war as separated the cheering crowds of 1914 from the Franco-Prussian War. And yet they are no strangers to the subject of warfare. Images of military violence have become a plague and also, perhaps, a symptom. So

far from reducing interest in killing, the retreat of full-scale war to the poor parts of the world seems to have increased it.

Is it fear that focuses our art, literature, and popular entertainment on war? Or is it longing? As Wyndham Lewis once observed, horror and romance are never far apart. The passage of time and familiarity induced by repetition, aid their union. Ersatz wars—sometimes present-day but distant more often re-runs or loving reconstructions—are offered with growing prolixity in order to stimulate our nerve ends. The public thrill caused by our own little war in the Falklands, the election-winning rush of adrenalin, provided a sharp glimpse of a truth: war is not only ob-

# ish a beach-head

scene it is also seductive.

There is a platform cliché that acts of war arouse a universal abhorrence. If that were true, war would be impossible and half our bookshops and video clubs would be out of business. In fact, for those not directly involved, war is a spectator sport, like motoring.

Wars permit and encourage different values. That's part of their attraction. Another part is their suppression of individuality. What perverse standards will the next war impose? Every war is fought in the language of its predecessor; we do not have an idiom to describe a war that is yet to take place. Instead, we rely on omens and rehearsals. Recent films (Apocalypse Now or The Killing Fields) which point to the moral warp, are as much about the future as the past.

So are recent books about the killing of the Jews. Both Anatoli Kuznetsov's study of Babi Yar and Martin Gilbert's scholarly monument The Holocaust open with the same gruesome symbol: grains of sand made up of fragments of pulverised humanity. Both books are remarkable, not so much for their accounts of the actual acts of wickedness, as for the impression they convey of the desert of depraved conformity to which war can give rise — a distortion of peacetime norms.

There is a common view that wars happen because of insufficient vigilance on the

part of those who might predict them. Recent history suggests the opposite. The first world war created an obsession with schemes to avoid or meet aggression. Never has more intellectual and diplomatic effort been expended by more countries in pursuit of plans for peace. Yet when a real threat arose the international community was as hypnotised as a rabbit. Guilty anticipation and the sense of a blood debt to be paid did as much as the failure of the League of Nations to draw the Western powers into the vortex.

Modern discussions of war are couched in equations of balance and deterrence. Possibly, however, the conditions for war have more to do with mental habit. In retrospect, it is a miracle that the early post-war years were passed in peace. Documents of the Cold War reveal a startling belief among generals and politicians that the resumption of world conflict could not be delayed. In 1945, Europe had been at war for 10 years out of the previous 31.

Those of us who do not remember a time before the Day of Judgment became an instant military possibility, think of war differently from our forebears. At the same time, those with a little knowledge of the past are more sceptical than others about attempts, or the public will, to prevent a recurrence. When we veterans hear the

bombers proudly marched from Aldermaston a quarter of a century ago, a British renouncement of nuclear weapons might have had some effect pour encourager les autres.

Today, it is self-important to imagine that anybody would notice.

It would be wonderful to believe that a new Labour government might actually give nuclear divestment the drastic priority it requires. But even if all the obstacles were successfully overcome, the disposal of every base and launcher would not greatly improve our chances of survival. Nuclear or merely conventional, all the North Europeans on the Côte Sauvage — a small Horoshima's worth, half a day's work at Auschwitz or on the Somme — are fairly equally in danger of consideration. And probably equally indifferent.

A week ago it thundered all day. Rain pocked the dry dunes. The Côte, shining like a sword, was cool, empty, and beautiful. Eighty thousand nipples and nates had vanished as if they had never been. Who were these pink Anglo-Saxons and brown Teutons? Where did they go? For how long will they return, aimlessly courting risk and discomfort? What do they really want? When will Odin, God of Gods, Father of Battle, decide to take them?

GUARDIAN

21.8.86

Psy / Arg.