CHAPTER VI

ACTION

I. “There is no Wealth but Life”

IN January, 1876, William Morris returned from resigning his directorship of the Devon Great Consols Company, put his tophat on a chair, and sat down on it. He never bought another. During the months of spring and summer he was at work on Sigurd the Volsung, renewing in the work his youthful impulse to wage a “holy warfare” against the age. In the summer, with the work nearly complete, he felt his “rebellious inclinations” turning towards Iceland again. One wonders if it was while he was at work on Sigurd that he glanced up from the page to ponder the newspaper headlines, with their gathering warnings of a major European war.

On October 24th, 1876, the readers of the Liberal Daily News read at their breakfast table a long letter from “William Morris. Author of ‘The Earthly Paradise’”, headed “England and the Turks”.

“Sir,

I cannot help noting that a rumour is about in the air that England is going to war and from the depths of my astonishment I ask, On behalf of whom? Against whom? And for what end?”

Later in the letter, he wrote

“I who am writing this am one of a large class of men—quiet men, who usually go about their own business, heeding public matters less than they ought, and afraid to speak in such a huge concourse as the English nation, however much they may feel, but who are now stung into bitterness by thinking how helpless they are in a public matter that touches them so closely”.

Early next year he was writing to The Athenaeum.

“Sir,

My eye just now caught the word ‘restoration’ in the morning paper, and, on looking closer, I saw that this time it is nothing less

1 Letters, p 78
2 Ibid, pp 81–4
than the minster of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott. Is it altogether too late to do something to save it—it and whatever else of beautiful or historical is still left us on the sites of the ancient buildings we were once so famous for? Would it not be of some use once for all, and with the least delay possible, to set on foot an association for the purpose of watching over and protecting these relics.”

In May, 1877, now Treasurer of the Eastern Question Association, he wrote his famous Manifesto “To the Working-men of England” Towards the end of it he struck a note that seems to reveal a change, almost overnight, in the quality of his insight and understanding.

“Working-men of England, one word of warning yet. I doubt if you know the bitterness of hatred against freedom and progress that lies at the hearts of a certain part of the richer classes in this country their newspapers veil it in a kind of decent language, but do but hear them talking among themselves, as I have often, and I know not whether scorn or anger would prevail in you at their folly and insolence—these men cannot speak of your order, of its aims, of its leaders without a sneer or an insult these men, if they had the power (may England perish rather) would thwart your just aspirations, would silence you, would deliver you bound hand and foot for ever to irresponsible capital—and these men, I say it deliberately, are the heart and soul of the party that is driving us to an unjust war.”

A dramatic alteration had taken place in the direction of William Morris’s activities and interests. And a new force had entered English public life.

Of course, this peal of thunder did not come entirely unannounced out of a clear sky. Morris was thoroughly conversant with advanced democratic and republican opinion in his time, and his interest in the “social question”, while it had lain dormant since his Oxford days, had certainly not been extinguished. Foreign refugees of advanced opinions were often to be seen at Madox Brown’s receptions, and at other social occasions of his immediate circle acquaintances such as W B Scott, Woolner and William Rossetti, took an active interest in Radical issues or in the progress of free thought. Mme Bodichon (Barbara Leigh Smith), the notable advocate of women’s rights, was another member of his circle. His closest friends, Edward Burne-Jones

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1 Letters, p 85
2 For the full Manifesto, see Letters, Appendix II
and Charles Faulkner, had taken an interest in the agitation of the Reform League which preceded the 1867 Reform Bill, and Allingham described "Ned" in 1866 as "a People's Man". William Rossetti, who was the first to introduce Walt Whitman to the English public, noted with surprise in his Diary for March, 1868, that Morris took an "interest in politics", holding views "quite in harmony with the democratic sympathies of Jones, Swinburne", and himself.

Whatever his private sympathies may have been, he seems to have set political questions aside with that feeling of hopelessness which had come over him in the late 1850s. However, in the early 1870s there are suggestions that these questions were once again beginning to thrust themselves forward in his thoughts. In March, 1874, he was writing to Mrs Alfred Baldwin, from London:

"Monday was a day here to set one longing to get away as warm as June—though town looks rather shocking on such days, and then instead of the sweet scents one gets an extra smell of dirt. Surely if people lived five hundred years instead of threescore and ten they would find some better way of living than in such a sordid loathsome place, but now it seems to be nobody's business to try to better things—isn't mine you see in spite of all my grumbling—but look, suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields so that you could be in the country in five minutes' walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted. Then I think one might hope that civilization had really begun. But as it is, the best thing one can wish for this country at least is, one seems, some great and tragical circumstances, so that if they cannot have pleasant life, which is what one means of civilization, they may at least have a history and something to think of—all of which won't happen in our time. Sad grumbling ."

In August of the same year, when he wrote to the Hon Mrs George Howard, the presence in his mind of the Norse mythology is even more evident:

"I hope you will let me come again some time and that then you will think me less arrogant on the—what shall I say?—Wesleyan-tradesman-unsympathetic-with-art subjects than you seemed to think.

1 William Allingham, A Diary, p 139
2 Angeli, op cit, p 117
3 Letters, p 62
me the other day but I think to shut one’s eyes to ugliness and vulgarity is wrong, even when they show themselves in people not un-human. Do you know, when I see a poor devil drunk and brutal I always feel, quite apart from my aesthetical perceptions, a sort of shame, as if I myself had some hand in it.”

Mrs Howard had evidently been taking him to task for contrasting the “Pax Brittanica” unfavourably with the past of the Northern legends, since the letter continues.

“Neither do I grudge the triumph that the modern mind finds in having made the world (or a small corner of it) quieter and less violent, but I think that this blindness to beauty will draw down a kind of revenge one day, who knows? Years ago men’s minds were full of art and the dignified shows of life, and they had but little time for justice and peace, and the vengeance on them was not increase of the violence they did not heed, but destruction of the art they heeded. So perhaps the gods are preparing troubles and terrors for the world (or our small corner of it) again, that it may once again become beautiful and dramatic withal for I do not believe they will have it dull and ugly for ever. Meantime, what is good enough for them must content us though sometimes I should like to know why the story of the earth gets so unworthy.”

The thunder-clouds are there—but in both cases, while threatening, they pass on overhead “nobody’s business isn’t mine you see in spite of all my grumbling”, “meantime, what is good enough for them must content us”.

Apart from these few letters, there are surprisingly few forewarnings of the outburst into public affairs. It is necessary to take notice, not only of the few anticipations that exist, but also of the omissions. Two are particularly surprising. In all Morris’s published correspondence and surviving papers there seem to be no contemporary references either to the Paris Commune of 1871, or to Ruskin’s later writings on political economy and morality, Unto this Last, Munera Pulveris, and the series of letters entitled Fors Clavigera, which were addressed “To the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain” between 1871 and 1877. In his later years, the story of the Commune so gripped Morris’s imagination that it provided the climax for his long poem, The Pilgrims of Hope, while his many references to Ruskin not only show that he was quite well aware of his later writing, but also suggest that it.

1 Letters, p 64
had given him some measure of hope amid his years of despair. But, in the 1870s, he seems to have suppressed, half-consciously, the effect of these events and writings upon his mind. Still, despite the contrary urge of the Icelandic influence, he felt himself to be the “Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time”.

Nevertheless, he cannot have been unaware of these things. About the true course of events in the Commune he was unlikely to have had any clear understanding, in the chorus of fear and vilification of the bourgeois Press; but if (as was likely) he read the Fortnightly Review he would not have missed Frederick Harrison’s courageous defence of the Communards.

“For the first time in Modern Europe, the workmen of the chief city of the Continent have organized a regular government in the name of a new Social order,”

nor his exposure of the hysteria on platform and Press, which (in Harrison’s words) “was as if the horses had made an insurrection against men—the frenzy which seizes a white population when their black slaves grow insubordinate.” But, with little understanding of the issues at stake, and besieged on all sides by atrocity stories of the most lurid nature, Morris was scarcely likely to have grasped the import of the great events across the Channel.

It is more likely that Morris’s reactions to the news of the Commune were influenced by those of his “master”, Ruskin. Two of the most remarkable letters in Fors Clavigera were numbers VI and VII, the former “written under the excitement of continual news of the revolution in Paris”, the latter “upon the ruin of Paris” Ruskin broke from the chorus of fear and hatred of his class by attributing the cause of the revolution to “the idleness, disobedience, and covetousness of the richer and middle classes” themselves. He declared in Letter VI

“This cruelty has been done by the kindest of us, and the most honourable, by the delicate women, by the nobly-nurtured men. This robbery has been taught to the hands,—this blasphemy to the lips,—of the lost poor, by the False Prophets who have taken the name of Christ in vain, and leagued themselves with His chief enemy, ‘Covetousness, which is idolatry’

“Covetousness, lady of Competition and of deadly Care, idol above

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1 Fortnightly Review, May, 1871
2 Ibid, August, 1871
3 Fors Clavigera, Letter XLIII
the altars of Ignoble Victory, builder of streets, in cities of Ignoble Peace.”

In Letter VII he was even more specific

“Occult Theft—Theft which hides itself even from itself, and is legal, respectable, and cowardly—corrupts the body and soul of man, to the last fibre of them. And the guilty Thieves of Europe, the real sources of all deadly war in it, are the Capitalists—that is to say, people who live by percentages on the labour of others, instead of by fair wages for their own. The Real war in Europe, of which this fighting in Paris is the Inauguration, is between these and the workmen, such as these have made him. They have kept him poor, ignorant, and sinful, that they might, without his knowledge, gather for themselves the produce of his toil. At last a dim insight into the fact of this dawns on him, and such as they have made him he meets them, and will meet.”

This was the farthest point of understanding which Ruskin ever reached. His sympathies with the workers were sharply repressed by an event which must have fallen as a heavy blow upon Morris as well—the burning of the Louvre “I am myself a Communist”, he wrote in Letter VII.

“I am myself a Communist of the old school—reddest also of the red, and was on the very point of saying so at the end of my last letter, only the telegram about the Louvre’s being on fire stopped me.”

And the “Communism” which he went on to elaborate is a ridiculous eclectic dream-picture, made up of patches of Sir Thomas More, of patriarchal reaction, and medieval nostalgia.

In truth, John Ruskin had advanced with strong (if uneven) strides since the writing of The Stones of Venice. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, he had become a declared disciple of Thomas Carlyle and had turned his main energies to developing the social criticism implicit in Past and Present and in his own “The Nature of Gothic”. In all his writings he returned again and again to the assault upon industrial capitalism. A passage from the Crown of Wild Olive strikes the recurrent note.

“Our cities are a wilderness of spinning wheels instead of palaces, yet the people have not clothes. We have blackened every leaf of English greenwood with ashes, and the people die of cold, our harbours are a forest of merchant ships, and the people die of hunger.”

In a series of articles in the Cornhill Magazine in 1860, later
published as *Unto this Last*, he entered the field of “Political Economy”, developing his ideas in 1862-3 in some essays in *Fraser’s Magazine*, reprinted as *Munera Pulveris*. In one sense, these essays are no more than an elaboration of Carlyle’s warning “We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings.” But in their negative application of this warning these essays are devastating *Unto this Last* is in many respects the most logical of all Ruskin’s writings; it reveals an effort of mental discipline for which he rarely had the patience. By striking at the root assumptions of orthodox capitalist economics, again and again he succeeds in making the “Prophets” of the Manchester School look silly, contradictory, and shallow. The orthodox economists, he writes in *Unto this Last*, say that “the social affections are accidental and disturbing elements in human nature, but avarice and the desire for progress are constant elements. Let us eliminate the inconstants, and, considering the human being merely as a covetous machine, examine by what laws of labour, purchase, and sale, the greatest accumulative result in wealth is obtainable.” His analysis of these assumptions was so disturbing, his indictment of capitalist ethics so unpardonable, that in both cases the outcry of the readers of the periodicals forced their editors to ask Ruskin to bring his contributions to an end.

On the positive side, too, Ruskin added much to Carlyle’s early precepts. Since his conclusions were derived less from any study of the facts of society than from moral principles, he failed to construct any valid system of knowledge. On the other hand, he reiterated several truths which the orthodox Prophets ignored, and which must have had a seminal influence upon Morris. True value, he declared, could not be expressed by the capitalist laws of supply and demand “to be ‘valuable’ is to ‘avail towards life’. A truly valuable thing is that which leads to life with its whole strength.” “The real science of political economy is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life and which teaches them to scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction.” His definition of “labour”, again, must have puzzled the orthodox. “Labour is the contest of the life of man with an opposite—the term ‘life’ including his intellect, soul, and physical power,
contending with question, difficulty, trial, or material force.” “The prosperity of any nation”, he continued, “is in exact proportion to the quantity of labour which it spends in obtaining and employing means of life. Observe—I say, obtaining and employing, that is to say, not merely wisely producing, but wisely distributing and consuming. Wise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production. The vital question, for individual and for nation, is, never ‘how much do they make?’ but ‘to what purpose do they spend?’” Sissy Jupe had found a notable ally in her suspicion of the talk of “national prosperity.” And—with the notice to conclude the series already issued by the editor—Ruskin could do no more than throw down his last challenge in a phrase which seems to have haunted Morris’s imagination throughout his last years “I desire, in closing the series of introductory papers, to leave this one great fact clearly stated: THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE.”

The value which Morris set on this work was clearly expressed in his Preface to “The Nature of Gothic” when it was issued from the Kelmscott Press in 1892. But the Ruskin of Fors Clavigera was in some respects a poorer man than the Ruskin of Unto this Last. The bourgeois periodicals had been barred to him, and the middle classes turned a deaf ear towards him. Although in his new Letters he addressed directly the working men, it was not with any sense of identity of interest, but in the hope that among them might be found a few individuals who had escaped a little of the contamination of a contaminated age. The first Proposition with which he started his new series was one of bitter despair.

“The English nation is beginning another group of ten years, empty in purse, empty in stomach, and in a state of terrified hostility, to every other nation under the sun.”

The series had hardly begun before the blow of the Commune fell upon him. It was as if the last leg of hope had been knocked from under him. Henceforward an element of fear entered into his feelings towards the working-people, which provoked in him a tone of moral hectoring. The burning of the Louvre made him see the workers as a brutalized, destructive force, bearing the stamp of the masters who had oppressed them. The Commune he

1 See May Morris, I, p. 295
seemed to regard at times almost as a divine warning, the revenge upon the capitalists brought about by their neglect of human responsibilities, the Doom that overshadowed society if it did not heed the teachings of the "Master" of St. George's Guild—Ruskin himself. The revolutionary forces he identified with the bourgeois caricatures of the blood-stained ouvrier and the petroleuse. He could not look towards them with hope.

Moreover, like many people who speak without being listened to, he was beginning to turn deaf himself. No doubt he was perfectly sincere when he wrote, in Letter XVII:

"St. George's war! Here, since last May, have I been asking whether any one would volunteer for such battle? Not one human creature, except a personal friend or two, for mere love of me, has answered.

"Now, it is true, that my writing may be obscure, or seem only half in earnest. But it is the best I can do, it expresses the thoughts that come to me as they come. And, whether you believe them or not, they are entirely faithful words. I have no interest at all to serve by writing, but yours.

"And, literally, no one answers"

"I have given you the tenth of all I have, as I promised." Yes, certainly, Ruskin's sincerity is one of the incontrovertible and redeeming facts of the mid-nineteenth century. But he had ceased to listen to the world. Isolation had made him indifferent to the thought of his contemporaries. He strained the egotism already apparent in his earliest writings, had made his style eccentric, arrogant, and self-absorbed. It was a wonder that any working men read *Iors Clavigera* at all—and yet Tom Mann was quoting from it in his Socialist agitation,¹ and he was by no means the only working man who was introduced to Socialist ideas along this road.² Moreover, the pressures of neuroses within Ruskin—the foreshadowings of his madness—resulted in the expression of attitudes in the Letters which could not have failed.

¹ Tom Mann, *Memorials* (1923), p. 50
² Tom Barclay, the Leicester Socialist Leaguer, published a selection entitled *The Rights of Labour* According to John Ruskin (1886). See F W Jowett, *What Made Me a Socialist* (n.d.). "Unto This Last" made me a Socialist in all but the name, and when, shortly afterwards, I came across pamphlets by William Morris and Edward Carpenter, I knew what I was without any doubt." See also G B Shaw's Appendix to E. R. Pease, *History of the Fabian Society*, p. 263
to have grated on Morris. In brief, Ruskin was still entrapped in the "feudal Socialism" of Past and Present, and it was almost impossible to recognize the world of the 1870s in this queer amalgam of wicked Tory squires (who must still be protected), monarchs, crusades and religious ejaculations which made up his Letters. While it is possible that Morris may have been one of those unnamed personal friends who—out of "mere love"—gave donations to Ruskin's fund for St George's Guild, there is no doubt at all that he saw the pitiful impracticability of Ruskin's latter-day Crusade. He agreed with Ruskin well enough about the dragon, but he saw that it needed more than an art-critic or a "literary man" with a medieval spear to kill it.

Thus, whatever insight into capitalist society Morris gained in the early 1870s from the Commune and Ruskin's writings, on one point—and this was the central point of all—both may have combined to hold him back. The burning of the Louvre—and all that it seemed to symbolize—and the pitiful tilting of Ruskin—neither gave him any hope. Both served, rather, to estrange him from the source of hope, the working-class movement. Morris had reached a point where—if he was to progress at all and not decline into being a cynic and "railer against progress"—it was of vital importance that he should learn the truth about society by active participation and engagement within it. Three occasions all combined at the same time to force this active participation in social life upon him—the "Eastern Question", the destruction or "restoration" of ancient buildings, and a seeming deadlock in his creative ambitions with the Firm—and in this participation he came to understand clearly for the first time the power and the nature of the forces arrayed against him, and the forces of hope with which he must identify his own cause if he were to break that power.

II. The "Eastern Question"

Morris could scarcely have chosen a more complex issue for his initiation into public life than the "Eastern Question" agitation. On the surface the moral issues appeared clean-cut beneath the surface were the intricacies of secret diplomacy and rival imperialist interests. During the course of the agitation, all the elements

1 For example, see the appalling homilies on the duties of women in the later letters of Fors Clavigera
of nineteenth-century political melodrama were present impassioned public professions, and private intrigue widely publicized splits in both the Conservative and Liberal Parties the revelation of secret agreements by a temporary Foreign Office clerk, paid at the rate of 8d an hour rumours of the impending abdication of the Queen Conferences and Congresses of the major European powers Morris — whose social contacts had up to this time extended little further than to his literary and artistic associates and to his business clients — was now thrown into the company of prominent politicians and business-men, and leaders of the London trade unions and radical associations Whereas up to this moment his political experience was limited to voting for Liberal candidates, and rare attendance at public meetings, he was now a frequent attender at demonstrations, rallies and conferences, at some of which he was called upon to speak It was as if, at the age of forty-three, he had suddenly started upon a new course of education

The immediate cause for the formation of the "Eastern Question Association" was to promote resistance to Disraeli's alliance with the Turks, following the revelations of atrocities committed by Turkish mercenaries upon the Christian population of Bulgaria. The Conservative administration had come to power in 1874, and Disraeli had embarked on his grandiose policies of Oriental imperialism "You have", he declared, "a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope The relations of England to Europe are not the same as they were in the days of Lord Chatham or Frederick the Great The Queen of England has become the Sovereign of the most powerful of Oriental States On the other side of the globe there are new establishments belonging to her, teeming with wealth and population What our duty is at this critical moment is to maintain the Empire of England"

In November, 1875, the British Government purchased 176,000

1 Morris avoided the usual social round, and very rarely attended any social function. When he did, he was miserable for days in advance. See his letter to Mrs Alfred Baldwin, March 26th, 1874 "I have got to go to a wedding next Tuesday and it enrages me to think that I lack the courage to say, I don't care for either of you, and you neither of you care for me, and I won't waste a day of my precious life in grinning a company grin at you two" (Letters, p 62)

2 See Mackail, I, p 338
shares in the Suez Canal. The Prince of Wales was sent on a mission to receive the loyalty of his mother's Indian subjects, and early in 1876 it was announced that Queen Victoria would soon be blessed with the title of "Empress of India." Meanwhile, in the preceding year, outbreaks of revolt had occurred within the corrupt Turkish Empire in Europe—an empire which, since the time of the Crimean War, had increasingly been regarded as a British satellite, and in which the British Ambassador, Sir Henry Elliot, wielded extraordinary influence. The nationalist and "Christian" outbreaks extended from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Servia, to (in 1876) the most subjugated province of all, Bulgaria, and they were not only watched with interest, but prompted and aided by the great power of Russia to the north. Intent upon distracting attention from misery and the cry for reform at home, the Tsar nourished the sentiments of Pan-Slavism among Russian intellectuals by threatening Turkey with the seizure and liberation of the Christian provinces. Within the councils of British imperialism itself, two extreme policies were debated—the partition of the Turkish Empire in Europe and North Africa between Russia and the other major European powers—Britain looking for Egypt, Cyprus and a foothold in Syria as her share or uncompromising opposition to the Russian claims, and the preservation of the Turkish Empire intact and within the sphere of British influence.

Disraeli inclined towards the second policy (while hoping by threats, secret diplomacy, and force, to make the best of both worlds), and, in the summer of 1876, when the news of the nationalist uprisings were disturbing the British public, he contented himself with admonishing the Turks to carry through reforms within their European provinces. On June 23rd, however, the Liberal Daily News published the first full accounts of the appalling savagery of the mercenary Bashi-Bazouks against the Christian population of Bulgaria which came to be known as the "Bulgarian atrocities." Disraeli, partly because he was misinformed by Sir Henry Elliot, partly because he did not have the same sharp eye to the "Nonconformist conscience" as Gladstone, dismissed the revelations as "to a large extent inventions," the accounts of the torture of victims he thought unlikely, since the Turks usually adopted "more expeditious methods." He was
soon to regret the phrase. A storm of protest broke out in the country, coming in the first place, not from any official Liberal politicians, but from the organizations of the people. Meanwhile, the extent of the atrocities was daily confirmed, and was finally substantiated at the beginning of September by an official Government investigator. Spontaneous meetings of protest were held throughout the country during August and the first week of September. The storm of feeling rose to such heights that Lord Derby, Disraeli’s Foreign Minister, was forced to inform the Turks that the outrages had “aroused an universal feeling of indignation in all classes of English society, and to such a pitch has this risen, that, in the extreme case of Russia declaring war on Turkey Her Majesty’s Government would find it practically impossible to interfere in defence of the Ottoman Empire.” Disraeli could therefore only urge the Turks to appease both Russia and British opinion by speeding up their long-promised administrative reforms of the Christian provinces.

Until this time the agitation in the country had been without a central leadership, springing from the initiative of local Liberal Associations, radical and nonconformist groups, and working-class organizations. But now a new figure emerged on the scene. Gladstone, who had retired in a disgruntled mood from the leadership of the Liberal Party after his defeat in 1874, saw in the popular agitation a matchless opportunity for rehabilitating the Party and strengthening his own hand against the aristocratic Whigs, Lords Hartington and Granville, who had resumed its leadership. When the summer parliamentary session came to an end, he later recalled he thought the Eastern Question was “all up” for the time being.

“I knew it would revive, and I thought it would revive in the next Session, but I gave it up for the moment until I saw in the newspapers by accident that the working men of England were going to meet on the subject of it. I said to myself that moment, ‘Then it is alive.’ Seeing that it was alive, I did what I could, and we all did what we could, and we stirred the country.”

This hardly reveals the character of the impassioned crusader in which he publicly emerged. On September 6th he published his famous pamphlet, The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East,

1 Life of W E Gladstone, Ed Wemyss-Reid (1899), p 619
in which—to the consternation of his more cautious colleagues in the parliamentary leadership of the Liberal Party—he demanded the evacuation by the Turks of Bulgaria

“Let the Turks now carry away their abuses in the only possible manner, namely by carrying off themselves Their Zaptehs and their Mudirs, their Bimbashis and their Yuzbashis, their Kaimakams and their Pashas, one and all, bag and baggage, shall, I hope, clear out of the province they have desolated and profaned.”

Three days later he addressed an enormous meeting on Blackheath. As feeling rose even higher, politicians on the Radical wing of the Liberal Party—motivated equally, it would seem, by an interest in the cause itself and by the magnificent opportunity provided for strengthening their own position and organization within the country—considered means of giving the agitation a central leadership. Chief among these was A. J. Mundella, the Radical M P for Sheffield, whose whole career was devoted to strengthening the alliance between the Liberal Party and organized labour, and to promoting policies of enlightened capitalist administration, arbitration in trades disputes, and “class peace.” Early in October he and his Sheffield friend, Robert Leader, were discussing the calling of a national Conference on the Eastern Question. The politicians were to keep in the background “I think the ‘Great Guns’ should hardly be Parliamentary,” he wrote to Leader “Get clergy, ministers, representatives of great bodies, Mayors of towns, etc.”

The Liberal leader, Lord Hartington, with the Whig dislike of any popular movement, opposed the Conference for fear “it would get into the hands of men of extreme opinions” Gladstone continued speaking on the Question, but havered at the idea of giving the agitation a more pronounced organizational form. While the politicians manoeuvred, the Labour Representation League was rallying the London workers, presenting the issue not as one of party tactics, but as one of the independence of an oppressed nationality, resolving on October 20th that

“Should Russia make war upon Turkey, it will be the duty of the English people to oppose any action of the Government which has for its object any defence of the Ottoman Empire, or which shall prevent the establishment of such an independent Government for the Turkish

1 W H G Armytage, A J Mundella (1951), p 170
provinces of Eastern Europe as shall be in accordance with the wishes of the people of these provinces 

The agitation, at its height in September, had begun to fall away at the end of October when William Morris published his first letter in the Daily News. Possibly he had already been in touch with Mundella beforehand, and hoped it would prepare the way for the Conference. It is not difficult to understand why the agitation had aroused his enthusiasm. The spirit of Shelley and Byron—humiliated by fifty years of commercial cynicism—was once again astir. The admiration with which the struggle of the Italian people for independence and unity had been watched by Chartists and Radicals in England had kept the old flame alive. Now, once again, as in Byron's time before Salonica, it seemed that the British were being called upon to give aid to valiant oppressed nationalities struggling for independence against the most barbarous of tyrannies. Had Britain gone to war in their aid—wrote Morris—"I should have thought I had lived for something at last to have seen England just, and in earnest, the Tories converted or silenced, and our country honoured throughout the world." Instead of this, Britain was allying herself with a Government "who, to speak the downright truth, are a gang of thieves and murderers." The issue appeared to those who remembered the old liberal traditions as clear-cut as the destruction of democracy in Spain in our own time.

Morris was in no way breaking with the opinions of his friends or associates in declaring his mind on the question, even if his turn of phrase might have seemed a little extreme. In a letter to Mundella on November 15th, 1876, he sent a list of friends, all of them "feeling strongly and rightly about the matter. Their letters to me all express the desire that something should be done, and done as speedily as possible." The names included (with Morris’s comments) William Allingham, Literary man, Editor of Fraser’s, William De Morgan, Artist, F S Ellis, "my publisher", C J Faulkner, Fellow and Tutor of University College, Oxford—"not a parson", W B Scott, Artist, Writer on Art, Henry Wallis, Artist, Philip Webb, Architect, and W T Stead, Editor of the Northern Echo (later to become Assistant

¹ Minutes of the Labour Representation League (British Library of Political and Economic Science)
Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*)\(^1\) In addition to his own friends, a score of other prominent cultural personalities were associated with the agitation during its early stages—among them Professor Thorold Rogers, Professor Fawcett, Robert Browning, the Reverend Stopford Brooke, D. G. Rossetti, and Thomas Carlyle (author of the phrase, "the unspeakable Turk") Edward Burne-Jones was at Morris's side throughout, and in the early stages of the movement, when he wrote to Ruskin for support, he received the reply

"I hope neither Morris nor you will retire wholly again out of such spheres of effort. It seems to me especially a time when the quietest men should be disquieted, and the meekest self-asserting."

Morris, indeed, for once in his life seemed only to be following the fashion.

Neither is it in any way surprising to find that in Morris's first letter there are many confusions and naiveties of thought—his faith in the complete integrity of Gladstone, in the honour of British intentions "except in trade", and his lack of apparent suspicion of Russian aims. On the other hand, for the first public utterance of a poet and artist, there is a quite surprising understanding of the power of popular organization. The whole letter is an appeal to the people to carry the agitation to new heights. From the very outset Morris saw the working class as the real force behind the agitation: "The nation is dumb, if it were not for the 2,000 working men who met last Sunday at Clerkenwell" and expressed his faith, which so many of his cultivated contemporaries entirely lacked, in the power of organized and determined opinion.

"In matters of peace and war, no Government durst go against the expressed will of the English people, when it has a will and can find time to express it. I say it would be impossible even for that clever trickster [Disraeli] to do this, not only if united England were in earnest to gainsay him, but even if a large minority were but half in earnest and spoke and said 'No'."

These words might be placed in twelve-foot lettering around England to-day.

The distinguished new recruit to the agitation did not deflect

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1 Mundella Correspondence (Sheffield University Library)
2 *Memorials*, II, p. 73
Disraeli from his course At the Lord Mayor’s Banquet on November 9th he made the provocative statement

“If England were to go to war in a righteous cause... a cause that concerned her liberty, her independence, or her Empire, her resources would prove inexhaustible. She is not a country that, when she enters into a campaign, has to ask herself whether she can support a second or third campaign. If she enters a campaign she will not terminate it until right is done.”

These lofty sentiments were soon put into rhyme, and became the popular song of the war party.

“We don’t want to fight, but by jingo if we do,
We’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, we’ve got the money too!”

They also provoked, on November 10th, an angry reply from the Tsar, and a distinct heightening of the danger of war. The issues now became increasingly complex. For half a century Russia had been regarded by British working class and radical opinion as the greatest bastion of reaction in Europe. A small group on the extreme left, together with a few Radicals—men as diverse as Karl Marx, Frederick Harrison, the Positivist leader, H. M. Hyndman, the Tory feeling his way towards Socialism, and Joseph Cowan, the Radical M.P. for Newcastle—were inflexibly opposed to any compromise with Russia, believing that every diplomatic or military defeat suffered by the Tsar would hasten the cause of the progressive movement throughout the world. Objectively, they had constantly to ward the danger of becoming aligned with the imperialist party, headed by Disraeli and the Queen herself, whose support for the Turks was motivated by grandiose plans of British influence in the Near East, and the even more dubious anti-Russian propaganda on Press and platform promoted by financial speculators who had bought up enormous numbers of depreciated Turkish bonds, £165,000,000 of which had come on to the market at this time. On the other hand, the Liberal Associations, the Labour Representation League, and the rank-and-file Radicals and trade unionists who were conducting in the country the anti-Turkish agitation in favour of the oppressed European nations were in equal danger of becoming the tools of interested Liberal politicians and of Russian imperialism. A letter of Morris’s of November 15th,
1876, receiving his old friend Charles Faulkner, the Oxford mathematician, into the agitation, shows him floundering in an attempt to rebut the latter charge.

"I know that the Russians have committed many crimes, but I cannot accuse them of behaving ill in this Turkish business at present, and I must say I think it very unfair of us, who freed our black men, to give them no credit for freeing their serfs. Both deeds seem to me to be great landmarks in history. My cry and that of all that I consider really on our side is 'The Turkish Government to the Devil, and something rational and progressive in its place.'"¹

"Something rational and progressive"—this is the note of the old Benthamite radicalism, not yet of Morris the Socialist. Another passage in the same letter shows Morris condemning the commercial imperialism of the "age of shoddy", but still with the suggested reservation that this is a degeneration from an enlightened liberal imperialism of the past. Supposing, he asks Faulkner, Britain were to be victorious in a war against Russia as Turkey's ally,

"what should we do with Turkey, if we didn't wish to be damned? 'Take it ourselves,' says the bold man, 'and rule it as we rule India.' But the bold man don't live in England at present I think, and I know what the Tory trading stock-jobbing scoundrel that one calls an Englishman to-day would do with it: he would shut his eyes hard over it, get his widows and orphans to lend it money, and sell it vast quantities of bad cotton."²

It is also clear from this letter that Morris was from the outset impatient with the tactics and manoeuvring of the parliamentary supporters of the agitation. "I do not feel very sanguine about it all", he wrote, describing the plans for the Conference, "but it is the only thing that offers at present, and I do not wish to be anarchical. I must do the best I can with it."² Mundella, after bombarding Gladstone with letters, requesting him to address the Conference in which he forecast that "we shall have such a

¹ Mr Henderson (Letters, p 99) gives the date of the letter as 1877. This is clearly the result of a confusion in Mackail, from whom the letter was taken. The letter is given as 1876 in Mackail's transcript in his notebook in the Morris Museum, Walthamstow, and this date is confirmed by internal evidence.

² Mackail, I, 348. In the context given to it in his book, Mackail leaves the suggestion that Morris was not "sanguine" about any form of action. The transcript of the letter in his notebook shows that it was the parliamentary end of the action which Morris thought would be ineffective.
demonstration as England has not seen since the Anti-Corn Law days”, and of “associations and committees organizing all over the country”, finally got a grudging and hedging reply in the affirmative “Many thanks for your various communications. If, upon full consideration, it is thought that my appearance at one of your meetings is desirable I am ready to say that as at present advised I will come”. The sincerity of the moral fervour positively burns up the lines! The Conference was fixed for St James’s Hall on December 8th, and on the evening before Mundella was able to relax and look back on his good political management of the previous few weeks which had brought the “Eastern Question Association” into being.

“What a work it has been as hard as a general election I found that my first business was to extingush the irrepressibles I don’t intend that any Radicals shall speak if I can help it. I want to fire off the Bishops, the Parsons, the Peers, the Literati, etc, not those who have been the actors heretofore but a new set. I have been twice with Gladstone giving him his rôle. It is like a moth going to the candle to go near him, he is all light and flame.”

The salvo on the next day was an enormous success. The heavy artillery of Gladstone was saved for the evening. In the afternoon the howitzers and light field guns were arrayed—Anthony Trollope and the Duke of Westminster, the Pacifist Henry Richard and Samuel Morley, the wealthy Radical M P, while George Howell and Henry Broadhurst brought supporting fire on behalf of the working men. Indeed, the bombardment aroused the fury of Queen Victoria herself, who wished to set the Attorney-General on to the speakers “It can’t be constitutional”. But despite the justice of the cause, there was something more than a little nauseous about the torrents of moral oratory. No doubt the spirit of Byron stalked the Hall, but if it had been suggested to most of the “Big Guns” that they should join the Serbs or Montenegrins on the battlefield they would most probably “upon full consideration” have found their other engagements too pressing to enable them to attend.

1 Armytage, op cit, p 172  2 Ibid, p 173  3 Ibid, p 173  4 G E. Buckle, *Life of Disraeli* (1920), Vol VI, p 107 See also p 130 for the Queen’s statement “This mawkish sentimantality for people who hardly deserve the name of real Christians—forgetting the interests of this great country—is really incomprehensible”
As a result of the Conference, the Eastern Question Association was officially established. Its figure-heads included the Duke of Westminster and Lord Shaftesbury, but Mundella emerged from his unpublicized wire-pulling to become Chairman of the Executive Committee, while Morris became Treasurer. No doubt Mundella was pleased with himself at having hooked this particular member of the "Literati", although later in the agitation it must have occurred to him to ask himself what it was he had got on the other end of the line. The first job of the E QA was the issuing of tracts, one of which—Lessons in Massacre—was from Gladstone's pen. The agitation was no longer so urgent, owing to the lull of the Constantinople Conference. It was in the excitement immediately before and after the declaration of war by Russia upon Turkey on April 24th, 1877, that the danger of war became once again acute. In their efforts to prevent Disraeli's bringing Britain into the conflict on the Turkish side, Morris and Mundella were in constant contact with Henry Broadhurst, George Howell, and others of the Labour Representation League. Since this was Morris's first close contact with any working-class organization, it is necessary to explain something of its make-up and aims.

For ten years the L R L—an alliance of the survivors of the old trade union leaders of the "Junta", of the London trade unionists who had served on the General Council of the "First International", and of a few middle-class Radicals—had been promoting the candidatures of working men to Parliament. Despite occasional moments of independence, it had been falling increasingly under the wing of the Liberal Party. Influential and far-seeing Liberal MPs—among them Samuel Morley and A J Mundella—had been attempting to secure the support of the working-class vote for the Liberal Party by setting aside a handful of seats in the mining and industrial areas for working-men Liberal MPs. Their efforts were continually frustrated by the die-hard attitude of the mill-owners and industrialists in the leadership of the Liberal machine in the localities, who—while perhaps giving lip-service to the general principle of working-class representation—were not prepared to permit a working man to sit in their own constituencies. Despite this opposition, in 1874 Thomas Burt, the Northumberland miners' leader, was
returned without a Liberal opponent for Morpeth, and Alexander Macdonald was returned for the two-seat constituency of Stafford. In 1875 the L R L issued a "Manifesto" which finally marked the end of any pretence of independence from the Liberal Party.

"We have ever sought to be allied to the great Liberal Party, to which we, by conviction, belong. If they have not reciprocated this feeling, the fault is theirs, and the cause of disruption is to be found in them, and not in the League. But, happily, this exclusive feeling is fast dying out, as evidenced by the fact that men of the highest standing in the Liberal ranks have both written and spoken in favour of the objects of the League." ¹

In home affairs, the next four or five years of the L.R.L.'s existence (with its most prominent leaders, Broadhurst and Howell, themselves eager to secure places in Parliament) make up a record of the abasement of working-class interests to those of the Liberal Party, so that early in 1878 Marx was writing to Liebknecht in disgust of "the corrupt trade union leaders and professional agitators", who had reduced the working-class movement to being "nothing more than the tail of the great Liberal Party" ²

However, notwithstanding the degeneration at home from independent working-class politics to "Lib-Lab-ism", the Eastern Question agitation revived in the movement the old traditions of radical internationalism. Among the leaders of the League were several, including John Hales, of the Elastic Web Weavers, and Thomas Mottershead of the Silk Weavers, who had signed the Address of the General Council of the International welcoming the Paris Commune in 1871. On this issue at least, the L R L. acted not as the "tail" but as the head of the popular movement. Among even the most typical exponents of "Lib-Lab-ism" during this period—men like Henry Broadhurst of the Stonemason's, and Thomas Burt—the ideals of democratic internationalism were the last to be jettisoned.

At what time William Morris first met the leaders of the Labour Representation League it is difficult to say. Probably he was introduced to Broadhurst, Daniel Guile, and George Howell, at the Conference on December 8th, 1876. On April

¹ Reprinted in *Labour's Formative Years*, Ed J B Jeffreys (Lawrence and Wishart "History in the Making" Series), p 155

² *Marx-Engels Sel. Cor.*, p 356
20th, 1877, with war between Russia and Turkey imminent, the League resolved:

"That should an attempt be made to involve this country in the conflict in support of Turkish interest, either direct or indirect, it will be the duty of the people of this country to take such steps as will prevent English Blood and the people's Taxes being employed in such an unworthy and hopeless cause"  

Russia's declaration of war threw the E Q A and the L R L into joint action. Henry Broadhurst called a meeting of "Workmen's Political Associations and Trade Societies of the Metropolis" to meet at the Cannon Street Hotel on May 2nd, 1877, to support five anti-Turkish resolutions which Gladstone had tabled in the House Thomas Burt, M P, and Thomas Hughes, Q C, presided over a meeting of 150 delegates of trade unions and Radical associations, and "a larger number of middle-class men" Morris was in the front of the activity and wrote of the meeting two days later

"I was at the working-men's meeting on Wednesday, it was quite a success, they seem to have advanced since last autumn. Some of them spoke very well, nor would the meeting so much as listen to George Potter on the other side. Burt (M P for Morpeth and who is, or was, a working man) was chairman, and spoke excellently though shortly, with a strong Northumbrian tongue. He seemed a capital fellow. Meantime the Liberal party is blown to pieces, and everything is in confusion" 

The meeting appointed a Committee to "watch" the Eastern Question, which included Hales, Mottershead, and Howell, and Morris had frequent dealings with this Committee in the next few months. The Council of the L.R.L also agreed upon a strong resolution to be issued as a handbill "To the Working-People of the United Kingdom" It included the passage:

"Never let the fiery oratory of sensationalism nor the florid assertions of that portion of the Press which have ever been on the side of oppression in all countries—nor the flaunting colours of war—nor the bray of the bugle—win your consent to a policy which will paralyse our already crippled industry, cover foreign fields in the blood of English soldiers, fill our workhouses and possibly jails, with the orphans of our fellow-workers"

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1 Minutes of Labour Representation League
2 Ibid
3 See Letters, p 90
4 Mackail, I, p 350.
Another passage may have influenced Morris when drawing up his own Manifesto

“English millionaires, who preferred to invest capital resulting from your labours in Turkish Bonds, rather than employ it in home speculation, should be taught that your Lives and your Taxes should not be used for recovering their personal debts”¹

On the following Monday, May 7th, a further great Conference was held in St James’s Hall under the auspices of the E Q A Meanwhile—as Morris had written—the Liberal Party was “blown to pieces”. Incessant manoeuvres were going on among the parliamentarians to tone down Gladstone’s five anti-Turkish resolutions, one of which only—in a modified form—was taken to a division on May 14th. The agitation had achieved a part of its aim in so far as on May 6th the Foreign Minister, Lord Derby, had been forced to declare that Britain was concerned in the war only to protect her own interests, which were defined as centring on the Suez Canal, the overland route to the Persian Gulf, and the use of the Dardanelles. It was within this context, irritated at the vacillation of the Parliamentary Liberals and admiring by contrast the stand of the L R L, that Morris issued his Manifesto “To the Working-men of England” on May 11th, over the signature of “A Lover of Justice”. It reveals the enormous educational effect upon him of his recent participation in the agitation, the great stride forward in understanding of class issues which he had taken since his original letter of the previous October.

“Who are they that are leading us into war? Let us look at these saviours of England’s honour, these champions of Poland, these scourges of Russia’s iniquities! Do you know them?—Greedy gamblers on the Stock Exchange, idle officers of the army and navy (poor fellows!) worn-out mockers of the Clubs, desperate purveyors of exciting war news for the comfortable breakfast tables of those who have nothing to lose by war, and lastly, in the place of honour, the Tory Rump, that we fools, weary of peace, reason, and justice, chose at the last election to represent us and over all their captain [Disraeli, recently made Earl of Beaconsfield] the ancient place-hunter, who, having at last climbed into an Earl’s chair, grins down thence into the anxious face of England, while his empty heart and shifty head is compassing the stroke that will bring on our destruction perhaps, our confusion certainly —O shame

¹ Minutes of Labour Representation League
and double shame, if we march under such a leadership as this in an unjust war against a people who are not our enemies, against Europe, against freedom, against nature, against the hope of the world.”

Throughout, as in the passage already quoted (p. 231) it is to the working class that Morris appeals as the true force of internationalism and the backbone of the agitation.

“If you have any wrongs to be redressed, if you cherish your most worthy hope of raising your whole order peacefully and solidly, if you thirst for leisure and knowledge, if you long to lessen those inequalities which have been our stumbling-block since the beginning of the world, then cast aside sloth and cry out against an unjust war, and urge us of the Middle Classes to do no less.”

The success of the agitation contributed to ensure an ambiguous kind of neutrality during the next few months. Until November the stubborn resistance of the Turks at Plevna made it seem possible that the Russians would fail to break their defences. Meanwhile the “patriotic” newspapers used every event to arouse sympathy for the “gallant Turk”, whether victorious or in defeat, and when on December 10th the fall of Plevna signaled the collapse of the main Turkish armies, a war temper was skilfully engineered in the country. On December 19th it was announced that Parliament would be recalled three weeks early, on January 18th, 1878. The next day Morris was writing to his wife:

“Great things have happened since your letter. The marshal [Osman Pasha] has given way, Plevna has fallen, Servia is on the frontier—and things seem most like the Jew wretch & that old Vic forcing us into the war. You will see how the sprightly widow went to Hughenden & then said she would stay at Windsor Christmas over. & now Parliament is to meet for business on Jan. 17. So we are all alive at the E Q A. I am so bothered by it all that I can do little else. I even tried to fit a few words at a small meeting we had at Lambeth yesterday. I can’t say I got on very well but I did manage to get a few words out & get to the end.”

This seems to have been Morris’s first impromptu public speech. Five days later he was writing to his daughters:

“I have been much agitated for the past week by the goings on of an august personage and my Lord Beaconsfield, but we hope to agitate

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1 See Letters, Appendix II, pp 388-9
2 Letters, p 103
others in our turn next he do not think it will really end in war, but the party of stupidity will do their best to bring it about, neither is there any doubt that the A P aforesaid is helping them and that this fact, strange as it may seem to us, makes many people, especially professional politicians, feeble in resistance. On the whole our side has got weaker, and many people are sluggish and hard to move who thoroughly agree with us. The E Q A met in committee yesterday and agreed to do something, though not as dramatically as I could have wished we are issuing a manifesto and asking people to stir...

On January 4th he was writing that “we are all of opinion that we must go on agitating.” He had unwillingly agreed to address a Liberal Association at Chichester, and had spent the whole morning with Henry Broadhurst arranging a joint meeting between the E Q A and L R L—the “Workmen’s Neutrality Demonstration” held in Exeter Hall on January 16th, 1878. The Trafalgar Square meeting, though disgracefully reported in the Liberal Daily News, was “a glorious victory for us, though I believe some blood was shed (from noses) the enemy spent huge time & trouble & plenty of money all to be spoilt in the end.” Once again he returned to the attack on the Queen.

“You may be sure the Empress Brown has a great deal to do with it all, what a rage she will be in! For I really cannot think that the country will go to war when all is said, it would be too monstrous the London working men have now got their backs well upon our side.”

In fact, the situation was very different from the widespread and spontaneous agitation at the time of the “Bulgarian atrocities”. The war party within the Cabinet was being goaded on by Queen Victoria who went so far as to threaten to lay down her “thorny crown” if a war policy were not pursued. On January 10th she went so far as to write to Disraeli: “The Queen is really distressed at the low tone which this Country is inclined to hold. Oh, if the Queen were a man, she would like to go and give those Russians...such a beating! We shall never be friends again till

1 Letters, pp. 103-4

2 Ibid, p. 106. William De Morgan, the potter, first christened Queen Victoria the “Empress Brown”, and Morris eagerly adopted the title. In 1878 Queen Victoria was intending to set up a tapestry and stained-glass manufactory, and Morris wrote to his daughter, Jenny (March 6th, 1878) “The Empress Brown is hard at work at her rival establishment. I am sure she expects to get the whole of the ornamental upholstery of the kingdom into her hands. Let her tremble! I will under-sell her in all branches.” (Brit Mus Add MSS 45339)
we have it out "1 In the country, the propaganda of the "patriotic" Press, playing upon traditional hostility to Tsarism, had begun to show its effect. Successful anti-Russian demonstrations were held in the provinces, with some working-class support, and in London gangs of roughs broke up or threatened anti-war meetings. The parliamentarians, always with one eye to the constituencies, were more unreliable than ever, and the E Q A and L R L had its biggest job yet upon its hands. Jingoism, with its foreshadowing of fascist methods of terrorism and thuggery, was appearing on all sides, and in the critical last week of December and first fortnight of January Morris and his friends only just held their own.

The most important meeting was held on January 16th, on the eve of the opening of Parliament. It is significant of the change in political temperature that the meeting was called by the "Workmen's Neutrality Committee"—the joint committee coordinating the L R L and E Q A—rather than by the E Q A itself. At the afternoon session in Willis's rooms the main speakers included the courageous Radical, Professor Thorold Rogers, and the leader of the agricultural workers, Joseph Arch, rather than the Dukes of Westminster and Anthony Trollope of a year before. Even in this less respectable gathering it was left to Morris to commit the unforgivable breach of tact, and unmask the biggest war-monger of the lot. According to The Times, "Mr W Morris spoke in strong terms against the action of the 'war-at-any-price-party'". After praising Gladstone, he went on

"He must also face the fact that the Court was using all the influence which it possessed—(Cries of 'No, no,' and 'Three cheers for the Queen!') The speaker, having been reminded by the chairman that it was not desirable to introduce the name of the Sovereign into political discussion, concluded by expressing his regret that fortune had placed at the head of affairs in England a man who was unfitted to be a statesman, a man without genius, to whose shiftiness the nation must oppose a steady resistance."2

1 Buckle, op cit, Vol VI, p 217
2 The Times, January 17th, 1878. It was probably of this meeting that George Wardle recalled "Morris tried to speak, but was so hoarse from excitement that he could scarce utter a word. I stood near but could only catch 'He is a trickster—a trickster', meaning Dizzy. This was screamed or hissed with a voice so weakened by his emotion that it was scarce audible. Sir Robert Peel, who stood by, his hat cocked on the side of his head, was highly amused." May Morris, II, p 604)
The Morris of this speech is already the Morris whom the workers came to love—not the “Author of the ‘Earthly Paradise’” but the terror of all bigots and hypocrites, the uncompromising enemy of every form of sham. After the meeting he wrote to his wife:

“As to the agitation I must confess I have been agitated as well as agitating you will have got the newspapers by this time with a sort of report of our proceedings including the speech of me, & it’s—may I call it amiable indiscretion of course I said more, and more connected words than that the little meeting was very noisy, but I call it a success at least it quite refused to cheer the Empress Brown you see I had to speak at the end by what time the peace-party desired to fight for peace, and the war party was blue with rage.”

This afternoon meeting was only preparatory to a great demonstration in Exeter Hall in the evening, at which Mundella took the chair Morris wrote, in the same letter, that it had been—“magnificent orderly and enthusiastic though mind you it took some heavy work to keep the enemy’s roughs out, and the noise of them outside was like the sea roaring against a lighthouse.”

Admission was by tickets which had been distributed among London trade unions and Radical and Liberal clubs Henry Broadhurst was in charge of a party of stewards at the doors, “all acquainted with the features of the leaders of the Jingo mob”, and personally threw one suspect on to the floor. A good many penetrated into the Hall, but they were in too small a minority to cause disturbance. Broadhurst had persuaded a fellow stonemason, organist at a London chapel, to bring a choir “composed entirely of working men and women” While the audience filled the Hall, the organist and choir prepared them for singing the song which either Broadhurst or F W Chesson had persuaded Morris to write for the occasion. It went to the tune of ‘The Hardy Norseman’s Home of Yore’

“Wake, London lads, wake, bold and free!
Arise and fall to work,
Lest England’s glory come to be
Bond servant to the Turk!”

1 Letters, p 107.
2 Henry Broadhurst, From a Stonemason’s Bench to a Cabinet Bench, pp 81–4
In Broadhurst’s account more than one meeting and incident are telescoped together, and Mr Atmytage has followed him in one or two confusions, e.g as to the meeting at which Morris’s song was sung, etc
"From out the dusk, from out the dark,
Of old our fathers came,
Till lovely freedom’s glimmering spark
Broke forth a glorious flame
And shall we now praise freedom’s dearth
And rob the years to come,
And quench upon a brother’s hearth
The fires we lit at home?”

There were five verses to the song, and a copy was at every place
A Nonconformist minister read it through, verse by verse, and then the choir went through it twice. When the great assembly
rose to their feet and thundered it out together, people as different
in their backgrounds as Henry Broadhurst and “Georgie” Burne-Jones were deeply moved.

“It went down very well”, Morris wrote, “& they sang it well
 together they struck up while we were just ready to come onto the
platform & you may imagine that I felt rather excited when I heard
them begin to tune up they stopped at the end of each verse and
cheered lustily we came onto the platform just about the middle of it”

Meanwhile, an overflow meeting outside was invaded by the
disappointed Jingoists who had failed to penetrate the Hall, but
despite their intervention a neutrality resolution was passed by a
great majority. Next day, when the Queen’s Speech was less
bellicose than had been feared, Morris was able to write with
confidence

“There is no doubt that the last fortnight’s agitation has stopped
Dizzy from asking for money & proposing a Gallipoli expedition that
is to say from proposing immediate war this is encouraging but the
danger will not be over until peace is signed” \(^1\)

In fact the next two and a half months were ones of ceaseless
activity and war rumours. On January 23rd, 1878, the news was
given that the fleet had been ordered to sail to the Dardanelles
The war spirit in the country was unscrupulously fanned by
professional Jingoists a Trafalgar Square meeting on January 31st
was broken up with the aid of a large party of workmen brought
down from Woolwich Arsenal and paid a gratuity for their day’s
work “people on our side had to hide away in cellars & places &
get out anyhow” \(^2\) “I was at a very noisy meeting last night down

\(^1\) *Letters*, p 107

\(^2\) *Ibid*, p 108 See also the account in Maccoby, *English Radicalism 1853-1886*, p 229, and Armitage, *op cit* pp 181-4
at Stepney, where we had a bare majority”, Morris writes the next day “I feel very low & muddled about it all but we have one shot in the locker yet, to whit a big, a real big demonstration in Hyde Park.” In the first week of February officially-sponsored rumours suggested that the Russians were on the point of occupying Constantinople, even that the Indian Empire was in danger. Successful pro-war demonstrations were held in several towns. The Parliamentary Liberal Party, which was screwing up its courage to oppose a Vote of Credit, collapsed on the receipt of a bogus telegram about the imminent Russian occupation of the city. Even before this debacle, on February 7th, Morris was writing to Faulkner.

“I am full of shame and anger at the cowardice of the so-called Liberal Party. A very few righteous men refuse to sit down at the bidding of these yelling scoundrels and pretend to agree with what they hate; these few are determined with the help of our working-men allies (who all along have been both staunch and sagacious) to get up a great demonstration in London as soon as may be. There will certainly be a fight, so of course you will come up if you can”.

The day before this “there was a meeting of the E.Q.A & it was obvious that our Party in Parliament were getting out of heart so some of us conscious of how dangerous things were getting met at Mr. Broadhurst’s & talked about holding a great demonstration in Hyde Park to keep up their spirits”. Together with Auberon Herbert he had visited Samuel Morley for money, and then spent a part of that day and the next lobbying the Liberal M.Ps. He was decidedly unimpressed by the experience “The worst part of it all is that the war fever is raging in England, & people go about in a Rule Britannia style that turns one’s stomach”.

The final stage in the Eastern Question “education”—as far as Morris was concerned—came in the following fortnight. The fleet was now anchored off the Dardanelles in earnest, waiting for Turkish permission to make the passage. The idea of a grand Hyde Park demonstration was abandoned because of the uncertain winter weather and the exposure to the thuggery of the Jingoists. Instead, Morris pushed through the ambitious plan of a meeting in the Agricultural Hall, the largest building in London.

Several members of the E Q A., including Morris and Burne-Jones, contributed £50 each to guarantee the expenses \(^1\). The story—or Morris's version of it—is told by him in a letter of February 25th.

"As to my political career, I think it is at an end for the present & has ended sufficiently disgustingly, after beating about the bush and trying to organize some rags of resistance to the war-party for a fortnight, after spending all one's time in committees & the like. I went to Gladstone with some of the workmen & Chesson, to talk about getting him to a meeting at the Agricultural Hall he agreed and was quite hot about it, and as brisk as a bee to work we fell, & everything got into trim but—on Monday our parliamentaries began to quake, and tease Gladstone, and they have quaked the meeting out now the E Q A. was foremost in the flight, & really I must needs say they behaved ill in the matter. Gladstone was quite ready to come up to the scratch & has behaved well throughout but I am that ashamed that I can scarcely look people in the face though I did my best to keep the thing up, the working-men are in a great rage about it, as they well may be, for I do verily believe that we should have made it a success. There was a stormy meeting of the E Q A. yesterday I am out of it now, I mean as to bothering my head about it. I shall give up reading the Papers, and shall stick to my work. After this fiasco it will be impossible to hold another meeting in London on the subject we have been terrorized by the Medical Students & the Civil Servants, and are now slaves of the Tories for life \(^2\).

There seems to be little doubt that Morris's account is substantially accurate. On one point, perhaps, Morris was misled—Gladstone's simulated enthusiasm for the meeting. On January 3rd, 1870, he had turned down Mundella's request to him to speak with his characteristic tone of moral ambiguity.

"You cannot, I think, doubt from the moment I take a more active part the whole parliamentary forces of the Tories will be set to work against us.

"But pray continue to write as you see occasion and be assured that every word will be weighed." \(^3\)

By the end of January it was becoming difficult to hold any meeting in London without danger of rioting and Jingoist attack. From Sheffield on January 29th came the news that 20,000 inhabitants had passed a resolution in favour of the Government. This being Mundella's own constituency, there was some cause,

\(^1\) Memorials, II, p 84  \(^2\) Letters, p 112  \(^3\) Armytage, op cit, p 183
it seemed, for "quaking" Mundella's letters assumed a note of tragic self-sacrifice.

"It is utterly discouraging to our side, and damaging to my influence on the Eastern Question. Personally, I can bear it—but I grieve for the sake of the cause and party, and the country." 1

It is only necessary to compare the tone of these letters with those of Morris, to see the difference between a professional politician and a fighter. "I have had a sleepless night," he wrote the next day, "and feel a weaker man in every way this morning, but I shall put a good face on it, and go into the fight following my own convictions regardless of all consequences." Such professions—as is usual with politicians—were a prelude to his backing out altogether. Horror upon horrors, Gladstone's windows were broken by the Jingoists. The "Bishops, Parsons, Peers, Literati, etc.", who had been so keen on the expulsion of the Turks from Europe just over a year before, were thoroughly cowed, in London at least. Morris found himself left out on a limb, with only Chesson and the L.R.L standing firm. The day after they had lobbied Gladstone and found him "brisk as a bee", the great man was writing anxiously to Mundella.

"I told the gentlemen last night that I could only attend a meeting "1 seated all through the Hall
"2 without any admission of the public, i.e. promiscuous persons
"3 with an ample allocation of stewards to each position to keep order

"They were sanguine as to the feeling—and they seemed to think the operation required to fulfil these conditions could be effected in the time."

No doubt the quaking was not quite so one-sided as Morris imagined. As soon as Gladstone discovered that Mundella himself had cold feet, he seems to have dropped the matter with relief. But Morris refused to lay any responsibility upon him, and still regarded him as "the most illustrious statesman of England, the most single-hearted statesman in the world." 3

The pass had been sold to the war party, so far as any resistance

1 Armytage, op cit, p 184 2 Mundella Correspondence
3 "Address to English Liberals", delivered to the Chichester Liberal Association (1878), May Morris, II, p 379.
from the parliamentarians was concerned. Had Disraeli been determined upon war, there seemed to be little to restrain him. But, while the Queen was thirsting for another Crimean adventure, Disraeli was alternating the threat of force with tortuous diplomacy, and was more concerned with securing new footholds in the Mediterranean than with entering upon a major military operation. On March 3rd, Peace Preliminaries were signed between Russia and a Turkey thoroughly disgruntled with the British "alliance." On March 8th, the Cabinet resolved (in private) that in the event of the Peace Treaty compromising British maritime interests, "a new naval station in the east of the Mediterranean must be obtained, and if necessary by force." On March 27th, Disraeli announced the immediate calling-up of the Reserves and privately proposed the seizure—with Indian troops—of ports in the Levant and of Cyprus. As a result of the modified acceptance of these proposals, Lord Derby, who had for some time exerted a restraining influence within the Cabinet, resigned as Foreign Minister. "Yesterday morning," Morris commented on this news, "I suppose there were few people in England who did not think war as good as declared. But it is strange how a feeling of backing out on both sides seems growing this morning so that I should not wonder if the Jingoes were disappointed after all EQA as good as dead."¹ The Labour Representation League, on the other hand, was by no means dead, and noted in its minutes for April 4th that it had issued a powerful manifesto against the machinations of the Turkish bondholders, and also that a petition for neutrality had received the signatures of about 15,000 "leading men" of various trade unions, "the whole transaction occupying less than a week," having been launched upon the news of the call-up of the Reserves.² With the support of Joseph Chamberlain and John Bright, the call for peace once again made itself heard above the Jingoes. The revelation, on April 17th, of Disraeli's movement of 7,000 Indian troops to Malta aroused a considerable revulsion of feeling. How far the Jingoes hysteria had

¹ Letters, p 119

² Minutes of Labour Representation League. The Manifesto is reprinted in full in Labour's Formative Years, pp 193-4. See also Broadhurst, op. cit., p 84, for an account of the petition
really penetrated the masses. It is difficult to judge but certainly large sections of the organized workers remained steady throughout. In the end, Disraeli achieved one of his main aims, not by force of arms but through the Congress of Berlin, from which he returned with “peace with honour”—and Cyprus.  

This, then, was Morris’s first introduction to the political world. It was an experience which was likely either to teach him many lessons or to drive him off in disgust. The latter seemed the more likely result. In the last two months of the agitation he took little part. He seems to have been taking in earnest his own threat “I shall give up reading the Papers, and shall stick to my work.” On the other hand, he may well have been meditating upon his lessons—the depth of cynicism and unscrupulousness of the Tory Party, the opportunism and moral cowardice of professional politicians, the power of the working class, even when only a mere fringe are organized.

Two years later, when he had occasion to write to Mundella now elevated to Vice-President of the Council in Gladstone’s Government, he recalled the days of the Jingo terror.

“I wonder sometimes as I walk through the streets and look at the people if they are the same flesh and blood as made things so pleasant.

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1 Marx and Morris were diametrically opposed on the Eastern Question. Marx’s view—set forward in a letter to Liebknecht on February 4th, 1878—was that “a Russian defeat would have greatly hastened the social revolution in Russia, for which the elements exist on a mass scale, and with it the revolution throughout Europe” (Marx-Engels Sel. Cor., p. 357). He was appalled by the hypocrisy of those Liberal politicians who were exploiting the “Bulgarian atrocities” propaganda for their own tactical interests, and he condemned the “corrupt trade union leaders” who tagged on behind them. “These fellows shouted and howled behind Gladstone, Bright, Mundella, Morley and the whole gang of factory owners, etc., in majorem gloriam of the Tsar as emancipator of nations, while they never raised a finger for their own brothers in South Wales, condemned to die of starvation by the mineowners” (Marx to Liebknecht, February 11th, 1878, Marx-Engels Sel. Cor., p. 356). The letter to Liebknecht concludes with the suggestion that the growing opposition of the workers to Russia early in 1878 was prompted, not by Jingoism, but by the British people’s traditional and healthy opposition to Tsarism. It is interesting to note that H.M. Hyndman was also in the opposite camp to Morris during the Eastern Question agitation.

2 He was preparing, at this time, to join his family in Italy, and was also suffering from one of those rheumatic attacks which came upon him more than once at the end of a period of severe nervous tension.
for us in the spring of 1878, and I feel inclined to say, what the deuce then was it all about?" 1

When eight more years had passed, he understood the answer well enough "Gladstone-worship" was now a thing of the past although he felt now an admiration of a different nature "What will be left of Liberalism", he asked,

"when this one old man has gone, with his astonishing physical vigour, his belief in himself, his capacity of shutting his eyes to everything that his momentary political position forbids him to see, and his keen delight in playing the political game?"

True, his "soft fighting was discouraging enough" in the days of the Eastern Question—

"but after all it was perhaps good enough for the occasion, for the Jingoes and Dizzy at their head never intended to go to war, they only meant bragging—I admit that we didn't know it at the time " 2

1 Mundella Correspondence 2 Commonweal, January 7th, 1888