

WHY WE ARE AT WAR.

BY J. RAMSAY MACDONALD.

[The labor parties of the world have been growing almost from year to year not only in numbers but also in political influence, and they give fair promise of becoming an international power which will make for peace in the world.

The labor party in Germany is democratic and socialistic. It is a strong peace party, and its leaders were in favor of supporting the peace movement with all their strength. But at the outbreak of the war, after an investigation of the case, the German labor leaders saw clearly that the present war was forced upon Germany with the obvious intention of crushing her for the benefit of her rivals, and they stood by the government and voted in favor of the subsidies for war. They stated their reasons in speeches and published articles, and there can be no better argument for the justice of Germany's cause.

The labor party in England was branded as unpatriotic, and Mr. John Burns resigned his position in the cabinet, while the leader of the advocates of peace in the French labor party was even more quickly and directly disposed of by being shot, the murder being acquiesced in by the public to the extent of letting the assassin escape punishment. There was not even a serious attempt made at investigating the crime or prosecuting the criminal.

The laborers of different countries have formed an alliance which is called "the International," and if it had been only a little stronger it might have been able to prevent the present war; but Germany was the only country in which the labor party was well organized, and there they did not veto the war because they saw that for Germany it was but a war of self-defense.

We here republish from *The Continental Times*, of December 4, 1914, a short article by J. Ramsay Macdonald, M. P., leader of the English labor party and a man well conversant with the inside of English politics. The article is little known, almost unknown, even in England. So far as I know it has never been printed in the United States, and yet it ought to be read. Mr. Macdonald knows whereof he speaks. He states facts, and in the light of these facts he places the responsibility for the war.—EDITOR.]

ON that fatal Sunday, the second of August, I met in Whitehall a member of the Cabinet and he told me of the messages and conversations between foreign secretaries and ambassadors which were to be published for the purpose of showing how we strove

for peace and how Germany immovably went to war. "It will have a great effect on public opinion," he said, and he was right. It is called "Correspondence respecting the European Crisis," but is generally referred to as "The White Paper." I wish to comment upon it for the purpose of explaining its significance.

It begins with a conversation between Sir Edward Grey and the German ambassador on July 20 regarding the Austrian threat to punish Servia, and finishes with the delivery of our ultimatum to Germany on August 4. From it certain conclusions appear to be justified, the following in particular:

1. Sir Edward Grey strove to the last to prevent a European war.

2. Germany did next to nothing for peace, but it is not clear whether she actually encouraged Austria to pursue her Servian policy.

3. The mobilization of Russia drove Germany to war.

4. Russia and France strove, from the very beginning, both by open pressure and by wiles, to get us to commit ourselves to support them in the event of war.

5. Though Sir Edward Grey would not give them a pledge he made the German ambassador understand that we might not keep out of the conflict.

6. During the negotiations Germany tried to meet our wishes on certain points so as to secure our neutrality. Sometimes her proposals were brusque, but no attempt was made by us to negotiate diplomatically to improve them. They were all summarily rejected by Sir Edward Grey. Finally, so anxious was Germany to confine the limits of the war, the German ambassador asked Sir Edward Grey to propose his own conditions of neutrality, and Sir Edward Grey declined to discuss the matter. This fact was suppressed by Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Asquith in their speeches in Parliament.

7. When Sir Edward Grey failed to secure peace between Germany and Russia, he worked deliberately to involve us in the war, using Belgium as his chief excuse.

That is the gist of the White Paper. It proves quite conclusively that those who were in favor of neutrality before the second of August ought to have remained in favor of it after the White Paper was published.

That Sir Edward Grey should have striven for European peace and then, when he failed, that he should have striven with equal determination to embroil Great Britain, seems contradictory. But

it is not, and the explanation of why it is not is the justification of those of us who for the last eight years have regarded Sir Edward Grey as a menace to the peace of Europe and his policy as a misfortune to our country. What is the explanation?

Great Britain in Europe can pursue one of two policies. It can keep on terms of general friendship with the European nations, treating with each separately when necessary and cooperating with all on matters of common interest. To do this effectively it has to keep its hands clean. It has to make its position clear, and its sympathy has to be boldly given to every movement for liberty. This is a policy which requires great faith, great patience, and great courage. Its foundations are being built by our own International, and if our Liberal Government had only followed it since 1905 it would by this time have smashed the military autocracies which have brought us into war.

But there is a more alluring policy—apparently easier, apparently safer, apparently more direct, but in reality more difficult, more dangerous, and less calculable. That is the policy of the balance of power through alliance. Weak and short-sighted ministers have always resorted to this because it is the policy of the instincts rather than of the reason. It formed groups of powers on the continent. It divided Europe into two great hostile camps—Germany, Austria, and Italy on the one hand; Russia, France and ourselves on the other. The progeny of this policy is suspicion and armaments; its end is war and the smashing up of the very balance which it is designed to maintain. When war comes it is then bound to be universal. Every nation is on one rope or another and when one slips it drags its allies with it.

As a matter of practical experience the very worst form of alliance is the *entente*. An alliance is definite. Every one knows his responsibilities under it. The *entente* deceives the people. When Mr. Asquith and Sir Edward Grey kept assuring the House of Commons that we had contracted no obligations by our *entente* with France they said what was literally true but substantially untrue. That is why stupid or dishonest statesmen prefer the *entente* to the alliance; it permits them to see hard facts through a veil of sentimental vagueness. Had we had a definite alliance with France and Russia the only difference would have been that we and everybody else should have known what we had let ourselves in for, and that might have averted the war. Italy could keep out of the turmoil because its membership in the alliance imposed only definite

obligations upon it; we were dragged in because our *entente* involved us in an indefinite maze of honorable commitments.

It is interesting to gather from Sir Edward Grey's speech of August 3 and the White Paper how completely the *entente* entangled him. There were first of all the "conversations" between French and British naval and army experts from 1906 onwards. These produced plans of naval and military operations which France and we were to take jointly together. It was in accordance with these schemes that the northern coasts of France were left unprotected by the French navy. When Sir Edward Grey evoked our sympathy on the ground that the French northern coasts were unprotected, he did not tell us that he had agreed that they should be unprotected and that the French fleet should be concentrated in the Mediterranean.

These "conversations" were carried on for about six years without the knowledge or consent of the Cabinet. The military plans were sent to St. Petersburg and a Grand Duke (so well-informed authorities say) connected with the German party in Russia sent them to Berlin. Germany has known for years that there were military arrangements between France and ourselves, and that Russia would fit her operations into these plans.

We had so mixed ourselves up in the Franco-Russian alliance that Sir Edward Grey had to tell us on August 3 that though our hands were free our honor was pledged!

The country had been so helplessly committed to fight for France and Russia that Sir Edward Grey had to refuse point blank every overture made by Germany to keep us out of the conflict. That is why, when reporting the negotiations to the House of Commons, he found it impossible to tell the whole truth and to put impartially what he chose to tell us. He scoffed at the German guarantee to Belgium on the ground that it only secured the "integrity" of the country but not its independence; when the actual documents appeared it was found that its independence was secured as well. And that is not the worst. The White Paper contains several offers which were made to us by Germany aimed at securing our neutrality. None were quite satisfactory in their form and Sir Edward Grey left the impression that these unsatisfactory proposals were all that Germany made. Later on the Prime Minister did the same. Both withheld the full truth from us. The German ambassador saw Sir Edward Grey, according to the White Paper, on August 1—and this is our foreign minister's note of the conversation:

“The Ambassador pressed me as to whether I could not formulate conditions upon which we could remain neutral. He even suggested that the integrity of France and her colonies might be guaranteed.”

Sir Edward Grey declined to consider neutrality on any conditions and refrained from reporting this conversation to the House. Why? It was the most important proposal that Germany made. Had this been told us by Sir Edward Grey his speech could not have worked up a war sentiment. The hard, immovable fact is that Sir Edward Grey had so pledged the country's honor without the country's knowledge to fight for France or Russia, that he was not in a position even to discuss neutrality. That was the state of affairs on July 20 and did not arise from anything Germany did or did not do after that date.

Now, the apparent contradiction that the man who had worked for European peace was at the same time the leader of the war party in the Cabinet can be explained. Sir Edward Grey strove to undo the result of his policy and keep Europe at peace but, when he failed, he found himself committed to dragging his country into war.

The justifications offered are nothing but the excuses which ministers can always produce for mistakes. Let me take the case of Belgium. It has been known for years that, in the event of a war between Russia and France on the one hand and Germany on the other, the only possible military tactics for Germany to pursue were to attack France hot foot through Belgium, and then return to meet the Russians. The plans were in our war office. They were discussed quite openly during the Agadir trouble, and were the subject of some magazine articles, particularly one by Mr. Belloc.

Mr. Gladstone made it clear in 1870 that in a general conflict formal neutrality might be violated. He said in the House of Commons in August, 1870: “I am not able to subscribe to the doctrine of those who have held in this House what plainly amounts to an assertion that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding on every party to it, irrespective altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises.”

Germany's guarantees to Belgium would have been accepted by Mr. Gladstone. If France had decided to attack Germany through Belgium Sir Edward Grey would not have objected. but would have justified himself by Mr. Gladstone's opinions.

We knew Germany's military plans. We obtained them through the usual channels of spies and secret service. We knew that the road through Belgium was an essential part of them. That was our opportunity to find a "disinterested" motive apart from the obligations of the *entente*. It is well known that a nation will not fight except for a cause in which idealism is mingled. The *Daily Mail* supplied the idealism for the South African war by telling lies about the flogging of British women and children; our government supplied the idealism for this war by telling us that the independence of Belgium had to be vindicated by us. Before it addressed its inquiries to France and Germany upon this point, knowing the military exigencies of both countries, it knew that France could reply suitably whilst Germany could not do so. It was a pretty little game in hypocrisy which the magnificent valor of the Belgians will enable the government to hide up for the time being.

Such are the facts of the case. It is a diplomatist's war, made by about half-a-dozen men. Up to the moment that ambassadors were withdrawn the peoples were at peace. They had no quarrel with each other; they bore each other no ill-will. Half-a-dozen men brought Europe to the brink of a precipice and Europe fell over it because it could not help itself. To-day our happy industrial prospects of a fortnight ago are darkened. Suffering has come to be with us. Ruin stares many of us in the face. Little comfortable businesses are wrecked, tiny incomes have vanished. Want is in our midst, and Death walks with Want. And when we sit down and ask ourselves with fulness of knowledge: "Why has this evil happened?" the only answer we can give is, because Sir Edward Grey has guided our foreign policy during the past eight years. His short-sightedness and his blunders have brought all this upon us.

I have been reminded of one of those sombre judgments which the prophet who lived in evil times uttered against Israel. "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means, and my people love to have it so; and what will ye do in the end thereof?"

Aye, what will ye do in the end thereof?