

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR.¹

BY FRED. C. CONYBEARE.

A LADY remarked to me lately that it was too terrible to think that our brave fellows should be bearing the hardships of the trenches, should be enduring wounds and death, for any but a wholly righteous cause. Our sufferings alone, she urged, prove that justice is on our side; and she shook with wrath when I suggested that by the same test the Germans could be shown to be in the right. Her attitude, which may properly be described as tribalism, was all very well as long as we had little except the lies and insincerities of our public men and press with which to combat the Germans, but now that we are putting into the field some two million good soldiers to prove that we are as brave and capable of fighting as they are, surely the time is come when rationalists anyhow can make a more serious attempt to understand the course of events than Mr. McCabe and Mr. Charles T. Gorham have done.

I admit at the outset that by invading Belgium the Germans left us no choice but to intervene. This is so, even if we allow

¹This article was accompanied by the following personal letter to the editor: "Dear Dr. Carus—You and I have been good friends in the past and have worked in our respective spheres for the humanizing and enlightening of opinion in both hemispheres. I therefore invite you to publish in *The Open Court* the enclosed MS. together with this communication to yourself. It was originally sent to the *Literary Guide*, the monthly organ of the Rationalist league, for I did not see why England's case should be entirely left, in its columns, to the tender mercies of Mr. McCabe and Mr. Gorham. My use of the English White Paper however was too frank for the taste of that journal, and its editors refused to publish it.

"Germany at present is resounding with hymns of hatred against England, but I hope and believe that Germans will come to see that my countrymen were as a whole averse to war until by the invasion of a weak and defenceless Belgium they were goaded into it. The fact that the German ambassador in London on August 1 was ready to give an assurance that Belgium would not be molested if we would undertake to be neutral, proves that the passage over her soil of German armies was not the unavoidable military necessity which

with Sir E. Grey that their action "was not wanton," and that "Germany feared that if she did not occupy Belgium France might do so." Mr. Lloyd George has recently assured us that for him, as for ninety-five percent of the business men of London, Belgium made the whole difference, and that nothing short of the violation of her neutrality could have inclined him or them to war. His attitude is and was my own, and I maintain that the *Times* of March 8 takes up an immoral position when it writes that "Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg is quite right" in what he says of us, that as "in the great war we did not lavish our gold from love of German or of Austrian liberty or out of sheer altruism," so in this war we have "invested it for our own safety and our own advantage"; and, the *Times* adds, as then "on the whole our commitments were rewarded by an adequate return," so they will be in this war. Yet I venture to think what turned the scale on August 3 in the House of Commons was the eloquent appeal of the late Mr. Gladstone, as Sir E. Grey repeated it. Here it is: "We have an interest in the independence of Belgium which is wider than that which we may have in the literal operation of the guarantee. It is found in the answer to the question whether, under the circumstances of the case, this country, endowed as it is with influence and power, would quietly stand by and witness the perpetration of the direst crime that ever stained the pages of history, and thus become participators in the sin." If Grey had

Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg on August 4 asserted it to be. In any case it meant that Belgium would be turned into a shambles. I hold that Sir E. Grey did wrong in binding England by his secret engagements (unknown even to the English cabinet and probably to the king) to take part against Germany in a war over an issue which did not concern us. He erred in making any defensive and offensive secret alliance with France, until the latter power should have composed her quarrel with Germany. Still the fact remains, duly attested by our own and even by the French diplomatic books, that he and his secret policy would have been cast aside by our cabinet, parliament and nation, had not the German General Staff with cynical disregard of justice and international law actually played into his and Sazonof's hands. Had that Staff known a little more of human nature, they would have foreseen that their aggression on Belgium, premeditated and planned for years, was the one thing that would light a flame among us, and alienate the sympathies both of America and Italy. They deliberately provoked us to war, as, I consider, Sazonof provoked the poor Kaiser; and I fear there is nothing for us now but to fight it out. May I suggest that you should print in your journal the passages which I have marked in the current number of the *Candid Quarterly*. This is a journal edited by Mr. Thos. Gibson Bowles, and it may be said to represent the "Young Tory" party. I believe that its stern condemnation of Sir E. Grey's policy is well merited, though I do not see eye to eye with the editor in many matters, and, particularly, in the essentially aggressive designs of the present Kaiser against England.—I am yours sincerely, FRED. C. CONYBEARE, M.A., F.B.A., Honorary Fellow Univ. Coll. Oxford, Hon. Dr. Theol. Giessen, Hon. LL.D. St. Andrews."

dangled this war before our Parliament as an "investment," he would have found few to support him.

Now my object here is to point out that we should not now be at war, and that Europe would probably not be at war with herself if Sir E. Grey had taken up this ethical standpoint from the first and stuck to it.

The war originated in a quarrel between Austria and Servia. In such a war were we under any obligation, moral or material, to join? As to the moral obligation, Grey declared on July 20 that for us or any other power to "be dragged into a war by Servia would be detestable" (White Paper 1). We assured Austria that "if in the course of the present grave crisis our point of view should sometimes differ from hers, this would arise not from want of sympathy with the many just complaints which Austria-Hungary had against Servia," etc. (White Paper 62). On July 29 (*ibid.* 91) Grey told the Austrian ambassador in London that he "did not wish to discuss the merits of the question between Austria and Servia."

Were we then under material obligations to go to war over Servia?

On this point Sir G. Buchanan, our ambassador at St. Petersburg, was emphatic. On July 24 he was urged by Sazonof and the French ambassador there, "to proclaim our solidarity with Russia and France." "They continued to press me," he writes (White Paper 6), "for a declaration of complete solidarity of His Majesty's government with French and Russian governments."

He reports his answer thus: "Personally I saw no reason to expect any declaration of solidarity from His Majesty's government that would entail an unconditional engagement on their part to support Russia and France by force of arms. Direct British interests in Servia were *nil*, and a war on behalf of that country would never be sanctioned by British public opinion."

It is certain that if Grey had remained true to this twofold standpoint, that neither duty nor interests called upon us to intervene, France would not have stirred, for she relied upon our aid, and she would have held back her ally Russia. The fire in the heather might have been thus stamped out from the beginning, and never have become a vast conflagration consuming the whole of Europe.

It may be said: "Oh, but we could not allow Germany once more to humiliate Russia." But Austria gave assurances from the first that she only wished to chastise Servia and not touch her in-

tegrity or sovereign rights (White Paper 18, 57, 62, 64, 72, 75, 79, 137, etc.). There was therefore not involved any particular humiliation of Russia, which in 1876, 1878, 1897, had in special conventions thrice assigned Servia to the Austrian sphere of influence in the Balkans, reserving Bulgaria as her own sphere. The Austrians had a better quarrel with Servia than we ever had with the Boers, and Russia less excuse for throwing her aegis over Servia than Germany would have had in 1900 for throwing hers over the Transvaal. But in view of Sir E. Grey's repeated disclaimers of all interest in the rights and wrongs of Servia it is superfluous to press this point. He not less emphatically denied that France had any cause to interfere in a Servian squabble. For example, on July 31 (*ibid.* 116) he writes to Sir F. Bertie, our ambassador at Paris, that "in this case France is being drawn into a dispute which is not hers."

That being so, why did he not warn France from the first that if she, merely as Russia's ally, chose to go to war with Germany, she would do so at her own risk? Why did he not point out that, as it was not *her* dispute, the Germans could not be accused of an *unprovoked* attack on her if they defended themselves in a war into which she might follow Russia? It is useless to urge that France was bound by her treaty with Russia. That was her look-out, and she did not allege her treaty but her *interests* as a reason for accepting war with Germany. Is any one so *naïf* as to suppose that Russia would go out of her way to aid France in similar circumstances? Would Russia ever intervene *vi et armis* to save England from any humiliation whatever?

Russia from the first resolved to take up the quarrel of Servia and assert a protectorate over her as against Austria, and on July 25 mobilized her southern armies against Austria—this, although Germany categorically warned her that she would protect her ally. Austria declared war on Servia on July 28 and on July 29 proceeded to bombard Belgrade. Then at last Grey yielded to Sazonof's appeal that he should declare our "complete solidarity" with France and Russia, and he warned Germany that if France went to war we must intervene on her side and could not stand aside (White Paper 89, 102, 111, 116, 119).

Till now Germany, while insisting that Austria intended only to chastise Servia and not impair her sovereign rights or appropriate any of her territory, had been intransigent in her attitude. *Ex post facto* she had approved of Austria's note to Servia, and toward Russia she assumed an air of "you can take it or leave it."

She hoped to bluff her as in 1909. At the same time she was ready to fight Russia and France, if they wanted to fight her. Sazonof and the two Cambons² on their side equally intended to fight her if they could get possession of the weak man with the strong fleet, Sir E. Grey. Both sides took Grey's warning of July 29 very seriously. It was in effect an ultimatum to Germany and an assurance of support to Russia; and an impartial witness, the Belgian minister at St. Petersburg, the Baron de l'Escaille, wrote on the evening of July 30 to his government at Brussels that on that day people there were "firmly convinced, nay they had a positive assurance to the effect, that England would support France. This assurance of support was of enormous importance, and had contributed not a little to encourage the war party." And he adds: "Although on the day before there were such divergencies of opinion in the Czar's council of ministers that the ukase ordering mobilization was delayed, a change of scene subsequently took place, the war party gained the upper hand, and to-day (July 30) at four o'clock the order for mobilization was published. The army, which is conscious of its strength, is full of enthusiasm and reposes great hopes on the progress it has achieved since the Japanese war. The navy is so far from having realized its program of reconstruction and reorganization that one cannot count upon it. And this is just the reason why so much importance is attached to the assurance of support given by England."³

But just in proportion as Sir Edward Grey's warning raised the hopes of Sazonof, it depressed those of Germany, who instantly set herself to conciliate Russia and buy off England. Thus she sent her Ambassador, Count Pourtalés, at 2 a. m. on the morning of July 30, to Sazonof. He "completely broke down," so we read (White Paper 97), "on seeing that war was inevitable. He appealed to M. Sazonof to make some suggestion which he could telegraph to the German government as a last hope."

It was now Sazonof's turn to bluff Germany, and he dictated a

² French ambassadors in Berlin and London.

³ The first paragraphs of this dispatch are equally interesting with those which I cite:

"M. le Ministre. Yesterday [July 29] and the day before have been passed in expectation of the events which were bound to follow upon the declaration of war by Austria on Servia.

"Most contradictory news has been in circulation, without it being possible to distinguish truth from falsehood, about the Imperial Government's intentions. What is certain is that Germany has endeavored, no less here than in Vienna, to find any means whatever, to avoid a general conflict; but she has been confronted, on one side, with the obstinate determination of the Vienna Cabinet not to yield an inch, and, on the other, with the distrust felt by the

formula to Portalés by which Austria was "to recognize that her conflict with Servia had assumed the character of a question of European interest and declare herself ready to eliminate from her ultimatum (to Servia) points which violate the principle of sovereignty of Servia." This done, "Russia engaged to stop all military preparations."

The Austrian demand which violated Servian sovereignty was that an Austrian assessor should sit on the Servian court of enquiry into the assassination of the Archduke. He was not to have judicial or executive powers, but only to see that the enquiry was not a mock one. At Hodeida recently the Italians similarly demanded of Turkey that their consul should sit on the Turkish court of enquiry, and the demand was instantly granted.

The Germans spent July 30 in urging Austria to consider Sazonof's terms. Austria had broken off negotiations with St. Petersburg, and accordingly Bethmann-Hollweg in a note addressed to her that day used these words: "We cannot expect Austria-Hungary to negotiate with Servia, with which she is in a state of war. The refusal, however, to exchange views with St. Petersburg would be a grave mistake. We are indeed ready to fulfil our duty. As an ally we must, however, refuse to be drawn into a world conflagration through Austria-Hungary not respecting our advice." And the German ambassador was told to address this warning to Berchtold, the Austrian chancellor, "with all emphasis and great seriousness."⁴

Petersburg Cabinet of Austria's assurances that her only idea is to punish Servia, and not possess herself of that country.

"M. Sazonof has declared that it is impossible for Russia not to hold herself ready and not to mobilize, that however these preparations were not directed against Germany. This morning an official communication to the journals announces that 'the reservists have been called to arms in a certain number of provinces.' Knowing the reserve usually practised in official Russian communications, it is easy to infer that the mobilization is general. The German ambassador has declared to-day that he has exhausted the endeavors for peace which since Saturday he has unremittingly pursued, and that he is now left without any hope. I have been told that the English embassy has expressed itself in the same manner. Great Britain has as a last resort proposed arbitration. M. Sazonof has replied: 'We ourselves proposed it to Austria-Hungary and she refused it.' To the proposal for a conference Germany replied by proposing an understanding between the Cabinets. One may well ask oneself if it is not the case that all parties want war and are only trying to delay its declaration a little while in order to gain time. England began by giving out that she did not intend to be drawn into a conflict. Sir George Buchanan openly said so. To-day at Petersburg people are firmly convinced etc."

⁴ Mr. M. P. Price in his work *The Diplomatic History of the War* shows that this telegram is genuine, although it has been impugned. Yet Mr. Gorman quotes with approval Mr. Jas. M. Beck's denial that the Kaiser ever "gave the world the text of any advice he gave the Austrian officials."

Emperor Franz Joseph—the *enfant terrible* of the whole episode—had Sazonof's note (modified in certain ways by Grey, White Paper 120) laid before him by Berchtold on the morning of July 31. The old man's habit is to transact important affairs of state at 5 a. m. He so far yielded that Sazonof at once informed Grey through his agent in London, De Etter, of his satisfaction at the fact (White Paper 133) that "the Austro-Hungarian ambassador had declared the readiness of his government to discuss the substance of the Austrian ultimatum to Servia." Sazonof adds that "it is desirable that the discussions should take place in London with the participation of the great powers." He also "hopes that the British government will assume the direction of these discussions. The whole of Europe would be thankful to them." The extent to which Austria would have yielded to Russian demands would of course have depended on the course of these "discussions," which unhappily never took place.

One would have thought that Sazonof in this moment of diplomatic triumph might have been pleased to yield to the appeal which the German emperor had been making to him for two days to stay his military preparations against himself. For some reason or another Grey would not second this appeal; he was too much afraid of Sazonof ever to offer him advice, and even as early as July 24 had made the "stiff" tone of the note to Servia an excuse for refusing "to exercise any moderating influence on Russia" (White Paper 10), and our ambassador at Vienna was told from the first (White Paper 26) to support the policy of Sazonof. The latter now chose the moment of his triumph to complete his mobilization against Germany. This was early on the morning of July 31. As early as July 26 the Germans had warned Russia that if she mobilized they must do so too; and, they added, "mobilization means war." Russia paid no heed, with the result that at midnight on July 31 the Kaiser, seized with panic, gave her 12 hours to demobilize, and getting no answer, declared war late on August 1, on which day he also began to mobilize in his turn. I do not seek to palliate the guilt of the Kaiser in thus rushing into war, but I do aver that Sazonof had done all he could to provoke the poor man to declare war, and might have declared war himself if the Kaiser had not been in such a hurry.

The English Cabinet was still averse to war,⁵ and, in spite of

⁵ Mr. Lloyd George recently made the following statement: "This I know is true—after the guarantee given that the German fleet would not attack the coast of France or annex any French territory, I would not have been

Grey's secret undertakings to France, was willing to be neutral if Germany would give, like France, an assurance not to violate Belgium's neutrality. They accordingly sent Grey on August 1 "to make proposals [to the German ambassador] for England's neutrality even in the event of Germany being at war with France as well as with Russia." The ambassador immediately offered the required assurance on condition that Grey would make a definite statement with regard to our neutrality. Grey however refused "to be neutral on that condition alone." The ambassador then "pressed him to formulate conditions" on which we would be neutral. He even offered that the integrity both of France and of her colonies might be respected, in case France was beaten. Grey might also have asked and obtained the condition that the German fleet should keep itself in the North Sea. But Grey wanted to keep his hands free and refused to be neutral on any conditions; and the next morning (August 2) he did not even deem it worth his while to inform our Cabinet of the German overtures of the day before, though a majority thereof would certainly have embraced them. The Germans now made up their minds that we were really going to join France against them; and, thinking that they might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, went through Belgium. That issue swallowed up all our earlier negotiations, and we had to go to war. The only way to have kept out of it would have been to close with the offers made by Germany on August 1.⁶ But Grey resolved not to do that, and the Cabinet never heard of them in time.

It cannot be denied that on the morning of July 31 Russia had obtained all she had asked for. On July 27 (White Paper 55) Sazonof told our ambassador that all he wanted was that Serbia's "territorial integrity must be guaranteed and her rights as a sovereign state respected," and by the 31st not only were these terms conceded by Austria, but Germany had offered to see that they

a party to a declaration of war had Belgium not been invaded; and I can say the same thing for most, if not all, of my colleagues. If Germany had been wise, she would not have set foot on Belgian soil; the Liberal Government, then, would not have intervened."

⁶ A war of Germany and Austria with France and Russia was likely to result in the emergence of many unforeseen issues and contingencies which made it unwise of England beforehand to tie herself down unconditionally to permanent neutrality. For example the war might have spread to Dutch, Danish and Swedish soil, even America might have been drawn in as well as Italy and Turkey. Nevertheless, since we had no army with which to repel a German advance through Belgium, I regret that Grey did not accept Lychnowski's overtures. We should have saved her from the excesses of German *Schrecklichkeit*.

were carried out when the punitive expedition was ended. But neither side trusted the other.

Grey's dispatches prove that his policy was to join in the war if it became general, and especially if France elected to go in. This he intended to do, Belgium or no Belgium. I believe it was an unwise policy. The Servian bone was foul and rotten, and stunk in his nostrils as long as only one big dog was growling over it, but as soon as the other big dogs began to snarl, it suddenly acquired for him an almost sacramental importance.

Germany, if we may believe the Italian Foreign Minister, San Juliano (White Paper 80), was all along "really anxious for good relations with ourselves;" and Sir E. Goschen at Berlin, in conversation with the German chancellor on August 4, remarked that it "was part of the tragedy" that the two nations should "fall apart just at the moment when the relations between them had been more friendly and cordial than they had been for years." One may well ask, if this was so, why Sir E. Grey did not accept the German overtures for peace three days earlier or at least give our very pacifist Cabinet a chance to accept them. But he evidently agreed with his friend M. Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London (White Paper 119, July 31), that "in 1870 we had made a great mistake in allowing an enormous increase of German strength, and we should now be repeating the mistake," if we did not attack Germany when we could. This is the moral standpoint which prevails in a thieves' kitchen. We made it, unwillingly and by accident, our own.

How the future historian will view this war we hardly can say, but I suspect he will blame Russia and Germany about equally. He will recognize that our House of Commons went to war to rescue the weak and oppressed, and that, except for the violation of Belgium, we would either not have gone to war at all, or have done so with little enthusiasm. He will recognize that the Germans honestly believed they were fighting a defensive war, which was to rid them of the double incubus of Russia and France holding their loaded revolvers at them on two frontiers. France will be rightly credited with a passion for *revanche*; the Russian peasant with his blind traditional loyalty for his "Little Father" the Czar. Finally the historian will conclude that any one of the five combatants with a little good-will could have prevented the war at the outset of the crisis and at any subsequent phase of it up to August 1; and he will blame all alike for the bloody popular convulsions, the plague and famine, the uprising of the East against the West, of the

yellow races against the white, the wasting feuds between race and race, the war between classes, the overthrow of faith in humanity, the destruction of all schemes of social amelioration, the general bankruptcy of states and individuals, the revival of superstition, the decay of literature and art, and countless other evils which will follow in its train all over Europe.