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THE RESPONSIBILITY
FOR THE WAR

BY

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THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR

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THE evidence as to the immediate causes of the European war has so far been made public by the issue of the German White Book and the British White Papers.¹ These documents are already of historic value, and it is important that all who would grasp clearly the development of the situation in the critical days before the outbreak of hostilities should examine closely the materials of information which have been thus officially presented. It will be found by students that these documents require very careful collation, for the situation which they reflect was highly complex and developing very rapidly. It is well to give this warning. But a study and restudy of the materials thus available will enable the action of the several States in the crisis to be more clearly appreciated and the comparative responsibility of the various parties to be in certain important respects determined.

Behind the proximate or immediate acts which led

¹ The edition in English of the German White Book was issued from Berlin. It is reproduced (Appendix I) in *Why we are at War* Clarendon Press, Oxford. 2s. net). The British White Papers are [Cd. 7467] and [Cd. 7445]. The Russian Orange Book has also been issued (*Why we are at War*, Appendix VI); a translation of some of the more important documents in it appeared in the *Manchester Guardian*, Sept. 11.

to the rupture of diplomatic relations and the outbreak of war lie large and deep issues. The development of the rival Teuton and Slav ambitions—the expansion of German influence in south-east Europe and in Asia Minor, the recovery and pressure of Russian political and military policy, the activity of Servian agitation in the southern Slav provinces of Austria-Hungary, the jealousies and fears raised and unallayed by the Balkan settlement, the mutual suspicions of Germany and France and of Germany and England—these and other factors underlie the rapid ripening of the crisis which has convulsed Europe. Many other more immediate circumstances affecting the barometer of political and military opportunity have also to be taken into account by the student of the situation—such as the industrial unrest in Russia, the military revelations in France, the political crisis over the Irish question in England. But important as are the large underlying forces which mould the foreign policies of the European States, and significant as are internal conditions at the time of an international crisis, the immediate actions which precipitate a war are often of peculiar value in estimating the responsibility of nations and in judging their standard of action. It is so in the present case. The events which preceded and precipitated war were such as reveal swiftly and clearly the character of States, and in themselves raised questions of the highest significance in the history of international relations.

In the complex situation which developed so suddenly between July 23, when Austria-Hungary presented its Note to Servia, and the last step in the crisis, when on August 4 England joined France, Russia, Servia, and Belgium by declaring war on Germany, it is important to distinguish as clearly as may be the main question

on which a judgement has to be formed. These may be stated as follows :

1. The Austro-Hungarian Note to Servia.
2. The responsibility of Russia.
3. The intervention of England.

I. THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN NOTE TO SERVIA

The Austro-Hungarian Note, with the Servian reply and the Austrian comments thereon,¹ is the first matter which claims attention. These documents should be read in the full text, so as to appreciate the character of the original Note and the extent of the Servian reservations. It will be clear to most people that the Austrian Note was not simply a humiliating demand, but one which no sovereign State could be expected to accept. The humiliating conditions might be endured, but to accept the dictation that Austro-Hungarian officials should take part *in Servia* in the suppression of the movement against the territorial integrity of the monarchy was a demand which threatened the independence of Servia. Sir Edward Grey told the Austrian Ambassador that he had never before seen one State address to another independent State a document of so formidable a character.² The German Secretary of State himself admitted to the English Ambassador at Berlin that there were some things in the Austrian Note that Servia could hardly be expected to swallow.³ The Austrian Government required a reply in forty-eight hours.

¹ These will be found in the German White Book, pp. 23-32. The Austrian Note and the Servian reply—but not the Austrian comments—are also in Cd. 7467.

² Cd. 7467, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The Servian reply, on July 25, accepted the ten points of the Note with reservations, and, as Sir Edward Grey told the German Ambassador, went further than could have been expected to meet the Austrian demands. They promised to hand over for trial any Servian subject, without regard to his situation or rank, of whose complicity in the crime of Serajevo proofs were forthcoming,¹ and they declared that

If the Imperial and Royal Government are not satisfied with this reply, the Servian Government, considering that it is not to the common interest to precipitate the solution of this question, are ready as always to accept a pacific understanding, either by referring this question to the decision of the International Tribunal of The Hague, or to the Great Powers which took part in the drawing up of the declaration made by the Servian Government on March 18 (31), 1909.

Austria summarily declared the Servian reply unsatisfactory, and on July 27 the British Ambassador at Vienna informed Sir Edward Grey that the impression left on his mind was that the Austro-Hungarian Note was so drawn up as to make war inevitable.²

There are three charges against Austria, from which there seems no acquittal—*first*, that the Note was one which no self-respecting independent Power could accept; *second*, that Austria refused to meet Servia's offer in any way, or to entrust the matter to an impartial tribunal—and in this connexion it must be borne in mind that the evidence accepted by the Austro-Hungarian court of inquiry had not been submitted for examination; *third*, that by requiring unconditional acceptance within forty-eight hours, Austria greatly aggravated the situation. The action of Austria was

¹ Cd. 7467, p. 24.

² Ibid., p. 41

nothing short of a crime against the peace of Europe. Austria meant war.

But this is not all. Austria and Germany were both quite aware of the fact that the Austrian Note to Serbia might lead to a European war. Whether the Kaiser or the German Ambassador at Vienna or the German Government had or had not seen the actual terms of the Note is unproved, and is not important. What is important is, that the Austrian Government informed the German Government of their 'conception' of the situation and asked their opinion. The German White Book states this plainly, and proceeds :¹

With all our heart we were able to agree with our ally's estimate of the situation, and assure him that any action considered necessary to end the movement in Serbia directed against the conservation of the monarchy would meet with our approval.

We were perfectly aware that a possible warlike attitude of Austria-Hungary against Serbia might bring Russia upon the field, and that it might, therefore, involve us in a war, in accordance with our duty as allies.

It is clear that Austria and Germany plunged into this step with the consciousness that it might provoke a European war, and the direct responsibility for war falls first on Austria and Germany, both on account of the Note and the conditions attached thereto, as well as on account of their subsequent diplomacy in relation to the discussion of the Note by the Powers.

II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF RUSSIA

The second question is the responsibility of Russia. This is the burden of the German White Book. Time and again it is argued that Russia is responsible for the

¹ German White Book, p. 4.

European war, and that in particular its act of mobilization is that which made war inevitable. It is therefore very important that the evidence on this matter should be carefully and dispassionately considered.

The question of mobilization cannot, however, be treated apart from the prior question of Russia's intervention in the Austro-Servian dispute. It was throughout the claim of Austria and Germany that the dispute of Austria with Servia was a matter in which no other Power had a right to interfere. Hence up to the eleventh hour Austria refused, and Germany supported her, to accept any mediation or reference to an outside tribunal of the dispute with Servia. Russia, on the other hand, made it clear at once that she could not allow Austria to dictate to Servia. On July 24, the day after the presenting of the Austrian Note to Servia, M. Sazonof informed the German Ambassador at St. Petersburg 'most positively' that Russia would not accept non-intervention.¹ An urgent appeal from the Crown Prince of Servia to the Czar, dated July 24, appears among the recently published Russian documents. It is indeed very difficult to think that the Austrian or German authorities believed that Russia could simply stand apart. In any case, considering the relations of Russia and Servia, it would have been unlikely. The terms of the Austrian Note now made it practically impossible. Anticipating trouble, and some days before the Austrian Note had been presented, the German Ambassador in London privately asked Sir Edward Grey to exercise moderating influence in St. Petersburg, and had even suggested Russia as 'mediator'. On the 24th Sir Edward Grey, reminding the German Ambassador of his request, said that in view of the extraordinarily stiff

¹ German White Book, p. 37

character of the Austrian Note, the shortness of the time allowed, and the wide scope of the demands upon Serbia, he felt quite helpless as far as Russia was concerned, and did not believe any Power could exercise influence alone. The only chance he considered to lie in all the four Powers, Germany, Italy, France, and England, working simultaneously at Vienna and at St. Petersburg.

Nevertheless, despite the character of the Austrian Note, Russia counselled Serbia to meet in as conciliatory a manner as possible the Austrian demands, and, even after Austria had summarily rejected the Servian advances and proceeded with its military preparations, the diplomatic efforts of Russia were persistently directed to avoiding a conflict. On July 27 the Russian Ambassador at Vienna informed the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs that he would do all he could to keep the Servians quiet pending any discussions that might yet take place, and he advised his Government to induce the Servian Government to avoid any conflict as long as possible, and to fall back before an Austrian advance. Meanwhile the Russian Government showed themselves ready to take any diplomatic steps which would settle the crisis. They were anxious to discuss matters directly with Vienna, and they were willing to stand aside and leave the dispute to the four neutral Powers. Vienna blocked the one proposal, Berlin the other. Even at the eleventh hour Russia was ready to negotiate. At an interview which the German Ambassador had with M. Sazonof in the early morning of July 30, the latter made the following offer :

If Austria, recognizing that her conflict with Serbia has assumed character of question of European interest, declares herself ready to eliminate from her ultimatum

points which violate principle of sovereignty of Servia, Russia engages to stop all military preparations.

This formula was subsequently modified, on the suggestion of England, to run as follows :

If Austria will agree to check the advance of her troops on Servian territory ; if recognizing that the dispute between Austria and Servia has assumed a character of European interest, she will allow the Great Powers to look into the matter and determine whether Servia could satisfy the Austro-Hungarian Government without impairing her rights as a sovereign State or her independence, Russia will undertake to maintain her waiting attitude.

On July 31 M. Sazonof telegraphed that the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador had declared the readiness of his Government to discuss the substance of the Austrian ultimatum to Servia. It must therefore be remembered that it was with this declaration before it that the German Government, while avowedly mediating at Vienna, presented its ultimatum at St. Petersburg requiring general demobilization within twelve hours.

With regard to the question of Russian mobilization and what must also be considered with it, the mobilization of the other Powers, it may be long, if ever, before the whole truth is sifted out.

There seems to be a good deal of diplomatic play with the term ' mobilization ', and in studying the documents this question should be attended to. There is a conflict of evidence as to when the several armies mobilized, and it is not clear how much reality is to be attached to the term ' mobilization '. The French Ministry of War stated that the Germans did what was in effect mobilization under another name.¹ Thus, by July 30 the German

¹ Cd. 7467, p. 70.

reserves had been called in and the troops were being massed on the French and Russian frontiers.¹ It was not until August 1, the day on which Germany declared war, that the order for mobilization was published to take effect on August 2.²

The difficulty of dealing with the evidence regarding mobilization being kept in mind, the following points should be remembered :

(a) That Russia began military preparations because it was evident that Austria-Hungary intended to attack Servia.

(b) That on July 26 the German military attaché at St. Petersburg reported as follows :

I deem it certain that mobilization has been ordered for Kiev and Odessa. It is doubtful at Warsaw and Moscow and improbable elsewhere.³

(c) That on the same day the German Ambassador at St. Petersburg was directed to make the following declaration to the Russian Government: ⁴

Preparatory military measures by Russia will force us to counter-measures which must consist in mobilizing the army.

But mobilization means war.

As we know the obligations of France towards Russia, this mobilization would be directed against both Russia and France. . . .

It will be observed that this strong Note from Berlin to St. Petersburg was sent the day after the Servian reply to Austria.

(d) That on the day following (July 27) the Russian Secretary of War gave the German military attaché his

¹ Ibid., p. 58.

² Ibid., p. 72.

³ German White Book, p. 38.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

word of honour that no order to mobilize had yet been issued :

Though general preparations are being made, no reserves were called and no horses mustered. If Austria crossed the Servian frontier such military districts that are directed towards Austria, viz. Kiev, Odessa, Moscow, Kazan, are to be mobilized. Under no circumstances those on the German frontier, Warsaw, Vilna, St. Petersburg.¹

(e) That on July 29 the Chief of the Russian General Staff informed the German military attaché on the authority of the Secretary for War that everything remained as two days ago, and he offered confirmation in writing and gave his word of honour that up to 3 P.M. there had been no mobilization—adding the important statement :

He could not assume a guaranty for future, but he could emphasize that in the fronts directed towards our frontier His Majesty desired no mobilization.

The German attaché informed his Government that he considered the conversation an attempt to mislead.²

(f) That on the same day, the 29th, Russia, on the news of the Austrian invasion of Servia, issued mobilization orders for four districts towards Austria and informed Berlin of this action.³

(g) That on the 30th M. Cambon reported to Sir Edward Grey that Germany was massing troops on the French frontier.⁴

(h) That on the 31st (Russia having offered on the 30th to cease military preparations if Austria would modify her ultimatum to Servia) it was decided at St. Petersburg to issue orders for general mobilization.

¹ German White Book, p. 40.

² Ibid., pp. 10, 11.

³ Cd. 7467, p. 7.

⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

The British Ambassador at St. Petersburg reported as follows :

This decision was taken in consequence of the Report received from the Russian Ambassador in Vienna to the effect that Austria is determined not to yield to intervention of Powers and that she is moving troops against Russia as well as against Servia. Russia has also reason to believe that Germany is making active military preparations, and she cannot afford to let her get a start.¹

(i) That on the same day, July 31, the Czar telegraphed to the Kaiser that 'as long as the negotiations between Austria and Servia continue my troops will undertake no provocative action. I give you my solemn word thereon.'²

At midnight (July 31) the German Ambassador presented the ultimatum requiring Russia to stop every measure of war against Germany and Austria-Hungary within twelve hours. An ultimatum was presented to France allowing eighteen hours. With these steps all hope of a peaceful settlement vanished.

The German White Book asserts that before the declaration of war Russian troops had crossed the frontier—'Thus Russia began the war against us'. So again, a few lines later, it adds, 'on the morning of the next day France opened hostilities'—though there is abundant evidence that the first acts of aggression came from Germany, the French troops having been purposely kept at a distance of 10 kilometres from the frontier. Thus, too, Servia is charged with acts of aggression before the Austrian declaration of war. Little store can be placed on any of these statements, and indeed the counter-evidence seems

¹ Cd. 7467, p. 61.

² German White Book, p. 12

overwhelming. But such points must be left for full investigation—when this becomes possible. What stands out clear is the fact that Germany cannot lightly shift on to Russia the responsibility for the European war. A study of the documents which so far have seen the light will leave with most people the conviction that such a responsibility falls more on the Kaiser and his Government than on any other party. Not unlike the act of the violation of the neutrality of Belgium, the precipitate step of Germany in delivering its ultimatum to Russia was dictated by ideas of military exigencies which in the German mind dominated all other considerations.

III. THE INTERVENTION OF ENGLAND

Thanks to the documents of the White Paper and the full statements in Parliament, it is possible to get a clear view of the line followed by England throughout the crisis. At this time of day no proof is needed that from the outset every effort was made by Sir Edward Grey to reach a basis of settlement. It is admitted on all sides.

The question of greater interest and importance was that of England's position with regard to neutrality. Russia and France urged that England should declare her solidarity with them. But it was clear at the time when these requests were made that such a step would not have been justified, though Germany was repeatedly warned that she must not count on England's neutrality. On July 31 Sir Edward Grey put the matter in a very plain light, and his statement is of great importance in view of later developments :

I said to German Ambassador this morning that if Germany could get any reasonable proposal put forward

which made it clear that Germany and Austria were striving to preserve European peace, and that Russia and France would be unreasonable if they rejected it, I would support it at St. Petersburg and Paris, and go the length of saying that if Russia and France would not accept it His Majesty's Government would have nothing more to do with the consequences ; but, otherwise, I told German Ambassador that if France became involved we should be drawn in.

This statement furnishes the true reply to the question which has been asked, why England did not meet the German Ambassador's request for England to state the terms of her neutrality. The terms were already stated, and equally plain was the warning that otherwise, if France became involved, we should be drawn in. So long as there was any hope of restricting the Austro-Servian dispute, England maintained her neutrality.

But war between the Great Powers raised questions of obligation—first towards France, and second towards Belgium. With regard to France, (1) it was plain that for some time there had been an understanding as to the disposition of the French and British fleets ; (2) there had been the Agadir crisis, in which England openly stood by France ; and (3) there had been the assurance given by the Prime Minister that England was not bound to France, but was free to choose her course.

But Sir Edward Grey's speech of August 3 revealed much more clearly the real position. It was summed up in the interchange of letters between M. Cambon and Sir Edward Grey on November 22 and 23, 1912. Therein three things were stated and agreed to : (1) that the French and English naval and military experts had from ' time to time in recent years ' consulted together ; (2) that such consultations had been understood not to restrict the freedom of either Government to decide at

any future time whether or not to assist the other by armed force ; and (3) that in the event of either Government having grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so what measures they would be prepared to take in common. This most important statement defined and determined England's obligation. It was clearly understood that the consultations, and what was more, the arrangements arising out of such consultations, did not restrict the freedom of either Government. 'The disposition, for instance, of the French and British Fleets respectively at the present moment', wrote Sir Edward Grey to M. Cambon, 'is not based upon an engagement to co-operate in war.' But if an agreement as regards the fleets did not create an obligation, it was something very like it, and presently it was felt to be an obligation. Further, there was an explicit obligation to consult together on certain contingencies named, and clearly such a contingency had now arisen. If in such a contingency England was not going to stand by France when she was threatened, when would she do so ? There was now, if ever, a clear obligation. The Cabinet decided that under the circumstances it was its duty to help France, and it was announced to the French Ambassador that, subject to the approval of Parliament, the British Fleet would give all the protection in its power to the shipping and to the north and west coasts of France. Thus, apart altogether from the question of Belgium, there was a clear obligation facing England with regard to France, and that obligation was honoured.

But if there had been no obligation to France, there

was a clear obligation to Belgium. England, France, and Germany were all guarantors of the neutrality of Belgium. Belgium declared on August 1 her determination to defend her neutrality to the utmost of her power; France stated that she would respect it; Germany would give no undertaking, and violated it. There could only be one course.

Thus it is doubly clear that the decision for England rested on a basis of obligation, and it is important that this position should be plainly understood and firmly held.

The Issues of the War

The issues of this great war cannot yet be seen in their fullness. But this much is already clear, that they are comparable with the magnitude of the war, and that the paramount issue is the question of freedom. The present struggle is first and foremost a struggle of freedom against militarism. Men have seen with anxiety the growing domination in Germany of the military power. It has controlled the life of the nation. Prussia has mastered Germany, and Germany has become a strong armed camp in the centre of Europe—not simply on the defensive but avowedly with aggressive ideas. More than anything else the militarism of Germany is responsible for the race of armaments in Europe. The strong hand of the military Power has been behind all the acts of State and has sought to crush opposition whether in east or west—in Prussian Poland or in Alsace-Lorraine. The first issue in this war is to free Europe from this military menace. It is said that this is to crush one military Power only to raise up another, and that a military France and still more a militant Russia will take the place of Germany.

That is not the belief of those who have engaged in this war. They believe that France is essentially pacific, and that, relieved from the dread which has been for years overhanging their country, the French democracy will show themselves one of the greatest bulwarks of European peace. The call of President Poincaré to rally to the defence of 'France the eternal, the pacific, the resolute', voiced that sentiment which is deep in the hearts of all democracies—the love of peace.

The future of Russia is unknown, but in Russia there are also great internal forces that make for peace ; and once the Slav peoples are free from the rule of the Teuton, there are hopes for peace such as have not been before possible. But with German militarism threatening and thwarting the 'natural rights' of Slavdom peace for Russia was impossible. The great foundation of peace is liberty, and the war to-day is to Englishmen a war of liberty. It is this belief which is at the bottom of that fervid union of men in all parts of the Empire to crush the growing military power of Europe. Great fundamental feelings are those which move large masses of people, and with all its differences of race and feeling the common bond which is uniting men to-day throughout the British Empire is the love of liberty. For what is the outstanding mark of the British Empire ? It is the freedom of the people in it and the security which union gives. Among the self-governing States of the Empire that freedom is complete, and to-day, if any one of those self-governing States determined to end its membership of the Empire, it would be free to go. The Empire is one of freemen who are conscious of that membership of Empire as not only giving them the rights of freemen, but as securing

also for others such rights. Everywhere throughout the Empire this spirit is rising, and it is the highest ambition of those who love the Empire to see all parts of it working forward towards freedom. It is because the Germans have, despite their great efficiency and wide culture, never realized that full sense of political freedom and self-government, best expressed in the common law of England and in its responsible parliamentary and local institutions, that men who have known what such freedom means are determined at all costs not to let the domination of Germany spread.

And closely connected with this is the question of the rights of the smaller nations. The sense of nationality has always been deep in England, and men have felt the strongest sympathy with the small nations of Europe in their struggle for independence and their right to live their own life and make their contribution to civilization. The greatness of a nation is not measured by its size but by its spirit, and one of the desires of England to-day—quickenened powerfully by recent events—is to see the smaller nations of Europe secure from domination by the larger Powers. This war is one for the liberty of the smaller States—Belgium, Holland, Denmark—as well as the States of South-East Europe. Nations must be free to enter into alliance or union, but the end of such alliance or union must be national self-realization. And where, as in the Scandinavian States, in Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland, the democratic spirit is strongly developed, there men have freedom and the desire for peace and culture. Every additional such State is a guarantee of peace, and England sees in such States nations which have with her a great bond of common interest.

There is a third ground which played a large part at

the outbreak of the controversy, and which is no minor issue—the maintenance of international obligations. If a matter such as the neutrality of Belgium is to be treated as ‘a scrap of paper’, there is an end to the security of international agreements. What guarantee can there be that any agreement will be found of value if the plea of ‘necessity’ can be put forward to justify its disregard? It is perfectly true that circumstances may arise which justify the denunciation of an agreement. But if a country ceases to regard an agreement as binding upon it, it must give full and proper notice. So again, if there has to be war, at least some progress has been made by the conventions of civilized nations to conduct war on lines which mitigate as far as may be the sufferings of non-combatants and neutrals. But by German methods on land and sea, both non-combatants and neutrals have suffered. The war must punish the breaking of agreements and establish on a firmer basis than before the sanctity of international regulations.

This war will have many far-reaching consequences, and not only in Europe. It brings with it complex problems of national boundaries, of the rights of States, and of new relationships between races eastern and western. But behind it all the great question is that of securing the future of peace. And to this end the main object in view must be that of requiring disputes between sovereign States to be the subject of arbitration before there is recourse to war, and of securing international action to punish the disregard of arbitration. To prevent a recurrence of the swift appeal to the sword, such as has been seen in the history of the present war, is the first task of the peoples who claim to be democratic.

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