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SLAVERY IN EUROPE

P18-63

A LETTER TO NEUTRAL
GOVERNMENTS FROM THE
ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY

HODDER & STOUGHTON,
LONDON. NEW YORK. TORONTO.
MCMXVII.

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SLAVERY IN EUROPE

A LETTER TO THE REPRESENTATIVES
OF NEUTRAL GOVERNMENTS.

YOUR EXCELLENCY,

The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society came into existence in order to secure complete abolition of every form of slave-trading and slavery. Throughout its history the Society has pursued this task with the help of all political parties in Great Britain and of sympathisers in other countries.

The committee of the Society has watched with deep and growing concern the measures which have recently been taken by the German authorities in Belgium and the northern towns of France in seizing and forcibly deporting from their homes large numbers of the civilian population, both men and women, to Germany for industrial purposes. The Belgian Government, in protesting against this action, declared it to be a mockery of the laws of humanity as well as of the conventional rules of war relative to the power of a belligerent in the occupation

SLAVERY IN EUROPE.

of a country. After careful consideration, the committee is convinced that these acts in Belgium constitute a clear violation of the spirit, if not of the letter, of solemn international treaty obligations in regard to slave owning and slave-trading.

The European Powers have repeatedly pledged themselves to action to put down the slave trade and "the evils of every kind which attend it." As long ago as 1815 the Powers assembled at the Congress of Vienna (including Austria and Prussia) acknowledged the slave trade to be repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality, and asserted the duty and necessity of abolishing it as "a scourge" which had "long desolated Africa, degraded Europe and afflicted humanity." Again, at the Conference at Verona in 1822, the representatives of the Powers announced their intention of preventing "a traffic which the laws of almost every civilised country have already declared to be culpable and illegal, and of punishing with severity those who persist in carrying it on in manifest violation of these laws." In 1885, when acts of slave traffic had become restricted mainly to the coloured inhabitants of tropical and sub-tropical regions, the General Act of Berlin was signed. The signatories, including

SLAVERY IN EUROPE.

the Neutral Powers of Europe, in addition to the Entente and Central Powers (the United States were also party but did not, we believe, ratify the Act), declared their intention to put an end to the slave trade in the part of Africa covered by the Act. All the Powers, belligerent and neutral, were signatory to the General Act of Brussels, of 1890, the avowed object of which was to put an end to the crimes and devastations engendered by the traffic in slaves. The Powers have thus repeatedly asserted their abhorrence of traffic in slaves and their intention to abolish slavery, and it has been their legitimate boast that they have united in taking measures to this end.

The German Government, we understand, defends its acts on the ground that the deportations are in the interests of the people deported. Your Excellency's Government will be familiar with the fact that every system of slave holding in history has been defended upon this plea. The only reason which could be advanced with any shadow of validity would have been that of administrative *corvée*, but we have nowhere seen even this plea of justification. The Society has for years pointed out the abuses which are inseparable from forced labour, even under safeguards, but it has been prepared to admit

SLAVERY IN EUROPE.

justification for administrative *corvée* under certain conditions clearly defined by all the civilised Governments and under the exceptional circumstances of an "act of God." Your Excellency's Government is doubtless aware that administrative *corvée* operates within the following limitations :—

- (a) The labourers must be employed within their own country upon works of public utility to the community, whilst it must be demonstrable that the whole community affected will suffer more from the omission than from the adoption of such measures.
- (b) The labour in which the units are engaged must permit of the maintenance of the domestic life of the labourer.
- (c) Under no circumstances may such forced labour be employed upon industrial work of a profit producing nature.
- (d) That such labour can only be exacted in lieu of taxation and then only under definite administrative ordinance.

Examples of justifiable forced labour may be found in connection with some "act of God," as in the calling out of the population of Holland to maintain the dykes, or that of the inhabitants

SLAVERY IN EUROPE.

of the Nile Valley to prevent the river overflowing its banks. We cannot think that even the German Government would argue that the invasion and destruction of Belgium come within the definition of "an act of God." The abuse in this case is even more flagrant when labour is demanded not only not for the benefit of the community to which the labourers belong, but wholly against its interest and for the sole advantage of an enemy country. Indeed, the utter divergence of these German acts from any likeness to "administrative corvée" is revealed by the fact that the Germans have actually stopped the employment of Belgian labour by the provincial relief bodies—notably in Luxembourg—on works of real public utility.

The Society therefore utters a strenuous protest against such acts of wholesale slavery as grossly opposed to the professions of the Powers expressed in international treaty instruments, and calls upon the Neutral Powers to intervene and to use every available diplomatic means to call Germany to account for such action and secure the restoration of the unfortunate people so enslaved to their homes.

This appeal has been addressed to the following Governments:—The United States of

SLAVERY IN EUROPE.

America, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway,
Spain and Sweden.

We have the honour to be,

Your Excellency's obedient servants,

(Signed)

T. F. V. BUXTON, *President.*

TRAVERS BUXTON, *Secretary.*

JOHN H. HARRIS, *Organising Secretary.*

The Anti-Slavery & Aborigines Protection Society,

Denison House,

296, Vauxhall Bridge Road,

London, S.W.

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