

September 1, 1914

"I am authorized to give an assurance that if the German fleet comes into the Channel or through the North Sea to undertake hostile operations against the French coasts or shipping, the British fleet will give all the protection in its power."

This assurance is, of course, subject to the policy of his Majesty's Government receiving the support of Parliament, and it must not be taken as binding the Government to take any action until the contingency takes place. So I state this to the House, not as a declaration of war on our part, not as entailing immediate aggressive action on our part, but as binding us to take aggressive action should the contingency arise. I understand that the German Government would be prepared, if we would pledge ourselves to neutrality, to agree that its fleet would not attack the northern coasts of France. I only heard that shortly before I came to the House; but it is far too narrow an engagement—(loud Opposition cheers)—and there is a more serious consideration, becoming more serious every hour—there is the question of the neutrality of Belgium. (Cheers.)

Britain and Belgium.

I shall have to put before the House at some length what our position with regard to Belgium is. The governing factor is the treaty of 1839. That is a treaty with a history accumulated since. In 1870 there was war between France and Germany, and the question of the neutrality of Belgium arose. Various things were said, and among other things Prince Bismarck gave an assurance to Belgium, and, confirming verbal assurances, he gave in writing a declaration that the German Confederation and allies would respect the neutrality of Belgium, it being always understood that that neutrality would be respected by the other belligerent Powers. What was our own attitude? The people who laid down the attitude of the British Government were Lord Granville and Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Gladstone said:

"It is not necessary, nor does time permit me to enter into the complicated question of the nature of the treaty, but I am not able to subscribe to the doctrine of those who held in this House that the simple fact of the guarantee is binding upon all those who are parties to it, irrespective of the particular position in which they may find themselves at the time when the occasion for acting upon the guarantee arises. The great authorities to which I have been accustomed to listen never took that rigid and unpracticable view of the guarantee. (Hear, hear.) The circumstance that there is already existing a guarantee in force is of necessity an important factor and weighty element in the case to which we are bound to give full and weighty consideration. There is also this further consideration which we must all feel most deeply, that is the common interest against the unmeasured aggrandizement of any Power whatever.

French and German Answers.

Well, I ask myself now: The treaty is an old treaty. It is one of those treaties which are founded not only in consideration for Belgium, which benefits by it, but for the interests of those who guarantee neutrality to Belgium. (Hear, hear.) Our interests are as strong to-day as in 1870, and we cannot take a more narrow or less serious view of our obligations than the view of the importance of the obligations taken by Mr. Gladstone's Government in 1870. I will read to the House what took place last week upon this subject when mobilization began. I knew that this question was bound to be a most important element in our policy

and an urgent subject for the House of Commons to consider. (Hear, hear.) I telegraphed at the same time on similar terms to Paris and Berlin, saying it was essential for us to know whether French and German Governments respectively were prepared to undertake an engagement respecting the neutrality of Belgium. (Hear, hear.)

These are replies:

"The French Government are resolved to respect the neutrality of Belgium, and it would only be in the event of some other Power violating that neutrality that France might find herself under the necessity to act otherwise."

From the German Government the reply was:—

"The Secretary for Foreign Affairs could not possibly give an answer before consulting the Emperor and the Chancellor."

Sir Edward Goschen said he hoped the answer would not be too long delayed. The German Minister for Foreign Affairs then gave Sir Edward Goschen to understand that he rather doubted whether they could answer at all, as any reply they might give could not fail, in the event of war, to have the undesirable effect of disclosing part of their plan of campaign. (Laughter.) I telegraphed at the same time to Brussels to the Belgian Government, and got the following reply from our Ambassador: "The Minister for Foreign Affairs thanked me for the communication, and replied that Belgium would, to the utmost of her power, maintain neutrality. He begged me to add that the Belgian Government believed they were in a position to defend the neutrality of their country in case of violation." (Cheers.)

Germany's Ultimatum.

Now, there appears the news I have received to-day—though I am not sure how far it has reached men in an accurate form—the news that an ultimatum has been given by Germany to Belgium, the object of which was to offer Belgium friendly relations with Germany on consideration that she would facilitate the passing of German troops through Belgium. (Laughter and cries of "Shame.") Till one has the news absolutely definitely I do not wish to say all that one would say otherwise. We were sounded in the course of last week as to whether if after a war Belgian integrity should be preserved that would have contented us. We replied that we could not bargain away what obligations we have in regard to Belgian neutrality. (Cheers.)

Shortly before I reached the House I am informed that the following telegram has been received from the King of Belgium by our King George: "Remembering the numerous proofs of your Majesty's friendship and that of your predecessor and the friendly attitude of England in 1870, and the proof of friendship which she has just given us again, I make a supreme appeal for the diplomatic intervention of your Majesty's Government to safeguard the integrity of Belgium." (Cheers.)

Diplomatic Intervention.

But the diplomatic intervention took place last week on our part. What can diplomatic intervention do now? (Loud cheers.) We have a great and vital interest in the independence of Belgium. If Belgium is compelled to submit to allow her neutrality to be violated the situation is clear. Even if by agreement she admitted the violation of her neutrality it is clear she could only do so under duress. These smaller