

Speech Delivered by The Rt. Hon. David Lloyd George, M. P.

At the Queen Hall, London, on September 19, 1914

My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen—I have come here this afternoon to talk to my fellow countrymen about this great war and the part that we ought to take in it.

Why Our National Honour is Involved

There is no man in this room who has always regarded the prospect of engaging in a great war with greater reluctance and with greater repugnance than I have done throughout the whole of my political life. There is no man either inside or outside of this room more convinced that we could not have avoided it without national dishonour. I am fully alive to the fact that every nation who has ever engaged in any war has always loved the sacred name of honour. Many a crime has been committed in its name; there are some being committed now. All the same, national honour is a reality, and any nation that disregards it is doomed. Why is our honour involved in this war? Because, in the first instance, we are bound by honourable obligations to defend the independence—the liberty—the integrity of a small neighbour that has always lived peacefully. She could not have compelled us; she was weak; but the man who declines to discharge his duty because his creditor is too poor to enforce it is a blackguard. We entered into a treaty—a solemn treaty—two treaties—to defend Belgium and her integrity. Our signatures are attached to the documents. Our signatures do not stand alone there; this country was not the only country that undertook to defend the integrity of Belgium. Russia, France, Austria, Prussia—they are all there. Why are Austria and Prussia not performing the obligations of their bond? It is suggested that when we quote this treaty it is purely an excuse on our part—it is our low craft and cunning to cloak our jealousy of a superior civilization—that we are attempting to destroy. Our answer is the action we took in 1870. What was that? Mr. Gladstone was then Prime Minister. Lord Granville, I think, was then Foreign Secretary. I have never heard it laid to their charge that they were ever Jingoes.

France and Belgium in 1870

What did they do in 1870? That treaty bound us then. We called upon the belligerent Powers to respect it. We called upon France, and we called upon Germany. At that time, bear in mind, the greatest danger to Belgium came from France and not from Germany. We intervened to protect Belgium against France, exactly as we are doing now to protect her against Germany. We proceeded in exactly the same way. We invited both the belligerent Powers to state that they had no intention of violating Belgian territory. What was the answer given to Bismarck? He said it was superfluous to ask Prussia such a question in view of the treaties in force. France gave a similar answer. We received at that time the thanks of the Belgian people for our intervention in a very remarkable document. It is a document addressed by the municipality of Brussels to Queen Victoria after that intervention and it reads:—

"The great and noble people over whose destinies you preside has just given a further proof of its benevolent sentiments towards our country. . . . The voice of the English nation has been heard above the din of arms, and it has asserted the principles of justice and right. Next to the unalterable attachment of the Belgian people to their independence, the strongest sentiment which fills their hearts is that of an imperishable gratitude."

That was 1870. Mark what followed. Three or four days after that document of thanks, a French army was wedged up against the Belgian frontier, every means of escape shut out by a ring of flame from Prussian cannon. There was one way of escape. What was that? Violating the neutrality of Belgium. What did they do? The French on that occasion preferred ruin and humiliation to the breaking of their bond. The French Emperor, the French Marshals, 100,000 gallant Frenchmen in arms, preferred to be carried captive to the strange land of their enemies, rather than dishonour the name of their country. It was the last French army in the field. Had they violated Belgian neutrality, the whole history of that war would have been changed, and yet, when it was the interest of France to break the treaty then, she did not do it.

"A Scrap of Paper"

It is the interest of Prussia to-day to break the treaty, and she has done it. She avows it with cynical contempt for every principle of justice. She says: "Treaties only bind you when it is your interest to keep them." "What is a treaty?" says the German

Chancellor, "A scrap of paper." Have you any five pound notes about you? I am not calling for them. Have you any of those neat little Treasury one pound notes? If you have, burn them; they are only scraps of paper. What are they made of? Rags. What are they worth? The whole credit of the British Empire. Scraps of paper! I have been dealing with scraps of paper within the last month. One suddenly found the commerce of the world coming to a standstill. The machine had stopped. Why? I will tell you. We discovered—many of us for the first time, for I do not pretend that I do not know much more about the machinery of commerce to-day than I did six weeks ago, and there are many others like me—we discovered that the machinery of commerce was moved by bills of exchange. I have seen some of them—wretched, crinkled, scrawled over, blotched, frowsy, and yet those wretched little scraps of paper move great ships laden with thousands of tons of precious cargo from one end of the world to the other. What is the motive power behind them? The honour of commercial men. Treaties are the currency of international statesmanship. Let us be fair; German merchants, German traders, have the reputation of being as upright and straightforward as any traders in the world—but if the currency of German commerce is to be debased to the level of that of her statesmanship, no trader from Shanghai to Valparaiso will ever look at a German signature again. This doctrine of the scrap of paper, this doctrine which is proclaimed by Bernhardt, that treaties only bind a nation as long as it is to its interest, goes under the root of all public law. It is the straight road to barbarism. It is as if you were to remove the Magnetic Pole because it was in the way of a German cruiser. The whole navigation of the sea would become dangerous, difficult and impossible; and the whole machinery of civilization will break down if this doctrine wins in this war. We are fighting against barbarism—and there is only one way of putting it right. If there are nations that say they will only respect treaties when it is to their interest to do so, we must make it to their interest to do so for the future.

Germany's Perjury

What is their defence? Consider the interview which took place between our Ambassador and the great German officials. When their attention was called to this treaty to which they were parties, they said: "We cannot help that. Rapidity of action is the great German asset." There is a greater asset for a nation than rapidity of action, and that is honest dealing. What are Germany's excuses? She says Belgium was plotting against her; Belgium was engaged in a conspiracy with Britain and France to attack her. Not merely is it not true, but Germany knows it is not true. What is her other excuse? That France meant to invade Germany through Belgium. That is absolutely untrue. France offered Belgium five army corps to defend her if she were attacked. Belgium said: "I do not require them; I have the word of the Kaiser. Shall Caesar send a lie?" All these tales about conspiracy have been vamped up since. A great nation ought to be ashamed to behave like a fraudulent bankrupt, perverting its way through its obligations. What she says is not true. She has deliberately broken this treaty, and we were in honour bound to stand by it.

Belgium's "Crime"

Belgium has been treated brutally. How brutally we shall not yet know. We already know too much. But what had she done? Had she sent an ultimatum to Germany? Had she challenged Germany? Was she preparing to make war on Germany? Had she inflicted any wrong upon Germany which the Kaiser was bound to redress? She was one of the most inoffending countries in Europe. There she was—peaceable, industrious, thrifty, hardworking, giving offence to no one. And her cornfields have been trampled, her villages have been burned, her art treasures have been destroyed, her men have been slaughtered—yea, and her women and children too. Hundreds and thousands of her people, their neat, comfortable little homes burnt to the dust, are wandering homeless in their own land. What was their crime? Their crime was that they trusted to the word of a Prussian King. I do not know what the Kaiser hopes to achieve by this war. I have a shrewd idea what he will get; but one thing he has made certain, and that is that no nation will ever commit that crime again.

"The Right to Defend its Homes"

I am not going to enter into details of outrages. Many of them are untrue, and always are in a war. War

is a grim, ghastly business at best or at worst—and I am not going to say that all that has been said in the way of outrages must necessarily be true. I will go beyond that, and I will say that if you turn two millions of men—forced, conscript, compelled, driven—into the field, you will always get amongst them a certain number who will do things that the nation to which they belong would be ashamed of. I am not depending on these tales. It is enough for me to have the story which Germans themselves avow, admit, defend and proclaim—the burning and massacring, the shooting down of harmless people. Why? Because, according to the Germans, these people fired on German soldiers. What business had German soldiers there at all? Belgium was acting in pursuance of the most sacred right, the right to defend its homes. But they were not in uniform when they fired! If a burglar broke into the Kaiser's Palace at Potsdam, destroyed his furniture, killed his servants, ruined his art treasures—especially those he has made himself—and burned the precious manuscripts of his speeches, do you think he would wait until he got into uniform before he shot him down? They were dealing with those who had broken into their household. But the perfidy of the Germans has already failed. They entered Belgium to save time. The time has gone. They have not gained time, but they have lost their good name.

The Case of Serbia

But Belgium is not the only little nation that has been attacked in this war, and I make no excuse for referring to the case of the other little nation, the case of Serbia. The history of Serbia is not unblotted. Whose his story, in the category of nations is unblotted? The first nation that is without sin, let her cast a stone at Serbia. She was a nation trained in a horrible school, but she won her freedom with a tenacious valour, and she has maintained it by the same courage. If any Serbians were mixed up in the assassination of the Grand Duke, they ought to be punished. Serbia admits that. The Serbian Government had nothing to do with it. Not even Austria claims that. The Serbian Prime Minister is one of the most capable and honored men in Europe. Serbia was willing to punish any one of her subjects who had been proved to have any complicity in that assassination. What more could you expect? What were the Austrian demands? Serbia sympathized with her fellow-countrymen in Bosnia—that was one of her crimes. She must do no more. Her newspapers were saying nasty things about Austria; they must do so no longer. That is the German spirit; you had it in Zuber. How dare you criticize a Prussian official?—and if you laugh, it is a capital offense—the colonel in Zuber threatened to shoot if it was repeated. In the same way the Serbian newspapers must not criticize Austria. I wonder who would have happened if we had not taken the same line about German newspapers. Serbia said: "Very well, we will give orders to the newspapers that they must in future criticize neither Austria nor Hungary, nor anything that is theirs." Who can doubt the valor of Serbia when she undertook to tackle her newspaper editors? She promised not to sympathize with Bosnia; she promised to write no critical articles about Austria; she would have no public meetings in which anything unkind was said about Austria.

"Serbia Faced the Situation with Dignity." But that was not enough. She must dismiss from her army the officers whom Austria should subsequently name. These officers had just emerged from a war where they had added lustre to the Serbian arms; they were gallant, brave and efficient. I wonder whether it was their guilt or their efficiency that prompted Austria's action! But, mark you, the officers were not named; Serbia was to undertake in advance to dismiss them from her army, the names to be sent in subsequently. Can you name a country in the world that would have stood that? Supposing Austria or Germany had issued an ultimatum of that kind to this country, saying "You must dismiss from your Army—and from your navy all those officers whom we shall subsequently name." Well I think I could name them now. Lord Kitchen would go. Sir John French would be sent away; General Smith-Dorrien would go, and I am sure that Sir John Jellicoe would have to go. And there is another gallant old warrior who would go—Lord Roberts. It was a difficult situation for a small country. Here was a demand made upon her by a great military Power that could have put half-a-dozen men in the field for every one of Serbia's men, and that Power was supported by the greatest military Power in the world. How did Serbia behave? It is not what happens in life to you that matters; it is the way in which you face it—and Serbia faced the situation with dignity. She said to Austria: "If any officers of mine have been guilty, and are proved to be guilty, I will dismiss them." Austria said: "That is not

good enough for me." It was not at all that she was after, but capacity.

Russia's Turn

Then came Russia's turn. Russia has a special regard for Serbia; she has a special interest in Serbia. Russians have shed their blood for Serbian independence many a time, for Serbia is a member of Russia's family and she cannot see Serbia maltreated. Austria knew that Germany knew it, and she turned round to Russia, and said: "I insist that you shall stand by with you arms folded whilst Austria is strangling your little brother to death." What answer did the Russian Slav give? He gave the only answer that becomes a man. He turned to Austria, and said: "You lay hands on that little fellow, and I will tear your ramshackle Empire limb from limb." And he is doing it!

The Little Nations

That is the story of two little nations. The world owes much to little nations and to little men! This theory of bigness, this theory that you must have a big empire, and a big nation, and a big man—well, long legs have their advantage in a retreat. The Kaiser's ancestor chose his warriors for their height, and that tradition has become a policy in Germany. Germany applies that ideal to nations, and will only allow 6-foot-2 nations to stand in the ranks. But ah! the world owes much to the little 5-foot-5 nations. The greatest art in the world was the work of little nations; the most enduring literature of the world came from little nations; the greatest literature of England came when she was a nation of the size of Belgium fighting a great Empire. The heroic deeds that thrill humanity through generations were the deeds of little nations fighting for their freedom. Yes, and the salvation of mankind came through a little nation. God has chosen little nations as the vessels by which He carries His choicest wines to the lips of humanity, to rejoice their hearts, to exalt their vision, to stimulate and strengthen their faith; and if we had stood by when two little nations were being crushed and broken by the brutal hands of barbarism, our shame would have rung down the everlasting ages.

"The Test of Our Faith"

But Germany insists that this is an attack by a lower civilization upon a higher one. As a matter of fact, the attack was begun by the civilization which calls itself the higher one. I am no apologist for Russia; she has perpetrated deeds of which I have no doubt her best sons are ashamed. What Empire has not? But Germany is the last empire to point the finger of reproach at Russia. Russia has made sacrifices for freedom—great sacrifices. Do you remember the cry of Bulgaria when she was torn by the most insensate tyranny that Europe had ever seen? Who listened to that cry? The only answer of the higher civilization was that the liberty of Bulgarian peasants was not worth the life of a single Pomeranian grenadier. But the "made barbarians of the North" sent their sons by the thousand to die for Bulgarian freedom. What about England? Go to Greece, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France—in all those lands I could point out places where the sons of Britain have died for the freedom of those peoples. France has made sacrifices for the freedom of other lands than her own. Can you name a single country in the world for the freedom of which modern Prussia has ever sacrificed a single life? ("No.") By the test of our faith, the highest standard of civilization is the readiness to sacrifice for others.

German "Civilization"

I will not say a single word in disparagement of the German people. They are a great people, and have great qualities of head and hand and heart. I believe, in spite of recent events, that there is as great a store of kindness in the German peasant as in any peasant in the world; but he has been drilled in a false idea of civilization. It is efficient, it is capable; but it is a hard civilization. It is a selfish civilization; it is a material civilization. They cannot comprehend the action of Britain at the present moment; they say so. They

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