

The War Documents

PART 2.

It had been agreed by treaty that Belgium and Switzerland be made neutral, but I am not disposed to attach very much importance to such engagements, for the history of the world shows when a quarrel arises, and a nation makes war, and thinks it advantageous to traverse with its army such neutral territory, the declarations of neutrality are not apt to be very religiously respected.

Lord Palmerston (a signatory of the Belgian Treaty of 1839), Hansard, June 8, 1855. See "Economic Causes of War," p. 53).

WHETHER or not the British Cabinet as a whole was fully advised of its Foreign Office commitments during the period we have been considering is a matter that is still being discussed in some quarters. The evidence, however, is against any such notion. Indeed, affairs in the Near East reported in the press just a week ago indicate that in the British House of Commons and House of Lords Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Chamberlain and Lord Birkenhead have denied ever having seen a letter sent by the late Greek Premier last February to Lord Curzon, Minister for Foreign affairs, in which the uncertain nature of the foothold of the Greek Armies in Asia Minor was stated. Curzon had replied, encouraging the Greek armies to hold on. George, Chamberlain and Birkenhead deny that they were consulted by Curzon and place the responsibility for any advices tendered the Greeks on the Foreign Office. So it would seem to be still a practice to hold such matters as Foreign affairs secret, and to withhold information from responsible members of the Cabinet itself. At any rate, Sir E. Grey on 3rd Aug. 1914 spoke somewhat in an offhand way of "the conversations" that had taken place between his department and the French Foreign Office, which "conversations" were later to appear as actual agreements. The Anglo-French agreements being in existence, Sazonov, Russian Minister of Foreign affairs, in pursuit of the "encircling offensive" visited London in Sept. 1912 and the Russian Imperial archives reveal his report to the Czar of the outcome:

After I had confidentially initiated Grey into the contents of our Naval agreement with France, and pointed to the fact that according to this settled compact, the French Fleet would be concerned with the safeguarding of our interests at the Southern scene of war, in that it would prevent the Austrian Fleet from breaking through into the Black Sea, I asked the Secretary of State whether England on her side would not render us a similar service in the North by diverting the German squadron from our coast in the Baltic? Without hesitation Grey stated that, should the conditions under discussion arise, England would stake everything in order to inflict the most serious blow to German Power. In the competent departments the question of war operations in the Baltic has already been discussed, but it appears that the English Fleet, which would certainly not have much difficulty in reaching the Baltic, would be exposed to a serious danger there, as it would be shut up as in a mouse-trap owing to Germany having the possibility of laying her hands on Denmark, and blocking the exit through the Baltic. England would probably have to confine her operations to the North Sea.

Arising out of this, Grey, upon his own initiative, corroborated what I already knew from Poincare, the existence of an agreement between France and Great Britain, according to which England undertook, in case of a war with Germany, not only to come to the assistance of France on the sea, but also on the continent, by landing troops.

Russia's interest lay directly in the hope of dominating Constantinople and the Straits, and the documents of the war period reveal clearly her interest in using the Balkan League toward that end. The question of the Straits had not approached a definite settlement among the Allies until March 1915 when the World War was in the first year of its progress, but already in October 12th, 1911, Izvolski, Russian Ambassador at Paris sent this telegram to Neratov, Russian Foreign Minister.

If we really decide to raise at once the question of the Straits, it is very important that steps should be taken

to insure a good press. Yet in this respect I lack the principle weapon, for my insistence that I be provided with special funds for the press have had no result. . . . An instance of the advantage of spending money on the press here is furnished by the Tripolitan affair. I know that Tittoni worked up the principal French papers very thoroughly and with a very generous hand. The results are evident.

Izvolski, in previous despatches to Neratov, had written of his success in "influencing" the "Matin" and the "Journal des Debats," and his hopes concerning Tardieu's "Temps,"—that he might succeed, by monetary persuasion, to secure the presentation of a pro-Russian viewpoint in the French press. Sazonov succeeded Neratov as Russian Foreign Minister, and in May, 1912 Izvolski, referring to some press excitement over the recall of the pacifist Georges Louis, French Ambassador to St. Petersburg, sent him a message in which he said:

This renders even more serious the fact that it is impossible for me to bring sufficient influence to bear upon the lesser papers which live upon blackmail and "gratifications."

This press "friendliness" was promoted in order to prompt French public opinion toward a Franco-Russian unity policy. In the meantime, in August 1912 Sazonov reported to the Czar that he had concluded a naval agreement with Poincare, French President and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Incidentally his letter mentions that Poincare indicated the desire of the French general staff that the carrying capacity of the Russian railways running toward the western frontier should be increased by double tracking the lines. In this letter to the Czar Sazonov reports:

The relations between France and England formed the subject of the most candid exchange of views between M. Poincare and myself. Having pointed out that these relations have lately, under the influence of the aggressive policy towards France on the part of Germany, assumed the character of especial closeness, the French Prime Minister confided to me that although no written agreement existed between France and England nevertheless both the military and the naval general staffs of both countries maintain with each other a close contact and continually communicate to each other with complete frankness all information that may interest either of them. This constant interchange of views had as its consequence the conclusion between the French and the English governments of a verbal agreement by virtue of which England stated her readiness, in the event of an attack on the part of Germany, to give assistance to France with both her naval and her military forces. On land England promised to help France by sending over to the Belgian frontier an army of 100,000 men in order to resist the German invasion of France through Belgium which is anticipated by the French general staff.

Lord Haldane had apparently brought his task to a successful conclusion. The military and naval agreements were reached and the plans perfected which he had undertaken to formulate. In the event of an anticipated clash between Russia and Austria, France would enter a war in alliance with Russia provided Germany entered in alliance with Austria. Britain would enter a war in alliance with France and Russia in the event of German intervention in alliance with Austria. So it worked out. Izvolski advised Sazonov, Dec. 18, 1912:

According to the information received here (Paris) Austria is at present carrying out the complete mobilization of ten corps, a part of which is ostensibly arrayed against Russia. This mobilization weighs heavily upon the Austrian budget, for the financial situation is already difficult, and a decisive step by the Austrian Cabinet may be expected any day. This step, it is believed here, may provoke the intervention of Russia, which in turn would automatically and inevitably bring in first Germany and then France. The French government calmly recognizes this possibility, and has firmly decided to fulfil its obligations as an ally. It has taken all the necessary measures: the mobilization on the eastern front has been checked up, supplies are ready, etc. . . . (Here follow more references to the process of influencing the French press).

By May, 1913, Poincare was writing to the Czar urging again the need "of hastening the construction of certain railroad lines upon the western (German) frontier of the (Russian) empire. The great military effort which the French government proposes to make in order to maintain the equilibrium of European forces renders particularly urgent today the correlative measures upon the necessity of which the general staffs of the two countries have agreed," etc. No wonder Izvolski wrote to Sazonov, Jan. 16, 1913, when Poincare's election as President of France was still uncertain: "If—may God not will it—Poincare should be beaten, it would be a catastrophe for us."

Poincare was safely elected. As Baron Guillaume, Belgian Minister at Paris wrote to his chief at the Belgian Foreign office, Feb. 14, 1913:

The new President of the Republic has in France today such a popularity as none of his predecessors experienced. . . . This popularity is made of diverse elements; his election was skilfully prepared.

It was following Poincare's election that Delcasse replaced Georges Louis, French Ambassador to St. Petersburg, a course which in 1912 Izvolski said in the interest of Franco-Russian relations would be necessary sooner or later. War was even then considered an immediate possibility. The campaign in favor of the three years' military service law was raging in France (and which, incidentally, was supported by the Northcliffe press in England). Germany had raised her army estimates. Russia, it is agreed on all hands, was even then conducting trial mobilizations and Guillaume was informing the Belgian Foreign office that France was favorable to war. Already, while Poincare was French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Izvolski was writing to Sazonov:

M. Poincare has not ceased, on every occasion, to invite the London Cabinet to confidential conversations, with the object of clearing up the position which would be adopted by England in the event of a general European conflict. On the British side no decision has been taken hitherto. The London Cabinet invariably replies that this will depend upon circumstances, and that the question of peace or war will be decided by public opinion. On the other hand, not only has the examination of all eventualities which may present themselves not been interrupted between the French and British Headquarters Staffs, but the existing Military and Naval Agreements have quite recently undergone a still greater development, so that at the present moment the Anglo-French military convention is as settled and complete as the Franco-Russian convention; the only difference consists in the fact that the former bear the signature of the Chiefs of the two Headquarters Staffs, and, on this account are, so to speak, not obligatory upon the Government. These last few days General Wilson, the English Chief-of-Staff, has been in France, in the most rigorous secrecy, and, on this occasion, various complementary details have been elaborated; moreover, apparently for the first time, it is not only military men who participated in this work, but also other representatives of the French Government.

Yet on August 4, 1914, before an extraordinary session of the French Chamber, Poincare opened his speech by declaring: "Gentlemen, France has just been the object of a violent and premeditated attack." Nobody need be astonished at the contradictions manifested in the official utterances at one time and another. For instance, referring to Lord Haldane's visit to Berlin, February 1912, Izvolski wrote to Sazonov:

From my conversation with Poincare and Paleologue, (French Ambassador to Russia) I have been able to learn in the most confidential way that in the course of the famous visit of Lord Haldane, to Berlin, in February of this year, Germany made a quite concrete proposal to England to the effect that the London Cabinet should undertake in writing to maintain neutrality in the event of Germany finding herself involved in a war not provoked on the German side. . . . the London Cabinet rejected the German proposal, which caused great umbrage in Berlin.