

## THE BELGIAN PARALLEL

A document that moved the whole world was published five years ago by a Commission appointed by Mr. Asquith's Government to report on the German atrocities in Belgium (says the *London Nation*). Lord Bryce was chairman, and the committee included Sir Frederick Pollock, Sir Edward Clarke, Sir Alfred Hopkinson, Mr. Harold Cox, and Mr. Herbert Fisher, who is now a Minister and a member of the Committee of the Cabinet, which orders reprisals in Ireland. These were the early days of the war, and the indictment of Germany revealed to a horrified world what militarism really means, and the reckless thoroughness with which it sacrifices every human right to military success. It was widely read in all countries, in England with burning indignation. But, like all such literature, it was soon pushed out of most people's minds by the events of the war. Those who read it now will be startled to find how exact is the parallel between Germany's reasoning in Belgium and ours in Ireland.

Take this general verdict from the Report of that Commission: "An invading army may be entitled to shoot at sight a civilian caught redhanded, or anyone who, though not caught redhanded, is proved guilty on inquiry. But this was not the practice followed by the German troops. They do not seem to have made any inquiry. They seized the civilians of the village indiscriminately, and killed them, or such as they selected from among them, without the least regard to guilt or innocence."

In how many towns and villages of Ireland have men or boys been shot out of hand on this same principle? The three men murdered at Cork last October, to take an example, were chosen not because they had been associated with any crime, but because they were representative Sinn Feiners. The Commissioners, after turning over various explanations of the conduct of the German troops, hit upon a sentence which exactly describes the policy defended and expounded by Sir Hamar Greenwood in his speeches to the House of Commons and in the columns of his paper, *The Weekly Summary*.

"The explanation seems to be that these excesses were committed—in some cases ordered, in others allowed—on a system and in pursuance of a set purpose. That purpose was to strike terror into the civil population and dishearten the Belgian troops, so as to crush down resistance and extinguish the very spirit of self-defence."

Pursuing these reflections the Commissioners discuss the effect of the German spirit and doctrine of Imperialism:—

"In the minds of Prussian officers war seems to have become a sort of sacred mission, one of the highest functions of the omnipotent State, which is itself as much an Army as a State. Ordinary morality and the ordinary sentiment of pity vanish in its presence, superseded by a new standard which justifies to the soldier every means that can conduce to success, however shocking to a natural sense of justice and humanity, however revolting to his own feelings."

What better description could be written of the shooting of Mr. Gwynn, or the girl killed in the Dublin streets, or of the speeches in which Hamar Greenwood told the House of Commons that the right way to pacify Ireland was not to control the armed servants of the Crown, but to leave the "Black-and-Tans" to use their own methods.

In detail, almost everything that is done in Ireland was blamed by the Commission in reporting on Belgium. The Commissioners report, for example, that a woman was shot by some German soldiers as she was walking home, and for no apparent reason. Doubtless the Reichstag would have been told, as the House of Commons was told by Sir Hamar Greenwood, that the soldiers were in the habit of shooting as they moved about in case there might be an ambush in the neighborhood. The practice of sending handcuffed men in lorries as hostages, which we have now adopted as a regular system, was sharply condemned by Mr. Fisher and his colleagues when the Germans began to use civilians or prisoners as "screens."

"Setting aside these doubtful cases, there remains evidence which satisfies us that on so many occasions as to justify its being described as a practice, the German sol-

diers, under the eyes and by the direction of their officers, were guilty of this practice."

In the case of incendiarism, the parallel is remarkably close. In Ireland houses have been burned in towns and villages by the hundred on the excuse that somebody has been shot in the neighborhood. Turn now to Belgium:—

"At Morlanwitz . . . the Germans burnt the Hotel de Ville and 62 houses. The usual accusation of firing by civilians was made."

Here is an incident that again precisely recalls Irish experiences:—

"The Liège Fire Brigade was turned out, but was not allowed to extinguish the fire."

Of the Irish reprisals, which have taken the form of killing men or boys because their sons or brothers are in the Republican Army, we get examples in the Report:—

"This witness asked a German officer why her husband had been shot, and he told her that it was because her two sons had been in the Civil Guard and had shot at the Germans."

The Irish newspapers supply similar cases in the last two months.

It is now an offence punishable with death to have arms in your possession in Ireland (unless you belong to the Orange rioters). The Commission noted that in a house where arms were found by the Germans, "the inhabitants, without exception, were brought out and shot." The Commissioners cite a passage from the diary of a German soldier describing the shooting of "suspicious civilians." They remark about this incident: "Hoffman does not indicate of what offence these civilians were guilty. . . . They were 'suspicious,' and that was enough." It is certainly quite enough in Ireland.

Nobody pretends that the scale of atrocities in the two cases is the same. But nobody can read the Bryce Report without seeing that we have adopted both the measures and the spirit described and discussed in its pages. Ministers judge everything by its bearing on the success of a policy of repression; to this they have subordinated every instinct of pity and all feeling for justice and English tradition. The *Irish Independent* recalls some striking passages from Mr. Lloyd George's speeches on the Boer War. When our Government took to farm-burning, Mr. Lloyd George said:

"It is a war, not against men, but against women and children. You may have destroyed the conventions of 1881 and 1884, you may have wiped out the humiliation attached to the memory of Majuba; but you have substituted for it a proclamation which turned women and children in the depth of winter from their own homes into the African desert."—(July 25, 1901.)

Of the general policy of reprisals, he said:—

"What justice was there in punishing one man for offences committed by others over whom he had no control?"—(December, 1900.)

"You do not punish De Wet because you cannot catch him, but you burn the farms possibly occupied by women and children of all those people who have had nothing to do with the raid and the cutting of the railways. I do not think it is calculated to impress the inhabitants of these two States with a clear sense of the even-handed justice they are likely to have at our hands."—(December 15, 1900.)

Mr. Lloyd George was not then Prime Minister; he was a Welshman who had not grown out of the emotions and sympathies that made a son of a people of farmers feel the wrongs of the Boer women as his own. The humanity of his earlier days was the best rebuke to the brutal policy with which his name is now associated in one of the most disfiguring chapters in the history of our treatment of Ireland. We believe at the time that his protest was right in 1900; we believe it no less strongly today. But the historian will find it easier to excuse the atrocities he blamed than the atrocities he commits. The world has passed through a more terrible lesson in the consequences of Imperialism than any recorded by history. On the morrow of that experience we have drifted into a war. For in our war on the Irish people, which is the consequence of racial pride, we are copying the spirit which Lord Bryce and his colleagues described as the spirit of Prussia. We represent that spirit in Ireland, and nothing else; it is because we represent that spirit that we are imitating the practices in which it found expression

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