

New York Tribune
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“They Can’t Do That!”

The Attitude of the Neutrals Toward Germany

To the Editor of the Tribune.

Sir: In the “Deep Purple” one of the characters, indignant at some police outrage, exclaims, “But they can’t do that!” and another answers, “That’s what your lawyer tells you when you’re in jail.”

Long ago, when the Germans invaded neutral Belgium, burned Louvain, shot the citizens and, with threats of hanging the hostages they had taken, levied ransom, the whole world exclaimed: “But they can’t do that! It’s against the declaration of this and the treaty of that and the conference of the other place; it’s against international law and the usages of polite society and civilized peoples. they can’t do it!”

In answer the Germans shelled the cathedral at Rheims, from which Red Cross flag were flying, incidentally killing some of their own wounded.

“But they can’t fire on sacred edifices,” the civilized world explained, “nor on the Red Cross!” And the pope told them they could not do that, and architects, historians and art lovers over all the world told them.

So the Germans sent airships over Paris and her monuments, and dropped a bomb on a lawyer and a little girl. The bomb tore off the leg of the little girl. When in the hospital she became conscious she said “Don’t tell my mother how serious it is!” They sent zeppelins over Pont-a-Mousson and Nancy, killing more children, and then with that thoroughness for which their general staff is celebrated, and that there might not be more children to confront them later, at Remiremont dropped a bomb on the maternity hospital.

And the civilized world said: “But you agreed not to drop bombs on unfortified places. So you can’t do that.”

And in answer the Germans sent warships to bombard the watering place of Scarborough. At Scarborough the only forts are those the children build in the sand. It is as though they had shelled Atlantic City or Long Branch. In one group in a playground they killed fourteen schoolboys, and elsewhere several babies. It was a record bag. But the world was very indignant and pointed out that they could not do that, and by international law and treaties and scraps of paper proved they could not do that.

But this indignation was not expressed to Germany.

So, in consequence, Germany sent submarines into neutral waters to destroy neutral merchant ships. And again, among themselves, the neutral powers spoke with indignation. “They can’t do that!” they exclaimed. “They cannot sink non-combatant captains and stokers and innocent passengers!”

And in answer, on the 18th and 20th of this month Germany sank three neutral merchant ships. Out of the water a periscope raised its head, and while in terror the clumsy freight steamer reversed her engines, the torpedo tore into her bowels. The submarine sank to rise another day, and the neutral steamer also sank, but not to rise again.

The crime of the neutral powers and the civilized peoples is that at the first outrage perpetrated by Germany they remained silent. The individual protested. From platforms, in editorials, in Congress, he made himself heard. But no individual, no matter how just may be his indignation, can communicate that indignation to the German Emperor. His government must do that for him. And as no government had the courage to protest, to speak sharply, to brandish the "big stick," Germany exclaimed: "We have a free hand!" and from bad hastened to worse. From the moment she broke her word and entered the neutral territory of Belgium, the rights of every neutral were in jeopardy. The man who is false to one will be false to another. But the neutral powers could not see that. Belgium seemed so far away. And in the United States we were so entirely surrounded by water, so comfortably safe. So, although as joint signers of the agreement made at The Hague, it was our privilege and duty to protest, we said nothing. And, emboldened by the silence, Germany broke, one after another, all the rules of war. All war is wasteful, unintelligent, indecent. But steadily, for several hundred years, the effort has been made to make it less inhuman, to limit the death and suffering it entails to the actual combatants. The effort has been made to get away from the days of the Huns, who sacked, looted and raped; from the days of our Indians, who burned villages; from the ethics of Raisuli, the Moorish bandit, and the Mexican cattle thieves, who with threats of death held up non-combatants for money. But to the days of these outrages Germany has returned. Instead of the neutrals setting the standard for war, they allowed Germany to set it. They have allowed her to rag it back eight hundred years. And guilty as she is, I cannot see that those who stood by while Belgium was desolated, and children and women were killed by bombs, and mines were spread in the open sea that belonged to all of them, are not equally guilty.

If you go to a fight at the Garden and one of the men strikes below the belt you will hear from several thousand spectators. The spectator is in no danger. No one is hitting him. He is comfortably, safely seated far from the combat, smoking a cigar. But still he yells "Foul!" and threatens the referee. Why? Because he is in danger? No, because he desires fair play and insists that the rules of the game be respected.

If, at the start of this war, our government and those of South America, Italy, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland and Switzerland had jointly protested to Germany against the outrages she committed, against her breaking all the rules of civilized warfare, they might not only have prevented the destruction of lives and of cities, but even might have brought the war to a close.

To a committee who came to discuss our attitude toward the nations at war President Wilson used these words:

"Think of America first!"

Spoken by Holland or Switzerland or any neutral nation that is small and weak, that sentiment might be understood. Coming from a great and powerful nation of a hundred millions, it is most unpleasant. Nor do I believe the American people are as selfish as that. I also like to think of America first, and had she made protests against the outrages of Germany in behalf of the Allies as affronts to humanity and civilization, when this war is over she would have stood first. But now it is too late.

When the burglars are finally driven away the man who thought of himself first and crawled under the bed is not given much consideration.