

1

1919 Report of the Commission on the Responsibility of the War, and on Their Punishment (excerpts)

Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties Report Presented to the Preliminary Peace Conference

March 29, 1919

...

The Commission was charged to inquire into and report upon the following points:

1. The responsibility of the authors of the war.
2. The facts as to breaches of the laws and customs of war committed by the forces of the German Empire and their Allies, on land, on sea, and in the air during the present war.
3. The degree of responsibility for these offences attaching to particular members of the enemy forces, including members of the General Staffs, and other individuals, however highly placed.
4. The constitution and procedure of a tribunal appropriate for the trial of these offences.
5. Any other matters cognate or ancillary to the above which may arise in the course of the enquiry, and which the Commission finds it useful and relevant to take into consideration.

...

CHAPTER I: RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHORS OF THE WAR

On the question of the responsibility of the authors of the war, the Commission, after having examined a number of official documents relating to the origin of the World War, and to the violations of neutrality and of frontiers which accompanied its inception, has determined that the responsibility for it lies wholly upon the Powers which declared war in pursuance of a policy of aggression, the concealment of which gives to the origin of this war the character of a dark conspiracy against the peace of Europe.

...

Conclusions

1. The war was premeditated by the Central Powers together with their Allies, Turkey and Bulgaria, and was the result of acts deliberately committed in order to make it unavoidable.
2. Germany, in agreement with Austria-Hungary, deliberately worked to defeat all the many conciliatory proposals made by the Entente Powers and their repeated efforts to avoid war.

II: Violation of the Neutrality of Belgium and Luxemburg

...

Conclusion

The neutrality of Belgium, guaranteed by the treaties of the 19th April, 1839, and that of Luxemburg, guaranteed by the treaty of the 11th May, 1867, were deliberately violated by Germany and Austria-Hungary.

CHAPTER II: VIOLATIONS OF THE LAWS AND CUSTOMS OF WAR

On the second point submitted by the Conference, the facts as to breaches of the laws and customs of war committed by the forces of the German Empire and their allies on land, on sea, and in the air, during the present war, the Commission has considered a large number of documents.

... [they] ... supply abundant evidence of outrages of every description committed on land, at sea, and in the air, against the laws and customs of war and of the laws of humanity.

In spite of the explicit regulations, of established customs, and of the clear dictates of humanity, Germany and her allies have piled outrage upon outrage. Additions are daily and continually being made. By way of illustration a certain number of examples have been collected in Annex I [not included here]. It is impossible to imagine a list of cases so diverse and so painful. Violations of the rights of combatants, of the rights of civilians, and of the rights of both, are multiplied in this list of the most cruel practices which primitive barbarism, aided by all the resources of modern science, could devise for the execution of a system of terrorism carefully planned and carried out to the end. Not even prisoners, or wounded, or women, or children have been respected by belligerents who deliberately sought to strike terror into every heart for the purpose of repressing all resistance. Murders and massacres, tortures, shields formed of living human beings, collective penalties, the arrest and execution of hostages, the requisitioning of services for military purposes, the arbitrary destruction of public and private property, the aerial bombardment of open towns without there being any regular siege, the destruction of merchant ships without previous visit and without any precautions for the safety of passengers and crew, the massacre of prisoners, attacks on hospital ships, the poisoning of springs and of wells, outrages and profanations without regard for religion or the honor of individuals, the issue of counterfeit money reported by the Polish Government, the methodical and deliberate destruction of industries with no other object than to promote German economic supremacy after the war, constitute the most striking list of crimes that has ever been drawn up to the eternal shame of those who committed them. The facts are established. They are numerous and so vouched for that they admit of no doubt and cry for justice. The Commission, impressed by their number and gravity, thinks there are good grounds for the constitution of a special commission, to collect and classify all outstanding information for the purpose of preparing a complete list of the charges under the following heads:

The following is the list arrived at:

- (1) Murders and massacres; systematic terrorism.

- (2) Putting hostages to death.
- (3) Torture of civilians.
- (4) Deliberate starvation of civilians.
- (5) Rape.
- (6) Abduction of girls and women for the purpose of enforced prostitution.
- (7) Deportation of civilians.
- (8) Internment of civilians under inhuman conditions.
- (9) Forced labor of civilians in connection with the military operations of the enemy.
- (10) Usurpation of sovereignty during military occupation.
- (11) Compulsory enlistment of soldiers among the inhabitants of occupied territory.
- (12) Attempts to denationalize the inhabitants of occupied territory.
- (13) Pillage.
- (14) Confiscation of property.
- (15) Exaction of illegitimate or of exorbitant contributions and requisitions.
- (16) Debasement of the currency, and issue of spurious currency.
- (17) Imposition of collective penalties.
- (18) Wanton devastation and destruction of property.
- (19) Deliberate bombardment of undefended places.
- (20) Wanton destruction of religious, charitable, educational, and historic buildings and monuments.
- (21) Destruction of merchant ships and passenger vessels without warning and without provision for the safety of passengers or crew.
- (22) Destruction of fishing boats and of relief ships.
- (23) Deliberate bombardment of hospitals.
- (24) Attack on and destruction of hospital ships.
- (25) Breach of other rules relating to the Red Cross.
- (26) Use of deleterious and asphyxiating gases.
- (27) Use of explosive or expanding bullets, and other inhuman appliances.
- (28) Directions to give no quarter.
- (29) Ill-treatment of wounded and prisoners of war.
- (30) Employment of prisoners of war on unauthorized works.
- (31) Misuse of flags of truce.
- (32) Poisoning of wells.

The Commission desires to draw attention to the fact that the offences enumerated and the particulars given in Annex I are not regarded as complete and exhaustive; to these such additions can from time to time be made as may seem necessary.

Conclusions

1. The war was carried on by the Central Empires together with their allies, Turkey and Bulgaria, by barbarous or illegitimate methods in violation of the established laws and customs of war and the elementary laws of humanity.
2. A commission should be created for the purpose of collecting and classifying systematically all the information already had or to be obtained, in order to prepare as complete a list of facts as possible concerning the violations of the laws and customs of war committed by the forces of the German Empire and its Allies, on land, on sea and in the air, in the course of the present war.

CHAPTER III: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The third point submitted by the Conference is thus stated:

The degree of responsibility for these offences attaching to particular members of the enemy forces, including members of the General Staffs and other individuals, however highly placed.

For the purpose of dealing with this point, it is not necessary to wait for proof attaching guilt to particular individuals. It is quite clear from the information now before the Commission that there are grave charges which must be brought and investigated by a court against a number of persons.

In these circumstances, the Commission desire to state expressly that in the hierarchy of persons in authority, there is no reason why rank, however exalted, should in any circumstances protect the holder of it from responsibility when that responsibility has been established before a properly constituted tribunal. This extends even to the case of heads of states. An argument has been raised to the contrary based upon the alleged immunity, and in particular the alleged inviolability, of a sovereign of a state. But this privilege, where it is recognized, is one of practical expedience in municipal law, and is not fundamental. However, even if, in some countries, a sovereign is exempt from being prosecuted in a national court of his own country the position from an international point of view is quite different.

We have later on in our Report proposed the establishment of a high tribunal composed of judges drawn from many nations, and included the possibility of the trial before that tribunal of a former head of a state with the consent of that state itself secured by articles in the Treaty of Peace. If the immunity of a sovereign is claimed to extend beyond the limits above stated, it would involve laying down the principle that the greatest outrages against the laws and customs of war and the laws of humanity, if proved against him, could in no circumstances be punished. Such a conclusion would shock the conscience of civilized mankind.

...

Conclusion

All persons belonging to enemy countries, however high their position may have been, without distinction of rank, including Chiefs of States, who have been guilty of offences against the laws and customs of war or the laws of humanity, are liable to criminal prosecution.

CHAPTER IV: CONSTITUTION AND PROCEDURE OF AN APPROPRIATE TRIBUNAL

The fourth point submitted to the Commission is stated as follows:

The constitution and procedure of a tribunal appropriate for the trial of these offences (crimes relating to the war).

On this question the Commission is of opinion that, having regard to the multiplicity of crimes committed by those Powers which a short time before had on two occasions at The Hague protested their reverence for right and their respect for the principles of humanity, the public conscience insists upon a sanction which will put clearly in the light that it is not permitted cynically to profess a disdain for the most sacred laws and the most formal undertakings.

Two classes of culpable acts present themselves:

- (a) Acts which provoked the world war and accompanied its inception.
- (b) Violations of the laws and customs of war and the laws of humanity.

(a) Acts which Provoked the World War and Accompanied Its Inception

In this class the Commission has considered acts not strictly war crimes, but acts which provoked the war or accompanied its inception, such, to take outstanding examples, as the invasion of Luxemburg and Belgium.

The premeditation of a war of aggression, dissimulated under a peaceful pretence, then suddenly declared under false pretexts, is conduct which the public conscience reproves and which history will condemn, but by reason of the purely optional character of the institutions at The Hague for the maintenance of peace (International Commission of Inquiry, Mediation and Arbitration) a war of aggression may not be considered as an act directly contrary to positive law, or one which can be successfully brought before a tribunal such as the Commission is authorized to consider under its terms of reference.

Further, any inquiry into the authorship of the war must, to be exhaustive, extend over events that have happened during many years in different European countries, and must raise many difficult and complex problems which might be more fitly investigated by historians and statesmen than by a tribunal appropriate to the trial of offenders against the laws and customs of war. The need of prompt action is from this point of view important. Any tribunal appropriate to deal with the other offences to which reference is made might hardly be a good court to discuss and deal decisively with such a subject as the authorship of the war. The proceedings and discussions, charges and counter-charges, if adequately and dispassionately examined, might consume much time, and the result might conceivably confuse the simpler issues into which the tribunal will be charged to inquire. While this prolonged investigation was proceeding some witnesses might disappear, the recollection of others would become fainter and less trustworthy, offenders might escape, and the moral effect of tardily imposed punishment would be much less salutary than if punishment were inflicted while the memory of the wrongs done was still fresh and the demand for punishment was insistent.

We therefore do not advise that the acts which provoked the war should be charged against their authors and made the subject of proceedings before a tribunal ... The Commission is ... of the opinion that no criminal charge can be made against the responsible authorities or individuals (and notably the ex-Kaiser) on the special head of these breaches of neutrality, but the gravity of these gross outrages upon the law of nations and international good faith is such that the Commission thinks they should be the subject of a formal condemnation by the Conference.

Conclusions

1. The acts which brought about the war should not be charged against their authors or made the subject of proceedings before a tribunal.
2. On the special head of the breaches of the neutrality of Luxemburg and Belgium, the gravity of these outrages upon the principles of the law of nations and upon international good faith is such that they should be made the subject of a formal condemnation by the Conference.

3. On the whole case, including both the acts which brought about the war and those which accompanied its inception, particularly the violation of the neutrality of Belgium and Luxemburg, it would be right for the Peace Conference, in a matter so unprecedented, to adopt special measures, and even to create a special organ in order to deal as they deserve with the authors of such acts.
4. It is desirable that for the future penal sanctions should be provided for such grave outrages against the elementary principles of international law.

(b) Violations of the Laws and Customs of War and of the Laws of Humanity

Every belligerent has, according to international law, the power and authority to try the individuals alleged to be guilty of the crimes of which an enumeration has been given in Chapter II on Violations of the Laws and Customs of War, if such persons have been taken prisoners or have otherwise fallen into its power. Each belligerent has, or has power to set up, pursuant to its own legislation, an appropriate tribunal, military or civil, for the trial of such cases. These courts would be able to try the incriminated persons according to their own procedure, and much complication and consequent delay would be avoided which would arise if all such cases were to be brought before a single tribunal.

There remain, however, a number of charges:

- (a) Against persons belonging to enemy countries who have committed outrages against a number of civilians and soldiers of several Allied nations, such as outrages committed in prison camps where prisoners of war of several nations were congregated or the crime of forced labor in mines where prisoners of more than one nationality were forced to work;
- (b) Against persons of authority, belonging to enemy countries, whose orders were executed not only in one area or on one battle front, but whose orders affected the conduct of operations against several of the Allied armies;
- (c) Against all authorities, civil or military, belonging to enemy countries, however high their position may have been, without distinction of rank, including the heads of states, who ordered, or, with knowledge thereof and with power to intervene, abstained from preventing or taking measures to prevent, putting an end to or repressing, violations of the laws or customs of war (it being understood that no such abstention should constitute a defence for the actual perpetrators);
- (d) Against such other persons belonging to enemy countries as, having regard to the character of the offence or the law of any belligerent country, it may be considered advisable not to proceed before a court other than the high tribunal hereafter referred to.

For the trial of outrages falling under these four categories the Commission is of opinion that a high tribunal is essential and should be established ...

Conclusions

The Commission has consequently the honor to recommend:

1. That a high tribunal be constituted as above set out.
2. That it shall be provided by the treaty of peace:
 - (a) That the enemy governments shall, notwithstanding that peace may have been declared, recognize the jurisdiction of the national tribunals and the high tribunal, that all enemy persons alleged to have been guilty of offences against the laws and

customs of war and the laws of humanity shall be excluded from any amnesty to which the belligerents may agree, and that the governments of such persons shall undertake to surrender them to be tried.

- (b) That the enemy governments shall undertake to deliver up and give in such manner as may be determined thereby:
- (i) The names of all persons in command or charge of or in any way exercising authority in or over all civilian internment camps, prisoner-of-war camps, branch camps, working camps and “commandoes” and other places where prisoners were confined in any of their dominions or in territory at any time occupied by them, with respect to which such information is required, and all orders and instructions or copies of orders or instructions and reports in their possession or under their control relating to the administration and discipline of all such places in respect of which the supply of such documents as aforesaid shall be demanded;
 - (ii) All orders, instructions, copies of orders and instructions, General Staff plans of campaign, proceedings in naval or military courts and courts of inquiry, reports and other documents in their possession or under their control which relate to acts or operations, whether in their dominions or in territory at any time occupied by them, which shall be alleged to have been done or carried out in breach of the laws and customs of war and the laws of humanity;
 - (iii) Such information as will indicate the persons who committed or were responsible for such acts or operations;

...

ANNEX II: MEMORANDUM OF RESERVATIONS PRESENTED BY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES TO THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON RESPONSIBILITIES

April 4, 1919.

The American members of the Commission on Responsibilities, in presenting their reservations to the report of the Commission, declare that they are as earnestly desirous as the other members of the Commission that those persons responsible for causing the Great War and those responsible for violations of the laws and customs of war should be punished for their crimes, moral and legal. The differences which have arisen between them and their colleagues lie in the means of accomplishing this common desire. The American members therefore submit to the Conference on the Preliminaries of Peace a memorandum of the reasons for their dissent from the report of the Commission and from certain provisions for insertion in treaties with enemy countries, as stated in Annex IV, and suggestions as to the cause of action which they consider should be adopted in dealing with the subjects upon which the Commission on Responsibilities was directed to report.

Preliminary to a consideration of the points at issue and the irreconcilable differences which have developed and which make this dissenting report necessary, we desire to express our high appreciation of the conciliatory and considerate spirit manifested by our colleagues throughout the many and protracted sessions of the Commission. From the first of these, held on February 3, 1919, there was an earnest purpose shown to compose

1 the differences which existed, to find a formula acceptable to all, and to render, if possible, a unanimous report. That this purpose failed was not because of want of effort on the part of any member of the Commission. It failed because, after all the proposed means of adjustment had been tested with frank and open minds, no practicable way could be found to harmonize the differences without an abandonment of principles which were fundamental. This the representatives of the United States could not do and they could not expect it of others.

In the early meetings of the Commission and the three Sub-Commissions appointed to consider various phases of the subject submitted to the Commission, the American members declared that there were two classes of responsibilities, those of a legal nature and those of a moral nature, that legal offences were justiciable and liable to trial and punishment by appropriate tribunals, but that moral offences, however iniquitous and infamous and however terrible their results, were beyond the reach of judicial procedure, and subject only to moral sanctions.

While this principle seems to have been adopted by the Commission in the report so far as the responsibility for the authorship of the war is concerned, the Commission appeared unwilling to apply it in the case of indirect responsibility for violations of the laws and customs of war committed after the outbreak of the war and during its course. It is respectfully submitted that this inconsistency was due in large measure to a determination to punish certain persons, high in authority, particularly the heads of enemy states, even though heads of states were not hitherto legally responsible for the atrocious acts committed by subordinate authorities. To such an inconsistency the American members of the Commission were unwilling to assent ...

With the manifest purpose of trying and punishing those persons to whom reference has been made, it was proposed to create a high tribunal with an international character, and to bring before it those who had been marked as responsible, not only for directly ordering illegal acts of war, but for having abstained from preventing such illegal acts.

Appreciating the importance of a judicial proceeding of this nature, as well as its novelty, the American representatives laid before the Commission a memorandum upon the constitution and procedure of a tribunal of an international character which, in their opinion, should be formed by the union of existing national military tribunals or commissions of admitted competence in the premises. And in view of the fact that "customs" as well as "laws" were to be considered, they filed another memorandum, attached hereto, as to the principles which should, in their opinion, guide the Commission in considering and reporting on this subject.

The practice proposed in the memorandum as to the military commissions was in part accepted, but the purpose of constituting a high tribunal for the trial of persons exercising sovereign rights was persisted in, and the abstention from preventing violations of the laws and customs of war and of humanity was insisted upon. It was frankly stated that the purpose was to bring before this tribunal the ex-Kaiser of Germany, and that the jurisdiction of the tribunals must be broad enough to include him even if he had not directly ordered the violations.

To the unprecedented proposal of creating an international criminal tribunal and to the doctrine of negative criminality the American members refused to give their assent.

...

II

The second question submitted by the Conference to the Commission requires an investigation of and report upon “the facts as to breaches of the laws and customs of war committed by the forces of the German Empire and their Allies, on land, on sea, and in the air, during the present war.” ... The duty of the Commission was, therefore, to determine whether the facts found were violations of the laws and customs of war. It was not asked whether these facts were violations of the laws or of the principles of humanity. Nevertheless, the report of the Commission does not, as in the opinion of the American representatives it should, confine itself to the ascertainment of the facts and to their violation of the laws and customs of war, but, going beyond the terms of the mandate, declares that the facts found and acts committed were in violation of the laws and of the elementary principles of humanity ... The laws and customs of war are a standard certain, to be found in books of authority and in the practice of nations. The laws and principles of humanity vary with the individual, which, if for no other reason, should exclude them from consideration in a court of justice, especially one charged with the administration of criminal law. The American representatives, therefore, objected to the references to the laws and principles of humanity, to be found in the report, in what they believed was meant to be a judicial proceeding, as, in their opinion, the facts found were to be violations or breaches of the laws and customs of war, and the persons singled out for trial and punishment for acts committed during the war were only to be those persons guilty of acts which should have been committed in violation of the laws and customs of war.

...

III

The third question submitted to the Commission on Responsibilities requires an expression of opinion concerning “the degree of responsibility for these offences attaching to particular members of the enemy forces, including members of the General Staffs, and other individuals, however highly placed.” The conclusions which the Commission reached, and which is stated in the report, is to the effect that “all persons belonging to enemy countries, however high their position may have been, without distinction of rank, including chiefs of states, who have been guilty of offences against the laws and customs of war or the laws of humanity, are liable to criminal prosecution.” The American representatives are unable to agree with this conclusion, in so far as it subjects to criminal, and, therefore, to legal prosecution, persons accused of offences against “the laws of humanity,” and in so far as it subjects chiefs of states to a degree of responsibility hitherto unknown to municipal or international law, for which no precedents are to be found in the modern practice of nations.

Omitting for the present the question of criminal liability for offences against the laws of humanity, which will be considered in connection with the law to be administered in the national tribunals and the high court, whose constitution is recommended by the Commission, and likewise reserving for discussion in connection with the high court the question of the liability of a chief of state to criminal prosecution, a reference may properly be made in this place to the masterly and hitherto unanswered opinion of Chief Justice Marshall in the case of the *Schooner Exchange v. McFaddon and Others* (7 Cranch, 116), decided by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1812, in which the reasons are given for the exemption of the sovereign and of the sovereign agent of a

1 state from judicial process. This does not mean that the head of the state, whether he be called emperor, king, or chief executive, is not responsible for breaches of the law, but that he is responsible not to the judicial but to the political authority of his country. His act may and does bind his country and render it responsible for the acts which he has committed in its name and its behalf, or under cover of its authority; but he is, and it is submitted that he should be, only responsible to his country, as otherwise to hold would be to subject to foreign countries, a chief executive, thus withdrawing him from the laws of his country, even its organic laws, to which he owes obedience, and subordinating him to foreign jurisdictions to which neither he nor his country owes allegiance or obedience, thus denying the very conception of sovereignty.

But the law to which the head of the state is responsible is the law of his country, not the law of a foreign country or group of countries; the tribunal to which he is responsible is the tribunal of his country, not of a foreign country or group of countries, and the punishment to be inflicted is the punishment prescribed by the law in force at the time of the commission of the act, not a punishment created after the commission of the act.

These observations the American representatives believe to be applicable to a head of a state actually in office and engaged in the performance of his duties. They do not apply to a head of a state who has abdicated or has been repudiated by his people. Proceedings against him might be wise or unwise, but in any event they would be against an individual out of office and not against an individual in office and thus in effect against the state.

The American representatives also believe that the above observations apply to liability of the head of a state for violations of positive law in the strict and legal sense of the term. They are not intended to apply to what may be called political offences and to political sanctions.

These are matters for statesmen, not for judges, and it is for them to determine whether or not the violators of the treaties guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium and of Luxemburg should be subjected to a political sanction.

However, as questions of this kind seem to be beyond the mandate of the Conference, the American representatives consider it unnecessary to enter upon their discussion.

IV

The fourth question calls for an investigation of and a report upon “the constitution and procedure of a tribunal appropriate for the trial of these offences.” Apparently the Conference had in mind the violations of the laws and customs of war, inasmuch as the Commission is required by the third submission to report upon “the degree of responsibility for these offences attaching to particular members of the enemy forces, including members of the General Staffs and other individuals, however highly placed.” The fourth point relates to the constitution and procedure of a tribunal appropriate for the investigation of these crimes, and to the trial and punishment of the persons accused of their commission, should they be found guilty.

The Commission seems to have been of the opinion that the tribunal referred to in the fourth point was to deal with the crimes specified in the second and third submissions, not with the responsibility of the authors of the war, as appears from the following statement taken from the report:

On the whole case, including both the acts which brought about the war and those which accompanied its inception, particularly the violation of the neutrality of