

The Start of World War 1 - an eyewitness account

This eyewitness account was in the papers of my grandfather, Frank Wise (1885 - 1933), who was a civil servant, politician and adviser on Russian trade. Written by Tony Struthers.

On Sunday evening August 2nd Munich was seething with excitement, for the news had come through that war had been declared on Russia by Germany. Central Station had already been handed over to the military authorities and bristled with bayonets. Train after train steamed in loaded with reservists called to the colours, excited and anxious, while outside excited crowds surged to and fro singing patriotic songs.

But other news was scarce. Of France there was hardly a word. She was mobilising as was every other country in Europe and it was felt it would be difficult indeed to avoid a conflict with her. There was no serious hostility though and except for the entanglement of the Russian alliance, public opinion groped in vain for a satisfactory *casus belli*. Russia indeed, so German opinion steadfastly believed, had brought about the war for her own purposes; she was the aggressor. Germany was bound to defend herself against Muscovite attacks. Meanwhile, France had kept quiet. Pre-occupied with l'affaire Cailloux, with a socialist government in power, and with the Three Years Law still under hot discussion, she appeared unprepared and unwilling to fight. Certainly, France had shown no sign of aggression.

However, the German people had been trained to believe that the French were the historic enemy, and the young were taught to look forward to 'Der Tag - The Day', when the triumphs of 1870 would be repeated. and though the German government knew in its heart that France must now be fought too, it is not surprising that it shirked a declaration of war that would plunge all Europe into strife. Munich seemed to be searching for a presentable excuse for the declaration of war on France that was obviously coming.

Late in the evening the papers rushed out a special sheet which was posted all over the city. "The Nuremberg railway administration" it ran "states that flying men were seen to throw bombs on the line between Nuremberg & Kissingen and then on the line between Nuremberg & Ausbach. It has not been discovered whether any damage was done."

A telegram from Berlin went further "A military report has just arrived that this morning French airmen threw bombs in the neighbourhood of Nuremberg. As war has not been declared between France and Germany, this constitutes a breach of international law".

There was no doubt about the sensation caused by these telegrams. French zeal had providentially presented Germany with the excuse she wanted - or so it appeared. German opinion was too excited to give the facts much examination, but they are worth some attention. Nuremberg is more than a hundred miles from the French frontier. To reach it several important strategic railways must be crossed, and on the safety of these railways depended the whole scheme of German mobilization and the whole success of a campaign against France. The airmen must have been men of superhuman control. To reach Nuremberg by the morning they must have crossed all these railways in the grey dawn and reserved all their bombs in order to discharge them in the full light of day on a railway of hardly any strategic importance at all.

What is more, the plate-layers or other officials who saw them must have had more than usually good eyesight or insight for it takes a good deal of both to recognise an airman's nationality. Or perhaps the insight might be ascribed to Berlin. The sequence of telegrams certainly supports that hypothesis, for there was no record that the airmen had been seen anywhere else on their journey to and from France. Indeed they might have been Flying Dutchmen.

Nevertheless the news did its work. Everywhere in Munich that night, denunciations of French treachery could be heard and Germany was full of their exploits on the morrow. At Mainz a fair haired boy of 6 or 7 got into the train with his mother and prattled away of the soldiers and of his father, though his mother was heavy eyed and sad. "Where is your father?" he was asked. "He is gone to fight the French, the wicked French who blow up the trains. With their flying machines they come over Germany and when we are not looking, they drop their bombs on us. How I wish I were a man and could go out and kill them."

The other Germans in the carriage - quite friendly they all were - hastened to explain - "Surely we had heard? French airmen and Russian spies are everywhere. No railway line is safe from them. France has been guilty of a dastardly action in breaking the peace by sending swarms of airmen to blow up the railways before war is declared."

Perhaps we were fortunate but in a journey of some hundreds of miles that day we saw no traces of them or their nefarious deeds. Still, they may figure in the history books in the future, for in the German Declaration of War on France, the exploits of the French airmen are given the full publicity of a State document. Needless to say the French Government immediately and absolutely denied their existence. Frank Wise 1914

From Tony Struthers 7/2014