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ENGL 3733: World War One

International Politics and Gender after Edith Cavell's Execution

This report details the correspondence between several ambassadors from the Allied countries who attempted to delay or prevent the execution of Edith Cavell following her trial and sentencing. Cavell had been accused by the German authorities of helping Allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Belgium and cross the border into neutral Holland. Presented to the British Parliament in October 1915, (soon after Edith Cavell was executed, on October 12<sup>th</sup>) the document also focuses on the attempt by several Allied diplomats to reason with the German authorities overseeing Cavell's case. Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, had this to say following the news of Cavell's execution:

"Sir E. Grey is confident that the news of the execution of this noble Englishwoman will be received with horror and disgust...throughout the civilized world. Miss Cavell was not even charged with espionage, and the fact that she had nursed numbers of wounded German soldiers might have been regarded as a complete reason in itself for treating her with leniency." (No. 7, pg. 12)

He goes on to accuse German officials of deliberately misleading the ambassadors, since Cavell had been sentenced to death on the afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup>, but this verdict was kept hidden from Grey and his company for most of the day.

Although the pamphlet itself appears to be merely a customary report of the correspondence between the ministers involved in the delay attempt, there is very likely a

political purpose behind its publication, or at least potential for great political gain or loss. From the British perspective, a very strong thesis can be gleaned from the report, namely that the humanitarian efforts of the Allied ambassadors, though valiant and well-intentioned, were nevertheless not enough to overcome the obstinacy of the German bureaucracy. The diplomats involved in the struggle for Cavell's life are involved in a kind of argumentative warfare amongst themselves. A human life hangs in the balance of their debate, though, and the cold tone of Sir Grey's message above is an implicit accusation that the Germans are playing a dangerous game with Edith Cavell's life. They have crossed some sort of ethical line (if such a thing ever existed) by executing her without leaving any time for a court appeal. The pamphlet seems to be presenting a thesis to Parliament and the British public about German military and bureaucratic culture: that England cannot defeat it by means of the traditional, more gentlemanly methods of warfare.

Since Cavell was never accused of espionage (which was punishable by death under German law) but only of escorting soldiers across borders to friendly soil, it remains unclear just what the Germans hoped to accomplish by executing her. It seems like an unwise decision on their part, since Cavell's execution was received with outrage worldwide, and especially since Cavell was a good Christian. But this senseless murdering of an innocent, heroic Englishwoman was useful for the English political agenda; it drew a line between the God-serving English and the God-forsaken Germans. As tragic as it was, the British seized the event as an opportunity to further their own cause in the war. The wide dissemination of this pamphlet—paid for by the king himself and advertised on the cover as available for purchase "either directly or through any bookseller"—proves the extent to which the public backlash against the Germans following

Cavell's execution was seized upon by British political power. Rowland Ryder, in his biography of Cavell, writes that a recruitment drive following the news of her execution "brought in about 40,000 extra recruits to the army alone" (Appendix D). In the eight weeks prior to her death, an average of less than 5,000 men volunteered per week, while in the eight weeks following news of her death, that weekly figure more than doubled.

From the standpoint of Cavell's humanistic Christianity, Britain's move to use her death as a flagpole around which to rally troops comes under fire. While from one perspective, the English crown used her martyrdom as a useful propagandizing device, and did so without scruples, for the purpose of boosting enlistment rates in the time before conscription was passed in Parliament, it is an interesting point to consider how else England could have responded effectively to an issue of this nature if not in some way furthering their own nationalistic agenda. But the English national agenda does not necessarily exclude genuine humanitarian sentiment, which of course was the rhetorical framework for the recruitment drive itself; Germany had to be demonized so that England could be glorified.

This conflict between nationalism and humanitarianism is precisely what Cavell was describing when she famously said from her jail cell the night before her execution that "patriotism is not enough". She seems to be suggesting that fighting for one's country does nothing to eradicate conflict from the world; rather, it feeds an inherently antagonistic and competitive global political structure. The main destructive flaws of the nation-state system, which came to prominence in its more modern form only about 300 years before, finally showed their face in the war. But there is not much one country can do to fight for Right and

Justice within that system, the whole point of which is that each country is its own sovereign and therefore determines for itself and its citizens what is Right and Just within its own borders. When those borders are challenged or breached during wartime, competing definitions of Rightness come into conflict and it is impossible to determine who is 'most right'. Cavell's quote addresses this problem directly. Her strong Christian morality, whose central tenet is mercy and aid to all people regardless of their national allegiance, is significantly linked with the internationalization movement that was popular at the time.

Noting this perspective, a main reason for Edith Cavell's execution is that she was a threat to the nation-state system, a system in which the enemy Germans had vested interests—along with every other country in the world, not excepting Great Britain. This system creates a scale of value for different kinds of human lives: Germans value German lives more than English lives, and vice versa. Germany likely would not dispute that life in general is valuable, but when a particular life in question is a British one, it represents a challenge against the existence of Germany, since global politics is a zero-sum game. Cavell was an embodiment of a political movement on an international scale, one that was inherently progressive and threatening to the embedded nation-state system that existed and still exists. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that if there was a German nurse who helped soldiers escape from a British-occupied region, that the British would have executed her in the same manner as Cavell was executed. To assert otherwise is to assert that Germany as a nation at the time was more severe in character than England, which, although it is not necessarily untrue, is too complicated an issue to resolve here.

Another complicated aspect of Cavell's execution is her gender. What if Edith Cavell had been a man? There are some definite gender stereotypes at play in this document. To some extent, all of the ambassadors are racing to chivalrously be the ones who save the innocent Christian woman. A man accused of espionage in wartime Brussels would likely have his case fought as hard as Cavell's was, but because she was a nurse, more conflicts are raised. It marks her as a non-combatant—one who is above or at least removed from the fray, as restorative a force as the soldier is a destructive one. But her execution suggests a different revision of what constitutes warfare—Edith Cavell never killed anyone (and indeed, she did not refuse attention to even the German soldiers she came across), but helping the enemy is an affront against the German state, and helping an English soldier is as good as killing a German one. Something at least similar to this must have been the German rationalization for her sentence. Still, it is not fair to suggest that she was "innocent", since innocent is a relative term under these circumstances. Under German law, it is true that she was not accused of espionage, a crime that was traditionally punishable by death. But Cavell was very aware of what she was doing and of the dangerous nature of her actions. Any plea for innocence on her part is based on the perspective that 1) her work was purely humanitarian and 2) that, as a woman, she ought to be spared the full force of the law.

Her gender, it seems likely to say, served as fuel for the international outrage following this incident. Gender stereotypes that suggest she should be treated differently under the law than a man are inaccurate and insulting to the character of her work; she was adhering closely to her firm Anglican principles, and in this light, her gender ought to be irrelevant, and she should have been held just as morally accountable for her actions as a man would be. Naturally,

public opinion made the distinction anyway, which made the scandal much larger than it might have been in the absence of gender biases. Germany's breach of one of these biases, that women ought to be treated leniently because of their non-threatening, non-combatant roles, truly signals that this conflict was a modern one, because her execution does suggest a more equal assumption of legal culpability (Ethel Rosenberg is another example of this) between genders.

## Works Cited

Ryder, Rowland. *Edith Cavell*. New York: Stein and Day, 1975. Print.