

CHURCHILL VERSION ON LEOPOLD DENIED

Letter of Lord Keyes to Lord Gort Says Surrender Was Made Inevitable

By WILL LISSNER

Documents were presented yesterday to THE NEW YORK TIMES giving a version of the capitulation of the Belgian Army in May, 1940, at variance with the account related by former Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the installment of his memoirs published by this newspaper last Monday.

The documents seek to prove that King Leopold, exiled King of the Belgians, was not a defeatist but a gallant leader who fought for his allies to the end with his troops, and that far from failing to notify the British leadership of his situation he was in constant touch with it until the last moment.

They also seek to show that the overwhelming of the Belgian Army by the German invaders was a part of the strategy of the British War Cabinet which, in agreement with King Leopold, according to the documents, envisaged that the Belgians would sacrifice themselves to save the British to fight on.

Copied From Records

Photostatic copies of the records, which in the original are British official and private documents, were turned over to this newspaper by a former United States diplomat, who vouches for their authenticity. The statesman, who prefers to remain anonymous, said that the chief documents had been copied from the originals in the files of the late Lord Keyes, Admiral of the Fleet, by his widow, Lady Keyes.

The others are vouched for by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Certain of the documents were referred to in a Reuters dispatch from Brussels published in THE NEW YORK TIMES last Jan. 16.

The following is the version of the capitulation of the Belgian Army told by the documents:

Lord Keyes, who was Special Liaison Officer of the British Government with King Leopold from May 10 to May 27, 1940, wrote to Lord Gort, Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France, on June 12, 1940. Lord Keyes remonstrated with Lord Gort for blaming his misfortunes "on having had your left flank exposed, without any warning from King Leopold that he was about to capitulate."

Statement Held Unfair

"Do you really think that that is a fair statement," Lord Keyes asked, "in view of the repeated requests made to you on 26th-27th May, for help from the B.E.F. to prevent the Belgian Army's right flank being turned, which you were unable to give; and in view of the warning to you and the Government from 20th May onwards, that the King would be forced to capitulate if the British and Belgian armies became separated, which he regarded as inevitable, if the British attack to the southward was persisted in? An opinion shared by the C.I.G.S. [Chief Imperial General Staff, Lieut. Gen. Ironside] and you at the time."

Lord Keyes wrote that the preparations of six days for the attack and the withdrawals of British divisions to take part in it, "left the Belgian right flank and indeed the whole Belgian front line, dangerously weak, as was repeatedly pointed out to you and to Churchill from 20th May onwards, and by King Leopold to [Sir John] Dill [Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff] on the 25th."

Recalls Gort's Remark

Lord Keyes said flatly in his letter to Lord Gort that the latter had decided upon the evacuation on May 19: "When I stayed with you at Wahagnies, on the night of 19th May, it was evident to me, that your one object was to withdraw to the seaports as soon as possible. * * *"

When General Ironside gave Lord Gort the Cabinet's instruction to prepare for an attack to the southward on May 20, "you made no secret of your consternation," Lord Keyes wrote. Lord Keyes telegraphed to Mr. Churchill that day that the orders "amount to abandonment of junction with Belgian Army." He warned that "the Germans will quickly drive wedge through" and declared, "I do not propose to tell the Belgians that B. E. F. intends to desert them yet."

Lord Keyes recalled to Lord Gort "the remark you made to me at Ypres on the 21st May: 'Do the Belgians think us awful dirty dogs?' I said 'No' and referred you to King Leopold's message to Churchill * * *"

Lord Keyes recalled that on May 20 he offered to Lord Gort to help him try to get the War Cabinet to reverse the order for the ill-fated southward attack and that Lord Gort helped him to write a military evaluation of it. "But," he added, "you would not let me say that you had seen it and approved of it, which would have strengthened my hand when I tackled the Prime Minister about it."

Later that evening, Lord Keyes goes on, King Leopold asked him to let the British Government know "his anxiety to help our splendid Army to extricate itself from the impossible position into which it had been placed by the French reverse on the Meuse."

The King "said he could not understand why we did not realize that the only chance now of extricating the British Army, was to swing to the northwest at once, strengthen our contact with the Belgian Army, and cover Dunkirk and the Belgian ports by occupying the Lys-Gravelines Line." He warned that the line to be held by the British on his right flank was very strong but that to be held by the Belgian troops was weak, manned by defensive troops without tanks or anti-aircraft, and would invite attack: "He feared that if seriously assaulted with strong air support, the Germans would break through, sever the connection between the two armies and overwhelm the Belgian Army."

Lord Keyes went to La Panne on May 21 to talk over the cable with Mr. Churchill:

"* * * I did my utmost to make

A MESSAGE FROM CHURCHILL TO KEYES

Copy

(Secret)

From the Prime Minister to Admiral Keyes
despatched 3 a.m. 27.5.40.

"Impart the following to your friend. Presumes he knows that

British and French are fighting their way to coast between Gravelines and Ostend inclusive, and that we propose to give fullest support from Navy and Air Force during hazardous embarkation. What can we do for him? Certainly we cannot serve Belgium's cause by being hemmed in and starved out. Only hope is victory, and England will never quit the war whatever happens, till Hitler is beat or we cease to be a State. Trust you will back him he leaves with you by aeroplanes before too late. Should our operation prosper and we establish effective bridgehead, we would try if desired to carry some Belgian Divisions to France by sea. Vitally important Belgium should continue in war and safety of King's person essential.

This message did not reach Admiral Keyes until he returned to England on the 28th May, so he was not able to give it to King Leopold.

Sir Keyes

27: Aug, 1946

A copy of the Prime Minister's telegram regarding King Leopold which did not reach the British War Cabinet representative until he returned to England.

him understand the gravity of your position. He would not listen, and even abused me for the statements in the military appreciation you gave me. * * * He would not accept my contention that if the counterattack to the Southward was insisted on, it was bound to separate the Belgian and British Armies, as it did * * *

Lord Keyes asked Mr. Churchill

to send Sir John Dill to the King on May 24. On that day the Belgian Cabinet had vainly begged the King to flee the country with them. Sir John told King Leopold on May 25 that the offensive must go on. The King issued an order of the day: "Soldiers: The great battle which we were expecting has commenced. * * * Belgium expects that you will do honor to her flag."

Officers and Men: Whatever happens, my fate will be yours. * * *

On May 26 Lord Keyes and hence the King learned from Mr. Churchill for the first time that the attack had been called off. Lord Gort asked that the Belgians fall back toward the Yser. The King and his staff said that troop movement without fighter support was impossible, one battalion having been wiped out in the attempt, but they would do what they could.

The King had ordered the Army to hold the line of the Lys to the end and said that an attempt to restore the situation on the Lys by a British counter-attack must be made at once if a disaster was to be averted. "When it was obvious that the B. E. F. had no intention of coming to the Belgian Army's assistance, it [the latter] lost heart," Lord Keyes remarks.

Orders Yser Crossing

But the King ordered the French Sixtieth Division under his direction, his only reserves, to be moved across the Yser on the night of the 26th. Mr. Churchill recalled that an inward turn of the German thrust across the Yser was forestalled; such a turn, he pointed out, would have brought the enemy on to the beaches behind the British troops.

At 12:30 P. M. on May 27 the King informed Lord Keyes that he hoped to be able to hold on for another day. He sent a message to Lord Gort through Lord Keyes that "the time is rapidly approaching when they [the Belgian troops]

will be unable to continue the fight. The King will be forced to capitulate to avoid a collapse."

But the Germans broke through the Belgian line in several places in the afternoon. As Lord Keyes told Lord Gort in the letter, "the situation had now arisen which the King, and you, foresaw on May 20." The King informed Lord Keyes at 5 P. M. that his Army had collapsed and he was asking for a cessation of hostilities. The message from Lord Keyes was received at the War Office at 5:54 P. M. By asking for terms the King delayed the cease-fire order until 4 A. M. on the twenty-eighth.

Back in London on the twenty-eighth, Lord Keyes received an undelivered message that Mr. Churchill had sent him at 3 A. M. on the twenty-seventh, and which Mr. Churchill includes in his memoirs without the time of dispatch. It reported that the British and the French were retreating to the coast for embarkation.

"He [the King] would have been justified in taking any steps which he thought fit, to avoid the ruthless slaughter of his Army and people," Lord Keyes comments. The message that did not reach the King "clearly indicated," Lord Keyes said, "that we were about to leave the Belgians to their fate."

Reynaud States Case

On May 28 Paul Reynaud, then Premier of France, told his people that on orders from King Leopold, without warning to the Brit-

ish and the French, the Belgian Army had suddenly capitulated "at the height of battle." Mr. Churchill, on Lord Keyes' insistence, asked the British to suspend judgment on the King's action.

Six days later Mr. Churchill reversed himself in the House of Commons. He gave the French version:

"Suddenly, without prior consultation, with the least possible notice, without the advice of his Ministers, and upon his own personal act, he [the King] sent a plenipotentiary to the German command, surrendered his Army and exposed our whole flank and means of retreat."

Mr. Churchill omitted this from his memoirs. He gives his first version, which he says was more moderate than M. Reynaud's. He includes the undelivered message to the King as an enclosure, dated the 27th but untimed, of a message to Lord Gort which admitted that the British were asking the Belgians to sacrifice themselves for their ally. He says the King prepared for capitulation on the 24th.