

GIBSON, Hugh Simons (Secretary of the American Legation in Brussels, 1914) ; *A journal from our Legation in Belgium* ; New York ; Doubleday, Page & Company Garden City; 1917 :

<http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/memoir/Legation/Gibs onTC.htm>

## INTRODUCTION

This volume is not a carefully prepared treatise on the war. It does not set out to prove anything. It is merely what its title indicates---a private journal jotted down hastily from day to day in odd moments, when more pressing duties would permit. Much material has been eliminated as of little interest. Other material of interest has been left out because it cannot be published at this time. It is believed, however, that what is printed here will suffice to give some idea of life in Belgium during the first few months of the war.

I have eliminated from the journal most of the matter about the early history of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. My day-to-day record did not do any sort of justice to the subject, and since it was not adequate, I have preferred to eliminate all but such casual reference to the relief work as is necessary to maintain the narrative. I am reconciled to this treatment of the subject by the knowledge that the story will be told comprehensively and well by Dr. Vernon Kellogg, who will soon publish an authoritative history of the Commission's work. As former Director of the Commission in Belgium, he has the detailed knowledge of its workings and the sympathetic understanding of its purpose, which peculiarly fit him for the task.

The work of the Commission is of a scope and significance that few of us realise. It is without doubt the greatest humanitarian enterprise in history, conducted under conditions of almost incredible difficulty. To those who had an understanding of the work, it had a compelling appeal, not only as an opportunity for service but also as the greatest conservation project of all time---the conservation of one of the finest races of our civilisation.

In its inception and execution, the work of the Commission is distinctively American. Its inception was in the mind of Herbert Hoover; in its execution he had the whole-hearted assistance of a little band of quiet American gentlemen who laboured in Belgium from the autumn of 1914 until we entered the war in April of this year. They came from all parts of our country and from all walks of life. They were simple work-a-day Americans, welded together by unwavering devotion to the common task and to Herbert Hoover, the "Chief." It was the splendid human side of the Commission that made it succeed in spite of all obstacles, and that part of the story will be hard to tell.

The gallant little band is now widely scattered. Some are carrying on their old work from Holland or England or America in order to ensure a steady flow of food to Belgium. Others are serving our Government in various capacities or fighting in the armies of our allies. Some of them we shall not see again and there will never be another reunion, as in the old days, when the "Chief " came over from London to Brussels with work to be done. But the bright light of kindly human service which brought them all together is still aflame and will always be an inspiration to those who served, however humbly, in the great work.

WASHINGTON, D. C.,  
SEPT. 24, 1917.

**BRUSSELS, July 4, 1914.** --- After years of hard work and revolutions and wars and rumours of war, the change to this quiet post has been most welcome and I have wallowed in the luxury of having time to play.

For the last year or two I have looked forward to just such a post as this, where nothing ever happens, where there is no earthly chance of being called out of bed in the middle of the night to see the human race brawling over its differences. When pounding along in the small hours of the night, nearly dead with fatigue, I have thought that I should like to have a long assignment to just such a post and become a diplomatic Lotos Eater. And at first it was great fun.

That phase lasted until I had had a thorough rest, and then the longing for something more active began to manifest itself.

I sat down and wrote to the Department of State that while I greatly appreciated having been sent to this much-coveted post I was ready whenever there might be need of my services to go where there was work to be done.

**July 28, 1914.**---Well, the roof has fallen in. War was declared this afternoon by Austria. The town is seething with excitement and everybody seems to realise how near they are to the big stage. Three classes of reserves have already been called to the colours to defend Belgian neutrality. A general mobilisation is prepared and may be declared at any time. The Bourse has been closed to prevent too much play on the situation, and let things steady themselves. In every other way the hatches have been battened down and preparations made for heavy weather.

To-night the streets are crowded and demonstrations for and against war are being held. The Socialists have Jaurés, their French leader, up from Paris, and have him

haranguing an anti-war demonstration in the Grande Place, where a tremendous crowd has collected. Nobody on earth can see where it will all lead. England is trying hard to localise the conflict, and has valuable help. If she does not succeed . .

An advance guard of tourists is arriving from France, Germany, and Switzerland, and a lot of them drop in for advice as to whether it is safe for them to go to various places in Europe. And most of them seem to feel that we really have authoritative information as to what the next few days are to bring forth, and resent the fact that we are too disobliging to tell them the inside news. A deluge of this sort would be easier for a full-sized Embassy to grapple with, but as Belgium is one of those places where nothing ever happens ---we have the smallest possible organisation, consisting on a peace basis of the Minister and myself, with one clerk. We shall have somehow to build up an emergency force to meet the situation.

**July 30th.**---No line on the future yet. Brussels is beginning to look warlike. Troops are beginning to appear. The railway stations have been occupied, and the Boy Scouts are swarming over the town as busy as bird dogs. A week ago there was hardly a tourist in Brussels. Now the Legation hall is filled with them, and they all demand precise information as to what is going to happen next and where they can go with a guarantee from the Legation that they will not get into trouble.

**July 31st.**---No, my recent remarks about nothing ever happening in Brussels were not intended as sarcasm. I thought Belgium was the one place where I could be sure of a quiet time, and here we are right in the centre of it. Even if nothing more happens we have had enough excitement to last me for some time. The doings of the past few days have brought out some idea of what a general European war would mean---and it is altogether too dreadful to think of.

**Saturday, Aug. 1st.**---Last night when I went home, at about midnight, I found the police going about with the orders for mobilisation, ringing the door bells and summoning the men to the colours. There was no time to tarry, but each man tumbled out of bed into his clothes and hurried away to his regiment. Two of my neighbours were routed out a little after mid-night, and got away within the hour. There was a good deal of weeping and handshaking and farewelling, and it was not the sort of thing to promote restful sleep.

This morning I got down to the chancery at a quarter past eight, and found that Omer, our good messenger, had been summoned to the colours. He had gone, of course, and had left a note for me to announce the fact. He had been ill, and could perfectly well have been exempted. The other day, when we had discussed the matter, I had told him that there would be no difficulty in getting him off. He showed no enthusiasm, however, and merely remarked, without heroics, that it was up to him.

Colonel Falls, 7th Regiment, of the National Guard of New York, came in, having been sent back from the frontier. He had the pleasure of standing all the way as the trains were packed.

Millard Shaler, the American mining engineer, who had just come back from the Congo, came in with his amusing Belgian friend who had been telling us for weeks about the wonderful new car in which he was investing. This time he came around to let me have a look at it, he having been advised that the car was requisitioned and due to be taken over to-day.

We have done a land-office business in passports, and shall probably continue to turn them out by the dozen.

**Sunday, August 2d.**---Another hectic day with promise of more to come.

This morning I came down a little earlier than usual and found the Minister already hard at it. He had been routed out of bed and had not had time to bathe or shave. There was nothing to show that it was a Sunday---nearly twice as many callers as yesterday, and they were more exacting.

Mrs. A- B- C- came in airily and announced that she had started from Paris yesterday on a motor tour through France and Belgium. Having got this far, some rude person had told her that her motor might be seized by the Government for military purposes and that an order had been promulgated forbidding any one to take cars out of the country. She came around confidently to have us assure her that this was a wicked lie---and needless to say was deeply disappointed in us when---we failed to back her up. We had refrained from asking the Government to release our own servants from their military obligations and have refused to interfere for anybody else, but that was not enough for her. She left, a highly indignant lady.

The story is around town this afternoon that the Germans have already crossed the frontier without the formality of a declaration of war---but that remains to be seen. Brussels was put under martial law last night, and is now patrolled by grenadiers and lancers.

The money situation is bad. All small change has disappeared in the general panic, and none of it has dared show its head during the past few days. The next thing done by panicky people was to pass round word that the Government bank notes were no good and would not be honoured. Lots of shops are refusing to accept bank notes, and few places can make any change. The police are lined up outside the banks keeping people in line. People in general are frantic with fear, and are trampling each other in the rush to get money out of the banks before the crash that

probably will not come. Travelers who came here with pockets bulging with express cheeks and bank notes are unable to get a cent of real money, and nobody shows any enthusiasm over American paper. I have a few bank notes left, and this evening when I went into a restaurant I have patronised ever since my arrival the head waiter refused to change a note for me, and I finally had to leave it and take credit against future meals to be eaten there. We may have our troubles when our small store is gone, but probably the situation will improve and I refuse to worry. And some of our compatriots don't understand why the Legation does not have a cellar full of hard money to finance them through their stay in Europe.

Communications, with such parts of the world as we still speak to, are getting very difficult on account of mobilisation, the military having right of way. This morning's Paris papers have not come in this evening, and there are no promises as to when we shall see them. The news in the local papers is scarce and doubtful, and I hope for a word from Paris.

Word has just come in that the Government has seized the supplies of bread, rice, and beans, and will fix prices for the present. That is a sensible and steady thing, and should have a good effect.

Nobody seems to remember that a few days ago Serbia was playing a star rôle in this affair. She seems to have faded away behind the scenes. A few days ago, Mexico loomed large in the papers and now we have forgotten that she ever existed. Albania supplied a lot of table talk, and now we think about as much about her and her troubles as we do about Thibet.

This afternoon I went around to the Rue Ducale to take a look at the French Legation. The tricolor was flying in the fresh breeze, and there was a big crowd outside cheering itself hoarse. It was made up of men who were called to the colors

and were waiting to enroll themselves and get instructions as to where they should report for duty. The air was electric, and every now and then the military band struck up the Marseillaise and the crowd instantly became happily delirious. Some of them had been standing in the sun for hours waiting to get in and get their orders, but they were just as keenly responsive to the music and the mood of the crowd as anybody. All the crowd in the Legation had been working day and night for days. and was dead with fatigue; but, some way, they kept going, and managed to be civil and friendly when I had business with them. How they do it I don't know. A Frenchman's politeness must be more deeply ingrained than even I had supposed.

On the way back from the Legation this evening, I saw von Below, the German Minister, driving home from the Foreign Office to his Legation. He passed close to me, and I saw that the perspiration was standing out on his forehead. He held his hat in his hand and puffed at a cigarette like a mechanical toy, blowing out jerky clouds of smoke. He looked neither to left nor right, and failed to give me his usual ceremonious bow. He is evidently not at ease about the situation, although he continues to figure in the newspapers as stating that all is well, that Germany has no intention of setting foot on Belgian soil, and that all Belgium has to do is to keep calm. In an interview given to *Le Soir* he sums up his reassuring remarks by saying: "Your neighbour's house may burn but yours will be safe."

**August 3, 1914.**---No mail in to-day. All communications seem to be stopped for the time being at least. Mobilisation here and in France requires all the efforts of all hands, and little workaday things like mail and newspapers go by the board.

According to the news which was given me when I got out of bed this morning, the German Minister last night presented to the Belgian Government an ultimatum demanding the right to send German troops across Belgium to attack France. He



was evidently returning from this pleasant duty when I saw him last night, for the ultimatum seems to have been presented at seven o'clock. The King presided over a Cabinet Council which sat all night; and when the twelve hours given by the ultimatum had expired, at seven this morning, a flat refusal was sent to the German Legation. Arrangements were got under way, as the Council sat, to defend the frontiers of the country against aggression. During the night the garrison left and the Garde Civique came on duty to police the town.

The influx of callers was greater to-day than at any time so far, and we were fairly swamped. Miss Lerner came and worked like a Trojan, taking passport applications and reassuring the women who wanted to be told that the Germans would not kill them even when they got to Brussels. She is a godsend to us.

Monsieur de Leval, the Belgian lawyer who for ten years has been the legal counselor of the Legation, came in and brought some good clerks with him. He also hung up his hat and went to work, making all sorts of calls at the Foreign Office, seeing callers, and going about to the different Legations. Granville Fortescue came in from Ostend, and I should have put him to work but that he had plans of his own and has decided to blossom forth as a war correspondent. He is all for getting to the "front" if any.

Just to see what would happen, I went to the telephone after lunch and asked to be put through to the Embassy at London. To my surprise, I got the connection in a few minutes and had a talk with Bell, the Second Secretary. The Cabinet had been sitting since eleven this morning, but had announced no decision. I telephoned him again this evening and got the same reply. Bell said that they had several hundred people in the chancery and were preparing for a heavy blow.

As nearly as we can make out the Germans have sent patrols into Belgian territory, but there have been no actual operations so far. All day long we have been getting stories to the effect that there has been a battle at Visé and that fifteen hundred Belgians had been killed; later it was stated that they had driven the Germans back with heavy losses. The net result is that at the end of the day we know little more than we did this morning.

Parliament is summoned to meet in special session to-morrow morning to hear what the King has to say about the German ultimatum. It will be an interesting sight. Parliament has long been rent with most bitter factional quarrels, but I hear that all these are to be forgotten and that all parties, Socialists included, are to rally rotund the throne in a great demonstration of loyalty.

All the regular troops have been withdrawn from this part of the country and dispatched to the front, leaving the protection of the capital to the Garde Civique, who are patrolling the streets, to examine the papers of everybody who moves about. This is a sort of local guard made up of people who have not been called for active military service, but who have volunteered for local defense. They are from every class---lawyers and butchers and bakers and dentists and university professors. They have, of course, had little training for this sort of work, and have had only elementary orders to guide them. These they carry out to the letter. There are detachments of them at all sorts of strategic points in the city where they hold up passing vehicles to see who is inside. I have been stopped by them goodness knows how many times this day. They hold up the car, look inside, apologise, and explain good-naturedly that they are obliged to bother me, asking who I am, and after I have satisfied them with papers that any well-equipped spy would be ashamed of, they let me go on with more apologies. They rejoice in a traditional

uniform topped off by a derby hat with kangaroo feathers on it. This is anything but martial in appearance and seems to affect their funny bone as it does mine.

## **Footnotes.**

1. The following is the text of the German ultimatum :

BRUSSELS, August 2, 1914.

VERY CONFIDENTIAL.

Reliable information has been received by the German Government to the effect that French forces intend to march on the line of the Meuse by Givet and Namur. This information leaves no doubt as to the intention of France to march through Belgian territory against Germany.

The German Government cannot but fear that Belgium, in spite of the utmost goodwill, will be unable, without assistance, to repel so considerable a French invasion with sufficient prospect of success to afford an adequate guarantee against danger to Germany. It is essential for the self-defence of Germany that she should anticipate any such hostile attack. The German Government would, however, feel the deepest regret if Belgium regarded as an act of hostility against herself the fact that the measures of Germany's opponents force Germany, for her own protection, to enter Belgian territory.

In order to exclude any possibility of misunderstanding, the German Government make the following declaration:

1. Germany has in view no act of hostility against Belgium. In the event of Belgium being prepared in the coming war to maintain an attitude of friendly neutrality

towards Germany, the German Government bind themselves, at the conclusion of peace, to guarantee the possessions and independence of the Belgian Kingdom in full

2. Germany undertakes, under the above-mentioned condition, to evacuate Belgian territory on the conclusion of peace.

3. If Belgium adopts a friendly attitude, Germany is prepared, in co-operation with the Belgian authorities, to purchase all necessaries for her troops against a cash payment, and to pay an indemnity for any damage that may have been caused by German troops.

4. Should Belgium oppose the German troops, and in particular should she throw difficulties in the way of their march by a resistance of the fortresses on the Meuse, or by destroying railways, roads, tunnels or other similar works, Germany will, to her regret, be compelled to consider Belgium as an enemy.

In this event, Germany can undertake no obligations towards Belgium, but the eventual adjustment of the relations between the two States must be left to the decision of arms.

The German Government, however, entertain the distinct hope that this eventuality will not occur, and that the Belgian Government will know how to take the necessary measures to prevent the occurrence of incidents such as those mentioned.

In this case the friendly ties which bind the two neighbouring States will grow stronger and more enduring.

2. The Belgian Government replied as follows to the German ultimatum:

The German Government stated in their note of the 2nd August, 1914, that according to reliable information French forces intended to march on the Meuse via Givet and Namur, and that Belgium, in spite of the best intentions, would not be in a position to repulse, without assistance, an advance of French troops.

The German Government, therefore, considered themselves compelled to anticipate this attack and to violate Belgian territory. In these circumstances, Germany proposed that the Belgian Government adopt a friendly attitude towards her, and undertook, on the conclusion of peace, to guarantee the integrity of the Kingdom and its possessions to their full extent. The note added that if Belgium put difficulties in the way of the advance of German troops, Germany would be compelled to consider her as an enemy, and to leave the ultimate adjustment of the relations between the two States to the decision of arms.

This note has made a deep and painful impression upon the Belgian Government.

The intentions attributed to France by Germany are in contradiction to the formal declarations made to us on August 1st in the name of the French Government.

Moreover, if contrary to our expectation, Belgian neutrality should be violated by France, Belgium intends to fulfil her international obligations and the Belgian army would offer the most vigorous resistance to the invader.

The treaties of 1839, confirmed by the treaties of 1870, vouch for the independence and neutrality of Belgium under the guarantee of the Powers, and notably of His Majesty the King of Prussia.

Belgium has always been faithful to her international obligations; she has carried out her duties in a spirit of loyal impartiality, and she has left nothing undone to maintain and enforce respect for her neutrality.

The attack upon her independence with which the German Government threaten her constitutes a flagrant violation of international law. No strategic interest justifies such a violation of law.

The Belgian Government, if they were able to accept the proposals submitted to them, would sacrifice the honour of the nation and betray their duty towards Europe.

Conscious of the part which Belgium has played for more than eighty years in the civilisation of the world, they refuse to believe that the independence of Belgium can only be preserved at the price of the violation of her neutrality.

If this hope is disappointed the Belgian Government are firmly resolved to repel, by all the means in their power, every attack upon their rights.

Brussels, August 3, 1914 (7 A.M.).

### **More footnotes.**

It would be interesting compare with what **Roberto J. Payró** told about the same days in his *Diario de un testigo* (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

Original Spanish version :

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It would be also interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same days in his *Journal de guerre* (*Notes d'un Bruxellois pendant l'Occupation 1914-1918*) :

([http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/Fichier\\_PDF/Fonte/Journal\\_de%20Oguerre\\_de\\_Paul\\_Max\\_bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20Oguerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf))