

# **BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)**

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### **Chapter XXXIII. The press-gangs.**

As in looking over my notes and reading memoranda furnished me at the time, I live over again those terrible days of the autumn and winter of 1916, with their darkness and their cold and their hourly tale of horror, I wonder how we ever lived through them at all. The pitiless and insensate cruelty, the brutal indifference to all human rights and human dignity that characterized this restoration of human slavery in our time, the violence to every moral sentiment and the strain imposed upon the sympathies by the ruthless deeds that were all about us, made those days in many ways the saddest that Belgium had endured. There were no words for it then ; there are none now. I could only write to my Government that it was enough to cause one to despair of the future of the human race, and find the words weak and inadequate to the expression of all that I felt, all that I suffered, and know something like shame that I could write calmly of it at all in the cold and formal terms of an official report. Better, I often thought, yield to the constant and importunate temptation to cry out against it, in some hot flash of

rage and indignation, to have done with the too polite expressions of diplomacy, to call things, for once in the world, by their right name, and, when one meant **slavery** to say **slavery** instead of deportation. But we were still officially neutral, we of America, and in any position of public responsibility one must think of many things at a time. And there was always the *ravitaillement*, to which I had clung that those poor wronged people might at least have their daily bread, that the brave little race that had had the excruciating and immortal honour to stand in history as the symbol of heroic resistance to tyranny might live, and with it the liberty which it had conquered so long before and in which it had felt itself so secure.

The policy of carrying off into slavery the people of a conquered territory was characteristic of the military chiefs who celebrated their accession to undisputed power in Germany by its inauguration, and they carried it out amid the amazement and horror of the civilized world, with brutal accompaniments that affirmed the essentially savage qualities of their creed. And that no hideous detail might be wanting, with a face of brass they justified it by hypocrisies that were as revolting as the acts they sought to excuse.

A description of the deeds of those field-grey press-gangs in any one of the lovely little villages of Flanders or Brabant might serve as a resume of what went on everywhere, if it were not for the fact

that the slight differences in detail and method, marking the varied taste and the virtuosity in cruelty of local commandants, throws a flood of light on the essentially irresponsible nature of the whole German organization. The earlier pretence that they were taking only those men who were living in idleness on the charity of their absent Government was abandoned even as soon as it was put forth. It is perhaps well that it was, since that position was as untenable under international law and the code of morals professed by every nation that had a sovereign and a seal, as the indiscriminate slave-driving that followed. And the excuse that the men wished to labour was equally stupid and void, for the men would not work when offered it, and were not even shown the consideration inspired by those economic motives which, when human motives were wanting, once led masters to feed their slaves sufficiently to support them in a physical state fit for labour. And if, among the intellectual classes of Germany, among journalists or priests or pastors or professors, or among *bourgeois* or working men or even Socialists preaching Karl Marx's evangel of the dignity and authority and international solidarity of labour, there was any objection or any opposition, any moral repugnance anywhere in the German nation, then or later, it never found, so far as I know, any public voice or utterance. I was told that Bissing disapproved, and that certain of his

henchmen disapproved, and I heard stories to the effect that soldiers in executing the orders actually wept at the scenes they were compelled to witness, and that even certain officers turned away in shame, but not one ever gave any public expression to the sentiments that did them such unusual credit.

The policy, in defiance, one would say, of the conventions of The Hague, if it did not seem ridiculous to invoke again those mutilated charters wherein short years ago we thought to record the progress of the human species, had been instituted, as I have shown, as early as 1915 in the zone of operations, that inferno whose history will not be written until its rightful occupants shall have been released to recount their hideous sufferings. But that was not surprising ; anything was to be expected of the *Operationsgebiet*. It spread up into the lowlands of Flanders where old men of the *Landsturm* were quartered in peasants' homes, living in some sort of understanding under a *modus vivendi* by which they got on well enough, carrying water for the housewives, helping with the household tasks, able to converse in those vocables that are so much alike in Flemish and in low German, and perhaps paving the way, as Bissing shrewdly divined, to some sort of an understanding with the population, which he hoped by his subtle schemes to turn to the Imperial advantage later on.

But the Governor-General's determination to bring happiness to the unemployed of Belgium in spite of themselves by the humane compulsions of the pressgang, was not, as the Governor-General might have anticipated, appreciated by the people, and there were presented to him many protests, the first of which was that of the great Cardinal himself.

Brand WITHLOCK

### Footnotes.

*Belgium under the German Occupation : A Personal Narrative* ; London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919, 2 volumes. See chapter (« The Press-gangs», sometimes with title « *Documents in evidence* » in other editions), volume 2, pages 268-344 (76 pages), especially pages 268-271. (Very partial) French translation : «*Les enlèvements*» in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXVI (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 383-391.

It would be interesting compare with what **Paul MAX** (cousin of the *bourgmestre Adolphe MAX*) told about the same day 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%20guerre\\_de\\_Paul\\_Max\\_bdef.pdf](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)

It would also be interesting compare with what [Louis GILLE](#), [Alphonse OOMS](#) et [Paul DELANDSHEERE](#) told about the same days in *50 mois d'occupation allemande* (Volume 2 : 1916) :  
<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>