

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXXIII**. The press-gangs : **Bruges**.

At the old city of Bruges (Brugge), which, like Ghent, was in the *Etape*, the effort to induce the labourers to work for the Germans was made in a somewhat different fashion. Toward the **end of September** the German authorities ordered the city of Bruges to provide four hundred workmen, in groups of one hundred, "*for employment on the West Front*". The Burgomaster, Count Vizart, and his colleagues in the municipal administration, replied in the proud spirit of the old free city, saying that it was for the workmen themselves to decide whether they would work for the Germans or not ; as for the city fathers, they would neither provide the labourers nor give their names to the German authorities. The German Kommandant then asked, or perhaps ordered the Burgomaster and the aldermen to appear at his home. They went, and the Kommandant laid down the law ; the Germans were masters in Bruges, he said, and as masters they had the right to dictate orders, and the orders were not to be discussed, but to be obeyed.

But it was not in the traditions of Bruges for the municipal authorities to take orders from any

one ; the whole history of the proud old city had been one long defiance by Burgomaster and aldermen of some truculent overlord. The Burgomaster and the aldermen persisted in their refusal, and the Kommandant informed them that they were dismissed from office ;



they were to return to their houses and remain there, considering themselves under arrest, and the city of Bruges was to be fined one hundred thousand marks for each day's delay in providing the workmen. The Kommandant, in the German municipal way, had a professional mayor ready, Lieutenant Rogge, a German officer who in time of peace discharged the functions of Burgomaster of Schwerin, and he was detailed as Burgomaster of Bruges.

The Germans then demanded the lists of the *chômeurs*, but M. Henri van Vaillie, who was

director of the municipal service for the aid of the unemployed, refused to give the lists without the authorization of the *Comité National* at Brussels. And so he, too, was arrested at his home and put in prison, whence the Germans took him to the employment bureau, seized the books and took him back to prison where, without trial, he was condemned to remain for twenty-eight days and to pay a fine of three thousand marks, or, in default, to spend twenty-eight days longer in prison.

The *Polizei* were then sent to summon the *chômeurs* whose names were on the lists. Workmen, or men who appeared capable of working, were seized indiscriminately in the streets and at the *Meldeamt*, where all men between the ages of sixteen and forty-five were compelled to report at intervals. As rapidly as groups of one hundred men were assembled they were put under guard, conducted to the barracks, and on the following day shipped off in the tramway toward Meerbeek, near the Dutch frontier. All along the way weeping women gathered in crowds until German soldiers dispersed them. The Germans were constructing trenches just then along the Dutch border, in fear, it was supposed, of a British invasion from that direction. The men refusing to work in these trenches were imprisoned in a large building and told that those who would not work could not eat. Some of the men, after two days without food, surrendered ; others held out longer.

The same thing occurred in all the communes near Bruges.

Burgomaster Rogge, however, notwithstanding the fact that he was a professional mayor, did not achieve a very successful administration of the municipal affairs of Bruges ; it was not the same thing to govern a Belgian population as to govern a German population, which does as it is told to do. Like some other cities I might mention, Belgian cities are not so easily governed, and after a week the imported professional burgomaster gave up, the Bruges municipal authorities were recalled to their posts — and the city condemned to pay a fine of four hundred thousand marks.

M. van Vaillie was kept in prison until the end of his term ; he was treated with all severity, not even permitted to receive visits from his wife and children, and when he had completed the sentence he was fined three hundred marks.

M. Charles Serweytens, formerly president of the commercial court at Bruges, and honorary consul for Norway, had expressed publicly the opinion that it was contrary to international law to force the people to give up their brass and copper utensils — as they were compelled to do all over Belgium — and though he was sixty-five years of age and ill, he was sent off to prison in Germany.

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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). (**Very partial**) About Bruges : pages 277-279. 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

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>

It would also be interesting compare with what Charles TYTGAT told about the same days in ***Journal d'un journaliste. Bruxelles sous la botte allemande*** :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

Brugge tijdens de oorlog 1914-1918 :

Brugse verhalen uit de Grote oorlog,
inspiratiebundel 3 :

<https://www.brugge.be/files/uploads/document/inspiratiebundel-3.pdf>

http://www.historischebronnenbrugge.be/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=136&Itemid=497

www.beeldbankbrugge.be