

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

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

He came with the story of Alost. There the men "*capable of bearing arms*" — nothing was said there about *chômeurs* — were summoned by *affiche* on Thursday, **October 12**, to present themselves the following day. About seventeen hundred men, between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, were assembled. They were examined by the Germans precisely as slaves would be examined in the slave mart, their muscles pinched and tested, and about four hundred who appeared physically unfit were thus eliminated. The remaining thirteen hundred were locked up at Alost, and a second examination eliminated about three hundred more. The thousand who remained were imprisoned and the military authorities by force compelled the Burgomaster to announce to them that they need not fear, that they would be utilized only for work on the railways. The men were then released and told to appear on the 16th, bringing certain clothes and effects.

However, on the following Monday, the 16th, instead of the thousand less than six hundred appeared. Of these the married men were released, and the remaining, about four hundred,

were given a paper to sign. The paper was in German, and the military refused to translate it or to explain its contents. The men, all of them, refused to sign, and were again locked up. What happened after that the man did not know, but two trains filled with young men went away, and the young men were singing "*La Brabançonne*" and "*De Leeuw van Vlaanderen*".

Later we learned of their fate. The men seized at Alost were not deported to Germany, but were taken to France in the *région* of the Somme, a few hours from the firing-line. There they were set to work making a grade for a railroad line ; at night they were locked up in an unused factory building and as they were given little to eat the French used to come and throw bits of food over the walls for the Belgians. Some of the French were punished for this charity by fines of from twenty to fifty marks, and afterward they would place food on the side of the road along which the prisoners were led when they went to their work. Despite the prohibition of the military authorities the French continued to help the Belgians in many ways, and it was due to their efforts that two young men from Alost, brothers, twenty and twenty-two years of age, were able to escape, and, making their way on foot, at last to reach Brussels. They, had made their escape one day when aviators came to throw bombs on the railway line they were building ; the German guards ran to cover, and the

two Belgian boys seized the moment to flee. They wore, like all the other enslaved Belgians, yellow brassards to distinguish them from the French, who wore red brassards, but some French men gave them red brassards, and with these to avert suspicion they escaped, lay in hiding all day and at night set forth on foot. They reached Brussels, as I have said, and finally got back to Alost. They said that when they were first seized they were asked to sign contracts to work, which they refused to do. They were deprived of their food but would not yield; then they were beaten until they were black and blue all over, but they never signed the contracts. The Germans tried to force one Belgian of their party, who had refused to work, to take up a pick; they tied his hands to the implement, but he said though they cut his hands off he would never yield. This man had been so brutally treated that the two boys thought he would never live to see Belgium again. The Germans in speaking of the Belgians called them *Banditen* or *schlechtes Volk*.

The paper the men had been asked to sign was, no doubt, an agreement to labour that would invest the transaction with the innocent and legal aspect of a voluntary contract of employment. The Germans laid great stress on this contract in the earlier days of the press; they sought by threats, by cuffs, and blows of gun stocks, to force the men to sign it, and frequently tried hunger — indeed, did

starve some of the men into signing it — and exhibited the contracts afterward as proof of the Belgian willingness to work. But later this effort to make the transaction appear normal and legal was abandoned, and the "*contracts*" were heard of no more.

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). About Alost : pages 274-276. (**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 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>

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)

See also :

PASSELECQ, Fernand ; ***Les déportations belges à la lumière des documents allemands*** (avec de nombreux fac-similés et la reproduction de tous les documents belges) ; Paris-Nancy, Berger-Levrault ; 1917, pp. 27-28.

<http://www.bibliotheca-andana.be/wp-content/uploads/large/Deportations.pdf>