

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

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

(...) 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. (page 269) (...)

As early as **October 19**, when the news of the deportations was spreading abroad, His Eminence had written to the Governor-General a letter which he sent to the Baron von der Lancken to be delivered to his chief. The Cardinal's note transmitting the protest to the Baron contained a paragraph of the highest spirit, which itself would have disposed of all the Governor-General's specious reasons, if the Cardinal could have got his letter published.

*"I hope", he wrote to Baron von der Lancken, "that you will employ all your influence with the superior authorities to avoid such an outrage. And do not talk to us, I beg you ; of the need of protecting domestic order or alleviating the burdens of public charity. Spare us that bitter irony. You know well that public order is not threatened*

*and that all the moral and civil influences would lend you spontaneously their aid if it were in danger. The unemployed are not a burden to the official charity, and it is not your money which aids them."*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

**Translation :**

To Baron von der Lancken,  
Chief of the Political Department near the  
Governor-General, Brussels.

Baron :

I have the honour to send to His Excellency the Baron von Bissing a letter of which I add here a copy.

The Governor-General has expressed many times, even publicly, his wish to reserve a large part of his solicitude for the interest of the occupied country. Yourself, Baron, have so often affirmed the desire of the German authorities not to perpetuate, under the regime of occupation, the state of war of the first days, that I cannot believe that the measures by which your Government menaces the working men reduced, in spite of themselves, to unemployment will be placed in execution.

I hope that you will use all your influence with superior authorities in order to prevent such an outrage.

And do not talk to us, I beg you, of the need of protecting domestic order or alleviating the burdens of public charity. Spare us that bitter irony. You know well that public order is not threatened, and that all the moral and civil influences would lend you spontaneously their aid if it were in danger. The unemployed are not a burden on official charity, and it is not your money that aids them.

Consider if it is not in the interest of Germany as much as in our own, to respect engagements signed by two high personalities of your Empire.

I have confidence that my efforts towards the Governor-General and towards you will not be misinterpreted or misunderstood, and I beg you to accept, Baron, the expression of my most distinguished sentiments.

D. J. Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

**Translation :**

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing,  
Governor-General, Brussels.

Archbishopric of Malines

Malines, October 19, 1916.

Mr. Governor General :

The day after the surrender of Antwerp the frightened population asked itself what would become of the Belgians of age to bear arms or who would reach that age before the end of the

occupation. The entreaties of the fathers and mothers of families determined me to question the Governor of Antwerp, Baron von Huene, who had the kindness to reassure me and to authorize me to reassure in his name the agonized parents. The rumour had spread at Antwerp, nevertheless, that at Liège, Namur and Charleroi young men had been seized and taken by force to Germany. I therefore asked Governor von Huene to be good enough to confirm to me in writing the guarantee which he had given to me orally, to the effect that nothing similar would happen in Antwerp. He answered me immediately that the rumours concerning deportations were without basis, and unhesitatingly he sent me in writing, among other statements, the following :

*"Young men need have no fear that they will be taken to Germany, either to be there enrolled in the army or to be employed for forced labour."*

This declaration, written and signed, was publicly transmitted to the clergy and to those of the faith of the province of Antwerp, as Your Excellency can see from the document enclosed herewith, dated **October 16, 1914**, which was read in all the churches.

Upon the arrival of your predecessor, the late Baron von der Goltz, at Brussels, I had the honour of presenting myself at his house and asking him to be good enough to ratify for the entire country, without time limit, the guarantees which General

von Huene had given to me for the province of Antwerp. The Governor-General retained this request in his possession in order to examine it at his leisure. The following day he was good enough to come in person to Malines to bring me his approval, and confirmed to me, in the presence of two aides-de-camp and of my private secretary, the promise that the liberty of Belgian citizens would be respected.

To doubt the authority of such undertakings would have been to have reflections on the persons who had made them, and I took steps therefore to allay, by all the means of persuasion in my power, the anxieties which persisted in the interested families.

Notwithstanding all this your Government now tears from their homes workmen reduced, in spite of their efforts, to a state of unemployment, separates them by force from their wives and children, and deports them to enemy territory. Numerous workmen have already undergone this unhappy lot ; more numerous are those who are threatened by the same acts of violence.

In the name of the liberty of domicile and of the liberty of work ; in the name of the inviolability of families ; in the name of the moral interests which the measures of deportation would deeply compromise ; in the name of the word given by the government of the province of Antwerp and by the Governor-General, immediate representative of the

highest authority of the German Empire, I respectfully beg Your Excellency to be kind enough to withdraw the measures of forced labour and of deportation threatened the Belgian workmen, and to be good enough to reinstate in their homes those who have already been deported.

Your Excellency will appreciate how painful would be for me the weight of the responsibility that I would have to bear as regards these families if the confidence which they have given you through my intermediary and at my request had been lamentably deceived.

I persist in believing that it will not be thus.

Accept, Mr. Governor-General, the assurance of my very high consideration.

D. J. Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

### **Translation of :**

Archbishopric of Malines.

Malines, October 16, 1914.

Dear Confrères and Devoted Collaborators :

The clergy of the province of Antwerp is largely scattered and I have no direct means of communicating with all of you. I therefore request those among you who read these lines to be good

enough to transmit them to their *confrères* with whom they are in communication.

It is urgent that the *curés* and the *vice-curés* return to their parishes if they have left them. The highways are open and public security is guaranteed everywhere. The return of the clergy will strengthen the courage of the people ; as the homes are repopulated the honest people will hunt out the marauders ; they will resume work, and life will soon return to its normal course.

The Governor of Antwerp, General the Baron von Huene, has authorized me to inform you in his name, and to communicate by your obliging intermediary to our population, the three following declarations :

(1) The young men need not fear being taken to Germany, either to be enrolled in the army or to be employed at forced labour.

(2) If individual infractions of police regulations are committed, the authorities will institute a search for the responsible parties and will punish them, without placing the responsibility on the entire population.

(3) The German and the Belgian authorities will spare no effort to assure the distribution of food to the population.

I earnestly request the pastor to rejoin his flock, even in the parishes where the church and presbytery have been destroyed, and to conduct the services in some improvised place, either in a

hall or in a barn or in a private house, and to ask shelter for himself in the home of one of his faithful flock.

The first duty of the *curé*, after his return amidst his parishioners, will be to form a relief committee, which he will supervise and which will be composed of the notable persons in the parish. The mission of this committee will be to provide shelter for families in distress, even though it be only temporary ; to help them to find immediate means of subsistence ; to urge them to take up again their work in the fields, sowing, working at their trades, etc. ; to open as soon as possible the schools for the children and to instruct them in their catechism ; and, in general, to give to every one the moral comfort and religious confidence which so many souls require in the unhappy hours we are passing through.

The less unfortunate parishes have a bounden duty to perform toward the populations who have suffered more. They must also organize their relief committees and send their monetary assistance to the Archbishopric (the administration of the Archbishopric, if it please God, will be reinstalled at Malines on the 20th instant), which will distribute it according to the needs of the diocese.

The public authorities will, of course, assure the rebuilding of the houses destroyed by the war, but charitable private initiative must provide at



once for the first buildings and for the first work of farming, and it is to this generous initiative that our devoted clergy must make its appeal.

Persons who are possessed of some means must consider it a rigorous obligation of charity to come to the assistance of the unfortunate and to enable us to perform our duties in our religious capacity. Until further orders abstinence from fasting will be allowed on Fridays and other fast days.

Please accept, my dear *confrères* and devoted collaborators, the assurances of my religious devotion.

D. J. Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

#### 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 this letter abstract : pages 271 + 286-289. (**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 384-385.

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>

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>