

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

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

To His Eminence, Cardinal Mercier,
Archbishop of Malines, Malines.

Brussels, October 26, 1916.

Mr. Cardinal :

By your honoured letter of October 19, Your Eminence made the request that the Belgian unemployed be not taken to Germany. While appreciating to its just value the point of view taken by Your Eminence, I believe I must reply that you have not considered the problem in all its aspects, full of difficulties as it is. Your Eminence seems not to take into account the abnormal circumstances created by two years of war. The measures taken, the repeal of which you desire, are but the expression of an imperative necessity, an inevitable consequence of the war. You will find below the *exposé*.

Your Eminence begins by recalling the declarations made by my predecessor and the Military Governor of Antwerp in the month of

October 1914. These declarations referred to incidents closely related to military operations ; they concerned Belgians fit for military service who, according to the customs of war generally recognized, might have been taken to Germany as civil prisoners. At that time England and France were taking off neutral steamers on the high seas all Germans between the ages of 17 and 50, in order to intern them in concentration camps. Germany did not apply the same measures to the Belgians. The declarations made to Your Eminence in order to reassure the population have been strictly observed. In any case these declarations were a proof of the good intentions with which the German General Government assumed the administration of the occupied territory. Owing to the clandestine emigration *en masse* of young Belgians bent upon joining the Belgian army, the German authorities would have been perfectly justified in imitating the example of England and France. This they did not do. The employment of Belgian unemployed in Germany, which has been inaugurated only after two years of war, differs essentially from the placing in captivity of men fit for military service. The measure, furthermore, is not related to the conduct of war so called, but is influenced by social and economic causes.

The economic isolation of Germany pursued by England without mercy, with the greatest rigour,

has been extended and has weighed more and more upon Belgium. Belgian commerce and industry, being largely dependent on the importation of raw materials and the exportation of finished products, were attacked at their very bases. The inevitable consequence was lack of employment for the greater part of the population. The system of subsidies allotted to the unemployed upon a great scale might appear acceptable on condition that the war be of short duration. The long duration of the war entailed an abusive exploitation of these subsidies and produced a state of things untenable from the social point of view. Far-sighted Belgians called upon me in the spring of 1915 to show its perils. They insisted upon this point — that whosoever supplies the funds at present the subsidies will finally have to be paid by Belgium. They set forth, furthermore, that the subsidies tend to induce laziness among the working men. The inevitable consequence of enforced unemployment would mean the physical and moral decadence of the workmen ; especially would expert workmen lose their technical cunning and upon the signing of peace would become unfit for any work. It was upon these representations and in collaboration with the competent Belgian administration that my orders of the month of August, 1915 (**Note** : decree 15/08/1915; see below), against voluntary unemployment were elaborated. They were

completed by the order of May 15th, 1916. These orders did not contemplate the employment of force except in cases where workmen refused without any valid motives to accept work of a suitable nature and offered at a reasonable salary, and who thereby became a charge upon the public charity. Every refusal based upon international law is formally recognized as valid. Consequently no workman can be forced to undertake work of a military nature. Your Eminence will recognize that these orders are based upon sane considerations of legislation which properly place the general interest above that of individual liberty.

The social plagues noticed in 1915 having with time evolved into public calamity, it becomes imperative to apply at once the orders in question.

In your letter Your Eminence invokes the high ideal of familial virtues. I may be permitted to reply that, like Your Eminence, I place this ideal very high, but for that very reason I must say also that the working classes run the great risk of completely losing all ideal if the present state of affairs, which can but become worse, continues. For laziness is the family's worst enemy. Surely the man who works far away from his folk — a state of affairs which has existed always for the Belgian workman — contributes much more to the welfare of his family than by remaining at home in idleness. Workmen accepting work in Germany are permitted to remain in relation with their families. At

regular intervals they will be allowed leaves to return to their country. They may take their families to Germany, where they will find priests acquainted with the languages.

In their own common sense the people have to a great extent well understood those truths, and by tens of thousands Belgian workmen have gone to Germany of their own free will. Placed on the same level with German workmen, they earn high salaries which they have never known in Belgium. Far from falling into misery, like their comrades who have remained in Belgium, they, as well as their families, have become self-supporting again. Others in large numbers would like to follow their example. They do not dare because influences are brought systematically to bear upon them. Responsibility for rigours which can not be avoided would fall upon those who have prevented them from working.

Finally, to judge the situation as a whole, I pray Your Eminence to be so kind as to give His attention to the following explanations, which are the very essence of the problem :

The isolation imposed by England has forced the occupied territories to enter into closer economic relations with Germany. Practically the only country with which Belgium can entertain commercial relations is Germany. Although it is the custom between enemy countries, Germany has never forbidden the payment of funds into Belgium,

and consequently German money is continually coming into the country. The salaries of workmen in Germany will increase that flow. Moreover, in a general way the occupation brings money into Belgium continually and adds it to the war contributions which, as it is admitted and established, are spent entirely in the country. The community of interests resulting from these facts imposes, by the logic of things, on both parties the necessity of exchanging and of stabilizing the elements of economic life. Hundreds of thousands being without work in Belgium while Germany needs labourers, it becomes a duty both from an economic and a social point of view, to furnish the Belgian unemployed with the productive labour in Germany necessitated by this community of interests. If there are any objections to offer to such a state of affairs they must be addressed to England, who, by her policy of isolation, has created the situation.

Your Eminence will see from the above that the problem is very complex. I should feel a satisfaction if after my explanation Your Eminence would consider it from a social and an economic point of view.

Frh. von Bissing.

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 the letter and the English translation : pages 291-294. (**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

German decree, dated 15/8/1915, concerning
**« les chômeurs qui, par paresse,
se soustraient au travail »**

**ARRÊTÉ CONCERNANT LES CHOMEURS QUI, PAR
PARESSE, SE SOUSTRAIENT AU TRAVAIL.**

Article 1^{er}

Quiconque, sciemment ou par négligence, fait de fausses déclarations au sujet de sa situation personnelle lors d'une enquête destinée à établir son indigence, est passible d'une peine d'emprisonnement de six semaines au plus, à moins que les lois en vigueur ne prévoient l'application d'une peine plus forte ; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une amende pouvant aller jusque deux mille deux cent cinquante francs.

Article 2.

Quiconque est secouru par l'assistance publique ou privée, et, sans motif suffisant, refuse d'entreprendre ou de continuer un travail qu'on lui a proposé et qui répond à ses capacités ou quiconque, en refusant un tel travail, tombe à charge de l'assistance publique ou privée, sera passible d'une peine d'emprisonnement de quatorze jours à six mois.

Tout motif concernant le refus de travailler sera valable s'il est admis par le droit des gens.

Le tribunal peut, en outre, ordonner l'application de la mesure prévue à l'article 14 de la loi du 27 novembre 1891 (« Moniteur belge », p. 3531 et suivantes).

Article 3.

Quiconque, sciemment favorise par des secours ou d'autres moyens le refus de travailler punissable en vertu de l'article 2 est passible d'une amende pouvant aller jusque douze mille cinq cents francs ; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une peine d'emprisonnement d'un an au plus.

Article 4.

Si des communes, associations ou d'autres groupements favorisent le refus de travailler de la manière prévue à l'article 3, les chefs en seront rendus responsables conformément à cet article.

Article 5.

S'il est prouvé que certaines sommes sont destinées à secourir les personnes désignées à l'article 2, ces sommes seront confisquées au profit de la Croix-Rouge de Belgique.

Article 6.

Les infractions au présent arrêté seront jugées par les chambres correctionnelles des tribunaux belges de première instance.

Article 7.

Le présent arrêté entrera en vigueur le jour de sa publication.

Bruxelles, le 15 Août 1915.

Der General-Gouverneur in Belgien,
Freiherr von BISSING,
Generaloberst.