

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

(...) 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)

Von Bissing had no sooner received and replied to the Cardinal's protest, and then read the Cardinal's rejoinder, than he was involved in another correspondence, this time with the working men themselves who, on **October 30**, through the Socialist organizations and the independent labour unions, protested against the deportations. The Governor-General replied on **November 3**, and the workingmen rejoined on **November 14** (Note 2 page 304) and the six documents that compose this correspondence express not only the two parties to the conflict, but set side by side in the light of their bright contrast, the two systems that are grappling in the world to-day. Governor-General's views were published in Belgium, but those of his opponents and victims were not,

though they found their way at last into the freer and more luminous world outside.

Brand WHITLOCK

(Translation :)

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing,
Governor-General in Belgium, Brussels

Brussels, October 30, 1916.

Excellency :

The measures under consideration by your administration to force the unemployed to work for an invading power, the deportation of our unhappy comrades which has begun in the *region of the etape*, have most profoundly moved the entire working class in Belgium.

The undersigned members of the large socialist and independent syndicates of Belgium would consider that they had not fulfilled their duty if they did not express to you the painful sentiments which agitate the labourers and convey to you the echo of their touching complaints.

They have seen the machinery taken from their factories, the most diverse kinds of raw materials being requisitioned, the accumulation of obstacles to prevent the resumption of regular

work, the disappearance, one by one, of every public liberty of which they were so proud.

For more than two years the labouring class, more than any other, has been forced to undergo the most bitter trials, experiencing misery and often hunger ; while their children far away fight and die, the parents can never convey to them the affection with which their hearts are overflowing.

Our labouring class has endured everything with the utmost calm and with the most impressive dignity, ignoring its sufferings and heavy trials, sacrificing everything to its ideal of liberty and independence. But now the measures which have been announced will make the population drink the last dregs of the cup of human sorrow ; the proletariat, the poor upon whom unemployment has been forced, citizens of a modern state, are to be condemned to forced labour without having violated any regulation or order.

In the name of the families of workmen among which the most painful anxiety reigns at present, whose mothers, whose fiancées and whose little children are destined to shed so many more tears, we beg Your Excellency to prevent the carrying out of this painful enterprise, contrary to international law, contrary to the dignity of the working classes, contrary to everything that makes for worth and greatness in human nature.

We beg Your Excellency to pardon our emotion and we offer Him the homage of our distinguished consideration.

(Signed by the members of the National Committee and of the Commission Syndicale de la Belgique.)

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 and the English translation : pages 304-305. (**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