

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

(...) 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)

There were other protests, too, to which the Governor-General did not reply, that of **November 2**, signed by the Senators and Deputies of the district of Mons

Brand WITHLOCK

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

Excellency :

We, the deputies and senators of the district of Mons, feel it our duty to protest vigorously against the impressment of able-bodied men which is being carried out in our region at this moment by the German military authorities, and to bring to your attention the just reproach which it deserves.

The events occur as follows :

Posters direct citizens over seventeen years of age to present themselves on a certain day at a certain hour and place, under penalty of severe punishment for disobedience, or as certain posters declare, under penalty of being considered unemployed.

The men assembled are grouped in several divisions.

A preliminary division eliminates a number of classes : priests, doctors, professors, old men, sick, etc.

Thereupon the selection takes place.

All those who are chosen are placed at one side and led under strong guard to the station, where a train awaits them. The others are liberated. We do not know what rules are followed in making the choice. Unemployed men are taken, but also many others who have never been without work, in various professions : butchers, bakers, master tailors, brewers, electricians, farmers ; very young people are taken as well, high school students, university students, and those attending other higher schools ; and, on the other hand, heads of families already past middle age who have several children to care for.

The manner of recruiting varies. Sometimes the recruiting officer depends upon the size of the population, sometimes he requires the persons to show their identification-cards ; he sometimes tries to gain the consent of the person summoned.

Some contracts have been signed where it is stipulated that the duration of time is limited to four months, the wages at five marks, the lodgings chosen by the German authorities, and the transportation free, going and coming ; the point of destination is not determined.

More often the signatures are obtained by intimidation or as the result of a promise of several days' delay before being sent away.

The men enrolled by force leave without the knowledge of their families as to where they are going and for how long. At first they present themselves without provisions, linen or extra clothing, ignorant of the fate awaiting them.

It is a sad spectacle, the unexpected and brutal separation of members of a family without a word, without saying good-bye.

Sorrow, anxiety and indignation have filled many, many homes. This deportation is the worst of punishments. It revolts the proudest and most deeply felt sentiments of our race, the love of liberty, particularly of the freedom of work and the attachment to the land of birth.

The military authorities have declared on several occasions that such enrollments were made only because the mayors refused to point out themselves those who were unemployed in their communes.

Is it necessary to defend the mayors against such an accusation ?

We state firmly that it is not justified. All the mayors have caused to be posted the orders of the authorities requiring the unemployed to register in the books in the possession of the communal administration. In obeying that order the mayors have done everything that they should have done ; they could not have done more. As a matter of fact the laws of our country do not permit them to enter the homes of private individuals and to proceed to make investigations as to their social status ; the Belgian is his own master in his home, and he owes it to no one to account for his mode of existence.

Any mayor who would have gone so far as to make a list of the unemployed and to hand it to the military authorities would have called down upon himself the curses of his people. In so doing he would have taken part in a measure of force which is going to compel a large number of our fellow-citizens to go to Germany to carry out most repulsive and most odious work — work the results of which are to be used against the native land.

It is invariably said that the workers will not be employed except on projects that are not of a military nature. But what is such an explanation worth ?

In taking the place of a German workman the Belgian workman permits a gap in the German army to be filled.

To work for Germany is to fight against one's country.

And the instinct of the public is not deceived. It has resisted the most pressing appeals, the most tempting promises posted on its walls. Very few in number are those whose lust for large wages tempted them into Germany.

The Press has called our working population indolent. This is an insult.

The Belgians are not lazy, but they love their country and they realize the sacred duty that the war imposes. No man of honour can blame them for their resistance.

We have felt obliged, Excellency, to recite these facts to you in order that you may use your high authority to put an end to this flagrant violation of international law.

As for us, we should have been lacking in our duty if we had not lifted the voice of our conscience at a moment so solemn and so sorrowful.

Accept, Excellency, the expression of our most distinguished consideration.

Senators : Mosselman, Roland, Vicomte Vilain XIII, Demerbe.

Deputies : Alph. Harmignie, Masson, Bastien, Mariolle, Brenez, Servais.

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 278-354 (**76** pages), especially pages 312-314. (**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 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>