

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

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

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

**Translation :**

Brussels, November 3, 1916.

To the Commission of Labour Unions.

In reply to your communication of October 30, 1916, in which you beg me to refrain from the deportation of the unemployed to Germany, I inform you that I am unable to grant your request.

Since the beginning of the war a large number of Belgian workmen have been unemployed. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, the inactivity of many industrial plants because of the lack of raw materials which the enemy's policy of isolation has brought about, and, on the other hand, a disinclination to work.

The long duration of this state of affairs has begun to manifest serious consequences, and as Governor of the occupied territory I am in duty bound, in virtue of the principles of international law, to take the necessary measures to prevent these consequences.

As early as the spring of 1915 far-seeing Belgians pointed out to me the dangers of unemployment and of the disinclination to work. They dwelt particularly upon the fact that charitable aid, no matter what its source, would in the end be harmful to the political economy of Belgium, and that it would induce idleness. The consequence of this state of affairs is that the workmen depreciate morally and physically ; particularly qualified workmen will lose their capability and their dexterity, and also, when peace comes, will be incapable of working for Belgian industries.

In accordance with this idea, and in collaboration with the competent Belgian ministries, my notices against this antagonism to work were posted in August, 1915, and were afterward supplemented by the regulations of May 15, 1916.

These regulations did not provide forced labour except in case the unemployed labourer should refuse, without sufficient cause, to do work suited to his capacity and to be remunerated by a proper salary, his support, in consequence, falling upon the public charities.

Any cause based on international law is expressly recognized as a legitimate reason for refusal. Thus no workman can be obliged to take part in military operations. These ordinances rest on wholesome considerations, which properly

place the interests of the commonwealth above those of individual liberty.

It is now a question solely of the efficacious application of these ordinances, after the anomaly which already existed in 1915 had been changed, in the course of time, into a public calamity.

For this purpose lists of names of unemployed are demanded of the mayors. When the men are assembled to be presented to the authorities, well-paid employment is offered to the unemployed whose names are on the lists ; it is true that this work must be performed in Germany because in the territory of the General-Government only a limited number of unemployed can be used.

The unemployed who do not accept the work offered them at these meetings for registry are taken by force to Germany. They also receive a salary there, but less than that given to those who remit themselves to be enrolled as free workmen.

I hope that these measures will not have to be applied except in unusual cases. A large part of the ordinary population has, through its good sense, perfectly understood the conditions of affairs, and Belgian workmen by tens of thousands have already gone to Germany, where, placed on the same footing as the German workmen, they earn salaries higher than those they ever knew in Belgium, and where, instead of dying in misery like their comrades who remain in Belgium, they raise

their economic situation as well as that of their families.

You must admit, after these details, that, thanks to the transfert of the Belgian unemployed to Germany, the economic interests of Belgium are entirely safeguarded.

When you influence the unemployed in this manner, you render them a better service than when you induce them to refuse to work, and when thereby, you oblige the German authorities to take severe measures.

If it should be necessary to employ harshness in the seizures, and if employed workmen are taken away, the fault will lie at the door of the burgomasters who refused to give the lists of the unemployed, or whose lists were incomplete.

The Governor-General,  
Von Bissing, *General in Chief*.

**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 this letter and the English translation : pages 306-307. (**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](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>