

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

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

Antwerp, November 7, 1916.

Excellency :

By virtue of an order of the Military Governor of Antwerp, given according to the instructions of the Governor-General in Belgium and dated November 2, 1916, our fellow-citizens without work, whose names are on the lists of the ***Meldeamt***, are now called to present themselves at the Southern Railway Station. From there they will be transported by force if necessary to Germany, there to be compelled to perform labour that will be assigned to them.

The same measures have been taken in the rest of the country.

Without judgment, without having committed any wrong, thousands of free citizens are thus deported against their will to an enemy land, far from their homes, far from their wives and children,

there to submit to a treatment the hardest of all for a free man — forced labour.

Deputies, Senators, Notables of Antwerp and of its agglomeration, we would consider ourselves as having failed in every one of our duties if such things could happen under our eyes without our using the right that we have to address ourselves in all circumstances to the executive power to make known our complaints or reservations or our protestations.

By what right is forced labour with deportation introduced in our unhappy country ?

Such is the question to which we seek in vain a response.

International law condemns such a measure.

There is not a modern author that justifies it. The text of The Hague Conventions, limiting requisitions to the profit of the army of occupation, are directly opposed to it.

The constitutional right of all European countries, Germany among them, is not less opposed to it. The most illustrious of your sovereigns, Frederick II, has honoured the individual liberty as a dogma, and the right of every citizen to dispose of his faculties and his work as he wishes to. The occupant must respect these essential principles, which for centuries have become the common patrimony of humanity.

It cannot be disputed that Belgian workmen deported by virtue of the measures in question

liberate proportionally German working men, in giving them freedom to go and fight the brothers and the sons of the workmen who have been carried away by force. There is an evident co-operation in the war against our country which article 52 of the Convention of The Hague prohibits in those very terms.

That is not all.

The morning after the occupation of Antwerp hundreds and thousands of our fellow-citizens left their country and took refuge in Holland, in the region situated along the frontier.

The most reassuring declarations were made to them by the German authorities.

On October 9 General von Bessler, Commander-in-Chief of the besieging army, submitted to the negotiators sent to Contich a declaration stating "*the disarmed gardes civiques will not be considered as prisoners of war.*"

Under the same date Lieutenant-General von Schultz, called to the commandment of the fortified place of Antwerp, had proclaimed the following :

"The undersigned, commanding the fortified place of Antwerp, declares that nothing is opposed to the return of the inhabitants to their homes.

Not one will be molested.

Disarmed gardes civiques can safely return."

On October 16, 1914, Cardinal Mercier communicated to the population a declaration signed by General von Huene, Military Governor of

Antwerp, in which the latter said *in terminis*, for the purpose of publication :

"The young men need not fear to be sent to Germany, either to be enrolled in the army or to be employed in forced labour."

A short time afterwards the eminent prelate of Belgium asked Baron von der Goltz, Governor-General in Belgium, to ratify for the whole of the country, without limit of time, the guarantees which General von Huene had given him for the province of Antwerp.

He succeeded in doing so.

Finally, on October 18, 1914, the military authority of Antwerp gave, under his signature, to the delegates of General van Terwisga, commanding the Dutch army in the field, a declaration confirming not only that young men and disarmed *gardes civiques* could return to Belgium and need not be troubled, but added besides : *"The rumour according to which the young Belgians will be sent into Germany . . . is entirely without foundation."*

It is on the faith of these solemn and public declarations that numberless citizens, not only of Antwerp but of all parts of the country, came back again across the frontier and returned to their homes.

Now, these men who returned to Belgium after such formal declarations will be sent to Germany, there to be obliged to perform this forced

labour which they were promised they would never be compelled to do.

Under these circumstances we believe we have the right to ask that the measure taken be reported.

We add that the treaty of Contich stipulates formally that the *gardes civiques* will not be treated as prisoners of war. There can, then, be no question of transporting them to Germany to receive a treatment still more rigorous.

The preamble of the ordinance which we are considering seems to complain of the inaction of the working men, and invokes the care for public order, and is troubled about the increasing charges on public charity.

We may be permitted to remark to your Excellency that at the time of the invasion of the German army there were in the country considerable stocks of raw materials, of which the transformation would have given work for a long time to numerous working men. These stocks were taken away and transported to Germany. There were factories completely fitted out with machinery which could have worked for exportation into neutral countries. The machines and tools and much else were taken away in great numbers and sent to Germany.

To be sure, it has happened that our working men have refused employment offered by the occupant because this aimed to aid the occupant

in his military enterprise ; instead of high wages gained at such a price, they preferred privations. But where is the patriot, where is the man of heart, who would not have admired these workmen for their dignity and their courage ?

No one can reproach with inaction, then, our working classes, who cede to no one in their love of labour.

The ordinance invokes besides a desire to establish good order, and is preoccupied by the fear that numberless unemployed will be a charge on public charity.

The order has not been troubled.

As to charity, it is true that millions have been dispensed in aiding the unemployed since the beginning of the war in Belgium. But for that great effort of solidarity, nothing has been asked from the German Government, neither from the Belgian Treasury administered under your surveyance and furnished by our taxes. Germany need not worry about money that does not belong to her, and Your Excellency is not unaware that it is not the public charity, but the *Comité National* which assures the budget of this work so necessary, and that it will perform it in the future as it has done in the past.

None of the motives invoked to sustain the new policy appears to us as being well founded.

In the history of war one will seek in vain during two centuries a precedent, and in the wars of the Revolution and of the Empire, or in those

that afterwards desolated Europe, no one has ever touched the sacred principle of individual liberty of peaceful and inoffensive populations.

Where would one stop in this road if reasons of state should justify such a treatment ? Even in colonies forced labour has disappeared at the present time.

In consequence, we beg Your Excellency to take into consideration the views which we have just submitted to him, and to return to their homes those of our fellow-citizens who were deported to Germany as a result of the order of November 2, 1916.

(Here follow the signatures of the Senators, Deputies and Notables of Antwerp.)

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 338-342, especially pages 340-342. (**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](http://www.museedelavilledebruxelles.be/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/Fichier_PDF/Fonte/Journal_de%20guerre_de_Paul_Max_bdef.pdf)