

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

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

(...) 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 9**, signed by the Belgian Senators and Deputies present in Brussels at that time. (note 4, page 323)

**Translation :**

Brussels, November 9, 1916.

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

Excellency :

It seemed that no suffering could be added to those which we have already been bearing since the occupation of our country. Our banished liberty,

our destroyed industry and commerce, our raw materials, our instruments of work taken out of the country, the public fortune ruined, privations replacing the wealth of families formerly the most prosperous, grief, anxieties and mourning, had all been endured without any other sign of revolt than a mute protestation of the spirit, without any disturbance of public order in any part of the country. An enormous impulse of solidarity had brought together all the social classes in a common suffering, and the mutuality of burdens lessened the weight of the individual miseries.

But now comes a new violence to our families, tearing them apart.

Hundreds and thousands of peaceful citizens of all ages, of all conditions, an entire civilian population, is harshly, brutally turned out of its home and deported to Germany. Where, in what part of the Empire ? No one knows. What will be their existence ? To what work will they be assigned ? For these reasons hundreds and thousands of wives, children and old men are abandoned and deprived of their support, betrayed to the anguishes of a separation of which no one can see the end ; and the spectacle of their desolation is such that in order not to witness it the recruiters refuse the suffering wives, the suffering parents, the consolation of a last farewell.

Is there need to repeat the scenes for which the region of the *étape* has for several weeks been

the theatre, and which have been repeating themselves during the past days in the territory of the Government-General where this terrible measure promises to extend from commune to commune until its victims are counted by hundreds of thousands ? The notices posted on the walls and reproduced in the newspapers tell sufficiently what it is. It is the same procedure everywhere, summary and sorrowful : arrests *en masse*, men classed arbitrarily among the unemployed, grouped together, divided, sent toward the unknown. To mention only the notices of yesterday, posted at Nivelles, Virginal, Ittre, Haut-Ittre, Lillois, Baulers, Monstreux, Bornival, Thimes, Braine l'Alleud, Ophain, Wauthier-Braine, Waterloo, Plancenoit ; they summon without distinction all persons of the male sex over seventeen years of age, with the exception only of clergymen, doctors, lawyers and professors, and they are told to bring with them only a small amount of baggage. The levy is no longer limited to unemployed ; indeed the pretext to give employment to our unemployed outside of the country no longer deceives us. The best means of giving them occupation in their own country would have been to leave them their tools, their machines, their shops, their supplies, their facilities for communication, their liberty of work. Philanthropists have suggested using workmen on public improvements. Their initiative has been

stopped and finally broken. Others have taken steps to organize for the unemployed a vast system of technical education, intended to increase their professional value ; but the plan was not approved, any more than that which had envisaged the creation in various places of information offices and employment bureaus.

They prefer to give them work in Germany, where the representatives of the Industrial Bureau promise them "*good wages*" if they consent to work there "*voluntarily*", and where they may expect, in case of refusal, famine wages ; physical and moral depression are counted on in order to force their hand.

Invariably it has been asserted that the work offered to them is non-military in character ; but denials from every side have come in. In taking the place of a German workman the Belgian workman permits Germany to increase the numerical force of its armies. The most odious work is that which is used in effect against the native land. To serve Germany is to fight against their own country. To compel our workmen to do this is nothing less than an act of force contrary to international law, as cited by Your Excellency in his proclamation of August 15th, 1915, and contrary also to the spirit, if not to the text of the fourth convention of The Hague of 1907.

"*A measure such as the deportation of non-combatant civil population*", writes Ernest Nys,

Professor of International Law, in his letter of even date (**Note** : November **6th**) to the Mayor of Brussels, **a copy of which is enclosed herewith**, "*is in complete contradiction to the idea of military occupation. This idea has replaced the former theory of conquest, which made the conqueror the sovereign of the conquered country. The conqueror must respect the rights of the peaceful inhabitants*".

It is in the name of the sacred rights openly violated that the senators and deputies whose signatures follow, now at Brussels, speaking in the name of the Belgian nation, address to Your Excellency the solemn protest of the numberless families affected by the cruel edict which sends through the country at this moment a tremor of indignation, that can not but arouse the reprobation of the civilized world.

They adjure Your Excellency to employ with the military authorities the high prerogatives granted to him by his position, and not to allow the consummation of an act without precedent in the history of modern wars, and they beg him to accept the assurance of their most distinguished consideration.

List of Signatures

**Ministres d'Etat :**

Baron de Favereau, président du Sénat ;

Comte Woeste, representant d'Alost ;

Jules Vandenpeereboom, sénateur provincial de la Flandre occidentale ;

Joseph Devolder, sénateur pour Arlon-Marche-Bastogne.

**Sénateurs :**

Braun, Alexandre, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Brunard, Edouard, sénateur pour Nivelles ;

De Becker-Remy, sénateur pour Louvain ;

De Blicq, sénateur pour Alost ;

De Ro, Georges, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Dubost, Edouard, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Dumont de Chassart, sénateur pour Nivelles ;

Dupret, Georges, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Hallet, Max, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Hanrez, Prosper, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Baron E. de Kerchove d'Exaerde, sénateur pour Alost ;

Lekeu, Jules, sénateur provincial du Hainaut ;

Mesens, Edmond, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Baron de Mevius, sénateur pour Namur-Dinant-Philippeville ;

Baron Alfred Orban de Xivry, sénateur pour Arlon-Marche-Bastogne ;

Poelaert, Albert, sénateur pour Bruxelles ;

Vicomte Simonis, sénateur pour Verviers, ancien président du Senat ;

Speyer, Herbert, sénateur pour Arlon-Marche-Bastogne ;

Vinck, Emile, sénateur provincial du Brabant ;

## **Membres de la Chambre des représentants :**

Levie, Michel, ancien ministre, représentant de Charleroi ;

Bertrand, Louis, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Boël, Pol, représentant de Soignies ;

Buisset, Emile, représentant de Charleroi ;

Buyl, représentant d'Ostende-Furnes-Dixmude ;

Cocq, Fernand, représentant de Bruxelles ;

De Bue, Xavier, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Delporte, Antoine, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Baron Drion, représentant de Charleroi ;

Elbers, François, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Hanssens, Eugene, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Baron Albert d'Huart, représentant de Dinant-Philippeville ;

Janson, Paul-Emile, représentant de Tournai-Ath ;

Jourez, Léon, représentant de Nivelles ;

Lamborelle, représentant de Malines ;

Lemonnier, Maurice, représentant de Bruxelles ;

Comte de Limburg Stirum, représentant d'Arlon-Marche-Bastogne ;

Polet, Hyacinthe, représentant de Liège ;

Poncelet, Jules, représentant de Neufchâteau-Virton ;

Rens, représentant d'Alost ;

Tibbaut, Emile, représentant de Termonde ;

Wauters, représentant de Huy-Waremme ;

Wauwermans, Paul, représentant de Bruxelles.

**Au nom de la Députation permanente du  
Brabant :**

Janssen, Charles.

**Copy enclosed**

Brussels, November 6, 1916.

Mr. Alderman Lemonnier,  
Acting Burgomaster of Brussels.

Your College of Aldermen rightfully maintains that if the fourth convention of The Hague of 1907 does not contain the precise text relative to the deportation of the civil non-combatant population, it is nevertheless to be concluded from the spirit of that convention that such a measure is not legitimate.

Such a measure is in complete contradiction to the idea of military occupation. This idea has replaced the former theory of conquest which made the conqueror the sovereign of the conquered country. In modern warfare the peaceful population has certain rights. The conqueror is the provisory administrator ; he must respect the rights of the peaceful inhabitants.

All this was clearly indicated in 1874 at the Conference of Brussels, notably by the delegate of the German Empire, General von Voigts-Rhetz. The project of a convention of that Conference was not ratified but its text served for the preparatory work of the Conventions of 1897 and of 1907 ; and



these two Conventions drew their inspiration from it, and, on the point that interests us, they made no change in it.

In 1899, at the first conference of The Hague, the President of the Committee on Rules and Customs of Land Warfare, Frédéric de Martens (Part 3, page 92, edition of 1907), speaking of the exigencies of war, said these words :

*"It is our unanimous desire that the armies of civilized nations be not only provided with arms of the greatest perfection but that they also be actively aware of the principles of law, of justice, and of humanity, obligatory even in occupied territory and as regards the enemy."*

These words are not at all Utopian ; they take sufficient cognizance of the facts ; but they admit also the demands of humanity and the aspirations of modern civilization.

Such will be the impartial statement of any jurist.

I beg you to accept, Mr. Burgomaster, the expression of my highest consideration.

E. Nys, Professor of the University.  
39, Rue Saint- Jean

**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). This letter and the English translation : pages 321-

324. (**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)