

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

Brussels, November 9, 1916.

To the Deputies of Mons :

In reply to your letter of November 2, 1916, in which you ask us to give up the deportation of imemployed toward Germany, I have the honour to inform you that your request cannot be taken into consideration.

From the beginning of the war a great part of the Belgian population has been idle. The reasons that created that situation are, on the one hand, the inactivity of many industrial establishments, brought about by the lack of raw materials resulting from the enemy blockade, and on the other, by the lack of a desire to work. The long duration of this situation begins to bring about evil results, and in his capacity of Governor of the occupied country His Excellency the Governor-General of Belgium, under the internationsl law, finds it his duty to take the necessary measures to remedy such a state of things.

Enlightened Belgians as early as the spring of 1915 addressed themselves to H. E. the Governor-

General and pointed out the dangers of unemployment and of an aversion to work.

They showed him that charity, wherever it came from, will finish by becoming a weight on the population, and at the same time lead the working people to idleness.

That would have as a consequence the physical and moral enfeeblement of the working men, and that skilled workers in particular would lose their aptitude and dexterity and would become useless for Belgian industry as soon as the future peace was reestablished.

For these reasons the decrees issued against the unemployment were put in vigour in August 1915 with the aid of the proper Belgian ministry, and have later been completed by the decree of May 15, 1916.

These decrees did not envisage compulsory labour except in the case when the unemployed would refuse, without sufficient motives, for a proper salary offered to him, work suitable to his abilities, and he become a charge on public charity.

Every infraction contrary to international law is formally recognized as a founded motive to refuse this work. Therefore no working man can be compelled to take part in war-labour. These decrees are founded on wholesome considerations in conformity with the law, and which respect without any possible doubt the interest of the

masses and the liberty of each person. It is merely a question of the application (of measures taken ?) after the situations which had been presented had led to a public calamity.

To this effect the lists of the names of the unemployed must be addressed to us by the burgomasters. When in the assemblies work is offered for good wages to the unemployed mentioned on the list, and this work must be carried out in Germany, whereas in the territory of the General Government only a limited number of unemployed may be employed.

The unemployed who in these assemblies refuse the work offered will be sent by force to Germany. They gain wages also, but smaller than that which they would have had as free labourers. The Governor-General hopes that it will be necessary to use these measures only on exceptional occasions.

The greater part of the people has, with its sound comprehension of things, judged the situation in a correct manner, and by tens of thousands Belgian working men have freely taken the road to Germany, where, put on the same footing with German working men, they earn wages higher than those which they ever knew in Belgium, and that instead of falling into misery like their comrades remaining in the country, they raise their families to a higher rank.

After this, you must admit that by the deportations of the Belgian unemployed in Germany the interest of the Belgian people rests entirely safe. If you speak to the unemployed in this sense you will render them a better service than you would do by leading them to refuse to work, and by that means force the German authorities to take severe measures.

If at the time of the deportation there is severity, and if there are employed working men who are taken away, the fault will rest on the burgomasters who refuse to give the lists or whose lists were not complete.

For the Governor-General.
(Signature)

(Note. — The French employed by the Germans is often exceedingly difficult to translate ! — **B. W.**)

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 314-316. (**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)