

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

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

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

Archbishopric of Malines,

Malines, November 10, 1916.

Mr. Governor General :

I refrain from expressing to Your Excellency the sentiments which his letter have evoked in me, in reply to the letter which I had the honour to address to him on October 19th, relative to the deportation of the unemployed.

I have recalled with melancholy the words which Your Excellency, scanning each syllable, pronounced in my presence after his arrival at Brussels : "*I hope that our relations will be loyal ... I have received the mission of dressing the wounds of Belgium*".

My letter of October 19 recalled to Your Excellency the engagement undertaken by Baron von Huene, Military Governor of Antwerp, and ratified a few days later by Baron von der Goltz, your predecessor as Governor-General, at

Brussels. The engagement was explicit, absolute, unlimited as to time : *"The young men need not fear being taken to Germany, either to be enrolled in the army or to be employed at forced labour"*.

This engagement is being violated every day, thousands of times in the last fortnight.

Baron von Huene and Baron von der Goltz did not say conditionally, as your communication of October 26th would like to imply : *"If the occupation does not last longer than two years, men fit for military duty will not be taken into captivity"* ; they said, categorically : *"Young men, and with greater reason, men who have reached an advanced age, will not be at any moment of the occupation either made prisoners or employed at forced labour"*. To justify himself, Your Excellency invokes the conduct of England and of France who, so he says, *"took off neutral steamers all Germans between the ages of 17 and 50 in order to intern them in concentration camps"*.

If England and France have committed an injustice, it is upon the English and the French that you should avenge yourself, and not upon an inoffensive and disarmed people. But has an injustice been done ? We are poorly informed as to what goes on outside the walls of our prison, but I am strongly inclined to believe that the Germans who were seized and interned belonged to the reserve of the imperial army, they were therefore

soldiers, and England and France had the right to send them to concentration camps.

Belgium had inaugurated only since the month of August, 1913 the system of compulsory service for all.

Belgians between the ages of 17 and 50 residing in the occupied portion of Belgium are therefore civilians, that is to say *non-combattants*. It is to juggle words to assimilate them with the German reservists in applying to them the equivocal appellation "*men fit for military service*".

The decrees (Note : 15/08/1915), *affiches*, comments of the press, which were intended to prepare public opinion for the measures to be taken, invoked chiefly two considerations : the unemployed, so they declared, are a danger to public security ; they are a charge upon the public charity.

It is not true, as I said in my letter of October 19, that our workmen have troubled or even threatened public order anywhere. Five million Belgians, hundreds of Americans, are the astonished witnesses of the remarkable dignity and patience of our working class. It is not true that workmen deprived of labour are a charge upon the occupying Power for the charity which is dispensed by their administration. The *Comité National*, in which the occupying Government plays no active part, is the sole provider of subsistence to the victims of enforced idleness.

These two replies remain unanswered.

The letter of October 26 attempts another process of justification ; it alleges that the measure affecting the unemployed is influenced by "*social and economic*" causes.

It is because the German Government has taken to heart more warmly and more intelligently than we the interest of the Belgian nation that it is saving the workman from idleness and preventing him from losing his technical fitness. Forced labour is the equivalent of the economic advantages that we obtained from our commercial exchanges with the Empire.

Furthermore, if the Belgians complain of this state of things let them address their grievances to England ; she is the great guilty one : "*it is she who has brought about this situation by her policy of isolation*".

To this argument, which in the original is confused, complicated, it will suffice to oppose a few frank and brief statements :

Each Belgian workman will liberate a German workman, who will add one more soldier to the German army. There, in all its simplicity, is the fact that dominates the situation. The author of the letter seems himself to feel this burning fact, for he writes, "*nor is the measure affecting the conduct of war properly so called*". It is therefore connected with war "*improperly so called*" (*improprement dite*); what does this mean, if not that if the Belgian

workman does not bear arms, he will free the hands of a German workman who will take up arms ? The Belgian workman is forced to cooperate in an indirect but undeniable manner in the war against his country. This is manifestly contrary to the spirit of the Hague conventions.

Another statement is this : unemployment is caused neither by the Belgian workmen nor by England ; it is brought about by the regime of German occupation.

The occupying Power has seized great quantities of raw materials intended for our national industry ; it has seized from our factories and workshops machinery, tools and metals, and shipped them to Germany. The possibility of national employment being thus suppressed, there remained one of two alternatives to the workmen — to work for the German Empire here or in Germany, or to remain idle. A few thousand workmen, under the influence of fright or hunger, agreed, the greater part with regret, to work for the enemy ; but four hundred thousand workmen and workwomen preferred to resign themselves to unemployment, with its privations, rather than to betray the interests of their native land ; they lived in poverty, with the aid of a meagre relief allowed them by the *Comité National de Secours*, under the supervision of the Ministers of the United States (**Note** : Brand Whitlock), Spain (**Note** : Villalobar) and Holland (**Note** : van Vollenhoven).

Calm, dignified, they bore without a murmur their painful lot. In no section of the country was there a revolt, or even the semblance of one. Employers and *employés* awaited with patience the end of our long martyrdom. The communal administrations, however, and private initiative endeavored to alleviate the undoubted inconveniences of unemployment. But the occupying force paralysed their efforts. The C.N. attempted to organize a professional school for the benefit of the unemployed. This practical instruction, respectful of the dignity of our workmen, was intended to preserve their skill and to increase their capacity for work, in order to prepare for the revival of the country. Who opposed this noble movement, the scheme of which had been devised by our large manufacturers ? Who ? The occupying Government !

Nevertheless, the communes made every effort to give work to the unemployed by undertaking public improvements ; the Governor-General limited these enterprises to a permission, which as a general rule he refused to grant. There are, I understand, numerous cases where the General Government authorized work of this kind upon the express condition that it be not undertaken by the unemployed.

They were seeking to create employment. They were recruiting the army of the unemployed.

And they dare, after this, to insult our workmen by calling them lazy. (**Note** : German decree, 15/08/1915 ; reproduced below)

No, the Belgian workman is not lazy ; he has a taste for work. In the noble struggles of economic life he has proved his fitness. When he refused to work at a high wage offered him by the occupying Government, it was on account of a dignified patriotism. We, the pastors of our people, who are sharing more and more closely its sufferings and anguish, we know what it has cost them sometimes to choose independence, with its privations, instead of well-being in a state of subjection. Do not throw stones at them ; they are entitled to your respect.

The letter of October 26 says that the party primarily responsible for the unemployment of our workmen is England, because she has not allowed raw material to enter Belgium.

England has generously allowed food-stuffs to enter Belgium for the *ravitaillement*, under the control of neutral nations such as the United States, Holland and Spain. She would also allow, under the same control, raw materials for industry to enter the country if Germany were to agree to leave them to us and not to seize the finished products of our industrial labours.

But Germany, by divers processes, notably by the organization of its "*Zentrales*" (**Note**) over which neither the Belgians nor their protecting

Ministers can exercise any efficacious control, absorbs a large portion of the agricultural and industrial products of our country. The result is an alarming increase in the cost of living, which causes painful privations for those who have no longer any savings. The community of interests, of which the letter speaks so highly, is not the normal equilibrium of commercial exchange, but the predominance of the strong over the weak. Do not represent, I beseech you, this state of economic inferiority to which we are reduced as a privilege that should justify hard labour to the advantage of our enemy and the deportation of legions of innocent people to the land of exile !

Slavery, and the heaviest penalty of the penal code after that of death — that is deportation ! Has Belgium, who never did you any wrong, deserved this treatment from you which calls down vengeance from heaven ?

Mr. Governor-General, in the beginning of my letter I recalled the noble phrase of Your Excellency : "*I have received the mission of dressing the wounds of Belgium*".

If Your Excellency could penetrate into the homes of working men as our priests do, and hear the lamentations of wives and mothers whom his order has cast into mourning and into dismay, you would realize far better that the wound of the Belgian people is wide open.

Two years ago, we hear people say, it was death, pillage, fire, but it was war ! To-day it is no longer war ; it is the cold, calculating spirit, the desire to annihilate, the victory of force over right, the lowering of the human personality, the cry of defiance to humanity.

It rests with Your Excellency to quiet these cries of a revolted conscience ; may the good Lord, upon whom we call with our whole soul for our oppressed people, inspire Him with the pity of a Good Samaritan !

Accept, Mr. Governor-General, the homage of my consideration.

D. J. Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

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), especially pages 297-299. About this letters and the English translation : pages 294-299. (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.

"Zentrales". See : « *Commerce and corruption* » chapter 22 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/BRAND%20WHITLOCK%20BELGIUM%20UNDER%20GERMAN%20OCCUPATION%20%20CHAPTER%2022.pdf>

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&smo d=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&smo d=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

German decree, dated 15/8/1915, concerning
**« les chômeurs qui, par paresse,
se soustraient au travail »**

**ARRÊTÉ CONCERNANT LES CHOMEURS QUI, PAR
PARESSE, SE SOUSTRAIENT AU TRAVAIL.**

Article 1^{er}

Quiconque, sciemment ou par négligence, fait de fausses déclarations au sujet de sa situation personnelle lors d'une enquête destinée à établir son indigence, est passible d'une peine d'emprisonnement de six semaines au plus, à moins que les lois en vigueur ne prévoient l'application d'une peine plus forte ; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une amende pouvant aller jusque deux mille deux cent cinquante francs.

Article 2.

Quiconque est secouru par l'assistance publique ou privée, et, sans motif suffisant, refuse d'entreprendre ou de continuer un travail qu'on lui a proposé et qui répond à ses capacités ou quiconque, en refusant un tel travail, tombe à charge de l'assistance publique ou privée, sera passible d'une peine d'emprisonnement de quatorze jours à six mois.

Tout motif concernant le refus de travailler sera valable s'il est admis par le droit des gens.

Le tribunal peut, en outre, ordonner l'application de la mesure prévue à l'article 14 de la loi du 27 novembre 1891 (« Moniteur belge », p. 3531 et suivantes).

Article 3.

Quiconque, sciemment favorise par des secours ou d'autres moyens le refus de travailler punissable en vertu de l'article 2 est passible d'une amende pouvant aller jusque douze mille cinq cents francs ; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une peine d'emprisonnement d'un an au plus.

Article 4.

Si des communes, associations ou d'autres groupements favorisent le refus de travailler de la manière prévue à l'article 3, les chefs en seront rendus responsables conformément à cet article.

Article 5.

S'il est prouvé que certaines sommes sont destinées à secourir les personnes désignées à l'article 2, ces sommes seront confisquées au profit de la Croix-Rouge de Belgique.

Article 6.

Les infractions au présent arrêté seront jugées par les chambres correctionnelles des tribunaux belges de première instance.

Article 7.

Le présent arrêté entrera en vigueur le jour de sa publication.

Bruxelles, le 15 Août 1915.

Der General-Gouverneur in Belgien,
Freiherr von BISSING,
Generaloberst.