

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

(...) 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 14**, signed by by the Senators and Deputies of the Province of Liège (...)

Brand WITHLOCK

Translation :

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

Liège, November 14, 1916.

Excellency :

We learn that the measures already carried out in certain parts of occupied Belgium are about to be applied to the province of Liège. They cause in our population a profound and legitimate emotion.

As members of the Chambers of Députés and of the Senate of the Province of Liège, we are bound to address to the executive powers the expressions of these feelings.

Thousands of men, victims of events for which they are not in any way responsible and the unyielding rigour, of which they undergo in silence and in misery, are condemned, without judgment and without having committed any crime, to deportation and to forced labour.

Are they to blame for having left the factories and the workshops where they were employed ?

Is it not the war which, by closing these workshops and factories, has forced them to such a step ?

The metallurgical industry has ceased partially through the lack of means of transportation.

The seizures of the machines and of the tools, the requisitioning of raw materials, have brought to a stop all work in the greater part of the industrial establishments.

The arms factories which gave work to so many men in our district are closed by the orders of the German authorities.

Thus the entire activity of the country has been stopped.

In a day a mass of our compatriots have seen themselves reduced to inaction, deprived of their means of subsistence, bereft of other resources

than their meagre savings, the kindness of their employers and the co-operative aid that has so wonderfully spread throughout Belgium in these unhappy times.

Certain journals accuse our working class of **laziness** (**Note** : the German authority too; see, below, 15. August 15, 1915 ; May 15, 1916) Was it necessary, then, to add calumny to iniquity ?

Our neighbors to the east know, however, the ability and the bravery of our working population.

They have been able to estimate them by the commercial and industrial relations that we have maintained for centuries with the Rhine provinces. How many great German men of industry and commerce have been obliged to praise their skill and their energy ! Perhaps they will protest with us against those who insult the misery of our workmen and call them ne'er-do-wells.

But they have also witnessed their fierce pride.

The workman of our region is jealous of his independence and of his liberty. He means to do with himself, his intelligence and his labour as he pleases. He claims to be master of his life and of his deeds.

The occupying Power offered him work, and at a high wage. Most of our workers rejected these offers. They judged that to accept them would be to serve the interests of the invader to the detriment of their country.

And who would venture to deny it ? To take the place of a German workman permits him to go and fight our sons and brothers, does it not ?'

Our workmen have accepted severe privations from patriotic motives. Your Excellency will not blame them for it. Their spirit of independence has nevertheless bowed to the necessities of war.

Our province was occupied during the first days of operations. It underwent its fate with courage, not without hope, but without revolt or commotion. Public order has not been troubled.

What, then, is the cause of the deportation and the forced labour with which our fellow-citizens are to-day threatened ?

International law condemns such measures. Not a single modern author justifies them. The text of the convention of The Hague, in limiting the requisitions for the benefit of the occupying army, prohibits such measures. As a matter of fact, in the present case it is no question of requisitioning or of services required for the needs of the occupying forces.

At the Conference of Brussels of 1874, General von Voigts-Rhetz, delegate of the German Empire, explicitly disapproved of such measures, notably in the following words : "*What can not be demanded of occupied peoples are services which Article 48 would condemn as contrary to patriotism and to honour*".

On the other hand, the terms of Articles 5 and 6 of the convention treating of the conditions of internment and of work apply only to prisoners of war, and consequently exclude the possibility of any such treatment of civil populations.

The constitutions of all the States of Europe exalt as dogmas individual liberty and the right of each person to dispose of his faculties and his labours as seems best to him.

In the country of Liège these principles have been firmly implanted for many centuries and have been proudly inscribed in the hearts of men in the lofty form of an old legal adage, which still lives and is sacred : "*A poor man is king in his own home*".

They are honoured everywhere as one of the foundation-stones of our modern world.

The occupant can not abolish these rights, which form the inheritance of Humanity.

The military authorities, by an announcement of the Commander of Liège, December 18, 1914, guaranteed to the Garde Civique that "*there was no question of sending them to Germany either at the present time or in the future*".

Your Excellency's own announcement of October 22, 1915, gives the same assurance.

The several commanders who have held the power at Liège have by various notices confirmed that "*the control service was solely to prove the presence of the persons to whom it applied*".

Would it be possible that such formal undertakings should not have been observed ?

To deport Belgians to Germany and to compel them there to perform forced labour is, as we have said, to permit German workmen whom they replace to go to the front to fight the sons and brothers of those whom you take away by force. Such a measure forces them to take an obvious part in the war against their country ; it violates The Hague Convention, the generous thought with which it is animated and the very text of its Article 52, it destroys the progressive victories of Humanity that are consecrated to that much discussed convention, and it takes us back to the darkest practices of a far away past.

For this deportation and this forced labour resembles slavery to that degree where they can not be distinguished — the slavery by which in olden times the conqueror completely disposed of the conquered.

We feel that it is our duty to bring these considerations and complaints of our afflicted people to the attention of Your Excellency. We still hope that the voice of law will be heard.

We beg Your Excellency to accept the expression of our most distinguished consideration.

For the population of the Province of Liège :

Deputies :

Sixteen signatures
Eugene Mullendorff,
De Liedekerke,
H. Polet,
Marquis Imperiali,
J. Dauvister,
S. Donnay,
Schindler,
Pirard,
Paul van Hoegaerden,
Nicholas Goblet,
J. Dallemagne,
F. Galopin,
Dejardin,
Léon Troclet,
Xavier Neujean.

Senators :

Eight signatures.
A. Magis,
Ed. Peltzer de Clermont,
Van Zuylen,
H. Colleaux,
J. Keppenne,
Ch. Magnette,
L. Naveau,
A. Flechet.

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 327-331. (**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

ARRÊTÉ CONCERNANT LES CHÔMEURS QUI, PAR PARESSE,
SE SOUSTRAIENT AU TRAVAIL

ART. 1. — 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 jusqu'à 1.250 francs.

ART. 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).

ART. 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 jusqu'à 12.500 francs; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une peine d'emprisonnement d'un an au plus.

ART. 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.

ART. 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.

ART. 6. — Les infractions au présent arrêté seront jugées par les chambres correctionnelles des tribunaux belges de première instance.

ART. 7. — Le présent arrêté entrera en vigueur le jour de sa publication.

Bruxelles, le 15 août 1915.

C. C. V. 3298.

Der Generalgouverneur in Belgien
Freiherr VON BISSING,
Generaloberst.

ARRÊTÉ CONCERNANT LES CHÔMEURS QUI, PAR PARESSE,
SE SOUSTRAIENT AU TRAVAIL

J'abroge l'arrêté du 15 août 1915, paru sous le même titre (*Bulletin officiel des Lois et Arrêtés* n° 108, p. 889) et arrête ce qui suit :

ART. 1. — 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 atteindre 1.000 marks.

ART. 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 un an.

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

Au lieu de recourir à des poursuites pénales, les gouverneurs, les commandants militaires qui leur sont assimilés et les chefs d'arrondissement peuvent ordonner que les chômeurs récalcitrants soient conduits de force aux endroits où ils doivent travailler.

ART. 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 atteindre 10.000 marks; en outre, il pourra être condamné à une peine d'emprisonnement de deux ans au plus.

ART. 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.

ART. 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.

ART. 6. — Les tribunaux et commandants militaires sont compétents pour juger soit les infractions aux articles 2, 3 et 4 du présent arrêté, soit les infractions à l'article 1, dirigées contre les autorités et troupes allemandes ou contre les autorités ou associations instituées par moi.

Les chambres correctionnelles des tribunaux belges de première instance sont compétentes pour juger les infractions à l'article 1 du présent arrêté qui, en tenant compte de la disposition précédente, ne tombent pas sous la juridiction des tribunaux et commandants militaires.

Bruxelles, le 15 mai 1916.

Der Generalgouverneur in Belgien,

Freiherr VON BISSING,

Generaloberst.