

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

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

Chapter **XXXIII**. The press-gangs : **Trade unions**.

### **Translation :**

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

Brussels, November 14, 1916.

Excellency :

The secretaries and the representatives of the socialistic and independent labour unions of Belgium have, with the most painful disappointment, taken cognizance of the answer that you were good enough to make to their petition of October 30, concerning the deportation of labourers to Germany, and it is in the name of the working classes as a united whole that we make a final effort to prevent the consummation of an act without precedent against its liberty, its sentiments and its dignity.

You say that many industrial works have been closed on account of the lack of raw materials which the enemy's policy of isolation has brought about. Permit us, Excellency, to recall to your mind the fact that the Allied Powers manifested very clearly their willingness to allow

the importation into Belgium of raw materials required by our industries, provided — and it is a very natural provision — that no requisitions be made except those mentioned in Article 52 of The Hague Convention, that is to say, those necessary to the "*occupying army*", and that an international commission, the Commission for Relief in Belgium, have the right to supervise the destination of the manufactured products.

Instead of agreeing to such a proposal, we have seen the occupying authorities systematically remove the machinery, implements, machines of all kinds, engines and raw materials, metals, leather, wood, limit the production and continually aggravate the difficulties of the transactions. When the districts and the committees have attempted to employ workmen without work in public improvements, so many obstacles were thrown in their way that in many cases their initiative was checked and broken. In a word, as fast as the most tireless efforts were strained to employ the greatest number possible, other men were thrown out of work.

You state also that unemployment is caused by the labourers' hostility to work. The whole past of our working class protests against this accusation with the utmost energy.

Where is there to be found in the whole world a working class that has made of such a small country such a large industrial and commercial

power ?' And we, who for the last twenty-five years have been the enthusiastic witnesses of the magnificent efforts of our brother-workmen regarding their material and moral betterment, we proudly affirm that it is not among their ranks that one can find men so debased that they prefer to receive charitable assistance, which barely furnishes them with sufficient food, to an honest salary given in remuneration for a free and profitable work.

The truth is that the Belgian workmen, conforming to the same Article 52 of The Hague Convention, which admits requisition of labour only "*for the needs of the army of occupation and provided these requisitions do not imply an obligation to take part in the war against their country*", have refused the most tempting offers, not wishing to build trenches or to repair forts, or to work in factories manufacturing war materials. This was their right and their duty. Their attitude deserves respect and not the most humiliating of punishments.

You refer to your decrees of August, 1915, and of May 15, 1916, mentioning possible punishment for workmen receiving support who refuse work suited to their capacities and recompensed by a proper salary. Those who know with what care the conditions have been established under which the unemployed have the right to receive assistance will find that these

menaces are, to say the least, useless. But as you yourself declare, these decrees provide in their Article 2 that every motive for refusal to work will be considered valid if it is admitted by international law.

In the cases of refusal the German authorities reserved the right to cause these recalcitrants to appear before Belgian tribunals, and later before military tribunals. It is therefore certain that the unemployed have the right to refuse to work for any reason approved by international law. Summoned before the tribunal, they have the right to employ defense and to use their reasons of refusal. It is well enough to say that it is not a question of obliging the workmen to participate in military enterprises ; it is only too apparent that every Belgian deported to Germany will take the place there of a man who to-morrow will go to reinforce the ranks of the enemy. We should like to know, Excellency, whether these tribunals carry on their functions.

You fear that continued unemployment depreciates the physical and moral states of the workmen. We who know them have more confidence in them. We have seen them suffer with a stoicism that does not exist but in proud and lofty souls. Did not the splendid idea of organizing throughout the entire country a vast chain of educational schools for the unemployed in order to develop their technical knowledge and to increase

their professional value, come from them ? The *Comité National* was not, alas ! allowed to attempt this magnificent enterprise. Is it the opinion, then, that through forced labour our unhappy brothers, like slaves, will keep up their physical and moral energy ?'

You fear also that the assistance that they receive will at last be a heavy economic charge on the Belgian national resources. It is with difficulty that we can believe that Belgians, as you inform us, have had the sad courage to begrudge in that form the bitter piece of bread and the bit of soup which have for so many months formed the subsistence of so many working families ; and, after all, what do the twelve millions amount to that each month are distributed among six hundred thousand unemployed, in comparison to the destruction of goods and lives without number, which has been and is still being brought to our country, as a result of the horrors of a war for which it has not the slightest responsibility ? With the most energetic faith in our destinies, we, the most closely interested, know that in the near future Flanders and Wallonie will rise again, glorious, in history.

Excellency, our heart and our reason refuse to believe that it is for the good of our class, and in order to avoid an additional calamity to our country, that thousands of workers are harshly torn from their families and transported to Germany. Public

sentiment has not been deceived, and to the unhappy complaints of the victims are added protests from the entire population, as expressed by its representatives, its communal magistrates, and those persons who constitute the highest incarnation of law in our country.

Furthermore, the arbitrary and brutal manner employed in the execution of these unhappy measures has raised all kinds of doubts as to the object in view. The question above all is to obtain workmen in Germany for Germany's profit and for the success of her arms.

While at Antwerp they did not take any young men from the ages of seventeen to thirty-one who were under the regime of control, in the Borinage they called all the men of seventeen to fifty years of age, in Walloon Brabant, all men over seventeen years, making no distinction between employed and unemployed. Men of all professions and of all conditions have been taken — bakers, who have never ceased to work in our co-operatives in the Borinage, for example, mechanics who always had employment, agricultural workmen, merchants ... at Lessines on the 6th instant 2.100 persons were taken away, all workmen under sixty years of age. Several cases are recorded where old men with five or six sons have been taken thus by force to be exiled.

Distressing scenes occur everywhere. The unhappy ones grouped together in the public

squares are quickly divided. They are directed to take with them a small amount of baggage ; they are taken at once to the railway-station and loaded into the cattle-cars. They are not allowed to say good-bye to their families. No opportunity is given them to put their affairs in order ; even the most pressing matters must be left. They do not know where they are going, nor for what work, nor for how long. They are taken away at the beginning of the winter, after two years of privations, having no further resources and no means to provide themselves with warm clothing, nor even with the indispensable. What privations are they going to endure ?' How long will they live there ? In what state will they return ? This ignorance and anxiety are the cause of the ceaseless tears of the mothers and small children. Distress and despair reign in all homes.

Heed these tears and these sobs, Excellency. Do not permit our free and intact past to go to ruin. Do not permit human right to be violated in its holy of holies. Do not permit the dignity of our working classes, which has been acquired after so many centuries of effort, to be trampled under foot.

We solemnly appeal to law and to humanity, with the hope of being heard, for we have the profound conviction that our voice at this tragic hour is the great voice of the working class of the entire civilized world, which expresses its sorrow and its protest.

Accept, Excellency, the homage of our most distinguished consideration.

(Here follow the signatures of the members of the *Comité National* and of the Commission Syndicale de la Belgique.)

(We transmit this letter, together with previous correspondence, to the Ministers and representatives of foreign powers at Brussels, as well as to our comrades of the Commission Syndicale des Syndicats in Holland.)

**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), especially pages 307-311. (**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 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)