

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

(...) 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. (...)

There were other protests, too, to which the Governor-General did not reply, that of **November 17**, signed by the Burgomaster and Echevins of Brussels (...)

Brand WITHLOCK

(Translation :)

Ville de Bruxelles

N° U7838

Brussels, November 17, 1916.

Excellency :

A notice of the German Governor, Lieutenant General Hurt, to the mayors of Greater Brussels and of Brabant, published to-day, announces that the German authorities have decided to deport to Germany the workmen without employment.

This notice produces a profound emotion among our fellow workmen.

Public sentiment considers this deportation to be the establishment in Belgium of a state of slavery.

You will understand without difficulty to what point such a measure, which plunges so many families into sorrow, infringes the right of personal liberty, the profound feeling of personal dignity that have been for centuries the pride and the moral greatness of the entire Belgian people.

Our population has always been distinguished for its observance of justice and of law.

In political as well as in international affairs it has ever considered that law would always remain its safeguard.

Article 43 of the Convention of The Hague states that the occupying Power shall respect, except in case of absolute necessity, the laws in force in the occupied territory. Among the laws in force in Belgium there is no one more precious or more sacred than that which guarantees to each Belgian citizen his personal liberty, which is manifested notably in the domain of labour.

There does not appear to us at this moment any fact to justify the infraction of that law.

The occupying Power calls attention to the regrettable unemployment to which a large number of our workmen are reduced.

Who knows it better than we do ?

Who knows it better than our courageous working population, which had at all times been honoured by its devotion to and its love for labour ?

Our workmen ask nothing better than to continue their habitual occupations.

Are they to blame for the unemployment that has been imposed upon them ?

Is it their fault if the raw materials and the machines have been requisitioned, if there are practically no horses remaining, if communication is limited, if 800.000 metres of rails of inter-urban railways have been removed ?

Is reference made to the charge of public charity ?

It is heavy, no doubt, but it falls in no way to the charge of the occupying Power, which has never been called upon to intervene to relieve the general suffering.

It is the *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* and private initiative that help our involuntarily unemployed and that are ready to continue their work of co-operation.

Since the Belgian population does not expect to be assisted by the occupying Power is it not legitimate to leave to the population to decide under what conditions it is permissible and possible for it to take up work ?

One can but feel the most profound respect for those who refuse to work on the sole ground of

a noble patriotism, and particularly for those who will not furnish, directly or indirectly, assistance to the enemy.

It is certain that the work which it is desired to force upon our countrymen has for its sole object the strengthening of Germany economically, and even militarily. This brings still more clearly to the foreground the character of the slavery and of the servitude that is presented by the measure which threatens so many of our fellow-citizens.

Our population has not ceased to endure calmly and with resignation and dignity the cruel tests of the war.

This attitude of mind could only be strengthened by the declarations of the German authorities at the very beginning of the war.

The Governor-General, Baron von der Goltz, said in his proclamation of September 2, 1914 :

"Belgian citizens desiring to return peacefully to their occupations have nothing to fear from the German troops or authority. What can be done will be done. Commerce must be resumed, the factories must begin to work again, the harvest must be gathered.

Belgian citizens, I do not ask any one to renounce his patriotic feelings, but I expect from you absolute obedience and sensible submission as regards the Government General. I invite you to show your confidence in it and to offer it your support. I address this invitation particularly to the

officers of the Government, of the communes, who have stayed at their posts. The more you heed this appeal the more will you serve your country."

In all the churches of the country, at the invitation of Cardinal Mercier, it was announced during the month of October, 1914, that the Military Governor of Antwerp, General von Huene, had authorized the Cardinal to make in his name, to be communicated to the population, the following declaration, with the approval of Governor-General the Baron von der Goltz :

"Young men need not fear being taken into Germany either to be incorporated there into the army or to be employed at forced labour."

Is there need to recall again the text of the following notices posted on the walls of Brussels :

"Whoever was in the Garde Civique and has returned from abroad to Greater Brussels will not be treated as a prisoner of war, but can remain there in complete liberty if he signs the undertaking not to take up arms against Germany during this war and not to undertake any act hostile to the German cause.

*Governor,
von Kraewel, Major-General.
Brussels, February 19, 1915."*

*"By virtue of the order of the General Government in Belgium of February 13 and 19, 1915, it is decreed hereby that all male subjects of Belgian nationality born between 1892 and 1897, inclusive, and domiciled at Brussels, Anderlecht, Auderghem, Etterbeek, Forest, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Ixelles, Jette-Saint-Pierre, Koekelberg, Laeken, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Saint-Gilles, Uccle, Watermael-Boitsfort and Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, are placed under control service by the registry office, **Deutsches Meldeamt Gross Brüssel**, rue du Méridien, 10, to which all communes mentioned above have communicated all the names of male subjects born from 1892 to 1897 ...*

It is expressly understood that the German Government does not have in mind the incorporation of Belgian subjects in the German army, or their deportation to Germany as prisoners during the war.

*Governor,
von Kraewel, Major General.
Brussels, March 17, 1915."*

"From November 1st next the service of control in operation until the present time regarding Belgians born between 1892 and 1897 will be applied likewise to all Belgian men born between 1885 and 1898, inclusive.

Soldiers, not officers, of the former Garde Civique not in active service will be freed from the control if they are more than 30 full years of age.

I repeat that the control does not have any other object than to permit the confirmation of the presence of persons registered and to prevent them from leaving the country.

There is therefore no intention whatsoever of incorporating them in the German army or of interning them as prisoners of war.

*The Governor-General in Belgium,
Freiherr von Bissing, Major-General.
Brussels, October 22, 1915."*

Lastly, the regulation concerning the Belgian subjects submitted to the control, born between 1885 and 1898 (***Vorschriften für Meldepflichtige Männliche Belgier, Geburtsjahr 1885-1898***), a copy of which was transmitted to each Belgian subject at the time of this registry at the German control office (***Meldeamt***) and which serves as a form of contract for them, reads :

"It is thoroughly understood that the German Government has in no wise the intention of incorporating Belgians in the German army, nor to intern them in Germany during the course of the war (Paragraph 6, p, 13)."

Can one conceive a more precise undertaking, one more exact ?

They "***will not be incorporated in the German army nor be interned in Germany during the course of the war***". The normal undertakings determined a large number of our fellow-citizens who had taken refuge abroad to return to their country.

We could not believe that such solemn promises could be broken.

We were obliged to believe that the occupying Power would maintain the principles of international law and would respect the feelings and the honour and the patriotism of the Belgian people.

Whatever may be the necessities of the war, it seems to us impossible that the occupying Power can continue in the manner in which it has begun and carry out an act that is bound to excite the emotion of the entire civilized world.

We beg you, Excellency, to accept the assurances, etc.

Secretary of the Council The Council of Aldermen
Maurice Vauthier

Maurice Lemonnier,
Louis Steens,
Emile Jacqmain,
Max Hallet,
Jean Pladet.

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 letters and the English translations : pages 334-336. (**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 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&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>

Proklamation.

Seine Majestät der Deutsche Kaiser haben geruht, mich nach okkupierung belgischen Gebiets zum Generalgouverneur in Belgien zu ernennen. Ich habe den Sitz des Generalgouvernements in Brüssel (Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Künste, rue de la Loi) aufgeschlagen.

Auf Grund weiterer Anordnung Seiner Majestät ist dem Generalgouverneur eine Zivilverwaltung angegliedert (Kriegsministerium, rue de Louvain an deren Spitze Seine Exzellenz Herr von Sandt steht.

Die deutschen Heere dringen siegreich in Frankreich vor. Hier im belgischen Gebiete Ruhe und Ordnung aufrecht zu erhalten, ist Aufgabe der Generalgouvernements.

Jede feindselige Handlung der Einwohnerschaft gegen Angehörige der deutschen Heeres, jeder Versuch, ihren Verkehr mit der Heimat zu stören, Eisenbahnen, Telegraphen, Fernsprechverbindungen zu gefährden oder gar zu unterbrechen, wird unnahebsichtlich geandert werden. Aufruhr oder Widerstand gegen die deutsche Verwaltung haben rücksichtslose Niederwerfung zu gewärtigen.

Die harte Notwendigkeit des Krieges bringt es mit sich, dass bei Bestrafung feindseliger Handlungen Unschuldige mit den Schuldigen leiden. Unsommer ist es Pflicht aller verständig denkenden Bewohner Belgiens, die unruhigen Elemente im Lande von jeder Ausschreitung gegen die öffentliche Ordnung abzuhalten.

Kein belgischer Bürger, der trieffertig seinem Erwebe nachgeht, hat irgend etwas von seiten der deutschen Truppen und Behörden zu betuerchten. Soweit irgend moeglich, sollen Handel und Wandel wieder aufgenommen, die industriellen Betriebe wieder in Gang gebracht und die Einbringung der Ernte vollendet werden.

Belgier !

Von Niemand wird Verleugnung seiner vaterlandischen Gesinnung verlangt, wohl aber eine vernünftige Fuegsamkeit und unbedingter Gehorsam gegen die Anordnungen des Generalgouvernements. Von Eurem Verhalten, von dem Vertrauen und dem Masse der Unterstuetzung, die das Volk, insbesondere die im Lande verbliebenen Staats- und Gemeindebeamten, dem Generalgouvernement entgegen bringen, wird es abhaengen ob die neue Verwaltung Euch und Eurem Lande zum Segen gereicht.

Gegeben, Brüssel, den 2. September 1914.

Der Kaiserliche General-Gouverneur in Belgien,
Freiherr von der Goltz,
Generalfeldmarschall.

Proclamation.

Sa Majesté l'Empereur d'Allemagne, après l'occupation de la plus grande partie du territoire belge, a daigné me nommer Gouverneur Général en Belgique. J'ai établi le siège du Gouvernement Général à Bruxelles (Ministère des Sciences et des Arts, rue de la Loi).

Par ordre de Sa Majesté, une administration civile a été installée auprès du Gouvernement Général (Ministère de la Guerre, rue de Louvain). Son Excellence Monsieur von Sandt a été appelé aux fonctions de chef de cette administration.

Les armées allemandes s'avancent victorieusement en France. Ma tâche sera de conserver la tranquillité et l'ordre public en territoire belge.

Tout acte hostile des habitants contre les militaires allemands, toute tentative de troubler leurs communications avec l'Allemagne, de gêner ou de couper les services des chemins de fer, du télégraphe et du téléphone seront punis très sévèrement. Toute résistance ou révolte contre l'administration allemande sera réprimée sans pardon.

C'est la dure nécessité de la guerre que les punitions d'actes hostiles frappent, en dehors des coupables, aussi des innocents. Le devoir s'impose d'autant plus à tous les citoyens raisonnables d'exercer une pression sur les éléments turbulents en vue de les retenir de toute action dirigée contre l'ordre public.

Les citoyens belges désirant vaquer paisiblement à leurs occupations n'ont rien à craindre de la part des troupes ou des autorités allemandes. Autant que faire se pourra, le commerce devra être repris, les usines devront recommencer à travailler, les moissons être rentrées.

Citoyens Belges,

Je ne demande à personne de renier ses sentiments patriotiques, mais j'attends de vous tous une soumission raisonnable et une obéissance absolue vis-à-vis des ordres du Gouvernement Général. Je vous invite à lui montrer de la confiance et à lui prêter votre concours. J'adresse cette invitation spécialement aux fonctionnaires de l'Etat et des communes qui sont restés à leurs postes. Plus vous donnerez suite à cet appel, plus vous servirez votre patrie.

Fait à Bruxelles, le 2 septembre 1914.

Le Gouverneur Général,
Baron von der Goltz,
Feldmarschal.

Proclamatie.

Zijne Majesteit de Keizer van Duitschland na bezetting van het grootste gedeelte van het belgisch territorium, heeft mij tot Generaal Gouverneur in België benoemd. Ik heb den zetel van het Generaal-Gouvernement in Brussel (Ministerie van Schoone Kunsten, Wetstraat) opgeschlagen.

Op bevel van Zijne Majesteit, is er eene burgerlijke administratie bij het Generaal-Gouvernement ingericht. Zijne Excellentie de Heer von Sandt is benoemd tot hoofd dezer administratie (Ministerie van Oorlog, Leuvensehe weg).

De deutsche troepen dringen overwinnen in Frankrijk binnen. Mijne taak zal zijn de kalme en openbare orde op belgisch gebied oprecht te houden.

Alle vijandelijke handeling der inwoners tegen aangehörigen van het deutsche leger, alle verzoek den verkeer met Duitschland te storen, den dienst der ijzeren wegen, des telegraafs en des telefoons te belemmeren of te breken, zal zeer streng gestraft worden. Jedere wederstand of revolte tegen de deutsche administratie zal zonder genade gestraft worden.

Het is de harde noodzakelijkheid van den oorlog, dat de straffen van vijandelijke handelingen, buiten de schuldigen ook de onschuldigen treffen. Des te meer is het de plicht van alle verstandige burgers op de onrustige elementen eenen druk uit te oefenen om deze van iedere handeling tegen de openbare orde te weerhouden.

De belgische burgers, die wenschen in rust hare nijverheid na te gaan, hebben niets te vreezen van wege de troepen of de deutsche autoriteiten. Zooveel het mogelijk zal zijn, moet de handel hernomen, de fabrieken in 't werk hersteld, de oogst binnengebracht worden.

Belgische burgers,

Ik vraag aan niemand zijne patriotische gevoelens te ontzeggen, maar ik verwacht van U allen eene verstandige onderwerping en eene volledige gehoorzaamheid tegenover de bevelen van het Generaal-Gouvernement. Ik verzoek U hem vertrouwen te schenken en hem Uwe hulp te verloozen. Ik richt dit verzoek hooftzakelijk aan alle ambtenaaren van den Staat en van de gemeenten, die op hunne plaats gebleven zijn. Hoemeer U dezen wensch voldoen zult, des te meer zult U uw vaderland nuttig zijn.

Gegeben te Brussel, den 2^o September 1914.

De Generaal-Gouverneur,
Baron von der Goltz,
Veldmaarschalk.