

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

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier
Archbishop of Malines, Malines.

The Governor-General of Belgium,
P. A. I. 11254.

Brussels, November 23, 1916.

Very Venerable Cardinal :

I have the honour to inform Your Eminence that I have duly received the honoured letter of the 10th of this month, as well as the autographic letter of the 15th of this month concerning the delay in sending it. I reply as follows :

On October 19 of this year Your Eminence addressed to me a request with a view of inducing us to cease to employ the Belgians unemployed in Germany. In my response of October 28 (**Note** : 26) of this year, while appreciating at its true value the point of view at which you place yourself, I have exposed the considerations and the reasons that have moved the occupying power to take

measures concerning the question of workmen. The measures were not the consequence of an arbitrary will or of an insufficient study of a difficult problem, but the result of a ripe examination of the circumstances which it is proper to consider and of the necessity that we must recognize as inevitable. Under the circumstances I find myself obliged to again invite the attention of Your Eminence to my declaration of October 28. Your response to these considerations either reposes on a misunderstanding of my declaration or is the result of conceptions which, in their essence, I cannot approve. The unemployment has taken a wide extension in Belgium and is a great social sore, so much so that it is to the social benefit of the Belgian working men to put them to work in Germany. It is true that on my arrival in Belgium I told Your Eminence that I wished to dress the wounds the war had done to the Belgian people ; but the measures taken are not in contradiction with this declaration. I should say also that Your Eminence recognizes the facts when he tries to put aside my efforts, often crowned with success, to re-establish economic life in Belgium, by the remark that we have created on the contrary an artificial unemployment. England has imposed unacceptable conditions on the importation of raw materials and exportation of manufactured products. These questions have been, during the war, the subject of serious negotiations with

competent persons, not only of Belgian nationality, but of neutral countries. But we would be led too far if I had to expose them here. I only repeat that the lamentable situation is in the last analysis a result of the English policy of isolation, as formerly the requisitions of raw materials were the unavoidable consequence of the same policy. I must absolutely maintain that from the economic point of view the occupying power guarantees to the country all the advantages which, in view of the constraint created by England, can be assured to it.

The execution of the measures taken with reference to the unemployed has caused my administration many difficulties, which occasion also difficulties for the population. All this could have been avoided if the communal administrations had permitted us, by an appropriate intervention, to render the execution of these measures more simple and better adapted to the end proposed. Under the present circumstances we have had to extend the measures to a larger circle, in order in the first place to take in a larger number of persons. But precautions have been taken to avoid errors as much as possible. Those in certain professional categories are exempted from the obligation to present themselves, and individual complaints either are immediately examined or postponed for future examination.

From the foregoing considerations, Your Eminence will be good enough to conclude that it is impossible to respond to his request to withdraw the measures that have already been taken. However, in the application of these we have done all that it is possible to do in the common interest.

Pray accept, Eminence, the expression of my very high consideration.

Baron von Bissing, Colonel-General.

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 in the English translation : page 301. (**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>