

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

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

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

Mons, November 27, 1916.

Excellency :

We have taken note of the response of November 9 which Your Excellency was good enough to make to our letter of November 2, which came to us through the *Comité Provincial de Secours et d'Alimentation de Mons*, to which it had been addressed.

Witnesses of the enrolment in our region, we have the conviction that the execution of the decrees relating to unemployment has taken place in flagrant violation of the considerations which you set forth. We can only repeat that the motive of this operation has not been to procure work for the unemployed Belgians to relieve the public charities of the support of men without work. Permit us to submit to you several facts as examples.

At Quaregnon, out of 1.000 working men taken to control, 304 were deported. Among these there were 227 employed, including 4 cultivators, 5

master-bakers, 6 bakers, an employer-butcher, a brewer, director of a great brewery, an important merchant, the son of a blacksmith, and a printer.

It should be noted that the number of men called to the control is relatively small in proportion of the total population ; but it must not be lost sight of that we are in the centre of the mining region, and that all the miners have been exempted.

This observation applies to all the other communes.

At Dour, out of 137 deported 117 were counted who were employed, among which 9 cultivators, 4 students, and a number of small employers working at home.

At Wasmes, out of 186 deported 130 were employed.

At Frameries, out of 200 deported 187 were employed.

At Hornu, out of 140 deported 87 were employed.

At Paturages, out of 139 deported 134 were employed.

At Ghlin, out of 155 deported 109 were employed.

At Havré, the burgomaster had declared to the recruiting officer that all the men summoned to be enrolled were occupied ; he had made an inquiry and asked to be allowed to prove it. No attention was paid to his observation, and out of

450 men called to the control 46 were deported, all employed.

The same proportions were found in all the communes.

Is this the effect of chance ? No. The greater part of the time they deliberately chose working men who had employment in Belgium. The recruiting officers appeared to have a marked predilection for the most experienced working men of certain industries — foremen, men from the shops, iron-workers, glass-blowers, shoemakers, adjusters, electricians, cultivators.

Thus, at the forges and rolling mills of Baume at Haine-Saint-Pierre, out of 400 workmen who were examined 52 were deported.

In the Gilson factories at La Croyère, 50 workmen were deported out of 225 called.

At the company La Brugeoise et Nicaise et Delcuve, 56 out of 389.

At the limited company of the Rolling Mills of La Croyère, 51 out of 73.

At the factories of the Boulonneries et Fonderie de la Louvière, 25 out of 131.

At the workshops of Bouvy at La Croyère, 25 out of 145.

At the Compagnie Centrale de Construction at Haine-Saint-Pierre 37 workmen and *employés* who were working were deported, about 10 per cent of the personnel.

At the workshops Spiltoir, Happez et Meck, at Haine-Saint-Paul, 14 workmen were deported, which represents 70 per cent, of the personnel examined and 40 per cent, of the entire personnel.

At the Hauts-Fourneaux et Fonderies de la Louvière the deportations reached 70 per cent, which made it impossible for the factory to continue work.

In the Usines Boël, at La Louvière, they took away 249 workmen, among them a head clerk, 10 *employés*, 21 foremen, and 217 workmen. All the *employés* and workmen of these factories that were deported were working at the time they were examined.

At the glass-works of Jemappes, the only establishment of the kind in our arrondissement, the application of the system had a striking effect.

This factory had resumed work on December 4, 1915 ; it worked without interruption and more and more until September 1, 1916. It had to shut down till November 10 to repair certain furnaces, intending to enlarge its activity. They took away from it more than half of its best workmen. In order to be precise, we cite the following figures :

Forty per cent of the blowers ;

Sixty per cent, of the boys of the first class who aid the blowers ;

Thirty per cent, of the boys of the second class who aid the blowers ;

Forty per cent, of the personnel of grinders ;

Thirty-five per cent, of the stretchers ;
One hundred per cent, of the electricians ;
One hundred per cent, of the adjusters, etc.
What a perturbation for this industry !

What we have just said of the speeding up of the glassworks of Jemappes applies to almost all of the industries we have spoken of.

We put aside the coal-mines, of which the activity is considered with favour ; we wish above all to speak of the workshops, the rolling mills, the crockeries, the boot factories, the tile factories, etc. None of these industries, big or little, was touched by the blockade, or at least did not suffer any great embarrassment on this account. The time during which they had to shut down was caused by interruption of transport, the insufficiency of fuel or of minerals, because of the lack of means of transport, and above all, because of the rigours of the decrees by which part of the tools were seized and which limited the working day to a number of hours very greatly reduced (the boot factories).

The manufacturers did not fail to show the recruiting officers how necessary it was for the success of their work to leave their personnel intact. Their observations were hardly listened to.

One thing that is characteristic, which shows the fixed idea to choose among the professions or categories already determined, was that the military authority grouped on one side the working men in the factories that were going full blast, and

made their choice under the eyes of the chiefs of the establishments and despite their protestations : it was the same for the workmen of the rolling mills of Jemappes for those of the constructing-shops of Nimy and the shops of Bouvy at La Louvière.

What complaints can they make to these good fellows that were torn away from their families, who were taken away from national labour to be compelled to work in the interest of Germany?

What wrongs had they committed ?

The deportation is a cruel and unmerited suffering for them and for us Belgians a national calamity.

To all the requisitions of material, of tools, of horses, which had already made such ravages, was it necessary to add that most abominable of all, that of man ?

By the development of civilization, by the adoption of codified laws of war in international conventions, it would seem that never more would a vanquished people have been submitted to such a torture and that the personal liberty of peaceful inhabitants would have been respected. All the unemployed as well as the working men must be left in their homes.

And has one ever seen a population more calm, more stoic under suffering ? Was the population ever the occasion of difficulties or care for the Imperial Government ?

You try to reassure our patriotism. Excellency, in declaring to us that the deported Belgians will not have to take part in anything that has to do with the war. But do not all those who cooperate in any way in the enterprises of belligerent peoples work for war ? The farmer who furnishes fats to the army, the tailor who makes clothes, the beltmaker, the shoemaker, the lumberman, the road-builder, do they not participate in work which has a war end ? Whoever puts a foot on the soil of Germany to work becomes an auxiliary of the German army, no matter what work he does.

It is so true that the German Government wishes to establish obligatory civil service ; all of the civilians will be by that fact militarized.

And even before the authorities have put in vigour this new war legislation they apply it to occupied Belgium. They impose it on Belgians against their own country, notwithstanding the solemn assurances which had relieved their minds of this odious perspective.

Never, Excellency, never has international law recognized such a power in the conqueror. Never has it consecrated such an iniquity.

Do not ask us to say to our populations that it is in their interest that they are being sent to Germany. In doing so we would betray our country.

Accept, Excellency, the expression of our distinguished consideration.

(Same signatures as November 2 ? ...)

Senators : Mosselman, Roland, Vicomte Vilain XIII, Demerbe.

Deputies : Alph. Harmignie, Masson, Bastien, Mariolle, Brenez, Servais.

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 and the English translation : pages 316-321. (**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&smode=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&smode=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