

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

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

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

Translation :

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing,
Governor-General, Brussels.

Archbishopric of Malines,

Malines, November 29, 1916.

Mr. Governor-General,

The letter (I.11254) that Your Excellency does me the honour to write under date of November 23 is a disappointment to me. In many circles that I had reasons to believe well informed, I was told that Your Excellency had felt it a duty to protest before the highest authorities of the Empire against the measures that he is obliged to apply in Belgium. I reckoned then at least on a delay in the application of these measures, until they can be given a new examination or an amelioration of the processes which put them in execution.

But now, without a word of reply to any one of the arguments by which, in my letters of October 19 and November 10, I establish the anti-judicial and anti-social character of the condemnation of

the Belgian working classes to forced labour and to deportation, Your Excellency confines himself to repeat in his dispatch of November 23 the very text of his letter of October 26. His two letters of November 23 and October 26 are in effect identical in matter and almost in form.

Besides, the recruiting of pretended unemployed is made, the greater part of the time, without any observation of the local authorities. Several reports that I have in hand attest that the clergy is brutally put aside, the burgomasters and common councillors are ordered to keep silent ; the recruiting officers find themselves then faced by unknown people, among whom they arbitrarily make their choice.

There are abundant examples of this ; here are two very recent ones among quantities of others that I hold at the disposal of Your Excellency. On November 21 recruiting was going over in the commune of Kersbeek-Misoom. Out of the 1.323 inhabitants of the commune the recruiting officers took away ninety-four in a mass, without discussion as to the social conditions or professions — sons of farmers, the supporters of aged and infirm parents, fathers of families, leaving wife and children in poverty, all as necessary to their families as daily bread. Two families had torn from them each four sons at a time. Out of the ninety-four deported there were two unemployed.

In the region of Aerschot the recruiting was made on November 23. At Rillaer, at Gelrode, at Rotselaer, young men, the supporters of a widowed mother, fathers at the head of large families — one among them who had already passed fifty years, has ten children, cultivating the ground, possessing several horned beasts, having never touched a *sou* of public charity — were carried away by force, despite their protestations. In the commune of Rillaer they took as many as twenty-five young boys of seventeen years.

Your Excellency would have wished the communal administrations to be the accomplices of these odious seizures ; by their legal situation and in all conscience they could not do it, but they could have enlightened the recruiting officers and were able to do this. The priests, who knew better than everybody the common people, would have been for the recruiting officers very able aids. How did they refuse their help ?'

At the end of your letter Your Excellency recalls that the men belonging to the liberal professions are not troubled. If they took away only the unemployed I would understand the decision ; but if they continue to enrol without distinction able men, the exception is not justified. It would be iniquitous to allow the deportation to weigh solely on the working classes. The middle class should have its part in the sacrifice, however cruel it may be — and precisely because it is cruel — which the

occupant imposes on the nation. The members of my clergy, who have prayed me to ask for them a place in the vanguard of the persecuted are numerous. I register their offer and submit it to you with pride.

I should like to believe that the authorities of the Empire have not said their last word. They will think of our unmerited sufferings, of the reprobation of the civilized world, the judgment of History, and the punishment of God.

Accept, Excellency, the homage of my very high consideration.

D. J. Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

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 302-303. (**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>