

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter XXXIV. The German state.

I USED to recall the American lady who, in those first days of the war, came to the Legation in fear. I had tried to calm her, assured her that she would be safe — that modern armies did not make war on civilians, much less on women.

"*But these are Germans !*" she said, as though I had overlooked the prime factor in the equation.

I had long since learned that arguments never convince. I supposed that she was but reflecting the opinion that was *à la mode* at Paris, where she had so long lived. One cannot indict a whole nation, as Burke said, but perhaps her instinctive theory was as good, as any to explain the dreadful deeds that had been done. People usually translate problems into the terms of their own understanding.

Field-Marshal Baron von der Goltz, the old pacha, came to Belgium announcing the doctrine, amazing in our Western eyes, that "*the punishment for hostile acts falls not only on the guilty, but on the innocent as well.*"

The doctrine, of course, is implicit in the German theory of the State. The State is conceived as something with an independent, ideal, unrelated existence, wholly dissociated from the individuals that compose it — an entity suspended somewhere between the heaven and the earth, like the coffin of Mohammed.

It does not exist for the benefit of the individual, but, so far as he is of any account in it at all, he exists for it. Hegel, it seems, was the original inventor of the theory, and students of German metaphysics can trace it all back to Kant's categorical imperative of duty, and to Goethe's principle of self-culture — doctrines distorted into something quite otherwise than that which their originators intended. They will cite Fichte, teaching that the citizen must sink his individuality in the State ; Treitschke, with his notion that the State is a half-divine entity based on force, and that therefore the army is the highest manifestation of the State and war its chief business, "*a radical medicine for the ills of State*", which "*the living God will take good care ... shall not cease*" ; Clausewitz, preaching the duty of every man to be in the army ; and Nietzsche, scorning the Christian tenets as soft and effeminate, inculcating the dogma of moral irresponsibility. Goethe's self-culture becomes a kind of sublimated selfishness, and into all this muddle a perversion of Darwin's theory of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest is mixed, until Bernhardi, getting down to business, teaches that might makes right, and that nothing succeeds like success. Thus is evolved a nation of supermen, all doing the goosetep.

For forty years these doctrines were dinned into the German ear ; pamphleteers, novelists, soldiers, statesmen, scientists, professors, theologians, and pastors ail preached and expounded them. The army became the avatar of the State. Every man is in the army, and there is but one law, one duty, one principle, one religion — obey. The private obeys the corporal, the corporal obeys the sergeant, the sergeant obeys the lieutenant, the lieutenant the captain, and so on up the scaffolding of the mounting grades, until all power, all authority, all privilege, is vested finally in the generals, the field-m Marshals, and the General Staff. Pastors exist only to assure them of the approval of the Teutonic god, professors to write learned justifications of their crimes, and scientists to invent new and more terrible methods of destruction. For forty-four years the writers and

thinkers of Germany had been at work upon this theory — forty-four years of what laborious study, of what prodigious toil ! There is something almost pathetic in the spectacle ; one ray of humour visiting those patient, docile, heavy minds would have spared them all their pains — and made the empire impossible. Forty-four years and whole libraries of ponderous tomes to define a theory that Louis XIV, without hypocrisy and with no illusions, with French clearness, French logic, French cynicism, and French wit, put into a word, "*L'état, c'est moi !*"

The trouble with theories is that when they undertake to realize themselves, to body themselves forth, they have nothing to do it with except men. I am sure that those old men of the Landsturm, in the little round caps and buckles with "*Gott mit uns !*" on their bellies, and the boots and the rifles with the long shining bayonets, whom we used to see standing in ecstasies before the windows of the *Delicatessen* shops in Brussels, where the red sausages glistened and the golden Dutch cheeses gleamed, had never heard of Nietzsche or of Bernhardi or of Treitschke. They were neither philosophers nor mystics, and were all unaware that they were supermen. All they had heard of was the Burgundy of Belgium, the champagne and the women of France — and *francs-tireurs*. In their pockets they carried inflammable pastilles and the like, phrase-books giving alternate translations in German and French of such sentences as :

" *Hands up !* "

" *Carry out all the furniture !* "

" *I am thirsty ; bring me some beer, gin, rum.*"

" *You have to supply a barrel of wine and a keg of beer !* "

" *If you lie to me I will have you shot immediately !* "

" *Lead me to the wealthiest inhabitants of this village. I have orders to requisition several barrels of wine.*"

" *Show us the way to ... If you lead us astray you will be shot !* "

For forty years German writers had been preaching the duty of waging war not only on armies but on civil populations as well, and the German mind was saturated with the notion that in France the civil population was composed of *francs-tireurs*. Not only the military writers but the German romanticists had filled their books with the idea. Their popular romances abound in tales of the terrible French *francs-tireurs* with their ferocious names, the eidola of those Tartarins the Germans had heard of in France in 1870, and those tales were told everywhere in the Prussian Germany that grew up afterward.

In the first days of the war, arrived in a village that was on the frontier, near Malmedy, partly in Belgium and partly in Germany, it is said — I cannot vouch for this story — that the German soldiers at once began burning houses, and that there were cries of "*Nein ! Nein ! Dies ist noch deutsch !*" At any rate, there is little doubt that along the Route des Trois-Cheminées the peasants were assembled under guard by the soldiers and pointed out to the oncoming columns as specimens of the Belgian *francs-tireurs* that had fired on their comrades !

The result was that when the German soldiers entered Belgium they were in such a highly excited state, in a condition of such fear, that they saw a *franc-tireur* in every peasant, in every peaceful civilian ; the lightest sound, the crackling of a twig, the slamming of a door, brought the cry "*Man hat geschossen !*" and the stampede and carnage began. Even officers were not free from the obsession. A general, quartered in a Ministry in Brussels in the autumn of 1914, was awakened by an unusual sound — a steady, persistent tick-tick-tick — there in the silent watches of the night ; he rose, summoned the guard, told them that there was an infernal machine at work, ordered them to ransack the house from attic to cellar, where at last they found a defective water-meter.

To the general, of course, and no doubt to all those with loftier seats in the hierarchy, the doctrines that I have cited meant something ; war had become a sacred thing, and a German's duty first of all was to the State. An official at Brussels one day, while he was smoking a cigar with a relish that seemed entirely human, said, with an air of great merit, and no doubt with entire sincerity :

"If that sentinel out there should tell me to throw away this cigar I should do so, unhesitatingly and instantly."

Thus the peculiar conception of " *duty* " came before conscience, before honour, before every moral consideration. Distinctions become blurred, and finally fade from the mind. Men who in their private or personal capacity would not think of countenancing such deeds would permit, even command, any brutality, any wickedness, any atrocity, the moment they could say to themselves that it was being done for the State. In this mystical conception the deed becomes a high and holy thing. The uniform comes to possess a magic quality ; the moment it is on his back the wearer becomes something other than a man. And when anything that a man, provided he wears a uniform, desires to do can be justified and approved in conscience merely by saying that it is for the benefit of the State, there is no end to the possibility of mischief.

The *White Book*, issued on May 10, 1915, to justify the deeds of the German army in Belgium, admits all the essential facts and attempts a justification — a plea in confession and avoidance. The claim was not that here and there some maddened and desperate peasant had fired from behind hayricks or trees — that might have been conceivable, perhaps not unnatural, under all the circumstances ; it was not even that there were here and there bands of *francs-tireurs* ; but that the whole nation, secretly and officially organized, had risen and flung itself on the invader. " *Man hat geschossen !* " becomes " *Der belgischen Volkskrieg.* "

In Brussels, to convict a Belgian of anything, the word of a German soldier sufficed ; he did not have to give evidence of the fact, much less prove it — he merely had to assert it. It may be that same similar notion accounts for the fact that in the *White Book* there is no convincing evidence that the Germans were actually fired upon, and indeed, as it seems, that no serious effort was made judicially to establish the fact. As to have a town given over to fire and sword it sufficed simply for a German soldier to cry " *Man hat geschossen !* " — when justification is attempted it seems sufficient to say " *The Belgians fired on us* ". The fact that in a moment of panic some soldier cried " *Man hat geschossen !* " is offered as proof that some one did shoot at them. Three hundred times the *White Book* contents itself with repeating the unsupported allegation, " *They have fired upon us* ". It was, of course, sufficient for Germany, for " *a German soldier said so.* "

In the *White Book* there is not a word about Tamines, not a word about Surice, not a word about Spontin, not a word about Namur, not a word about Ethe, not a word about Gommeries, not a word about Latour — not a word, in short, about sixty-five other places where there was pillage and massacre and incendiarism.

The testimony, most of it gathered for the Louvain inquiry, consists almost wholly of such statements as those of Berghausen and his comrades; they were the star witnesses.

" *Men of all professions* ", says the *White Book*, " *workers, manufacturers, doctors, professors, even clergymen — yes, even women and children — were taken with weapons in their hands, in the regions from which the regular troops had retired. They were shooting from houses or from gardens, from roofs and from cellars, from fields and from forests, on the Germans. They used means that would never be employed* "

by regular troops — shot-guns and lead-shot, old revolvers and old pistols — and numerous were the men found mutilated or scalded with boiling tar or boiling water. In short, it is not to be doubted that the German wounded were struck and killed by the Belgian population, and also greatly mutilated ; nor is it to be doubted that women and even girls participated in these shameful exploits. German wounded had their eyes punctured, their noses and ears and fingers and their sexual organs mutilated, their bodies ripped open ; in other cases German soldiers were poisoned, sprayed with boiling liquid, or roasted, so that they suffered an atrocious death."

And by an even more extensive flight of the imagination, one German soldier says that he saw a Belgian boy going about in a field with a bucket filled with the eyes of German soldiers. And hence it was necessary to do what was done at Visé, at Dinant, at Aerschot, at Louvain, and in a hundred other towns sacked, pillaged, and burned, with masses mowed down by machineguns, children murdered and women raped. And yet, if the alleged firing by civilians was done on such a scale it would seem rather simple to produce some direct evidence of the fact, and to show who fired on the soldiers and where and when, and the names of some, at least, of the numerous victims.

Doubtless it is not given to us, with our Common Law notions of evidence and of proof, to penetrate the mystery of the German idea of justice. "*Man hat geschossen!*" A German soldier said so. That settles it.

It is, of course, inconvenient to argue with an opponent who has such a supreme and impregnable refuge. Attempts to have all the facts submitted to some impartial tribunal, as well as appeals, were all in vain.*

Monseigneur Rutten, Bishop of Liège, as early as August 18, 1914, had written to Commandant Bayer, German Military Governor of Liège :

"I appeal to your heart as a man and a Christian and I beseech you to put a stop to the executions and reprisals. I have been informed repeatedly that several villages have been destroyed, that many notables — among them priests — have been shot, that others have been arrested, and all have protested that they were innocent. As I know the priests of my parish, I cannot believe that any one of them was guilty of acts of cruelty to German soldiers. I have visited several hospitals and have seen that they are as well cared for as the Belgians ; they themselves have testified to this. I do not wish to discuss past events ; I only ask of you, in the name of Humanity and of God, to prevent acts of reprisal against our harmless population. These reprisals can no longer have any useful object, but will only push the population to the depths of despair.

"I should be pleased to discuss the matter with you, for I am confident that it is your wish as much as it is mine to lessen the hardships of war rather than to increase them. At the last minute I learn that the curate of R — has been arrested and conducted to the Chartreuse [a fort]. I do not know what the accusation against him is, but I do know that he is incapable of committing a hostile act toward your soldiers ; he is a good priest, gentle and charitable. I can vouch for him, and beg you to send him back to his parish."

And Cardinal Mercier and the five Bishops of Belgium, on November 24, 1915, wrote a collective letter to the Cardinals and Bishops of Germany, Bavaria, and Austria, in which this touching passage occurs :

"You will say, perhaps : 'It is past ; let us forget it. Instead of pouring oil on the fire you had better strive to pardon and to collaborate with the Power in Occupation, whose sole desire is to heal the wounds of the unfortunate Belgian people.' Oh ! your Eminences and dear Colleagues, do not add irony to injustice. Have we not suffered enough ? Have we not been, are we not continuing to be, tortured with sufficient cruelty ?

"You say : 'All is past ; accept it with resignation ; forget.'

"The past ! But all the wounds are bleeding ! There is not an honest heart that is not inflamed with indignation. While we hear our Government say to the world : He is twice guilty who, after having violated the rights of others, still attempts, with the most audacious cynicism, to justify himself by attributing to his victim faults that the latter never committed, our people can only keep back with violence words of malediction. Only yesterday a farmer in the neighbourhood of Malines learns that his son has died on the battlefield. A priest tries to console him, and the brave man replies : Oh ! This one ; I give him to my country ! But my eldest son, they took him from me, the accursed ones, and, like cowards, shot him and threw him into a ditch ! "

It has been said that after Louvain orders were given at Berlin that the policy of *Schrecklichkeit* be discontinued. If such orders were given they were neither enforced nor obeyed. All through the battles of September about Antwerp the same thing went on ; the tragedies of Termonde, of Lierre, were enacted there. And after Antwerp, when in October the German got down into West Flanders, where the Belgian army made its heroic stand along the Yser and blocked the way to Calais, the tragedies of Roulers, of Furnes, of Ypres, of Pervijze, of Boesinghe were the result.

And right here we have the key of the mystery. If one will take a fairly large map of Belgium and lay one's right hand upon it with the wrist at Aix-la-Chapelle, the base of the palm on Liège, and the fingers outspread toward the Belgian coast, the thumb will touch Dinant, the index-finger Nivelles, the middle finger Brussels, the second finger Louvain and Malines, and the little finger Antwerp. The five fingers thus disposed will represent in a crude figure the progress of the German forces that in August 1914 invaded the little kingdom they had sworn to protect and defend. The first of these — that went southward at about the line marked by the thumb — was the army of the Crown Prince, the next was the army of the Duke of Würtemberg, the next the army of Von Hansen, the next the army of Von Bülow, and last the army of Von Kluck. And it was in the area covered by the hand that the atrocities for the most part — until the Germans got into Flanders — were committed.

As one studies the evidence one is struck at the outset by a fact so general that it must exclude the hypothesis of mere coincidence, and that is, that these wholesale massacres followed immediately upon some reverse which the Germans had sustained. Their army is checked by the guns at the forts to the east of Liège, and the horrors of Visé, Verviers, Bligny, Battice, Hervé, and twenty villages follow. Checked before Namur, they sack Andenne, Bouvignies, and Champignon. Compelled to give battle to the French army in the Belgian Ardennes, they ravage the beautiful valley of the Semois, destroy the village of Rossignol, and exterminate its entire male population. Checked again by the French on the Meuse, the awful carnage of Dinant results ; and on the Sambre by the same army, they burn Charleroi and enact the appalling tragedy of Tamines. At Mons the English balk them, and all over the Borinage there are systematic destruction, pillage, and murder. The Belgian army drives them back from Malines, and Louvain is doomed. The Belgian army, falling back and fighting in retreat, takes refuge in the forts of Antwerp, and the burning and sack of Hougaerde, Wavre, Ottignies, Grimde, Neerlinter, Weert-St.-Georges, Schaffen, and Aerschot follow. The Belgian troops inflict serious losses on the Germans in the south of the province of Limbourg, and the towns of Lummen, Bilsen, and Lanaeken are partially destroyed. Antwerp held out for two months, and all about its

outer lines of fortifications there were blood and fire, numerous villages were sacked and burned, and the whole town of Termonde was destroyed. During the battles of September the village of Boortmeerbeek, near Malines, occupied by the Germans, was retaken by the Belgians, and when the Germans entered it again they burned forty houses. Three times occupied by the Belgians and retaken by the Germans, Boortmeerbeek was three times punished in the same way. That is to say, everywhere the German army met with a defeat it turned on the civil population and punished it, wreaking a cowardly vengeance on helpless and unoffending civilians. This happened so many times and so precisely in the same way that its significance cannot be avoided.

But there is a striking corollary to all this. In all those regions where the Germans could pass without resistance from the Belgian or French or English troops there were no massacres and no incendiarism in the grand style ; there were many isolated cases of individual outrage and atrocity, of course, but no systematically organized annihilation of cities, no massacre of populations, as at Louvain, Dinant, Termonde, Aerschot, Tamines, Visé. Between Brussels and Mons, in the northern part of the Ardennes, in the north of Limbourg, in East Flanders, the German army passed in force, but there was no resistance there on the part of regular troops, no check to the ambitious plan ; and there was no *Schrecklichkeit*.

If, as the claim is, the whole civil population of Belgium was organized for a *Volkskrieg*, the *francs-tireurs* would have been found there as well. From all that one can gather, the *franc-tireur* existed only in the overwrought imagination of the German soldiers, and one is led irresistibly to the conclusion that, thus stung by little defeats and exasperated by the checks that their plans had sustained, the officers either ordered or permitted these atrocities on the civil population.

Almost as much has been said of German discipline as of German organization. There is, of course, much of both in Germany, but the discipline is mostly of the military kind ; there seems to be little self-discipline. There are no sports in Germany and the sense of fair play is not developed ; the idea of "*playing the game*" does not exist. It is said that German schoolboys see nothing out of the way in snitching, in informing, and are encouraged to do so.

And even the higher officers so easily fly into a rage — like the general in Brussels flinging his *képi* and gloves on the floor when suddenly he became furious with the burgomaster ... The German language, so wonderfully rich, has a word for it : *wütherich*.

They used to tell a story in Brussels of a sentinel at the old Ministry for Foreign Affairs in the Rue de la Loi who, halting some one, was instantly inundated by a flood of such shocking German oaths that he hastily, saluted and allowed the man to pass.

"*Why did you let him pass, Dumbkopf ?*" demanded a sergeant, rushing up.

"*I thought from the way he spoke that he was an officer*", replied the sentinel.

They have a word, too, for the state of wild and beastly rage into which the *wütherich* so easily flues : *Jähzorn* ... It may have been *Schrecklichkeit* or it may have been *Jähzorn* ; perhaps it was both.

There should be some word, however, for the worst deed of all, that which followed this. For all those deliberately organized massacres of civilians, those wanton murders and outrages, the violation of women, the killing of children, the destruction, the burning, the footing and pillage, until whole towns were annihilated, as Carthage and Pompeii and Herculaneum were annihilated, and their people either massacred or sent forth to wander on the face of the earth — these were not the worst. It was not the worst even that after having repelled the dishonourable

advances of Germany Belgium should be violated by force, and that all these outrages should have been committed to punish her for her virtue. The worst is that after this the assailant should have tried to justify the deed by trying to sully the reputation of the victim. There is no word for that — in English, at any rate.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The Belgian Senator, Charles Magnetti, Grand Master of the Belgian Free-masons, wrote a letter, September 27, 1914, proposing to the Grand Lodge of Germany that a commission of inquiry (would) be constituted with delegates from the lodges of neutral countries, but the proposal was not accepted.

On January 24, 1915, Count von Wengersky, Kreischef at Malines, having asked for proof as to the murder of priests in the diocese, Cardinal Mercier wrote, proposing that an impartial investigation be made :

"To this end I have the honour to propose to you, M. le Comte, and to propose, by your kind medium, to the German authorities, that the Commission of Inquiry (would) be composed equally of German delegates and Belgian lawyers, to be designated by our chief magistrate and presided over by the representative of a neutral country. I am pleased to believe that His Excellency the Minister of the United States will not refuse to accept this presidency, or to entrust it to a delegate chosen by him."

No reply was made to this proposal.

Monseigneur Heylen, Bishop of Namur, on October 31, 1915, courageously published a note in which he subjected the **White Book** to the pitiless examination of a remorseless logic. On November 6 he sent a letter to the Governor General in Belgium, protesting against the allegation and conclusions in the document and he forwarded a similar protestation to Rome,

The Bishop of Liège, Monseigneur Rutten, sent protests not only to Commandant Bayer, but renewed the same protest on August 21 to General von Kolewe, who had then been appointed Military Governor of Liège. No answer was received to any of these protests.

Identical protests, but amplified and energetically accentuated, says the Bishop, were renewed in an interview with the Governor-General in Belgium, Field-Marshal the Baron von der Goltz Pacha, then lodged in the Episcopal Palace with his staff, on August 29.

A priest accredited by His Eminence Cardinal Piffel, Prince Archbishop of Vienna, made an inquiry in Belgium in the name of the *Priesterverein* of Vienna, the results of which were published in *De Tijd* of Amsterdam and in the *Politiken* of Copenhagen. The Verdict was overwhelmingly against the German military authorities. So far as is known this report was never published in Germany or in Austria.

In their response to the French Catholics, the German Catholics, speaking of the violation of nuns, say that when the German Governor-General in Belgium addressed himself on the subject to the Belgian Bishops, the Archbishop of Malines (Cardinal Mercier) caused it to be made known that he could furnish no precise information as to any case whatever of the violation of nuns in his diocese. Thereupon Cardinal Mercier published his correspondence with Baron von Bissing on this delicate subject, in which he said that the priests were bound to respect secrets of the confessional, and physicians those of their profession ; that he would not submit any nun to an interrogatory, and that no good could come from a discussion of the subject. But when his words were misinterpreted, he wrote :

"I wrote, indeed, to the Governor-General that I could furnish no precise information, because my conscience forbade me to deliver to any tribunal whatever the information — alas, too precise — which I possess. Assaults on nuns have been committed. I believe them, happily, to be not numerous, but they occurred, to my knowledge, several times."

The Cardinal thereupon published in its entirety his correspondence with the Governor-General.