

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXI. Organization of the General Government.

THE incident might have ended otherwise if, as I have said, the counsel of Baron von der Lancken had not prevailed over the violent insistence of the military *clique*. It was not the first of its kind, nor was it the last, but it was one of the most serious of the many divergences of opinion between the military and the civil branches of the government of occupation that was then getting itself installed. There was a vast change from those first days when General von Jarotsky and his staff were occupying the Hôtel de Ville. As I have said, General von Lüttwitz, when he came, had removed his headquarters to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 8 Rue de la Loi, and there the Governor of Brussels continued to reside, while next door, in the Ministry of the Interior, there was set up that institution which is the heart of the German system, the thing whose name came to have a sinister connotation every time it was pronounced — the Kommandantur. It is a large *local*, two great buildings, one the luxurious hotel of the Minister of the Interior — the Belgian Ministers live, or used to live, in their Ministries — and the other devoted to the numerous offices. There was the headquarters of the chief of police, in many respects the most powerful man in Brussels, for he seemed to be accountable to nobody, and to move in a wide and tragic orbit of irresponsibility that allowed him enormous latitude in the exercise of his terrible powers. Every morning there set forth from those big doors a battalion of *Polizei*, German soldiers in grey, ill-fitting uniforms, their trousers stuffed in their short, heavy, iron-shod boots, squat helmets on their heads, their rifles, with bayonets fixed, slung to their shoulders. They were distinguished from the others only by the black, white, and red brassards, with the seal of the Imperial eagle stamped on them, and by the metal *plaques*, strung by chains about their necks, bearing in large letters the word *Polizei*. This gave them, in our unaccustomed eyes at any rate, a ridiculous appearance and the Brussels folk a new subject for their incorrigible mockery ; they instantly suggested the little labels hung about the necks of bottle ; of curaçao and other liqueurs.

If these had left any doubt as to their authority and function, their brutish look would have sufficiently declared it. They went in twos, sometimes in threes ; they were stationed at various *carrefours* and at all the entrances to the city ; they tramped heavily up and down the streets, returning to the Rue de la Loi late in the afternoon dragging the latest of their luckless victims, who disappeared in the Kommandantur, not always to come out again until it was time to go in the black wagon to the prison at St.-Gilles, or to the field of execution at the National Rifle Range.

There was always a long queue there before the Kommandantur stretching from the entrance at No. 4 Rue de la Loi down to the corner, and oft-times around the corner into the Rue Royale, with *Polizei* to keep it straight. Sad faces, for the most part, those in that -line, and the drab habiliments of the poor, since it is always in any calamity the poor who pay first. There was something degrading and shameful in the spectacle, as there is in any reckless and irresponsible use of mere brute force. Those people were there on all sorts of errands ; many in compliance with the harassing regulations of the German system, to secure *cartes d'identité*, or passes, or maybe to ask to see some relative or friend confined there ; the line was always there, in rain

or frost or sun, huddled along the wall, moving slowly on, step by step, through the long weary hours.

There was another entrance to the Kommandantur, back in the Rue de Louvain, another wide portal quite as tragic and perhaps more hopeless. Often one would see prisoners taken in there, men or women, to be charged with one of the countless crimes that irresponsible autocracy invents to allege against those who even in the lightest ways run counter to its whim. Often, in walking down the Rue de Louvain — one had to go that way to get to the lower town, unless one went round the other end of the Park, for the Park and the Rue de la Loi were forbidden the public — I have seen four or five *Polizei* leading some woman with tear-stained, tragic eyes, and the slatternly skirt and *sabots* she had on when they suddenly descended upon her, and rubbed my eyes and wondered if it were not the twelfth instead of the twentieth century.

The door at the Rue de Louvain was the more sinister and more tragic portal, in my eyes at least, because I understood that the more important prisoners were taken in that way ; I do not know, and it makes little difference. Not far away, behind the Banque Nationale, a whole block of buildings in the Rue Berlaimont had been taken over by the secret police, and in and out of those doors there streamed every day the army of spics, secret police, informers, and *agents provocateurs* who infested Brussels, and in plying their detestable calling resorted to every mean device that the depraved and abandoned could imagine. Among them were Germans who had been merchants in Belgium before the war ; others who had been received socially in Brussels and in Antwerp. A German police commissioner was there to instruct them in all the refinements of their atrocious trade. One with any faith left in humanity could not believe that so many loathsome scoundrels could be assembled in the earth ; there were said to be more than six thousand of them, and they prowled in every alley and in every by-way, in every avenue and boulevard in the town ; they made perquisitions everywhere ; a suspicion, a hint, an anonymous letter, sufficed to send them to a private home, where they ransacked and rummaged every drawer and cupboard, searched the inmates, browbeat and intimidated them. They rode in trams, wriggled their way into little groups and gatherings, insinuated themselves into bedroom and closet, made friends and confidants in order to betray them, held out bribes and temptations when there were no offences, they invented them ; when there was no disorder, they created it, and then lured or dragged the poor victims of their treachery and duplicity to their headquarters, where they interrogated, badgered, sweated them, and by ruses or violence extorted avowals before turning them over to the courts martial and the firing-squad, or sending them to rot in German prisons or to die in German camps. They were of both sexes, of all nations and of all tongues, the scum and offscouring of the earth, the moral filth and refuse of the world.

They were everywhere. There was a questionable fellow who was the tenant of a building of three stories in the Rue de Trèves across from the Legation. On summer evenings I noticed that in an upper room the windows, which commanded a view of the Legation, were always open, though the chamber was never lighted. In the darkness every evening I would see a coal, as if fire, that would glow bright and then fade into the blackness around, then glow and fade — a cigar, evidently ; precisely the effect William Gillette used to produce in the last act of *Sherlock Holmes*.

Who is that man in that room in the third story ? we wondered ; and one morning I sent a servant across the street to inquire of the proprietor, in shirt-sleeves, taking the air in his doorway.

"*He's an English soldier*", was the word brought back, "*left behind at Mons ; he's in hiding.*"

"*He is not*", I replied, "*he is a German spy. Tell the man lunch good it will do his tenant to waste his time there.*"

The proprietor, at this, took his pipe from his lips, gazed — and went in. I saw the evening cigar glow and fade no more.

One always had the uncanny sensation of some one at one's elbow. There were furtive shadows when one was out at night ; some one always near the doorway, or the door of the mater. Men meeting in the boulevard always turned and glanced about before conversing, And in the trams the wise were silent, for gossip on the rear platforms was the most dangerous of indulgences. Spies or secret agents were constantly coming to the Legation with all sorts of questions. How could one send letters ? How could one communicate with France or England ? The favourite device was to whisper : "*I am a French soldier, and I should like to be sent out*", or "*I am a Belgian and should like to join the army ; they tell me that you know the way.*"

We knew nothing of such things, of course ; but the Kommandantur has no conception of the fact that there is, after all, such a thing as honour in this world. We had one response which, in many instances, it was a pleasure to make :

"*Wait until you can speak French without a German accent, and then come back*", we would say.

There were several who came as newspaper correspondents, and not without credentials, usually conducted by German officers, from Berlin. Two of them at least were women.

"*What is your opinion, confidentially, of the German administration in Belgium ? What kind of man is Von Bissing ?*" they would ask.

Their poor ruses were so transparent ! How much of the German taxpayer's money has been expended in the purchase of scoundrels ! And all wasted !

There were *dossiers*, of course, for every one of any importance in town ; an official *Who's Who*, wherein with meticulous and ultimate detail whole lives were laid bare.

Espionage was practised not only on their enemies but on their own army. I was told that each general, each high official was watched, and that for this purpose men were selected whose whole personal resentment could be brought into play. Thus the spies selected to watch the actions of generals and high military officials were Socialists, who could gratify their personal dislike of militarism by compromising military officials.

"*Do you see that man over there ?*" said a German one day in the Palace Hotel, pointing to a man who was sitting before the door of the lift. "*The Government profits by his political hatred of a certain general who is now in his room upstairs. Watch a while and you will see something.*"

Half an hour later the lift descended, a general came out, the man got up, approached, and bespoke him ; the general turned deathly pale ; they two went away together.

This enormous and complicated engine of oppression and of terror was incessantly, tirelessly hunting down patriots, seeking out evidence for prosecution for what the Germans by a peculiar illogic, impossible in any Western country, call treason in time of war. Any one, if it be so desired, may be convicted of treason against Germany, no matter what his nationality may be, simply by charging him with treason in time of war. Hundreds of graves where Belgians lie testify to the fact. When this was not the object sought, they were gathering information for the purpose of draining the resources and ruining the industries of the country. The Kommandantur and the secret police formed a section of the central military branch of the Government, and were by far its most powerful arm.

The whole organization of *Das General-Gouvernement* is exceedingly complicated, based on a conception difficult for any one of Anglo-Saxon or Latin culture and temperament to understand. One hears much expansive admiration of the German genius for organizing, but it comes for the most part from those who have never had actual experience of German organization. Perhaps it is because there is so much of it ; because it is so *Kolossal* : It is in many ways efficient, no doubt ; they get certain things done ; but then, so do the French, who seem to have so little organization and are so clever in improvization. But the vast, elephantine deliberation of German organization would drive an American captain of industry mad in a fortnight.

It is heavy, cumbersome ; its complicated machinery rumbles on and on remorselessly, and once set in motion there is no way of stopping it, of timing it aside, of adapting it to sudden exigencies. It is blindly impersonal, inhuman, taking no account of persons or of the personal equation. Wherever it touches human beings, it consists of a multitude of regulations, of *verbotens* ; instead of a few simple guide-posts to point the way through a wilderness, the Germans would put up myriad sign-boards telling the traveller where not to go ; instead of barking a few trees to blaze the trail, they would hack all the trees in the forest except those along the way they wished to indicate. That, indeed, is what they did in the Parc there in the centre of Brussels, which they took from the people and closed in for their own officers. Standing at the east entrance in the Rue Ducale, near the Rue Lambermont, one morning, I counted twenty-six sign-boards, of many colours, with their various *verbotens*. Before the war the only signs that I recall were those reminding the public that certain places were reserved for the children to play in. But then the Belgians had learned liberty in their communal system and had their own pride in their own Park.

In the German system there is no room for liberty or initiation or imagination. The nation is organized like a penitentiary — with the lock-step. And the difference between the German system and the Belgian, or the English or the French or the American, is that which is expressed so clearly in the famous illustration of Tolstoy — the man in the boat who steers by landmarks along the coast and the man who steers by compass. The one hugs the shore, the other goes forth and roves the seven seas.

Our dealings, fortunately, were all with the Civil Government. We found them usually much like the officials with whom one would have dealings anywhere ; they were generally polite, affable, oftentimes anxious to please. They were rather slow perhaps, and very bureaucratic ; and sometimes letters, referred from one department to another, got caught in the cogs of the terrible

machine and were lost for weeks or for ever. And there was a way, which no doubt had its convenience, of sending one from pillar to post and from Peter to Paul, until one was lost in a hopeless labyrinth. But what was worst of all, the machine stopped clanking sometimes ; and the explanation given, with a shrug of the shoulders, was very simple and expressed in two words, "*les militaires*". Whenever *les militaires* spoke the machine stalled, the organization was instantly paralysed. The officials in the civil administration (*Zivilverwaltung*) were in mortal terror most of the time of the *militaires*, and for them the *militaires* had a supreme contempt. We seldom saw the *militaires* ; they were always behind somewhere, out of sight, and always there, their dark shadows over everything and everybody. The *civils* wore uniforms, but wore them clumsily, and the *militaires* used to laugh at their awkward manner of saluting.

There were thousands of these civilians ; they descended on Brussels immediately after the occupation, like a swarm of grasshoppers. They crowded all the Ministries, warming all the chairs, old bureaucrats and clerks, *ronds de cuir*, hairy professors and specialists in spectacles ; filling innumerable reams of paper with their strange characters, compiling figures and statistics and reports, until the Ministries were not large enough to contain them all ; and they had to seize whole buildings wherein to install themselves and their bewildering dockets and papers, and import from Germany troops of German boy scouts, who wore hats like foresters, to run their errands for them. And these were not enough ; they imported hundreds of women and girls, and took over entire hotels to house them. The salaries of all these functionaries were enormous — and all paid out of the contributions and fines wrung from the Belgians. For the functionaries of the *police des mœurs* that were imported from Germany the city of Brussels alone had to pay ninety thousand francs a month.

The supreme authority and the source of all power and privilege was the Governor-General, delegated by the Emperor as his personal representative, and responsible to him alone. He wielded all political authority (*Staatsgewalt*) as chief of the Government of Occupation. The extent of his powers depended entirely and exclusively upon the Imperial will. The Kaiser, in his *rôle* of war-lord, had an absolute right, emanating from military force, in the conquered territories. This power, for occupied Belgium, was delegated to the Governor-General. At Berlin neither Reichstag, Bundesrath, or Foreign Office had any authority over him ; his decrees required no countersign or attestation. His will was supreme. In a word, he was a dictator. As to offences committed against the German State and the German army — which is the German State — he had the power of life and death, and yet, if there were no legal restrictions to his powers, save as the approbation of the Kaiser was necessary to them, he was nevertheless subject to the ambient military influence, the prejudices, the opinions, the whims of the military caste. The aged Von der Goltz, who was there so short a time — the gossips say that he was intended for the post of Governor-General of France when the Germans reached Paris, and that when the Battle of the Marne dissolved that dream he was assigned to Brussels — was not so ferocious a man as the world has painted Von Bissing, and Von Bissing was not so ferocious as he is generally represented. His name bears the odium of all that was done in Belgium, and, since he was ultimately responsible, no formal injustice perhaps is thereby done him, but he was not always in favour of what was done, and much was done, even by him, that was against his judgment. Like all executives he was the victim of his environment, the slave of the system, that had produced him. Behind him was the formidable and

powerful military machine, from whose occult influence he could not escape. And, as in the case of all arbitrary and autocratic rulers, while untrammelled by laws and principles and tribunals, he was surrounded by cliques, constantly disputing the possession of him, and, pulled and hauled, swayed this way and that by the jealous factions in his staff, he revealed himself now just, merciful, and yielding, now unjust, cruel, and inflexible. There was always in his staff that endless dispute that goes on in Germany between the military and the civil factions. Old soldier even though he was, I often thought that since he was by no means a stupid or unenlightened man, his feelings inclined toward the clique of civilians, but in any matter which the military clique considered vital, they always had their way, as in Germany they seem always to do.

By decrees of the Governor-General it was announced that the powers appertaining to the King of the Belgians would be exercised by the Military Governor-General ; that the powers appertaining to the Provincial Governors in Belgium would be exercised by the Military Governors of the Provinces, and that the rôles of Commissioners of Arrondissements would be filled by *Kreischefs*.

The central military organization, *Das General-Gouvernement*, was under the exclusive direction of the Chief of the General Staff, who was, *ex officio*, the Military Governor of Brussels, and the Chief Quartermaster (*Ober-Quartiermeister*). This was that, to us, mysterious power behind the scenes, referred to by the civilians as "*messieurs les militaires*", sometimes in moments of pique or bitterness as "*les militaires*", or again, with almost superstitious reverence, as though *ces messieurs* were some immutable principle, as "*la nécessité militaire*."

This department was supreme in all military matters, in all things concerning the army or the security of the state, and it controlled the police. It was divided into numerous sub-departments, directed by officers of the General Staff, which were responsible for the troops of occupation, the lines of communication, the surveillance of the Dutch frontier, and all that ; there were sub-departments that controlled the foreigners, took measures against spying, directed the military courts and tribunals, the police, issued passports and permits of all kinds, provided the defence against aviators, and were responsible for the remount depots, carting, wagonage, and all those multiple questions of arms, equipment and supplies that concern a vast army.

The civil administration (*Zivilverwaltung*) was directed by the Herr Dr. von Sandt, the *Verwaltungschef*. The lesser officials in the Departments of the Belgian Government, save those of Foreign Affairs and War, continued at their posts even after the German invasion. The Belgian Ministers themselves had gone, of course, with the King to Antwerp, and then on the long and painful Odyssey to Ostend, and finally to Le Havre, but for the most part their subordinates remained in Brussels. The employees of the Railways, Posts and Telegraphs refused to work for the Germans because the railroads were used to serve the army, and they were replaced by German functionaries. But the Ministries of Justice, of Arts and Sciences, and of Finance continued to function, though without their political heads. They did so, of course, under the German eye, and occupied themselves solely with internal questions and affairs of a routine character. It was after the defeat of the Marne, in the autumn of 1914, that, in conformity with The Hague Conventions, Von der Goltz formally invited them to remain at their posts, requiring of them only a promise to do nothing contrary to the German administration, and giving them official assurances that in so

doing they waived no rights as patriotic citizens of Belgium, and might resign at any time. The problem was as difficult as the relation, and there were long and scrupulous examinations of conscience, but since it was in the interest of the nation and in conformity with international usage and The Hague Conventions, the functionaries decided to remain, and the formal assurances were signed by Von Sandt on the part of the Governor-General. The decision was wise and patriotic ; it kept the nation alive, and with the communal or municipal governments still in operation concerned with all those local problems that most nearly touch the citizen in his daily life, the machinery of government was kept in motion by its own people, and Belgium was enabled to survive the catastrophe that would otherwise have overwhelmed her.

Those Departments were all under Von Sandt's direction, and to each was assigned a German referendary through whose hands all the official documents passed. The Germans allowed the Belgian courts to continue, and to try civil and criminal cases wherein Belgians were concerned, but the moment a German was involved, as the experience of Bâtonnier Théodor was later to show, they interfered.

In addition to the Departments in the Belgian Government under which the country for three-quarters of a century had been so contented, so prosperous, and so happy, the Germans, of course, created many new Departments, many of them parallel to those already existing, Departments for supervising accounts, for taxes, for arts and sciences, even for ecclesiastical questions. And in the Department of Agriculture they organized *Zentralen*, as they called them, in order "*to facilitate the distribution of food products*". They had a *Zentrale* for everything, with a chief and numerous employees ; one for potatoes, for instance, *Kartoffelzentrale* ; for fruits, *Obstzentrale* ; for barley, *Gerstenzentrale* ; for coal, *Kohlenzentrale*; for butter and eggs, for milk, and for many other products. As soon as one of these *Zentralen* got itself well into operation, the thing it was centralizing promptly disappeared and was no more to be had for love or money. The most famous of the *Zentralen* was the *Kartoffelzentrale*. It directed all peasants to declare the amount of potatoes they had on hand ; it forbade them to transport them from one commune to another, it fixed a maximum price, and all that, the instant result of which was that all the peasants hid their potatoes, buried them, and even sowed their fields over them ; and though potatoes are a staple article of diet in Belgium, as popular as they are in Ireland, they were thenceforth no longer to be obtained.

There were other Departments similar to the *Zentralen*, all with appropriate names, and each supporting a horde of officials. There was a *Zuckervorteilungstelle*, which caused the disappearance of sugar ; the *Brauerkontrollstelle* for the breweries ; and there was the *Zentral-Einkaufsgesellschaft*, organized for the purpose of buying agricultural products and selling them to the Comité National. In the Department of Industry there was organized a section of commerce and industry, which considered the labour question, and had also its assembly of *Zentralen*, as, for instance, of raw materials, the *Rohstoffverwaltungstelle*. There were *Zentralen* for oil, gas, electricity, water, in fact for everything.

Besides these two sections, and independent of both, was the Political Department (*Politische Abteilung*). It had originally been a sub-department of the *Zivilverwaltung*, but after certain internal differences of opinion it freed itself from this Department and emerged as an independent and equal entity. It was a civil Department in the sense that it was not military, and so

far as that could be in a situation so anomalous, it was a kind of Foreign Office, having relations with the Department of Foreign Affairs at Berlin, following its methods, and more or less inspired by its policies. Its chief, the Baron von der Lancken-Wakenitz, was one of the most trusted advisers of General von Bissing. It was with the *Politische Abteilung* that the few diplomats in Brussels had their relations. The juridical position of the foreign Legations was never defined. The Legations, of course, never abandoned the point of view that they were accredited to the Belgian Government, and though they were recognized by the Government of Occupation, the status of their chiefs in Brussels remained until the end that of "*distinguished personalities*". Baron von der Lancken had among his several assistants Count von Moltke, a name well known in German history, a tall young man whose courtesy and reasonableness made many a hard task less difficult for us; the Baron von Falkenhausen, a young cavalry officer who had been educated at Cambridge, and was likewise polite and obliging. There was, too, the Count Harrach, of a prominent German family, who, at the outbreak of the war, had doffed his sculptor's blouse in his Florentine villa to don the uniform of a German hussar. Count Harrach was an amateur of the plastic arts who had lived long in Italy and spoke as many languages as Von der Lancken, and his wide knowledge of the world made intercourse with him easy. We did not see him so often as we saw the others because his duties made him the head of another Central, that of the Press (*Press-Zentrale*). This Central had the same effect on the product it sought to centralize as did the other on their respective products, so that news, like potatoes, disappeared. There was, too, Herr Conrad, a secretary, who was always and unfailingly kind, and Dr. Lorenz, a young student of philosophy, who, I always felt, would have preferred the quiet of his study to the clamour of the war.

The *Politische Abteilung* had also an economic department which examined questions concerning importations and exportations, and it had, eventually, a section that sustained relations with the Comité National and the Commission for Relief in Belgium, known as *Vermittlungstelle*.

I think I have referred to Dr. von Lumm, who was at the head of the *Bank Abteilung*, which studied and regulated all financial questions, the relations, always strained and difficult, with the Banque Nationale and the Société Générale, the sequestrations of property, the moratorium, requisitions, savings banks, the Bourse, and, by no means the least of its functions, the enormous contributions of war imposed on Belgium and on the cities and towns.

This General Government in its two principal Departments extended down into all the nine provinces of Belgium, and then into the arrondissements. In each province there was a Military Governor, with the rank of general, and a president of the *Zivilverwaltung*, who replaced the Belgian Governor. The government of the provinces and of the arrondissements was thus carried on, though the small legislative bodies, or provincial delegations, were assembled only when, as under his decree of December 8, 1914, General von Bissing convoked them in order to devise ways and means of raising the heavy war contribution he had just then levied. This decree, and the others like it that followed in each year, said bluntly : "The sole object of the deliberation, with which they will occupy themselves exclusively, is the means of paying the war levy". ("*L'objet unique de la délibération dont on s'occupera exclusivement, c'est le mode visant l'accomplissement de l'impôt de guerre.*")

In each *arrondissement* there was a *Kreischef*, with the rank of colonel. Then there was a *Zivilkommissar* who replaced the *commissaire d'arrondissement* provided for by the Belgian law, and had his relations with the authorities of the *communes*.

The communal authorities, as I have shown, continued at their posts when they were not arrested or sent to Germany, enduring constant annoyance and ignominy from *Kreischef* and *Zivilkommissär*. The local police, however, was always subject to the military authority, and in any city or town where there was a German garnison there was a German Commandant and a *Kommandantur*.

The territory of the Government of Occupation (*Occupationgebiet*) comprised the provinces of Limbourg, Liège, Luxembourg, Namur, Hainaut, Brabant, and Antwerp, and it was to this district that the jurisdiction of the Governor-General was limited. Beyond, toward the sea, in the provinces of East and West Flanders, was the *Etappengebiet*, or military zone, exclusively under the *militaires*, and now and then as the line wavered, or as military exigencies demanded, parts of the *Occupationgebiet* were sliced off and placed in the *Étappe* as it was usually called. In the *Étappe* there was no government save the arbitrary rule of the *Kommandantur*. Beyond lay the *Operationsgebiet*, the invaded portions of the north of France.

In Brussels they used to say that the *Occupationgebiet* was paradise, the *Etappengebiet* purgatory, and the *Operationsgebiet* hell.

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.