

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

Chapter LXXII. Violations of the Convention.

APRIL 8 was the birthday of King Albert *. There were extra guards placed to prevent any manifestation, and the display of the national colours was, of course, forbidden ; there seemed to be nothing that his people could do to testify their love, their admiration — one might almost say their idolatry — for the most heroic figure, I suppose, in the modern world, and more heroic than most figures in the ancient world. But while he was down there in the little corner of his kingdom that remained to him, fighting to protect it, and not only it, but France. and England and America and all others whose lives and liberty were equally involved — the dramatic anomaly of a king fighting for democracy — it was decided, no one knew how, that gentlemen were to wear high hats and walk on the boulevard that day, there being as yet no *verboden* to that effect. It was not a very good day for high hats ; there were *giboulées*, a flash of sun one minute and rain or hail or snow, or perhaps all three, the next, but every man in Brussels who had a high hat wore it, and that honoured symbol of respectability received a new consecration.

It was about that time, though the two events had no relation, that the Germans took over the Red Cross. One afternoon, while the Red Cross officials, the Countess de Mérode, the Prince de Ligne, and others appointed by King Albert, were holding a meeting, the Prince Hatzfeld suddenly appeared, and on behalf of the Governor-General notified them that they were removed from their posts ; that the Governor-General proposed to take over the Red Cross himself and have it conducted by a delegate named by him, and that "*at the disposition of this delegate there would be placed the armed forces*". The Belgian delegates decided to make a written protest to von Bissing — very politely, of course — and to prepare a statement for the International Red Cross at Geneva. The protests were duly made and filed, but thereafter Prince Hatzfeld directed the Red Cross in Belgium.

This sensation occurred concurrently with another that created some excitement at German Headquarters. Cardinal Mercier had written a letter to the Bishop of Paris, which was published in the French newspapers — a letter excoriating some of the deeds of the Germans in Belgium ; and when von

Bissing read it, or heard of it, furious with rage, he dictated a terrible letter and, consulting no one, sent it out at once to Malines by a German chaplain. When Baron von der Lancken heard of this it seems that he at once went to von Bissing, told him that he had made a mistake — that the Cardinal would find means of publishing the letter in the outside world, to the detriment of Germany. The wrath of the old Prussian had cooled somewhat, and all afternoon they kept the road between Brussels and Malines hot with *aides* and orderlies trying to overtake the chaplain and to recover the imprudent letter before it could be delivered to the Cardinal. I asked at the *Politische Abteilung* the next morning whether the speeding almoner had reached Malines in time, and with a droll expression of relief the Baron replied :

" Non ; le ciel lui a envoyé une bonne panne en route, et nous avons pu l'attraper avant qu'il n'arrivât à Malines. "

I do not know whether the state of the road between Brussels and Malines was responsible for the *bonne panne* or not ; the roads in Belgium are not famous for their smoothness, since they are paved with stubborn Belgian blocks, and these had been displaced by the cannons that had been hauled over them for half a year. It was about this time that the German authorities ordered the city of Brussels to reconstruct the road from Malines to Brussels. The municipal authorities at once refused, saying that they had no power under the Belgian law to use the city's moneys for works outside the city's — which was, of course, incontestable ; but that besides this objection there was another, namely, that the road would be used for military purposes by Belgium's enemies. After menacing Burgomaster Lemonnier with arrest and I know not what else besides, the German authorities imposed a fine of five hundred thousand marks on the city of Brussels. The authorities protested again, on the ground that the Convention providing for the original levy on the city had stated that it was to be in *lieu* of all contributions.

The German authorities replied to this protest, defending themselves on the charge of having broken their promise not to levy any more contributions on the city of Brussels by saying that this was not strictly a contribution, but a "*military necessity*", and that while they recognized the fact that the municipality of Brussels had not the right to use the money of the city for the purpose of building a road beyond the limits of the city, they would have to do so because people elsewhere in Belgium refused to work for the Germans — a

non sequitur that may have served as well as any other excuse for what they wished to do.

It may have been something that they made any excuse at all, since it was the fourth time that the Germans had broken their original Convention. The theory, or the phrase, "*military necessity*" was invoked in any exigency, in the naïve confidence that it carried the same convincing weight with the rest of mankind that it did with Germans. When the German troops entered Brussels the city and the communes of the agglomeration, as I have said, were summoned to pay, as a contribution of war, the sum of fifty millions of francs. This amount, after discussion with the municipal authorities, was reduced by the Germans to forty-five millions ; and on October 12 a convention was drawn up, signed by the Military Governor in the name of the German authorities, and by the city of Brussels, in which it was stipulated : "*The indemnity thus paid by Greater Brussels being forty-five millions of francs, it is understood that there will not be imposed, either directly or indirectly, any new contribution on the inhabitants of Greater Brussels. In case, however, that a criminal attempt should be made against the German troops there will be imposed on the communes of the agglomeration, in the territory where the attempt was committed, a contribution or some other punishment.* **

This Convention was negotiated between M. Lemonnier, the Acting Burgomaster of Brussels, and Herr von Schwabach, as the representative of the German authorities. In discussing the clause relative to the criminal attack, M. Lemonnier remarked to Herr von Schwabach that this clause should not be made to cover any deed of violence except one undertaken deliberately by a considerable portion of the population ; that is to say, that if an insane person, or some assassin, should strike at a German soldier, it should not be considered as justifying the application of this clause. Herr von Schwabach stated that he was in accord with this view of the matter, that the clause meant an attack on German troops and nothing else. A few days after, however, in that same month of October, a German detective or policeman in civil attire tried to arrest a newsdealer, and, the newsdealer resisting, there was a scuffle. Two Brussels policemen ran to the scene, and in the scramble the German detective was injured. Thereupon the two Belgian policemen, de Ryckers and Seghers, were arrested, tried before a German court martial behind closed doors without any one to defend them, and condemned, de

Ryckers to five years' and Seghers to three years' imprisonment. The Military Governor, announcing this condemnation to the city authorities of Brussels, wrote that de Ryckers had been condemned for an assault on a German *functionary* and for having attacked a German *soldier*. Therefore, because a soldier had been attacked, said the Military Governor, the punishment mentioned in Article II of the Convention of October 12 applied, and the city of Brussels was fined five million francs.

By a somewhat too evident coincidence the five million francs was precisely the amount by which the original contribution had been reduced ; and as a final touch, almost artistic, Burgomaster Max, some time before his arrest, having asked how many detectives the Germans were maintaining in Brussels, had been officially informed by the German authorities that there were no German policemen in plain clothes — to use our American expression — in Brussels. The soldier, or policeman, was not in uniform.

The city of Brussels, of course, protested ; an inquiry had revealed that the policemen had not injured the German secret agent, and the city cited the original Convention — claimed that even if the German agent had been wounded, and by Brussels policemen, it could not be said that German troops had been attacked, because the agent was not in uniform. The German authorities, however, insisted, and the fine was paid.

This was the first violation of the Convention of October. The second occurred on December 19, when the Germans imposed a war contribution of 480.000.000 francs on the provinces of Belgium, to be paid at the rate of 40.000.000 francs a month from that day. The Convention of October 12 had stipulated that no further contribution should be imposed on the inhabitants of Brussels ; Brussels is in Brabant, and of the 1.500.000 inhabitants of Brabant 750.000 lived in Brussels, and were obliged to pay their share of the 480.000.000 francs — which was, as it would seem to most minds, an indirect method of fining once more the city of Brussels.

The third violation of the Convention of October 12 occurred on January 16, 1915, when the Governor-General, as I have already said, imposed on those Belgians who had left the country — that is, on the *réfugiés*, among whom, of course, were many inhabitants of Greater Brussels — a tax equivalent to ten times the personal tax they paid.

The fourth violation was that of March 12, 1915, when the city of Brussels was fined 500.000 marks for refusing to repair the road from Brussels to Malines. And all this in addition to those contributions that were so frequently imposed on the communes under the form of condemnation for damages which it was said German citizens had sustained when war was declared, and to do this the more easily and readily the Governor-General had issued, as I have shown, a decree changing the Belgian law, that made communes liable in damages for the work of mobs.***

Brand WITHLOCK

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

* The King's *fête* officially falls on November 15, but after the war the Belgian people began to celebrate in addition his birthday, April 8.

** L'indemnité ainsi payée par l'agglomération bruxelloise étant de quarante-cinq millions (45.000.000) de francs, il est entendu qu'il ne sera plus imposé, ni *directement ni indirectement*. de nouvelle contribution aux habitants de l'agglomération bruxelloise.

Dans le cas, cependant, où un attentat criminel serait commis contre *des troupes allemandes*, on imposera à la commune de l'agglomération, dans le territoire de laquelle l'attentat a été commis, une contribution ou une autre punition quelconque.

*** There were many other contributions. When the German army arrived at Brussels it demanded each day for the troops 18.000 kilograms of wheat, 10.000 kilograms of fresh meat, 6.000 kilograms of rice, 10.000 kilograms of sugar, 72.000 kilograms of oats. And similar requisitions were made in every city through which German troops passed. At Louvain the Germans requisitioned 250.000 francs' worth of preserved vegetables ; at Malines, 4.000.000 francs' worth. In Flanders and in part of Hainaut they seized nearly all the horses and beasts of burden belonging to the farmers, and the little wheat and flour that remained to them. The little village of Middelburg, notably, which had only 850 inhabitants, after having furnished 50 cows, 35 pigs, and 1.600 kilograms of oats, was forced to deliver up in January and February 1915, 100 pigs, 100.000 kilograms of wheat, 50.000 kilograms of beans or peas, 50.000 kilograms of oats, and 150.000 kilograms of straw.

Everywhere the splendid draught-horses, which were the result of more than a century of careful scientific breeding, were seized. Not only did the German army requisition the horses necessary to draw its wagons, to mount its troops, and to serve in its artillery, but it took away the best of the Brabançon stallions, which were wholly useless for military service, and sent them off to Germany.

German quartermasters at Ghent and at Antwerp seized over 40.000 tons of oil-cakes used for feeding cattle in winter ; they seized also several hundreds of tons of phosphates that still existed in Belgium. They cut down all the walnut-trees, not only in the State forest, but even in private grounds, and used them to make the butts of rifles. All raw materials used for Belgian industry were requisitioned and sent to Germany : leather, bides, copper, wool, flax, etc. Besides this, nearly all the machines and tools were seized and sent to Germany, there to be used, as the German authorities said, to make munitions which Belgian factories had refused to manufacture.

Enormous quantities of materials and products were requisitioned at Antwerp. Notably, there were seized 18.000.000 francs' worth of cereals ; about 5.000.000 francs' worth of oil-cakes ; over 4.000.000 francs' worth of nitrate ; animal and vegetable oil to the value of 2.000.000 francs ; petroleum and mineral oil worth 3.000.000 francs ; 6.000.000 francs' worth of wool ; cotton in enormous quantities — there was taken from one firm more than 1.300.000 francs' worth ; rubber to the value of 10.000.000 francs ; up to December 1, 1914, copper valued at more than 20.000.000 francs was seized ; horsehair worth 1.500.000 francs ; ivory worth 800.000 francs ; wines worth 1.100.000 francs. The total amount requisitioned amounted approximately to 85.000.000 francs.

There was also requisitioned a large amount of merchandise stored in the warehouses, which had been consigned to various exporting and forwarding houses. It is impossible to place even an approximate valuation on this property, which was of many different sorts, but its value was enormous.