

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION.

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 1

### Chapter LXXVII. The strike at Malines.

THERE were those in Brussels who did not hesitate to predict that the city would be compelled to pay a heavy fine as a penalty for the raid of the Allied airmen, and, while the two cases were not alike, they could point to Malines as a precedent and as an example of how a whole community could be punished. For a week Malines had been *incommunicado*, blockaded, the population shut up within the city walls and cut off from all contact with the outside world. This had been done because the workmen, five hundred or more, employed in the Malines arsenal, had refused to work for the German authorities. The arsenal was not an arsenal in the military sense, but the machine-shops where the locomotives operating the railways, which in Belgium belong to the State, were repaired. The Germans had, of course, seized the railways and were using them, and when the locomotives needed repairs they called on the workmen to effect them. This the workmen unanimously refused to do on the ground that the railways were used by the German military authorities to transport troops, and that as patriotic Belgians they could not aid the Germans in this. They invoked The Hague Convention in support of their position, but the Government of Occupation insisted that the work was not at all in the interest of the German army, but in the interest of commercial traffic and of the Belgian population ; and to make this distinction clear, the Governor General issued a statement which insisted that "*if the population of Malines is cut off from the world ...it owes it to the strike of the workers. By such a machination, the origin of which may be easily discovered, the intentions of His Excellency the Governor-General to revive the economic life of Belgium are called into question in the most criminal manner, to the detriment of the entire Belgian population.*" \*

This solicitude, however, with the veiled allusion to the Cardinal by which it was accompanied, was all lost on the stiff-necked Belgian workmen ; and on June 6 the Governor-General proclaimed an edict stating that "*in view of the fact, which any unprejudiced person could recognize from the edict of May 25, the German Administration had not the slightest intention of forcing the labourers to work for the German army, and that as the work in question was solely in the interest of the Belgian population*" he was "*obliged to punish the city of Malines and its environs by arresting all economic traffic so long as a sufficient number of workmen in the arsenal shall not have resumed their labours.*"

And so all traffic and all travel from the four railway-stations in Malines was prohibited ; no civilian was allowed even to approach the stations ; all circulation of vehicles, bicycles, automobiles, interurban trams, and canal-boats was forbidden ; even the rails of the interurban tramways were taken up, and the office for passports closed.

"*If the economic life of Malines and its environs*", the statement concluded, "*which I have endeavoured especially to favour, must suffer gravely from the above-mentioned measures, the fault and the responsibility will be due to the lack of foresight on the part of the workers in the arsenal in allowing themselves to be influenced by their ringleaders.*" \* \*

And so the gates were closed and the city, with its sixty thousand inhabitants, was shut off from the rest of Belgium. The Comité National even was forbidden to send in any clothing, though it was still permitted to send in food.

There were protests on the part of the Cardinal and the Burgomaster, but the Germans were deaf, and persistent in their determination to punish the whole community. The workmen stood firm, and the citizens of Malines made it a point of honour to stand with them. There were no disorders — simply a firm, silent, dignified, patriotic resistance. The situation lasted two weeks. Then the Germans themselves began to suffer, they could not carry on their affairs ; they brought in German workmen, announced that the work was resumed, and threw open the gates of the city.

And thus ended one of the most singular strikes ever undertaken. Not a single Belgian had worked for the Germans, and a German official at the *Politische Abteilung* paid a reluctant tribute to their character when he said bitterly :

*"The Belgians are indomitable ; the Cardinal has shown us that."*

The Cardinal, indeed, about the same time had been having another difficulty with the oppressors of his country. He had written a note to the *Kreischef* at Malines informing him politely of a religious procession he proposed to have — an old traditional ceremony held every year, and the *Kreischef* had forbidden it because, as he said, the Cardinal had not expressly asked permission ; the *Kreischef* had insisted that the Cardinal used the word "*permission*". The Germans were told by a certain diplomat that for a distinguished man like the Cardinal to write and inform the *Kreischef* of his intentions was equivalent to a polite request for permission. But no, that would not suffice ; German authority, German supremacy, must be recognized to the very uttermost. \*\*\*

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

\* Le Gouverneur général a fait publier, le 30 mai, à Malines, un avis disant que, si mercredi 2 juin, à 10 heures du matin, 500 ouvriers expérimentés, anciennement occupés aux arsenaux, ne s'étaient pas présentés au travail, il se verrait forcé de punir la ville de Malines et les environs par la suspension de tout trafic économique, aussi longtemps que des ouvriers en nombre suffisant n'auraient pas repris le travail,

Tel n'a pas été le cas. Il s'agit visiblement dans ce refus de travailler d'un accord collectif. Il y a lieu de considérer que, par l'avis publié par le *Kreischef* de Malines, tout citoyen raisonnable de la ville a pu se rendre compte que le travail exigé n'est pas à faire au profit de l'armée allemande, mais simplement à exécuter dans l'intérêt du trafic économique de la population belge.

Ces agissements inexcusables des ouvriers de l'arsenal de Malines ont rendu nécessaire l'application de mesures coercitives qui ont déjà été portées à la connaissance de tous par l'affichage et qui entreront en vigueur le 3 juin à 6 heures du matin.

Si la population de Malines est coupée du monde jusqu'au moment où une modification se produira dans la situation inadmissible actuelle, elle le doit à la grève des ouvriers. Par pareille machination, dont l'origine peut être facilement retrouvée, les intentions de S.E. M. le Gouverneur général de faire renaître la vie économique en Belgique sont remises en question de la façon la plus criminelle, au détriment de la population belge tout entière.

*Translation*

The Governor-General caused to be published, on May 30, at Malines, a notice saying that if on Wednesday, June 2, at ten o'clock in the morning, 500 experienced workmen, formerly employed in the arsenal, had not presented themselves for work, he would find himself obliged to punish Malines and the environs by the suspension of all economic traffic so long as the workmen in sufficient numbers did not return to work.

Such was not the case. In this refusal to work there was obviously a collective agreement. We must consider that, according to the notice published by the *Kreischef* of Malines, every

reasonable citizen of the city could have satisfied himself that the work required was not to be done for the benefit of the German army, but simply to be executed in the interest of the economic traffic of the Belgian population.

These inexcusable activities of the workmen of the arsenal of Malines have made necessary the application of coercive measures, which have already been brought to the knowledge of every one by the posting of notices, and which will come into effect on June 3 at six o'clock in the morning.

If the population of Malines is cut off from the world until such time as there shall be a modification in the present intolerable situation, it owes it to the strike of the workmen. By such a machination, the origin of which may be easily discovered, the intentions of His Excellency the Governor-General to revive the economic life of Belgium are called into question in the most criminal manner, to the detriment of the entire Belgian population.

**\*\* À L'ARSENAL DE MALINES  
AVIS DU GOUVERNEUR GÉNÉRAL EN BELGIQUE EN DATE DU 30 MAI 1915**

M. le Chef de l'arrondissement de Malines m'a fait savoir que son avis du 25 mai n'a pas amené un nombre suffisant d'ouvriers expérimentés à reprendre l'ouvrage à l'arsenal.

Vu que, comme toute personne qui n'est pas de parti pris a dû s'en rendre compte par l'avis du 25 mai, l'administration allemande n'a nullement l'intention d'obliger les ouvriers à travailler pour l'armée allemande et que les travaux dont il s'agit répondent uniquement aux intérêts de la population belge, je suis obligé de punir la ville de Malines et ses environs en y arrêtant tout trafic économique tant qu'un nombre suffisant d'ouvriers de l'arsenal n'aura pas repris le travail.

J'ordonne donc que :

Si le mercredi 2 juin, à 10 heures du matin (heure allemande), 500 anciens ouvriers de l'arsenal pouvant et désirant travailler (ceux qui désirent travailler peuvent se faire inscrire à l'entrée de l'arsenal tous les jours de 8 à 12 heures et de 2 h. 30 à 6 heures (heure allemande), ne se présentent pas à l'ouvrage, les restrictions suivantes au trafic entreront en vigueur le 3 juin, à partir de 6 heures du matin :

(a) Les autorités des chemins de fer empêcheront tout trafic de personnes et de voyageurs partant des gares situées sur les parcours suivants, ou y aboutissant :

Malines-Weerde ;

Malines-Boortmeerbeek ;

Malines-Wavre-Ste.-Catherine ;

Malines-Capelle-au-Bois,

y compris les gares terminus.

Il sera défendu à tout civil, sous peine d'être puni, de pénétrer dans les gares en question.

(b) Toute circulation de véhicules (transport de personnes et de fardeaux) de vélos, d'autos, de vicinaux et de bateaux, même en transit (à l'exception du transit des bateaux) est interdite dans la région comprise entre le pont de la chaussée de Duffel, la Nèthe et le Rupel en aval jusqu'au confluent du canal de Bruxelles, la rive est du canal vers le sud jusqu'à Pont Brûlé, puis les chemins d'Epeghem, Elewijt, Wippendries, Berghsheide, Kampelaar, Boortmeerbeek, Rijmenam, Wurgnes, Peulis, Hoogstraten, Wavre-Notre-Dame, Buckheuvet, Berkhoef, jusqu'au pont de la chaussée de Duffel.

Les rails de vicinaux seront enlevés aux limites de la région délimitée ci-dessus.

(c) Il ne sera fait d'exception à l'alinéa (b) que pour les transports du Comité National destinés à l'alimentation du district interdit.

(d) Le bureau des passeports sera fermé.

Si la vie économique de Malines et des environs, que je me suis efforcé spécialement de favoriser, souffrait gravement des mesures susmentionnées la faute et la responsabilité en seraient au manque de prévoyance des ouvriers de l'arsenal se laissant influencer par des meneurs.

*Translation*

MALINES ARSENAL

NOTICE OF THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL IN BELGIUM, UNDER DATE OF  
MAY 30, 1915

The officer in command of Malines has brought to my knowledge the fact that his order of May 25 has not brought out a sufficient number of experienced workmen to resume the work at the arsenal.

Therefore, as every one who is not prejudiced could have recognized from the edict of May 25 that the German intention of forcing the labourers to work for the German army, and that the work in question was solely in the interest of the Belgian population, I am obliged to punish the city of Malines and its environs by arresting all economic traffic so long as a sufficient number of workmen in the arsenal shall not have resumed their labours.

I therefore order that :

If, on Wednesday, June 2, at 10 o'clock in the morning (German time), 500 former workmen of the arsenal, being able and willing to work — those who desire to work can sign up at the entrance to the arsenal every day from 8 to 12 and from 2.30 to 6 (German time) — do not present themselves for work, the following restrictions on traffic will come into force on June 3, beginning at 6 o'clock in the morning :

(a) The railway authorities will stop all traffic of persons and travellers leaving from the stations on the following lines, and those connecting with them :

Malines-Weerde ;

Malines-Boortmeerbeek ;

Malines-Wavre-Ste.-Catherine ;

Malines-Capelle-au-Bois,

including their terminals.

It will be forbidden to every civilian, on pain of punishment, to enter the stations in question.

(b) All circulation of vehicles (carrying persons or goods), of bicycles, automobiles, interurban tramways, and boats, even in transit (with the exception of the transit of boats), is forbidden in the region comprised between the bridge on the Duffel road, the Nethe and the Rupel, down to its confluence with the Brussels canal, the east bank of the canal toward the south up to the Pont Brûlé, then along these roads, Eppenheim, Elewyt, Wippendries, Berghsheide, Campelaar, Boort-Meerbeek, Rymenam, Wurgnes, Peulis, Hoogstraat, Wavre-Notre-Dame, Buckheuvet, Berkhoef, up to the bridge on the Duffel road.

The rails of the interurban tramways will be taken up as far as the limits of the region herein marked out.

(c) There will be an exception made in section (b) in favour of the transports of the Comité National destined to the feeding of the restricted district.

(d) The passport office will be closed.

If the economic life of Malines and its environs, which I have endeavoured especially to favour, must suffer gravely from the above-mentioned measures, the fault and the responsibility will be due to the lack of foresight on the part of the workers in the Arsenal in allowing themselves to be influenced by their ringleaders.

\* The same measures were attempted at Ghent, which was in the *Etappengebiet* and not in the jurisdiction of the German General. There the following order was issued :

#### LES AVIS OFFICIELS ALLEMANDS

L'Administration communale de Gand nous transmet l'avis suivant :

\* \* \* **AVIS**

Par Ordre de Son Excellence M. l'Inspecteur de l'Étape, je porte à la connaissance des communes ce qui suit :

L'attitude de quelques fabriques qui, sous prétexte de patriotisme et en s'appuyant sur la Convention de La Haye, ont refusé de travailler pour l'armée allemande, prouve que, parmi la population, il y a des tendances ayant pour but de susciter des difficultés à l'administration de l'armée allemande.

A ce propos je fais savoir que je réprimerai par tous les moyens à ma disposition de pareilles menées qui ne peuvent que troubler le bon accord existant jusqu'ici entre l'Administration de l'armée allemande et la population.

Je rends responsables en premier lieu les autorités communales de l'extension de pareilles tendances, et je fais remarquer que la population elle-même sera cause que les libertés accordées jusqu'ici de la façon la plus large lui seront enlevées et remplacées par des mesures restrictives rendues nécessaire par sa propre faute.

Lieutenant-Général GRAF VON WESTARP

*Commandant de l'Étape.*

GAND, le 10 juin 1915.

*Translation*

The Municipal Administration at Ghent transmits to us the following notice :

NOTICE

By order of His Excellency the Inspector of the District I bring to the attention of the communes the following :

The attitude of certain manufactories which, under the pretext of patriotism and depending upon The Hague Convention, have refused to work for the German army, proves that among the population there are tendencies to create difficulties for the administration of the German army.

In this connexion I announce that I shall repress by every means in my power such efforts, which can only trouble the good feeling existing until now between the Administration of the German army and the population.

I hold responsible, in the first place, the communal authorities for the dissemination of these tendencies, and I may add that the population itself will be the cause if the liberties up to now granted freely are taken away from it and replaced by restrictive measures rendered necessary by its own fault.

Lieutenant-General GRAF VON WESTARP.

*Commandant of the Étape.*

GHENT, *June 10, 1915.*