

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter XVIII. Toward war.

We might have alleged in our own defense that we were not responsible, though when one ponders on the infinitely complex and insoluble question of personal responsibility one is not so sure of one's defense. I suppose it is best not to be too self-righteous since we all have somewhere our share of the injustices that are done in this evil, evil world. We used to talk about the war most of the time, discuss the question of the responsibility for it ; most every one laid it directly at the door of the German Emperor. At the *Politische Abteilung*, with his hand on his heart, a German officer said to me, as though he would finally, once and for all, dispose of the question :

"I assure you on my honour that we did not begin or desire this war ; it was all the fault of England."

Again it would be the fault of Russia ; and one man traced its origin to Louis Napoleon and his annexation of Savoy ; while another, the most erudite of all, carried it back to 1453 and the beginning of modern history with the taking of Constantinople by Mohammed II.

I have spoken somewhere in these pages of the fact that during the war men and women did not act up to the cinematographic standards. We had to get what little distraction we could, and get it how we could, and there was little in poor Brussels in those times to distract it from its tragic preoccupation. Had we given way to our emotions we should not have lived and done our work, even as imperfectly as we did accomplish it. M. Francqui returned from one of his journeys outside and told us of a scene in the Belgian trenches somewhere along the Yser. A group of soldiers were playing at cards in their muddy trench ; immediately behind, on the damp and desolate Flemish plain, was a new-made grave, its occupant, killed that very morning by a shell, just buried there. Some one asked whose grave it was.

"My comrade's. I play the ace !" – said one of the men, and with a triumphant flourish flung down the winning card.

No one who knew war as we had come to know it could wish his country to go to war as long as there was an honourable way of avoiding it, and yet, much as I loathed war myself, I had come to realize that there was a peace far more loathsome, and that was a peace bought by acquiescence in a monstrous and hideous injustice. We were coming to realize what this modern Germany was, what ruin and havoc it would create in the world if it was allowed to go unhindered on its way. And the fact

that in that process it would naturally destroy itself was not sufficient reason for letting it destroy the structure that mankind had been so long in rearing. The feeling was deeper than that inspired by the **atrocities** * ; these things, though never on such a broad and scientifically organized scale, had been done before ; Germany in her development in that respect seemed to be passing through the Stone Age. One could imagine some ultimate, sophisticated German, two centuries hence, sadly shaking his head and saying : "*Oh yes, our forefathers did shocking things when our empire was being founded.*" But the great difficulty was that the ultimate German could never exist at this rate, because the principle upon which such character is based was not only wholly lacking, but derided and denied.

"*Your democracy, your idea of liberty, bah !*" – said a German officer to me one day ; and another remarked, with less emphasis:

"*It doesn't suit us ; we have another way of looking at things.*"

Precisely ; and that way of looking at things deprived them of that moral discipline, that inner subjective restraint independent of all external sanctions, which deters men from doing certain evil things. That subtle sense which we define and recognize as honour, however imperfectly we may live up to it, seemed to be unknown to them. "*There are things a fellow can not do*", says a

character in one of Mr. Kipling's stories ; it is a sentiment that Germans did not seem to understand ; there was nothing a German fellow could not do provided he could say to himself that it was for the *Vaterland*, and provided, too, that he had the physical force to prevent others from interfering with his doing it. What was worse, he could prepare to do it by all sorts of pious hypocrisies so as to throw those whom it would injure off their guard, and afterward deny having done it at all. When he wished to invade Belgium he could say that French aviators had thrown bombs on Nuremberg ; when he wished to sack and destroy Louvain he could say that the civilians had fired on him ; when he wished to use asphyxiating gas he could say that the French were using it. When he wished to rescind the promise not to billet soldiers on the inhabitants, he could say that these promises would be annulled as a punishment for the population if spying did not cease, and then lodge his troops in the residences of Brussels. When he wished to divide and annex Belgium he could pretend to fly to the relief of the persecuted Flemings ; when he wished to restore slavery he could bewail the sad condition of the Belgian unemployed. The thing that vitiated the whole character of modern Germany and set at naught and cancelled all its other qualities was that subtle and implicit Lie — the lie of the despatch of Ems, upon which the Empire was founded ; the lie

as to the alliance of Belgium with France or England ; the lie of the *francs-tireurs* ; the lie of the ninety philosophers about Louvain ; the lie that was ever ready and available in any emergency. The lie was far worse than the gas, was indeed a noxious vapour in itself, which poisoned first of all those who invented it and stooped to its use.

The rise of the Prussian state over that old Germany, the blond, gentle and dreamy Germany of idealism and humanitarianism, celebrated by Madame de Staël so long ago, was predicted by Edgar Quinet, the French historian, in 1831, but the danger to civilization was not realized by France until 1871. It was not realized by England until 1914, and in 1916 America had not yet realized it. We in Belgium did not wholly realize it even then. And so we lived on in a fond and foolish hope, trying to work from day to day, always with that troubling sense of incertitude and impermanence ; the only permanent thing seemed to be the German occupation. But we began packing up, as I have said, and waited for the exchange of the final notes and the beginning of the unlimited submarine war — for no one in his senses could believe that the Germans, having such weapons, would hesitate to use them. I began first by packing up my library, which foolishly I had dragged across the sea with me, but even in this I could make no progress because I stopped to read each book I started to pack, and at

the end of the first day I had disposed of and packed three volumes. Then I turned the task over to one of Desamblancx's men.

That was early in May. The hatred of the Americans was growing so intense that even the common soldiers were affected by it ; we began to note it in the sentinels, who performed their duties with that superserviceable and boundless zeal that is the product of the German soldier's gaping idolatry. When we drove in the country and patrols of Uhlans mounted on bicycles halted us, when they read my great G.G. *Passierschein* they glared at us terribly. But there was compensation in the welcome of the little children in every village through which we passed, then and always. They danced and swung their caps, and shouted "*Vive l'Amérique !*" or "*Amerika !*" if they happened to be Flemish. The children of Belgium know that word, and I know no more patriotic wish than that it may come to mean to every one, even Americans, what it meant to those little Flemish children in wooden shoes.

After dinner that evening Hermancito came with the German note which was in the Cologne newspapers of that day. Mr. Poland came, too, to hear the news, and after we had got through the usual spiteful references to England we found the note less warlike than we had expected, and possibly sufficient to prevent a rupture, though we were not sure of the little paragraph tucked in at

the end, which was susceptible of an interpretation that would impose a condition binding America to induce England to lift her blockade. Much of it was evidently to the galleries — *aus dem Fenster zu Sprechen*, as the Germans' own phrase has it. It did not settle our problem or allay our uncertainty, and I felt that Desamblancx's men might as well continue packing the books. Five days passed, then the President's note was printed, fine, clear and strong, and two days later the Belgians, relieved at knowing that the Americans were not to leave, were congratulating me on the President's diplomatic victory, and even if they were convinced that the Germans one day would blow up another ship they took comfort in the respite, and I resumed the familiar task of trying to settle the latest difficulty in the *ravitaillement*.

It had arisen during that week of uncertainty when we were waiting to hear whether Germany would conduct her submarine war according to the rules of the game, or whether she proposed herself to change the rules while the game was in progress. The difficulty was this : The Governor-General, as I have said, had just given assurances that no more cattle and food-stuffs would be requisitioned. These assurances covered the *Occupationsgebiet*, but we heard that by a German order fifteen communes toward the south had been detached from the *Occupationsgebiet* and added to the *Etappengebiet*. The assurances did not run

in the *Etappengebiet* ; hence requisitions could be and were already being made in the fifteen communes just detached. It was of course no affair of ours how the Germans altered the boundaries of their *Gebiets*, but if they continued to alter them so as to exempt territory from the application of the new guarantees it was plain that they might as well never have been given. We went, Villalobar and I, to see Baron von der Lancken about it, and he said that the boundaries between *Gebiets* were changed from time to time according to military exigencies, but we succeeded in securing recognition of the principle that once guarantees had been applied to territory in the *Occupationsgebiet* they should remain in force, and, as it were, run with the land, even when it was detached to be included in the *Etappengebiet*.

There were, however, many infractions of those later guarantees. It was not so simple a matter to enforce them as it was the others, either those relating to imported foods or to the indigenous crop. The imports were brought in by the C.R.B. and turned over to the C.N. which distributed them directly ; they were always thus in our hands and subject to our control, and the indigenous crop, while in the control of the *Zentrale-Ernte-Kommission*, or Crop Commission, was distributed by the C.R.B. The others — that is the latest guaranties — were pledges not to requisition cattle or food-stuffs, and over these

cattle and food-stuffs, in the possession as they were of peasants, we had no possible effective control. Peasants were not above turning an honest penny by selling their eggs or their chickens or their pigs, and soldiers, proverbially prone to pilfer, would take those things where they found them. This was particularly the case just then. German officers told me that troops released from the inferno about Verdun and brought back for repose and recuperation into what was to them the paradise of Belgium would take anything fit to eat, and pig sties and hen-roosts suffered ; there was no power, not even German discipline, that could control them. Doubtless their officers did not give themselves great pains to control them, but winked at what were to them such minor infractions. We secured a reiteration of the promises, and more stringent orders were issued, and then we encountered another difficulty — the old desire of the Germans to be admitted to the sessions of the C.N. and its sub-organs. Just whence this insistence came we could not be sure, but there it was, at any rate, working behind the mysterious scenes of the organization, pushing the old Governor-General on to an interference that would have been fatal to the work. The demand was the old one that a German officer should attend all the meetings of the provincial committees. We had a conference — Villalobar, Francqui and I — one May morning with the Baron von der Lancken and

Dr. Brohn, and explained to them the danger, the impossibility, of such a method. The Belgians would never consent to meet with a German officer at the head of the table ; they would rather abandon the work and starve. I imagined the scene for them : the Belgian committeemen arriving and seating themselves around the table ; then the *Kreischef* or his *lieutenant* coming in, in boots and spurs, with an enormous sabre at his side, a revolver in his belt, taking his seat at the head of the table, letting his fist fall on it — what kind of discussion could there be in such conditions ? They smiled and actually saw the point. There was the old suspicion on their part of political manoeuvres in the sessions, but, we asked, if the Belgians who formed those committees — and they were, of course, the leading men, the officials, the personalities of their respective communities — wished to discuss politics, did the Germans suppose that the presence of a German officer at their committee-meetings would prevent them from doing so at some other time or place ? Did they imagine that it would not occur to them to discuss political questions elsewhere ? The Baron von der Lancken and Dr. Brohn did not fail to see this themselves, and we finally agreed upon a formula according to which the Belgian president of the provincial committee would go to the German provincial president at stated intervals, or whenever desired, and give him whatever

information concerning the functioning of the *ravitaillement* he wished. And to settle the question once and for all we asked — Villalobar and I — for an audience of the Governor-General himself.

It was one rainy Saturday morning — May 13 — that the Marquis and I drove to the Ministry of Arts and Sciences in the Rue de la Loi to have our interview. The antechamber was thronged with German officers waiting for their turns at the source of favour and privilege and power in occupied Belgium. Juul, a grey little man with an unhealthy complexion, the head of the Brussels secret police, was there, and the Prince Hatzfeld, who directed the Red Cross which the Germans had taken over from the Belgians, and others, all bowing in the German military way as we entered. Von der Lancken came ere long, smart in his uniform and in elegant high boots, springing up the grand staircase like a boy, fearing he was late.

The Governor-General received us in the grand *salon* where he held his receptions, and asked us to be seated at a table that stood between the windows. After a word or two he produced a manuscript and read to us in French what he had to say, making curious mistakes in pronunciation now and then. He sat there with the great enamel cross of the Black Eagle dangling at his wrinkled throat, and other crosses on his breast, while down below us there in the Place before the Palais de la Nation, the troops were at

guard-mount. It was noon. A military band was playing, some prodigious German voice was bellowing martial commands and booted feet were striking the pavement in the goose-step ; then more commands and the ring of the butts of muskets on the stones as they came to order arms... Then it was still.

Greatly to our relief it was a mild address that the old Governor-General was reading to us : we had feared that he was going to impose very hard conditions, but nothing of the kind appeared ; all he wished, he said, was that his authorities be kept informed as to what went on in the *ravitaillement* and that there be no political discussion, and he left the task of finding a formula to Baron von der Lancken and to us. Finding the Governor-General in such a favourable mood, we asked that other functionaries be not allowed to interfere in the *ravitaillement*, but to centre the discussion of its problems in the *Politische Abteilung*, and he nodded appreciatively and agreed. We chatted for half an hour, the Governor-General appealing to von der Lancken now and then when he sought a French word to express his meaning, and when the Baron whispered to me that some *haut personnage* was coming to luncheon we withdrew. The *haut personnage* was our former host of the château at Lille, the Crown Prince of Bavaria, but we did not see him, and came away with the

satisfaction of knowing that the *ravitaillement* would still go on.

To be sure, there were always the potatoes to be worried about. The Governor-General, on our suggestion, had declared an armistice of a fortnight, saying to the peasants that if during that time they would declare their stocks they would not be punished for having concealed them, but all to no avail. The peasants were more wily and stubborn than ever, and saw in this complaisance only a new and more subtle method to trick and outwit and despoil them.

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London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *Vers la guerre* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XI (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 325-330.

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>

About the “**atrocities**” in Belgium, it would be interesting to read what **Roberto J. Payró** told in his *Diario de un testigo* (*La guerra vista desde Bruselas*) :

fusilamiento del cónsul argentino :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141020%20PAYRO%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

incendio de la ciudad de Lovaina :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140825-30%20PAYRO%20DESTRUCCION%20LOVAINA.zip>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140804-19140911%20PAYRO%20EPISODIOS%20OCUPACION%20ALEMANA.pdf>

matanzas de Dinant :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140820%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140821%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140822%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140823%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140824%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140825%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140826%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140827%20PAYRO%20DINANT%20SP%20DOS%20REPRESENTANTES%20ARGENTINOS%20MUERTOS%20EN%20LA%20GUERRA.pdf>

Le 8ème (huitième) « **RAPPORT SUR LA VIOLATION DU DROIT DES GENS EN Belgique** » évoque les « *Destructions et massacres dans la province de Luxembourg* », principalement en août 1914. :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/MASSACRES%20ROVINCE%20LUXEMBOURG%201914%20HUITIEME%20Rapport-sur-la-violation-du-droit-des-gens-en-Belgique%201915%201%20106-109.pdf>

PAYRO ; « *La Pastoral de Monseñor Mercier* » ; in *La Nación* ; 11/03/1915 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19141225%20PAYRO%20PASTORAL%20MONSEÑOR%20MERCIER.pdf>

PAYRO ; « *Episodios de la ocupación alemana (3-6)* » ; in *La Nación* ; 19-22/03/1915 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140804-19140911%20PAYRO%20EPISODIOS%20OCUPACION%20ALEMANA.pdf>

PAYRO ; « *La Guerra vista desde Bruselas ; diario de un testigo ; **neutralidad de Bélgica** (20-25)* » ; in *La Nación* ; 07-12/12/1914 :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/191412%20PAYRO%20NEUTRALIDAD%20BELGICA.pdf>

In French too. See :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/?p=ides&mod=iea&smod=ieaFictions&part=belgique100>

RAPPORTS VIOLATION DROITS DES GENS EN Belgique :

Le rapport N°1 (pages 43-47) est daté du 28 août :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140828%20RAPPORT%201%20AARSCHOT%20VIOLATION%20DROIT%20GENS%20EN%20BELGIQUE.zip>

Le rapport N°2 (pages 47-53) est daté du 31 août :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140831%20RAPPORT%202%20LOUVAIN%20MALINES%20VIOLATION%20DROIT%20GENS%20EN%20BELGIQUE.zip>

Le rapport N°3 (pages 53-58) est daté du 10 septembre :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140910%20RAPPORT%203%20LOUVAIN%20%20VISE%20VIOLATION%20DROIT%20GENS%20EN%20BELGIQUE.zip>

Le rapport N°4 (pages 58-63) est daté du 17 septembre :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140917%20RAPPORT%204%20AARSCHOT%20VIOLATION%20DROIT%20GENS%20EN%20BELGIQUE.zip>

Le rapport N°5 (pages 64-75) est daté du 25 septembre :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19140925%20RAPPORT%205%20AARSCHOT%20LOUVAIN%20VIOLATION%20DROIT%20GENS%20BELGIQUE.zip>