

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

Brand WHITLOCK

Chapter **XXVI**. Reliation.

It was not to be expected, however, that the Germans could allow in two successive years such scenes to pass without resentment, and in the evening of that day an event occurred that gave them an excuse for the reprisals which it was not in their nature or their philosophy to forego.

Cardinal Mercier during the afternoon had remained quietly indoors at the College of Saint-Louis attending to the duties that had summoned him to Brussels. In the evening he left the College and was about to enter his motor-car to return to Malines when a group in the street caught sight of the tall figure, instantly recognized the patriotic Primate of Belgium, and broke into enthusiastic acclaim :

"Vive le Cardinal ! Vive le Cardinal !"

His Eminence tried to still the applause by deprecatory gestures of the hands in the red gloves, hastily entered his automobile and at once disappeared down the Rue du Progrès. That was all that occurred.

The next day the city was fined one million marks. The punishment was announced to the

Burgomaster in a letter addressed to him by General Hurt, Governor of Brussels :

Monsieur the Governor-General (the letter began), in view of the circumstances which Belgium traverses at this moment, had supposed that a serious-minded population would of itself have renounced the idea of publicly celebrating its national holiday. Nevertheless, because of the experience of last year, he had decreed certain measures destined to prevent all demonstrations organized by the light and turbulent element.

In the well-understood interests of the population, the communal authorities of Greater Brussels have in good faith, intelligently and energetically, supported the prescriptions of the German authorities in such manner that it was possible throughout the day yesterday to avoid, until evening, unfortunate incidents, despite the fact that the unthinking portion of the population had invited the public, by an abundant distribution of hand bills, not to follow the prescriptions.

The German police paid no attention to the green ribbons, the public order not having been troubled by them.

On the other hand, when, in the evening. Cardinal Mercier crossed the city in an automobile, there were produced manifestations in direct opposition to the prescriptions of the German authority of a nature to incite the population to resistance and to thoughtless acts. You will agree. Monsieur the Burgomaster, that no occupying Power in the world could endure such a provocation.

In consequence I proposed to Monsieur the Governor-General to inflict a fine on Greater Brussels.

*Monsieur the Governor-General has carried out my proposition and has inflicted a fine of one million marks. He caused it to be observed on that occasion that it is only out of regard for the loyal collaboration given by the communal authorities in maintaining order that the fine inflicted was fixed at such a moderate figure.**

To this remarkable letter Burgomaster Lemonnier replied, pointing out its inconsistencies and injustices **, but the Germans did not recede, and the fine was collected.

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Footnotes.

** Monsieur le Bourgmestre, — M. le gouverneur général avait cru que, dans les circonstances que traverse la Belgique en ce moment, une population sérieuse aurait d'elle-même renoncé à fêter publiquement sa fête nationale. Néanmoins, il avait, eu égard aux expériences faites l'année dernière, décrété des mesures d'ordre, qui devaient empêcher toute démonstration de la part d'éléments légers et turbulents.*

Dans l'intérêt bien compris de la population, les autorités communales de l'agglomération bruxelloise ont loyalement, intelligemment et énergiquement soutenu les prescriptions de l'autorité allemande, de sorte qu'il a été possible, dans la journée d'hier, d'éviter jusqu'à la soirée des incidents fâcheux, quoique la partie irréfléchie de la population eut invité le public, par une abondante distribution de billets, à ne pas suivre ces prescriptions.

La police allemande ne s'est pas occupée du port des rubans verts, l'ordre public n'ayant pas été troublé.

Par contre, lorsque, dans la soirée, le cardinal Mercier a traversé la ville en automobile, il s'est produit des manifestations qui étaient en opposition directe avec les prescriptions de l'autorité allemande, et qui étaient de nature à inciter la population à la résistance et à des actes irréfléchis. Vous conviendrez, Monsieur le Bourgmestre, qu'aucune puissance occupante au monde ne peut souffrir une pareille provocation.

Par conséquent, j'ai proposé à M. le gouverneur général d'infliger une amende à l'agglomération bruxelloise.

M. le gouverneur général a donné suite à ma proposition et a infligé une amende d'un million de marks ; il a fait remarquer à cette occasion que c'est uniquement par égard pour la collaboration loyale prêtée par les administrations communales pour le maintien de l'ordre, que l'amende infligée a été fixée à un chiffre aussi modéré.

Avec l'expression de ma considération,

*HURT,
Lieutenant-général et gouverneur de Bruxelles
et du Brabant.*

*** "It results from my information", said the Burgomaster, "that the manifestation aimed at resolves itself into cheers by which the inhabitants saluted His Eminence the Cardinal at the moment*

when he entered his automobile in quitting the College of Saint-Louis.

In the letter in which he informs us of the penalty inflicted in the Brussels population the Governor-General recognized ... that the communal authority took all the measures in its power to assure order ... In these conditions it is certain that the alleged acclamations — which did not however disturb the peace — should be considered as individual acts for which the entire population can not be held responsible. This condemnation, therefore, is in direct contradiction with Article 50 of The Hague convention :

'No collective penalty, pecuniary or otherwise, can be inflicted upon a population because of individual acts for which it could not be considered responsible.'

Besides, it is manifestly in opposition to the convention of the October 12, 1914, relative to the payment to the German authority by the city of Brussels and the agglomeration of twenty-five millions of francs as a new contribution of war. Article 2 of that Convention is as follows :

'The indemnity thus paid by the agglomeration of 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 the agglomeration of Brussels. In case, however, that a criminal attempt shall be committed against the

German troops there will be imposed on the communes of the agglomeration in whose territory the attempt shall have been committed a contribution, or some other punishment.'

Article 4 is as follows :

'German troops will not be lodged in private houses of the agglomeration of Brussels ; I count on your help to fix the price which German officers lodged in dwellings will have to pay, and I beg your Administration to put itself in accord on this subject with the Intendance Militaire.'

I myself negotiated that convention with the German authority, and in order to obtain the adhesion of the communal authorities interested and to contract the loans necessary to the payment of the contribution, I called the attention of the communal administrations to the importance of these two clauses. The Administrations approved the Convention, we contracted the loans, and after we had paid the sum demanded the German authority set at naught these two clauses. It lodged troops in a great many houses and imposed on us the expense of lodging not only the troops, but also German employees of the railroads. Under this head we have to meet to-day expenses which may attain a million francs, and at this moment, by your last decision, there is imposed on us a new contribution for causes wholly foreign to those foreseen by the aforesaid Article 2 of the convention.

You will recognize. Excellency, that these decisions, incompatible with formal engagements, are of a nature to wound the sensibilities of our constituents. That which our population honours in Monsieur the Burgomaster Max and in His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, that which unites them in the same thought, is their attachment to the nation. In manifesting its sympathies for the Cardinal the population simply wished to express its patriotic sentiments.

In his proclamation of the September 2, 1914, did not the Governor-General von der Goltz say :

'I ask no one to renounce his patriotic sentiments.'

And in the letter of Your Excellency of July 18, 1915, we read :

'I ask no one to renounce his ideals, neither to disavow, sometimes by a hypocritical manner, his convictions, but what I must expect of each one is a recognition of the real situation. That is to say that I, and my administration, in accordance with the laws of war and the laws of man, have the legal duty, and from that also the legal right, to administer the country and to expect the collaboration of the authorities of the country, as well as that of its intellectuals, ecclesiastic or lay.'

And yet because some citizens have manifested their patriotic sentiments in acclaiming the Cardinal, without any offense for the occupant, you condemn the whole population.

It must be recognized, besides, that such penalties are really overwhelming for the agglomeration of Brussels, already so heavily taxed. Constantly the communes have to resort to loans to aid and succour the unemployed population. In the city of Brussels alone, which counts actually less than 170.000 inhabitants, nearly 60.000 persons are nourished by the communal soups, and a great many other persons who from a sense of dignity do not dare to appeal to that charity, must be helped privately.

We have the profound conviction that after having taken cognizance of the situation the German authority will reconsider its decision, and that it will understand that the condemnation is unjustified as it tends to weaken the efforts of the communal administrations to assure public order and tranquillity.

Le Bourgmestre f.f., Maurice Lemonnier."

French translation : « *La revanche* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XIX (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 358-359.

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>