

# **BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1916)**

## **A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2**

**Brand WHITLOCK**

Chapter **XXX**. To assassinate a nation's soul.

Von Bissing was just then maturing a plan over which he had long been brooding, a plan more audacious, more far-reaching, more imaginative, and more noxious in its effect on the life of the Belgian nation than the slave-drive of the military power impersonated by von Hindenburg. The von Bissing plan showed a certain finesse, it was no mere recrudescence of medievalism, no reversion to the ancient type. Both men wished to carry out the imperial German scheme of conquering and annexing Belgium in order to have a foothold whence Germany might strike at England and America. Hindenburg, heavy and ponderous, could think of nothing more original than to drag Belgians off into slavery, after the manner of conquerors in ancient times. But Bissing, old, wily, subtle, had a deeper scheme, the sequel of the inauguration of the Flemish university at Ghent ; by an adroit appeal to the old racial feeling between the Flemish and the Walloons, he would divide the Belgian nation ; he would give his policy the appearance of a spontaneous and generous act undertaken in the name of the very principle for which the Allies were

fighting, the right of small nations to govern themselves. He would stand by benevolently, holding out a patronizing and protecting hand, while the Flemish set up for themselves the Flemish State under a German protectorate, and in this way gain Antwerp and the Belgian littoral, the foothold on the sea, menacing the virile democracies of the British Isles and the American continent. This daring and ambitious scheme, with its imperial vision, never had any chance of success, because Bissing did not understand the Flemish people, but he did apprehend the fact that whatever chance his scheme may have had was destroyed at a blow by the savage policy of the burly hero into whose enormous wooden statue the Germans, like savages with some fetich or totem pole, were enthusiastically driving nails.

Von Bissing, having studied "***The Prince***", was already dramatizing himself amid the acclamations and the enthusiastic *Hochs !* of a posterity that would hail him as the first dictator of Belgium and as the man who had annexed it to the Empire, when Hindenburg, coming to the Western Front, ruined all his careful plans by his stubborn and impetuous will ! And he had to swallow his chagrin and go off to Ghent, and there, on October 21, to open the new Flemish university by a speech in which he sought to flatter the pride of the Flemish people.

It must have been a bitter and ironical moment for the old satrap who was trying to rule his province with a pretense of paternal concern, to think that at the very moment when, posing as a patron of learning and of art, and the saviour of the Flemish people, delivering an address in opening the Flemish University at Ghent, he could catch the strains of the "*Lion of Flanders*" sung by the Flemish workmen whom the stupid *militaires* were dragging off into slavery, leaving behind them in the land he was trying to conquer a hatred for the very word German — *Duitch* — that would burn as long as there was memory in Flanders.

Baron von der Lancken returned from Berlin with the result that we had expected ; there was nothing to be done. The German military authorities were stubbornly determined to go through with it at all hazards, even if it put an end to the *ravitaillement*.

That week, for the second time since the slave-drive had begun, the delegates of the C.R.B. came in from the provinces for their regular meeting, shaken by the scenes they had witnessed. Tuck, Richardson and Osborn came to tell me of it. Tuck had stood on the bridge at Mons and watched long trains of cattle cars, many of them open to the sky, pass under it, filled with Belgian miners, going into slavery, and singing "*la Brabançonne*" and "*la Marseillaise*" as they went. The people, gathered in crowds on the bridge,

flung down to them turnips, potatoes, anything and all they had ; the men seized these raw vegetables and ate them ravenously, like animals. The crowd joined in their cries, the single German sentinel on the bridge running about meanwhile and imploring them to be still. Every one of the delegates had some such tale to tell ; they were half sick with the horror of it, but they had rendered all the help they could, even when that help was only the sympathy they could not refrain from expressing. We determined on a protest, and formally asked an interview with von der Lancken.

It was on Friday, October 27, a day of cold rain and wet leaves falling dismally, that we went to discuss it. At five o'clock in the afternoon at the *Politische Abteilung*, the Marquis of Villalobar, M. van Vollenhoven, M. Francqui, M. Emmanuel Janssen, and I met the Baron von der Lancken and Dr. Brohn and Dr. Reith, of the *Vermittlungsstelle*. Before taking up the question of the deportations, von der Lancken, opening the meeting in his formal way, asked Dr. Reith to read us a letter just written by the Governor-General and addressed to the Protecting Ministers, according what we had asked at our latest interview with him, representation on the various *Zentralen*, and a more stringent control. The letter was satisfactory to us, and then we made our formal protest against the deportations, and the Baron said that he would define the

attitude of the General Government in regard to the question.

It was very still in the little *salon* ; von der Lancken, sitting by the marble-topped table, undeniably handsome in his uniform of delicate blue grey, began his reply by saying that in Germany the old men and the women and the children were working in the fields, while in Belgium there were seven hundred thousand idle folk, more than half of them men ; for the most part young and capable of working. His Excellency the Governor-General had twice, publicly and officially, offered work to the *chômeurs* but it had been refused ; now, because of the lack of labour (*le manqué de main-d'oeuvre*) in Germany the General Government was determined to force these Belgians to go to work. The General Government, he said, felt that it had not only the legal, but the moral right to do this ; that idleness was always a menace, and that if the war continued a year or two longer these men would lose the habit of work completely (*ils perdront complètement l'habitude de travailler*). They would, therefore, be transferred to Germany — some ten thousand had already been sent — and there they would be set to work in the fields, in the quarries, and elsewhere, but not one of them would be compelled to work for the army or for any military purpose whatever.

He paused a moment, with a wide, exculpating gesture as of one who admits some trifling exception, and said :

*"Je ne dis pas que pas un seul ne travaillera à un rail sur lequel un train militaire passera — mais ..."*

The decision had been made, he added, and — there would be no rescinding of it. Dr. Brohn, who was a director in the Krupp works, remarked that there were hundreds of Belgians working in the Krupp works, but not in the munitions department. But, said one of us, *Belgians had been set to work making trenches in northern France*. But this the Baron denied ; *no Belgian*, he said, *had been employed at such labour save those who had come voluntarily and asked for work*, though he did admit that some of them had been employed on the new fortifications at Antwerp.

Villalobar and I by turns called the Baron's attention to the storm that the reports of the seizures would produce in the world outside, and asked him if they had considered the effect the measure would have on the *ravitaillement*. The Baron replied that the *Comité National* and the *Commission for Relief* would be respected, and the engagements entered into with them would be kept. The Governor had not and would not ask the *Comité National* for the lists of *chômeurs*.

Then we called his attention to the state of affairs in the province of Luxembourg, where there were no *chômeurs* ; the communes had undertaken public works in order to provide employment ; they had begun to build roads, bridges, town halls, ditches — any justifiable improvement that might lighten the needs of the people. But the German civil president had ordered all this construction discontinued ; he had even gone so far as to prohibit workmen living in one commune to go into neighboring communes in search of work. Dr.Reith replied for the Baron, saying that these public works had been undertaken after the Germans had called for workmen, which was doubtless accurate enough, since the Germans had begun calling for workmen almost as soon as the occupation began, and that the Belgian authorities had inaugurated these works in order to defeat the German plan to secure manual labour.

It was a long and futile discussion ; one after another we brought up all the objections that so readily occurred to the mind, but to no avail. There was once more that impregnable impasse, that magic phrase — military necessity ; *Messieurs les militaires* had pronounced it, and that closed all debate. Baron von der Lancken shrugged his shoulders to show that he was powerless, and besides, he had not been in favour of the policy ... The discussion went on, was interminable, and at

last despairing. There we sat, while the evening closed in, perplexed by the difficulty the modern mind experiences when suddenly called upon to establish any elementary and universally admitted principle, something long accepted as axiomatic ; as that the earth is round, that tides are coincident with the phases of the moon, that there is a law of gravity, that liberty is a right, that human slavery is wrong — Villalobar, quiet in a wide *fauteuil* close to the little table with the marble top, playing with the *dossier* he always had before him, picking up and letting fall the papers of his numerous affairs ; Dr. Reith, the only one of the Germans in civilian clothes, wearing an extraordinarily high collar ; Dr. Brohn, a big, mild, agreeable man in the dark blue uniform of the 2nd Alexandria regiment, caught in the cogs of the terrible German machine ; van Vollenhoven, ruddy, taciturn ; Emmanuel Janssen in scrupulous black, with never a word to say ; M. Francqui, sitting sidewise in his chair, one short, fat leg crossed over the other, nervously smoking cigarette after cigarette, his eloquent dark eyes darting here and there their brilliant glances, which nothing, not even the shadow of an expression, ever escaped ; and Lancken, with his air of youth, trim, well-groomed, in his uniform of delicate blue grey, his black hair clipped short and carefully brushed, his blue eyes fixed on the sheet of paper on his knees, the faint adumbration of an enigmatic



smile about his lips. It was still in the *salon* when suddenly M. Francqui, with a nervous movement, uncrossed his legs, turned restlessly in his chair, crossed his legs again, and exclaimed, as if to himself :

"*Nous sommes des nègres !*" His dark eyes were flashing, and over the face of Baron von der Lancken there swept a scarlet flame ; he turned quickly and exclaimed :

"*Non, je ne peux pas permettre que vous disiez cela !*"

Then silence again, very deep ; a vast weariness of a common recognition of the whole impossible situation, of the madness and horror of the war. Villalobar sighed heavily, the sigh was audible all over the salon, and turning wearily toward the Baron, he said :

"*Cette guerre dure trop longtemps ; vous et l'Angleterre devriez y mettre fin.*"

The words wrung suddenly from von der Lancken a human cry :

"*Cette guerre abominable doit cesser !*" he cried, striking his knee with a clenched fist. "*Nous sommes prêts ! Pourquoi les autres ne veulent-ils pas la paix aussi ?*"

There was an instant, the only one, no doubt, in all the hours of all the different discussions we had had in that gay little yellow Louis XVI *salon*, with its closed piano, its chairs with the satin cushions wearing out by unwonted usage, its

mirrors that had reflected so many strange and varied forms and features, when we were in accord...

The discussion was fraying out into those vain and idle repetitions that mark the end of most conferences ; some one, Villalobar, I believe, asked Lancken to state once more the official German position with regard to the *ravitaillement* — he had already stated it five or six times — and the Baron, emphasizing each word with a blow of his fist on his knee, said :

*"Nous restons et nous resterons dans nos droits ; nous respectons et nous respecterons nos engagements ; nous ne toucherons en rien au Comité National."*

That was all ; the meeting was over, and we sat there, benumbed by the conviction, the absolute and disheartening certainty, that all argument, all discussion, all reason, all appeal, was useless. Lancken had no power ; he was engaged in the impossible task of presenting the deeds of the *Reiters* and *hobereaux* under a light that would somehow reconcile them with the ideals of western liberal culture, apprehended by him in his ten years at Paris ; even Bissing, the Governor-General, whom all Belgium cursed and execrated, whose name was anathema, the old man who stood to Britain and to France and to America as the very sign and symbol of all that was abominable in German theory and practice, even

he had not been severe enough to suit the General Staff. There was but one argument that could impress the military power, and that was a knock on the head. I had come a long way and reluctantly to a conclusion so utterly at variance with all I had thought and dreamed for years. I had learned that there was but one hope, one salvation for the world, one hope and one salvation for the German people themselves, and that was that the military caste of Germany be defeated and passed under the yoke — literally ; it was the only thing that they could understand.

The result of this formal protest, like the effect of information we had received in several private *causeries*, was the conviction that if any representations could avail they would have to be made at Berlin. In these circumstances I could only report the facts to Washington, and ventured to suggest that some action be taken at Berlin, where the power, if there was any power in Germany higher than the General Staff, alone resided. My course was approved and the suggestion adopted. Mr. Gerard had gone home and Mr. Grew was in charge at Berlin, and I sent him all the facts upon which to base a representation, and suggested to Mr. Grew that in case protests, appeals or representations should fail to stop the hideous thing, some policy at least be adopted by the Germans, that if the pretence of seizing only *chômeurs* were observed it would be something,

and that if certain classes of exemptions could be created, such as would include married men or heads of families, or only men apt for military service, or some such thing, it might somewhat ameliorate the situation. I suggested also that the camps in Germany be open to inspection by representatives of our Embassy there, or, since Spain was in charge of Belgian interests at Berlin, to the representatives of the Spanish Embassy.

November came, cold and gloomy, with the bells tolling on All Saints' Day for the dead ; the bells in the ancient little chapel of Stalle, behind the *Orangerie*, clanged dismally all day long. There were long, woebegone processions in black, winding toward the cemeteries, and there were thoughts of the dead in those new graves all over Belgium and down along the Yser ; thoughts, too, of all those who were being herded by the slavers to living tombs in German mines and quarries.

The Kelloggs were about to depart ; Mr. Warren Gregory, the lawyer of San Francisco, had arrived to succeed Mr. Kellogg at the most difficult moment in the history of the *ravitaillement*. Mr. Hoover had come over from London to discuss with M. Francqui an internal problem of organization of great difficulty and delicacy, and for days that discussion went on, with frequent references of its details to me. It was a trying week, and in addition to the trouble in which it was so prolific there was the uncertainty of the election at

home. One morning Harrach sent me word from the *Politische Abteilung* to the effect that Judge Hughes had been elected. Two days later, he sent word that the result was in doubt, and then, the slowly emerging fact that the President's course had been vindicated by the people.

Baron von der Lancken had gone to Berlin again. He was about two days and immediately on his return (November 11) I had a long conversation with him, in which he said that through one of the representatives of the *Vermittlungsstelle* had seen Mr. Hoover, he had heard that it had been suggested that the Belgian camp's in Germany be open to American or neutral visitation and inspection ; he said that he was heartily in favour of the suggestion, and wished to know if it had emanated from the American Government, or from Mr. Hoover, or from me. I told him that since we were living in a world where every one seemed to be much more concerned about the credit of a thing than about the thing itself, I wished not one to be deprived of what was his ; the idea was Mr. Hoover's, unless it were Villalobar's, for Mr. Hoover had mentioned it to me after a conversation with Villalobar. It was, indeed, the idea of Mr. Hoover, who was still in Brussels, and indignant over the deportations, and Lancken said he would telegraph at once to urge it on his Government's consideration. I said, too, that bad as the whole policy was it would perhaps be less evil if there

were some principle in its application, and I told him of the indiscriminate seizures that were being made all over the Hainaut and Brabant. The Baron said that they could not distinguish between *chômeurs* and *non-chômeurs* because they had not the lists. I replied that, of course, the *Comité National* could not give up the lists.

"*Mon Dieu, non !*" he said, lifting his hands with an ironical gesture as if of pious horror. "*Le Comité National est sacro-saint.*"

There were the burgomasters, too, but without my having to remind him, he realized that they could not give up the lists.

"*Ils seraient lynché*", he said.

I asked whether, if we were to bring to his notice cases of what might be called "injustice" under the German policy as he had defined it, such as seizures of men who were employed, they would be considered and rectified, and he replied that they would. It was agreed that all Belgians employed either by the C.N. or by the C.R.B. should be exempt. Beyond this, which was so little, the Baron's visit to Berlin had been rather barren of results.

We were sitting in the little upper room where he worked ; it was a chill, autumn day, but the small stove burning furiously made the room somewhat too *gemütlich*. We talked long that morning and I told the Baron that the policy of deportation would create horror and a *furor* of

indignation in America and indeed everywhere in the world outside. The Baron said that the Governor-General was preparing an interview to be given to an American journalist for the purpose of explaining the deportations to the American people and for the purpose of affecting public opinion. There was a copy of ***La Libre Belgique*** on his table, the latest number to appear, and he pointed out in it to me an article which contained an appeal to neutral countries, and especially to the neutral countries then represented at Brussels.

*"Ils tapent sur vous !"* he said.

And then he asked :

*"Est-ce qu'on doit vous féliciter des élections?  
Est-ce Wilson ou non ?"*

I could only tell him that I had no accurate news, and he rummaged through the newspaper file on his little table and found and read an *Associated Press* dispatch which said that the President had two hundred and seventy-seven votes and was elected ; and then he asked me many questions about the system by which our Presidents are chosen, and I explained it, as I had to explain it so many times, and to so many persons ; it was then a mystery to Europe, like so many other things in our America !

The Belgians had somehow acquired the impression that the national conventions in June had decided that question ; they thought Mr. Hughes had then been elected to succeed

President Wilson, and the recrudescence, as it seemed to them, of political discussion on the other side of the sea, confused and puzzled them. They would say to me :

"*Mais, je pensais que Monsieur 'Ugue'*" — as they pronounced Hughes — "*a déjà été élu ?*"

It was a result, or at least the defeat of the President was a result, for which the Germans, as some of them did not hesitate to say, were hoping.

**Brand WITHLOCK**

London ; William HEINEMANN ; 1919.

#### **Footnotes.**

French translation : « *Pour assassiner l'âme d'une nation* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre XXIII (1916) in *La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles* ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 373-376.

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](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>