

# BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

## A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

**Brand WHITLOCK**

### Chapter XL. “*La guerre à outrance*”.

#### **The end's beginning.**

Then late one evening Ruddock sent me word that von der Lancken wished to see me at ten o'clock on the morrow ; it was very urgent, though he had not said what it was about. There was no need to say ; I knew that at last the end had come.

I drove to the *Politische Abteilung* the next morning before ten o'clock, and when I went into the little room where Conrad sat I read in his grave face the reflected seriousness of the situation. I asked him what was up, but he, dutifully keeping his secret, pretended not to know. I was shown into that yellow *salon*, the scene of so many anxious, so many difficult, so many painful hours during those years. I stood in the embrasure of the window looking out across the Rue Ducale into the park, watching the white sea-gulls that were there all that winter, as they were before the Palace of the King. They had been driven in from the North Sea by the rigours of the terrible winter to seek

their food, and the people used to feed them, standing in the cold and flinging them the crumbs they could hardly spare. The gulls, wheeling with consummate skill on wings of silver and of pearl, there over the snow in the cold winter's sunlight, were concerned about their *ravitaillement*, too, poor lovely things !

And there was Villalobar, just come, standing beside me.

"*C'est la guerre sous-marine — à outrance*", he said, in a low, serious tone.

Von Moltke had told him. And somehow for a second I was glad that the moment at last had come, glad that a situation so long impossible was at last made clear, glad above all that neutrality was at an end. Van Vollenhoven arrived ; he, too, had been summoned to hear the announcement. We waited ...

After a while von der Lancken entered in his grey uniform and the well-worn puttees, evidently from a morning canter in the Bois. He was pale, with those black circles under his eyes that always showed there when he was troubled or concerned. He made a little apology for having kept us waiting, and then waved us to our familiar seats at that

marble-topped centre table. Dr. Brohn appeared in a great double-breasted blue coat with silver buttons, and enormous boots, as big as Bismarck's; and then Dr. Reith in a long morning coat, extremely high collar, and brilliant cravat. They were seated and then Lancken began formally :

*"Messieurs, j'ai une communication importante à vous faire en ce qui concerne la guerre sous-marine. Je m'adresse à vous en votre qualité de protecteurs de l'oeuvre de ravitaillement."*

And then he asked Dr. Reith to read, and opening a great dossier Reith read to us the Note addressed by Herr Zimmermann to Mr. Gerard, declaring Germany's intention to blockade the coasts of Great Britain, France and Italy, and after he had read this he read a statement to the effect that the German Government did not wish the C.R.B. to cease functioning, and desired us to consider what could be done to insure the continuance of the *ravitaillement* \*. Then for three-quarters of an hour we discussed the new situation, which was so far beyond any decision of ours, or any hope of change, since it represented the will of the military party, whose steady rise to

autocratic power in Germany had been revealed by the successive measures of the deportations, the military power that must be consulted even before the decision in so small a matter as the granting of permission to a few English nurses and governesses to leave Belgium could be reached. Bissing, dying at Wiesbaden, was no longer the depository of sovereign power in Belgium but a mere figurehead in whose name the General Staff governed Belgium, as it governed the *Etape* and the north of France. It was the moment that decided the fall of von Bethmann, approved every extravagance of von Tirpitz, and witnessed the apotheosis of von Hindenburg, though men there in Belgium, the inevitable sceptical, always seeking the power behind the throne, were contending that the burly hero owed his laurels to the genius of Ludendorff, the real intelligence in the General Staff.

Lancken, in giving us copies of the documents, gave us also little maps showing the lines drawn around Great Britain, Spain and Italy, those dead lines across which — incredible insolence ! — American ships were not to pass. Looking at them I knew what America would say, and yet just then, studying for the moment those charts, we did not

discuss that question. We followed the narrow and tortuous lane that had been traced for the C.R.B. ships around the Orkneys and John O' Groat's, and around Italy and Spain, and then Villalobar, with his finger on the map of his own country, said :

*" You haven't left us room enough even to go in bathing !"*

We sent for M. Francqui and Mr. Gregory. What was to be done ? Could the *ravitaillement* be preserved ? I was glad of Gregory's presence, for his legal mind, his clear conceptions, his logical thought, always pertinent and to the point, helped us to a decision that meant much for Belgium. He had intended to go to Rotterdam on the next day ; he determined instead to go at once, and it was decided that M. Francqui should go with him, to communicate with the Belgian Government in an effort to induce Great Britain to permit the work of the C.R.B. to continue. I suggested that we telegraph to the heads of our respective States to ask them to arrange with the British Government a means whereby the C.R.B. ships could land at Rotterdam without having to stop at English ports to be searched for contraband, the control to be exercised at Rotterdam or at New York. While we

were discussing this and agreeing to it, Brohn whispered to me :

*"What will the President say ? That is the important thing."*

It was not for me to answer that question, though I thought that I might answer it, and answer it correctly, but I had the impression that the Germans, with their persistent misunderstanding of American psychology and character, were convinced even then that they could tack around this point by trimming the sails of long and tortuous diplomatic discussion. I had another impression, and that was that the Germans were certain that the submarines thus unleashed and set free to work their cruel and reckless will would win the war and win it quickly for Germany.

*"It is hard", said Brohn, "but in the end it is kind, for we must end it. It is like a surgical operation."*

Brohn spoke generally in English ; he had been much in America. And Lancken added :

*"Oui, il faut que ça finisse."*

And so we separated to send off our telegrams to Washington and Madrid. Van Vollenhoven was going to The Hague for the week-end — it was on a Thursday. Lancken promised passports for Gregory and Francqui ; they would go to Holland that afternoon.

It was very cold and clear the next day, what enthusiasts call fine weather. We waited and watched. And yet I was perfectly certain of the answer ; it would be war, inevitable from that moment in August 1914, when the two old systems clashed once more in a world that, by the many inventions which man, originally made upright, had wickedly sought out, had grown too small for both to live in it any longer together. It had been inevitable from the moment when the war brought face to face at last two civilizations, two ideals, two faiths — on the one hand the ideal of liberty and human justice, on the other that of brute force and material success. It was the logical conclusion of the whole question raised by the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and nobody who was not the dupe of the stupendous illusions of that other world in which we used to live ever would have supposed that Germans could restrain themselves from using, once they had it, such a weapon as the

submarine, which, combining ruthlessness and stealth, exercised on their maniacal minds a fatal fascination, and, by one of those ironies with which history is replete, was destined to lure them ultimately to their own defeat.

War ! The word assumed a new meaning as I thought of my own country involved in it. For as the Germans had conceived it and forced it on the world, war was more hideous than ever.

*"Der Krieg hat gar nichts elegantes mehr"*, as the old Emperor Franz-Josef said.

And yet, strangely, I felt no regret in it. I was suddenly, not exultant, but proud and glad that my country had arisen in the fierceness and pride of its athletic democracy and taken up the insolent defiance of the power that I had come to know too well ; and then suddenly I realized that I had another cause for resentment against the Germans — they had made me insensible to the feeling that once, long since, I should have expected to find, in such a moment, in my breast.

I was almost sorry that I had not sent that presumptuous telegram to Washington in those first nights of the war — how long ago it seemed ! I might have had the petty human satisfaction of



being on record, of posing as a vindicated prophet, of saying, "*I told you so*". Strange, that so many in my own country had not seen it ! But then they had not seen Germans, modern, imperialistic super-Germans. They knew only the old kind of the Sunday afternoon beer-garden and the *meerschaum* pipe, listening to the band play sentimental waltzes. No sentimental waltz now, but another tune to dance to !

**Brand WITHLOCK**

\* Translation :

It goes without saying that the Imperial Government has not the slightest intention of hindering the work of the *ravitaillement* of Belgium. But the Imperial Government must demand that the Commission for Relief causes its ships to travel outside the forbidden zone. It has been provided that the ships in the forbidden zone on the 1st February can leave the said zone, by the most direct route, without fear of unexpected attacks, and that the ships finding themselves in English ports can, up to the evening of the 4th February, leave them and can cross the forbidden zone by the most direct route, Nevertheless the Commission for Relief is urged in the most earnest manner to divert by an immediate notice all ships

*en route* toward those waters situated outside the forbidden zone. The ships that do not give heed to such a notice will do so at their own risk and peril.

### **Footnotes.**

French translation : « *La guerre à outrance* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre II (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 412-416.

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

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>

It would also be interesting compare with what Charles TYTGAT told about the same days in ***Journal d'un journaliste. Bruxelles sous la botte allemande*** :

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

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)