

BELGIUM UNDER THE GERMAN OCCUPATION. (1917)

A PERSONAL NARRATIVE 2

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Chapter XLIV. Destroying a nation.

At the nation's soul.

We supposed, however, that with the Imperial promise the deportations had come to an end and that we could indulge the natural feeling of relief that would come with the passing of the worst of the horrors the Germans had brought to Belgium. And yet, almost unnoticed, in those days of anxiety and care, there were being enacted the opening scenes in a tragedy that transcended any yet played in Belgium, the preparation for a deed worse than the atrocities, worse even than the Cavell case, worse than the deportations. These were of that sensational nature and of that stark objectivity which instantly shock the imagination. But this went deeper, was far more subtle and insidious. The atrocities, the deportations and the rest destroyed the body ; this was an attempt to destroy the soul ; they murdered men ; this would assassinate a nation.

On March 3, or about that time, the German newspapers announced that the administration in Belgium would be divided ; then ten days later the German newspapers were filled with accounts of a

"*visit*" to Berlin of a group of Belgians, *soi-disant* leaders among the Flemish, gone to present a petition to that end. Preoccupied by my own problems and perplexities, I paid little attention to this at the time ; it was mentioned now and then, but we were thinking and talking of other things. Then on March 21 there appeared on the walls of Brussels a small *affiche* :

Order

There are formed in Belgium two administrative regions, one of which comprises the provinces of Antwerp, Limbourg, East and West Flanders, as well as the districts of Brussels and of Louvain, the other of which comprises the provinces of Hainaut, Liège, Luxembourg, and Namur, as well as the district of Nivelles.

The administration of the first of these two regions will be directed from Brussels ; that of the second, from Namur.

All arrangements looking to the assurance of the execution of the present order, notably from the point of view of the administrative organization of the two regions and the transfer of the control, are reserved. For all that concerns the Ministry of Arts and Sciences, the orders of October 25, 1916, December 13 February 14, 1917 (***Official Bulletin of Laws and Orders***, pp. 2930, 3054, and 3319),

remain in force until the publication of the above-mentioned arrangements.

The Governor-General in Belgium,
Freiherr von BISSING,
Generaloberst
Brussels, March 21, 1917

This order was the culmination of a carefully nurtured scheme of von Bissing's, a scheme not only for the conquest, but for the political agglutination of Belgium, the finale of that policy of Flaminganization already revealed in the transformation of the University of Ghent. It had been cunningly devised and deeply meditated for long months ; its details had been studied with Machiavellian subtlety in the department of the *Politische Abteilung* and the *Zivilverwaltung*, and while he was taking the cure at Wiesbaden von Bissing had matured it ; now on his return, he promulgated it. The moment, as it proved, was hardly auspicious, and revealed the reason why von Bissing had been so opposed to the deportations — not as a principle, but as a policy — and why he quarreled, or at least differed, with Hindenburg. Von Bissing and his advisers just then affected *la manière douce*, which Hindenburg and his leaders could neither tolerate nor understand.

It was always referred to as *la séparation administrative*, a phrase that hardly illustrates its

own sinister and tragic significance. It meant more, of course, than a mere division of the prosaic functions of the civil administration of the kingdom ; it involved the establishment of two administrations where one had served before, one that had been in operation for more than eighty years and was an integral part of a most practical system of government. The Hague Convention made it incumbent on the German occupant to respect the laws in force in the country, the only exception recognized by that Convention being that of "*absolute necessity*". There had been no absolute necessity for innovation ; the Belgian internal administration had carried on, as the English say, under German occupancy for more than two years. The functionaries had continued at their posts at the express invitation of General von Bissing himself, and with a promise that they would not be molested.

On January 4, 1915, the Chief of the Civil administration, Dr. von Sandt, had formally communicated to them a statement of the Governor-General informing them that he would leave it to Belgian functionaries "*to decide freely whether they were able to reconcile the future exercise of their functions with their duty toward the Belgian state*", assuring them that those who should resign their functions would have no reason to fear any result other than the loss of their salaries, "*providing they had done nothing in the*

pursuance of their duties and obligations that was against the interests of the German administration". This striking generosity was supererogatory even if elementary rules of justice did not give a man the right to quit his employment, for that right had already been expressly secured by Article 43 of the regulations annexed to The Hague Convention of 1907.

In that dark winter of 1914, the first of the war, we used to hear that the Germans were only waiting to take Ypres and *nettoyer le pays là-bas*, before declaring the annexation of Belgium ; the Kaiser was said to have prepared an imposing theatrical ceremony to be unrolled in the old Cloth Hall as soon as the city should fall. But that performance was deferred and another annexation was conceived as a substitute for the geographical conquest, to accomplish which it was necessary to destroy the national organization and in its place to erect two organizations, one Flemish and the other Walloon. Whether Belgium were formally annexed or not, this procedure would divide the people, break the national spirit, and dismember the nation; it was a part of the unaltered purpose of the military oligarchy and the Pan-Germanists to create the *Mittel-Europa*, a purpose from which for an instant they had never swerved ; they would first separate the Flemish provinces from Belgium and then attach them to the Empire, thus gaining the great port of Antwerp and the Belgian littoral.*

The Germans knew, of course, in every detail, the historic feeling between the Flemish and the Walloons, and they were no sooner installed in Belgium than they set about the congenial task of profiting by the fact. The idea of separating the administrations, like that of transforming the University of Ghent, was not original with them ; few ideas are ; they are better at adapting than originating. *La séparation administrative* was an old notion in Belgium, and since it lent itself so readily to demagoguery it was precisely the sort of thing that appeals to your small politician, who is always confusing sectionalism and particularism with democracy. But it had never excited a serious general interest, and when the war came on was moribund. The Germans, however, sent their *agents provocateurs*, manipulators, and agitators through the land to try to revive the issue, and with the exaggerated solicitude and gross flattery of the seductor tried to win the confidence of the Flemish. In the minds of the intelligent and responsible Flemish leaders such clumsy methods, of course, produced no feeling but disgust, but a few men were influenced to play the traitorous *rôles* for which the Germans cast them.

The movement, then, for the separation of administration opened with a comedy staged at Berlin. The four or five Flemish men, as a commission representing the Flemish people, "*went*", as I have said, to Berlin with their petitions.

Inasmuch as no one could go from one town to another in Belgium, much less to Germany, without appealing to the *Kommandantur* for days and sometimes for weeks in order to obtain the necessary passports, which besides were seldom granted, and inasmuch as the Belgian people were not allowed to assemble or to hold public discussions, and as they had no Press, it is easy to imagine just whom and what these men represented. They were received by the Chancellor, Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg, as we read in the German newspapers, and he made a speech in which he extended to the "*delegates*" a cordial welcome to the capital of the German Empire in "*their quality of representatives of a people so closely united to the German people by political, economical and intellectual ties*". He referred to the "*community of ideals which prevails between the two peoples*" and assured them that "*the confidence with which they had approached him had found a vibrating echo in his heart*". He went on to express the wish that "*in the midst of a bloody struggle Germans and Flemish might remember that the bitter fight against the encroachments of the Latin race should lead them to the same end*".

"*We have still before us many struggles and much labour*", he said, "*but that does not prevent me from extending to you my hand, that we may combat together our common enemy*".

Continuing, the Chancellor said that "*His Majesty, animated only by his esteem and compassion for the Flemish people, had decided to grant their wishes*", and that "*in execution of the orders of His Majesty the Emperor*", he was "*authorized to say that in order to give the Flemish people the possibility of developing freely, intellectually and economically, which has heretofore been refused them*", he would lay "*the corner-stone of the edifice of the Flemish national autonomy which the Flemish people were not able to conquer for themselves*". In accord with the Governor-General in Belgium he gave them the assurance that this policy "*which, as you have said, must be in conformity with the principles of international law*", would be adopted, "*and in order to bring it about we shall make a complete separation of administration, such as has been desired for so long by both parties in Belgium ...*"

"*The frontier of tongues must also be the frontier of administration under the common authority of the Governor-General*", and the collaboration of the German authorities was promised the "*representatives of the Flemish people, who are so profoundly conscious of the duty they have to undertake and of the task that has been imposed upon them by their patriotism in these decisive times*".

The Chancellor hailed "*the unanimity of the Flemish people*" as the best guarantee of the success of their work, and went on to say :

"After the negotiations of peace, and when peace shall have been established, the German Empire will do all in its power to encourage and to insure the development of the Flemish nation."

And then, in conclusion, he charged his visitors to spread his declaration in their "*beautiful country. Say to the citizens of Flanders that we Germans shall do all that we can so that out of the distress and the misery of these times a new era of prosperity shall dawn for them.*"

It seems incredible, I know, and yet I take these extracts from the speech of the Chancellor as published in the officially censored Press in Germany and in Belgium. That, at the very moment when German soldiers were ravaging Belgium, bearing from those very provinces of Flanders for which such touching solicitude was expressed thousands of men into slavery, stripping every home in Belgium of the last of its copper and of its linen, with thousands of spies swarming over the country and rummaging in every bedroom and closet in the land, with daily executions of the death penalty after a mockery of a trial, the head of a modern State could seriously have adopted that tone, is beyond the comprehension of the normal mind. If he was sincere it proves that the Prussian

mind thinks in sequences that are inaccessible to our mental processes.**

Then on March 21 appeared the official edict of von Bissing decreeing the division of the administrations, ordering that thenceforth there be virtually two internal Governments, one Flemish with its seat at Brussels, the other Walloon with its seat at Namur. The Flemish administration included, it will be noted, the two Flanders, part of Brabant, and Antwerp — that is, those portions of Belgium most coveted by German imperialism. Never, even when German troops entered Belgium in that terrible month of August 1914, had such a blow been struck at Belgian honour, at Belgian patriotism, at Belgian pride, and the answer on the part of Belgium, and especially on the part of Flemish Belgium, was instant. The so-called Flemish delegates who had gone to Berlin were disowned, and the most prominent men in the intellectual, political, and financial world among the Flemish at once sent a vigorous protest to the Chancellor. The responsible Flemish leaders, indeed, had protested even before the affiche definitely announcing the separation had been published. On the 20th (Note : 10th) they addressed a protest to the Chancellor of the Empire, telling him that the so-called delegation was composed of men unknown in the country, saying that they were without mandate or authority, and denouncing them as traitors to their own

country and their own people. They were, indeed, everywhere execrated ; threats against them were heard ; if they remained in Belgium after the war they would be lynched, and they were added to that list, not very long in truth, considering all the circumstances, of whom it was said : "*On arrangerá leur affaire après la guerre.*"

As the far-reaching meaning and the purpose of this act became more and more understood there was a spirit of resistance in Belgium such as I had never seen before. I was not in Belgium to see the end, but in those late days in March the personalities of Belgium and all the Parliamentarians then in or near the capital, met secretly and on several occasions, and unanimously resolved to resist the plan to dismember their nation. As a first step it was decided that when the edict was put into execution all the heads of departments should resign.

"*When you are outside*", said one of the leaders to me, "*tell our friends that we will never submit ; that the heads of departments will resign ; tell them not to think of us, not to think of peace without victory but to go on fighting until this brutal and insolent power is crushed.*" ***

That message was given to me again and again, by all sorts and conditions of men. It was the unanimous sentiment of those brave people who endured, not only all the cruelties and calamities and horrors of war, but the ignominies of a German

occupation besides, a civil population that resisted as heroically as its little army resisted at Liège and on the Yser. It is a sentiment that expresses the very soul of that brave people, about whose tragic destiny the great struggle for justice and freedom in the world has swirled.

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*After Governor-General von Bissing's death in 1917, there was published a document that purports to be a memoir left by him in which he sets forth his views of the future of Belgium, of Germany, and of the world in general. The authenticity of this document, so far as I know, has never been authoritatively denied. In it Baron von Bissing says :

"I propose to develop here an opinion already expressed by me in a previous memoir. I wish to speak of the cruel necessity, or rather the sacred duty imposed on us of keeping Belgium under our influence and our domination, because the security of Germany demands that we do not render Belgium her liberty".

The Governor-General in his memoir was without illusions. He said that there was no hope of reconciling the Belgians, and that in spite of all treaties that might be obtained, Belgium would remain inimical to Germany. He develops his theory of the use Germany could make of Belgium,

not only industrially, but as an outpost against England in that future war of which he speaks, as though it were already an actuality. He says that after the conclusion of peace they, the Germans, can not permit Belgium to be resuscitated as a State and as a neutral country, and adds :

"An independent Belgium, a neutral Belgium, or a Belgium whose status is fixed by treaties, will be, as prior to the war subject to the baneful influence of England and of France, and will be the prey of America, which seeks to utilize Belgian's resources. In order to prevent that there is but one means and one policy : FORCE ; and it is to force that we must again resort in order to compel the present population, still hostile, to accommodate itself to German domination and to submit to it.

Germany is interested also in the Flemish movement in Belgium, which has already gained considerable ground and which would be mortally affected if we did not extend to Belgium our policy of force."

The late Governor-General goes on :

"And this has great weight also in determining the future external policy of Holland, for as soon as we withdraw our protecting hand from Belgium the Flemish movement will be branded as Germanophile by the Walloons and the Francophiles, and completely crushed by them. The Flemish problem is not solved yet by any means, and I do not cherish the optimistic hope

that the Flemings will aid us in our domination of Belgium. From now on we must do everything in our power to divert into the proper channels the unrealizable hopes that are beginning to overflow. A certain Flemish group dreams of an autonomic Flemish State, governed by a king and entirely separate from any other State. Of course we must protect the Flemings, but we can not in any event or under any consideration allow them to become altogether independent."

The memoir concludes :

"Belgium must be conquered by us and we must retain it as it is at present and as it must remain in the future. We must retain in Belgium for many years to come the state of despotic control which is actually in force.

That despotic control, based on military force, is the sole administrative system that can be chosen ; but we shall work out in the future, slowly and methodically, and install a new form of government more appropriate to the interests of Germany."

Bissing, Moritz Ferdinand, freiherr von (1844-1917) ; **General von Bissing's testament : A study in German ideals** ; London : T. Fisher Unwin Ltd; 1917, 36 p. :

<https://ia601407.us.archive.org/29/items/generalvonbissin00biss/generalvonbissin00biss.pdf>

As I say, the authenticity of this document has not been entirely proved, though it is not difficult to imagine the old Prussian General writing such a memoir. It was printed in Herr Bacmeister's review. ***Das Grössere Deutschland***, and in the ***Bergische Markische Zeitung***. Herr Bacmeister, the publisher of the first-mentioned magazine, has issued a statement in response to some rival publication which, while not contesting the authenticity of von Bissing's memoir, claimed that the late Governor-General in Belgium had changed the opinions expressed in it before his death. Herr Bacmeister's statement contends, with some truth it would seem, that it would be impossible to diminish the significance of the von Bissing document, and he adds that he is authorized to declare that von Bissing "*to the day of his death invariably held the opinions that he expressed in his memoir*". But whether the memoir is authentic or not, there is another document the authenticity of which cannot be disputed, and which goes even further than the memoir.

In January, 1917, Baron von Bissing, being ill and at Wiesbaden taking the cure, wrote **** to Dr. S. Stressemann (**Note** : Stresemann), a member of the Reichstag and lately appointed by the Chancellor as a member of the Consulting

Commission of Seven, the latest triumph of the democratic movement in Germany. The letter that Baron von Bissing wrote is dated January 14, 1917, and was published in the ***Deutsche Tagezeitung*** for May 30, 1917. Von Bissing writes to congratulate Herr Dr. Stressemann on a lecture he had just delivered at Hanover on German victory and German peace, and is delighted to approve what the speaker had said as to the future of Belgium. In the letter von Bissing refers to a memoir in which he says he studies at greater length and more precisely and profoundly the future of Belgium, and the assumption is that this is the memoir mentioned above.

But in the letter itself he says :

"If we do not subject Belgium to our power, if we do not orient its politics toward a German goal, if we do not use Belgium for the best interests of Germany, then the war for us will have been lost.

For two years my policy has been guided by these considerations of the future. I have sought always noiselessly to weave binding ties and often those ties have been severed. But of all the attempts at *rapprochement*, however futile, something subsists, though it be in the deepest mystery. You will see what fruits this policy will bear as soon as, in order to reimburse itself for the heavy sacrifices it has made so as to assure the guaranties without which it can not insure its future, Germany, not knowing how to surrender, will

decree the annexation of Belgium on the basis of the right of conquest."

And he goes on :

"These thoughts have inspired my Flemish policy ; it is guided by these thoughts that I have directed with a wide reserve and moderation my religious policy. Doubtless it would have been easier for me to have recourse to the means of *Kulturkampf*, but we shall have need of the church if we wish one day to impose on Belgium the German spirit and German initiative.

These words, which your brilliant lecture alone could have inspired, are those of a man who knows not whether the state of his health will permit him to return to his post where await him such heavy responsibilities. If, however, God, our Lord, will give him back his strength, you may be assured that those, who like you, have understood with penetration what the future of Germany demands with reference to the problem of Belgium, and have set it forth as clearly as you have in your conference, will always find in me a staunch supporter.

I am still feeble and ill and I cannot write or even think as I hope to be able to do before long, when, after this long vacation which His Majesty the Emperor in his confidence has been kind enough to grant me, I shall be sufficiently restored

to be able to govern Belgian affairs in his name and after his will."

He was restored, at least partially, to health, and returned to Brussels to "*install a form of government more appropriate to the interests of Germany*".

The memoir in full is as follows :

It is a curious fact that in enemy countries, in France and England particularly, the men at the helm express themselves quite freely regarding their war aims, in spite of the reverses suffered on the various fronts. As at the outbreak of this world-war, which is constantly extending its scope, so today the parcelling-out or annihilation of Germany is demanded ; and this although German armies have made victory a matter of habit, as it were, and are in firm possession of huge expanses of enemy country.

Without paying the slightest heed to the military situation, or hesitating at the sacrifice of treasure and men to which the Powers allied against us vainly committed themselves, the anti-German Press is without exception blinded by a strange kind of self-hypnotism. The extravagance of the war aims of our opponents, who set as little value on our own successes as on those already won by our allies, obviously makes it impossible to

dream of a peace in the near future which shall be both honourable and acceptable to Germany.

To defend our independence and to assure our future, Germany must continue the struggle until the time when with sword in hand she can exact a peace, a peace which shall be effective and, if possible, durable. And it is then only that it will be suitable to speak of the character of our conditions of peace ; such is, contrary to that of our enemies, the opinion of many Germans, the Chancellor of the Empire among others. As for convincing those circles in which peace is now desired, either because they maintain the illusion of a possible reconciliation, or because they are nervously impatient of a peace which, being premature, cannot but be ephemeral, I do not believe that it can ever be done.

In those circles where only social-democrats meet they misunderstand the sentiments inspiring our people to finish the task that has been begun, while at the same time exaggerating the force of resistance of England. Thus they seem to believe that England will never decide to talk of peace so long as we shall not have evacuated and re-established in the position it occupied prior to the war, Belgium, which after fierce struggles and innumerable sacrifices we have succeeded in almost entirely conquering.

I do not wish to be led here to discuss the invincibility of England. Her world-empire is already

threatened ; it becomes daily more and more evident that in the West and in the East she is at present wounded in her vital organs. Does England nevertheless possess a power so great that, concentrating it upon us, she can snatch Belgium from us, force us again to surrender Belgium to Franco-British influence, and, finally, provide that in the future our country regain its primitive boundaries and frontiers, which, instead of extending to the Channel, shall be withdrawn to the frontier of Belgium ? I do not wish to discuss that here.

I propose to develop here an opinion already expressed by me in a previous memoir : I wish to speak of the cruel necessity, or rather the sacred duty imposed on us of keeping Belgium under our influence and our domination, because the security of Germany demands that we do not render Belgium her liberty.

I suppose, of course, that the firm hope I have of seeing the force of arms bring about a decision in our favour will become a reality. But at present we must convince ourselves of this : a Belgium restored to independence — whether she is declared neutral or not — will be included among our enemies ; not only will she be impelled to do so by an inevitable sense of necessity, but they will draw her to them. I take for granted that we may hope for a reconciliation — mythical, to my mind — and that we may, by means of as good treaties as

possible, obtain guarantees ; it cannot be denied, however, that from every point of view Belgium will be organized and utilized by our enemies as a TERRITORY of offensive and of advanced posts.

The following considerations will show what is, in view of a future war, the strategic importance of Belgium. In order to conduct the present war in an offensive manner the high command of the army was obliged to march through Belgium, but the right wing of the German army was not able to advance along the border of the Dutch province of Limbourg except with great difficulty. Strategically speaking, the objective pursued during the present war on the Western front was to find a space where we might march our army against France and England in a war the circumstances of which would all be new.

If the result of the present war should be to leave an independent Belgian State it would be necessary in a subsequent war to conduct the operations in an entirely different manner and with much greater difficulty than in the beginning of the present war, for the whole effort of England and France would tend to outdistance the German army with the aid of a Belgium either allied to them or entirely under their influence. It is permissible to ask one's self whether it would then be possible to safeguard the liberty of action of the German right wing, and even if in another war we could again take the offensive.

The present war has also proved, furthermore, that the possession of a defensive territory beyond the Rhine is essential. The present frontier of the Empire does not suffice. A Belgium supported by English and French forces would immediately threaten our industrial regions, which, by reason of their factories, are indispensable for supplying the needs of the army. Besides, England, if she dominated Belgium in peace times would not hesitate to force Holland — as Greece has recently been forced to do — to abandon her neutrality, or to bow to the exigencies of England's military operations. It is up to us, therefore, to protect our industrial regions — without whose aid we cannot conduct the war to a successful finish — by distant lines of defence, and to safeguard the freedom of action of our right wing by widening, as much as is necessary, the territories over which our offensive can deploy.

Before leaving the military and strategic viewpoint it is necessary that I draw attention to the great value of the industrial territory of Belgium, not only in peace time but also in time of war. A Belgium neutral, or under Franco-English influence, by means of its munitions factories, its metallurgic industry, its coal-mines, increases the fighting power and the forces of resistance of a country, just as our own industrial regions do. That is why it is absolutely necessary to prevent Belgian industry from aiding the armament policy of our

adversaries. The extra advantages that we have derived from Belgium during this war by the seizure of machinery, etc., should be considered as much as the injury caused the enemy deprived of this increase of fighting power.

If we consider the importance of Belgium to us as a *terrain* where our armies can deploy for an attack, and favourable during future operations for offensive or defensive warfare, there can be no doubt that a frontier limited to the line of the Meuse, where some misguided ones would establish it, and protected by the fortresses of Liège and Namur, can not suffice for Germany. It is necessary, on the contrary, to push the frontier to the sea, as our maritime interests, moreover, demand.

The Belgian industrial region is important for the conduct of the war, but that is not its sole importance. Without the coal, what would have become of our policy of exchange with Holland and the northern countries ?' The 23 million tons extracted annually from the Belgian coalfields have given us on the Continent a monopoly which has contributed to assure our existence.

In addition to these factors which must be considered in view of a future war, one must also consider that even in peace time it is of priceless importance for us to safeguard our economic interests in Belgium. A Belgium having again become independent will never again be neutral,

but will submit, on the contrary, to the protection of France and of England.

If we do not seize Belgium, if in the future we do not govern it to the best of our interests and do not protect it by force of arms, our industry and our commerce will lose the place they have won in Belgium and undoubtedly they will never be able to recover it.

German interests in Antwerp will be compromised from the time that Germany relinquishes Belgium, for without any doubt that country will enter into closer relations with England and France as soon as it feels free once more.

The Belgian Government and its politicians who have taken refuge in London are always openly working in that direction. We should not desire, of course, to kill Belgian industry, but by special laws we must impose on it the same conditions as those controlling German industry. We can thus make use of Belgian industry as a lever to play upon the world market and there fix prices. With Antwerp we should not only lose the port, the possibility of controlling railroad rates, etc., but also the great influence that this city possesses as a world-market and financial centre, in South America especially. These forces will also be turned against us, very naturally, as soon as they can be freely utilized.

It has now become a matter of history that neither before nor at the outbreak of this war could

Belgium be expected long to remain neutral, and, if one is to attach much importance to these historical truths, it is not admissible that on the conclusion of peace Belgium should be resuscitated as an independent State and neutral country. An independent Belgium, a neutral Belgium, or a Belgium whose status is fixed by treaties, will be, as prior to the war, subject to the baneful influence of England and of France, and will be the prey of America, which seeks to utilize Belgium's resources. In order to prevent that there is but one means and one policy : FORCE ; and it is to force that we must again resort in order to compel the present population, still hostile, to accommodate itself to German domination and to submit to it.

Germany is also interested in the Flemish Movement in Belgium, which has already gained considerable ground and which would be mortally affected if we did not extend to Belgium our policy of force. Many Flemings are openly our friends and many more also, who still conceal their sentiments; all are ready to associate their interests with those of Germany throughout the world. And this has great weight also in determining the future external policy of Holland, for as soon as we withdraw our protecting hand from Belgium the Flemish Movement will be branded as Germanophile by the Walloons and the Francophiles, and completely crushed by them. The Flemish question has not

been solved yet by any means, and I do not cherish the optimistic hope that the Flemings will aid us in our domination of Belgium. From now on we must do everything in our power to divert into the proper channels the unrealizable hopes that are beginning to overflow. A certain Flemish group dreams of an autonomous Flemish State, governed by a king and entirely separate from any other State. Of course we must protect the Flemings, but we cannot in any event or under any consideration allow them to become altogether independent. Being of German extraction, as opposed to the Walloons, they will be a precious asset for the German race.

Belgium must be conquered by us and we must retain it as it is at present and as it must remain in the future.

In order fully to assure our future position we must devise for the Belgian problem as simple a solution as possible. If we abandon a portion of Belgium, or if we erect an autonomous State on Belgian territory, we do not only create for ourselves considerable difficulties, but we also deprive ourselves of the very important advantages and of the assistance that Belgian territory can give us only if in its entirety it is subjected to German administration.

If for no other reason than to give our fleet a base of supply and to prevent the isolation of

Antwerp from the commercial centres, we must exact all the territory contiguous to that city.

After a century, we are going to be given an opportunity, on the conclusion of peace, to correct the errors made by the Congress of Vienna. In 1871 we corrected one of them by annexing Alsace-Lorraine, which Prussia had formerly claimed. At present there must be no more errors committed ; we must act without timidity and without any ulterior thought of a reconciliation.

If in order to oblige England to show us sufficient respect, we show a total lack of consideration and firmness, if we weaken, if we withdraw to the line of the Meuse or conclude some sort of an agreement concerning Antwerp, the whole world will consider us weak, the great results we have obtained in the Balkans will be minimized, and, in spite of the importance of our military successes, our fame will suffer in Turkey and throughout the whole of Islam.

There is but one means of forcing the English to recognize us as equals ; that is to stay in Belgium. England cannot remain mistress of the Belgian coast. We must prevent her from dominating a territory whence a new Franco-English offensive might be launched one of these days, and it would be an overwhelming one this time. I have the firm conviction that once out of Belgium, not only would Franco-English influences prevail, but also the English and French troops

would effect their junction there ; that is to say, in a future war more than a million men will be ready immediately — on the defensive or to attack our present frontier or on the line of the Meuse.

I shall confine myself to outlining rapidly and in its broad lines to what extent our interior policy is interested in the Belgian problem. The great majority of the people would not understand our giving up Belgium after its having been a long time in our hands, and that we should relinquish the fruits of a victory so dearly won. The war will have cost us at least a million men in the prime of life ; our industries will find themselves deprived of many of their strongest arms. The peoples are entitled to see the realization of their hopes. Furthermore, we should see a greater and more active opposition created should those expectations not be fulfilled. Already our diplomatic reserves of the last twenty years have made a very unfavourable impression upon the people ; the fear is more and more openly expressed that once again diplomacy will lose for us what we have won by the sword. This time, after such enormous sacrifices, we cannot run the risk of hearing such reproaches. We must attain that war objective which at home even the lowliest being considers absolutely certain of attainment.

It is not only a question of formulating a minimum of conditions with regard to Belgium that military interests impose on us, but positively to

insure in the future the life of the people and of the German Empire.

Whosoever, like me, with entire conviction and with all his energy, conducts a campaign in favour of the annexation of Belgium, is in duty bound also, in order completely to justify his passionate desire, to outline to himself the difficulties to be surmounted and the objections to be combated. For my part, I do not consider the reasons of those who, losing themselves in dreams, judge that the Government is bound by the declarations it made at the outbreak of the war. Of course we did not undertake the war in a spirit of conquest, but solely to defend the Fatherland. The conquest of Belgium was directly forced upon us, and it was considerations affecting the possibilities that lie in the future that led us logically to demand, in the name of our security, that the frontiers of Germany be extended to the west.

Certain people maintain that Germany must be kept free from every foreign element, and that it would affect the powerful unity of Germany to incorporate so many millions of inhabitants of another country differing in language. These are but empty phrases. Germany has nothing to fear ; Germany will remain German even though we draw Belgium into our midst ; besides, it is thickly peopled with Germans, for the Walloons themselves became French only through the action of time. It will suffice if we see to it that the German

spirit and courage become implanted there where French influences pursued the work of Frenchification. Obviously, it is a great and difficult problem to enlarge Germany, to subject Belgium to her rule, and to absorb the latter country ; but Germany is strong enough, and after the war she will find, I hope, capable men to solve in a German sense the problems that will arise in Belgium, and to solve them more happily than they were solved in Alsace-Lorraine. At least the faults previously committed will have taught us something, and we shall never return in Belgium to that policy of weakness and of reconciliation that was so injurious to us both in Alsace-Lorraine and in Poland.

Of course, it must be a brain-racking dilemma for the diplomatists and the jurists to determine what form the annexation of Belgium should take, and many times have we asked one another, "*With whom shall we conclude a peace sanctioning in law the right of conquest ?*" And indeed that question is not easily answered. Up to the present neither the Belgian Government nor the King has agreed with the Quadruple Entente not to sign a separate peace. But in spite of this reservation, from which there will undoubtedly be a departure in the near future, we shall never be able to conclude with the King of the Belgians and his Government a peace by which Belgium would remain under German domination, and the Quadruple Entente

cannot agree to our conditions of peace relative to Belgium, its ally. Therefore we can only refuse, during peace negotiations, to discuss the manner in which we shall incorporate Belgium.

We shall limit ourselves to asserting *the right of conquest*.

Obviously, one must not disregard the dynastic point of view, for in so doing, in justice and without concerning ourselves with idle considerations, we dethrone the King of the Belgians and allow him to remain abroad, an enemy full of ill-will. We must arrive at some decision in this respect, and perhaps it were better to conclude that it is so much to our advantage, if necessity does not force us to dwell too long on the dynastic view-point. A king will never voluntarily abandon his country to the conqueror, and the King of the Belgians will never resign himself to the surrender of his sovereignty or consent to its restriction. His prestige would be so affected that he could no longer be considered an aid to German interests, but a nuisance. The English for a long time and in divers circumstances maintained that the right of conquest is the sanest and simplest, and in Machiavelli's writings one may read that whosoever proposes to seize a country is obliged to rid himself of the king or government, even by murder.

These are certainly very serious resolutions to adopt, but they must nevertheless be adopted,

for it is a question of the welfare and future of Germany, and besides, a war of extermination waged against us calls for expiation. We must retain in Belgium for many years to come the state of despotic control which is actually in force.

That despotic control, based on military force, is the sole administrative system that can be chosen ; but we shall work out reforms in the future, slowly and methodically, and install a new form of government more appropriate to the interests of Germany. The annexation of Belgium, based upon the right of conquest, will be viewed by many Flemings and by a goodly number of Walloons as a release from doubt and vain hopes. One and the other can then breathe freely, do business, and enjoy life. The Flemings, whose nature is so independent, and who, furthermore, are difficult to manage, will find it easy to adapt themselves, on coming out of the state of tyranny, to a transitory state of things from which liberty for them will arise.

The Walloons can and must decide during that period whether they desire to adapt themselves to the new circumstances or whether they prefer to leave Belgium. Whoever remains in the country must recognize Germany, and, after a certain time, confess to *Deutschtum* (Allegiance to Germany).

As a result of this it will be impossible to tolerate that while wealthy land owners emigrate

they continue to derive income from their Belgian properties. In order to avoid in Belgium the creation of a situation analogous to that existing in Alsace-Lorraine, it will be necessary at all costs to have recourse to expropriation. Happily, we are not only powerful with the sword, but our statesmen have clear vision and know how to govern intelligently. Above all, half-way measures must be condemned and no attention paid to the possible wounding of susceptibilities. In these decisive days of German history it would be committing an injustice, fraught with the gravest consequences to those who have died for us, to be irresolute.

It would be, for instance, a half-way measure to treat Belgium as a hostage and not to reconquer, perhaps even to increase by means of her aid, our colonial empire. One thinks first of all of the Belgian Congo, and undoubtedly its possession would be of immense value to us. Speaking generally, I am strongly of the opinion that a colonial empire is necessary for Germany as a solid basis for her power and to allow her to develop a world-wide policy, and it is of slight importance over what regions this empire extends.

But the empire will not have its real value for us unless new frontiers afford us greater freedom on the seas. The partisans of a colonial policy must therefore also insist that we be given the Belgian coast-line, with the territory contiguous to it, for if we relinquish this, our fleet will lack important

bases from which to undertake the efficient defense of our colonies.

It is, I realize, a great scheme to propose to keep all of Belgium for Germany, and to annex it under one form or another. It is a great goal that can be attained only by a courage ready for every sacrifice, and by clever energy at the time of peace negotiations. Let us take inspiration from that phrase of Bismarck (to which Bismarck gave such significance) : *"As in every walk of life so it is true in politics, that faith removeth mountains, that courage and victory have not the relationship of cause and effect, but are identical."*

** The feeling of all Belgium was nowhere so correctly expressed as in the protest adopted by the common council of Antwerp, when the stout burghers, themselves all Flemish, declared to the Governor-General : *"We consider this measure as pernicious to the existence of our country and as favourable to our enemies. It is in contradiction with all our traditions and with our most important interests. If Antwerp considers itself with pride as the city having the strongest Flemish sentiments in the country, it is nevertheless to be, as a port and as an artistic center, one of the most powerful organs of Belgium as a whole. It does not yield to any other city in the realm, and this patriotism embraces in the same affection the Flemish and the Walloons. Blind is he who does not see that a*

people has other interests to safeguard than those which concern simply linguistic questions, however respectable those may be."

*** The project was put into execution and the functionaries affected were ready and prompt to act ; all the heads of departments, without exception, instantly resigned and refused to serve under the newly imposed conditions.

Baron von Bissing died April 18, 1917, and Baron von Falkenhausen, appointed to succeed him as Governor-General in Belgium, continued the work of dismemberment. On May 19, 1917, he issued an order to the Herr Dr. von Sandt, chief of the civil administration, to revoke his promise of January 4, 1915, and thus withdrew from the functionaries the right to resign. This was accordingly done, and the functionaries who had refused to continue after the separation of administration were arrested and most of them taken to Germany as prisoners, for having exercised a right that was not only assured them by The Hague Conventions, but had been expressly acknowledged by the German Government when they consented to continue at their posts, and had thereby formed a part of their contract of employment.

"*Revoking*" a promise was not much more of a novelty in Belgium than ignoring The Hague Conventions. The walls of Brussels had often

borne solemn proclamations "*revoking*" promises made to the population. Then, the promise of immunity having been "*revoked*", the directors, secretaries-general, chiefs of division and other functionaries who had resigned were arrested and dragged off to prison camps in Germany.

Cardinal Mercier, that noble and austere figure, the incarnation of the virtues of his race, the prelate who recalls the early fathers of the Church, added to the long list of heroic deeds he had so courageously performed by a letter to Baron von Falkenhausen in which he resolutely defended the right of these functionaries to resign, and protested against their deportation.

The Cardinal's letter concludes with a spirited and trenchant sentence :

"Excellency", he says, "heed those who know the Belgian people and their history ; no violence will ever overcome their patriotism."

The Cardinal sums up his countrymen in this defiant phrase. Their resistance to this attack on the political field has been instant and determined, as it was on the field of battle when, in 1914, the power that had sworn to protect the little State laid it waste with fire and sword. It is one more proof of the indomitable resistance of a brave people, inspiring to every lover of human liberty who realizes the significance of this war as the effort of autocracy, in its modern form of a military caste

with a camouflage of culture, to yoke its domination on the world.

Reading the Cardinal's various protests side by side with the von Bissing testament, one may behold in striking contrast the irreconcilable doctrines that oppose each other in this world-conflict. The two figures themselves are in bold opposition — the one, with no arms but those of culture, contending for democracy and justice, relying on the rule of reason ; the other, with a ruthless army at his command, striving to bring about the reign of brutal force, and relying on the theory that any deed is right if one has the power and the effrontery to commit it.

Somewhere toward the close of the von Bissing memoir there is a sentence in which is cited the advice of Machiavelli to the effect that when a prince would annex a province he must first dispose of the ruler of that province, even, if need be, by putting him to death.

General von Bissing is dead and history will deal with his rule in Belgium, and among the documents for the future historian to study none, perhaps, will be more interesting than this memoir, made public and vouched for by Herr Bacmeister, who thought thereby to render his friend an homage and his nation a patriotic service.

B. W.

Footnotes.

French translation : « *L'âme de la nation* » in WHITLOCK, Brand ; chapitre VI (1917) in ***La Belgique sous l'occupation allemande : mémoires du ministre d'Amérique à Bruxelles*** ; (Paris ; Berger-Levrault ; 1922) pages 432-437.

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

Letter of von Bissing to STRESEMANN (14 january 1917 ****) is on pages 467-468 of ***Archives du Conseil de Flandre (Raad van Vlaanderen)*** :

<http://www.idesetautres.be/upload/19170114%20VON%20BISSING%20STRESEMANN.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), especially 19170305, 19170312 and 19170316 :

<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***, especially 19170313 :

<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