

Through the Iron Bars eBook

Through the Iron Bars by Émile Cammaerts

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I.

The prison gates.

The English-speaking public is generally well informed concerning the part played in the war by the Belgian troops. The resistance of our small field army at Liege, before Antwerp, and on the Yser has been praised and is still being praised wherever the tale runs. This is easy enough to understand. The fact that those 100,000 men should have been able to hold so long in check the forces of the first military Empire in Europe, and that a great number of them, helped by new contingents of recruits and led by their young King, should still be fighting on their native soil, must appeal strongly to the imagination.

If it be told how the new Belgian army, reorganised and re-equipped after the terrible ordeal on the Yser, is at the present moment much stronger than at the beginning of the war, how it has been able lately to extend its front in Flanders, and how some of its units have rendered valuable help to the cause of the Allies in East Africa and even in Galicia, the story sounds like a fairy tale. There is, in the history of this unequal struggle, the true ring of legendary heroism; it seems an echo of the tale of David and Goliath, or of Jack the Giant Killer; it is full of the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, of independence and free will over fatalism and brute force, of Right over Might.

I feel confident that some day a poet will be able to sing this great epic in verses which shall answer to the swinging rhythm of battle and roll with the booming of a thousand guns. But, in the meantime, I should like to say a few words about a much humbler, a much simpler, a much more familiar subject. It awakes no classical remembrances of Leonidas or Marathon. My heroes risk their lives, but they are not soldiers, merely prosaic "bourgeois" and workmen. They have no weapon, they cannot fight. They have only to remain cheery in adversity and patient in the face of taunts. They cannot render blow for blow, they have no sword to flourish against an insolent conqueror. They can only oppose a stout heart, a loyal spirit, and an ironic smile to the persecutions to which they are subjected. They can do nothing—they must do nothing—only hope and wait. But there are as much heroism and beauty in their black frock-coats and their soiled workmen's smocks as in the gayest and most glittering uniforms.

It is the plain matter-of-fact story of Belgian life under German rule. Many more people will be tempted to praise the glory of our soldiers. But, if the incidents of conquered Belgium's life are not recorded in good time, they might escape notice. People might forget that, besides the 150,000 to 200,000 heroes who are now waging war for Belgium on the Western front, there are 7,500,000 heroes who are suffering for Belgium behind the German lines, in the close prison of guarded frontiers, cut off from the whole world, separated alike from those who are fighting for their deliverance and from those who have sought refuge abroad.

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These are the people whom America, England, Spain, and many generous people in other allied and neutral countries have tried to save from material starvation. If I could only show to my readers how they are saving themselves from despair, from spiritual starvation, I should be well repaid for my trouble, for, among all the wonders of this war, which has displayed mankind as at once so much worse and so much better than we thought, there is perhaps nothing more surprising than the way in which the Belgian people have kept their spirits up.

One can, to a certain extent, understand the bright courage and the grim humour of the fighting soldier; he has the excitement of battle to sustain him through danger and suffering. But that an unarmed population, which, having witnessed the martyrdom of many peaceful towns, is threatened with utter destruction, which, ruined by war contributions and requisitions, is on the brink of starvation, which, persecuted by spies and subjected constantly to the most severe individual and collective punishments on the slightest pretext, is obliged to refrain from any manifestation of patriotic sentiments—that such a population, completely cut off from its Government and from most of its political leaders, and, moreover, poisoned every day by news concocted by the enemy, should remain unshakable in its courage and loyalty and should still be able to laugh at the efforts made by its masters to bring it into submission, is truly one of the most amazing spectacles which we have witnessed since the war broke out. General von Bissing has declared that the Belgians are an enigma to him. No wonder. They are an enigma to themselves. I am not going to explain the miracle. I will only attempt to show how inexplicable, how miraculous, it is.

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The German occupation of Belgium may be roughly divided into two periods: Before the fall of Antwerp, when the hope of prompt deliverance was still vivid in every heart, and when the German policy, in spite of its frightfulness, had not yet assumed its most ruthless and systematic character; and, after the fall of the great fortress, when the yoke of the conqueror weighed more heavily on the vanquished shoulders, and when the Belgian population, grim and resolute, began to struggle to preserve its honour and loyalty and to resist the ever increasing pressure of the enemy to bring it into complete submission and to use it as a tool against its own army and its own King.

I am only concerned here with the second period. The story of the German atrocities committed in some parts of the country at the beginning of the occupation is too well known to require any further comment. Every honest man, in Allied and neutral countries, has made up his mind on the subject. No unprejudiced person can hesitate between the evidence brought forward by the Belgian Commission of Enquiry and the vague denials, paltry excuses and insolent calumnies opposed

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to it by the German Government and the Pro-German Press. Besides, in a way, the atrocities committed during the last days of August, 1914, ought not to be considered as the culminating point of Belgium's martyrdom. They have, of course, appealed to the imagination of the masses, they have filled the world with horror and indignation, but they did not extend all over the country, as the present oppression does; they only affected a few thousand men and women, instead of involving hundreds of thousands. They were clean wounds wrought by iron and fire, sudden, brutal blows struck at the heart of the country, wounds and blows from which it is possible to recover quickly, from which reaction is possible, which do not affect the soul and honour of a people. The military executioners of 1914 were compassionate when compared to the civilian administrators who succeeded them. The pen may be more cruel than the sword. Considered in the light of the recent deportations, the first days of frightfulness seem almost merciful.

Observers have found no words strong enough to praise the attitude of the Belgian people when victory seemed close at hand, when news was still allowed to reach them. What should be said now after the twenty-seven months for which they have been completely isolated from the rest of the world? The ruthless methods of the German army of invasion which deliberately massacred 5,000 unarmed civilians and sacked six or seven towns and many more villages has been vehemently condemned. What is to be the verdict now that they have succeeded, after two years of efforts, in sacking the whole country, ruining her industry and commerce, throwing out of employment her best workmen and leading into slavery tens of thousands of her staunchest patriots? The horrors of Louvain and Dinant were compared, with some reason, to the excesses of the Thirty Years War, but modern history offers no other instance of forced labour and wholesale deportations. If, fifty years ago, the conscience of the world revolted against black slavery, what should its feelings be today when it is confronted with this new and most appalling form of white slavery? We should in vain ransack the chronicles of history to find, even in ancient times, crimes similar to this one. For the Jews were at war with Babylon, the Gauls were at war with Rome. Belgium did not wage war against Germany. She merely refused to betray her honour.

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Let us watch, then, the closing of the prison gates. Up to the beginning of October, the Belgians, and specially the people of Brussels, had been kept in a state of suspense by the three sorties of the Belgian army, which left the shelter of the Antwerp forts to advance towards Vilvorde and Louvain, a few miles from the capital. At the beginning of September, the sound of guns came so close that the people rejoiced openly, thinking that deliverance was at their gates. To sober their spirit—or to exasperate

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their patience?—the Governor General ordered that a few Belgian prisoners, some of them wounded, with their quickfiring gun drawn by a dog, should be marched through the crowded streets. The men were covered with dust, their heads wrapped in blood-stained bandages, and they kept their eyes on the ground as if ashamed. Some women sobbed on seeing them, others cursed their guards, others plundered a flower shop and showered flowers upon them. At last two stalwart workmen shouldered away the escort, and, helped by the crowd, which paralysed the movements of the Germans, succeeded in kidnapping the prisoners, and getting them away to the neighbouring streets. They could never be discovered, and it was the last display of the kind which the Governor gave to Brussels.

During the siege, people had learnt to recognize the voice of every fort of Antwerp. They said to each other: “That is Lizele, Wavre Ste. Catherine, Waelhem.” One after the other the Belgian guns were silenced, first Wavre, then Waelhem ... and the vibrating boom of the German heavies was heard louder than ever. The listening Bruxellois grew paler, straining every nerve to catch the voice of Antwerp. It was as if their own life as a nation was slowly dying away, as if they were mourning their own agony. But still the valiant spirit of the first days prevailed. “They will be beaten for all that. What was Antwerp compared with the Marne? All forts must fall under ‘their’ artillery. After all, the nest is empty; the King and the army are safe.”

Since those days a kind of reckless indifference has seized the Belgians. If we must lose everything to gain everything, let us lose it. The sooner the better. It is the spirit of a poor man burning his furniture in order to shelter his children from cold, or of a Saint suffering every physical privation in order to gain the Kingdom of Heaven. It is an uncanny spirit composed of wild energy and bitter-sweet irony. “First Liege, then Brussels, then Namur, now Antwerp. The King has gone, the Government has gone. If all Belgium has to go, let it go. It is the price we have to pay. The victory of our soul shall be all the greater if our body is shattered and tortured.”

Henceforth, the voice of Belgium reaches us only from time to time. Its sound is muffled by the enemy’s strangle-hold, which grows tighter and tighter. Before the fall of Antwerp, the German administration of General von der Goltz had merely a temporary character. We knew that most of the high officials were stopping in Brussels on their way to Paris. On the other hand, any skilful move of the Allies, any successful sortie from Antwerp, might have jeopardized all the conqueror’s plans and necessitated an immediate retreat. The Yser-Ypres struggle barred the way to Brussels as well as to Calais. The Germans knew now that they were safe, at least for a good many months, and began systematically to “organize the country.” All communications with the uninterrupted part of Belgium were interrupted. It became more and more difficult and dangerous to cross the Dutch frontier without a special permit. The economic and moral pressure increased steadily, and the conflict between conquerors and patriots

began, a conflict unrelieved by dramatic interest or excitement from outside, which carried the country back to the worst days of Austrian and Spanish domination.

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II.

The lowered flag.

The contrast which I have endeavoured to indicate, in the first chapter, between the attitude of the German administration before the fall of Antwerp and its behaviour afterwards is nowhere so well marked as in the measures taken for the purpose of repressing all Belgian manifestations of patriotism.

During the two first months of occupation, the Germans made at least a show of respecting the loyal feelings of the population. In his first proclamation, dated September 2nd, in which he announced his appointment as General Governor of Belgium, Baron von der Goltz declared that "he asked no one to renounce his patriotic feelings." And when, a few days later, the Governor of Brussels, Baron von Luttwitz, issued a poster "advising" the citizens to take their flags from their windows, he did this in conciliatory words, giving the pretext that these manifestations might provoke reprisals from the German troops passing through the town: "The Military Governor does not intend in the least to hurt, by such a measure, the feelings and self-respect of the inhabitants. His only aim is to protect them against all harm." (September 16th.) Every Belgian was still wearing the national colours, pictures of the King and Queen were sold in the streets, and the Brabanconne was hummed, whistled, and sung all over the country. The people had lost every right but one: they could still show the enemy, in spite of the declarations of the German Press, that they were not yet ready to accept his rule.

This apparent tolerance is easy to explain. After the massacres of August, the German authorities were anxious not to exasperate public opinion, and not to spoil by uselessly vexatious measures the effect which had been produced. During the Marne and the three sorties of the Belgian army, they had only a very small number of men at their disposal to garrison the largest towns. The slightest progress of the Belgian army might have endangered their line of communications. We know now that the withdrawal of the seat of the government from Brussels to Liege was at one moment seriously contemplated, and that the same troops were made to pass again and again through the streets of the capital in order to give the illusion that the garrison was stronger than it really was (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, August 22nd, 1916). Besides, Germany had not yet given up all hopes of coming to terms with King Albert, since a third attempt was to be made at Antwerp to separate the Belgian Government from the Allies. In these circumstances it seemed wiser to let the Belgian folk indulge in their harmless manifestations of loyalty, so long as they did not cause any disturbance and did not complicate the task of the military.

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Let us look now at the next phase. As soon as the Belgian army has achieved its junction with the Allies on the Yser and all communications are cut between the Government and the people, the Germans cease to consider Belgium as an occupied territory, and seize upon every pretext to treat her as a conquered country, which will, sooner or later, become part of the Empire. They no longer take the trouble to explain or justify their oppressive measures, or to reconcile them with their former promises. They simply ignore them. First in Namur (November the 15th, 1914), then in Brussels (June the 30th, 1915), it becomes a crime to wear the tricolour cockade. The Te Deum, which is celebrated every year, on November 15th, in honour of King Albert's Saint's day, is forbidden. From the month of March, 1915, it is practically a forbidden thing to sing the Brabanconne, even in the schools. All patriotic manifestations, on the occasion of the King's Birthday (April 8th) and of the anniversary of Belgian Independence day (July 21st) are severely prosecuted.

In some of the orders issued there is still a weak attempt at "respecting," in a German way, "the people's patriotic feelings." The Governor of Namur, for instance, discriminates with the acutest subtlety between wearing the national colours in private and in public, and the Brabanconne can for a time be sung, so long as it is not rendered "in a provoking manner." In fact, the Belgians are free to manifest their patriotism so long as they are neither seen nor heard. They are generously allowed to line their cupboards with tricolour paper and to hum their national tunes in the depth of their cellars. But, in most of the orders made under Governor von Bissing's rule (his reign began on December 3rd, 1914), this last pretence of consideration and respect disappears entirely. "I warn the public," declares the Governor of Brussels on July the 18th, 1914, "that any demonstration whatsoever is forbidden on July 21st next."

More than that, the German Administration frequently goes out of its way to hurt the people's feelings. The fact of helping a patriot to join the Army is not merely punished as a crime against the Germans, it is delicately called "a crime of treason," and when people are condemned because they are suspected of belonging to the Belgian intelligence service, the public posters announcing their condemnation speak of them as supplying information "to the enemy."

The sham tolerance of the first days has given way to a restless repression, and even, during the last year, to deliberate persecution. Schools may be inspected at any time by the authorities and every "anti-German manifestation" (that is to say, any pro-Belgian teaching) is severely punished. Shops are raided so that every patriotic picture post-card (especially the portraits of the Royal Family) may be seized, and even the intimacy of the private home is not respected. To begin with, the Belgians have been allowed to show their loyalty—with discretion; next, every patriotic manifestation is excluded from public life; and last, the Germans, through their spies, penetrate the homes of every citizen, and endeavour to extirpate by a reign of terror these same feelings which they so emphatically promised to respect.

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People who are leading a quiet life and who enjoy the blessings of an autonomous Government will perhaps not appreciate the importance which the Belgians attach, at the present moment, to these patriotic manifestations. They may imagine that, so long as national life is assured and citizens are otherwise left alone by their conquerors, public affirmation of loyalty to King and country is of secondary importance.

God knows that the economic situation of occupied Belgium is bad enough, and the endless and tragic lists of condemnations and deportations are there to prove that her people are living under the most barbarous regime of modern times. But, even if this was not the case, anybody with the slightest knowledge of their national character would understand the extraordinary value which the Belgians attached to their last privilege and the deep indignation roused by this German betrayal.

Von Bissing shrugs his shoulders and calls them “big children.” So they are. And his son, with a scornful smile, declares in the *Suddeutsche Monatschrift* (April 15th, 1915) that it is in “the people’s blood to demonstrate and to wear cockades.” So it is. The love of processions and public pageants of all kinds is deeply rooted in Belgian traditions. But what does it prove? Simply that the people have preserved enough freshness and joy of life to care for these things, enough courage and independence to feel most need of them when they are most afflicted. This is how they think of it: “Our bands used to pass through the streets, shaking our window-panes with the crashing of their trombones, our flags used to wave in the breeze—in the happy days of peace. Should we now remain, silent and withdrawn, in the selfish privacy of our houses, now that the country needs us most, now that we want, more than ever, to feel that we are one people and that we will remain independent and united whatever happens in the future?” Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Bissing sneers at the Belgians because on any and every pretext they display the American colours. If they do, it is because they are not allowed to display their own, and because they feel somehow that the best way to show that they have still a flag is to adopt the colours of the great country which has so generously come to their help. It may well be, as the Baron informs us, that most of the “small and big children” who wear the Stars and Stripes do not know a word of English. What does it mean again? Simply that heart may call to heart and that it is not necessary to talk in his own language to understand a brother’s mind. It is true that only children—children small and big—know how to do it.

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If the Germans had had the least touch of generous feeling for the unfortunate country upon which they thrust war in spite of the most solemn treaties, they would not have obliged the Belgian citizens to lower the flags which they had put up during the defence of Liege, they would not have torn their tricolour cockades from their buttonholes, they would not have silenced their national songs, they would not have added these deep humiliations to the bitter cup of defeat. One wonders even why they did it if it was not for the mere pleasure which the bully is supposed to feel when he makes his strength felt by his victim. They might have gone on gaily plundering the country, shooting patriots, deporting young men, doing whatever seemed useful in their eyes. But the petty tyranny of these measures passes understanding. Governor von Bissing is certainly too clever to believe that the satisfaction of making a few cowards uneasy by such regulations can at all outweigh the danger inherent in the resentment and the deep hatred which the bullying has aroused against Germany. You may take the children's bread, you may take their freedom, but you might at least leave them a few toys to play with, and you would be wise to do so.

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Such narrow-minded tyranny always defeats its own objects. Burgomaster Max's proud answer to General von Luttwitz's "advice" to remove the flags became the password of the patriots. Every Bruxellois henceforth "waited for the hour of reparation." A great number of women went to prison rather than remove the emblems of Belgium which they wore. Stories passed from lip to lip. Their accuracy I would not guarantee, but they belong to the epic of the war and are true to the spirit of the people. A young lady, who was jeered at by a German officer because she was wearing King Albert's portrait, is said to have answered his "Lackland" with, "I would rather have a King who has lost his country than an Emperor who has lost his honour." Another lady, sitting in a tram-car opposite a German officer, was ordered by him to remove her tricolour rosette. She refused to do so, and, as he threatened her, defied him to do it himself. The Boche seized the rosette and pulled .. and pulled .. and pulled. The lady had concealed twenty yards of ribbon in her corsage.

When the tricolour was forbidden altogether, it was replaced by the ivyleaf, ivy being the emblem of faithfulness; later, the ivyleaf was followed by a green ribbon, green being the colour of hope. The Brabanconne being excluded from the street and from the school took refuge in the Churches, where it is played and often sung by the congregation at the end of the service. There are many ways of getting round the law. The Belgians were forbidden to celebrate in any ordinary way the anniversary of their independence. Thanks to a sort of tacit arrangement they succeeded in marking the occasion in spite of all regulations. On

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July 21st, 1915, the Bruxellois kept the shutters of their houses and shops closed and went out in the streets dressed in their best clothes, most of them in mourning. The next year, as the closing of shops was this time foreseen by the administration, they remained open. But a great number of tradespeople managed ingeniously to display the national colours in their windows—by the juxtaposition, for instance, of yellow lemons, red tomatoes and black grapes. Others emptied their windows altogether.

These jokes may seem childish, at first sight, but when we think that those who dared perform them paid for it with several months' imprisonment or several thousand marks, and paid cheerily, we understand that there is more in them than a schoolboy's pranks. It seems as if the Belgian spirit would break if it ceased to be able to react. One of the shop-managers who was most heavily fined on the occasion of our last "Independence Day" declared that he had not lost his money: "It is rather expensive, but it is worth it."

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If patriotism has become a religion in Belgium, this religion has found a priest whose authority is recognised by the last unbeliever. If every church has become the "*Temple de la Patrie*," if the Brabanconne resounds under the Gothic arches of every nave, Cardinal Mercier has become the good shepherd who has taken charge of the flock during the King's absence. The great Brotherhood, for which so many Christian souls are yearning, in which there are no more classes, parties, and sects, seems well nigh achieved beyond the electrified barbed wire of the Belgian frontier. Are not all Belgians threatened with the same danger, are they not close-knit by the same hope, the same love, the same hatred?

When the bells rang from the towers of Brussels Cathedral on July 21st last, when, in his red robes, Cardinal Mercier blessed the people assembled to celebrate the day of Belgium's Independence, it seemed that the soul of the martyred nation hovered in the Church. After the national anthem, people lifted their eyes towards the great crucifix in the choir, and could no longer distinguish, through their tears, the image of the Crucified from that of their bleeding country.

III.

The poisoned wells.

We must never forget, when we speak of the moral resistance of the Belgian people, that they have been completely isolated from their friends abroad for more than two years and that meanwhile they have been exposed to all the systematic and skilful

manoeuvres of German propaganda. Not only are they without news from abroad, but all the news they receive is calculated to spread discouragement and distrust.

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How true lovers could resist a long separation and the most wicked calumnies without losing faith in one another has been the theme of many a story. From the story-writer's point of view, the true narrative of the German occupation of Belgium is much more romantic than any romance, much more wonderful than any poem. The mass is not supposed to show the same constancy as the individual, and one does not expect from a whole people the ideal loyalty of Desdemona and Imogen. Besides, we do not want the reader to imagine that, before the war, the Belgians were ideally in love with one another. Like the English, the Americans and the French, we had our differences. It is one of the unavoidable drawbacks of Democracy that politics should exaggerate the importance of dissensions. Therefore it is all the more remarkable that the sudden friendship which sprang up between classes, parties and races in Belgium, on the eve of August 4th, should so long have defied the untiring efforts of the enemy and should remain as unshakeable to-day as it was at the beginning.

We do not wonder that the German intellectuals who have undertaken to break down Belgian unity are at a loss to explain their failure. Scientifically it defies every explanation. Here was a people apparently deeply divided against itself, Socialists opposed Liberals, Liberals opposed Catholics, Flemings opposed Walloons; theoretical differences degenerated frequently into personal quarrels; political antagonism was embittered by questions of religion and language. Surely this was ideal ground in which to sow the seed of discord, when the Government had been obliged to seek refuge in a foreign country and a great number of prominent citizens had emigrated abroad. The German propagandist, who had been able to work wonders in some neutral countries, must have thought the task almost unworthy of his efforts. Every one of his theoretical calculations was correct. He only forgot one small detail which a closer study of history might have taught him. He forgot that, in face of the common danger, all these differences would lose their hold on the people's soul, that the former bitterness of their quarrels was nothing compared with the sacred love of their country which they shared.

* * * * *

The first action of the German administration after the triumphal entry into Brussels was to try to isolate the occupied part of the country, in order to monopolize the news. Rather than submit to a German censor, all the Belgian papers—with the exception of two small provincial journals—had ceased to appear. During a fortnight, Brussels remained without authorized news. From that time, the authorities allowed the sale of some German and Dutch dailies and of a few newspapers published in Belgium under German control. The Government itself issued the *Deutsche Soldatenpost* and *Le Reveil* (in French) and a great number of posters, "*Communications officielles du Commandant de l'Armée allemande*," which were supposed to contain the latest war-news.

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To this imposing array, the patriots could only oppose a few pamphlets issued by the editor Bryan Hill, soon prohibited, and copies of Belgian, French and English papers, which were smuggled at great risk, and consequently were very expensive. Still, before the fall of Antwerp, it was practically impossible for the Germans to stop private letters and newspapers passing from the unoccupied to the occupied part of the country. Besides, they had more important business on hand. Here again, it was only after the second month of occupation that the pressure increased. During October and November, several people were condemned to heavy fines and to periods of imprisonment for circulating written and even verbal news. The Dutch frontier was closed, wherever no natural obstacle intervened, by a continuous line of barbed wire and electrified wire. Passports were only granted to the few people engaged in the work of relief and to those who could prove that it was essential to the interests of their business that they should leave the country for a time. The postal service being reorganized under German control, any other method of communication was severely prosecuted. At the end of 1914, several messengers lost their lives in attempting to cross the Dutch frontier. Under such conditions it is easy to understand that, in spite of the efforts made by the anonymous editors of two or three prohibited papers, such as *La Libre Belgique*, the bulk of the population was practically cut off from the rest of the world and was compelled to read, if they read at all, the pro-German papers and the German posters. The only wells left from which the people could drink were poisoned.

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The German Press Bureau in Brussels, openly recognised by the administration and formerly the headquarters of Baron von Bissing's son, set to work in three principal directions. It aimed at separating the Belgians from the Allies, then at separating the people from King Albert and his Government, and finally at reviving the old language quarrel between Walloons and Flemings.

The campaign against the Allies, though still carried on whenever the opportunity arises, was specially violent at the beginning, when the Germans had not yet given up all hope of detaching King Albert from the Alliance (August-September, 1914). It was perhaps the most dangerous line of attack because it did not imply any breach of patriotism. On the contrary it suggested that Belgium had been duped by the Allies, and especially by England, who had never meant to come to her help and who had used her as a catspaw, leaving her to bear all the brunt of the German assault in an unequal and heroic struggle. It was accompanied by a constant flow of war news exaggerating the German successes and suggesting that, even if they ever had the intention of delivering Belgium, the Allies would no longer be in a position to do so.

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According to the first war-news poster issued in Brussels, a few days after the enemy had entered the town, the French official papers had declared that “The French armies, being thrown on the defensive, would not be able to help Belgium in an offensive movement.” I need not recall how, his name having been used at Liege to bolster up this false report, M. Max, the burgomaster of Brussels, found an opportunity of contradicting it publicly and, at the same time, of discrediting all censored news.

The effect was amazing. Henceforth the official posters were not only regularly regarded as a tissue of lies, but definitely ridiculed. The people either ignored them or paid them an exaggerated attention. In some popular quarters, urchins climbed on ladders to read them aloud to a jeering crowd. The influence of M. Max’s attitude was such that, eighteen months later, several people coming from the capital declared that, as far as war news was concerned, Brussels was far more optimistic than London or Paris, every check received by the Allied armies being systematically ignored and every success exaggerated.

When one reads through the series of German “*Communications*” pasted on the walls of the capital during the first year of the occupation, one wonders how they did not succeed in discouraging the population. For, in spite of some extraordinary blunders—such as the announcement that a German squadron had captured fifteen English fishing boats (September 8th, 1914), that the Serbs had taken Semlin because they had nothing more to eat in Serbia (September 13th, 1914), or that the British army was so badly equipped that the soldiers lacked boot-laces and writing paper (October 6th, 1914)—the author of these proclamations succeeded so skilfully in mixing truth and untruth and in drawing the attention of the public away from any reverse suffered by the Central Empires, that the effect of the campaign might have been most demoralizing.

After this first reverse, the Germans only attacked the Allies in order to throw on their shoulders the responsibility for the woes which they themselves were inflicting on their victims. When some English aeroplanes visited Brussels, on September 26th, 1915, a few people were killed and many more wounded. The German press declared immediately that this was due to the want of skill of the airmen, who dropped the bombs indiscriminately over the town. We possess now material proof that the people were killed, not by bombs dropped from the air, but by fragments of shells fired from guns. This can only be explained in one way. The German gunners must have timed their shells so that they should not burst in the air, but only when falling on the ground. This method of propaganda may cost a few lives, but it is certainly clever. It might well be calculated to stir indignation in the hearts of the people against the Allies and at the same time to serve as a warning to enemy headquarters to the effect: “Whenever you send your aeroplanes over Belgian towns, we are going to make the population pay for it.”

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The same kind of argument is used at the present moment with regard to the wholesale deportations which are going on in Belgium. To justify his slave-raids, Governor von Bissing denounces England's blockade. It is the economic policy of England—not German requisitions—which has ruined Belgium and caused unemployment: "If there are any objections to be made about this state of affairs you must address them to England, who, through her policy of isolation, has rendered the coercive measures necessary." [1] But the argument is used more for the sake of discussion than in the real hope of convincing the public. General von Bissing can have very few illusions left as to the state of mind of the Belgian population. He knows that every Belgian worker, would answer, with the members of the *Commission Syndicale*: "All the Allies have agreed to let some raw material necessary to our industry enter Belgium, under the condition, naturally, that no requisitions should be made by the occupying power, and that a neutral commission should control the destination of the manufactured articles." [2] Or, more emphatically still, with Cardinal Mercier: "England generously allows some foodstuffs to enter Belgium under the control of neutral countries ... She would certainly allow raw materials to enter the country under the same control, if Germany would only pledge herself to leave them to us and not to seize the manufactured products of our industry."

Such arguments are extraordinarily characteristic of the German mind, as it has been developed by the war: "Let Belgium know that she is suffering for England's sake. Let England know that, as long as she enforces her blockade, her friends in Belgium will have to pay for it." It is the same kind of double-edged declaration as that used on the occasion of the Allied air-raid on Brussels. Literally speaking, it cuts both ways. The excuse becomes a threat and the untruth savours of blackmail. Healthy minds work by single or treble propositions. If we did not remember that our aim is to analyse the beautiful and heroic side of the occupation of Belgium, rather than to dwell on its most sinister aspects, we should recognize, in this last manoeuvre, the lowest example of human brutality and hypocrisy, the double mark of the German hoof.

[Footnote 1: Answer of Governor von Bissing to Cardinal Mercier's letter, Oct. 26th, 1916.]

[Footnote 2: Letter of the "*Commission Syndicale*" to Baron von Bissing, Nov. 14th, 1916.]

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In spite of the most authentic documents, of the most glaring material proofs, it might be difficult to realise that the human spirit may fall so low. It seems as if we were diminishing ourselves when we accuse our enemies. We have lived so long in the faith that "such things are impossible" that, now that they happen almost at our door, we should be inclined to doubt our eyes rather than to doubt the innate goodness of man.

Never did I feel this more strongly than when I saw, for the first time, a caricature of King Albert reproduced from a German newspaper.

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Surely if one man, one leader, has come out of this severe trial unstained, with his virtue untarnished, it is indeed Albert the First, King of the Belgians. His simple and loyal attitude in face of the German ultimatum, the indomitable courage which he showed during the Belgian campaign, his dignity, his reserve, his almost exaggerated modesty, ought to have won for him, besides the deep admiration of the Allies and of the neutral world, the respect and esteem even of his worst enemy. There is a man of few words and noble actions, fulfilling his pledges to the last article, faithful to his word even in the presence of death, a leader sharing the work of his soldiers, a King living the life of a poor man. When in Paris, in London, triumphal receptions were awaiting them, he and his noble and devoted Queen remained at their post, on the last stretch of Belgian territory, in the rough surroundings of army quarters.

The whole world has noted this. People who have no sympathy to spare for the Allies' cause have been obliged to bow before this young hero, more noble in his defeat than all the conquerors of Europe in their victory. But the Germans have not felt it. Not only did they try to ridicule King Albert in their comic papers. Even the son of Governor von Bissing did not hesitate to fling in his face the generous epithet, "Lackland." [3] As soon as the last attempt to conciliate the King had failed the German press in Belgium began a most violent and abusive campaign against him. The *Duesseldorfer General-Anzeiger* published a venomous article, in which he was represented as personally responsible for "the plot of the Allies against Germany and for the crimes of the franc-tireurs." He was stigmatised as "the slave of England," and it was asserted that "If he did not grasp the hand stretched out to him by the Kaiser on August 2nd and the 9th it is only because he did not dare to do so" (October 10th, 1914). He was said to have "betrayed his army at Antwerp. Had he not sworn not to leave the town alive?" And *Le Reveil*, another paper circulated in Belgium by German propagandists, announced solemnly that, once on the Yser, the King wanted to sign a separate peace with Germany, but England had forbidden him to do so. The *Hamburger Nachrichten*, the *Vossische Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung* repeated without scruple this tissue of gross calumnies. The *Deutsche Soldatenpost*, edited specially for the German soldiers in Belgium, went even a step further and violently reproached the Queen of the Belgians for not having protested against the cruelties inflicted on German civilians in Brussels and Antwerp, at the outbreak of the hostilities!

[Footnote 3: *Suddeutsche Monatshefte*, April 1915.]

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Not being able to stir the people against the Allies or against their own Government, the German Press Bureau attempted to revive the language quarrel and to provoke internal dissensions. It is interesting to notice that the new campaign, whose crowning episode was the opening of the German University at Ghent, in October last, began two months after the surrender of Brussels and did not develop until the spring of 1915, when an important minority of Germans began to realise that it would be impossible to retain Belgium, and when a greater number still only hoped to keep Antwerp and Flanders, thanks to the "social and linguistic affinities of Flemings and Germans."

That is how Germany, who had never troubled much before about the Flemish movement and Flemish literature, suddenly discovered a great affection for her Flemish brothers who had so long been exposed to "the insults of the Walloons"; how she suddenly espoused their grievances and put into effect, in spite of their strong protests, some reforms inscribed on the programme; how she tried by every means at her disposal to conciliate Flemish sympathies and to stir up antagonism and jealousies by treating Flemings and Walloons differently, whether prisoners in Germany or in occupied Belgium.

The German train of thought is clear enough: "If we are unable to hold Belgium, any pro-German demonstrations in the Northern provinces may suggest the idea that it is the wish of the Flemings to be bound to the Empire and give a pretext for the annexation of Antwerp and Flanders. If even that is impossible and if we are obliged to give back his Kingdom to King Albert, we shall have sown so many germs of discontent in the country that it will be impossible for the Government to restore Belgium in her full unity and power. She will never become against us the strong bulwark of the Allies."

All this Walloon-Flemish agitation started by Germany belongs to a vast plan of mismanagement. The day Germany knew that she would not be able to keep her conquest she deliberately set herself to ruin Belgium economically and morally. She succeeded economically, for nobody could prevent her from requisitioning whatever she wanted. She failed morally because the people understood her purpose and because the Flemish leaders proudly refused the German gifts. The reform of Ghent University was made in spite of them. It was made with the help of a few Germans, German-Dutch and Belgians without any reputation or following. The professors have been bought and the students (they only number eighty) have been mostly recruited among the Flemish prisoners in Germany and among a few young men threatened with deportation. They are obliged to wear a special cap and are under the ban of the whole population. No true "Gantois" passes them in the street without whispering, "*Vive l'Armée.*" This is the pitiful medley of cranks, traitors and unwilling students which General von Bissing is pleased to call a "University."

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In his inaugural speech, the Governor exclaimed, "The God of War, with his drawn sword, has held the new institution at the font. May the God of Peace be gracious to her for long years to come." The Germans' lack of humour surpasses even their ruthlessness. With one hand General von Bissing was baptizing the baby—rather a difficult operation—with the other he brandished his fiery sword over the heads of all the true Flemings who refused to adopt it. Many of them paid for this patriotic attitude by losing their liberty. With one hand Germany inflicted this unwelcome gift on the Flemings, with the other she banished M.M. Pirenne, Fredericq and Verhaegen from the sacred precincts of Flemish culture!

Most solemnly, on different occasions, all the prominent Flemish leaders have protested against the German Administration's action. They have declared that it was illegal and unjust. Governor von Bissing reminds them that, according to De Raet's words, "Two heroic spirits dominate the world: The Mind and the Sword." They may possess the first but he holds the second.

IV.

THE SACKING OF BELGIUM.

There is one idea which dominates the Belgian tragedy: "The body may be conquered, the soul remains free." These words were uttered for the first time, I believe, by the Belgian Premier, Baron de Broqueville, in the solemn sitting of the House, when the German violation of Belgian neutrality was announced to the representatives of the people. The idea is supposed to have been expressed by King Albert, in another form, before the evacuation of Antwerp. It was used to great effect in one of the most popular cartoons published by *Punch*, in which the Kaiser says to the King, with a sneer, "You have lost everything," and the King replies, "Not my soul." It is so intimately associated with the Belgian cause that the image of the stricken country is scarcely ever evoked without an allusion being made to it.

We have seen, in the course of the earlier chapters, how Belgium succeeded in preserving her loyalty and patriotism in spite of the most ruthless oppression and the most cunning calumnies. We must now look at the darker side of the picture and see how she has not succeeded in preserving either her prosperity, or even her supply of daily bread.

We shall soon be confronted with the most tragic aspect of her Calvary. So long as her armies were fighting the invader, so long as her towns and countryside were ruined by German frightfulness, so long as her martyrs, men, women and children, were falling side by side in the market-place before the firing party, so long as every symbol, every word of patriotism was forbidden her, Belgium could remain vanquished but unconquered, bleeding but unshakeable. She enjoyed, in the face of her oppressors, all



the privileges of the Christian martyrs of the first centuries; she could smile on the rack, laugh under the whip and sing in the flames. She remained free in her prison, free to respect Justice, in the midst of injustice, to treasure Righteousness, in spite of falsehood, to worship her Saints, in the face of calumny. She was still able to resist, to oppose, every day and at every turn, her patience to the enemy's threats and her cheerfulness to his ominous scowl. She had a clear conscience and her hands were clean.

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There is one thing that can be said for the Roman emperors, they seldom starved their victims to death. Popular imagination revels in their cruelty, and the *Golden Legend* displays to us all the grim splendours of a chamber of horrors. But the worst of all tortures—starvation—is not often inflicted. The idea is, I suppose, that the conversion must be sudden and striking. But Belgium's oppressors do not any longer want to convert her. They have tried and they have failed. They merely want to take all the food, all the raw materials, all the machines and—last but not least—all the labour they can out of her. Their fight is not the fight of one religion against another. It is the fight of material power against any philosophy, any religion which stands between it and the things which it covets. The Germans do not sacrifice Belgium to their gods. Such an ideal course is far from their thoughts. They sacrifice Belgium to Germany—that is, to themselves. It matters very little whether a slave is able to speak or to think, as long as he is able to work.

Here again, in spite of the wholesale plundering of the first days of occupation, and of the enormous fines imposed on towns and provinces, I do not suppose that the German plan was deliberately to ruin the country. It might even have been to develop its resources, as long as there was some hope of annexing it, though this benevolent spirit had scarcely any time to manifest itself. After the Marne and the Yser, however, when it became evident that anyhow the whole of Belgium could never be retained, and when the attitude of the people showed clearly that they would always remain hostile to their new masters, the systematic sacking of the country began without any thought for the consequences.

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The best way of coming to some appreciation of the work accomplished during these two years is to remember that, before the war, Belgium was the richest country in Europe in proportion to her size. Relatively she had the greatest commercial activity, the richest agricultural production, and she was more thickly populated than any other State, with the exception of Saxony. Nowhere were the imports and exports so important, in proportion to the number of the population, nowhere did the average square mile yield such rich crops, nowhere was the railway system so developed. Pauperism was practically unknown, and, even in the large towns, the number of people dependent on public charity was comparatively very small. To this picture of unequalled prosperity oppose the present situation: Part of the countryside left without culture for want of manure and horses; scarcely any cattle left in the fields; commerce paralysed by the stoppage of railway and other communications; industry at a complete standstill, with 500,000 men thrown out of work and nearly half of the population which remained in Belgium (3,500,000) on the verge of starvation and entirely dependent for their subsistence on the work of the Commission for Relief.

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It is said that the tree must be judged by its fruit. Such then is the fruit of the German administration of Belgium. When he arrived in Brussels, Governor von Bissing declared that he had come to dress Belgium's wounds. What would he have done if he had meant to aggravate them?

There is an insidious argument which must be met once and for ever. We have seen how Germany is trying to throw the responsibility for the misery prevailing in Belgium and for the present deportations on the English blockade, which paralyses the industry and prevents the introduction of raw materials. But, if this were the case, the situation ought not to be worse in Belgium than in Germany. On the contrary, thanks to the splendid work of the Commission for Relief, she ought to be far better off. How is it then that—according to General von Bissing's own declaration made to Mr. Julius Wertheimer, correspondent of the *Vossische Zeitung* (September the 1st, 1916)—how is it that “the average cost of life is much higher in Belgium than in Germany,” and that “a great number of inhabitants (tens of thousands of them) have not eaten a piece of meat for many weeks?”

This inequality between the social conditions in Germany and in Belgium, in spite of the advantages given to the latter by the introduction of food through the blockade with England's consent, can easily be explained: On the one hand, German industry has transformed itself, many factories which could not continue their ordinary work owing to the shortage of rawstuffs having been turned into war-factories in which there is still a great demand for labour. On the other hand, Germany has not been submitted to the same levies in money, and requisitions in foodstuffs and material; Germany has not been deprived, from the beginning, of all her reserve, she has not been depleted of all her stock.

We shall have to deal, in the next chapter, with the first question. Let us only consider the second here.

It is impossible to give more than a superficial glance at the matter. The particulars at hand are not complete and a full list of German exactions has not yet been drawn up. Let us, however, try to give an idea of the disproportion existing between the country's resources and the demands which were made on her.

On December 12th, 1914, a poster announced to the citizens of Brussels that the nine Belgian provinces would be obliged to pay, every month during the coming year, a sum of forty million francs, making a total of about 480 millions (over 19 million pounds). In order to understand the indignation caused by this announcement it is necessary to remember:

1st. That the Belgians were at the time already paying all the ordinary taxes, to the commune, to the province and to the State, so that this new contribution constituted a super-tax.

2nd. That all the direct taxes paid to the State, in ordinary times, amount scarcely to 75 millions, that is to say, to a sixth of this contribution.

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3rd. And that the new economic conditions imposed by the war had considerably reduced the income of the most wealthy citizens.

As the Germans persist in invoking the text of the Hague Convention of which they have again and again violated every clause, it may be useful to point out that, according to the 49th article, the occupying power is only allowed to raise war contributions "for the need of the army," that is to say, in order to pay in money the requisitions which he is obliged to make in order to supply the army of occupation with food, fodder, and so on. As, most of the time, the Germans only pay for what they requisition in "*bons de guerre*" payable after the war, and as, in spite of their sound appetite, we can scarcely believe that the few thousand "landsturmiers" who are garrisoning Belgium are eating two million pounds worth a month, the illegal character of the German measure seems evident. Besides, if any doubt were still possible, we should find it laid down in the 52nd article that any service required from the occupying power must be "in proportion to the country's resources."

As the announcement had provoked strong protests, Governor von Bissing announced a few days later that, if this contribution was paid, no further extraordinary taxes would be required and the requisitions would henceforth be paid for in money. Needless to say, none of these promises have been fulfilled, and the contribution of 480 millions was renewed at the beginning of 1915, and even increased to 600 millions lately, so that, from that source only, the Germans have raised in Belgium, after two years of occupation, a sum equal to one-fourth of the total State debt of the country on the eve of the war.

This is only one example among many. The communes did not enjoy better treatment. The reader will remember that during the period of invasion the enemy exacted various war-taxes from every town he entered: 20 millions from Liege, 50 millions from Brussels, 32 millions from Namur, 40 millions from Antwerp, and so on. Since then, he has never lost an opportunity of inflicting heavy fines even on the smallest villages. If one inhabitant succeeds in joining the army, if an allied aeroplane appears on the horizon, if, for some reason or other, the telegraph or the telephone wires are out of order, a shower of fines falls on the neighbouring towns and villages. In June last the total amount of these exactions was estimated, for 1916, at ten millions (L400,000). If we add to this the fines inflicted constantly, on the slightest pretext, on private individuals, we shall certainly remain below the mark in stating that Germany succeeds in getting out of Belgium over twenty million pounds a year. Twenty million pounds, when the ordinary income of the State amounts scarcely to seven millions! And I am not taking into account the money seized in the banks and the recent enforced transfer to Germany of the 600 millions (L24,000,000) of the National Bank.

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If we remember that the total value of commercial transactions in Belgium, before the war, did not exceed ten million francs (400,000 pounds) per year, we shall realise the absurdity of the German argument which shifts on to the English blockade the responsibility for Belgium's ruin. Even a complete stoppage of trade could not have done the country as much harm as the German exactions in money only. But the conquerors were not satisfied with fleecing the flock, they succeeded in robbing it of its food, in taking away its very means of life.

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Quite apart from any sentimental or moral reason, the last step was a grave mistake, even from the German point of view. It would certainly have paid the Germans better in the end if they had allowed the Allies to send raw material to feed the Belgian factories, under the control of neutral powers, and if they had not requisitioned the machines and paralysed industry by the most absurd restrictions. It would have been a most useful move from the point of view of propaganda, and, while posing as Belgium's kind protectors, they might always have reaped the benefit through fresh taxes and new contributions. If they have killed the goose rather than gather its golden eggs it is because they could not afford to wait. It was one of these desperate measures, like the violation of Belgian neutrality, the ruthless use of Zeppelins and the sinking of the *Lusitania*, which did them more harm than good. From the beginning Germany has fought with a bad conscience, prompted in all her actions more by the dread of being defeated than by the clear intention of winning the game. The manifestation of such a spirit ought only to encourage her enemies; they are the sure signs of a future breakdown. In the meantime, they must cause infinite torture to the unfortunate populations which are not yet delivered from her yoke.

During the first months of occupation the requisitions extended only to foodstuffs, cattle, horses, fodder, in short, to objects which could be used by the army. They were out of all proportion to the resources of the country (Article 52 of the Hague Convention) and therefore absolutely illegal, but they could still be considered as military requisitions. In a most interesting article published in Smoller's *Jahrbuch fuer Gesetzgebung Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft*, Professor Karl Ballod admits that the requisitions made in Belgium and Northern France have more than compensated for the harm caused by the Russian invasion of East Prussia. Not only the army of occupation, but all the troops concentrated on the northern sectors of the Western front, "three million men," have been fed by the conquered provinces. Besides this, Germany took from Belgium, at the beginning of the war, "more than 400,000 tons of meal and at least one million tons of other foodstuffs."

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With Governor von Bissing's arrival the requisitions extended to whatever raw material was needed in the Fatherland, and all pretence of respecting the Hague Convention (Article 49) ceased forthwith: One after another the stocks of raw cotton, of wool, of nickel, of jute, of copper, were seized and conveyed to Germany. The administration seized, in the same way, all the machines which could be employed, beyond the Rhine, for the manufacture of shells and munitions. I am afraid of tiring the reader with the long enumeration of these arbitrary decrees, but in order to give him an idea of what is still going on, at the present moment, I have gathered here all the measures of the kind taken by the paternal administration of Baron von Bissing which came to our knowledge during one month only (October last). I have chosen the period at random, and it must not be forgotten that, owing to the difficulties of communication, these particulars are far from complete. They will, however, give a fair idea of the economic situation of the country after the second year of occupation:

October 5th: The requisitions in cattle have been so frequent in Flanders *that many farmers have not a milch cow left.*

October 6th: Owing to the lack of motors, bicycles and horses, some tradespeople in Brussels are using oxen to draw their carts.

October 10th: All the chestnut trees around Antwerp have been requisitioned. Potatoes cannot be conveyed from one place to another even in small quantities.

October 17th: According to a decree dated September 27th, any person possessing more *than 50 kilos of straps or cables* must report it under a penalty of one year's imprisonment or a fine up to 20,000 marks.

October 19th: The scarcity of potatoes is increasing, in spite of a good crop. The peasants were forbidden to pull out their plants before July the 21st, *when the greater part of the crop was commandeered.*

October 22nd: The boot factories in Brussels are forbidden to work more than 24 hours per week.

October 24th: A decree dated October the 7th adds borax to the list of sulphurous products which must be declared according to the decree of September 16th.

October 29th: The Germans continue to take away the rails of the light railways ("vicinaux"). The line from St. Trond to Hanut has been demolished. A great deal of rolling stock has been commandeered. Owing to the shortage of lubricating oil *it is to be feared that this last mode of conveyance left to the Belgians will have to be stopped shortly.*

October 30th: A decree dated September 30th makes the measures for the requisition of metals still more severe. All the steel material—in *whatever shape it may be (including tools)*—must be declared to the *Abteilung fuer Handel und Gewerbe* in Brussels, under a penalty of five years of imprisonment (25,000 marks).

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October 31st: The commune of Anderlecht has voted a credit of 40,000 francs for the purchase of *wooden shoes as the shortage of leather prevents most of the people from buying boots.*

November 1st: A decree dated October 14th prepares for the seizure of all textile materials, ribbons, hosiery, *etc.* No more than one-tenth of the stocks can be manufactured, under a penalty of 10,000 marks. A decree dated October 17th makes the declaration of poplars all over Belgium compulsory.

It was scarcely necessary to underline some passages of this report. However bad may be the impression it causes, it would be twenty-six times worse if we had the leisure to follow step by step the progress of German economic policy in Belgium. It is evident that the German administration, in spite of its former declarations, is resolved to ruin Belgian industry and to throw out of work the greatest number of men possible. All raw material must go to Germany in order to be worked there. As it has become evident that the Belgian workers will not submit to war work so long as they remain in their surroundings, they must be torn away from their country and compelled to follow the materials and machines over the frontier. Labour has become an inanimated object necessary to the prosecution of the German war. It is as indispensable to Germany as cotton, nickel and copper. It will be treated as such. If the men resist, they will be crushed. If the soul of Belgium will not yield to persuasion, it will be taken away from her, like her cattle, her corn, her iron and her steel. And so Belgium will become a weapon in Germany's hands, a weapon which will strike at Belgium. And the only thought of the deported worker turning a shell in a German factory will be, as is suggested by Louis Raemaekers' cartoon, "Perhaps this one will kill my own son?"

V.

THE MODERN SLAVE.

I. THE CREEPING TIDE.

We must now deal with the second factor which makes the conditions worse in Belgium than in Germany. While German peace-factories, ruined by the blockade, have been turned into war-factories, the majority of Belgian industries have remained idle. In spite of the high wages offered by the Germans—some skilled workmen were offered as much as L2 and L2 10s. per day—the workers resisted the constant pressure exerted upon them and preferred to live miserably on half-wages or with the help given them by the "Comite National" rather than accept any work which might directly or indirectly help the occupying power. If a few thousands, compelled by hunger or unable to resist their conquerors' threats, passed the frontier, all the rest of the working population kept up, under the most depressing conditions, a great patriotic strike, the "strike of folded arms." If they could not, as the 20,000 young heroes who crossed the Dutch frontier,

join the Belgian army on the Yser; they could at least wage war at home and oppose to the enemy the impenetrable rampart of their naked breasts. It should not be said, when King Albert should return to Brussels at the head of his troops, that his subjects had not shared the sufferings of his soldiers. They should also have their wounds to show, they should also have their dead to honour.

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When, at the beginning of November last, the protests of the Belgian Government and the "Signal of Distress" of the Belgian bishops made known the slave raids which had taken place, most of the outside world was shocked and surprised. It had lived, for months, under the impression that "things were not so bad" in the conquered provinces. After the outcry caused by the atrocities of August, 1914, there came a natural reaction, a sort of anti-climax. Fines, requisitions, petty persecutions do not strike the imagination in the same way as the burning of towns and the wholesale massacre of peaceful citizens. It had become necessary to follow things closely in order to understand that, instead of suffering less, the Belgian population was suffering more and more every day. Besides, news was scarce and difficult to check. When alarming reports came from the Dutch frontier, it was usual to think that the newspaper correspondents spread them without much discrimination.

But to those who were familiar with the policy pursued by the German administration since the spring of 1915, the bad news which they received lately only confirmed the fears which they had entertained for a long time. As the war went on, it became more and more evident that Germany, whose man-power was steadily decreasing, would no longer tolerate the resistance of the Belgian workers, and would even attempt to enrol in her army of labour all the able-bodied men of the conquered provinces. The slave-raids coincide with the "levee en masse" in the Empire and with the organisation of the new "Polish Army": "If every German is made to fight or to work, ought not every Belgian, every Pole, to be compelled to do the same? The fact that they should turn their arms or their tools against their own country is not worthy of consideration, as it is supposed already to enjoy the blessings of German rule and has become an integral part of the Fatherland."

There is a great deal to be said for the slavery of ancient times. It was at least free from cunning and hypocrisy. The conqueror ill-treated the vanquished, but he spared him his calumnies. The only law was the law of the stronger, but the stronger did not pretend to be also the better. The tyrant was always right, of course, but he did not pretend to show that the victim was always wrong.

Now the worst aspect of the German policy is that it associates the subtlest dialectics with the most insane brutality. When the time comes, they act with the blind fury of the bull, but they have already thought it all over with the wisdom of the serpent. That is why the popular appellation of "Huns" is so misleading. It suggests merely the brutality of primitive men, which is not always so dangerous and so depraved as the brutality of civilised men. Brutality does not exclude honesty and pity. Attila listened to the prayers of the Pope and spared Rome. The Kaiser's lieutenant does not

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listen to Cardinal Mercier's protests. The Huns, as most strong men, made a point of keeping their word. The Germans seem to make a point of breaking theirs. When I compared the fight of Belgium and Germany to the unequal fight of Jack and the Giant, of David and Goliath, I was forgetting that David and Jack were cleverer than their antagonists. Folklore and fairy-tales always equalize the chances by granting more wit to the small people than to the big ones. It is a healthy inspiration. But we are confronted to-day with a new monster, a wise giant, a cunning dragon, a subtle beast.

We must therefore not imagine that Governor von Bissing got up one fine morning, called for pen and ink, like King Cole for his bowl, and wrote a proclamation to the effect that all Belgians of military age would be reduced to slavery and obliged, under the penalty of physical torture and under the whip of German sentries, to dig trenches behind the Western front or to turn shells in a German factory. Any fool—any Goliath—might have done that.

Every German crime is preceded by a series of false promises and followed by a series of calumnies. Between such a prelude and such a finale, you may perform a symphony of frightfulness with Dr. Strauss' orchestration—it will sound as innocent and artless as the three notes of a shepherd's pipe. The violation of Belgian neutrality is bad enough, but if you begin to lull Belgium to slumber by repeating, on every occasion, that she has nothing to fear, and if you end by declaring to the civilised world that Belgium was plotting with England and France a traitorous attack against Germany, then it becomes quite plausible. To massacre 6,000 civilians and burn 20,000 houses in cold blood looks rather harsh, but if you begin by giving "a solemn guarantee to the people that they will not have to suffer from the war" (General von Emmich's first proclamation) and end by saying that women have emptied buckets of boiling water on the heads of your soldiers and that children have put out the eyes of your wounded, it becomes almost a kind proceeding. In the same way, to seize and deport hundreds of thousands of men and compel them to work in exile against their country seems the act of Barbarians, but if you accumulate assurances that "normal conditions will be maintained" and that nobody need fear deportation, and if you end by declaring that the Belgian working classes are exclusively composed of loafers and drunkards, it becomes a measure of providence and wisdom for which your victims in particular, and the whole civilised world in general, ought to be deeply grateful.

The promise testifies to your good intentions and the calumny explains how you were regretfully obliged not to fulfill them. The promise keeps your victims within reach, the calumnies shift to them the responsibility for your crime. Who doubts that every town visited by a Zeppelin is fortified, that every ship sunk by a U boat carries troops or guns? The old Hun killed everything which stood in his way; the modern Hun does the same and then declares that *he* is the victim. The old Hun left the dead bodies of his

enemies to the crows; the modern Hun throws mud at them. The old Hun tried to kill the body; the modern Hun tries to ruin the soul.

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For this last and most monstrous of all Germany's crimes we have to register not one promise only, but a series of promises, an accumulation of solemn pledges. It seemed worth while apparently to keep the Belgian workmen at home. Let us record them here, in chronological order:

1st. September 2nd, 1914. Proclamation of Governor von der Goltz posted in Brussels: *"I ask no one to renounce his patriotic sentiments..."*

2nd. October 18th, 1914. Letter of Baron von Huene, Military Governor of Antwerp, to Cardinal Mercier, read in every church of the province in order to reassure the people after the fall of Antwerp and to stop the emigration: *"Young men need have no fear of being deported to Germany, either to be enrolled in the army or to be subjected to forced labour."*

3rd. On the same day, a written declaration of the military authorities of Antwerp to General von Terwisga, commanding the Dutch army in the field, declaring without foundation "the rumour that the young men will be sent to Germany."

4th. A few weeks later, this promise was confirmed verbally to Cardinal Mercier *and extended to the other provinces* under German rule by Governor von der Goltz, two aide-de-camps and the Cardinal's private secretary being present. (See letter from Cardinal Mercier to Baron von Bissing, October 19th, 1916).

5th. November, 1914. Assurances given by the German authorities to the Dutch Legation in Brussels in order to persuade the refugees to come back: *"Normal conditions will be restored and the refugees will be allowed to go back to Holland to look after their families."* (See also the letter of the Dutch Consul in Antwerp urging the refugees to come back to their homes.)

6th. July 25th, 1915. Placard of Governor von Bissing posted in Brussels: *"The people shall never be compelled to do anything against their country."*

7th. April, 1916: Assurances given to the neutral powers after the Lille raids that *such deportations would not be renewed.*

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Now, let us confront these texts, not even with the facts which come to us from the most trustworthy sources, but with the German decrees and proclamations preparing and ordering the recent deportations. We are not opposing a Belgian testimony to a German one, neither are we, for the present, propounding even our own interpretation of what occurred. We will merely oppose a German document to another German document and let them settle their differences as best they can.

The first trouble began in April and May, 1915, in Luttre, at the Malines arsenal, and in several other Flemish towns, when the German authorities exerted every possible pressure to compel the Belgian workmen to resume work. They were brought, under military escort, to their workshops, imprisoned, starved, and about two hundred of them were deported to Germany, where they were submitted to the most cruel tortures. (See the *Nineteenth Report of the Belgian Commission of Enquiry*.) The threats and persecutions are sufficiently established by three placards issued by the German authorities.

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The first one, posted on the walls of Pont-a-Celles, near Luttre, says, among other things: “If the workmen accept the above conditions (that is to say, resume work with handsome wages) *the prisoners will be released....*” The “prisoners” being several hundred workers who had been imprisoned in their shops and deprived of food. (April, 1915.)

The second, *signed von Bissing* (so that nobody could imagine that these measures were taken by some too zealous subaltern) and posted in Malines, on the 30th of May, tells us that “*the town of Malines must be punished as long as the required number of workmen have not resumed work.*” These workmen were employed by the Belgian State—which owns the country’s railway—for the repair of the rolling stock. When they had refused to resume work, at the beginning of the occupation, a few hundred German workmen had filled their posts. These had been sent back to their military depots. The patriotic duty of these Belgians was evident enough: by resuming their work, they released German soldiers for the front and increased the number of coaches and engines, of which the enemy was in great need for the transport of troops. If you will compare this poster with the one printed above and dated July 25th, you will be confronted with one of the neatest examples of German duplicity. Other people have broken their promises after making them. It was left to Governor von Bissing to make them after breaking them.

The third document is still more conclusive. On June the 16th the citizens of Ghent could read on their walls that: “The attitude of certain factories which refuse *to work for the German Army* under the pretext of patriotism proves that a movement is afoot to create difficulties for the *German Army*. If such an attitude is maintained I will hold the communal authorities responsible and the population will have only itself to blame if the great liberties granted to it until now are suspended.” This clumsy declaration is signed by Lieutenant-General Graf von Westcarp. And to think that, even now, Governor von Bissing perseveres in maintaining that no military work has ever been asked or will ever be asked from the Belgian workers! As the French proverb says: “On n’est jamais trahi que par les siens.” [4]

But, like the man who marries his mistress after the birth of the first child, the Governor General was thinking of “regularising the situation.” He knew that his attitude was illegal. He decided, therefore, to concoct a few decrees in order to legalize it in the eyes of the world. He had, you see, to save appearances. You cannot get on with no law at all. It might shock neutrals. So, if you break all the articles of the Hague Convention one by one, like so many sticks, the only thing to do is to manufacture some fresh regulations to replace them. And everything will again be for the best in the best of worlds.

That is where German subtlety comes in. You must not do things rashly, at once. Like a skilful dramatist, you must prepare the public to take in a situation. There is a true

artistic touch in the way this General of Cavalry succeeds in gradually legalizing illegality.

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In a first decree, dated August 10th, 1915, a fortnight after his last pledge, Governor von Bissing promises from fourteen days' to six months' imprisonment to anyone dependent on public charity who refuses to undertake work "without a sufficient reason" and a fine of L500 or a year's imprisonment to anyone who encourages refusal to work by the granting of relief. Notice that the accomplice is punished more heavily than the principal culprit. The idea is clearly to deprive every striker of the help of his commune and of the "Comite National." However, as it is still left to Belgian tribunals to decide which reasons are "sufficient" and which are not, this decree is not very harmful.

On May 2nd, 1916, the rising tide creeps nearer to us. The power of deciding on the matter passes from the Belgian tribunals to the military authority, and thereupon every striker becomes a culprit.

On May 13th, there is a new decree by which "the governors, military commanders, and chiefs of districts are allowed to order the unemployed *to be conducted by force* to the spots where they have to work." This, no doubt, in order to avoid the crowding of prisons, which would have necessarily followed the last decree. It only remains to declare that the workers can be deported to complete the process and to legalise slavery.

This step was taken on October 3rd last, when an order, signed by Quartier-Meister Sauberzweig and issued by the General Headquarters of the German Army, was posted in all the communes of Flanders. This order warned all persons "*who are fit to work* that they may be compelled to do so *even outside their places of residence*," when "they should be compelled to have recourse to public help for their own subsistence or for the subsistence of the persons dependent on them."

[Footnote 4: Another poster dated from Menin (August, 1915) reads as follows: "From to-day the town is forbidden to give any support whatever even to the families, wives, or children of workmen who are not employed *regularly on military work*.."]

* * * * *

But there is more to come in the story. Three guarantees were left, which have been quoted again and again by the German Press and by Baron von Bissing in his various answers to Cardinal Mercier. It was first stated that the men seized would not be sent to Germany, then that only the unemployed were taken, and finally that these would not be used on military work. These last guarantees have been repeatedly broken. Again, I will leave the Germans to condemn themselves.

In his decree published at Antwerp, on November the 2nd, General von Huene (the same man who had given Cardinal Mercier his formal written promise that no deportations should take place) declares that the men are to be concentrated at the

Southern Station, “whence ... they will be conveyed in groups to *workshops in Germany.*”

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In a letter sent by General Hurt, Military Governor of Brussels and of the province of Brabant, to all burgomasters, it is said that “where the Communes will not furnish the lists (of unemployed) the German administration will itself designate the men to be deported to Germany. If then ... errors are committed, the burgomasters will only have themselves to blame, for *the German administration has no time and no means for making an inquiry concerning the personal status of each person.*”

Finally, an extraordinary proclamation of the “Major-Commandant d’Etapes” of Antioing, dated October 20th, announces that “*the population will never be compelled to work under continuous fire,*” this population being composed, according to the same document, of *men and women* between 17 and 46 years of age. If they refuse “they will be placed in a *battalion of civil workers, on reduced rations.*” Here is the address of one of these militarised civilians dropped from a train leaving for the Western front and picked up by a friend: X., 3 Comp. Ziv. Arb. Bat. 27.—Et. Indp.—Armee No.

This did not prevent Governor von Bissing from declaring, a week later (letter to Cardinal Mercier, October 26th), that: “No workman can be obliged to participate in work connected with the war (*entreprises de guerre*)”! [5]

The last fatal step has been taken. From decree to decree, from proclamation to proclamation, the last threads of the curtain of legality which remained between the victim and the tyrant have been cut one by one. Between the acts of the German administration in Belgium and those of the African slave drivers, we are now unable to discover any difference whatever. The old plague which had been the shame of Europe for more than two centuries has risen again from its ashes. It appears before us with all its hideous characteristics. People are torn from their homes and sent away to foreign lands without any hope of returning. Any protest is crushed by the application of torture in the form of starvation, exposure, and their kindred ills ... There is, however, one new point about the modern slave: his face is as white as that of his master.

The nineteenth century stamped out black slavery. It was left to the twentieth century to reinstate white slavery. It is the purest glory of the English-speaking people to have succeeded in eradicating the old evil. It will be the eternal shame of the German-speaking people to have replaced it by something worse. Civilisation forbade any man, sixty years ago, to force another man to work for him. Civilisation to-day does not forbid a man—a conqueror—to force another man to work against himself. The old slave only lost his liberty. The new slave must lose his honour, his dignity, his self-respect. He has only one other alternative: death. And this, not the glorious death of a martyr which makes thousands of converts and shines all over the world, not the death of Nurse Cavell, but the anonymous death of X.Y.Z., the death of hundreds and hundreds of unknown heroes who will die under the whip or in the darkness of their cells in the German prison camps.

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I had almost forgotten a last distinction between the old and the new forms of slavery: The average slave driver of past days was only a trader who sold human beings instead of selling oxen or sheep. When his trade was prohibited, he took heavy risks and ran great danger of losing his fortune and his life. But the German rulers of Belgium, whether they be in Brussels or in Berlin, whether we call them von Bissing or Helfferich, live in the comfort of their homes, surrounded by their families, and when assailed by protests, can still play hide and seek around the broken pillars of the Temple of Peace and wave arrogantly, like so many flags, the torn articles of international law: "I assert," said Dr. Helfferich in the Reichstag (December 2nd)—"I assert that setting the Belgian unemployed to work is thoroughly consonant with international law. We therefore *take our stand, formally and in practice, on international law, making use of our undoubted rights.*"

Let Dr. Helfferich beware. He is not the only judge on international law. His stand may come crashing down.

[Footnote 5: I should ask the reader to confront this declaration with the statement made by the Belgian workmen in their appeal to the working classes of the world. "On the Western Front they force them, by the most brutal means, *to dig trenches*, construct aviation grounds...."

In his letter sent to the Belgian Ministers to the Vatican and to Spain, Baron Beyens, the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, says: "The men are sent to occupied France *to construct sets of trenches and a strategic railway, Lille-Aulnaye-Givet.*"

Among many trustworthy reports, we hear that the 5th Zivilisten-Bataillon, including some men of Ghent and Alost, has been forced to work, under threat of death, on the construction of a strategic railway between Laon and Soissons. Some of the men, exhausted by the bad treatment inflicted upon them, have been sent back to Belgium in a critical condition, and have written a full statement relating their experiences, signed by twenty of them. On the other hand, the Belgian General Headquarters report that Belgian civilians, obliged to dig trenches and dug-outs near Becelaere (West Flanders), were exposed to the fire of the English guns.]

II. BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON ...

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

What prophetic spirit inspired Cardinal Mercier when he chose this psalm for the text of his sermon, on the occasion of the second anniversary of their Independence (July 21st, 1916), which the Belgians celebrated in exile and captivity? It was in the great Gothic church, in Brussels, under the arches of *Ste. Gudule*, at the close of a service for the

soldiers fallen during the war, the very last patriotic ceremony tolerated by the Germans. Socialists, Liberals, Catholics crowded the nave, forgetting their old quarrels, united in a common worship, the worship of their threatened country, of their oppressed liberties.

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"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" His audience imagined that the preacher alluded only to a spiritual captivity, that he meant: "How shall we celebrate our freedom in this German prison?" And they listened, like the first Christians in the catacombs, dreading to hear the tramp of the soldiers before the door. The Cardinal pursued his fearless address: "The psalm ends with curses and maledictions. We will not utter them against our enemies. We are not of the Old but of the New Testament. We do not follow the old law: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but the new law of Love and Christian brotherhood. But we do not forget that even above Love stands Justice. If our brother sins, how can we pretend to love him if we do not wish that his sins should be punished...."

Such was the tenor of the Cardinal's address, the greatest Christian address inspired by the war, uttered under the most tragic and moving circumstances. For the people knew by then the danger of speaking out their minds in conquered Belgium; they knew that some German spies were in the church taking note of every word, of every gesture. Still, they could not restrain their feelings, and, at the close of the sermon, when the organ struck up the *Brabanconne*, they cheered and cheered again, thankful to feel, for an instant, the dull weight of oppression lifted from their shoulders by the indomitable spirit of their old leader.

What strikes us now, when recalling this memorable ceremony, is not so much the address itself as the choice of its text: "For they that carried us away captive required of us a song."

Many of those who listened to Cardinal Mercier on July 21st, 1916, have no doubt been "carried away" by now, and they have sung. They have sung the *Brabanconne* and the "Lion de Flandres" as a last defiance to their oppressors whilst those long cattle trains, packed with human cattle, rolled in wind and rain towards the German frontier. And the echo of their song still haunts the sleep of every honest man.

* * * * *

For whatever Germany may do or say, the time is no longer when such crimes can be left unpunished. Notwithstanding the war and the triumphant power of the mailed fist, there still exists such a thing as public conscience and public opinion. Nothing can happen, in any part of the world, without awakening an echo in the hearts of men who apparently are not at all concerned in the matter. The Germans are too clever not to understand this, and the endless trouble which they take in order to monopolise the news in neutral countries and to encounter every accusation with some more or less insidious excuse is the best proof of this. When one of them declared that Raemaekers' cartoons had done more harm to Germany than an army corps, he knew perfectly well what he was talking about. Only they rely so blindly on their own intellectual power and they have such a poor opinion of the brains of other people that they believe in first doing whatever suits their plans and then justify their action afterwards. They divide the

work between themselves: The soldier acts, the lawyer and the professor undertakes to explain what he has done. However black the first may become, there is plenty of whitewash ready to restore his innocence.

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If the unexpected resistance of Belgium has infuriated the Germans to such an extent, it is not only because it wrecked their surprise attack on France, it is also because, even after the retreat of the army, they have been confronted by a series of men courageous enough and clever enough to stand their ground and to come between them and the uneducated mass of the population.

Since, for the sake of propaganda, they wanted to make a show of respecting international law, they were taken at their word; so that they were obliged either to give way or to put themselves openly in the wrong. When they tried to break their promise to the municipality of Brussels and to annihilate the liberties of the old Belgian communes, Mr. Max stood in their way, calm and smiling, with no other weapon than the law which they pretended to respect. Mr. Max was sent to a German fortress, but Germany had torn up another scrap of paper—and the civilised world knew it. When they wanted to establish extraordinary tribunals for matters which belonged only to local tribunals, Mr. Theodor and all the barristers of the country lodged protest after protest and fought their case step by step. Mr. Theodor was deported, but the German administration had blundered again—and the world knew it. When Baron von Bissing tried to infringe the privileges of the Church and to cow the Belgian priests into submission by forbidding them to read to their flock the patriotic letter of Cardinal Mercier, published on Christmas Day, 1914, he found himself opposed not only by a far cleverer man than himself, but by all the spiritual influence of one of the greatest priests in Europe. The letter was read, the Cardinal did not leave for Germany but for Rome, whence he came back to Malines, and, if anything, adopted a still firmer tone in his subsequent letters and speeches. Von Bissing was beaten—and the world knew it.

These are only a few striking examples among many. Since August, 1914, hundreds and hundreds of civilians have been imprisoned or deported; workmen, because they refused to work for the enemy; lawyers, because they refused to accept his law; bankers, because they would not let their money cross the frontier; professors, because they did not consent to propagate Kultur; journalists, because they objected to print Wolff's news; tradespeople, because they put their patriotism above their private interests; priests, because they did not worship the German god; women, because they did not admire German officers; children, because they did not play the German games. Meanwhile the firing parties did not remain idle. The world has heard with horror of the death of Miss Cavell; it has been shocked by the disproportion between her "crime" and her punishment, and by the hypocrisy displayed by the German administration during her trial. But, if England has lost one great martyr, Belgium has lost hundreds, who perished in the same way, sometimes for smaller offences, often

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for no offence at all. For the German judges are in a hurry, and they have no time to enquire too closely in such matters. The vengeance of a spy, the slightest suspicion of a policeman, sometimes even an anonymous letter, are enough to convince them of the guilt of the accused person. The healthy effect produced on the population by Dinant and Louvain must not be allowed to spend itself. Frightfulness must be kept up at any price. The reign of terror is the condition of the German regime.

* * * * *

To-day, in this most tragic hour of Belgian history, when so many leaders, so many patriots, have been imprisoned, deported or shot, after twenty-nine months of constant threats and persecutions, we might ask ourselves: Is Belgium at last cowed into submission?

Listen, then, to Belgium's voice, not to the voice of the refugees, not even to the voice of the King and his Government, but to the voice of these miserable "slaves" whom Germany is trying to starve into submission. Letters have been dropped from these cattle trucks rolling towards Germany or towards the French front. They all tell us of the unshakeable resolution of the men never to sign an agreement to go to Germany, and never to work for the enemy: "We will never work for the Germans and never put our name on paper" (*onze naam on papier zetten*)—"We will not work for them. Do the same when you are taken." (*Faites de meme quand tu dois aller.*) Two young men imprisoned in Ghent write to their father: "They will have to make us fast a long time before we consent to work for the King of Prussia." Another man who was stopped when attempting to escape writes: "They tell us here that the Germans will make us work even if we do not sign an engagement. It would be abominable. *Take heart, the hour of deliverance will strike one day, after all.*" Another workman sends the following message to his employer: "We are here two thousand and three hundred men. They cannot annihilate us. *It is not right that our fate should be better than that of our brothers who suffer and fight at the front.* We cannot make a step without being threatened by the gun or the bayonet of our jailors. *I am hungry ... but I will not work for them.*"

And as the slave raids reach one province after another from Flanders to Antwerp, from Hainant to Brabant, as the fatal list of deportees increases from 20,000 to 50,000, from 50,000 to 100,000, from 100,000 to 200,000, whilst the cries of women and children are heard in the streets, whilst the modern slaves tramp along the roads carrying a light bundle of clothes on their shoulders, from everywhere in Belgium the strongest protests are sent to the Governor General, by the communes which will not consent to give the names of the unemployed, by the magistrates who will not see the last guarantees of individual right trampled upon, by the Socialist syndicates which are defending the right of the workmen not to work against their own country, by the chiefs of industry who

show clearly that the whole responsibility of the labour crisis rests on Germany alone, by the bishops of the Church, who refuse to admit that, after two thousand years of Christian teaching, a so-called Christian nation should fall so low as to revive, for her own benefit, the worst custom of Paganism.

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The energy of these protests is wonderful if one considers the conditions in which they have been made. The town councillors of Tournai were asked to draw up a list of unemployed. They refused; as the Germans insisted, they passed the following resolution: "The municipal council decide to persevere in their negative attitude.... The city of Tournai is prepared to submit without resistance to all the exigencies authorized by the laws and customs of the war. Its sincerity cannot be doubted, as it has shown perfect composure and has avoided any act of hostility during a period of over two years ... But, at the same time, the municipal council could not furnish weapons against their own children, fully conscious that natural law and international law, which is derived from it, forbids them to do so." (October 20th, 1916). We possess also the German answer, signed by Major-General Hopfer. It is a necessary supplement to von Bissing's unctuous literature. Major-General Hopfer calls the resolution "an act of arrogance without precedent." According to him, "the state of affairs, clearly and simply, is this: the military authority commands, the municipality has to obey. If it fails to do so it will have to support the heavy consequences." A fine of 200,000 marks is exacted from the town for its refusal, besides 20,000 marks for every day of delay until the lists are completed.

The case of Tournai, like that of Antoing and a good many small towns, is typical. The officers commanding in these districts either disregard the "mot d'ordre" given in Brussels or do not think it worth their while to keep up the sinister comedy played in the large towns. Here "Kultur" throws off her mask and the brute appears. We know at least where we stand. The conflict is cleared of all false pretence and paltry excuses. The councillors of Tournai appeal to some law, divine or human, which forbids a brother to betray his brother. It is not without relief that we hear the genuine voice of Major Hopfer declaring that there is no other law than his good pleasure. That settles everything and puts the case of Belgium in a nut-shell. Men like him and the commander of the Antoing district—another Major, by the way—are invaluable. But they will never become Generals unless they mend their manners.

From the perusal of the Belgian protests and of all particulars received, two things appear clearly: First, in spite of all the official declarations, whether the raiders are able or not to get hold of the lists, there is no real discrimination between employed or unemployed. And, secondly, in many districts, unemployment has been deliberately created by the authorities in order to justify the deportations.

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We cannot discover any method in the raids. In some places, all the able-bodied men from 17 to 50 are taken away; in others the priests, the town-clerks, the members of the "Comite de Secours," and the teachers are left at home; in others still a certain selection is made. *But everywhere some men who were actually working at the time or even men who had never been out of work since the beginning of the German occupation have been obliged to go with the others.* The proportions vary. In the small town of Gembloux, of a total of 750 inhabitants deported, *there were only two unemployed.* At Kersbeek-Miscom out of 94 deportees only two had been thrown out of work. At Rillaer, the Germans have taken 25 boys under 18 years of age.[6] In the district of Mons, from the numbers taken down in fourteen communes, we gather that the proportion of the unemployed varies between 10 and 15 per cent. of the total number of deportees.[7] Among the 400 men taken from Arlon (Luxembourg) were 43 members of the "Comite de Secours" who were working in connection with the Commission for Relief, so that not only the people supporting their families are being deported, but even those who employed themselves in alleviating the sufferings of the whole population. This practice has been repeated in several other towns, for instance, in Gembloux and Libramont.

Whether the people are ordered to present themselves at the town-hall or seized in their own homes, whether they are taken forthwith or allowed a few hours to prepare themselves, whether they are forced to sign an agreement or not, the same fact is evident: the criterion of employment is never considered as a sufficient cause for exemption.

In certain districts where, in spite of the requisitions, no unemployment existed, the authorities have manufactured it. Some of the new coal mines of the Limbourg province have been closed on the eve of the raids. The case of the Luxembourg province is still more typical. "We have not to enquire here," declare the senators and deputies of this province, "if unemployment has been caused in other regions by the disorganisation of transports, the seizure of raw stuffs and machines, the constant requisitions, and other measures which were bound to penalize the national industry. One fact remains incontestable; it is that, so far as the Luxembourg province is concerned, unemployment has been non-existent. During the worst periods, we have only had a small number of unemployed, and thanks to the initiative taken by the 'Comite de Secours' all, without any exception, have been at work without interruption." After enumerating a great number of works of public utility which had been approved by the German authorities, construction of light railways, drainage of extensive moors, creation of new plantations, water supplies, etc., ... the report goes on: "And to-day most of these works, which had been approved and subsidized by the province and by the State, have been suddenly condemned and interrupted.... *Such official obstacles to the legitimate and useful activity of our workmen renders still more painful for them, if possible, the measures taken against them by those who reproach them for their idleness and who prosecute them to-day under the pretext of an inaction which they have deliberately created.*"

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In the face of such testimony all the German argument crumbles to pieces. As Monseigneur Mercier puts it decisively: "It is not true that our workmen have caused any disturbance or even threatened anywhere to do so. Five million Belgians, hundreds of Americans, never cease to admire the perfect dignity and patience of our working classes. It is not true that the workmen, deprived of their work, become a charge on the occupying power or on public charity under its control. The 'Comite National,' in whose activity the Germans take no part, is the only organisation concerned in the matter." But even supposing, for the sake of argument, that the 43rd article of the Hague Convention should justify some form of coercion in the matter, the new measures should only be applied to some works of *public utility in Belgium*. Far from encouraging such works, the Germans have stopped them, seized *employed and unemployed*, and sent them either to *Germany* or to some *war-work* on the Western front. To put it simply, they wish to avoid public disturbance where there is no disturbance, to save money which is not their money, to deport unemployed who are not unemployed, to oblige them to work against their country instead of for their country, and in Germany instead of in Belgium. They are doing everything but what they want to do, they go anywhere but where they are going, and they say anything but what they are thinking.

[Footnote 6: Letter of Cardinal Mercier to Governor von Bissing, Nov. 29th, 1916.]

[Footnote 7: Reply of the Deputies of Mons to Governor von Bissing, Nov. 27th, 1916.]

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The other day I heard two people—two wizened city clerks—discussing the war in the train. "When and how will the Germans be beaten?" asked the first. The other shrugged his shoulders and declared solemnly, while pulling at his pipe: "The Germans? They have been beaten a long time ago! They were beaten when they set foot for the first time in Belgium."

The remark is not new, and I daresay it was a reminiscence of some sentence picked up in a newspaper or at a popular meeting. But whoever uttered it for the first time was right. The case of Belgium has uplifted the whole moral atmosphere of the struggle. Since the first guns boomed around Liege and the first civilians were shot at Vise, a war which might have been represented, to a certain extent, as a conflict of interests, has become a conflict of principles. In a way, the Germans were beaten because, from that moment, they had to struggle against unseen and inflexible forces. Whatever you choose to call them—democratic instinct, Christian aspiration, or the conscience of the civilised world—they will do their work relentlessly, every day of the year, every hour of the day. It is their doing that, in spite of the immense financial influence and the most active propaganda, Germany has become unpopular all over the world. Other facts, like the *Lusitania*, the trial of Miss Cavell, the work accomplished by Zeppelins, have contributed to provoke this feeling. But whether we consider the origin or the last exploits of German policy, whether we think of two years ago or of to-day, the image of

Belgium, of her invasion, of her martyrdom, of her oppression, of her deportations, dominates the spiritual aspect of the whole war.

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When they crossed the Belgian frontier, the Germans walked straight into a bog, and since then they have been sucked deeper and deeper into the mud of their own misdeeds and calumnies. They were ankle-deep at Liege, waist-deep at Louvain, the bog rises even to their lips to-day. In the desperate efforts which they make to free themselves they inflict fresh and worse tortures on their victims. It is as if victory could only be reached through the country's willing sacrifice. But every cry which the Germans provoke in the Belgian prison is heard throughout the world, every tear shed there fills their bitter cup, every drop of blood they shed falls back on their own heads. The world looks on, and its burning pity, its ardent sympathy, brings warmth and comfort to the Belgian slave. There is still some light shining through the narrow window of the cell. And there is not a man worthy of the name who does not feel more resolute and more confident in final victory when he meets the haggard look of the martyred country and watches her pale, patient, and still smiling face pressed against the iron bars.

VI.

THE OLIVE BRANCH.

We may ask ourselves if it was by chance only or through some subtle calculation that the first slave-raids in Belgium were timed to take place on the eve of the Christmas season, when the angels proclaimed "good-will towards men," and when the German diplomats offered us the olive branch and the dove—peace at their own price. We may perhaps admit, now that the crisis is over, that for us Belgians at least the temptation was great, and if our repeated experience of the enemy had not shown us that he is most dangerous when he dons the humanitarian garb, we might have been duped by this remarkable piece of stage-management. There is every reason to believe that the deportations were part and parcel of the German peace manoeuvre. By increasing a hundredfold the "horrors of war" Germany provided a powerful argument to the pacifists all the world over: "Look at these miserable Belgians. Have they not suffered enough? Is it not time that an end should be put to their misery? Germany has declared that she is ready to evacuate the country. She might even give an indemnity. What other satisfaction can the Allies ask, considering the present situation on both the Eastern and Western fronts? If England really went to war to deliver Belgium, let her prove it now by stopping the struggle to spare her innocent citizens. It is all very well for those who are living comfortably at home to urge the continuance of the struggle. But can they take the responsibility of speaking on behalf of the population which has to submit to the enemy's rule and whose sufferings increase every day? ..."

We have all listened to that voice. The Belgians in exile more intensely perhaps than the other Allies. Belgium had nothing whatever to do with the origin of the quarrel. She had nothing to gain from its conclusion. She had been drawn unwillingly into the conflict. She has taken arms merely to defend her rights and territory. What should her answer be if Germany offered to restore them?

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At the beginning of August last, a certain number of Socialist leaders, in occupied Belgium, succeeded in arranging a meeting, in spite of German regulations, and passed the following resolution, which they sent to the Minister Vandervelde, in London: "The Belgian working classes are decided to endure all sufferings rather than to accept a German peace, which could neither be lasting nor final. The Allies must not think that they must hasten the conclusion of the struggle for us. We are not asking for peace, and we take no responsibility for the Socialist manifestations made in neutral countries on our behalf. *We ask those who want to help us not to let the idea that we long for peace influence their decisions.* We pass this resolution in order to prevent the disastrous effect, which such an argument might produce."

The Belgium people has never departed from this attitude, and it is the plain duty of all those who are defending them, to conform, in the spirit and in the letter, to their heroic message. In the "Appeal" of the Belgian workers to the civilised world, sent during the worst period of the slave-raids, the idea of a truce is not even entertained. On the contrary, the workers declare that, "whatever their tortures may be, they will not have peace without the independence of their country and the triumph of justice." An eye-witness of the raids was telling me, a few days ago, that, on some occasions, the men in the slave trains are able to communicate with the people outside: "They shout, of course, 'Long live Belgium' and 'Long live King Albert,' but the most frequent cry, in which they seem to put their last ounce of strength, is: 'Do not sign,' which means: 'Do not sign an engagement to work in Germany, do not sign a compromise.'" And I have not the slightest doubt that, if they had heard of the German peace offers, they would still shout, "Do not sign, do not sign a German peace!"

We know what this attitude costs them. We know, from the report of those few men who have been sent back to Belgium from the Western front and from the German camps, the tortures to which the modern slaves are being subjected. These men were so ill, so worn out, that their family scarcely recognised them, and greeted them with tears, not with laughter. It was like a procession of ghosts coming back from hell. At Soltau, the prisoners are given only two pints of acorn soup and a mouldy piece of bread, every day. They are so famished that they creep at night to steal the potato parings which their German guards throw on to—the rubbish heap. They divide them amongst themselves and eat them raw to appease their hunger. After the first week of this regime, several men went mad. Others were isolated for a few days and given excellent food. "Will you sign now? If you do, you shall be kept on the same diet; if not... you go back to camp?" The great majority refused ... and were sent back. This is not an isolated report. All the accounts agree, even on the smallest details, and the deportees who have been able to write to their families tell the same story as those who, being henceforth useless, have been sent home to die.

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It has always been the German policy to bully and to cajole almost at the same time. But the image of Germania offering, with her sweetest humanitarian smile, an olive-branch to the Allies whilst her executioners are starving thousands of Belgian slaves and clubbing them with their rifles, will stand in the memory of mankind as the climax of combined brutality and hypocrisy.

Should we wonder if the present has been refused? There is only one peace which matters, it is the peace of man with his own conscience, the peace of the soul with its God. We have it already, and even the roar of the German guns will not disturb it. It hovers over our trenches, over the sea, even over these terrible German camps where the best blood of a great people is being sucked by the vampires of War. And those who have fallen stricken on the battlefields, those who have succumbed to the slow tortures to which they were subjected, are resting now under its great wings. Should we dare to disturb their sleep? Should we dare to stain their glory?

It is not for Germany to offer peace. She has lost, it with her honour. It lies in some pool, at the corner of a wood, where the hooligan waits in ambush, or on the rubbish heap of the Soltau camp in which men—noble men—are made to seek their food like pigs. Germany cannot offer what is not hers to offer. The Allies cannot take what they have already. For there is only one peace, “the peace that passeth all understanding.”

As for the German olive branch, how could we accept it? It is no longer green. There is a drop of blood on every leaf.

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It is perfectly useless to try, as has been done in certain quarters, to distinguish between Belgium’s attitude in the conflict and that of the Powers who are fighting for the restoration of her integrity. From the day when England, France and Russia answered King Albert’s appeal, the unflinching policy of Belgium has been to act in perfect harmony with the Allies. How could it be otherwise? Their cause is her cause. Their victory will be her victory, and—if we should ever consider the possibility of defeat—their defeat would be her defeat. The Belgians who like myself, were in England during these fateful days of August, 1914, when the destiny of Europe hung in the balance, know perfectly well the decisive influence which the invasion of Belgium had on English public opinion at that time. Nothing can ever blur the clear outlines of the events as they passed before us under the implacable rays of that glorious summer sun.

The whole policy of Germany is determined by her first stroke in the war. That stroke was delivered against a small nation. The whole policy of England and of the Allies is determined by their first efforts in the struggle, and these efforts were made to protect a

small nation against Germany's aggression. Never has the choice between right and wrong been made plainer in the whole history of the world.