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"Belgium under the surface". [1914-1918]

Hemphill, Alexander J.

New York: The Commission for Relief in Belgium, [1914-1918]

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C. R. B.

“Belgium under the Surface”

**Personal Observations of Alexander J. Hemphill,
Treasurer of the Commission**

BELGIANS' INDOMITABLE SPIRIT

600,000 Little Ones in Belgium Need a Special Diet to Keep Them Alive

Communal Herds formed to provide Milk for Thou- sands of Suffering Children

Mr. A. J. HEMPHILL, Chairman of the Guaranty Trust Company of New York, has just returned after a visit to Belgium and Germany. He was also received by King Albert.

Mr. Hemphill, who acts as Treasurer of the Neutral Commission for Relief, crossed the Atlantic to see for himself the conditions in the German occupied part of Belgium and to investigate the distribution of the relief supplies to which the American people have generously contributed. In order to secure permission to enter Belgium he had to go to Berlin, where he spent the better part of a week. In an interview, Mr. Hemphill said:—

“I was greatly impressed while in Berlin with the difference of opinion which exists among prominent Germans as to the advisability of permitting the continuation of the present system of relieving the Belgians in Belgium. The shortage of food supplies in Germany itself, owing to the allied blockade, has given rise to considerable criticism of the German Government's action in agreeing to the Allies' demand, as a condition of continued relief imports, that the whole of the home-grown food supplies in Belgium should be devoted to the sole use of the Belgians. An influential German section maintains that at least a portion of these supplies are, under the Hague Convention, the rightful support of the occupying army, and that so long as there is any possibility of German women and children and German soldiers being in want of food these Belgian native productions should be taken by the German Army for this purpose.

CRITICISM IN BERLIN.

“Another criticism levelled at the German Government is that the policy of permitting relief supplies to be distributed merely prolongs the passive resistance which is still practically universal among the seven million Belgians who are under German rule. However, despite the serious opposition on both these scores, I am confident that the more humane policy authorized by the German Chancellor will continue to prevail.

"When I got to Brussels my first impression was that everything was normal, except for the absence of vehicles owing to the scarcity of horses and the prohibition of motors except to a few. The people are well clad, the shops are open and every one goes about their daily life much the same as they do in London or New York. At the markets I saw people buying and selling—mostly vegetables—and business being freely transacted in the ordinary way. **That was on the surface.** But one has to remember that Belgium normally lives on imported raw materials and food and pays for her food by export of her manufactures. This vital current is stopped by the war and 60 per cent. of Belgium's work-people are idle. A large part of the commercial class are also idle and reduced to dependence upon charity. When I went to the relief stations where the wholly destitute—amounting to a large proportion of the population—get their soup and other provisions, I saw, in the waiting queues, not only the needy class that one would expect, but well-dressed men, women and children. In Brussels and elsewhere throughout Belgium the human lines that daily wait for the small ration provided by the charity of the world are marked by this same sad feature. Destitution is not only widespread, but there are now dependent upon relief thousands of the upper classes who never dreamt of coming to such a pass.

MISLEADING FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

"It is only after being in Brussels for a little time, and after visiting Charleroi, Malines, Antwerp, Liège and other places that one realizes how misleading are first impressions of life in Belgium as it is today. The outward appearance of normality is sustained only by the fact that relief to the value of over \$6,000,000 is, so to speak, injected into the country every month. The external calm is an amazing tribute to the efficiency of the system whereby the Relief organization provides and distributes to this whole nation the supplies without which there would be chaos and unthinkable suffering. In this complex work of rationing every day over seven million souls, of whom just one-half are totally or partially destitute, the Belgians themselves are co-operating magnificently. Without their unflagging support and public-spirited work the efforts of those throughout the world who, regardless of nationality, sympathize with the Belgian people would fail of their purpose. The Comité National in Brussels, composed of the leading Belgians who dared to stay and face the invaders, has enrolled thousands of volunteer helpers who are now experts in this problem of rationing.

RELIEF REACHES THE BELGIANS.

"Both in America and England a good deal of uneasiness somewhat naturally exists as to the relief supplies actually reaching the Belgians. I discussed this point thoroughly with responsible Belgians throughout the country and with the Americans who are supervising the distribution, besides keeping my own eyes open for any indications of confiscation by the Germans. **As a result I am convinced that the relief supplies sent into Belgium reach, in their entirety, the Belgian people.** Except for trivial local incidents, which are invariably remedied, I heard of

no instance whatever of the Germans breaking their guarantees to respect the food which the Allied Governments allow to be brought through the blockade. As regards the home-grown produce there are, probably, still some minor leakages—almost inevitable in a country garrisoned by a foreign army—but I can safely say that 95 per cent. of the native food supplies go towards feeding the Belgian people. The inappreciable leakages to which I refer are always made the subject of negotiations between the Relief Organization and the belligerent Powers.

“You ask me as to what the Belgian people really think. **They don't think. They just hope.** They live from day to day in the undimmed expectancy of regaining their independence. I might also say they live **on hope**, because if that wonderful spirit were not there, the scanty ration, which is all the Relief Organization can supply, would be inadequate to prevent increased disease and mortality.

HIGH GERMAN WAGES REFUSED.

“Under ordinary circumstances the population would be pauperized by free feeding of the unemployed. This is not the case in Belgium. In the first place, a daily diet of soup, bread, sometimes potatoes and a little bacon, and occasionally rice and beans, continued over two years, does not offer many attractions. **It is only the indomitable spirit of the people themselves that makes it bearable.** They will be glad enough when peace comes to exchange free meals of such a kind for the food they can earn by work. At present, a small percentage get a few days' work weekly in local industries, such as the enamel, glass and coal trades, at a few francs per week. **They unceasingly refuse wages of from 15 to 25 francs a week which they could obtain by working for the Germans.** Glass and enamel ware, by consent of the Allies, are being exported in small quantities, but the payments for such exports are retained in Allied countries until the conclusion of the war. The German assertion, that the whole Belgian nation has organized a passive resistance strike on an unprecedented scale, is undoubtedly correct.

“In one relief canteen which I inspected a man came up and made a complaint. There was no meat, he said excitedly, in his soup. He had long given up the idea of receiving meat as part of his daily meal, but if he was to live, he declared he must get some of the nourishment that meat provides. He was right. There was practically no meat in the soup. But what is one to do? Such meat as there is in the country is one dollar and fifty cents per pound.

THE PLIGHT OF THE CHILDREN.

“There are 600,000 children in Belgium entirely dependent upon the tender-heartedness of the outside world. A large percentage of the remaining two million children, up to the age of 16, are partially dependent upon relief. The problem of bringing them up and even of keeping them alive is becoming more and more grave. The Relief Organization has just started an extraordinarily interesting experiment to meet the emergency of short milk supplies in industrial centers. They have asked the peasants to lend, free of charge, for one year, one cow from each

of their herds to a communal herd which will provide milk for the children. In Antwerp, the herd now numbers over 400 cattle. In other centers the peasants are responding excellently to the appeal. At the end of the year the cows will be returned to their owners, who will be compensated for the loss of any of their cattle.

"It was a relief to turn from the complexities and hardships apparently inevitable in connection with the feeding of these unfortunate children to the splendid results of America's recent response to the appeal for clothing. In Brussels I visited the distributing centers and there saw huge quantities of cloth and garments from the United States being redistributed to different parts of the country. In Antwerp I saw 800 Belgian women and girls under one roof busily employed in making up their share of this cloth into suits or dresses or altering ready made clothing. The material over which they bent their heads had come from every State in the Union, from California to New York. I only wished that the generous donors were with me to see the joy it brought and also the businesslike way in which it was prepared for local requirements, and then discriminately given to those most in need.

"A MARVEL OF EFFICIENCY."

"My visit to Belgium gave me my first opportunity to see for myself the actual working of the relief system. It is a marvel of efficiency and devotion. As an American I am proud not only of my fellow-countryman, Mr. Herbert Hoover, to whose genius for organization the whole structure owes its continued existence through a thousand heart-breaking difficulties, but of those Americans who, so self-sacrificingly and self-effacingly, are devoting themselves in the occupied territory to keeping the Belgian nation alive. M. Emile Francqui, head of the Belgian Comité National, has also achieved wonders, and his army of Belgian workers is the most striking instance in history of volunteer collective action. The work, both of the Americans and Belgians, could not be carried on without the humane and effective backing of the American and Spanish Ambassadors in London, the American Ambassador in Berlin, and the devoted American and Spanish Ministers, who remain at their posts in Brussels.

"After seeing the work for myself, I venture to say that it is the duty of every humane individual to help these helpless civilians in Belgium—especially the children—who, for nearly two years have endured sorrows and privations that would try the soul of any nation in the world, and yet still remain heroically true to those traditions of liberty and freedom which they have inherited through centuries."

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Subscriptions are urgently needed for the continuation of this relief work, and should be sent to

The Commission for Relief in Belgium

120 Broadway, New York City

or to Local Committees where they have been formed.

COMMISSION FOR RELIEF IN BELGIUM

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