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BELGIAN REFUGEES

This is the most difficult subject about which to write because so much of what we appear to know is incorrect and there is a need to backtrack a little.

To begin to understand fully it is necessary to refer to all the machinations which led to the First World War. One of the best books so far for this is *July 1914: Countdown to War* by Sean MacMeekin.

The situation which has been handed down of Belgium is that brutal Germans marched in committing appalling atrocities, leaving Britain no alternative but to honour a treaty dated 1839 the signing of which guaranteed Belgium's neutrality.

It is not quite like that.

Germany in 1914 was in difficulties. One of these was the Kaiser himself. His mother, Victoria's eldest daughter, was a Hanoverian and had inherited the gene which caused George III's illness, the blood disorder porphyria. Her relationship with her son was peculiar. He was desperate to be accepted at family gatherings but his own personality acted against him. He grew up feeling rejected, damaged both physically, with an arm useless from birth, and mentally. 1914 was not the time for a country to have as its monarch someone so irrational and disturbed.

Internationally Germany found itself threatened with having to fight both Russia to the east of her and France to the west. She headed towards war convinced she could not win and decided the only chance she had was to confront France first, but there was only one way she had access to France and that was through Belgium. That is where it should have ended – such an act was intolerable – but then Helmuth von Molke made a decision of such crassness, and the communique sent to Belgium is of such breath-taking imperial arrogance, that it is impossible to understand the thinking behind it but, as we know to our cost, some politicians are prone to this.

So, Germany marched into Belgium and there was a battle at Liege. It was all monstrous, everything Germany was doing was wrong, but there is one very important difference to the accepted version – the atrocities, the spearing of babies, the raping and murder of women. They were in the fevered imagination of the propagandists. Foreign correspondents saw nothing of it, more importantly neither did our soldiers. On the other hand the invasion itself gave the British government what it needed. It had set up a department for propaganda.

People like Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton were part of it. It is as well to remember Harold Nicolson's words in 1938, when in the House of Commons, he said "During the War we lied damnably. Let us be quite clear about that. I think some of our lies have done us tremendous harm and I should not myself like to see such propaganda again."

Probably the reason for Britain entering the war was the growing threat of the German navy rather than the treaty although much would have been made of our dishonouring it.

First the Government had to stir up the fire in the belly of a nation that had been at peace for so long. One means was patriotism, the idea of sacrifice, but the invasion of Belgium gave them the gift of another theme - the noble revenge for a ravaged nation. Enlistment posters appeared showing an upright British soldier in the foreground and behind him a rural scene with a burning cottage and a family escaping across the fields. "Remember Belgium" was the phrase across it. Ghastly posters appeared of Germans carrying out the supposed atrocities.

Germany had made the most colossal mistake – and they knew it. There had been last minute attempts to stop the invasion but it was all too late and from then on she was branded as the guilty and brutal Hun.

About 1.5 million Belgians fled, mostly to Britain, Holland, France, Switzerland, Spain and some to the United States.

Folkestone was the first town in Britain to be affected with the arrival of 11,000 Belgians. They were sent on to London where accommodation had been arranged at Alexandra Palace, Earl's Court and then the White City. It must have been difficult for the refugees – safe but confused and exhausted, language was a problem not only with the English but between themselves, with Walloons mixed with the Flemish. The London centres were well organised with food and medical supplies and eventually the Belgians were dispensed around the country. It is estimated that more than a quarter of a million refugees arrived and stayed in Britain.

The towns and villages had different ways of absorbing them. A very small village like West Peckham, for example, adopted one family with local people donating what they could afford to support them. Here in our larger community, with its collection of villages, we had a different system. Organisation and management was given to the Emergency Committee.

Miss Nevill; Captain Spender Clay MP; Mr de Clermont (no initial); Mr Gow and Mr Stanger provided houses rent free.

Four teams were formed, each one to be responsible for one house and its occupants as follows:-

Fair Oaks, Town Hill, Lingfield (now the Dentist)

Mrs Ballantine, Mrs Fowler, Mrs Gow, Lady Forte

8 Stanhope Cottages, Lingfield (on the right, just under the railway bridge by the Racecourse.

Mrs Hicks, Mrs T.K.Morris, Mrs Turton

Old Post Office, Dormansland

Mrs Forte, Mrs Morshead, Miss Pelham, Mrs St Clair, Mrs Gerald Walker

San Bento, Dormans Park (this has disappeared, either renamed or demolished)

Mrs Durkin, Mrs St Clair, Mrs Stanger, Mrs Starr-Jones

They had arranged for the houses to be rate-free and wrote to the East Surrey Water Company asking them to remit the water rate.

Care was funded by donations and subscriptions. 12 refugees were being supported but when the villages were asked to take 14 more (the total rose to 36) the Committee wrote to the Belgian Relief Fund at the Belgian Legation to ask if they could help to some degree.

Finances from October 1914 – June 30th 1915

Donations and Subscriptions came to £378. 7s. 9d

After expenses had been deducted (made up of household expenses, coal, clothing, furnishings, education, travelling, insurance and sundries) there was a balance in the Bank of £71 19. 10p for emergencies.

The Committee discussed how much a refugee needed to earn to become independent.

A Mr Essers felt he would need to earn £1.10s a week (£1.50p).

The Committee made it a rule that any money earned should be banked in the General Post Office Bank, one half of savings being in the name of the man, one quarter in that of his wife and the man being allowed to keep the other quarter as pocket money but in the event of a refugee obtaining a permanent place then he would cease receiving funds from the Committee.

Relationships seem to have been good in our area. Here is an article which appeared in the Surrey Mirror, 8th January, 1915

THANKS TO THE ENGLISH

Mr Neefs, President of the Belgian Committee, also sends a Report of the Christmas gathering at the Public Hall and in it thus thanks the English:

“In the name of all compatriots I have the honour to express to you our feelings of deep gratitude for your kindness and your generosity towards the Belgian refugees living in Reigate, Redhill and the neighbourhood and, today especially, for their children.

In a few words but with a good heart we thank you for it. We shall still remember when we are back in Belgium the magnanimity of the English nation towards the Belgians. I want especially to express a word of thanks to the Mayor of Reigate who has never neglected any occasion to be agreeable and serviceable to the Belgians.

Hip, Hip Hurray for England.”

(It must be stressed it was not just England but Britain who helped them).

Here is another article also from the Surrey Mirror.

ENTERTAINMENT AT GODSTONE

“The Belgian refugees at The Grange, South Godstone, spent a happy, merry time under the care of Mr & Mrs Shephard. For several days beforehand the refugees were working to decorate the big room with flowers, flags and ornamental shields and as a result it was very pretty.

On Christmas morning, thanks to the kindness of Mr Deeds in providing a brake, 14 attended Divine Service at East Grinstead church. Special prayers were offered for the Belgians, for the success of the armies of the Allies and that peace may soon be restored.

When the party arrived home they found an excellent dinner in readiness for them, by kindly friends in the neighbourhood having provided turkeys, geese and Christmas puddings.

In the evening the whole party indulged in English games and everyone spent a thoroughly enjoyable time. The evening concluded with dancing, the music being provided by Mr Engelen, on the mandolin and selections were given on a gramophone.

All the guests were loud in their praise of Mr Shephard for the trouble he took in seeing that they spent a thoroughly enjoyable time and one which they will remember in the brighter years to come.”

There were problems, however. The Chief Constable published a warning that both hosts and refugees were either forgetting or ignoring the rules which applied when they first arrived in a county or changed their address. They had to register and had to have a police permit to stay in a prohibited area. There was a fine of £100 or 6 months imprisonment for neglecting such rules.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was anxious that the Belgians understood our different laws regarding ensnaring small birds for the pot,

The main serious worry, however, was the fact that Belgian men were not asked to enlist and British women started to protest. As a result the Government organised work in munition factories and the Belgian workforce contributed considerably to the war work. Apart from working in British factories they also set up their own.

In some areas there were signs of intolerance as time went on but in the main long standing friendships were established.

Finally, as a matter of interest, here is Germany's ultimatum:

The German Ambassador in Brussels, Herr von Below Saleske, delivered the following note to M. Davignon, Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs. August 2, 1914.

(As you read it, just think what it was unleashing. Britain was about to declare war.)

Reliable information has been received by the German Government to the effect that French forces intend to march on the line of the Meuse by Givet and Namur. This information leaves no doubt as to the intention of France to march through Belgian territory against Germany.
[This was nonsense]

The German Government cannot but fear that Belgium, in spite of the utmost goodwill, will be unable, without assistance, to repel so considerable a French invasion with sufficient prospect of success to afford an adequate guarantee against danger to Germany. It is essential for the self-defence of Germany that she should anticipate any such hostile attack. The German Government would, however, feel the deepest regret if Belgium regarded as an act of hostility against herself the fact that the measures of German's opponents force Germany, for her own protection, to enter Belgian territory.

In order to exclude any possibility of misunderstanding the German Government make the following declaration:

Germany has in view no act of hostility against Belgium. In the event of Belgium being prepared in the coming war to maintain an attitude of friendly neutrality towards Germany, the German Government bind themselves, at the conclusion of peace, to guarantee the possessions and independence of the Belgian Kingdom in full.

Germany undertakes, under the above-mentioned condition, to evacuate Belgian territory on the conclusion of peace.

If Belgium adopts a friendly attitude, Germany is prepared, in cooperation with the Belgian authorities, to purchase all necessaries for her troops against a cash payment, and to pay an indemnity for any damage that may have been caused by German troops.

Should Belgium oppose the German troops, and in particular should she throw difficulties in the way of their march by resistance of the fortresses on the Meuse, or by destroying railways, roads, tunnels or other similar works, Germany will, to her regret, be compelled to consider Belgium as an enemy.

In this event, Germany can undertake no obligations towards Belgium, but the eventual adjustment of the relations between the two States must be left to the decision of arms.

The German Government, however, entertains the distinct hope that this eventuality will not occur, and that the Belgian Government will know how to take the necessary measures to prevent the occurrence of incidents such as those mentioned. In this case the friendly ties which bid the two neighbouring States will grow stronger and more enduring.

M. Priestley. © 2014

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