

# CARDINAL MERCIER'S OWN STORY OF BELGIUM DURING FOUR YEARS OF GERMAN OCCUPATION

## "I Protest Against Acts of Violence of Which My Compatriots Have Been the Innocent Victims," Primate Writes Von Bissing, German Governor General

### Cardinal Mercier's Story

Including his correspondence with the German authorities in Belgium during the war, 1914 to 1918, edited by Professor Fernand Mayence of Louvain University and translated by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's, Ramsgate, England.

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### INTRODUCTION:

By CARDINAL MERCIER

Archeveque de Malines

I think I owe the public a word of explanation as to how this book has seen the light.

During the war, and more frequently after the armistice, I was asked would I write a narrative of my war experiences.

I had taken many notes of events as they had occurred, and my memory was full of incidents in which I was concerned.

Much as I would have wished to write such a story, from some points of view, if only to vindicate my country against its detractors, the libels circulated by its enemies, yet I felt, more and more inevitably as the weeks rolled by, that I would never have time to write this book.

I then thought of my correspondence with the German authorities right through the war.

Here are my war experiences in their most tense and vivid reality; all the issues I fought with the occupying power, their methods and mine clearly defined, undeniably fixed in black and white.

So I asked a friend of mine, Professor Mayence, of Louvain University, to take my notes and material.

I could not let his work go to press without publicly thanking him for having helped me as he has done, and to edit my correspondence with short explanatory remarks about the letters and the events they referred to or led up to. I also gave him some personal reminiscences for this purpose, and with him revised the whole book.

CARD. MERCIER,  
Archbp. of Malines.

7th 1st 19

### Cardinal Gibbons's Preface

CARDINAL'S RESIDENCE,  
408 N. Charles St.  
BALTIMORE.

September 16, 1919.

I am very happy to be able to recommend to the American reading public this authorized, official and authentic story of my beloved and esteemed brother, Cardinal Mercier's experience during the great war.

In it the reader will realize the full meaning of the Cardinal's attitude during the war and possess a true historical account of the great moral fight which was carried on by him as Belgium's spiritual leader.

J. CARDINAL GIBBONS.

### PREFACE

By Professor Fernand Mayence, of Louvain University, Louvain, Belgium

FROM all parts of the world, but especially from America, His Eminence Cardinal Mercier was requested to write his experiences during the German occupation of Belgium.

The magnificent role which he had played during the war was universally known. His pastoral letters with which he confronted the power in occupation and in which he publicly proclaimed the rights of truth and justice had been read in every corner of the world. Some of the powerful letters addressed by him to the German Governor General as a protest against the odious regime imposed upon Belgium had already been published even during the occupation. The knowledge of certain episodes of the duel which had been going on between the Cardinal and the German Governor General roused a good deal of curiosity.

What people wanted was to have in detail from him what had been during the occupation of Belgium the "soul of resistance" all the varying phases of the conflict which, without a moment's respite or any signs of wavering, he waged against the tyranny of the oppressor.

The many and unceasing labors of his episcopal office hindered the Cardinal from yielding to these pressing requests; but his experiences, had they not already been embodied during the war in the voluminous correspondence he had exchanged with the representatives of the Imperial Government?

To satisfy those who wanted a book on his encounters with the Germans, the Cardinal consented to the publication of these documents and conferred upon us a great honor in choosing us to edit them.

### A Duel in Documents

During the occupation, certain portions of the archiepiscopal archives—among other the Cardinal's correspondence with the German Governor General—underwent the fate of all the "verboten." To avoid persecutions and to guard against their being seized, they had to be hidden away in dark corners which, today appearing to afford security, tomorrow ceasing to do so, eventually were in all haste changed for others.

Unfortunately, in the course of these repeated and hurried removals from one place to another, some of the documents—happily of small importance, so it seems—went astray. We have called attention to these lacunae in the course of our work each time that we were able to certify the fact.

We have here reproduced all the documents that have been preserved. We have only left out a few letters of little importance, as, for instance, the sending of a passport to travel by motor or those only containing requests in favor of political prisoners, and for that reason presenting no point of general interest.

In the arrangement of the documents the method adopted is not a strictly chronological one. At the risk of not respecting the order in which they were written we thought it useful, at the same time as we have endeavored to follow as close as possible the sequence

of events, to group the letters according to the principal objects for which they were written.

### Tyranny and Hypocrisy Laid Bare

Cardinal Mercier's correspondence with the German Governor General is, in brief, an expose of the hateful regime to which Belgium was subjected during the fifty long months of the German domination. There is in fact, not a single crime of the occupying power which this courageous pastor has not stigmatized, not a single one of its snares which he has not exposed, not a single one of its hypocritical acts which he has not laid bare, not one single act of abuse of its governing power against which he has not raised his voice in angry protest.

Scorning all danger,\* listening only to the voice of his conscience, he constantly kept to the fore against the abuse of "might," the imprescribable rights of truth and justice. By his uniform behavior, by the calmness and nobleness of his attitude, whether in the face of threats or of conciliatory proposals of the occupying power, he upset the calculations of a government which labored under the conviction that a systematic organization placed at the service of "might" ought eventually to triumph over all resistance.

From the time he took office as Governor General, Baron von Bissing, using the Cardinal of Cologne as an intermediary, endeavored to enter into personal relations with the primate of Belgium. He gave him to understand that he was disposed to give entire satisfaction to the Catholic Church and to assuage the wounds already inflicted on the occupied country by the war.

In his first letter to Baron von Bissing, while thanking him in a very courteous manner for the good feelings shown by him, His Eminence made a point of clearing away from the beginning any possible misunderstanding. ("Whatever may be His Excellency Baron von Bissing's personal inclinations," he wrote, "the Governor General is the representative among us of a usurping and openly hostile nation, in the presence of which we boldly affirm our rights to our independence and to have our neutrality respected." "If, for the time being, we bow to a stronger power than our own," wrote he at the same time to Cardinal von Hartmann, "we proudly cherish our rights, and entertain our unshaken confidence in the future!")

Submission to the regulations imposed by the occupying power so long as they did not wound either our conscience or the dignity of our feelings as patriots; repeated protests against acts of violence and injustice; unflinching fidelity to our king and to the legitimate authority of our country; and unconquerable trust in the future—all these are the principal points of the program sketched out by the Cardinal from the very beginning of the occupation and to which he faithfully adhered up to the hour of deliverance.

### The Cardinal's Calm Defiance

The letters exchanged between the Cardinal and Baron von Bissing are very numerous and touch on very varied topics. The Governor General shows himself alternately conciliatory and quarrelsome, menacing and argumentative. But unflinching he finds himself up against the calm and serenity of a man strongly convinced of his rights and thoroughly confident in the justice and holiness of his cause.

Baron von Falkenhausen, Baron von Bissing's successor in the office of Governor General, stands out as the type of an autocratic and brutal officer. He declared on his arrival in Belgium that he declined to discuss with the Cardinal questions which had no direct connection with religious matters.

This implied prohibition did not restrain His Eminence from sending with his usual frankness and vigor protests to the Governor against the breaches of law committed by him or his officers, and notably against the arrest of state officials who had been charged with having refused to collaborate with the enemy administration and against measures taken by the occupying power to despoil the Belgians of the produce of the soil.

From the very beginning of the occupation, without allowing himself to be repelled by the successive

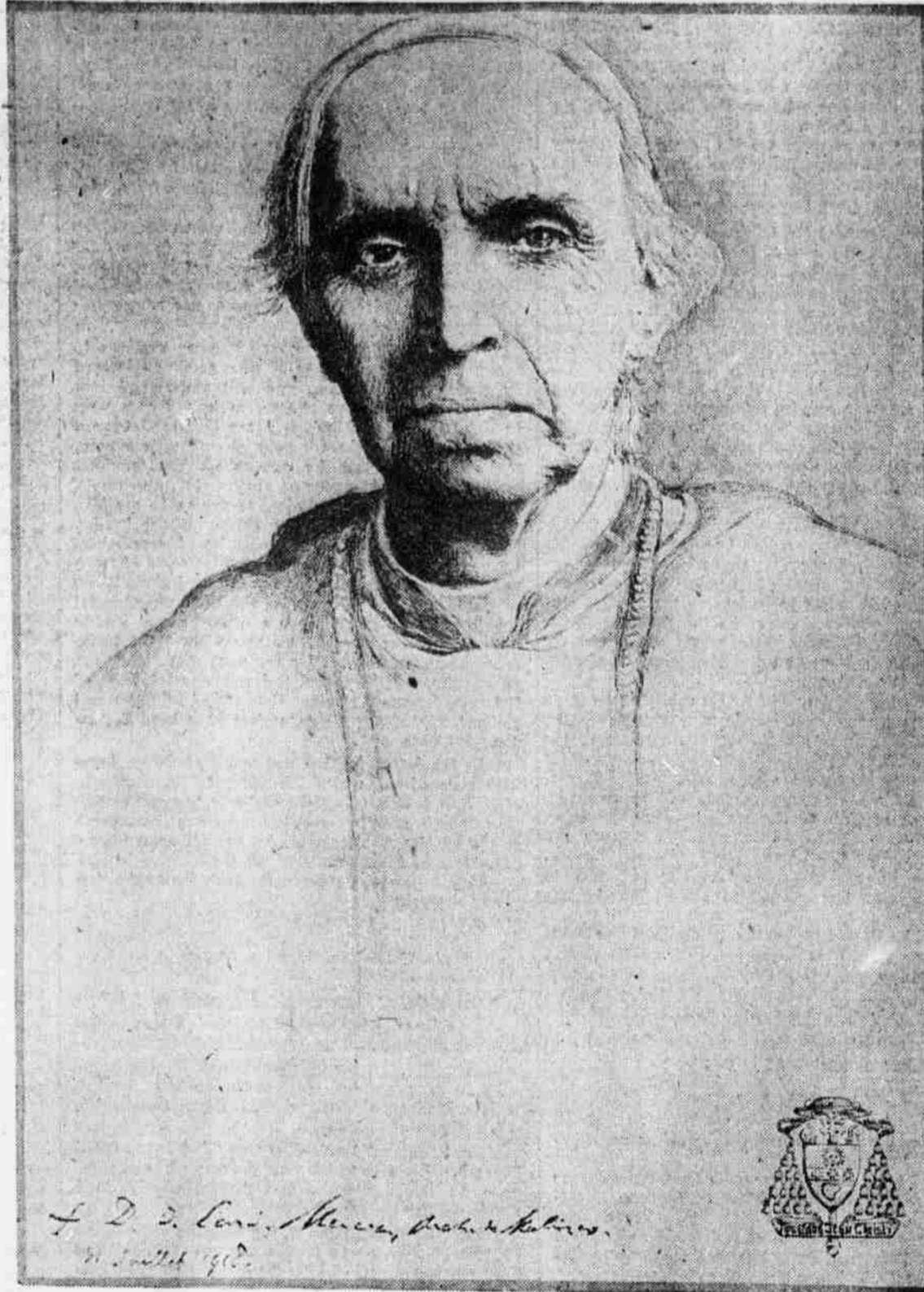
\*Note—It has been established by convincing evidence that on several occasions the Cardinal's arrest had been decided upon, but the German authorities each time held back in view of the consequences of this step and their decision was never put into force.

### EXCERPT FROM MERCIER'S INTRODUCTION

*Here are my war experiences in their most tense and vivid reality: all the issues I fought with the occupying power, their methods and mine clearly defined, undeniably fixed in black and white.*

*to D. J. Card. Mercier, Archbp. of Malines.*

What the Cardinal says in the above introduction to the publication of his story: "Here are my war experiences in their most tense and vivid reality, all the issues I fought with the occupying power, their methods and mine clearly defined, undeniably fixed in black and white."



This is a reproduction of a remarkable etching of Cardinal Mercier, the work of Mademoiselle Piron, a noted Belgian artist. The original was brought to America by Professor du Wolff, of Louvain University, who accompanied the Cardinal on his recent visit to this country.

refusals with which his requests had been met, His Eminence had constantly asked for sanction to send to the prisoner camps in Germany priests of Belgian nationality who could speak both native tongues. As the new Governor General had declared that in religious matters he would readily welcome any demands that came from the Belgian episcopacy, the Cardinal again returned to the charge, but his persistence had no greater success than before.

The same happened with several other requests made by him in which he pleaded for measures to be taken to further the religious welfare of the railway men and of those persons who had been arrested and were awaiting their trial in Belgian prisons. If Baron von Falkenhausen ever consented to take notice of any demands that were in any way connected with religious affairs, it was only to reply that he was not in a position to grant them.

### Jousts With a Cynical Dilettante

The one who corresponded at great length with the Cardinal was Baron von der Lancken, head of the political department at government headquarters. At the very beginning of the occupation he came into touch with His Eminence. For all that, his first letters to the Cardinal date only from the commencement of 1916.

After this he intervenes in all the important matters which became the object of discussion between the Cardinal and the Germans; namely, deportations, the patriotic action of the priests, church demonstrations,

the severance of administrative powers, the disastrous policy of the "Centrales," etc.

His letters betray the cold reserve of a diplomat. Contrary to his chiefs, he never loses his temper. If, very often at the request of the Governor General, he undertakes to take up and plead the bad cases brought forward by the representatives of the empire, he acts for them without enthusiasm, without conviction, almost in dilettante fashion.

He takes delight in these epistolary jousts, and at certain moments his correspondence with the Cardinal assumes the glamour of an academic discussion in the course of which the opponents argue out questions of right, of general policy, even those of philosophy. On the other hand, it seems that occasionally Baron von der Lancken did earnestly endeavor to soften the rigor of measures imposed by the military authorities.

During the four years of occupation, the Governor General, and following his example the whole of Germany, had constantly reproached the Cardinal with having overstepped his role of bishop. When at the beginning of the invasion he condemned the crimes committed by the German troops; when he rose in anger against the deportation of workmen; when he declared that it was every one's duty to love his country and to remain faithful to it even under oppression; when he sought to uplift the fainting heart of the Belgian population with the hope of a better future, he was accused of having misused his pastoral functions and of having pursued political ends.

### "The Incarnation of Belgium"

Over and over again the Cardinal gloriously defied his accusers. He had the satisfaction of seeing his conduct justified by the Imperial Government itself.

On October 17th, 1918, Baron von der Lancken presented himself at Archbishop's House. In the name of the Governor General and of the Berlin government, he announced to His Eminence the approaching release of all political prisoners and handed to him a note which commences with words vindicating the policy pursued by the Cardinal: "You are in our estimation the incarnation of occupied Belgium of which you are the venerated and trusted pastor. For this reason, it is to you that the Governor General and my government also have commissioned me to come and to announce that when we evacuate your soil we wish to hand over to you unasked and of our own free-will the political prisoners serving their time either in Belgium or in Germany."

This was an avowal of defeat. At the close of the struggle, which he had waged for four years against the Cardinal, the German Governor General acknowledged himself beaten. All his policy of coercion as well as his diplomatic subterfuges had broken down before the strong and unbending will of a man who, in everything and at all times had had this one thing alone in view—to do his duty.

### TRANSLATORS' FOREWORD

THE translators by way of preface have only this to say: That the work undertaken by them to give an English rendering to the present correspondence has been a real labor of love.

The spectators of the events which took place in Belgium during the occupation, the news of which leaked out at odd times in spite of the German censorship, we came to entertain for His Eminence, who largely loomed in these events, great admiration and sympathy, so that when the work of translating a series of letters which reflected the sturdiness, stanchness and unflinching courage of this stout champion of Belgian rights was offered to us, we gladly and lovingly accepted the honorable task.

If our humble collaboration is to result, as we hope it will, in making still better known the saintly virtues of a Prince of the Church who, like St. Thomas of Canterbury and many other churchmen in history, was pre-

pared to give up even his life for his flock and their rights, we shall be more than proud in having had some small share in bringing this about, while at the same time we beg the reading public, in view of the many difficulties with which a work of this kind is hedged, to condone any discrepancies or other faults that may have crept in in the course of our endeavor to reveal to them the minds of the several writers.

### CHAPTER I

#### First Relations of the Cardinal With Von Bissing

UNDER the government of Von der Goltz (September 3rd-December 3rd, 1914), there was no interchange of correspondence between the Cardinal and the Governor General. Their relations were limited to an exchange of mutual visits.

Shortly after the arrival at Brussels of the first German Governor, the Cardinal called upon him and asked him to intercede with the Imperial Government for the repatriation, as soon as possible, of the priests and teachers who had been deported at the time of the invasion. He drew his attention to the fears of the Belgians remaining in the country, and of the refugees wishing to return to Belgium, who dreaded seeing their young men deported to Germany for the purpose, presumably, of being incorporated in the ranks of the German army. The Cardinal had already started negotiations on this subject with the Governor of Antwerp, General von Huene. As a result of these, Von Huene had entered into an agreement, applicable to the province of Antwerp, according to which, (1) the civic guards having laid down their arms would not be molested, (2) young men would neither be deported to Germany nor in any way pressed into the service of the German army. The Cardinal, during the course of his visit, requested Von der Goltz to ratify this agreement, to extend its application to the whole country and to guarantee its observance by whoever might be his successor. The Governor promised to give the Cardinal's wishes his favorable consideration.

#### Governor General Goes to Malines

The very next day the Governor General in person went to Malines with his reply. He promised to use all the influence he could to obtain the repatriation of deported priests and teachers. As regards Von Huene's agreement, he did not hesitate to ratify it and extend it to the whole of Belgium. He was much less explicit about binding his successor to any course of action. "We have no use," he added, "for young Belgians; their presence in our ranks would be a danger to us." The Governor expressed his wish to see normal life restored at an early date. The Cardinal answered that it was his wish also, but that the people were too deeply impressed by the tragic events which had marked the beginning of hostilities to allow them to feel any confidence. He insisted particularly on the arbitrary proceedings which were responsible for the massacre of 140 victims at Aerschot. This threw the General into an embarrassment which he altogether failed to disguise. The interview ended with the mutually expressed wish to see the schools soon reopened.

On December 3rd, 1914, Von der Goltz's place was taken by Von Bissing. Hardly had the new Governor been appointed, when he realized that the task he had undertaken, and which he knew to be a hard one, would be made much easier for him if he succeeded in checking the growth of any hostility on the part of the Belgian clergy and their superiors. But he was wary. He knew how unanimous was the feeling of Belgian priests and bishops in face of the invader; so to obtain his end he took a roundabout way. Instead of addressing Mgr. Mercier directly, he wrote to Cardinal von Hartmann, Archbishop of Cologne, whom he had known for a long time, and asked him to intervene in his favor with the Belgian primate.

#### Letter to Cardinal von Hartmann

The following is the letter which he sent to him on the day after he took up his new duties:

The Governor General of Belgium

Brussels, December 4th, 1914.

To His Eminence Cardinal von Hartmann, Cologne.

Your Eminence will have heard, no doubt, of my nomination to the post of Governor General of Belgium. It is a mission by which I am much honored, but the task which I have undertaken by accepting it is in every respect a difficult one; it is only natural then that I should try to find influential persons who, though they may not be able to support me in the fulfillment of this duty, yet will be anxious not to increase the difficulties of it. In a large part of Belgium the Catholic clergy represent a force whose importance cannot be overrated; therefore, I should not wish to ignore negotiating with them and their heads, not only in the interests of my mission, but likewise in the interest of the country and of the Catholic population. In order to pave the way for these relations, I address your Eminence, asking you to be so kind as to inform the Cardinal of Malines that I should be very pleased to enter into personal relations with him, whether it be that he give me an opportunity to have an interview with him at Malines, for so long as the time at my disposal allows, or that he will have the kindness to pay me a visit at Brussels.

I hope to convince him during our interview that I am determined to do all in my power to satisfy the claims of the Catholic Church; but, on the other hand, I expect him to recognize the earnest wish which inspires me to attach supreme importance to alleviating the misery which present circumstances have created in Belgium, though, of course, safeguarding at the same time our military interests. I take the liberty to inform your Eminence that the head chaplain, Doctor Mitendorf, came yesterday; his mission is to supervise and extend the work of the Catholic chaplains and to see to it that the spiritual wants of the numerous troops of occupation and of the wounded be in no wise neglected. The Chaplain General has received the useful instructions from the Catholic "Feldprobst"; I have supplemented them and, in agreement with his superior, I have recommended him to get into touch with the bishops as soon as possible in the course of his tour through Belgium.

I expect from this line of conduct a twofold result: I hope that my intentions and my actions will be in accord with the wishes of your Eminence and also promote the general weal.

Wishing to convey to your Eminence my profoundest respect, I have the honor to be your Eminence's most devoted servant.

The Governor General of Belgium.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING.

Cavalry General.

#### German Churchman Backs Von Bissing

Cardinal von Hartmann hastened to forward to Mgr. Mercier the letter of Von Bissing, to which he gave his warm support:

Cologne, December 6th, 1914.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I take the liberty to forward to your Eminence the letter which I have just sent to me by the new Gov-

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