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# Why Belgian Anarchists Fight

Frans Verbelen

31 October 1914

[Extracts from a letter by Fr. Verbelen, the well-known Belgian Anarchist, to a Dutch comrade, published in the *Vrije Socialist*, October 31]

I am now in Holland, and can quietly judge all the misery of war better than you, my friend, because I went through it all. You say “Verbelen, you are no longer reasoning!” I have the right to answer: You do not know what you are talking about. Theories are all very well; but the reality! You speak of the madness of patriotism and nationalism of the Belgian people. That shows that you do not know the people. I do not think there is a nation that talks less of patriotism than the Belgians. Last year when the King paid a visit to Malines, the people remained perfectly cool.

We might have prevented all our suffering if we had allowed the German troops to pass through Belgium? I told you once before that the Germans could have entered Malines without any opposition. The town is an open town; the civil guard was disarmed, there was no longer a single policeman, and the Belgian soldiers had retired to the forts; there remained

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only unarmed citizen. Nevertheless, the Germans destroyed the town from a great distance, though it was absolutely of no use to their army. They simply acted from a desire to destroy. Now that Germany recognises the barbarity of its act, it states that the Belgian artillery shelled the beautiful church of St. Rombout!

And you think still that the hungry German wolves would have walked through Belgium as quietly as Catholics in a religious procession, if we had only not resisted? You must be very naive if you believe that.

The Belgian soldier fights because he is full of hatred and revenge against the brutal German hordes which have invaded the country to devastate, burn, massacre, and violate wherever possible.

You speak of secret negotiations between the Belgian Government and France. I do not know diplomatic secrets, but I do know that the workers in the Flemish as well as in the Walloon provinces do not like the German worker here, who is humble and submissive when he feels weak, but overbearing and brutal when he thinks that he has the upper hand. No other foreign workers were called "mean" but the Germans. As to our Clerical Government, it certainly was more in favour of the German than of the "godless" French Government; in the Clerical schools, even in those that received a subsidy from the Government, they prayed for victory for Germany. Our Clerical Government ordered its guns from Krupp, not from Creusot.

You see, my friend, that there was no question of making common cause with France.

Many people tell us that Germany on its word of honour promised to repay all possible damage. Has not Germany on word of honour guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium?

By our principles and anti-militarism, we ought to have remained passive when the pillagers attacked our homes, wives, and children? If we had not resisted, we are assured, all would have gone smoothly. What proof have you of this?

But there could not have been a question of allowing the German army to pass through the country; the Government would not have been able to go against the nation's will. The people would not have tolerated *any* invasion without resisting; and that is the best part of the people. We are not yet slaves. You and all who advised us to let the Germans enter, say, "What does it matter, a little more or less liberty?" A little more liberty is very dear to us; we Belgians would not care to live under a German *régime*. Ask the people who escaped from the German rule in Brussels. Ask the citizens who were made prisoners by the Germans. A comrade from Louvain, Cor van Haezendonek, who, with his son, fell into the hands of the Germans, whilst his wife remained alone (and we do not yet know what has become of her), writes to us: "If you see the Germans approaching, fly as far on your legs will carry you! What we have suffered is indescribable."

And you think that such barbarity would not have been shown if we had not resisted? It is too silly to talk of. German soldiers and officers drink till they are in a swinish state, whether allowed a free passage through Belgium or not. The result is terrible.

Do you think they would violate less women if there had been no resistance from our side? The animal instincts after such carouses would have dominated in any case. What has happened in that way is frightful. In a place—Wolverthene—all the men were driven away, the women and girls were ordered to stay. Why? Do you think affairs would have been better if we had allowed Germany to walk over us? Of course, *that* would have caused France to bar the way to the Germans; the Walloons would have taken the side of the French. In any case, we would have had battles on Belgian territory, and just as now the Germans are taking our young men, they would have obliged the Belgian army to take their side. I prefer to see the Belgian soldiers fight the German invaders, who have carried militarism to its highest point, and liberty to its lowest

level, whilst in Belgium freedom is comparatively great. Try, my friend, to hold a conference on anti-militarism in Germany, as you have done in Malines, and you will soon feel the difference.

That you remain indifferent at the news from Belgium or Germany is not in your favour. If you had seen the crying women and children, sleeping in sheds and stables, in the open fields and woods, without food, clothes, or money, you could not have remained cool.

Germany has nothing to reproach us for; no Belgian has been on their territory, except as a prisoner. If there have been citizens who have defended themselves against the invaders, they are right, a thousand times right. By what right should a stranger enter your home, and steal and plunder?

You say yet that you do not know what you would do if the Germans came to you; but that in any case you would be ashamed to speak as I do. That you can easily say, sitting peacefully behind your writing-table. But you may rest assured that the reality blows away the most beautiful theories, as a storm the sand in the desert. It is sad, but true. Above all, I hope that my Dutch comrades may be spared the reality and misery of war which the Belgian comrades have suffered.