

## Philip Gibbs on the Allied Occupation of the Rhineland *3 December 1918*

British reporter Philip Gibbs' account of the Allied occupation of the Rhineland. He observes that the German citizens seemed neither particularly friendly nor hostile towards the Allied soldiers.

### *Report from Malmedy*

British troops crossed the Belgian frontier and entered Germany today.

Here and there some small children, watching from cottage windows or in their mothers' arms, waved their hands with the friendliness of childhood for all men on horses, and they were not rebuked.

German schoolboys in peaked caps, with their hands thrust in their pockets, stared without friendliness or unfriendliness. Some girls on a hillside above the winding road laughed and waved their handkerchiefs. There was no sense as yet of passing through a hostile country where we were not wanted.

Round the hairpin turn we came down to Malmedy, lying in a narrow valley with some of its streets and houses climbing up the hillsides. It was a typical little German town, with here and there houses of the chalet style and houses of the modern country type in Germany, with wooden balconies and low-pitched roofs, and beyond very neat and clean-looking factories on the outskirts of the town.

The shops were bright, and I saw a display of wooden soldiers and flaxen-haired dolls and toy engines as though for the German Christmas which is coming, and in one little garden there was a figure of the little old gnome-like Rumpelstiltskin in my old copy of Grimm's "Fairy Tales."

It was surprising to hear that most of the people about one were speaking French. Some of us remembered then that Malmedy was not in Germany until after 1815, and that for a long time it was an independent little town belonging to a Belgian Abbey of great wealth and power before it was destroyed in the French Revolution.

The people here were not typically German, and many of them at least had the neutral spirit of people who live close to the frontier and speak two languages, or three, as at Malmedy, where everyone is equally familiar with German, French, and Walloon.

At Malmedy there was no sign whatever of hostility except the sullen look on the faces of some men who stared through the windows of a clubhouse and the gravity of other men who turned their heads away when the cavalry passed, as though unaware of them.

In many windows was a notice in German, which I read. It was an appeal by Burgomaster Kalpers, reading: "Citizens are earnestly requested to maintain great calm and order on the entry of the Entente troops into our city and to receive them with courtesy and dignity."

That wish was being carried out, and it was with politeness as well as dignity that the strangers were greeted in this first German town across the frontier.

## **Philip Gibbs on the Allied Occupation of the Rhineland, 14 December 1918**

### *Report from Cologne*

This morning at 10 o'clock our cavalry passed through the streets of Cologne, crossed the Hohenzollern Bridge, and went beyond the Rhine to take possession of the bridgeheads.

For some days not many British soldiers had been seen in the City of Cologne, the troops being camped in the outskirts, and it was only yesterday afternoon that the British Governor made his entry and established his headquarters in one of the hotels which had been taken over for the purpose.

Crowds of German people gathered to see the man who will control their way of life during the British occupation, and were kept back in a hollow square by their own police when the Governor's motor car drove in with an escort of lancers, while a band of Scottish pipers played a greeting.

This morning the passing of the cavalry over the Rhine was an impressive sight for all the people of Cologne, and for the British was another historical episode on the long journey of this war, which has led at last to this river flowing now behind the British lines.

To the German people the Rhine is the very river of their life, and down its tide come drifting all the ghost memories of their race, and its water is sacred to them as the fount from which their national legends, their old folk songs, and the sentiment that lies deep in their hearts have come forth in abundance.

In military history the Rhine has been their last line of defence, the moat around the keep of German strength; so today when British troops rode across the bridge and passed beyond the Rhine to further outposts it was the supreme sign of victory for them and of German defeat.