



The 'Rape of Belgium' Revisited

by Nick Milne

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The above image is an extract from [a proclamation by the German General Otto von Emmich](#), distributed widely in Belgium in the autumn of 1914 as the German army crossed the tiny nation's borders and began its slow march south. The declaration it makes is rather incredible:

It is to my very great regret that the German troops find themselves compelled to cross the Belgian frontier. They are acting under the constraints of an unavoidable necessity, Belgium's neutrality having been violated by French officers who, in disguise, crossed Belgian territory by motor-car in order to make their way into Germany.

It goes on to insist that the Belgian people should look upon the soldiers of the German army as "the best of friends," that those soldiers would "pay in gold" for anything requisitioned by that army in the course of its uneventful passage through Belgium, and closes with von Emmich's "formal pledges to the Belgian population that it will have nothing to suffer from the horrors of war." The document carries an ominous tone throughout, however; the reader is coolly informed that von Emmich "hope[s] the German army of the Meuse will not be forced to fight you," and that any Belgian destruction of their own bridges, tunnels and railways "will have to be looked upon as hostile acts." The Belgian reader could be forgiven, perhaps, for looking upon the above assurances with a degree of skepticism.

This skepticism was more than borne out by the course of events.

On August 4th, 1914, the German army began crossing the border into Belgium. The Belgians, understandably unwilling to allow such a thing to occur without offering firm protest, chose to stand and fight. Bridges were indeed destroyed. Roads were blocked. Barricades were put up -- and, while the nation's small and ill-equipped army could not hope to defeat the German invaders, it did manage to slow them down to such an extent that the carefully drafted timetables of the planned invasion had to be rewritten from scratch, and the British Expeditionary Force was able to arrive in time to further delay the attempted conquest of Belgium and passage into France. In an abstract sense, the First Battle of the Marne was won in the fields outside of Lige.

When the dust had settled, only a small sliver of Belgium south of the inundated Yser remained free -- the rest of the kingdom, including the great cities of Namur, Lige, Antwerp, and the capital Brussels, had been taken. The popular Belgian King, Albert I, remained at liberty and in command of the ~150,000-strong army that held the ground from Nieuwpoort through to Ypres.

All of this is fairly straightforward, but a peculiar thing has happened when it comes to the popular Anglo-American memory of the events that transpired in Belgium during the autumn of 1914: once the narrative of the war reaches the establishment of the trench system and the commencement of the long-standing stalemate that is viewed as such an essential aspect of the war in the West, Belgium and its people seem to vanish from the story entirely. Why might this be?

The answer to this question likely involves the troubled history of "propaganda" and its complex role in the war. A longer post on some other day will address this matter more fully, but in the meantime let it suffice to say that a great deal of propagandistic hay was made of the sufferings of Belgium in the war's early stages -- especially by British journalists, statesmen and public intellectuals. The most notorious example of this is likely the Bryce Report (or, more extensively, the Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages), first released in 1915. The report has long been a *bte noire* for those cultural historians examining popular attitudes during the war, it having been concluded by some very emphatic commentators in the 1920s and 1930s (such as Arthur Ponsonby in *Falsehood in War-Time* and Irene Cooper Willis in *England's Holy War*) that the Report was simply a tissue of lies. Modern research, as we shall see, has confirmed that the Report's conclusions were substantially correct.

As a consequence of this and other dismissals, the quite real and quite appalling sufferings of this nation and her people have since been unjustly swept away along with everything else that now smacks of the sensationalism, hate-mongering and outright invention that are believed to have been the propagandists' stock in trade. This would be a too-simple evaluation of the situation in general terms, but, in the case of the plight of Belgium, it is a very serious error indeed.

As we approach the beginning of the war's centenaries, it is only fitting that pieces of the puzzle that have hitherto been missing finally be put back into place. So:

It is true that many of the more sensational stories of German "outrages" perpetrated in Belgium during the course of the invasion and ensuing occupation are very hard to believe, much less corroborate. German soldiers eating Belgian babies; German soldiers hanging Belgian nuns between church bells and ringing them to death; German soldiers crucifying dozens of farmers by the roadside; and so on -- these are stories that are familiar to us through the fact of them having now become standard examples of why "propaganda" is not to be trusted. Claims like these (it is said) poisoned the home front's understanding of the war; works that made such claims disgusted the war poets and memoirists so much that they rose up in reaction against them; stories of this sort caused the English-speaking peoples to be so skeptical of atrocity reports that they were too late in reacting to the events of the years leading up to 1939. All of this is considerably more complicated than these summaries suggest, but, again -- a post for another day.

The point is that we need not dwell on such extreme suggestions to see much in the German occupation of Belgium worth acknowledging. Let us consider some numbers:

- The total Belgian deaths during the war amount to some 100,000 -- 40,000 military deaths and 60,000 civilian deaths.
- Of those civilians who died as a direct result of the war, some 6,000 were executed. More on this below.
- Nearly 1.5 million Belgians were displaced by the German occupation of their land, with impoverished refugees fleeing in every direction. Some 200,000 ended up in Britain, and another 300,000 in France. The most, by far -- nearly a million -- fled to the Netherlands, but did not always have an easy time in doing so. The German army constructed a 200km-long electrified fence, called the *Dodendraad* by the Dutch, that claimed the lives of around 3,000 attempted escapees during the course of the war.
- Some 120,000 Belgian civilians (of both sexes) were used as forced labour during the war, with roughly half being deported to Germany to toil in prison factories and camps, and half being sent to work just behind the front lines. Anguished Belgian letters and diaries from the period tell of being forced to work for the *Zivilarbeiter-Bataillone*, repairing damaged infrastructure, laying railway tracks, even manufacturing weapons and other war materiel for their enemies. Some were even forced to work in the support lines at the Front itself, digging secondary and tertiary trenches as Allied artillery fire exploded around them.

In all of this, then, it would seem that there is plenty that deserves the benefit of modern memory.

How, then, might it be best to remember this suffering? What place might it play in the ongoing debate over just

what tone and tenor the upcoming centenaries should take? The advent of the hundredth anniversaries of so many events provides an ideal moment for reflection and re-evaluation -- particularly when it comes to things that "everyone knows." It is now a commonplace that "everyone knows" the British state and news media lied about German atrocities in Belgium to maintain popular support for the British war effort, but it is well past time to re-examine what we think we know about those lies and that support.

Alan Kramer and John Horne, in their magisterial volume on this subject (*German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*; 2001), have painstakingly reconstructed the reality behind the propaganda in a way that should leave no reader in doubt. Through years of careful archival research they have reached the conclusion that there was indeed a systematic program of civilian executions -- sometimes en masse -- conducted in Belgium, by the German army, with the purpose of breaking the spirit of resistance and striking terror into the heart of the population. The anniversaries of the worst of these catastrophes are upon us; on August 23rd, 1914 -- ninety-nine years ago tomorrow -- the German army took revenge upon the Belgian city of Dinant for what it falsely believed to be the actions of Belgian *francs-tireurs* ("free-shooters", or non-military partisans). This revenge took the form of the burning of over a 1,000 buildings and the execution of some 674 civilians. The oldest among them was in his 90s; the youngest was barely a month old. These civilians were killed in a variety of ways. Some were bayoneted, others burned alive; most were bound, put up against walls, and then executed by a volley of rifle fire -- all in reprisal for something that *had not actually happened*. Two days later (August 25th), the same spirit of reprisal played out again elsewhere -- [in Leuven](#).

It is important to note, in closing, that we need not examine events such as those described above and come away with nothing but a "[Blame Germany](#)" perspective. Alan Kramer has convincingly shown in his 2007 follow-up volume, *Dynamics of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, that the increasing radicalization of military occupation was a feature of the war to be found in numerous theatres, not solely in Belgium or solely at the end of a German gun. As ever, it is very hard for anyone involved in the war to come away with their hands clean.

Nevertheless, with the transnational turn that has been taken by much of First World War historiography in recent decades and the centenary-inspired willingness to re-evaluate long-held assumptions about the war's meaning and conduct, it is perhaps well past time for the wartime sufferings of Belgium and her people to move out of the realm of convenient fiction and back into that of uncomfortable fact.

Suggested Readings:

- Kramer, Alan and John Horne. *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (2001).
- Kramer, Alan. *Dynamics of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*(2007).
- Stibbe, Matthew ed. *Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration in Europe During the First World War* (2009).
- Thiel, Jens. *'Menschenbassin Belgien': Anwerbung, Deportation und Zwangsarbeit in Ersten Weltkrieg*

- (2007).
- Hull, Isabel V. *Absolute destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (2005).
 - Jones, Heather. *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France, and Germany, 1914-1920* (2011).

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