Chapter 1: Introduction

Topic and Research Questions

Many books have been written about why soldiers of the various armies of the Great War - French, British, German and others - were able to continue fighting under the harsh conditions in the trenches, despite the length of the war, with the soldiers nearly always on or near the battlefield. In the case of the Russians after the 1917 Revolution and the French during the 1917 mutinies, we examine why they stopped fighting. Comradeship among soldiers, personal honor, sense of duty to their country, and many other factors have been used to explain why men fought regardless of how bad the circumstances.

At the beginning of war, soldiers have an abstract image of the enemy, says Richard Holmes, but the “concept of hateful and inhuman enemy rarely survives contact with him as an individual,” and “[s]oon, far from hating his enemy, the soldier may come to respect him for his fighting qualities.” Joanna Bourke finds that “[m]any historians, psychologists, and military commentators shared the assumption that hatred was crucial in inciting the desire to kill and enabling individuals to act upon this urge.” She disagrees, and thinks love for one’s fellow soldiers is a more powerful motivator. She looks at soldiers’ hatred for the enemy, and concludes that hatred depends on two things: “physical and psychological proximity of the foe and combat experience.” The further away, the more likely one was to hate the enemy, according to Bourke.

Often books on the First World War are short on the attitudes of the fighting soldiers toward their enemies, and follow books on war such as the one Holmes wrote: when the two

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sides encountered each other, the other side became human again; they felt that they were in similar conditions, living in the same environment, facing the same hardships. Thus, they had no hatred toward the enemy anymore; on the contrary, they often had respect for the enemies’ fighting skills, according to a lot of writers. Bourke writes that: “mass entrenched armies of the First World War were much more liable to engender feelings of respect and affection than in faster-paced conflicts between 1939 and 1945 and in Vietnam.”3 This thesis asks the question, was this also true in the Belgian case during the First World War?

Outside of Belgium itself, scholarship has often left Belgium out of the picture when talking about the First World War, except for the first month of the war, with the “Rape of Belgium.” The use of Belgium in propaganda in Britain and the United States has received a lot of attention. Examination of the military, including its soldiers and civilians, has been lacking, especially during the war.4 Only very recently has more interest been shown by scholars in what happened in Belgium, in works such as Jeff Lipkes’ Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914 (2007) and John Horne and Alan Kramer’s German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial (2001) about what happened during the invasion, respectively from Belgian and German sources. Larry Zuckerman’s The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I (2004) deals with the occupation of Belgium.5

Belgium was in certain ways a special case among the armies on the Western Front. Before the war it was neutral and had no serious conflicts with its neighboring countries, such as France for example had with Germany over Alsace-Lorraine. Belgium felt safe because of its

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3 Ibid., 363.
neutrality, and did not spend much on its military. After the German invasion only a very small part of the Belgian territory remained unoccupied. The Belgian army was pushed back by the Germans behind the Yser River, in the most western part of Belgium, after defeats at the forts of Liege, Namur and Antwerp. At the Yser, together with the French and British, they stopped the Germans, and then flooded large areas by opening the floodgates of the Yser at Nieuport to make it impossible for the Germans to attack any longer. A breakthrough was made impossible.

Communication between those in free Belgium and those in exile, including soldiers, and occupied Belgium was difficult. Soldiers could not go back home, or even go to their country when they were on leave, as the soldiers in other armies on the Western Front did. This was a situation that made it nearly impossible to accurately assess what was going on in occupied Belgium, which was very straining to the Belgian soldiers. Driving the Germans out of their almost completely occupied country was always a clear goal. Additionally, the Belgian government in exile in Le Havre was totally dependent on foreign loans and aid to sustain itself for the duration of the war.

Unlike the other armies on the Western Front, the Belgian army did not participate in any major attacks until the very end of the war. The Belgian King Albert wanted to preserve and rebuild his small army after the grueling losses of 1914, inflicted by the fights after the German invasion at the forts of Liege, Namur, Antwerp, and the First Battle of Ypres, 10-31 October 1914. As a result, he did not support any of the attacks the British or French allies launched. His was probably, as one scholar said, the only army that was better off at the end of the war than at the beginning, both in material and men. But many smaller attacks were made by both German and Belgian troops between the First Battle of Ypres in 1914 and the final offensive which started for the Belgians on September 28, 1918. In this long period between these two

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major attacks, soldiers got impatient and wanted to do something to speed up the removal of the Germans from their country so they could go home. When the general offensive finally came, Belgian soldiers were glad that they finally could contribute to the removal of the Germans from their home country. Did this relative inactivity influence how soldiers looked at the enemy?

The Belgian front began in Nieuport and extended to just before Ypres where the English took over. (France had a small part at the coast by Nieuport, and a part between the Belgian and English armies for awhile.) The Belgian front had quiet sectors, but also very active and dangerous parts, such as the sector around Dixmude where the Germans were very close to the Belgian trenches. In this respect, this part of the front was much like the rest of the Western Front.

Among Belgians, there were very hostile feelings towards Germany after the ultimatum they sent to Belgium for free passage through their country, which had been neutral since independence in 1830, obligated by a treaty that was co-signed by Prussia and the other major European powers of the time, France and Britain. During the invasion, many villages and buildings were destroyed. Inhabitants were badly treated during the whole occupation, but especially during the invasion, when about 5,000 civilians were killed. A significant part of the population fled from the Germans during the invasion. Around 200,000 people fled to both France and Britain; one million people went to the Netherlands. During the war, the number of refugees in the Netherlands and Britain dropped in December 1914 to 125,000 and 150,000 respectively. In France the number increased to 325,000 in November 1918. Hatred for the Germans was intense during this period.

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7 Lipkes, 5.
By November 1914, nearly the whole of Belgium was occupied by the Germans and the war became stalemated. This lasted for the duration of the war. Belgians had to undergo German rule and also the blockade that the Allies established against the Germans. This meant that the Belgian population had to endure the same hardship and shortages as the Germans, only with second-class status. One question to be examined is whether the Belgian fighting men knew about this and how. What did they think about this?

During the First World War, the Germans introduced many new weapons and tactics, some of which were used on the Belgian front: gas, airplanes, Zeppelins, bigger caliber guns, and others. These caused a lot of fear and suffering. Did the soldiers have more hatred toward the enemy for introducing/using them? Did they see the Germans as inhuman, different from them for using such weapons?

In Belgium there were two languages spoken, French and Dutch (Flemish), but at the time only French was used in the government, education and other official aspects of life. Even before the war, protest against suppression of the Flemish language was rising. In the army, French was necessary to get a promotion. Only at the end of the war, when the Flemish issue became a problem, were the officers required to pass a test in the Flemish language (a very easy one at that).

The Germans tried to use this division between the French and Flemish speakers to persuade the Flemish to cooperate with them. Those who agreed to work with the Germans were called Activists, including groups such as Jong-Vlaanderen in Ghent. Some Flemish soldiers might have viewed their own (French-speaking) officers with more hatred than they did the enemy. One example was Joris Van Severen, a Flemish nationalist, who near the end of the war was very hostile toward the Belgian military leadership. Another question to be examined is how the French-speaking soldiers reacted to this. Were they suspicious of Flemish sympathies?
Soldiers in unoccupied Belgium or France had little or no contact with the civilian population of Belgium during the war. Official letters in and out of Belgium were censored. Of course, a lot of illegal smuggling of letters was done. In the letters that did come from occupied Belgium, people heard that the Germans were very harsh, for example deporting part of the male population to work in Germany. Rumors and worries about what was being done by Germans in occupied Belgium spread through the army. On the other hand, disillusionment with war in the civilian population possibly had less effect on the Belgian army than it did on other armies, simple because there was so little contact between the army in unoccupied Belgian and the civilian population in occupied territory.

This study is about what the soldiers thought about the enemy, the Germans. Did those views change over time? Did the fact that the major part of the country was occupied affect the view of the soldiers? Did the actions of the Germans change their views? Did the non-involvement of Belgium in major battles play a role? What other issues influenced them? And, most importantly, did their views affect their willingness to continue to fight? These are the questions this thesis will examine.

Secondary Sources

The First World War is seen by many nowadays as an unnecessary and wasteful war. Many young lives were lost during its four years of fighting. This is the memory of the Great War, as explained in A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture (1991) by Samuel Lynn Hines. For years, the main focus of historians of the Great War, as with most other wars of the past, was on the battles and leaders of the warring nations, civilian and military, and how they “mismanaged” or won the war. John Keegan’s Face of Battle (1978) changed the way historians viewed war. He started looking at war from the perspective of the individual soldier.
Over the years, historians have delved deeper into the lives of the soldiers who actually fought the wars. Many, including Niall Ferguson in *Pity of War* (1999), have tried to explain why the soldiers of the First World War kept on fighting despite overwhelming hardships, death and a multitude of other reasons to quit. The focus of this research has mainly been on the French and British armies.\(^8\)

The reasons to fight in the war are mainly comradeship and trust between the soldiers, which made them willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the group, and the leadership of junior officers. Dennis Winter finds that the “small group unit” was the “strongest single sustaining force in the war.” Group cohesion and personal honor were not enough, according to Holmes; leadership over the soldiers was needed. Officers’ example, says Winter, could turn soldiers “into heroes or rabbits.” Other reasons were personal honor, the feeling of duty toward one’s country, just cause (the liberation of Belgium, for example) and the tensions/thrill of combat. Supplies of food, leave to go home or other places, decent clothing and shelter improved men’s will to continue. There were also what Ferguson calls “sticks,” the enforcement of discipline through force. Some men (around two percent, according to Dave Grossman) just enjoyed fighting and killing; it was in their nature.\(^9\)

The attitude of live and let live, as viewed by Tony Ashworth, is thought to explain why there were sectors on the front where fighting was very rare. A sort of agreement between the fighting men was reached, very often tacitly, rarely explicitly, not to use violence except as retaliation when first attacked by the opponent. Abiding by the rules of live and let live was in the best interest of the soldiers, namely self-preservation. This way, quiet sectors were created,

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where soldiers could get away from the fighting. The absence of violence allowed the soldiers to live a “normal” life, and recharge themselves. This was certainly not the view of all people at that time. Sir Douglas Haig, for example, tried to make every part of the front an active one by fostering the offensive spirit in the British army. Every chance to attack the enemy had to be taken. Raids, small scale attacks, were the best tactic to achieve this for Haig. There has been discussion about the scale on which this system was active. Ferguson agrees with the principles of the “live and let live” system, but argues that it did not spread to large portions of the armies. Thus, there is some disagreement among scholars about the soldiers’ attitude toward the enemy. Did it start a vicious circle of retaliation?

Scholars, including Ashworth, argue that being close to the enemy led to identification with the enemy. Soldiers could hear the enemy laugh, sing, have breakfast and all their other daily routines. Fraternization, the most famous instance being the Christmas of 1914, was made possible because of the short distance and long period of time the soldiers spent there. This influenced their views about enemy soldiers, seeing them as more human than people in the rear.

One explanation for the lack of collapse of the morale in the British army is the particular style of English entertainment, according to J.G. Fuller. Sports and music hall type of entertainment behind the lines provided the men with some distraction and kept the morale of the British troops high. Other armies, including the Belgian army, did not have anything similar of this magnitude (although they did have smaller local versions). This explained for Fuller why all the other armies, except Britain, had breakdowns or collapses of morale and the will to fight.

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11 Niall Ferguson, 343-344.
on. Although Belgium is not mentioned in his account, it did not suffer any serious breakdown either, despite the frustration the Flemish felt over their treatment by the French-speaking leadership.\textsuperscript{13}

In many of these secondary accounts, the view of the enemy held by soldiers is often only briefly mentioned. They say that soldiers were more worried about their own individual situation, and rarely got to see the enemy who, like them, was hiding in their own trenches. Even when they thought about the enemy it was with some empathy, because all had to survive in similar situations. No hatred was felt for the other side; they even felt respect for the fighting capabilities of the opponent.

The German brutalities against Belgians at the beginning of the war, mainly in the first month, were used in the Allied propaganda to portray the enemy as barbarians, to stimulate recruitment, bond sales, and hostility toward the enemy, and convince neutrals to join their side. Often they were exaggerated to be more effective.\textsuperscript{14} How and to what extent propaganda influenced soldiers is not examined extensively by scholars. Some think it did have an effect, even if only on a subconscious level. This seems especially the case early in the war when emotions were at a peak. Later on, the soldiers seemed to have had less and less trust in what was said on the home front (or, for Belgian soldiers, the exiles in the countries of the Allied Powers), which was basically seen as propaganda by those who had no idea what was going on at the front.\textsuperscript{15}

The Germans tried to use the conflicts between the French- and Dutch-speaking people of Belgium for their own purposes. In occupied Belgium they had a Flamenpolitik. For the soldiers at the front, signs and pamphlets were used to convince the Flemish that they were on

\footnote{J.G. Fuller, \textit{Troop morale and popular culture in the British and Dominion armies 1914-1918} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1-7.}

\footnote{Lipkes, 17.}

the same side as the Germans, and that the French speakers were against them. Not very much
has been said about this, except that it was self-serving. German propaganda did not seem to
have a big influence on Belgian soldiers.16

Methodology and Sources Used

Most of the primary source materials that will be used to examine these questions are
in published diaries, memoirs and letters of soldiers who fought in the First World War. They are
in French, Dutch and English. The ones in English are mostly translated from French. Some of the
Dutch ones are also translations from French, which was the only language that was taught in
schools in Belgium at that time, so even Dutch speakers were often more comfortable writing in
French than in Dutch. Two books were written in both French and Dutch. One of them is by Van
Severen, a Flemish nationalist. The author is known to have had sympathy for the Flemish cause
and tried to write in Dutch for awhile, but he gave up after a short period of time, because he
felt that he could not express himself as well in Dutch as in French.17

The authors of these diaries, memoirs and letters are from all parts of Belgium, Flanders,
Wallonia and Brussels, about 25 different authors in total (see bibliography). They served in all
services of the army, infantry, artillery, air forces, behind the lines as attendants at hospitals.
Even the head of the Belgian army, King Albert I contributed his writings. So they will provide a
representative survey to test whether there were differences in region or service. Several of
these authors changed service during the war, to avoid the front lines, or in one case because he
was injured and found unfit for service on the front lines, even though he would rather have

16 Sophie De Schaepdrijver, De Grote Oorlog: Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog
(Amsterdam: Atlas, 1997), 211.
17 Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, Journal de campagne 1914-1917, Oorlogdagboek van een
hulpdokter bij het Belgische leger (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1968); Joris Van Severen, Die
returned. A number of the authors were promoted to officer during the war. A few refused promotion, at least for a while.\textsuperscript{18}

There are potential problems with the sources. For example, most of the written material is from educated people, students and religious figures. This leaves out the uneducated, the ordinary soldiers, who were particularly from Flanders, where most lived in small towns or rural areas and many were (nearly) illiterate. The situation was better in the Walloon part of Belgium, which was richer because of its heavy industry, and had a better education system.\textsuperscript{19} Several of the books, however, were written by people in the infantry who had close contact with these uneducated classes. Sometimes they indicate what their comrades said and thought. The question is whether we can also assume that similar environment and daily contact meant, to a certain extent, that they shared similar thoughts and feelings.

For this study, additional sources besides diaries and letters written during the war include memoirs made after the war, works of fiction based on experience in the war, and a trench paper called \textit{De Stem van Opwijk}. All these accounts are by Belgian soldiers of the First World War. Diaries and letters are the best sources. They show the thoughts and feelings that the writer had at that time, although there is always the possibility that they were changed by editing later on by the author or others. Because of censorship and wanting to spare the feelings of the reader, letter writers censored themselves, leaving out the bad and emphasizing the good. Memoirs are written after the fact and are vulnerable to changes of view influenced by events and thoughts that happened later. Fictional accounts have the same problems. These tales never really happened, but can still give us an insight into how the soldier who wrote them experienced and felt the war.

\textsuperscript{18} Van Severen, 330.
Another problem with all of these types of sources is selectivity. All of the sources used are published. As a result, certain preference could have been given by the publishers to accounts that are marketable. Enough time has passed that this should not be a big issue. Also individuals, often the family of the author, privately published their relatives’ writing to honor the memory of those who fought during the war. Hence, they tended to be more positive accounts.

Other possible sources not available at this time include newspapers (trench and regular ones), artwork by soldiers, propaganda and official training manuals. Trench newspapers and art could give additional information about the thoughts and feelings of ordinary soldiers. The other sources could show us the influences that help shape the soldiers’ minds. From the material already available, an outline of chapters can be established.