Chapter 2: Violation of Belgium

If the foreigner, in defiance of that neutrality whose demands we have always scrupulously observed, violates our territory, he will find all the Belgians gathered about their sovereign, who will never betray his constitutional oath, and their Government, invested with the absolute confidence of the entire nation. – King Albert in a speech to the Belgian Parliament on his refusal to let the Germans pass through.

Invasion of Belgium

Throughout history the area now comprising Belgium has been invaded and conquered by other nations, because of its strategic position in Europe. After the Napoleonic Wars, the territory that would later make up Belgium was taken away from France and added to the Netherlands in 1815. The inhabitants with their French-speaking elite were never satisfied with this new arrangement, in which they were subordinate to the Dutch-speaking government of the Netherlands. In 1830 they revolted against and broke off from the Netherlands. The conflict and negotiations dragged on until 1839, when an agreement under pressure of the five powers of Europe, especially the British, was finally reached between the two states. This treaty was backed by all the major powers of the time, Austria, Russia, France, Prussia and Great Britain. One of its main provisions was that Belgium had to be a perpetually neutral state, protected by the major European powers.

At the time, Belgium had two language groups within its borders, the Dutch-speaking Flemish and the French-speaking Walloons. French was spoken by the elite and ruling class. It was used in state administration, education and the military. The majority of the people in Flanders and in municipal administration were Flemish. Flanders was agriculturally impoverished; Wallonia had heavy industry and was doing very well. When Flemish people

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moved to Wallonia they learned French. Flemish seemed doomed, because French was becoming ever more dominant, especially in Brussels, the capital of Belgium.

A small group of literary people in Flanders wrote their works in Flemish to support the language, such as De Leeuw van Vlanderen (1838) by Hendrik Conscience, about the Guldensporenslag, a battle between the Flemish and France in 1302 won by the Flemish.\(^2\) They had some literary successes, but their political aims were ignored. There were several reasons for this. Only the rich, who were mainly French-speaking, had a vote, and the Flemish movement did not speak to the ordinary population of Flanders; thus it lacked support, and Belgian politics was very divided into Catholics, mainly in Flanders, Liberals and Socialists, especially in Wallonia. In the latter half of the 19\(^{th}\) century Flemish influence grew, because of the increase in the population being allowed to vote. They recorded some successes during this time; a law such as in 1873 was approved on the use of Flemish in courts; in 1878 the law stated that people who worked for the state had to speak the language of the population they catered to. In 1883, a law for education was passed, and in the 1880s money, stamps and the official newspaper of the state, Staatsblad, became bilingual. In 1898, Flemish and French were recognized as being equal before the law, but this was only on paper; in practice equality still had to be obtained. The military remained a bastion for the French-speaking elite; no concessions were made there.\(^3\)

Next the Flemish movement wanted the University of Ghent to become completely Flemish. As they saw, it the rest of their aims would follow. Their main opponents were the French speaking elite in Flanders, who saw their own position threatened. They were able to mobilize a certain mass, especially among intellectuals and students. The Flemish movement


wanted to be able to use their own language in education and when dealing with the state. A few went even further, they wanted autonomy or separation. This was the situation right before the First World War broke out.

During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Belgium was able to stay on the sidelines, in accordance with the agreement of neutrality contained in the 1839 Treaty. Partly thanks to British pressure, because they feared one of combatants would try to annex Belgium, France and Germany signed an agreement to honor the treaty of 1839. Its soldiers only needed to patrol its borders to keep soldiers of the fighting states from crossing over into Belgium.4

Before the outbreak of the war in 1914, the attitude toward Germany varied widely among the Belgian population. Some admired their eastern neighbor, others particularly disliked them. It is not surprising to find both these opinions in the men that later fought in the war. Arthur Pasquier, a Walloon and a brilliant engineering student from the French-speaking part of Belgium, notes in his diary that Germany was not well liked by the general public, even before the war started.5 Others professed their admiration for pre-war Germany openly, as did writer Ernest Claes and medical student Joseph De Cuyper.6 The latter even admits in his diary that he respected the superior German military. He stresses that many did not think that a war would occur until it had become inevitable with the ultimatum, and that shocked everyone, including the Belgian government. Some, like De Cuyper, could not believe what was happening, even while it was unfolding right in front of his own eyes; until the very last minute he did not think that the Germans would attack France and Belgium. When it finally happened, his response was:

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“What a disillusion!” and “Germany is so arrogant.” There was some leaning toward Germany in the Flemish movement, because of church-and-state politics as much as German virtue, but not everyone agreed with these tendencies. Cardinal Mercier opposed them. Support for the Flemish cause often came from German ultranationalists, which was a problem for some Belgians. 

In 1914, while the events after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the mobilization of the Russian and German armies were escalating into a full-blown war, the Belgians thought that they could do the same thing they had done in the Franco-Prussian war, stand on the sidelines. They were confident that their neutrality, backed by the treaty of 1839, which was signed by all the major powers to avoid a struggle over a region that was positioned strategically in the center of Europe, and reinforced by the experience of the Franco-Prussian War, would be respected. Jozef Muls, a lawyer from Antwerp, recalled: “But the general mobilization was only to guard the border as in the year [18]70, to take weapons from deserting enemy soldiers and make them respect our neutrality.”

Following this view, it is not surprising that Belgium had not done more, earlier, to reform and strengthen its military, which was clearly lacking compared to neighboring European countries that had been in an arms race during the previous decades. Their field army only had a tenth of the men of the German army, official 145,000, but 40,000 did not respond to mobilization. Additionally, there were 14,000 professional soldiers, 65,000 soldiers at the forts, and token amounts of machine guns (102) and artillery (324), much of which was part of the

7 Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper. 5.
fortifications around Antwerp and Liege that were built in the previous century.\textsuperscript{10} By comparison, in 1912, the neutral Swiss spent 50 percent more on defense, the Dutch double, and the French four times the amount the Belgians spent.\textsuperscript{11} Reform of the army was opposed especially by the antimilitaristic wing of the Catholic Party under Charles Woeste. According to Michael F. Palo, “the tradition of Catholic antimilitarism, doctrinaire Liberal parsimony, bourgeois complacency, and Socialist hostility” slowed down all efforts at reform that would have greatly increased the manpower of the Belgian army.\textsuperscript{12} Eventually new army reforms came in two stages. On December 1, 1909, partial conscription, one son per family, had to join the army for 15 months. This proposal by Joseph Hellebaut was accepted by Parliament and signed by King Leopold II, a proponent of a strong military, on his deathbed. On August 13, 1913, general conscription became law, and this would increase the army’s manpower to 340,000 from 180,000 by 1920, thus too late for the coming war.\textsuperscript{13}

Unknown to most in Belgians and the outside world, the German General Staff, headed by Von Schlieffen, had designed a plan to defeat France in the case of a war in which Germany would have to fight on two fronts. France and Russia had entered a military alliance in 1892 after the failure of Germany to renew Bismarck’s Reinsurance Treaty of 1887 during the 1890s. With the rise of Germany, Great Britain also drew closer to France. In this plan the German army would march through neutral Belgium, which in Germany’s opinion would offer no or minimal resistance, to avoid the forts on the French-German border and outflank the French armies and defeat them in less than six weeks. Germany could then move their troops to the Russian front. They believed the Russians would need at least that long to mobilize their troops, something

\textsuperscript{11} Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 101.
\textsuperscript{13} Ferguson, 101-102.
that they thought might pose a challenge to them in the near future, as Russia was rapidly developing their railroads, industry and army.\textsuperscript{14}

![Schlieffen Plan Diagram]

\textbf{Figure 2.1: Schlieffen Plan}\textsuperscript{15}

William E. Lingelbach states that the Schlieffen plan was leaked to France in 1904, and they talked with Belgium and Britain about defense against Germany. Lipkes adds that both King Leopold II and King Albert, and Belgian military attachés, were warned about the German danger. Also Baron Napoleon Eugene Louis Beyens, minister to Germany, said he had been warned on several occasions. Common civilians, in their writings, declared that the ultimatum came as a surprise to them.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} http://www.1914-1918.net/MAPS/schlieffen.JPG.

With tensions between the great powers of Europe peaking and war a real possibility, Belgium sent its troops to its border areas, as it had done in 1870. To uphold an appearance of neutrality, the Belgians decided to treat all surrounding countries equally, and thus an equal number of troops were dispatched to positions facing Britain, France and Germany, regardless of where the greatest threat was thought to be. Only after Germany removed all possible doubt about its intentions toward Belgium, with the ultimatum demanding free passage through Belgium, were the soldiers stationed at the French border moved to the German border.17

On August 2nd, Germany sent an ultimatum to the Belgian government via its minister to Belgium, Karl-Konrad von Below-Saleske, with only 12 hours to decide. Although it had been drawn up on July 26, 1914, the ultimatum was presented as if it had only recently been drafted. The Germans argued that the French army was already in Belgium and threatened them, and they had to react.18 The Belgians faced a grim choice. They could allow the German army to pass through their territory on its way to France as the Schlieffen plan had stipulated, and after the war Belgium would be restored to its former form and get compensation from Germany for all the damage done. Allowing them to pass now would violate the neutrality that was so dear to Belgium, so the other option was to try to fight them off despite the German forces’ vastly superior numbers, both in men and material, which in peacetime alone was 761,000 men. Belgium only had 48,000.19

King Albert, the administration, including Prime Minister Charles de Broqueville, ministers of state who were appointed by the king, including leading members of Parliament and senior diplomats, and two leading generals, the army’s chief of staff, General Antoine de

17 Frank Gericke, De Val van Antwerpen. Een Vlaming in den Oorlog, http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/French/Slagveld_01.htm; Zuber argues that the Americans, British and Belgians had already come to the conclusion that Germany would go through Belgium in the event of a war. Zuber, 262-305.
18 Fromkin, 246.
19 Ferguson, 92.
Moranville, and second in command General Louis de Ryckel, met in several meetings to discuss how they were going to respond. Woeste and his brother-in-law, Baron Jules Greindl, a senior diplomat, wanted a cautious approach, replying to the Germans that their information about French movements into Belgium were incorrect. Eventually they gave in to what all the other members of the meeting wanted, a firm reply denying Germany entrance into their country. They also discussed the state of the army, which was severely lacking, and military options either to send the whole army to the Meuse or engage the Germans in the center of Belgium and pull back to Antwerp. Belgium chose to defend its neutrality, and its population stood squarely behind their government’s decision to defend its neutrality. Germany invaded on August 4, 1914.  

The ultimatum and violation of Belgian neutrality caused serious consternation among the Belgian population, including its soldiers. Very few had seen this turn of events coming and most were very shocked when it did. Hostile reactions toward the Germans following these events quickly arose in many places. Citizens gathered together to show their support for their country. Animosity toward the violator was everywhere. In these conditions it was no wonder that acts of protest sometimes turned violent; anyone or anything that seemed even remotely related to Germany was attacked. Rene De Decker, a student from Brussels who volunteered to join the army to fight against militarism in general (leaving unexplained what exactly he means), mentions in his diary that a bar called Café Munchenhaus changed its name because it sounded too German, which of course led to hostile reactions and invited violence. In Antwerp, Mul

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20 Lipkes, 21-38.
tells us that people “cried and yelled in front of German bars,” and that “signs fell to pieces, coat of arms of German companies were taken down.”

With the declaration of war by the Germans, all Belgians were united in their sentiments against the aggressor. Earlier divisions among themselves, linguistic or politic, were forgotten in the face of a common enemy. German actions following the invasion of Belgium, as we will see, just amplified these feelings of solidarity. Frank Gericke expresses it this way: “Stories of German atrocities provoked our combined hatred and united us in fear of what we loved: our home, our relatives and our friends.” King Albert asked, in a call in the Belgian Staatsblad of August 7, 1914, that the Flemish remember the Guldensporenslag, a battle the Flemish fought in 1302 against the French, and the Walloons the 600 Franchimontezen, 600 men from Franchimont who launched a surprise attack against the Duke of Bourgondie and King Louis XI of France at Liege on October 28, 1468:

Caesar told you forefathers: Of all peoples of Gaul, the Belgians were the bravest. Fame for you, army of the Belgian people. Before the enemy, I remind you that you are fighting for freedom and your threatened homes. Remember you Flemish, the Guldensporenslag, and you Liege Walloons that at this moment the honor of the 600 Franchimontese is yours. I am leaving Brussels to lead you. Done at the palace of Brussels, on August 5, 1914. Albert. This was a call for unity against the invader, and the leaders of the Flemish movement accepted a stop to the agitation and joined the fight against the invader; a unity was formed. Despite the treatment the Flemish soldiers received the unity held until 1916, when it started to start to crumble.

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23 Lipkes, 27.
Everyone, both those who had pro or contra Germany feelings before the war, now agreed that the invasion, the violation of Belgian neutrality, was an atrocious act. The whole population turned against the Germans. Pasquier, an engineering student with a motorcycle who volunteered his services to the army, writes that he wonders what the Belgians ever did to Germany to deserve such barbaric treatment. The diplomatic language of the ultimatum before the invasion was just mere sweet talk, he says; nothing they had said or done had been sincere. He could not believe they would do such a thing, and like many others had a hard time believing it at first. After the attack, he was happy to see the enthusiasm that the population showed for the war and their willingness to fight against the aggressor.26

There is no doubt that Germany was now hated by nearly everyone in Belgium. Many agreed that their behavior was scandalous. Extreme opinions among the population, both civilian and military, became widespread and were certainly not exceptional anymore. People as different as Van Severen, a very passionate student who was called to arms in September 1914 and a Flemish nationalist who would later be a leader of the Flemish movement, and Pasquier, a Walloon engineering student, both inspired by Germany culture such as Goethe before the war, now thought 1914 “the year that knew the most outrageous crime against humanity, civilization, justice, good and charity.”27 Frans Van Meerbeek, a journalist, described the German aggression as “cunning violence of the powerful on earth steps on the pride of the humble king, and is going to destroy a courageous small people. A promise-breaker is going to attack the innocent.”28 Raoul Snoeck, son of an influential publishing family in Ghent, argued that Germany forced the war onto innocent Belgium and for this they needed to be punished. He even yelled:

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26 Pasquier, 26.
“Death to the Germans and hurray to the war!” All positive images of Germany had by now disappeared.

On the morning of August 5, 1914, in Brussels, Geo Drains went out to volunteer to join the army to fight for his home country. He was not the only one there. The street where the recruitment office was located was packed with people waiting to volunteer. In his diary, Drains wrote: “The street is packed with people and each moment the crowd grows bigger, surging, impatient.” O. Bartelemy noticed that volunteers were eager to fight, “most of them are from Liege, Namur and Brussels and demand to avenge their city.” But they were stuck at training camp. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, 40,000 men did not show when called upon for the army. As historians have noticed in other countries, war enthusiasm was more likely in big cities; people living in the countryside were not as interested, perhaps thinking of what would happened to their land if a war broke out. For example, in Germany, according to Jeffrey Verhey, Berlin saw the biggest crowds; there were also parades in other big cities. The crowds in support of war consisted mainly of university students and well-to-do Burgers. Only very rarely were there demonstrations in the countryside, where farmers feared losing men to the war, especially because it was harvest time.

After the fact, one soldier concluded that Belgium had been naïve, and had put too much faith in the loyalty of Germans and in Belgian neutrality. Another soldier remembers that Belgium had ordered and paid for cannons from Germany right before the war, which would

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now of course be used against their original owners. Others even changed history to suit their new views and attitudes toward the Germans. Maurice Gauchez, a journalist who was “embedded” with the Belgian army for a short period, and was in frequent contact with the troops, claimed that the Prussians had infiltrated Belgian society before the war, in trade, commerce, banks. As ‘proof’ he remembered a banquet in honor of the Kaiser at which a toast was made to “our pacifistic emperor.” He also writes that there were numerous German weapons depots in Belgium, built before the war and used during the invasion. Even until March 1918, the last year of the war, Captain Raymond wrote in this correspondence with his Canadian *marraine* that “an international exposition was held in 1912 and the Boches did not hesitate to cunningly exploit it for their future occupation [...] Two years later, in 1914, unfortunately they were there, their entrance!”

These narratives probably came into being because of the shock of the invasion and the perceived German brutality. The Germans could not be other than treacherous, cruel and mean, and Belgians extrapolated this to be true even before the war had started. To achieve this, they retrospectively gave a new interpretation to some events of the past. These stories, like many rumors of events to come, were passed around among the men.

For some, Kaiser Wilhelm II, head of the German state, was the main culprit who bore most of the responsibility, and they blamed him for the unlawful invasion of their country. They saw him as the main perpetrator of this horrendous crime. One of the people who held this point of view was Van Severen, who while looking at a book of Goethe on his desk proclaimed

36 “Godmother,” used for foreign women to whom the soldiers wrote as a penpal.
that the Kaiser was a “mad materialistic fool of a king” who, among other things, he argued, had ordered the assassination of Karl Liebknecht.\textsuperscript{38}

Others blamed rampant German militarism for the recent events. De Decker said he joined the Belgian army to fight against militarism. In his mind, Germany was the very worst case, and thus fighting against the Germans was a good place to start his quest against militarism. After a cancelled military parade, he writes “soldierly innocence, the army is the opposite of civilization. More than ever I am anti-militarist, convinced that this stance is only possible with the destruction of the German ‘Kultur’, the first phase of my anti-militaristic program.”\textsuperscript{39} All agreed that the war was solely caused by Germany, not the other powers. Germany’s reason for invading, the encirclement of Germany by other European powers like France and Russia and its danger to Germany, was not believed by anyone.

The role that regular German troops played in the events is far more ambiguous for Belgian soldiers. Frederik Deflo notes in \textit{De literaire oorlog: de Vlaamse prozaliteratuur over de Eerste Wereldoorlog} (1991) that soldiers had views on the “abstract German,” but not really on real individual Germans whom they were very unlikely to meet or even see up close in person.\textsuperscript{40} For example, as Claes states, the German army did not consist of just German soldiers, but also Poles and other nationalities, but we can assume that most Belgian soldiers did not even consider this possibility.\textsuperscript{41} Some thought German soldiers did not really want to fight with the Belgians at all, only the French. Lambert Paredis heard a German soldier say: “Look here, 50 bullets: 49 for the French and one for the Crown Prince. None for the Belgians.”\textsuperscript{42} Other

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Van Severen, 21.
\item De Decker, 29, 41.
\item Frederik Deflo, \textit{De literaire oorlog: de Vlaamse prozaliteratuur over de Eerste Wereldoorlog} (Aartrijke: Decock, 1991), 113.
\item Claes, \textit{Namen 1914}, 99.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Germans, including three officers, said that it would better if they killed the Kaiser and saluted the Belgian soldiers.\(^{43}\) When they took two German soldiers as prisoners, Frans Verstraeten thought of them: “They were brave people, you could see that, they had to fight against their will ... it was like that.”\(^{44}\) Others like Hendrik Geuzen differed in their opinion: “give them all that you can because they are barbarians; they kill and burn everything when they are not treated well.”\(^{45}\) The longer the invasion lasted and the more “atrocities” happened, the more time stories had to spread among the soldiers, and the stronger their opinion became.

“Germans seemed surprised at the immensity of the catastrophe,” notes one soldier.

Overwhelmed by the consequences of their own actions, the suffering and destruction through acts of war and the retaliations of francs-tireurs, they tried to help civilians, trying to alleviate their suffering. But at the first shot they heard, the soldier says, they went back to their previous attitude and blamed the Belgians who were present there, threatening them with reprisals. The Belgians replied to the Germans that they were in the same danger as they were. The Germans shut up after that, according to the soldier.\(^{46}\) In remembrance of civilians who attacked the Germany army in France during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, there was a popular idea of a widespread resistance in the civilian population. Additionally, in the words of Horne and Kramer, “absence of news created an information vacuum that was filled by official army communications. Inevitably, rumors flourished as soldiers spread myth and fantasy by word of mouth.”\(^{47}\) This was similar to the “atrocities” stories spread among the Belgian army where these “rumors” were on a lot of men’s minds.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{44}\) Elfnovembergroep, Van den grooten Oorlog (Malegijs Uitgave, n.d.), 8.
\(^{45}\) Ballings, 35.
\(^{46}\) Buffin, 61.
A German in civilian clothing was captured and imprisoned as a spy. He was sentenced to be executed. Martial Lekeux, a monk who had been an officer in the army long before the war and then rejoined the army as an officer, met him in prison. At first he was very hostile toward the German spy. But over time, he got to know the prisoner through several events better and better; the German became a person, a human again. Lekeux heard from the spy that he wanted to write a letter to his wife and concluded: “Well, suddenly it is not an enemy before me anymore: it is a man.” Close contact could dramatically change soldiers’ perspectives.

*German Army in Belgium*

The Germans entered Belgium near Gemmerick on August 4, 1914. The first skirmishes were fought close by Vise, a town next to the Meuse. The Belgians blew up the bridge across the Meuse near the town on the same day as the invasion. Villages like Berneau, Visé, Argenteau, Warsage en Moelingen saw destruction early on. In Warsage, the Germans did what many Belgian soldiers came to see as typical behavior of the Germans, they burned and destroyed large parts of the town, and killed six civilians for *francs-tireurs* acts. Throughout the German march through Belgium this destruction was repeated. Dinant, Leuven and other places met the same fate as Warsage. Many Belgian soldiers saw these actions or the results: destroyed towns and countless refugees fleeing before the Germans arrived, about one million to the Netherlands, over 300,000 each to France and Britain. For example, when the Belgians counterattacked from Antwerp on September 9, 1914, to force the Germans to choose between fighting them or the French at the Marne, they recaptured several towns and saw what had happened there. The effect this had on them was profound. Any hesitation they had had before about fighting the Germans soon disappeared. Many soldiers stiffened their attitude toward and

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resistance against the Germans. From the area involved in the two sorties from Antwerp, the “Aerschot-Malines-Vilvorde-Louvain Quadrangle,” as the Bryce Report calls it, where the two sides were involved in heavy fighting, there were many dubious reports from soldiers. Led by what they saw and the rumors they heard, these exaggerations were made, but they certainly believed them to be true.

Van de Walle, who came from a big working class family and had received very little education because he had to work from a young age to help his family, experienced the First World War as an infantryman. His story is retold by his son, who wrote down and published the stories he heard from his father during his childhood. He tells about the effects some of the actions of the Germans had on Belgian soldiers. Van de Walle and some of his fellow soldiers had their doubts about battling against the vastly superior German army, which had crushed every attempt to stop them. They thought seriously about going over the border to the Netherlands and sitting out the war there. On their retreat, they stayed at the house of a woodcutter, who treated them very well and served them rabbit with potatoes and apple juice, and good beer. They left, but the next day they knew that they would pass by the woodcutter’s again. They bought cigarettes for him and a small statue for his wife. When they arrived at their house to give the presents to the woodcutter and his wife who had been so kind to them, they found the door open and

in the living room lay the body of the man in a big pool of blood. He was stabbed with a lance in chest and stomach. In the well we found the corpses of his wife and daughter. On the ground were horse trails. Uhlans had killed these people. I could not get a word out of my mouth and became white with anger. Now deserting was out of the question. I will make the Germans pay.

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They would keep fighting the Germans until the end.\textsuperscript{50} The circumstances surrounding this event, the frequency with which this type of event occurred, or German army’s policy toward it, was not important for these men. It happened and, it influenced Belgian soldiers, who passed it on to others.

Another example is told by Claes, while on duty guarding a road from Champion to Namur. What seemed to be an endless stream of refugees fleeing from the Germans passing by him. It was a pitiful sight, one that numerous other soldiers saw, of children and the old fleeing from their homes, dragging along everything they could. He wrote that he heard the wildest rumors from the refugees, but did not go into detail any further. In the Battle of Namur, he was wounded and he sought shelter in the basement of a house in Boninne, a town nearby, together with many others. They did not dare come out for fear of what the Germans would do to them, even though they could hear that the battle was over. The newspapers had portrayed the Germans as savagely brutal, capable of any atrocities and cruelties. The situation in the basement rapidly became unbearable; there was no food, water or hygiene. Several of the soldiers died there because they did not get medical attention on time. Claes overcame his fear and got out of the basement he was hiding in and was soon afterward captured by the Germans.\textsuperscript{51}

While being brought away by his captors, he saw what the Germans had done to the village of Boninne. During the house searches they had stolen everything they could carry away, and destroyed the rest. He calls them a “gang of trespassers and thieves.”\textsuperscript{52} Claes declares that he had loved Germany more than any other country before he saw what they were capable of doing. Before this eye-opener, he had joined the army mostly as his duty, to defend his country.

\textsuperscript{50} Gaston Van de Walle, \textit{Overleven in een grote Oorlog: herinneringen van een infanterist 1914-1918} (Erpe: Uitgeverij De Krijger, 1999), 13-14.
\textsuperscript{51} Claes, \textit{Namen 1914}, 77-79.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 88.
Any positive image he had left of the Germans had now been completely shattered. He was sent to a monastery that was turned into a hospital, where he was treated for his wound by the monks and German doctors. When he was healed, he was first imprisoned in Namur for 10 days under harsh circumstances, 11 men in a prison cell for only four, only one bed, one bucket as a toilet and one plate for all the men in the prison cell, before he was transported to a prisoner of war camp in Germany.53

The events in Van de Walle’s and Claes’ stories are not exceptional at all during this period of the war. Many Belgian soldiers experienced similar events. Jan De Nil saw a school that the Germans burned to the ground.54 When Pasquier went through Dendermonde on a march, he and his fellow soldiers reported that its houses were burned down, whole streets were destroyed. For the first time, he felt hatred for and disillusion with the Germans.55

Several military accounts of soldiers during the first months of the war in Brave Belgians, written by Baron Camille Buffin, dealt with the destruction they saw in Belgium done by the invaders. In one account a soldier saw an immense glow coming from Dinant, a town at the Meuse that had seen some fighting between French and German troops in which Charles de Gaulle was wounded. When it was sacked by the Germans, 674 civilians were killed for alleged francs-tireurs activities.

53 Ibid., 152-153.
55 Pasquier, 62.
Another soldier recalled seeing ruins everywhere. Many houses were destroyed; in some the people who had lived there died while still inside their houses when the Germans were sacking them. The horrors a Belgian soldier saw at Aerschot when he passed through after they retook it with an attack for Antwerp on September 9, 1914 to occupy German soldiers during the Battle of the Marne, roused anger among him and his fellow soldiers. They wanted to take revenge on the Germans for their unfortunate compatriots. One of them yelled out: “Vile Boches! I will pay them for it.” Paredis said of Aerschot: “Cadavers of horses and soldiers are only half buried. Everything is destroyed, and here too we heard from the few returned inhabitants the most gruesome histories and most unspeakable ones.” After seeing Termonde, Barthelemy describes his thoughts, shared with many others, as “no need to describe the
painful feelings the ruins provoke. We have firmly decided to make the Teutonic savages pay dearly for the devastations. ‘Termonde!’ That is our battle cry.”59

Real and rumored mistreatment by the Germans spread fear through the population. Streams of refugees fled from the battle area. Claes saw them pass by him when he was on duty, as mentioned earlier. Many others saw similar scenarios unfold in front of their eyes. In Brave Belgians, a soldier tells of the countless number of refugees that joined the army in its retreat, adding to the already chaotic situation. Another soldier speaks of an “exodus” and calls it the most heart-rending of all miseries of war, those which are inflicted on the weak and unoffending. Vast numbers of people were driven out of their villages by the “barbarians.”60 Many Belgian soldiers came in contact with the refugees; both were heading away from the German army. From Antwerp alone about a million people fled. Experiences and stories were exchanged, most of them sad and heart-rending.

59 Bartelemy, 75.
60 Buffin, 100, 109.
But fear of the perceived German brutality was not restricted to the general population; soldiers too were frightened, as seen from Claes’ experience. Many of those with him at the time preferred to stay in the hell of the basement rather than surrender to the anticipated treatment they would get from the Germans. This fear seems to have mainly come from encounters with the damage done by the Germans or secondhand stories from other soldiers or civilians. At the time, access to other sources to verify these stories was limited, especially for the soldiers, who were continually on the move.

The sight of so much destruction and the numerous rumors of German cruelty made many wonder if the Germans even cared at all about the destruction and harm they caused, be it military or civilian, as normal human beings like themselves would. In Pasquier’s opinion the enemy did not worry about military or civilian casualties at all.\textsuperscript{62} All means were good for the

\textsuperscript{62} Pasquier, 109.
Germans, thinks Snoeck. Van Meerbeek, who had heard many gruesome stories about their deeds, explained them as “[a]n enormous supremacy of cunning and cruel opponents, who enforced the coldhearted and unjust law of the right of the strongest ... killing defenseless women and old people and innocent children, sparing priests nor virgins and desecrating what was holy and respectable ...” There was clearly no doubt to him that they were cruel, devious, treacherous and unjust.

The thought of the Germans as different from themselves and their allies, capable of cruel and inhuman behavior, caused some Belgians to change past events to conform to this new perspective. One soldier compared the German and French bombing at Dinant. While both shelled the town, the French were careful and tried to use bombs in moderation. The Germans knew no limitations, according to this soldier: “their mad destructive rage sets out to respect nothing.” Another soldier describes Germans as follows: “One bomb, another bomb ... Ah, they do not sleep, those Germans! During the night they look for the demonic weapon that will kill us.” In the next chapter, on trench warfare, we will see that many soldier held this view of their opponents.

As mentioned before, Belgian soldiers also heard stories from others, newspapers, soldiers and civilians alike. It is not always clear if all these events really happened or if they were mere rumors, but the soldiers very often believed them to be true, because of their own anxieties and the destruction they saw that war had brought. Thus they had a real effect on the soldiers’ views and opinions. Lipkes, in his book on the actions of the Germans in Belgium in the first month of the war, especially in Liege, Aarschot, Andenne, Tamines, Dinant and Leuven,

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63 Snoeck, 91.
64 Van Meerbeek, 20, 23.
65 Gauchez, 104.
analyzes the Bryce Report, an investigation requested by the British government on alleged
German actions against civilians in Belgium during the invasion. Under the supervision of James
Bryce, it was published in May, 1915, and contained the testimonies in its appendix. Lipkes
uses a five point rating system, the most reliable testimonies get 5 and least get 1. His analysis
tells us that soldiers’ accounts were the least reliable among all testimonies. Ordinary citizens’
accounts were much more reliable. Soldiers’ accounts do tell of experiences ordinary citizens
cannot; soldiers had access to isolated places, or areas where citizens had been driven out.
Some towns were taken by the Belgians from the Germans, so the soldiers could see what had
happened there. Hofstade changed hands four times. Eighty-five percent of the testimonies on
Hofstade in the report were from soldiers. Lipkes concludes that it would have been better for
the Bryce Report’s credibility if they had not included soldiers’ accounts, although he still finds
their conclusions accurate.

These accounts are valuable for this study. They show how the Belgian soldiers thought
about their opponents during this phase of the war. The testimonies concerning Hofstade, 85
percent of them from soldiers, consisted mostly of soldiers’ testimonies involving implausible
atrocities, such as young children with their hands or feet chopped off, nailed to the side of a
house with a bayonet or dangling from a string, pregnant women bayoneted in the stomach.
The unreliability of their testimonies can be attributed to the higher intensity of their hatred
toward the enemy, combat experience, seeing the results of destruction of the war, and their
anxiety over their own fate and that of the families they had left behind.

While on a march, De Cuyper and his fellow soldiers heard a woman yelling that they
had killed her husband and son right before her eyes. Without being able to verify the

67 Bryce, James. The Bryce Report: Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages,
68 Lipkes, 698-704.
69 Ibid., 702.
truthfulness of this account, he tells us that: “That incident was painful for everyone.” Fritz Francken talks about horrendous stories committed by “[b]order crossing bandits,” killing of women who cannot defend themselves, the elderly, innocent children, priests, virgins. They “sacrilege everything that was holy and worth respecting.” One of the soldiers in one of the accounts in Brave Belgians tells us: “On seeing them [refugees], I was seized with fury against our relentless enemy, and I thought of my own family and of those I loved, whom I should perhaps never see again.” As this soldier does, Bartelemy and many others worried about their wives, girlfriends, and parents in now occupied Belgium and what was happening to them. All the rumors going around increased their anxieties.

Some dealings the Belgian soldiers had with the Germans made them very willing to believe nearly anything they heard about their opponents. G. and his comrade were shot at by Germans disguised as policemen. G. said to his friend: “one can expect anything from a bandit that tortures women and children.” In turn, his friend wondered if G. really believed that. With his reply, G. asked if his friend read the newspapers at all. To which his comrade answered: “Yes, but they were too horrible; I did not want to believe it ... Perhaps in individuals cases ...”

One day a group of Belgian soldiers entered a town where they found the body of a dead old man. The townspeople told them that the Germans killed him. They were so scared that they had hidden themselves in the hope that the Germans would not find them. The townspeople were very grateful to the soldiers, believing that the Germans only left because Belgian soldiers had come to their town, and so they were saved from certain death. The

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70 Joeseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 26.
71 Fritz Francken, De blijde kruisvaart : een blijmoedig verhaal (Amsterdam: Nederlandsche Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1929), 16.
72 Buffin, 239.
73 Bartelemy, 55.
74 ‘G.’ is the name he uses in his book; Fernand Hubert Grimauty, Six mois de guerre en Belgique par un soldat belge: Aout 1914-Fevrier 1915 (Paris, Perrin, 1920), 45.
soldiers were very angry over this incident: “It was the corpse of an old man of which the bandits had smashed the head, one hour earlier ... It is a flagrant crime, that made blood boil. It is the proof and certainty for all the crimes.” With this one experience, all stories, however horrible and gruesome, became believable to the men who had seen the corpse of the old man.

Grimauty also expressed the sentiments they felt at the time, “inextinguishable hatred.” He said that they would even pass this hatred on to their children.\(^75\) This one event that these soldiers experienced made all the other tales they had heard and read about the Germans believable.

All their experiences and others they heard about from other people reinforced their belief in their conception of the enemy and stories of atrocities committed by them. In the beginning, they still had access to newspapers, which often carried overly optimistic and exaggerated stories that mainly focused on the misdeeds of the Germans. Muls is of the opinion that this contributed to the people’s fear of the Germans. “In that way the war of Germany against Belgium became an invasion of barbarians. That created in the people a terrible fear, unthinkable in our civilized century, and that made whole towns and cities flee from the enemy, as from an earthquake or streaming lava from a volcano.” Of what was happening abroad, the newspapers knew nothing. Muls, who had insider knowledge through his contacts at the military court where he worked, chose to also read Dutch newspapers and the *Times* when he was at the *Kunstkring* to get additional information.\(^76\) Most common people would only read the local newspapers. Knowledge of foreign languages was only for the educated, limiting access to newspapers from other countries. With the occupation came a prohibition on all newspapers in Belgium. There was a black market for foreign ones.\(^77\)

\(^77\) Zuckerman, 79.
That this kind of reporting colored the soldiers’ views of the enemy is clear from their experiences, as we saw in Claes’ account of his stay in the basement. Pasquier tells us about a report that ran in the newspapers about a funeral that was shelled. First they reported that the Germans had done it. When it came out that they had not done it, the newspapers accused the Germans of misusing the funeral for their own goals. In actuality, Belgians had accidently shelled the funeral. Van Meerbeek knew that the newspapers were purposely withholding or fabricating news, but he thought it was a good thing, because it kept the morale of the soldiers high. When the fighting started and the Belgians were continually pushed back, eventually behind the Yser, everything became very hectic. Access to printed information was not readily available for many of the soldiers anymore. Every source of information became valuable to the soldiers, no matter how reliable it was. This situation led to speculation and rumors, reinforced by their experiences, which led to more rumors and speculation.

Before the war started there had been German citizens residing in Belgium. When the war broke out, the Belgian population immediately became very suspicious of them. If one believed everything one heard people say at the time, German spies where to be found everywhere. Rumors about German spies dressed as nuns or with fake beards rapidly spread around. The Belgian Parliament strengthened existing laws, lengthening the sentences of spies to lifelong imprisonment. That was not enough for the Ministry for Justice. They looked for and found some laws from 1799, before Belgium even existed, in which they found the death penalty as a sentence for espionage. These laws were used to convict people to death for

78 Pasquier, 32.
79 Van Meerbeek, 17.
80 Same argument is made by Horne and Kramer, but for franc-tireur on German side; Horne and Kramer, “German ‘Atrocities’ and Franco-German Opinion, 1914,” 18.
espionage, but according to Jacques Maes they were not valid laws, and thus several of the convictions are legally dubious.  

Some of the soldiers’ stories seem plausible. E. Van Isacker tells us of one day at the beginning of the war. He was awakened at 4 a.m. by the noise that was made bringing in two alleged spies who had tried to cut telephone wires. He went to sleep again. At 9 a.m., when he was having breakfast, two more spies were brought in who had been dressed as nuns begging for alms, with “a whole batch of papers of information about the neighborhood [were] found pinned to the inside of their skirts, and in a basket two pigeons.” Later on in the day, more spies were apprehended, two dressed as Capuchin monks with Red Cross armlets, and a man dressed as a nurse with a two-year-old baby. Four Germans were executed for espionage by the Belgians during the war; all in the first two months. Two of them, Schultz and Martin Mattonet, were arrested in civilian clothing and in possession of incriminating items, such as a gun and a compass. Otto Hofman and Paul Ehrhardt’s cases have been lost, possibly taken by the Germans in the Second World War. Ehrhardt does appear in Lekeux’s memoirs, as the spy he sympathizes with, as we saw earlier.

Eventually all Germans, innocent or not, were deported from Belgium after the invasion. Belgian citizens also had problems with this policy, because they were suspected of being German. Gauchez, a journalist following the Belgian army, and his friend were thought to be spies. Only with the help of some officers in the Belgian army they knew, did they manage to convince everyone that they were not spies at all. On August 5, 1914, Muls joined the Burgerwacht, or Garde civique, which consisted of an “active” and “non-active” part. The “non-

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81 Maes, 206-207.
83 Maes, 215.
84 Gauchez, 46.
active” part was to be called upon by the king in cases of emergencies and had only police duties, no military tasks. The “active” part wore uniforms. Their tasks varied by location. In some places they fought with the military, as in Tamine, Liege and Charleloi. It was more common, however, as those in Brussels did, to dig trenches and set up barricades, or dismantle them. By August 18, 1914, most units of the Garde civiques were disbanded.\textsuperscript{85}

Muls was transferred to a military court in Antwerp as a German translator only a week later. He gives us his observations of Germans brought before the court he worked at. Most of them were just innocent German citizens. Most of them were very scared of what would happen to them. According to Muls, it was because they thought they would be treated as they would have been in Germany. In reality, every German around the fortified cities of Liege, Namur, and Antwerp except young men of military age was deported to the Netherlands. Many others were arrested as spies and deported.\textsuperscript{86} Only once did Muls encounter a real spy. He got a fair trial — unlike the Belgians, Muls adds. The outcome of the trial was not known to Muls, but he was sure that the spy was not executed.\textsuperscript{87} Grimauty explains that spies were an everyday thing for soldiers. When they caught two spies, it was nothing special, just part of the war. There was no need to invent them, in his opinion.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{85} Lipkes, 50.
\textsuperscript{86} Lode Wils, \textit{Flamenpolitik en activisme} (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1974), 41.
\textsuperscript{88} Grimauty, 32-35.
Reasons of the Enemy

The influence that all these experiences and worries had on soldiers can readily be seen. At the mere sight of German soldiers some Belgian men went into a frenzy. Seeing “Prussian pilferers, house burners and torturers” made soldiers enthusiastic about fighting the war. Others did not even need physical evidence of the enemy. They “revealed in advance at the thought of massacring the most odious enemies that ever existed and cutting short their triumph in this sudden attack” and “this excited them and, in glee, they continued their work with enthusiasm and speed.” Shelling the Germans became a “magnificent work of death.”

Franc-tireurs, the name used for civilians forcefully resisting the German army, originated from the Franco-Prussian war where French civilians resisted the German invaders, and their acts were used as the rationale by the Germans for all their behavior during their invasion in Belgium. They alleged that none of the tragic events which occurred were their own fault; Belgian civilians were out to get them, through treachery and brutality, and they just reacted to the aggression against them. They claimed Belgian citizens murdered, poisoned or maimed wounded German soldiers and officers after welcoming them in a friendly manner at first. These claims appeared in the newspapers first, but soon they were officially sanctioned, including by the highest authorities, such as Bethmann Hollweg and Kaiser Wilhelm. In the German White Book, published by the German government in 1915 to explain its actions in Belgium during the invasion of 1914, they had dropped the maiming and poisoning, but still insisted there had been a large number of francs-tireurs incidents in a belated attempted to justify the actions of the German army in Belgium.

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89 Buffin, 119-120, 157.
90 Lipkes, 576-577.
Belgian soldiers, such as Claes and Pasquier who wrote as much in their diaries, were aware of this excuse from direct contact with Germans, news channels or hearsay. Neither of them, like many others, believed in the franc-tireurs events that worried the Germans so much. Recent studies have proved them right. Claes even confronted some German officers at the monastery of Champion, where his wound was being treated after his capture. They did not believe him: “I tell them directly that all of it is absurd, the improbability of it is obvious, but while shaking their heads they look at me with a compassioned smile for my naïve ignorance.”

In fact, while Claes was recovering in the monastery, several “franc-tireurs events” took place.

As he recorded in his diary:

Again several gunshots are heard in the garden, suddenly somewhere I hear shouting in German: “It’s francs-tireurs!” Soldiers jump into the hallway, I hear the guard called, walking and running in the hallway and on the stairs, after a few minutes everyone is standing at the entrance of the square, doctors, officers, soldiers and nurses, fully ready and armored. A gunfight of a few minutes follows. Through the lighted windows of the floor above the wing to the right I see several soldiers hurrying down. At first I think that the shots came from them. One of the soldiers in the hallway thinks that they are the francs-tireurs and yells: “There they go!” and get ready to aim their guns at them, until another soldier says: “They are ours. [...] Next the whole monastery is searched, in all places, by a German officer and two soldiers. [...] The soldiers stand on the square and the hallways with their guns in their hands, hotly debating the events. Oberstabsarzt Bluhm runs up and down the hallway, with his helmet on and his gun in his hand. He is very agitated, and also anxious. A couple of times he comes to me to ask with an incensed voice if I had seen it, and what I thought of my wonderful countrymen. Sadly I answer him: “I cannot believe it, Herr Oberstabsarzt, tomorrow you will see that it is a mistake.” [...] In the town several houses and farms are already burning, put to flames at the first shots, before they knew from where the shots came. [...] “What is happening in the town?” asks one of my group members. “Nothing, there is absolutely nothing to see. We had to chase the civilians out of their houses and locked them up in the church.” It is a sergeant that answers this with a calm voice. Behind us the foundations of a burning house are screeching and the windows are breaking. “Where did they shot then?” “In the monastery, there behind the wall, I think, certainly not in the town. Some of us then shot in the air as was ordered.” “Why then were those farms burned?” “Der Befehl” The calm voice utters this word as

91 Pasquier, 63.
if it is fate. [...] In the kitchen I find Carl Magersuppe. The kitchen-sisters come back and make coffee, we get a big glass of wine and then Carl Magersuppe tells us that in the whole monastery not one franc-tireur was found, only a few people have the town, who at the first bombardment came to the monastery for shelter and now are locked up in the basement. The whole “verdammt Schiesserei” was now solved, in the engine room, from where the electricity for the whole monastery comes from, the engines suddenly had to operate under the highest pressure, because the lights threatened to fail. That brought about some short loud bangs, and some soldiers, who were stealing fruit in the big garden, probably thought that they were being shot at, fired their own guns. Further away they heard this and did the same thing.

Claes notes that at the slightest sign that could be interpreted as an attack on them, the Germans went berserk. 93 He believed that the Germans were just seeking excuses for their behavior.

_Devious Opponent_

It was not just the invasion and destruction in Belgium that upset the Belgian soldiers.

The tactics the Germans used, or were believed to use in their military operations, made Belgians hate and despise them even more. First they had disregarded the treaty that guaranteed Belgian neutrality and independence, then they also broke international laws and the agreements on warfare they had signed. Snoeck wrote in his diary that Germans dressed themselves as members of the Red Cross so they could infiltrate the Belgian trenches. In the earlier days of the war, the trenches were not yet like the ones from when the war became stalemated. The early ones were very shallow, only meant for cover. Using this method, the Germans tried to kill all the soldiers they found in them. 94

Bartelemy was part of a group that encountered a German spy or a traitor wearing a Belgian uniform who tried to give them fake orders, so that the Belgian troops would be confused, in the hope that in the resulting chaos the Germans could then easily defeat them.

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94 Snoeck, 24.
Bartelemy’s case it did not work. But another soldier reported a similar event, where several Belgian soldiers were killed by a German machine gun. Other versions of this story involved Germans using a white flag to fake surrender, and then turning on their “captors.” It was also thought that Germans used the Red Cross and white flags to signal positions, or they dressed as Red Cross personnel to gain access to the Belgian trenches, the early shallow ones, and kill the Belgian soldiers they found. Some claimed that the Germans used civilians as human shields in some of their attacks. Many variations of these types of histories existed. They all come down to the Germans using devious, cowardly tricks to kill Belgian soldiers and further their cause. Belgian opinion on this issue is obvious. Of Germans using Belgian uniforms to try to capture a fort, Grimauty said: “What a wretched race we fight.”

As mentioned before it is not always obvious whether these stories heard by soldiers are truthful or merely wild rumors circulating at the time among the men. But they did have a real effect on the soldiers; many of whom believed what they heard about the Germans. It is as Nicoletta F. Gullace said about British propaganda, “In many ways, however, the accuracy of atrocity reports is less relevant to the cultural history of the war than the fact that they were widely disseminated and commonly believed.” For example, a tale that spread through the Belgian ranks, and is clearly false to us, was that the Germans turned Belgian fighting men that they captured into soldiers for their own army and sent them to fight against the Russians on the Eastern Front. The story was believed, and Belgian soldiers were shocked and appalled by this news. Belgian officers used this story to encourage their man to fight until death. This

95 Bartelemy, 51; Buffin, 28, 180.
96 Snoeck, 24.
97 Buffin, 66.
98 Grimauty, 90.
100 Bartelemy, 63.
kind of news, regardless of its truthfulness, was reflected in the negative opinion Belgian soldiers had of their opponent.

_Merciful Invader_

On the other hand, the Belgian army also used tactics that bordered on what could legally be done. Bartelemy, who complained about the German spy or traitor trying to wreak chaos in the Belgian ranks, himself was ordered by his superior to wear civilian clothes for special missions, such as cutting communication lines that could be useful to the enemy. After the Germans smashed the defenses and forts around Antwerp with their big cannons as they had done at Liege, the Belgian army, in fear of being surrounded by the German army, started to retreat westward toward Ostend on October 6, 1914. Some rear sections of the army were too slow, and were surrounded by the Germans. Lekeux and several of his comrades decided to use civilian clothes to escape the Germans. They failed and had to cross the border into the Netherlands, where they were taken into custody by Dutch soldiers. After several attempts, they succeed in getting away from their guards and escaped back into Belgium, where they were able to rejoin the Belgian army. Especially at the beginning of the war, crossing the border and escaping from an encampment one was placed in was common place. The same thing happened on the French-Belgian border, too, after the fall of Namur, but the French policy was to help Belgian units make their way back to the Belgian army.

Once it became clear that the Germans were going to invade, and during the invasion, the Belgian army blew up bridges as well as buildings, and constructed roadblocks to slow down or stop the invaders from advancing. Several soldiers mentioned these types of events in their writings; some even participated in them. This demolition might have contributed to the

101 Ibid., 71.
102 Lekeux, 109-130.
perception of destruction. Some who were not involved in creating these obstacles for the invaders might have gotten the idea that this destruction was done by the German army, never considering that the Belgian army could have just as easily destroyed bridges and buildings to deny their use to the invading enemy. It is hard to track how much this played a role in the soldiers’ perception. Since most of these bridges and building were of strategic importance, not the houses of civilians, which the Germans did destroy, it is likely that other types of destruction had a greater influence on their thinking. As with the use of civilian clothing, this was probably seen as necessary and perhaps even inevitable. Few Belgian soldiers were aware of these actions on the part of their countrymen, and even if they were, they would probably have excused it by referring to German actions which, in their opinion, were much worse.

Not everything that the Germans did at the time was bad, however. In many cases they treated the Belgian civilian population fairly and decently. Belgian soldiers recognized this in their writings. While they took all the supplies in occupied Belgium that they could take with them, they did reimburse the owners, which, according to Pasquier, meant a lot to the peasants. In another passage in his diary, he tells us of two German soldiers who refused to pay for cigarettes they got in a local store. The shop owner went to complain about this incident to a German officer, who instantly paid him the soldiers’ bill and punished the two soldiers for their misbehavior. De Cuyper wrote in his diary that when a German infantry unit made all the inhabitants of a town march away, none of them were mistreated; some Germans even offered the children some things they had on hand.

Identification with the enemy could influence one’s feelings toward one’s opponent. During this phase of the war, personal contact between the two sides did not occur very often. A

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103 Bartelemy, 39.
104 Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 24; Pasquier, 46.
105 Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 19.
war of movement did not allow it, and strong feelings about the invasion made it very hard for the Belgian “victims” to empathize with the Germans, but it happened. After one of the battles, Pasquier was looking through a dead German officer’s possessions and found the officer’s diary. He read the diary and thought to himself, “[h]orrible to realize that on both sides of the front intelligent beings are thinking and suffering.”

Or, as in the case of Lekeux, there was the personalization of the spy they had captured, whom he visited and became friends with.

The feelings of Belgian soldiers could change very quickly, though. “[M]en were mad with fury for the sight of German atrocities has exasperated them,” one soldier recounts, “a veritable flame of hatred had been lighted in all hearts.” But after the battle was over, the same soldiers who had been intoxicated with the madness of carnage, vengeance and hate, were now looking after their captives, offering them cigarettes and other stuff they had on hand.

During the retreat to avoid encirclement by the Germans at Antwerp on October 6, 1914, and after so many excruciating defeats, many Belgian soldiers, even officers, were demoralized. A part of the army was too slow in retreating and was surrounded on three sides by the Germans. Many crossed the border with the Netherlands to escape capture by the enemy. For some, their experience with German actions was strong enough for them to keep on going, or stay in the fight because of a strong feeling of patriotism and duty. Smalls groups of men disappeared into the bushes or tried to escape by using civilian clothing. Others had different priorities, such as a family that was still at home. They chose exile in the Netherlands, together with about 40,000 other Belgian soldiers, where they were interned by the Dutch in a camp for the duration of the war instead of an uncertain future, especially in light of how things were going for the Belgian army or certain capture by the Germans. Gericke’s brother-in-law decided to go to the Netherlands. Some, like Lekeux, managed to escape, despite Dutch policy,

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106 Pasquier, 91.
107 Buffin, 125.
and rejoin the Belgian army, thinking of his family. But it hurt him nonetheless to leave his country: “What an emptiness, what an incompleteness, what a feeling of weakness, yes, forsaking duty pained my heart. We had a colossal enemy that we could not handle and he crushed us!”

Bartelemy says that the soldiers did not have much trust in their officers, who spoke of leaving for the Netherlands at the first sight of conflict. “They were not ashamed to talk about treason.” At Antwerp, the officers advised, even ordered, men to escape to the Netherlands. But there were also others, such as Lekeux who, as we saw before, tried to escape at all costs, even when surrounded by Germans and ordered by a higher ranking officer to head to the Netherlands. When the forts of Namur fell between August 23rd and 25th 1914, it was a different story. Officers demanded, even forced their men to keep going no matter what, to stay out of the grasp of the German army. To motivate his men, Barthelemy’s lieutenant said that it was better to keep marching even with bloody feet than be captured by the enemy.

In this phase of the war, the animosity of the Belgian population, particularly of its soldiers, toward the German invaders boiled over, because of the Germans’ violation of Belgian neutrality, and the invasion and destruction and atrocities committed in their country, real or imagined. As Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker wrote in 14-18: Understanding the Great War (2002), the atrocities were a reason to keep fighting the war for the “victims,” and “hatred radically intensifies violence of war.” Soldiers’ writings about atrocities and their

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109 Bartelemy, 61.
111 Buffin, 200.
112 Bartelemy, 47.
feelings, according to them, could be taken at face value, “profound hostility based on an
indignant knowledge of the atrocities committed.”

In the next chapter we will see that, after the war stalemated, on the one hand doubts
and conflicts started to arise among the Belgian soldiers about their own officers, the high
command and the civilians in the rear and heaped up over time. Feelings toward the Germans
were pushed to the back of their minds. Yet, the war continued, shells and bombs were thrown
their way, destruction was everywhere, and friends were regularly killed. Consequently, the
presence of the Germans could never entirely be forgotten.

113 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 101-103.