

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 96

“The Rape of Belgium”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The American journalist Irwin Cobb recounted a conversation he had with a German scientist at the Café Kaiserhof in Aachen in September 1914, as the Battle of the Marne was raging. Over beer and sauerbraten, the German told the American, “I do not believe in war. War has no place in the civilization of the world today; but this war was inevitable. Germany had to expand or be suffocated. And out of this war good will come for all the world, especially for Europe. We Germans are the most industrious, the most earnest, and the best-educated race on this side of the ocean.

“Today one-fourth of the population of Belgium cannot read and write. Under German influence, illiteracy will disappear from among them. Russia stands for reaction; England for selfishness and perfidy; France for decadence. Germany stands for progress. Do not believe the claims of our foes that our Kaiser wishes to be another Napoleon and hold Europe under his thumb. What he wants for Germany and what he means to have is, first, breathing room for his people; and after that a fair share of the commercial opportunities of the world. German enlightenment and German institutions will do the rest.”

One hundred kilometers away, in Leuven, in Belgium, the guns had just fallen silent after a six-day rampage that would be held up time and again in the years to come as a rebuttal to any boast of German culture and enlightenment. In those six days, the German soldiers had killed over two hundred Belgian civilians, burned down over a thousand private homes, and torched two university libraries, destroying nearly half a million volumes, including thousands of printed books that dated from the Renaissance, and hundreds of medieval manuscripts that were even older.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 96. The Rape of Belgium.

Perhaps it was because the German command, having studied and rehearsed the Schlieffen Plan so many times over so many years, repeating to themselves again and again the argument that an

invasion of neutral Belgium, regrettable though it may be, was necessary for the sake of the war effort and the survival of Germany, perhaps they had become so convinced in their own minds of the moral necessity that they could not comprehend why the Belgians could not be made to see it as clearly as they.

It's worth noting here that Belgium was a neutral country by international agreement, and that international law imposes certain obligations on the neutral powers. One of those obligations is not to permit soldiers or supplies of any belligerent country to move across its territory. In other words, had the Belgian government agreed to the German proposal that they permit the German Army to travel across Belgian territory on their way to fight against France, that agreement would have violated Belgium's neutrality, and would have allowed for an Entente declaration of war against Belgium.

On the other hand, resisting an invader, as the Belgians did when the Germans entered their country, is *not* a violation of a nation's neutral status. But it did have the potential to throw a monkey wrench into the Schlieffen Plan. Bad enough that the Germans had to fight their way through Belgium on their way to France. Worse was the thought that after the offensive had moved on into French territory, German supply lines still ran through Belgium. Continued Belgian resistance might cut off the offensive's jugular vein.

And this brings us to the subjects of *francs-tireurs*. *Francs-tireurs* played an important role back in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. This is a topic I haven't touched on yet, even though I have talked about that war a number of times on this podcast. I've mentioned a few times how the Prussians and their German allies shocked the French and overwhelmed their Army, even capturing the French Emperor Napoleon III in about seven weeks. Now, possibly some of you may have wondered why the Franco-Prussian War lasted for another eight months after all that happened. *Francs-tireurs* are an important part of the answer to that question.

The phrase *Francs-tireurs* literally means "free shooters." In modern terms, we could call them guerilla fighters or insurgents or irregulars, and, please, I am going to use the word "insurgents" from now on, because it's a whole lot easier to say than *Francs-tireurs*.

These French insurgents had mostly been rural men. They owned their own rifles and tended to be members of hunting clubs or gun clubs or private military societies. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out, these men took up their rifles to fight the Prussian invaders. They mostly refused to accept orders from the official French military, much to the annoyance of the official French military, but many fought bravely and annoyed the Germans no end for taking the shine off their rapid victory.

The Germans regarded all this as dirty fighting, and when the Great War began in 1914, memories of those French insurgents of old were still fresh, and old resentments quickly resurfaced. From the first days of the invasion of Belgium, German soldiers began accusing Belgian civilians of shooting at them. These accusations were often made on the flimsiest of

evidence, and in hindsight, most if not all of the alleged incidents were more likely to have been cases of friendly fire or mistakes, such as misinterpreting the backfire of an automobile as a gunshot. Drinking may also have been a factor. German soldiers were often said to have raided wine cellars and stashes of beer during their march across Belgium. But the Germans would insist, over and over in the weeks that followed that their own soldiers were the victims of a dirty war fought by Belgian civilian insurgents in flagrant violation of international law, thus justifying a harsh German response. The Germans called it *der belgische Volkskrieg*, the Belgian people's war. The Belgians and the Allies called the harsh German response "The Rape of Belgium."

At noon on Monday, August 3, just five hours after the invasion of Belgium had begun, German soldiers reached the Meuse River crossing at the Belgian town of Visé, about thirty kilometers west of the Café Kaiserhof where Irwin Cobb and his unnamed scientist guest would have their conversation about what an advanced society the Germans were over a pleasant dinner a few weeks from now. The mission of these German soldiers was to capture the bridges that connected the town to the far side of the river. This would allow German units to move into position to assault Liège from the north.

But as the Germans entered Visé and approached the first bridge, they discovered that Belgian soldiers had already destroyed it and were firing at them from the far bank. In their anger and confusion, the soldiers quickly decided that they were also under fire from Belgian civilians sniping at them from the windows of the town, on this side of the river. The Germans began shooting down civilians in the streets, firing at random into buildings, and breaking down doors to enter homes and shops, smashing furniture and setting fires in order to root out the supposed snipers. Seven civilians were killed, and hundreds of civilian refugees fled across the nearby border to the neutral Dutch town of Eijsden, just a couple of miles downriver.

Some of the murdered civilians were women, including a sixteen-year old girl of whom the Germans said that she had been killed because she had been caught mutilating German corpses.

The killing and destruction at Visé, on the very first day of the war with Belgium, is one small example of a story that would be repeated across Belgium for the first two months of the war. Visé is notable only because it was the first.

The next day, in the town of Herve, just a few miles south of Visé, a town previously most notable for its distinctive cheese, a German Army car pulled into town. The officers inside hailed two civilian men. Eyewitness accounts disagree over whether the two men came over to the car as requested, or attempted to flee. Either way, they were shot dead. When more German soldiers arrived, they began looting and burning Herve in a three-day rampage that killed 38 Belgian civilians and left a thousand homeless.

[music: *Poème élégiaque*]

By the end of the first week of fighting, German newspapers were printing lurid tales of Belgian civilians rampaging the countryside behind German lines. Tales of unwary German sentries found dead, their eyes gouged out and their tongues missing. Multiple tales of women and children approaching German soldiers with seeming innocence, and then attacking them viciously. There was a story of a teenage girl caught with a bucket full of German soldiers' eyeballs, and another one about small children cutting the ears off of German soldiers as they lay wounded.

These German newspaper reports echoed back to the soldiers in Belgium, who became increasingly jittery and inevitably, that much more likely to shoot at civilians. There are stories of German soldiers on the march who refused opportunities to stop and rest, so afraid they were that Belgians might sneak up on them if they took a break to sit under a tree or take a nap in a field.

The sheer terror, bordering on hysteria, with which these German soldiers of 1914 regarded the Belgians, even women and children, is remarkable. When you think of German soldiers, the image that comes to mind is someone highly trained, disciplined to a fault, cool under pressure, and deadly in combat. Someone far more likely to be intimidating than intimidated. The tales coming out of Belgium in the early months of the war suggest a very different picture. Soldiers confused, panicky, and not properly supervised or disciplined.

These stories usually involve not the best German soldiers, the front-line troops. These are reservists, older men whose military training may be decades old by this time and who are more likely to see marching into foreign lands as strange and intimidating, rather than an exciting adventure, the way young men are more likely to see it.

Now those German soldiers who shot up the town of Visé on August 3, they were front-line soldiers, in spite of what I just said, but the soldiers who burned Visé two weeks later were reservists on occupation duty. Shooting had broken out in Visé after dark on August 15. The Germans responded by pillaging and burning the town over a period of three days. Sixteen civilians were killed and over 600 arrested and deported to Germany, including women and children, because the Germans accused them of being insurgents. The US ambassador to Belgium would visit Visé a few weeks later and compare the town to Pompeii.

Belgian eyewitnesses said the shooting started after some German soldiers got drunk and started firing their rifles. Other German soldiers returned fire, thinking they had come under attack, and finally the soldiers turned on the townspeople.

There are many eyewitness accounts attesting to German soldiers breaking into some of Belgium's many well-stocked wine cellars or stashes of beer—Belgium is famous for its beer—

and getting drunk. Drunk men and firearms are seldom a happy combination, and it is not hard to believe that intoxication plays an important role in this violence against civilians.

You can't blame soldiers too much for wanting to get drunk. Nor can you blame them for being frightened. To be on the front line of combat is a terrifying experience, and there are few worse places to be in combat than in a built-up area, like a city or town. To you and me, wandering through a scarred and blasted landscape of empty buildings that used to be a thriving town but has now gone eerily silent, with the knowledge that around the next corner death might lie in wait—all this might sound like some creepy new science fiction dystopia original series coming soon to Netflix, but a soldier in an urban combat zone calls it “Tuesday.” It's worth noting, too, that in an urban setting, when shots are fired, the sound echoes off the buildings and down the streets, making it hard to tell where the shot came from, or even how many shots were fired.

Still, this is where military officers come in. This is where leadership comes in. It is the responsibility of the soldiers' commander to keep them from giving into the kind of fears that degenerate into blind panic, or getting so stinking drunk they start shooting for no good reason. As I've said before on this podcast, the difference between a unit of soldiers and an armed gang comes down to discipline.

We've already seen that the Imperial German Army will back its soldiers to the hilt no matter how badly they behave. Remember Lieutenant Forstner, back in episode 81? So the German military and the civilian government in Berlin continued to insist that whatever harm was being inflicted on Belgian civilians was fully justified retribution for the terrible crimes the Belgians were committing against German soldiers. German occupation forces at first would take a few prominent officials hostage when they occupied a town: the mayor, the priest, the local representative to the Belgian Parliament. Soon they were taking more hostages. A citizen from every street in the town. Later it was ten citizens from every street in the town.

And speaking of priests, there was a particular suspicion among the Germans of Belgian priests. The belief was widespread among the Germans that the crimes supposedly committed against them by Belgian civilians were being organized and led by the Catholic priests. Priests were regarded with suspicion and often singled out for special punishment.

After the Belgian Army withdrew to Antwerp on August 18, the pace of the attacks on civilians increased. The night of August 19, in the town of Aarschot, the commander of a German infantry brigade was shot and killed. The Germans blamed the shooting on the 15-year old son of the town's mayor, and in retribution, executed the boy, his father, and 154 other Belgian civilians. They expelled everyone else, and then put the town to the torch.

This became a template for the German occupation. The sons of town mayors were repeatedly accused of attacking German soldiers and these attacks used as justification for retribution. In her book *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman remarks that there were so many stories of mayors'

sons killing German soldiers that you might have thought the Belgians were operating a secret society of killers, like the Assassins of Syria, except that only mayors' sons were eligible.

German anger at Belgian resistance was also likely also a factor. The attack on Aarschot took place just after a delaying action fought by the Belgian Army during its withdrawal to Antwerp. A German sense of outrage that the Belgian Army was continuing to fight long after any decent person would have surrendered surely contributed to this German response.

In the days leading up to the siege of Namur, as German units moved into positions around the city, reports of atrocities followed them. In Andenne, along the Meuse, just a few miles east of Namur, over two hundred Belgian civilians were killed on August 20. Two days later, at Tamines, about the same distance west of Namur, nearly four hundred civilians were killed.

The next day, August 23, saw the bloodiest incident, at the town of Dinant, about ten miles south of Namur, where the townspeople were accused of fighting alongside French soldiers. Nearly 700 civilians were killed.

[music: *Poème élégiaque*]

I haven't said anything about actual rape yet. The expression "Rape of Belgium" is more than just a metaphor. There were many rapes on the Western Front during the Great War, as well as on every other front. The Western Front was the most developed region, so it gets more attention there. In 1914, rape was regarded as regrettable but unavoidable whenever there was armed combat. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 that we've talked about before did not specifically identify rape as a war crime, although it was of course a *crime* crime.

It is in the nature of warfare that rape and all other crimes are most shocking, most memorable, and garner the most attention during the initial invasion. Rape and other crimes are easier to conceal over the long, hard years of an occupation. There are no reliable figures, even now, one hundred years later, on rape in Belgium at the beginning of the war, but what evidence we do have suggests that the incidence of rape was higher in Belgium during that invasion summer than it was in most times and places of the Great War.

There is no evidence that German officers encouraged or condoned rape, but it's a safe bet they didn't try very hard to prevent or punish it either. Most rapes were committed in secret, and it is likely most victims said nothing out of shame, but there are also reports of public rapes in Belgian towns, acts we can safely interpret as expressions of hostility toward not only the victim but her entire community.

The killings at Dinant were the single bloodiest episode in Belgium, but it was not the incident that shocked the world or brought the greatest condemnation down upon the German army and nation. That distinction belongs to Leuven.

The city of Leuven, or Louvain in French, was already a thousand years old when the Germans arrived. It had been King Albert's headquarters for the defense of Brussels, but the King was gone now and the Germans occupied the town on August 19. German occupation troops took the usual hostages, while more Germans poured through the city over the next several days, marching toward the front lines. The occupation was quiet at first. The citizens of the town went about their typically Belgian business: making beer and lace. German soldiers visited the shops and bought postcards to send home.

But on August 25, the Belgian Army sortied from its position defending Antwerp and surprised the German flank. It was part of a diversion meant to give the British Expeditionary Force an opportunity to retreat from its position at the Battle of Mons. The surprised Germans fell back toward Leuven. After dark, a riderless horse, apparently also fleeing the Belgian attack, galloped through the gate and into the town, startling German sentries and other horses. One frightened horse, which was harnessed to a wagon, tried to bolt and fell, overturning the wagon.

German sentries began firing into the dark. Other German soldiers fired back. The Germans would later claim that they were fired upon by Belgian civilians shooting out of the windows of their homes. The Belgians would say that the Germans simply panicked and began firing upon one another. The Germans would point to the alleged "coincidence" that the alleged Belgian civilian attacks in Louven occurred at the same time the Belgian Army was attacking in an effort to assist the British, and claim that all of this proved that the Belgian civilian resistance was not only organized, but was actually taking orders from and acting in concert with the Belgian military.

The German response was a five-day orgy of looting and violence. Doors were kicked in, furniture smashed into kindling, so that it would burn better, and house after house set on fire, after the German soldiers looted them of anything that caught their fancy. Because the old homes of Leuven were mostly stone, the task required individual fires to be set in each individual home, which the German soldiers methodically did. Over a thousand homes were destroyed, and about 250 civilians killed. Hundreds more were deported to Germany for manual labor, including women and children. And again, Catholic priests, monks, and nuns were singled out for special abuse.

Most shocking of all, and the reason why Leuven stands out in the roster of German war crimes, was the German soldiers' deliberate and systematic torching of the library of the Catholic University at Leuven, destroying hundreds of thousands of books, including thousands of priceless books and manuscripts that dated back to the Middle Ages. News of the sack of Leuven was greeted with shock and anger across the world.

The German military governor in Brussels met with the neutral Spanish and American ambassadors and told them the same old stories about children gouging out the eyes of German wounded, and a German general shot dead by a sniper who turned out to be some mayor's son.

In the days that followed, diplomats from a number of neutral nations, also including Mexico and Sweden, attested first hand to the destruction at Leuven.

[music: *Poème élégiaque*]

It was a crime particularly appalling to those of us who value history. Those who value history are also those who write it, and so the destruction of this library is likely always to be the first and foremost article in the indictment of German war crimes during the Great War, as well as becoming the instant and irrefutable rebuttal to any German argument that Germany represented a higher level of culture and enlightenment than her adversaries.

Or maybe it was that Leuven serves as a symbol for Belgium, which serves in turn as a symbol for the terrible excesses of German militarism. The British government and press certainly played up stories of German war crimes.

The stories made for good propaganda. The British needed recruits for their new army, and tales of depraved German behavior in Belgium made for much better recruiting than did arguments around Austrian bullying of Serbia. It is after Leuven that the Entente's cause became less about taking sides in Balkan squabbles and more about quashing brutal German expansionism. The stories were also useful to the British in influencing neutral countries toward the Entente and away from Germany, and in particular, the Great Neutral, the United States.

On September 7, Kaiser Wilhelm sent a telegram to the US President, Woodrow Wilson, alleging once again that Belgian civilians were guilty of atrocities against wounded German soldiers, as well as doctors and nurses, and that these underhanded civilian combatants were trained and directed by the Belgian government. Like most of the Kaiser's diplomatic initiatives, it was heavy-handed and ineffective.

Unfortunately, British propagandists were not content simply to report German crimes objectively and accurately, but tried to match the lurid and over-the-top claims the Germans were making with claims of their own. Stories circulated of the widespread raping of nuns, often said to have had their breasts cut off by the Germans. There were tales of German soldiers tossing babies into the air and skewering them with their bayonets on the way down. There were tales of Belgian orphans having their hands cut off, an ironic echo of the very real atrocities committed in the Congo during the rule of King Leopold II. And as I mentioned all the way back in episode 21, there were middle class Americans who offered to take in these nonexistent mutilated orphans, although there is no record of anyone offering to take in the very real mutilated Congolese orphans.

Most famous is the story from 1915 after the First Canadian Division arrived on the Western Front of a dead Canadian soldier supposedly found crucified with bayonets on a tree or a barn door. The story received widespread publicity at the time and was generally accepted as true,

although that's not the case today. There is no physical evidence to support the claim, only eyewitness accounts that vary considerably.

The trouble with these shocking stories is that they are inherently incredible, more so when there's no evidence other than "I heard a soldier say he saw..." which is how most of these stories begin. To highlight them and repeat them tends to undermine the credibility of the more ordinary crimes like the murder, rape, looting, and property destruction which, let's face it, these are pretty horrible all on their own without any embellishing, but such is the nature of wartime propaganda.

On September 15, the British government authorized an investigation into the claims of German brutality in Belgium. A committee was formed, chaired by Viscount Bryce. The committee did not interview witnesses itself, but merely reviewed unsworn depositions from Belgian civilians and British soldiers. Hundreds of depositions were printed as an appendix to the report, although the names of the witnesses were not given. It was said that Belgian names could not be given, lest the Germans exact retribution on the witness's family in Belgium. But that did not explain why the names of British soldiers were not given.

The report was published just days after the sinking of *Lusitania* in May 1915. Officially titled "Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages," is usually referred to as the Bryce Report. The British government was quick to ship tens of thousands of copies to the United States to capitalize on the outrage around *Lusitania*, and the report was reprinted verbatim in many American newspapers.

The Bryce Report has been, and remains, controversial. After the war, when other investigators wanted to review the original depositions that were the basis of the report, the British Home Office was unable to produce them. Still, the Bryce Report was widely influential, and at the time was generally regarded as thorough and accurate. Americans quickly linked the charges made in the Bryce Report to their outrage over the sinking of *Lusitania*, and in that regard, check out the political cartoon I posted at the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com. It's from a New York newspaper and links the two very effectively.

Just a few days later, the German government issued its own competing report, *The White Book*, on the causes of the war, which included a section detailing allegations of war crimes by Belgian civilians. *The White Book* was not taken seriously by anyone.

In those frantic days of August 1914, the sensational stories coming out of Belgium, both the real and the imagined, focused the attention of the citizens of the Entente nations and the neutrals as well on the German conduct in Belgium, and soon the Great War wasn't about the assassination of an Austrian Crown Prince or about Austrian bullying of Serbia anymore. Now it was about the conduct of the German Army, and very real concerns about what a German victory would mean for the vanquished. Ironically, the German Army killed civilians and destroyed buildings to send

a message of intimidation, but the message actually received in the rest of the world was that there could be no compromising with a nation capable of such acts.

It is probably not a coincidence that on September 4, when all the world was talking about Belgium, representatives of the three major Entente powers, Britain, France, and Russia, signed an agreement in London that there would be no separate peace with Germany. The war would continue until all three powers were satisfied with the peace terms. In St. Petersburg, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, told the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, “My formula is a simple one. We must destroy German militarism.”

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to Anne for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you’d like to be a patron, go to the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon button. Patronage starts at just \$2 per month. And while you’re at the website, leave a comment and let me know what you thought of today’s episode. And you can check out the playlist of music for this or any episode, so if you hear a piece of music and you want to know more about it, that’s the place to look, including links. Most of the music I use is free and downloadable.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we ponder the question of how a simple elongated yellow fruit can become the source of so much bloodshed and misery. The Banana Wars, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The reputation of the Bryce Report would always be blemished by the exaggerations, and in the years after the war, it would fall into disrepute and become widely ridiculed as a cheap exercise in propaganda, even though it got much of the story right, including fairly accurate descriptions of the crimes at Herve and Aarschot and Andenne and Leuven. Unfortunately, the blemishes were enough to undermine the credibility of the report, and undermine as well efforts to hold German military commanders accountable after the war. Worst of all perhaps, during the Second World War, the Bryce Report would be cited by skeptics to question the credibility of the Allies when they made claims of German war crimes during that conflict.

[music: Closing War Theme]