German atrocities, 1914: fact, fantasy or fabrication?

John Horne looks at what lay behind allegations of brutality on both sides in the opening months of the Great War.

On August 4th, 1914, German troops invaded neutral Belgium. Within days, rumours of atrocities against civilians were rife. They followed the entire German advance through Belgium and into France, and continued (with diminishing incidence) until October 1914. The issue was picked up on each side by newspapers, cartoons and official reports, until by spring 1915, ‘atrocities’ had become a defining issue of the war. German atrocities might be explained in three ways. They happened, they were imagined to have happened, or they were invented in order to manipulate opinion. We shall look at each of these possible explanations in turn, in reverse order, looking first at atrocities as propaganda.

Before doing so, however, an ambiguity must be noted. The first atrocities reported in the invasion were allegedly committed against German soldiers by French and Belgian civilians in a war of guerrillas, or franc-tireurs. The name franc-tireur, which literally means ‘free-shooter’, came from the Franco-Prussian War when, after the defeat of Napoleon III, French irregular troops fought for the newly proclaimed Republic by harassing the German armies. They used the term as one of approving self-description, for its deeper origins were bound up with the wars of the French Revolution. However, for the Prussian and Bavarian armies fighting against the French irregulars, franc-tireur became a term of disapproval or downright condemnation. In 1914, accounts circulating in the German army suggested that enemy franc-tireurs were ambushing German soldiers, shooting them in the back, or even poisoning, blinding and castrating them. Such stories were quickly countered by Allied tales of brutal German soldiers burning, raping, pillaging and, above all, butchering Belgian and French civilians. But any explanation of atrocities in 1914 must account for the accusations levelled by the Germans against the Allies, as well as those made by the Allies against the Germans.

After the war, it became widely assumed that the ‘German atrocities’ of 1914 were nothing more than Allied propaganda. In Allied countries, the moral and political issues felt to be at stake during the conflict faded in the light of a victorious, if unstable, peace. What came to dominate public opinion was the overwhelming cost of that victory, and notably the trench warfare that introduced the twentieth century to industrialised mass death. Scapegoats were required to explain this unthinkable tragedy. Propaganda was a key culprit. Liberals and socialists, in particular, considered the ‘people’ to be...
inherently pacific and rational. Ordinary individuals could only have continued the butchery of the Western Front because they were misled and 'manipulated'. 'Atrocity' propaganda was the prime example of how such manipulation occurred. The most famous British exposition of this case was *Falsehood in Wartime* (1928) written by the pacifist MP Arthur Ponsonby, who argued that 'the exaggeration and invention of atrocities soon becomes the main staple of propaganda'. In particular, he asserted that Allied governments (in the British case, through the work of the Bryce Committee, set up to investigate the atrocities in December 1914) had circulated:

... stories of German 'frightfulness' in Belgium [...] in such numbers as to give ample proof of the abominable cruelty of the German army and so to infuriate popular opinion against them.

It was a view held just as strongly in defeated Germany, but for opposite reasons. Here, it was part of a nationalist consensus on repudiating Versailles and war guilt. The very notion of 'German atrocities' was an alien 'truth' imposed by the victors who, under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, sought unsuccessfully to try German war criminals before an international court, foreshadowing the Nuremberg tribunal in 1945-46. When a commission of the Reichstag, set up in 1919 to examine the conduct of the German army in the war, reported in 1927, it flatly denied that atrocities had been committed. Hitler, in *Mein Kampf* (1925-26), considered the issue a brilliant feat of British propaganda and an inspiration for the Nazis' own brain-washing programme. Few German liberals and Social Democrats were prepared to break ranks and accuse the German army of really committing atrocities in 1914.

To this day it remains the consensus that the 'German atrocities' of 1914 were most important as Allied propaganda. At best, this is only part of the explanation. The 'atrocity' issue gave rise to propaganda in several ways. First, there were official inquiries in Belgium, France and Britain, the last chaired by the Liberal peer Lord Bryce. The reports varied considerably in tone but all claimed that German soldiers had killed large numbers of civilians in cold blood and deliberately inflicted enormous physical damage. The German government responded with the *White Book* of May 1915. Curiously, this did not deny the 'facts' alleged by the Allies but argued that German actions were legitimate reprisals for the real atrocity in the German view – mass resistance by
Franco-Belgian civilians in a war of _franc-tireurs_.

These official reports were certainly propagandist in that they were bitterly polemical. They contributed to the campaigns to bring America and Italy into war. But neither side believed, at least initially, that it was deliberately inventing, or fabricating, evidence, and the propaganda came less from the alleged facts than from the values and stereotypes used to explain the facts. The key German contention that the invaders had been faced with guerrilla insurgency is a good example. The Allied official reports denied the claim. But instead of allowing that the Germans might genuinely (if mistakenly) have believed they faced _franc-tireurs_, they assumed that the Germans cynically pretended to believe in civilian resistance as a cover for ferocious repression. Deliberate brutality was the real accusation, and the cause was seen to lie in a German or Prussian ‘militarism’ that was prepared to use extreme force to achieve continental domination.

The Germans, for their part, claimed there was civilian resistance and that it was illegal. They considered that they had been confronted by a bestial rabble inflamed by its priests and government, which had to be stamped out in the name of order. These antagonistic views were underpinned by contrasting attitudes to the legal and moral conduct of war. The Allies invoked the Hague Convention on Land Warfare of 1907. This forbade collective punishment for individual enemy crimes and it even allowed for civilians to take up arms and oppose an invasion provided that arms were carried openly, some distinguishing sign was worn, and that the civilians were subject to basic military command. Despite the fact that Germany had signed the Hague Convention, the German government and military felt that civilian resistance to standing armies was impermissible, treacherous, and against the customary law of war.

Official reports thus presented opposed versions of events that were incapable of resolution because they were rooted in contrasting interpretations and values. The very idea of ‘atrocities’ came as much from the way ‘facts’ were imbued with meaning as from the facts themselves.

_A French caricature of a real atrocity – the murder of four civilians by a German officer at Marquégise, north-east France, in September 1914._

‘Atrocities’ in this sense were a cultural construction. It should be added, however, that the German _White Book_ was deliberately manipulative for reasons to which we shall return.

The ‘atrocities’ might also be seen as propaganda due to the explosion of non-governmental accounts and images that started with the invasion, peaked in 1914-15, and continued in the Allied countries, at least, for much of the war. On both sides, there was exaggeration and myth. Tales of mutilation abounded. German newspapers ran stories of Belgian girls gouging out wounded German soldiers’ eyes – the victims often speaking of their ordeal from their German hospital beds. The Allied press told of women and above all children whose hands were lopped off by German soldiers. The mass-circulation Parisian newspaper _Le Matin_, for example, published an editorial on September 29th, 1914, on the supposed discovery of two hands, one of a young woman, the other of a girl, in the pockets of two wounded Germans in a Paris hospital. Similar stories appeared in the British press.

Some of this was ‘fabricated’, in the sense of tales and images deliberately invented with a manipulative intent. Yet doubt, and even scepticism, was expressed by those who, according to the inter-war view, should have been whipping up atrocity fever. The French government banned atrocity stories in September 1914, being afraid they would cause panic. In Germany, sceptical Catholics and Social Democrats pushed the War Ministry into investigations that often negated myths of Belgian civilian savagery. For example, despite the lurid newspaper stories, no soldiers blinded by Belgian civilians could be found in German
hospitals. It would be more accurate to see much of this ‘propaganda’ as an unwitting expression of fear on both sides—on the part of invading German soldiers and invaded Allied civilians respectively. It was a popular ‘mentality’ more than a conspiracy.

The propaganda can also be understood as part of the political and cultural ‘self-mobilisation’ by societies behind the war effort, as evidenced by the flood of publications by intellectuals, churches, pressure groups and other bodies. That process polarised national identities into positive images of the collective self and negative images of the enemy. ‘Atrocities’ were a succinct and powerful way in which to dehumanise the foe and present the deeper issues at stake in the war. Enemy brutality, once apparently proven, could be explained by a number of reductive explanations, depending on the ideology of the accuser. For example, French nationalists explained ‘German atrocities’ by the degeneracy of the Germans as a race; liberals and socialists saw them as the work of an arrogant military caste, and Catholics attributed them to godless Lutheranism or the immoral pretensions of modern German philosophy, from Kant to Nietzsche. Uncritical and emotive though such accusations were, they were often passionately believed by those who made them. The exaggeration came from the compelling conviction of the countries concerned that the war was about life and death issues. The conventional explanation of atrocity propaganda as cynical manipulation thus falls short of its real meaning, as an embattled, polemical portrayal of the conflict by contemporaries.

The second explanation—the ‘atrocities’ as fantasy—was proposed in a remarkable study published during the war by the Belgian sociologist, Fernand van Langenhove (1889-1982), entitled *The Growth of a Legend: A Study Based upon the German Accounts of ‘Frans-Titeurs’ and ‘Atrocities’ in Belgium* (1916). Langenhove argued that the belief by German soldiers in a war of resistance by civilian *frans-Titeurs* was a collective hallucination, or ‘cycle of legends’. Although the press played a secondary role in spreading the illusion, it sprang from the soldiers themselves the moment they set foot on enemy territory, and eventually permeated all German society.

Langenhove’s thesis represents a minority and largely forgotten interpretation, although it was alluded to in the Bryce Report and by some witnesses of German behaviour in Belgium. The Bishop of Namur, for example, condemned the German troops in his diocese during the invasion for unleashing ‘a monstrous war conducted not against soldiers but against civilians’. But he argued that they did so because ‘hysteria’ and ‘mass psychosis’ had led them to imagine a mass uprising of the inhabitants. The truth of this insight is confirmed by many sources, including the testimony of German soldiers and Allied civilians to the wartime inquiries on both sides, as well as in the war diaries found on captured or killed German soldiers, which related the murder of civilians and the burning of villages. The Allies took such diaries to be a German admission of brutality, and extracts were published accordingly. In fact what they show is that whether or not civilian resistance occurred, German soldiers believed that they were surrounded by *frans-Titeurs* and a hostile civilian population. This led them to take both pre-emptive measures and what they saw as ‘reprisals’.

Thus, the diary of an anonymous German officer from the 178th Infantry Regiment, which was found by the French, painted a telling portrait of the soldiers’ feelings as they crossed Belgium in August 1914. The initial reception was amicable, with one old woman telling the author: ‘you are not barbarians; you have spared our crops’. Sixty kilometres on, however, the men became fearful of ambush and took hostages as a ‘security measure’. On the night of August 22nd, near intense fighting, the diarist recorded a house on fire ‘doubtless to betray our position’, and the following day, he was convinced that stiff opposition encountered on entering Dinant came from *frans-Titeurs*, 150 to 200 of whom were captured and executed. Two handcuffed civilians were used as a human shield in a night march on August 26th, and the village of Villers-sur-Fagne was burnt down and civilians shot because the villagers had supposedly signalled to a French rearguard from the church tower. The diarist added that the first village they entered in France was set on fire by the Germans after one of their own men let off an accidental shot.

Women and children are being used as a human shield for German soldiers, in this French image.
A photograph of a village being burned by German soldiers near Lunéville (French Lorraine), 1914.

Belgian and French 'atrocities' as German fantasy. Heightened fear generated illusions. Unfamiliar sounds and experiences (including gunfire) were attributed to a sinister cause. The Allied retreat was re-cast as a civilian insurrection. Mythic elements, such as the faceless franc-tireur or signalling from church towers, fuelled the fantasy. The mood of hysteria meant that accidents (such as the antics of a trigger-happy German soldier) resulted in panic. Corroboration comes from a mass of other evidence, including sceptical German witnesses. A medical officer in a Württemburg regiment, Professor von Pezold, described how the funeral salvo for a German soldier provoked wild firing from other troops at franc-tireurs, before the mistake was discovered. Pezold went on to note in November 1914 that an equally sceptical colleague considered German brutality in Belgium as bad as the barbarity with which German newspapers accused the Russians.

Atrocities as fantasy would explain much of the German case. A vast collective delusion swept the German army as it invaded Belgium and France, convincing the best part of a million men that they faced a concerted civilian insurrection by the enemy. Transmitted across the military hierarchy and also back home to Germany by letter and word of mouth, the fantasy was amplified by the press. Within ten days of the outbreak of war the most serious levels of the High Command and government were convinced of the truth of the fantasy. The Kaiser himself, in a note to President Wilson on September 7th, 1914, explained that:

My generals were finally compelled to take the most drastic measures in order to punish the guilty and to frighten the blood-thirsty [Belgian] population from continuing their work of vile murder and horror.

In the Allied countries there is evidence of what in some ways amounted to a comparable phenomenon—the mythology of 'severed hands'. The French and Belgian commissions contain masses of depositions (little used in the published reports), which show that tales of children with hands cut off by brutal Germans proliferated before they appeared in the press and on postcards. For example, a Paris policeman recounted that in early September 1914, when the Germans were barely thirty miles from the capital, he had been discussing 'German atrocities' with a friend. The latter told him:

Yesterday, I saw a little Belgian girl, aged six; she was with one of her relatives who is a butcher on the rue de Flandre; when the German soldiers arrived in her village, they cut off her two hands—and with a hatchet.

In another instance, a refugee from the Pas-de-Calais (northern France) related that, near her home, the gendarmes captured half a dozen soldiers who, on being searched, turned out to have the severed hands of babies in their greatcoat pockets ('Two hands were found on one Prussian'). Such accounts were nearly always hearsay and official inquiries failed to find any trace of mutilated children, just as they had failed to find blinded soldiers in Germany. Yet the tales were not mere manipulation but mythic representations of real distress originating from traumatised civilian refugees, and sometimes from Allied soldiers. Tales of 'German atrocities' produced a veritable panic in Belgium and north-eastern France in late August–early September, contributing to the flood of refugees that carried the stories to Holland, Britain and the rest of France. Gathered by journalists avid for war copy, the audience of the tales was vastly expanded by an uncritical press.

As we have seen, contemporaries largely agreed on what the German troops did, but differed over whether this should be viewed in terms of war crimes or legitimate reprisals. By contrast, there was fundamental disagreement over Belgian and French 'atrocities'. The German army believed it had faced real franc-tireurs. Allied governments maintained that civilian resistance of the kind alleged by the Germans, though it would have been permissible under the Hague Convention, had not occurred.

Whether legal or not, the existence of real franc-tireurs would explain German 'reprisals'. Yet all the evidence points to their non-existence. This is not to deny that scattered acts of opposition may well have taken place, especially in the initial phase of the invasion when the Germans besieged the forts

‘From Liége to Aix-la-Chapelle, 1914’ by Raemaekers: his drawings caused a sensation when exhibited in London in 1915.
surrounding Liège in Belgium and probed the frontier area of French Lorraine. Even in these cases the Germans provided no proof. But they were not concerned with scattered acts of civilian resistance. Their accusation was that a People’s War (Volkshrieg) on a vast scale, planned by the government and conducted by local elites, including the priesthood, had broken out within days of the invasion. Had this been so, it would have constituted a major event with clear evidence from the French and Belgian side – stories, veterans’ organisations, monuments, etc. Yet in all the accounts by Allied soldiers and civilians, there is no mention of civilian resistance. The authorities did not foment it, as the Germans claimed, but warned against it. German ‘reprisals’ became an awful lesson of the penalties involved. Moreover, in the alleged incidents of resistance, there is always a more plausible alternative explanation – the skilful fighting retreat of Allied forces, ‘friendly-fire’ incidents, the exhausted nervousness of the German troops, and so on.

The paradox of the entire question lies here. French and Belgian ‘atrocities’ against German soldiers were a collective German delusion that expressed the fear and anger of inexperienced troops invading foreign territory, as well as the anticipation by the High Command that it might confront on a larger scale the irregular opposition encountered in 1870. But in fact there were no francs-tireurs in 1914. Belief to the contrary produced a German response whose harshness is explained by the antipathy of a conservative officer corps to civilian involvement in warfare. The consequence was a reign of terror in much of Belgium and north-eastern France, which, by the measure of the 1907 Hague Convention, resulted in war crimes.

In 129 cases, ten or more civilians were shot, sometimes by machine-gun in large groups. Six-and-a-half thousand civilians perished, mostly in ten days in the second half of August. Deportations to Germany and the use of civilians as ‘human shields’ were widespread. Some 20,000 buildings (including whole villages) were burned down, including numerous historical and cultural monuments. In the worst incidents, scores or even hundreds of civilians were killed (Aarschot, Tamines, Andenne, Dinant, Arlon in Belgium; Longuyon, Nomény and Gerbéviller in French Lorraine). The notorious destruction of Louvain, including the historic university library, with the death of 248 civilians, was the result of panic by German soldiers who convinced that they faced a rising of the inhabitants, mistakenly fired on each other.

Inevitably, there was exaggeration and fantasy on the Allied side, notably the charge that German soldiers mutilated civilians and engaged in mass rape. Such tales were used to demonise the enemy. But they originated in the accounts of those traumatised by the reality of German behaviour. This basis of reality gave Allied accusations of German atrocities a substance entirely lacking in the case of German accusations against the Allies, even if few at the time shared Langenhove’s insight into the role of fantasy in German behaviour.

The discrepancy between atrocity allegations on the two sides also explains the nature of the German official report, the White Book of May 1915. Faced with the need to respond to Allied atrocity accusations, the army and Foreign Ministry tried to prove the thesis of the franc-tireur war in order to justify German actions. In doing so, they had to ignore French and Belgian witnesses and to suppress evidence of the doubts and scepticism of many German soldiers. The result was a work of deliberate obfuscation and manipulation that rejected Allied charges as propaganda – a view that continued to be upheld by the German army and government after the war.

As opinion in the former Allied countries (including Belgium) dis-

Belgium strikes back, in this French postcard.
Severed hands: a mythic image of German brutality, according to a French postcard of October 1914.

missed the events of 1914 as either Allied propaganda or as insignificant when measured against the slaughter on the Western Front, the shock and anger experienced at the time became difficult to recall, let alone to take seriously. Only in the towns and villages that had suffered the German fury against illusory francs-tireurs did a different memory of German atrocities survive, expressed in local monuments and a stubborn refusal to forget.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Louvain was taken by the Germans in August 1914, and the university library destroyed in what many saw as an attack on civilisation.