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Jeff Lipkes. *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914.* Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2007. 832 pp. $55.95 (paper), ISBN 978-90-5867-596-5.

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Already in the course of the First World War, the atrocities committed by the German army during the invasion of neutral Belgium in the summer of 1914 were widely discussed by both the general public and the press. Fairly quickly after the end of the war, these atrocity stories were denounced as wartime propaganda, used to entice the population of Allied countries into committing to the war effort. Recent research, notably by Larry Zuckermann, Alan Kramer, and John Horne, has largely disproved this misconception.[1] Especially the much-acclaimed work of the latter two authors has shown how a fear of civilian sharpshooters, the so-called *franc-tireurs*, going back to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, and especially widespread among rank-and-file German soldiers, was one of the reasons why the latter submitted to violence against civilians. By looking for explanations in psychological digestion of past events, rather than rational decisions, Kramer and Horne contribute to a new wave in First World War historiography, in which psychological elements like identity and memory are more important than traditional research topics, like social or political factors.[2]

The book by American historian Jeff Lipkes, whose previous work dealt with the intellectual legacy of John Stuart Mill, also discusses the massacres committed by German troops during those fateful summer months of 1914.[3] After an introduction, in which the context of the invasion of Belgium is summarized, the author describes the massacres committed in Liège, Aarschot, Andenne, and Dinant, culminating in the sacking of Leuven and burning of its medieval university library. This research, which encompasses approximately five hundred of the book's eight hundred pages, is based on an impressive analysis of primary source material. Lipkes used postwar investigations, official reports, newspapers articles, pamphlets, and much more to build his story, albeit mostly from Belgian or British sources. The numbing effect that page after page of violence, rape, and massacre, carried out against Belgian civilians–men, women, and children alike–could have on the reader is skilfully countered by Lipkes by sprinkling his text with ironic remarks. For example: "Even in Dinant, with the citadel at their disposal, the franc-tireurs apparently preferred to fire on the invaders from the comfort of their living rooms. But when their homes were broken into, the reckless desperados never fired on the Germans, let alone held out to the last man" (p. 53). The author makes a convincing case, and reading through his reconstruction you have to wonder how anyone could have doubted that these atrocities actually happened. Although Lipkes asserts he is only interested in writing "a simple narrative history, not an argument" (p. 674), he concludes with a chapter explicitly titled "Explanations," in which he challenges several aspects of the hypothesis put forward by Horne and Kramer. Two chapters dealing with the postwar "cover-up" of the events, both on the German side and on the Anglo-Saxon side of the conflict, end the story. Based on the writings of renowned intellectuals, among others Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, and A. J. P. Taylor, these chapters form the high point of the book. This does not come as a surprise considering the author's previous background in writing intellectual history.

Contrasting these final chapters with the ones based on primary source material, the methodological failings of the latter become apparent. Lipkes is clearly more at ease analyzing intellectual publications than postwar statements by local historical actors. Although in an epilogue the author explains how he came to his reconstruction, I often had the feeling he took the statements at face value, relying often on direct quotations, sometimes spanning several pages (e.g., pp. 118-120). Lipkes arranges his material more like a public prosecutor would, in accusatory fashion, rather than in an explanatory historical narrative. This goes together with the explanations offered for the actions of the German army on Belgian soil in 1914. Lipkes accepts the explanation offered by Horne and Kramer about the widespread panic concerning *franc-tireurs* among German soldiers,

but denies that the experience of 1870 could have had a profound, generation-bridging effect (p. 548). Instead, the author proposes a multifaceted explanation, in which dread of civilian sharpshooters is supplemented with fear of British spies, confrontation with the unknown effects of modern weaponry, uneasiness with the presence of Belgian civilian men in the countryside, drunkenness, frustrations with the unexpected resistance offered by the Belgian army, or even deliberate military strategy. The latter encompassed using civilians as living shields or spreading tales of terror to cause civilians to flee, in order to allow the German armies to capture cities more easily so as to match the unforgiving timeframe of the Schlieffen plan.

Lipkes's leitmotiv is that the atrocities were not a spontaneous phenomenon but part of a deliberate policy of terror. German officers ordered civilians to be killed. The author solves the problem of the absence of a paper trail by claiming that such orders were surely given by word of mouth (p. 552). Given the polemic title, *Rehearsals*, it comes as no surprise the author makes analogies with the terror executed thirty years later, during the Second World War. Among others, references are made to the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing units responsible for the killing of the Jewish population in the invaded Soviet Union (p. 321) or the clearing of a ghetto in occupied Poland (p. 270). This is the element of Lipkes's explanation with which I have the biggest problem. Not only are such comparisons anachronistic, but they also lack the necessary background. The Nazi atrocities were committed in a very specific ideological context and geographical setting. The author anticipates this critique by substituting anti-Semitic motivations with anti-Catholic (p. 76) or antisocialist (p. 563) feelings of the German soldiers against Flemish and Walloon Belgians respectively, in itself already a very stereotypical representation. Geographically, "wild" killings during the Second World War did not take place in western Europe. The book deals exclusively with the western front, and while the eastern front might be a neglected aspect of the history of the First World War; recent research has shown how the experience of occupation changed Germany's attitude towards its eastern neighbors.[4] The feeling of creative omnipotence shaped the German policy of occupation in that region during the Second World War, much more than the so-called rehearsals in Belgium in 1914 did.

By rejecting Horne and Kramer's thesis, Lipkes also rejects the universal appeal it offers. Instead, he replaces it with a model where blame is shifted towards "a German problem" (p. 550). This is a line of thought that reminds me of the worst aspects of the *Sonderweg* or even Goldhagen debate, with the latter's emphasis on a specific German "eliminatory anti-Semitism."[5] For Lipkes, the legacy of German culture and its influence on a certain culture of violence is clearly something exceptional. He demonstrates this by contrasting the behavior of invading German troops in 1914 with that of invading American and British troops in Germany in 1945. Although, according to the author, these troops had just as much reason to fear the civilian population, these men chose not to act on it, "because [they] were restrained by the belief that charges against anyone accused of a crime had to be satisfactorily proved" (p. 550). In other words, for the author, Anglo-Saxon culture functions as the antipode of the legacy of "Prussia and Prussianization" (p. 234). He anticipates critique by stating that he "truly hopes not to be accused of any animus towards Germany or Germans" (p. 9).

For a historian who titles his book *Rehearsals* and who makes numerous references to the Second World War, it seems odd to me that the rich findings of Holocaust perpetrator studies are ignored. Moving beyond a search for explanations in Prussian culture or anti-Semitism, this research pointed towards the role played by elements like ideology, peer pressure, psychological mechanisms, and even career motivations, among others.[6] Using these works to contextualize his own findings, Lipkes could have contributed to a better understanding of the actions of the German troops in Belgium in 1914. The given example of the 178th regiment, described as the "more disciplined killers" (p. 300), would even have allowed for a direct comparison with Police Battalion 101, made infamous by Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men*.[7]

To conclude, *Rehearsals* is a well-researched and well-written book, albeit flawed with minor methodological problems. Although the author does add to the previous work done by Horne and Kramer and points out fallacies in their hypothesis (pp. 549-551), the work as it stands now disappoints on two counts: on the one hand it adds little to established knowledge of the events in question and on the other it offers a thorny interpretation of the motivation behind them. Although the author proposes a wide range of explanations for the behavior of the German troops, his emphasis on the role played in this by the legacy of German culture, and its identification as "a typical German problem" (p. 550), is problematic. Rather than this limited interpretation, I would have preferred a more comparative working method, through which the role played by universal elements in human nature, rather than nation-specific characteristics, in the instigation of acts of violence and genocide could be em-

phasized. The best parts of the book, the chapters dealing with the denial of the atrocities by German, English, and American intellectuals, are unfortunately treated as an extended epilogue rather than an integral part of the narrative. The end result is a book of unequal quality, which promises more than it actually delivers.

Notes

[1]. Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); and John N. Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2]. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.

[3]. Jeff Lipkes, *Politics, Religion and Classical Political Economy in Britain: John Stuart Mill and his Followers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[4]. Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[5]. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

[6]. For a recent overview of historiography, see Claus-Christian Szejnmann, "Perpetrators of the Holocaust: A Historiography," in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers. Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian Szejnmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 25-54.

[7]. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

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