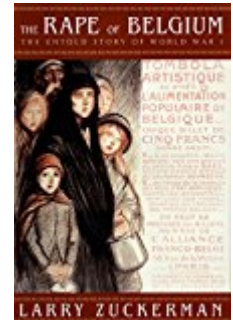


Larry Zuckerman. *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I.* New York: New York University Press, 2004. xi + 337 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-9704-4.



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"Plucky Little Belgium" Revisited

Within the last decade or so, the historiography of World War I has begun to examine the fate of the substantial populations who found themselves under enemy occupation. It has also begun to re-examine the whole issue of "Hunnish beastliness," long dismissed in intellectual circles as a rather embarrassing bit of wartime propaganda. The recent work of John Horne and Alan Kramer has shown that conclusion to be wrong, however. German forces in France and Belgium did commit deeds, during the autumn of 1914, which now would be labeled war crimes, and successive post-war German governments (with the effective complicity of many in the intellectual and political elites of the Allied powers) systematically lied and obscured this fact.[1] Larry Zuckerman's book contributes to both discussions.

The German invasion of Belgium was crucial in the unfolding of World War I. It stifled, at birth, a nascent anti-interventionist mobilization in Britain; without Belgium as an issue, British entry into the war on the Entente side would have been at least as controversial in British politics as the

contemporary participation of British forces in the recent Iraq war has been. As Zuckerman explains, however, Belgium was in an anomalous situation. Obligated by international law to be neutral, it was unable to make any plans for coordinating its defenses with any of the guaranteeing Powers should that neutrality be breached. Furthermore, Belgian governments had kept defense spending low. War planners in Berlin were increasingly inclined to view Belgian neutrality--and ultimately Belgium itself--as a nuisance, but one which was unlikely to prove a major hindrance to their plans if they invaded. This was a massive miscalculation.

Zuckerman follows the course of the fighting in Belgium during August and September 1914 in some detail. He squarely addresses the issue of German atrocities. His conclusions accord with those of Horne and Kramer and are thoroughly convincing. Trigger-happy German soldiers, who were inclined to panic at the slightest provocation and culturally conditioned to expect the hostile attention of un-uniformed irregulars (*franc tireurs*) due to events in France in 1870-71, saw and heard

such *franc tireurs* everywhere. They took brutal "vengeance" on civilian populations for the misdeeds of an entirely imaginary enemy. Their officers, equally steeped in the same conditioning, made no effort to prevent atrocities--indeed they went out of their way to justify the deeds to neutral journalists in terms which also betrayed a strident anti-Catholicism. The evidence that this was indeed an imaginary foe is overwhelming. There is a puzzle here. The French *franc tireurs* of 1870-71 were real enough. American journalists, no doubt with their own Civil War bushwhackers in mind, were quite prepared to believe that *franc tireurs* existed in Belgium in 1914. This was as true of journalists with little love for the Germans as for the quite sizeable group of pro-Germans among the U.S. press corps. Why were there none? This is an issue which merits future study.

It is usually accepted that "German atrocities" proved a valuable tool in allied propaganda. Zuckerman's carefully documented account of the lukewarm reception encountered by the Belgian delegation which visited the United States in September 1914 and the lengthy reluctance of substantial sections of American opinion to engage with the reality of German behavior in Belgium should perhaps qualify that piece of conventional wisdom. American opinion only began to shift after American interests were directly affected by U-boat warfare, for which the fate of the *Lusitania* became a symbol.

By that time, Belgium had settled down to the grinding reality of an occupation which endured for nearly four years--far longer than any of the parties could possibly have expected. The occupation tested to destruction what few constraints international law imposed on an occupying power. A heavy-handed German military administration sought to regulate every detail of daily life, backed up by mass deportations and imprisonments of those perceived as hostile to German interests or, increasingly, just to provide labor for German factories. The Belgian economy was ruth-

lessly exploited by the occupiers. Businesses were forced to work for the German war economy. Eventually, that proved not enough and the Germans simply seized equipment and transferred it to Germany. On another level, as the occupation wore on, certain German groups began to work toward a fracture in Belgian society to undermine its cohesion--most visibly through the so-called "Flamenpolitik" of favoring Flemish interests. In many ways, 1914-18 was a dress rehearsal for 1940-44.

As Zuckerman points out, however, the reality of occupation proved hard to express to the outside world, even by people like the American relief workers who knew it well. The world's attention focused on cases like that of Nurse Cavell or remained fixed on the atrocities of 1914. As the casualty lists lengthened in Britain, an undertow of resentment towards Belgium for dragging the country into the war became perceptible. The Belgians did not help their own case. They failed to articulate the realities of the occupation in ways outsiders found compelling. The mass of Belgian refugees who had fled to France or Britain wore out their welcome by their reluctance to join the Belgian army on the Yser front or otherwise contribute to the war effort. Belgium remained an Associated Power, not formally at war with Germany. The Belgian army played little active part in the fighting. King Albert, lionized by Allied public opinion, was deeply distrusted by British and French military and political leaders--with some justice, as Zuckerman makes clear, as he did not believe until the autumn of 1918 that the Allies would win the war. Before that stage, he had been putting out feelers to the Germans for a separate peace. Zuckerman could perhaps have made even more of the tensions between Albert (every bit as much of an authoritarian as his son Leopold III and every bit as keen to use the opportunity provided by war to emancipate himself from elected politicians) and his government during the war,

which cannot have done Belgium's image any good.

In the end, when liberation came in 1918, it came in a rather unsatisfying way. German power in Brussels collapsed several days before the first Allied troops got there, a result of the domestic revolution in Germany. Liberated Belgium was in a terrible state and expected substantial reparations as well as a more generally defined justice. This never happened. Allied leaders, increasingly weary of what they saw as Belgian importunities, ruthlessly sidelined Belgian interests in the Peace Conference. The Versailles Treaty contained the notorious "war guilt" clause, but attempts to put individual Germans on trial for war crimes were allowed to fizzle out with the fiasco of the Leipzig trials in 1921. Intellectuals began to question whether the atrocities had ever really happened; politicians and businessmen sought to get back to business as usual with their German partners.

In many ways it is a sorry tale, from which few parties, except the long-suffering Belgian people, emerge with much credit. Zuckerman tells it well and convincingly, in a lively and readable style. One might quibble over some details. The book would have benefited from more of a comparative dimension. Substantial areas of France, as well as Luxembourg, were also subject to German occupation and it would have been interesting to know more about how their experiences compared. (There is next to nothing on Luxembourg, whose fate is one of the forgotten stories of World War I.) It should also be noted that the occupied French regions were very shabbily treated by their own government after 1918, which perhaps puts the Belgian experience into a wider context.

Zuckerman gives a lengthy and valuable account of the complex genesis during the war of the notion that Germany, or at least individual Germans, should be held accountable for their actions before a court of law, and of the efforts to do so. This is a story with much wider resonances,

for many of the issues raised then are with us still in the debates over the International Tribunal at The Hague—who precisely has jurisdiction in such cases, and how can one try them in a fair and impartial manner? How far it is reasonable to try senior military commanders and political leaders for the misdeeds of their subordinates or for the political decision-making processes which prompted them to go to war? Zuckerman, while giving a fair account of the discussions, is ultimately somewhat dismissive of what he sees as a half-hearted exercise. For my part, I find the amount of thought and effort put into the war crimes issue remarkably large given the fragile and tenuous precedents in this area (ironically the clearest ones were provided by Germany's own imposed peace with Romania in 1918). However farcical the Leipzig trials may have been, they did, at least, demonstrate clearly the futility of expecting a nation's courts to judge its own citizens in something as emotive as a war crimes trial, imposed upon those courts by a foreign power.

Zuckerman's most contentious assertion is perhaps his view that the United States should have reacted to the German deportations in Belgium and entered the war in 1916. In a morally absolutist sense, he may have a point. I feel, however, that here he is perhaps guilty of reading the moral sensitivities of our own age back to a different time. Views on what constituted acceptable or unacceptable behavior on the part of sovereign states engaged in the most extreme assertion of that sovereignty (making war on each other) were, as he himself has clearly shown, in flux. It should be noted that it took the Balkan wars of the 1990s to persuade nations to assert the right to intervene in wars which did not directly affect their national interests, on the basis of atrocities committed by one party. Even then, such intervention was highly contentious in many quarters.

It would however be unfair to end on a carping note. Zuckerman has not written the definitive history of Belgium in World War I, but that was

not what he set out to do. He has given a clear and informative account of the ways in which the occupation of Belgium had a significance transcending the borders of one small European country. That is a major achievement.

Note

[1]. John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

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