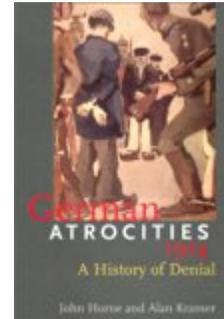


John N. Horne, Alan Kramer. *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 608 S. \$40.00 (leinen), ISBN 978-0-300-08975-2.

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The Etiology of War Crimes and the Complexities of Remembrance

On August 4, 1914, the German Army marched into neutral Belgium en route to what was hoped would be Paris and victory. By violating Belgian neutrality, Germany displayed disregard for international treaties and eased the entry of Britain into World War I. Reports emanating from Belgium and northern France during the months of August-September 1914, described German troops as engaged in wholesale murder of civilians with no discernible provocation. Accounts of mass executions, rapes, mutilations, and widespread arson helped mobilize support for the war in France and Britain, while simultaneously damaging the standing of Germany in neutral countries. The German official line during the war—and many years thereafter—contended that German forces encountered vicious *franc-tireur* (i.e. guerilla) combat, and that Belgian authorities were themselves to blame for encouraging their civilians to engage in “illegal warfare.” Echoes of this official line could be found as late as the 1990s in such respected works as Thomas Nipperdey’s *Deutsche Geschichte* and in the 1996 edition of *Brockhaus*.

In their impressively-researched and sophisticated *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial*, John Horne and Alan Kramer aim to ascertain what exactly happened in Belgium and northern France during the first two months of World War I. They seek to give an authoritative answer as to why 6,500 civilians were killed by the German Army during the invasion, and to analyze the diverse meanings bestowed over the past nine decades on this important chapter of modern history. As the title suggests, this study does not vacillate amid competing claims: it seeks to adjudicate between narratives and ac-

complishes it with conceptual attentiveness, rarely found in books of such empirical precision.

The first two chapters of the book effectively refute the *franc-tireur* thesis. Based on an array of primary and secondary sources, Horne and Kramer demonstrate that the German Army faced no irregular forces in Belgium and France during the first two and a half months of WWI. Nonetheless, German troops were involved in 129 “major” incidents—where ten or more civilians were killed—and 383 “minor” incidents with less than ten civilian casualties; almost all attributed by Germany to *franc-tireur* combat. The three most devastating massacres occurred in the Belgian towns of Dinant, Tamines, and Louvain. In Dinant, 674 civilians were killed, of whom 137 were murdered in a mass execution; in Tamines 383 civilians were murdered, 269 in a mass execution; and in the renowned university town of Louvain, 248 civilians were killed and the university library, with its vast and rare collection, deliberately set on fire. All in all, the German Army intentionally destroyed 15,000-20,000 buildings, used human-shields in hundreds of cases—particularly during bridge crossings—and generated a refugee wave of over a million people. As Horne and Kramer emphasize, this brutality was not the work of a few stray units: “over 150 regiments out of some 300 are known to have participated in major incidents, and many more in minor ones” (p. 76).

Chapters 3 and 4 of *German Atrocities, 1914* are devoted to deconstructing what Horne and Kramer designate as “the *franc-tireur* delusion.” In their mind, the

fact that the German Army did not encounter *franc-tireurs* does not mean that German soldiers did not believe in their existence. Following the important wartime work of Fernand van Langenhove and Georges Lefebvre's classic *The Great Fear of 1789*, Horne and Kramer argue that ghastly stories about *franc-tireurs* circulating among German troops, helped make sense of the intangible threats and dangers faced in an unknown territory. Incidents of "friendly fire," skirmishes with unidentified foes (usually French and Belgian army units) and various mishaps were explained as *franc-tireur* resistance. The "*franc-tireur* delusion," contend Horne and Kramer, rose from below, but was endorsed by the senior command, who proceeded to systematize and disseminate it. Its credibility rested on pre-war mindsets and doctrines: the memory of the 1870-1871 war against France, where the Prussian-led forces had indeed faced widespread *franc-tireur* opposition; the ideological hostility of German generals to a "popular" style of warfare; and, most importantly perhaps, the goal of "absolute victory" after a swift campaign, which encouraged harsh measures in the face of civilian resistance. Thus, although brutality toward civilians had not been pre-meditated, it was likely considering the mindsets of German troops and generals.

From August 1914 what Germans justified as "legitimate reprisals" acquired, on the British, French, and Belgian side, the label of "German atrocities." As Horne and Kramer explain in chapters 5 through 8, public outrage in entente countries was fueled not only by actual reports from Belgium, but also by graphic and inaccurate representations in the press. This was part of the emergent "war cultures," which sought to mobilize every individual against the enemy, now viewed and portrayed as "demonic." The image of a Belgian child with severed hands acquired iconic status, alongside representations of violated French and Belgian women. The Dutch cartoonist, Louis Raemaekers, gained fame by portraying the plight of Belgian and French civilians. In Horne's and Kramer's opinion, Raemaekers "became the single most influential figure projecting the Allied vision of the German enemy to home audiences and to the rest of the world" (p. 297).

As the war ended, the events in Belgium and France in 1914 became central to the discourse about "German guilt." The British and French governments insisted on moral reckoning with Germany and "bringing before military tribunals persons accused of having committed acts in violation of the laws and customs of war." [1] Although the new German government reluctantly signed the treaty, the Foreign Ministry and the army continued "the official policy of denial," which none of the govern-

ments in interwar Germany dared to challenge. The war crime proceedings launched in May 1921 by the Reichsgericht at Leipzig ended with very light sentences or acquittals. After the Belgian and French delegations to the trials retired in disgust, the Reichsgericht proceeded to hold pro-forma hearings for 853 individuals on the Allied extradition list, and dismiss the indictments. The Belgian and French courts, on their part, held trials in absentia for thousands of German soldiers accused of war crimes and convicted the majority of them.

The brutal conduct of the German Army in Belgium and France in 1914 continued to poison relations between the three countries until 1925. Public discourse revolved around issues of guilt, sustaining wartime cultures in their mobilized state. Then from the mid-1920s and onward something extraordinarily interesting happened: wartime cultures began to be demobilized and the human cost of the war now predominated public discourse. Lifting a page from pacifist wartime critique, intellectuals, first in Britain and then in France began to view war itself as the ultimate evil and challenged the notion of German guilt. This "pacifist turn"—as Horne and Kramer very appropriately denote it—tended to relativize events in Belgium and France, and discredit atrocity stories as vile propaganda. The highest degree of skepticism developed in the United States, where a large number of historians and journalists came to view the stories about "German atrocities" as mere lies, designed to feed a ravenous war machine. It was quite ironic that the arguments of pacifists in France, Britain, and the United States, paralleled the rhetoric of German revisionists. The works of leading pacifists in allied countries were distributed by nationalist circles in Germany, and some of the writers even received generous financial support from the German Foreign Office. During the Second World War, reports of Nazi horrors fell on deaf ears, partly because they resembled discredited stories from 1914. "The legacy of the pacifist turn," conclude Horne and Kramer, "resulted in widespread scepticism toward new reports of enemy atrocities" (p. 410).

In most cases Horne and Kramer's conceptual ingenuity helps in illuminating complex issues. However, some of their usages might seem baffling to some readers. Thus, throughout the book they use both German atrocities and "German atrocities" with and without quotation marks to distinguish between the actual crimes of the German Army and the depiction of these actions by allied propagandists. Although, the distinction is explained in the introduction, it might be lost on those who read only a section of the book, resulting in confusion regarding

the authors' argument. Also, the short sub-chapter entitled "Comparisons," in which the authors look at behavior of other armies toward civilians during World War I, is not as judicious as the rest of the book. Obviously, the paucity of studies regarding other fronts forms a major obstacle, yet it probably would have been better to leave such comparisons until enough material becomes available.

German Atrocities of 1914 is a monograph of exceptional erudition. It demonstrates the many advantages of specialist collaboration on a common project. It is undoubtedly one of the best books about World War I to come out in recent years.

Note

[1]. Quoted from the Treaty of Versailles, article 228.

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