Into the Abyss:  
The Legacy of the “Rape of Belgium” Propaganda

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“He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”
- Friederich Nietzsche

Introduction

In 1917, American artist H.R. Hopps designed an enlistment poster for the United States Army which depicts the German monster, an overgrown ape wearing the Kaiser’s headpiece, who wields the club of Kultur, and clutches a classically adorned woman while in the background stands the burned wreckage of a shadowy town. The poster reads “Destroy This Mad Brute! Enlist – US Army” (Figure A). For years this infamous poster has been used to instruct introductory history students on the use of dehumanizing Allied propaganda during World War I. According to a standard interpretation, such outrageous propaganda was one factor in precipitating both the unequal Treaty of Versailles and the interwar mistreatment of Germany ultimately leading to Hitler’s rise, and also provided a tool for National Socialist Holocaust denial during World War II. This poster, and the propaganda it stands for, has been considered as atrocious as the actual atrocities it depicts, and people often fail to question what lies behind the German monster: what spurred these stories and how we came to see this propaganda in such a negative light.

However, at the time of its production any Anglo-American audience would have understood exactly what lay behind the German monster. The burning towns in the background represent the destroyed remains of towns in Belgium and northern France after the German invasion in August 1914 – an event commonly know as the “Rape of Belgium.” On their way into France at the beginning of World War I, the German army requested passage through neutral Belgium, which Belgium subsequently denied them.
Disregarding this and breaking the 1839 Treaty of London which guaranteed Belgian neutrality, the German army marched through Belgium during August and September of 1914. With the army’s passage came tales of horrible atrocities committed against civilians, women, and children, of historic villages burned, and of general German cruelty. Almost overnight German Kultur and the German people, once considered the paramount expression of European civilization, became the barbarian other intent on destroying the culture of the Western world. Out of tales told by refugees and choice reporters, the British press and government propaganda ministry spun a tapestry of what appeared to be well-documented war crimes and deep-seated cultural perversion. These stories were spread throughout the United Kingdom and the United States in an attempt to galvanize support for the war effort. They later became known as the Rape of Belgium propaganda, and during the interwar years, after many began to question the veracity of such stories, acquired their current reputation as one of the great horrors of total war – the manipulation of civilians on the home front.

This shift in the perception of such propaganda has not received much scholarly study or explanation, and indeed few question how, when, and why this reversal of sentiment took place in the Anglo-American sphere. This paper proposes to examine the revision of the Rape of Belgium propaganda as it began with the original propaganda itself, and proceeded through various reconsiderations during the Paris Peace Conferences in 1918 and 1919, and into the interwar years. I will begin by situating the Rape of Belgium propaganda within the context of World War I, with the goal to accurately understand both its successes and failures.
In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the growing industrial, colonial, and military power of France, Great Britain, and particularly imperial Germany seriously strained diplomatic relationships. Tensions between France and Germany dating from the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war ran high. Simultaneously, a series of important treaties, some secret and some not, connected the great powers. The most important of these for our purposes was the 1839 Treaty of London. Signed by the British, French, Russians, Austrians, Dutch, and Prussians, the Treaty stipulated that “Belgium… shall form an Independent and perpetually Neutral State. It shall be bound to observe such Neutrality towards all other States”¹ – essentially guaranteeing Belgian neutrality and binding all the signatories to protect Belgium in case of invasion. This treaty compelled the British, upon learning of the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914, to declare war upon Germany. The British declaration of war was in no way predicated upon German behavior once they crossed the Belgian border – the issue was the violation of the treaty, and to this Great Britain had to respond. Thus for Britain, the Belgian propaganda was used not to promote entrance into the war, but instead to morally justify the conflict, to inflame U.S. interest in the war, and to cement and extend popular support for what was to be a long-term military campaign.

World War I was the longest and most brutal European land war in the living memory of its participants. Previous engagements such as the Franco-Prussian War had lasted only a few months and, while the fighting could be bloody and industrial military technology was surely tested, it nowhere matched the scope of the 1914-1918 Great War. In fact, the early nineteenth century Napoleonic wars were the most recent comparable conflict, and they were distant memories by 1914. This gap in memory produced two main

consequences for World War I. First, the early days of 1914 were marked by general enthusiasm, and men enlisted in droves to fight a war about which they had no memorial reference point. Second, when the conflict turned sour and it became apparent that the war would be nothing more than a long, brutal stalemate, governments were forced to find some means to justify such an engagement to their populations. In such a predicament, and in their eagerness to entice the Americans into the war, the British government turned to propaganda.

We must also note that while on a popular level the Rape of Belgium propaganda proved quite successful, effectively shifting the general perception of Germany and German culture, on a political level it proved far less persuasive. First, Britain did not require the Rape of Belgium propaganda in order to go to war with Germany: this was guaranteed by Germany’s violation of the Treaty of London. Second, while British propaganda may have impacted American popular opinion, it did not spur America to enter the war on behalf of the Allies – even popularized atrocities committed directly against U.S. citizens such as the sinking of the Lusitania failed in this regard. America refused to enter the fray until April 6, 1917, and even then only with certain reluctance and internal opposition.

As I have no illusions of offering here a comprehensive military history, I will focus only on the events of the Western Front and the invasion of Belgium. At the beginning of August 1914 the Germans launched the Schlieffen Plan, which aimed at reaching France via Luxembourg and Belgium and then continuing on to occupy Paris. They never made it to the city and instead ground to a ferocious halt along the Western
Front where the war quickly turned into a stalemate battle of attrition. On their way, however, the Germans requested passage through Belgium, which the Belgian government denied them. Regardless, German troops entered Belgium on August 4, 1914 and proceeded to bombard the town of Liege from August 5 to August 7. While this campaign lasted longer than the Germans had anticipated – the fort was well armed and the Belgian army bent on defending it – once Liege fell, the army and most of the citizens fled before the approaching troops to Antwerp, Namur, and eventually abroad.² German occupation of Belgium continued throughout the war, and indeed Germany still occupied Belgium and parts of France until the time of the Armistice in November 1918. However the period from August through September 1914 is considered the Rape of Belgium, as it was within this period that the Germans committed most atrocities against civilians and that the Germans experienced, or felt they experienced, the most stringent armed resistance from civilians. While inevitably some stories may come out of a later time in the German occupation, I have attempted to limit my focus to the events of this relatively short period and to how they were used in Anglo-American propaganda.

Upon evacuation, many Belgian refugees made their way to England. Here, they encountered a government willing to hear their stories and respond to their plight. While it would be cynical to say that the British were glad for the Belgian situation, nevertheless they took the opportunity presented them and turned the humanitarian crisis into a selling point for intervention on the continent, both at home and abroad in the United States. Before this period, the British government had not made a serious habit of producing propaganda and thus it was forced to put together an agency in charge of the monumental

task. Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith gave the job to Charles Masterman who promptly set up the Wellington House, a collection of noted British authors whose task it was to organize the propaganda. The group included literary notables such as H.G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, John Buchan, and John Masefield. It also included newspapermen such as Lord Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook. The Wellington House also enlisted the help of numerous academics such as Viscount Bryce to lend scholarly credibility to their reports. This combination of writers, journalists, and academics produced the portion of Rape of Belgium propaganda which was sanctioned by the British government. From this base source came most of the reports spread around the United Kingdom and the United States.

Although the Rape of Belgium propaganda itself has not been thoroughly addressed in modern scholarship, recently three influential books have been published exploring the Belgian atrocities themselves: John Horne and Alan Kramer’s German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial (2001), Larry Zuckerman’s The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I (2004), and Jeff Lipkes’ Rehearsals: the German Army in Belgium, 1914 (2007). Zuckerman examines the Rape of Belgium, but also focuses considerable effort on the treatment of Belgian representatives and claims at the Paris Peace Conferences as well as in the interwar years. Horne and Kramer, and Lipkes, both provide in-depth statistical analyses about the Rape of Belgium and attempt, as best they can, to reconstruct the events which took place in August and September of 1914 and both, to some extent, claim that

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many Belgians truly were the victims of unwarranted German aggression, even if horror stories of bayonetted babies and ravaged nuns were largely falsified.

From these analyses, Horne and Kramer and Lipkes present somewhat different interpretations of German motivation for the atrocities. Horne and Kramer discuss the origins of German paranoia about civilian soldiers during the 1870 Franco-Prussian war which, they claim, prompted German actions in 1914. Therefore, they attribute the German perpetration of atrocities to expectations of civilian violence based on previous experience. However Horne and Kramer generally accept the 1914 interpretations of the Belgian atrocities without providing new insight into the reasons behind the Rape of Belgium propaganda and its revision.

Lipkes proposes a different interpretation of German motives. In keeping with the title of his book *Rehearsals*, he “assigns… the massacres to national character, as something peculiarly ‘German.’” Lipkes claims that the German atrocities were planned and calculated, an “organized manhunt” such that “to anyone familiar with activities in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, there will be a striking sense of déjà-vu.” Like others who have reviewed Lipkes’ book (see reviews by Wim Klinkert and Maartje Abbenhuis), I find this interpretation too generalizing of the German people, and ultimately unsatisfactory. Thus, while both Horne and Kramer and Lipkes provide crucial information about the actual events of 1914, neither effectively address the Rape of Belgium propaganda itself or how it was revised in the years since its production.

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To get at this issue, I have consulted a variety of Anglo-American primary sources. In chapters one and three, where I analyze the original Rape of Belgium propaganda and its interwar revision respectively, I draw primarily from newspaper sources and personal letters, along with images and the scholarly works published at the time. Thus, my focus in chapters one and three is on public opinion. My primary source base for chapter two is somewhat different, as it consists mainly of translator Paul Mantaux’s notes from the Paris Peace Conferences, speeches by David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson, the personal correspondences of political leaders, and reports by other diplomats; thus the focus here is more on the political and diplomatic developments. Although these two source bases diverge from one another, together they provide a well-rounded consideration of the Rape of Belgium propaganda and its revision as it affected both the political and the public sphere.

The choice to focus on Great Britain and America restricts this study to English language propaganda, as well as to countries which did not suffer a physical invasion. British and American propaganda were often one and the same, as the British fed much of their product to the United States in an attempt to goad the Americans into the conflict. Similarly, British and American writers who worked on the revision also read and influenced each others’ thoughts in a relationship that did not occur with as many French or other interwar intellectuals. Granted, the British and American wartime experiences varied significantly, and therefore they also diverged in their reactions to the war and propaganda, but their propaganda nevertheless became entangled and their reactions subsequently complement each other.
This paper asks first and foremost how, when, and why did the revision to the Rape of Belgium propaganda occur? Was this revision part of the disillusionment with the entirety of World War I, and therefore did it play its part as did the other events of war, or did other, more complex forces play a role? I examine a select number of propagandistic portrayals of German atrocities – the destruction of the library at Louvain, the rape of Belgian women and cruelties to children, and the overall twist on German Kultur – as they were received in Britain and America at their time of publication in 1914 and early 1915, then at the end of World War I and the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles, and finally during the interwar years.

From this analysis, a number of important trends emerge which help to explain the revision to the Rape of Belgium propaganda. First, this propaganda, even more so than the actual event itself, was so deeply tied to the memory of World War I that disillusionment with the one prompted disillusionment with the other. Second, the fact that propaganda so roundly attacked German culture emphasizes the close pre-war connections and affections between German and Anglo-American culture. These ties were not easily broken and, especially as people began to question the validity of the Treaty of Versailles, were resurrected much to the detriment of the stories from the Rape of Belgium. In other words, as citizens gained greater distance from the atrocities and were less moved by outrage, latent feelings of sympathy towards Germany surfaced that made propaganda claims about German perversion appear petty and malicious. Third, the pragmatic use of the Rape of Belgium propaganda ended with the war. After November 11, 1918, it was in neither the U.S. nor Britain’s best interest to continue to demonize Germany, as they could neither effectively dismantle it nor survive a post-war world with such an unstable state. With
German militarism defeated, the Allies needed Germany to be a stable, self-sufficient ally against Bolshevism rather than an impoverished and angry rogue actor. Thus, the original goals of the Rape of Belgium propaganda had no place in the new post-war order and were subsequently dismissed.

Finally, the condemnation of the propaganda genre itself played a large role in the revision and continued disapproval of the Rape of Belgium propaganda. The manipulation of civilian populations for state goals during World War I flew entirely in the face of liberal ideals and has subsequently become a trademark, whether deserved or not, of totalitarian and communist regimes, thus garnering a negative cultural stigma. On an individual level, those who had felt strongly about the Rape of Belgium on account of atrocities stories became outraged to learn that some had actually been fabricated, and this disillusionment had a staying power greater than feelings of sympathy towards Belgian victims. In other words, while the Rape of Belgium may have had short-term appeal, its long-run effects were far more poignant and prolonged, a trend which speaks to the nature of propaganda itself. Thus on both an individual and a cultural level, the Rape of Belgium propaganda and the genre itself were greatly discredited after World War I, and today we still tend to view the dehumanized German monster, rather than the burning Belgian towns in the background, as the true Belgian atrocity.
Chapter 1: Creating a Monster: the making of the “Rape of Belgium”

propaganda

To evaluate the evolution of the Belgian atrocities propaganda, we must understand a complex intersection of political and cultural history and the events of 1914 themselves which birthed the propaganda. This in itself is a tall order. In this chapter, therefore, I will first propose an understanding of propaganda to be carried throughout the paper. I will proceed to briefly discuss the European climate immediately before the war, the events which occurred in the fall of 1914, the mobilization of the British propaganda machine, and the main propaganda themes which emerged from these efforts.

The term “propaganda” is not self-evident and requires clarification. One particularly helpful definition is Gary Messinger’s, who in his book British Propaganda and the State in the First World War, defines propaganda as “the presentation of information in an emotionally appealing manner for a purpose that is not candidly announced, and in support of a point of view that we would probably debate if we were presented with all the available facts that might bear upon the opinion and were invited to scrutinize the evidence prudently.”9 This explanation well-suits our purposes and will maintain the standard for propaganda discussed here.

The Rape of Belgium propaganda disseminated from two different spheres: one governmental, and the other private. Government propaganda came in the form of posters, official statements sent to newspapers, and published reports such as the Bryce Report, the Oxford pamphlets, and others. In Great Britain, this was produced and organized by

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Charles Masterman’s Wellington House, while the U.S. had no official propaganda ministry until the creation of the Committee on Public Information in April of 1917.\footnote{Stewart Halsey Ross, \textit{Propaganda for the War: How the U.S. was conditioned to fight the Great War of 1914-1918} (London: McFarland and Company Inc., 1996): 23.}

Private propaganda is more difficult to clearly identify – generally, this categorization applies to all stories and sources which were not issued by the government. I have defined it as “private” because it carried no association or guarantee of accuracy except the personal guarantee from whatever individual or private company supplied it. Often, it came in the form of stories told by refugees and spread as rumors, but it infiltrated all levels of popular opinion, newspapers, and sometimes even the official reports themselves. One good example of how private propaganda began, spread, and influenced the average British citizen is recorded in the diary of Frances Stevenson, mistress to David Lloyd George who was then the Chancellor of the Exchequer. On November 5, 1914, she wrote:

\begin{quote}
I talked to a Belgian refugee yesterday, who had left Brussels after the Germans entered it. She said that one German officer, who was disposed to be friendly, told them that the German armies, whatever they had done, had not been a quarter as brutal as the Kaiser had commanded them to be. His order had been that they were to kill whomsoever they met – that not a single Belgian man or woman or child was to be spared— there was to be no more Belgium and no more Belgians.\footnote{Frances Stevenson, \textit{Lloyd George: A Diary} ed. by A.J.P. Taylor (London: Hutchinson of London, 1971): 11.}
\end{quote}

Stevenson’s source is far from firsthand. She heard the story from a refugee, who in turn had heard it from an unknown German soldier. However, her previous entries indicate that she was familiar with the press coverage of the Belgian atrocities, and was also informed of them thanks to her relationship with Lloyd George, and all this led her to believe the otherwise unsubstantiated story.
These rumors and stories are not propaganda in the traditional sense – however, as they were often integrated with those supplied by the government, the two must be considered in conjunction. As expected, it is exceedingly difficult to determine which informed the other, as contemporary reporters often confused and conflated their facts and sources, and the passage of time has further clouded the issue. Often, the two spheres produced a sort of feedback cycle, as rumors, facts, and predispositions snowballed into the emblematic stories and images which today define the Belgian atrocities. Therefore I will examine government-issued propaganda reports, posters, and the like together with stories and opinions informed by less documented sources, but opinions which were nevertheless crucial to the overall conception of the Rape of Belgium.

Public and political opinion before August 4, 1914, was not overtly inflamed towards war. In Great Britain, the tribulations of militarization, colonization, secret treaties, and competition with Germany certainly created an atmosphere of tension and distrust, but a preference towards neutrality prevailed both in political circles and in the general population. For some politicians, neutrality had its drawbacks – many British feared diplomatic isolation after the war was fought, which would be significant if France and Russia won, even worse if Germany was victorious.\(^\text{12}\) Nevertheless, most of the cabinet was undecided as to whether to intervene or remain neutral.\(^\text{13}\) Even Lloyd George himself, later a transformative member of the Wellington House and an outspoken proponent of the war, held out hope for peace. In a private letter dated August 3, 1914, Lloyd George wrote “I am moving through a nightmare world these days. I have fought


hard for peace and succeeded so far in keeping the Cabinet out of it but I am driven to the conclusion that if the small nationality of Belgium is attacked by Germany all my traditions and even prejudices will be engaged on the side of war. I am filled with horror at the prospect.”  

Before the war, the British did not view Germany in overwhelming negative terms, although some bad blood existed over naval influence and colonial holdings, and more minor engagements leading up to the Great War. The portrayal of Germany will be discussed later in conjunction with cultural propaganda, but for the time being it is sufficient to say that although some of the negative stereotypes of German culture existed before the Belgian atrocities, none was great enough in itself to carry Britain to war. That being said, one can hardly describe Britain as even-handed in its neutrality, and it is highly doubtful that, had France invaded Belgium on its way to Germany, Britain would have declared war against France, although being similarly bound by the Treaty of London to do so. 

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, America staunchly opposed any involvement in the tangle of European affairs. The U.S. was more a friend of Britain than of any other European nation, but this friendship was not unconditional. The American population contained a significant number of German-Americans who felt drawn to the cause of the fatherland, and others who felt close ties with Great Britain, but the majority of people felt compelled to maintain neutrality.

The events of August 4, 1914 put all these tensions to the test, especially for the British. As Lloyd George’s letter and the text of the Treaty of London indicate, German

aggression towards Belgium produced only one option for Britain: a declaration of war. On August 2 Germany requested free passage through Belgium en route to France, on August 3 Belgium refused, and on August 4 five Prussian armies totaling nearly a million men marched into Belgium.\textsuperscript{16} The major engagement of the campaign was the siege of Liège, in which 39,000 German troops encircled 32,000 Belgians in an attack that proved more costly than the Germans anticipated, ending in 5,300 German casualties.\textsuperscript{17} However, they were eventually victorious and the Belgian army disintegrated and fled in the wake of the advancing German troops. This defeat marks the beginning of the Rape of Belgium.

The progress of the Belgian atrocities remains a controversial topic, but some facts are mostly agreed upon, or I am sufficiently convinced of their accuracy. The reader should be aware that this information is still debatable, and anyone seeking to learn more about the specifics of the Belgian atrocities should consult John Horne and Alan Kramer’s \textit{German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial} (2001), Larry Zuckerman’s \textit{The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I} (2004), or Jeff Lipkes’ \textit{Rehearsals: the German Army in Belgium, 1914} (2007).\textsuperscript{18} For the purposes of this paper, the events themselves are of secondary importance to the ways in which they were later conceived, and therefore this section will be brief.

The atrocities were concentrated around towns in eastern and central Belgium, which were captured as the German army moved west and south towards the French border. During the month of August, German soldiers committed significant atrocities in Aarschot, Andenne, Tamines, Dinant, and Louvain. Generally, these involved the execution of civilians, the rape of local women, and the burning and looting of private and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 13.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18}}
public property, although larger-than-life stories of bayoneted babies and mass executions spread quickly and were initially taken at face value. However, horrible atrocities certainly were perpetrated and an unacceptably large number of Belgians were killed – altogether, the Belgian atrocities resulted in approximately 5,521 Belgian civilian dead, and the number grows to 6,427 when taking French victims into account.  

Eyewitness accounts generally claimed that the atrocities began randomly, involved fierce German emotions, and were sparked by seemingly arbitrary incidents, but also that they appeared to be part of a more cohesive plan of response. Horne and Kramer explain this apparent contradiction by pointing towards German paranoia over *franc-tireurs*, civilian guerilla soldiers who had inflicted casualties on German troops during the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War and had since been outlawed in the 1899 Hague Conventions on Land Warfare. Although a very limited number of Belgian citizens probably did engage in armed resistance during the 1914 invasion, there was no large-scale or organized operation that mobilized citizens against soldiers – in essence, no *franc-tireurs* fought against the Germans in Belgium throughout the course of World War I. However, German soldiers were not convinced of this fact. Thus, while small and seemingly random events could trigger German aggression thanks to the *franc-tireur* complex, once this thought process was set in motion, officers instituted orders to carry out retribution against civilians and started a more standardized process.

For the Belgians, the events were atrocious on many levels, but refugee reports convey an overwhelming feeling of individual and collective violation at the hands of an enemy which had a monopoly on force. Many Belgians felt that the German soldiers made

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a direct effort to desecrate their community by targeting areas in the heart of the towns as well as Catholic symbols and persons. As rumors of the atrocities spread, Belgians fled their homes for safer areas and eventually went abroad to England and France. They carried with them their stories and the rumors they heard, fueling the fires of propaganda.

The British government was initially unsure of how to handle the coverage of the Rape of Belgium. There was no official propaganda or “information” ministry, so Prime Minister Asquith and Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George hired Charles Masterman, the former literary editor of The Daily Mail who was well acquainted with the literary circles of the day, to run what was called the Wellington House and which later became the British War Propaganda Bureau. Asquith was a gradualist who brought some propaganda tasks to the government, but left others in private hands, and he and Masterman kept the Wellington House activities a secret. Masterman agreed with the decision to keep the Wellington House under wraps – he did not mind secrecy, or using carefully selected and arranged facts in his work, but he was strongly against fabrication, a tactic he saw as distinguishing himself from the Germans. He was also most interested in bringing a literary flavor to British propaganda, and therefore assembled a team of novelists and other literary notables to run the propaganda agency. These included newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook, newspapermen Henry Wickham Steed and R.W. Seton-Watson, authors H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, John Buchanan, and John Masefield, and writer and diplomat Gilbert Parker, who directed the propaganda aimed at the United States.

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22 Buitenhuis, The Great War of Words, 12.
24 Buitenhuis, The Great War of Words, xvi.
When Lloyd George became Prime Minister in December 1916, he changed the course of the propaganda ministry. He decided that the Wellington House would be its own agency rather than be absorbed into the Foreign Office. He then demoted Masterman, brought in *Daily Mail* newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe, and focused his propaganda efforts more on press and film than on literature. While this was Lloyd George’s personal proclivity, it may also have been in response to the trends of the time. The first two years of the war saw strident pro-Allied sentiment in most sectors of the British population, but by 1916 some of the authors initially recruited by Masterman, such as H.G. Wells, began to express their doubts about the war effort.

The Wellington House produced a remarkably well-rounded portfolio of propaganda, spanning both media and methods of appeal: from posters to pamphlets to newspaper articles to fiction, and from emotional to intellectual to authoritative. The result was demonstratively magnificent in the short-term, galvanizing most of the population behind the war and the Belgian cause for at least the first two years. Perhaps its most famous publication was the Bryce Report. Many now accuse the report of solidifying the rumors of Belgian atrocities in an official, pseudo-academic document without any consideration for accuracy, thus purposefully misinforming populations the world over. Lord Bryce’s reputation as a trusted scholar – he was an expert historian who studied both the United States, about which he wrote *The American Commonwealth*, and Germany, where he had studied at Heidelberg University and was honored with the *Pour Le Merite* prize from the Kaiser – and successful diplomat added further weight to the report.

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The stories in the Bryce Report painted a horrific picture of slain children, violated women, and civilian executions on a massive scale. The following excerpt gives a flavor of the Bryce Report stories:

At HAECHT [a small Belgian town] several children had been murdered, one of two or three years old was found nailed to the door of a farmhouse by its hands and feet, a crime which seems almost incredible, but the evidence for which we feel bound to accept. In the garden of this house was the body of a girl, who had been shot in the forehead.  

Another sample reads, “two young women were lying in the back yard of the house. One had her breasts cut off, the other had been stabbed.”  

In addition, the report was illustrated with pictures of destroyed towns and buildings, as well as with cartoons by the Dutch cartoonist Louis Raemaeker. Raemaeker’s cartoons depicted atrocities committed against civilians, and often used images of women and children in emotional distress, while the German soldiers were overwhelmingly drawn either as dirty ruffians or cruel, calculating technocrats. (See Figures B and C). Later, more thorough investigation discovered that most of the outrageous claims were unsubstantiated and were probably the result of vicious rumor mills rather than vicious acts themselves. Still, the groundwork for cultural dehumanization had been laid and stories and images such as these produced moral outrage that lasted well into the war and, for some, beyond. But when many citizens looked back at these images and heard of the righting of these rumors by the end of the war, instead of feeling empathy for the Belgian plight, they believed themselves to have been emotionally manipulated.

In the meantime, however, the Wellington House produced more than just the Bryce Report. They commissioned Oxford professors and other distinguished individuals

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30 Bryce, The Bryce Report, 92.
to write eighty-seven pamphlets about the forces involved in the war.\textsuperscript{31} Although many of these were shipped to America, many also circulated around Britain, providing intellectual backing to the emotionally charged vignettes. The Wellington House was also aware that private sources sometimes seemed more legitimate and less manipulative, and so used private publishing houses for its pamphlets and reports (as can be seen in the Oxford pamphlets, published by Oxford University Press as opposed to His Majesty’s Stationary Office).\textsuperscript{32}

Some private institutions also realized the use of such published reports. Charities set up to help Belgian refugees such as the Belgian Relief Fund and the National Relief Committee for Belgium raised funds by selling commemorative literary anthologies which included articles or short stories written by sympathetic notables and decorated by any combination of destruction photos and atrocities illustrations.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, the propaganda originally born out of official channels produced private imitators also set on pleading the Belgian case.

Another area which saw the collaboration of governmental and private propaganda was the British press. In the early twentieth century, most British readers bought newspapers which played to their entrenched political values, but both the largest, national newspapers such as The London \textit{Times}, and the smallest, most provincial newspapers were less politically affiliated. The origins of false press stories are sometimes difficult to unravel. Government sources tended to blame low-class tabloid presses for spreading the worst rumors by printing stories directly from the mouths of refugees and then even exaggerating these to make headlines.\textsuperscript{34} However, the press claimed that their inaccuracies

\textsuperscript{31} Ross, \textit{Propaganda for War}, 34.
\textsuperscript{32} Buitenhuys, \textit{The Great War of Words}, xvi-xvii.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{34} Messinger, \textit{British Propaganda and the State}, 46.
were largely based on reports produced by the British government which they assumed to be credible but upon later re-examination were found to be trumped up or entirely fabricated.\textsuperscript{35} The truth is probably a bit of both – newspapers took stories from individuals as well as government sources, but the government sources, as is obvious from the example of the Bryce Report, were not in themselves to be trusted. The Wellington House also employed a number of prominent newspapermen, and many of their reports and press releases were almost newspaper articles themselves.

Reporting of atrocities stories did not begin immediately on August 4. For the first three weeks, the atrocities were largely ignored, relegated to bland reports on the fifth or sixth page of most papers.\textsuperscript{36} The French newspaper \textit{Le Matin} first used the term “atrocities” on August 7, but the term did not cross the Channel until late August. On August 21, the \textit{Daily Mail} published the first prominent opinion piece on the issue entitled “The Barbarity of German Troops – Sins against Civilization” by Hamilton Fyfe.\textsuperscript{37} However, it wasn’t until the August 24-26 destruction of Louvain that press coverage of the Belgian atrocities exploded. Ultimately, Louvain received the most coverage in the British press, followed by the destruction of Rheims Cathedral in France (September 17-19), and then the massacre at Termonde (September 9).\textsuperscript{38}

When it came to the issue of bias, British newspapers made no show of remaining neutral. Terms such as “Huns,” “barbarians,” “Goths,” and “Teutons” became synonymous with “German soldier” and their deeds were “moral outrages” and “crimes

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{38} Lipkes, \textit{Rehearsals}, 616.
against civilization.” The Belgians were overwhelmingly faultless and victimized. Newspapers published the same cartoons and images used to illustrate reports and pamphlets alongside the latest atrocity story. The headlines say it all: The Times reported the destruction of Louvain as “WAR ON POSTERITY” while Daily Mail called it “Vandalism at Louvain” (an especially poignant headline considering that “vandalism” itself is derived from the Vandals, but one of the Barbarian tribes with which the Germans were associated after August 1914)\(^3\) While the press may have relied on real events and accounts, most newspaper stories were oversimplified and exaggerated, which may have increased readership but also encouraged vilification and ignored alternative viewpoints.

The goals of all these propaganda efforts were multiple. At home, support for the war was high, but a number of adjustments were necessary to preserve the war effort. First, the population had to be convinced of the Allies’ complete and total moral right. This conflict was not a petty territorial squabble but a large-scale clash of civilizations in which peace-seeking and ethical democracy was pitted against militaristic, dangerous autocracy. While the German disregard for the guarantee of Belgian neutrality was a powerful indictment, the Belgian atrocities provided far greater fodder for moral outrage. The “total war or total peace” policy adopted by the British government necessitated this starkly polar construction. By agreeing to no separate treaties, the Allies essentially guaranteed a long and bloody battle requiring total mobilization.

Preparation of the population for such a trial was the second goal of British propaganda. Previously, European wars had been short and contained, but from the outset World War I proved to be everything but. The British Government assumed (and correctly

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so) that enthusiasm for the war would die away once the horrors of the fighting became known, but by inciting the population with an issue of larger moral significance, support for the war could in part be preserved. Throughout the war, other humanitarian crises were used to bring the focus back to the moral motivation for the conflict. Third, attempts to dehumanize the enemy can also be seen as a reaction to the brutal colonial uprisings that occurred before and during World War I. The use of extreme force in these uprisings was rarely discussed, but people may have balked at the idea of using such tactics on fellow “civilized” Europeans. Dehumanizing propaganda essentially removed this issue by claiming that the enemy was no better than the savage races. Indeed, one of the great horrors for those looking back on World War I would be that civilized nations could wage such an uncivilized war. In portraying the German race as a whole, not just the soldiers, as uncouth barbarians, the British government sought to assuage the consciences of its civilians and thus be free to fully unleash the horrors of mechanized warfare in pursuit of total victory.

Perhaps most importantly, British propaganda hoped to convince the United States to join the war effort on the side of the Allies. Gilbert Parker, a Canadian Anglophile writer working for the Wellington House, headed these efforts and the Wellington House pursued the U.S. press fervently. Britain cut the communication cables between the U.S. and Germany in August of 1914, expressing their early desire to monopolize contact with America. Most American news reports were based on information from the British War Information Bureau – the Wellington House – or on “special cables” to the U.S. from London or British correspondents in Brussels.

40 Ross, Propaganda for War, 58.
For its own part, most U.S. media was interested in maintaining more neutral coverage to match their neutral war position. They cited the source for their articles, and often marked them with quotation marks instead of simply printing them in full, but still the bias is more than apparent. Occasionally, an opposing viewpoint in the form of a letter to the editor or contributed article picked from *Staats-Zeitung*, the principal German-language newspaper in America, appeared. In a February 20, 1915 letter to the *New York Times*, Carl Alexander van Muessenthal defended his country as “a German who believes in the ‘Kultur’ – yes indeed! – of the fatherland” and then went on to point out a bias in the *New York Times*’ reporting.\(^41\) On September 2, 1914 the *New York Times* published a story from *Staats-Zeitung* claiming that the destruction at Louvain was militarily warranted and that portrayals of Louvain’s exceptionalism were overstated:

Louvain was not a city comparatively rich in treasures of art and architecture. Its particular pride and the Baedecker’s attraction of the place, the well-known town hall, was not destroyed. The rest of the city had merely the moss-grown charm of those delightful villages that cluster the neighborhood of Brussels. It was sufficient, however, to give the devil’s advocate a peg upon which to hang a story.\(^42\)

A later *Staats-Zeitung* article called out the British use of propaganda claiming “If pen wielding could win battles England would rule the world.”\(^43\)

However, instances like these were few and far between, and certainly did not receive the same cover space as other, British-inspired pieces (both *Staats-Zeitung* pieces were published on page five, the letter to the editor on page ten, and neither received accompanying pictures). The cultural and linguistic common ground between Great Britain and the U.S. certainly played a large role in this preference – Germany attempted to

distribute propaganda of its own in America, but this was nowhere near as effective as the British efforts.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, Americans were so inundated with information depicting the atrocities in graphic detail and then decrying the Rape of Belgium that even the reports of respected American journalists Irvin Cobb, Roger Lewis, Harry Hansen, James O’Donnell Bennett, and John T. McCutcheon did not stem support for Belgium. These journalists traveled with the German army into Belgium and wrote to the \textit{New York Times} claiming there were no atrocities.\textsuperscript{45} Nevertheless, U.S. support for Belgium was so entrenched that years later Belgium counted Woodrow Wilson and the American delegation its biggest supporters at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and American philanthropic activity in Belgium extended into the interwar years.

The Wellington House sought to convince the U.S. that World War I was more than just an overblown European argument but was actually a grand battle of universal ideals and moral right. By couching the Belgian atrocities in monumental rhetoric, propaganda elevated the causes, tone, and eventual outcome of the war to a point where the U.S. would feel obliged to participate. Another, though possibly less realistic goal, was to convince the United States that they themselves were in danger from German aggression and invasion. The idea of a war-exhausted Germany shipping its soldiers across the Atlantic to invade New York and Washington seems ridiculous now, but at least some of this fear took hold. The 1917 enlistment poster “Destroy this Mad Brute!” (Figure A) depicted the German monster standing on “America.”\textsuperscript{46} A political cartoon entitled “If Kultur Wins” which appeared in \textit{Life} on July 29, 1915, showed a Prussian soldier attacking the figure of Uncle

\textsuperscript{44} Lipkes, \textit{Rehearsals}, 623.
\textsuperscript{45} Lipkes, \textit{Rehearsals}, 625.
Sam. When America protests “But I have always remained neutral” the Prussian soldier responds “Couldn’t you learn from Belgium how I handle neutrals?” While it is doubtful that most Americans believed this to be an actual possibility, posters such as these demonstrate that there was an audience for this argument. This fear, and most of the other judgments passed about the Belgian atrocities in America, were cultivated by the work of the Wellington House and other sources of British propaganda. Although the U.S. remained neutral until 1917, the efforts of the Wellington House significantly influenced the American conception of the Rape of Belgium from its inception through its current interpretation.

The body of propaganda work relating to the Rape of Belgium in Britain and America is very large and rich. However, two central trends in particular endured the war and became important features in the revision and rejection of the Belgian atrocities, and as such are still important today. They are the humanitarian crisis and cruelty to civilians showed throughout, and the notion of Germans as barbarians, best showcased by the propaganda surrounding the destruction of Louvain. Through these two threads, we can best observe the portrayals of Germany that came out of the Rape of Belgium and therefore can examine how these views shifted during the Paris Peace Talks and beyond.

The humanitarian element of the Rape of Belgium was obviously powerful – the suffering of Belgian citizens at the hands of German soldiers was deplorable and the ensuing refugee crisis warranted a good deal of foreign support. However, the portrayal of the refugees in propaganda not only overplayed the atrocities issue, but reveals much about the prejudices of the time about Belgians and Germans alike. While “brave little Belgium”

rhetoric indeed praised Belgian resistance efforts, the sexualizing and victimizing of the Belgian population in propaganda ultimately constructed them as a nation which needed foreign assistance, not one which would help rebuild the world after the war. The propaganda did Belgium no favors—it was created to elicit sympathy and support policy in Britain and America, not ultimately to aid the Belgian cause. Although some was certainly created out of genuine feeling in the moment, it nevertheless endorsed a perception of Belgium which would not serve the country well in later negotiations.

One example of such self-serving propaganda which mostly lacked deeper sympathetic sentiment is the “Through Terror to Triumph” speech, given on September 19, 1914 at Queens Hall, London, by Chancellor to the Exchequer David Lloyd George. It is not that Lloyd George felt nothing towards the entire situation – according to his mistress, the cultural devastation that came with the invasion upset him. Stevenson records on September 21, 1914 that “C. [Lloyd George] is most indignant at the burning of Rheims cathedral, the news of which is in today’s papers. It has moved him more than anything else since the outbreak of the war.”

However, the humanitarian element of the Belgian atrocities interested Lloyd George little, if at all. His famous “Through Terror to Triumph” reflect this proclivity. Here, Lloyd George urged for war and talked in length about the Belgian case. He spoke of the virtues of “little nations” saying,

…the world owes much to little 5 foot 5 nations. The greatest art in the world was the work of little nations; the most enduring literature of the world came from little nations… God has chosen little nations as the vessels by which He carries His choicest wines to the lips of humanity… and if we had stood by when two little nations were being crushed and broken by the brutal hands of barbarism, our shame would have rung down the everlasting ages.

He then went on to contrast the cultural sophistication of Belgium to that of Germany, and to explain the threat of German cultural dominance:

It is in the interest of Prussia today to break the treaty, and she has done it. She avows it with cynical contempt for every principle of justice. She says: “Treaties only bind you when it is in your interest to keep them.” “What is a treaty?” says the German Chancellor: “A Scrap of paper.”… This was their religion. “Treaties? They tangle the feet of Germany in her advance. Cut them with the sword! Little nations? They hinder the advance of Germany. Trample them in the mire under the German heel!... We will have a new diet. We will force it upon the world. It will be made in Germany— a diet of blood and iron”… This is what we are fighting – that claim to predominance of a material, hard civilization… We are not fighting the German people. The German people are under the heel of the German military caste.\(^5^0\)

Lloyd George’s rhetorical choices here are significant. Other politicians appealed to other aspects of the attack on Belgium, and used imagery of raped women or defenseless children. Lloyd George took another tack and focused on the cultural destruction of Belgium at the hands of German culture, which he describes as threatening the entire world with its militaristic notions of civilization.

This speech foreshadows two main trends that became increasingly apparent throughout the course of the war and into the 1919 Paris Peace Conferences. First, the lack of interest in human destruction carried over in Lloyd George’s approach to reparations and Belgium’s post-war entitlement. Once the threat of German militarism was defeated there was little reason to support the Belgian cause at the expense of other countries. Lloyd George harbored little sympathy for the plight of Belgian civilians in 1914, and this would only diminish as the brutal nature of the war was brought home to British soldiers and civilians. Already in 1914 Belgium was but one example of the noble “little countries,” and by 1918 was even less important to the British Prime Minister.

\(^5^0\) Gilbert, Lloyd George, 49.
Second, and as will be discussed at length later, Lloyd George retained an interest in preserving Germany even at the height of anti-German sentiment in the fall of 1914. In this speech, he makes a clear distinction between the German military caste and the German people, and explicitly states that the German people are not the enemy. This belief manifested itself during the Versailles deliberations as a belief in the importance of Germany and a concern about the German state, as well as the desire to try the Kaiser, whom Lloyd George and many of the public blamed for German militarism and aggression.

Before news of the atrocities filtered into Anglo-American propaganda, depictions of Belgium focused on its stand against German treachery. One cartoon from the British magazine *Punch!* shows a child denying an older man access through a gate marked “no thoroughfare.” The caption reads “Bravo, Belgium!” (Figure D). 51 Similarly, a popular term of the day was “brave little Belgium.” However, even in these early images, Belgium is still demoted – portrayed as a child and described as “little,” it does not command the respect of the larger countries, the main players in the conflict.

Similarly, the image of Belgium as a raped woman was a popular one in early war propaganda – indeed, the term “Rape of Belgium” is not incidental. The comparisons between territorial invasion and sexual assault are not inappropriate, but the fact that propaganda so often returned to this theme requires further investigation. Typically, the illustrators drew wronged woman in classical style, with flowing hair and garments, left ravished or in another sort of emotional turmoil. In most pictures, their faces are either partially or entirely obscured from view, a sign of helplessness. Sometimes the German

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perpetrator is present, sometimes just the aftermath is shown, and the viewer assumes that
the soldiers have moved on to new victims. It is not always clear whether the women are
Belgium personified or meant to capture actual victims, or both. What is clear is that they
are entirely devastated and rendered powerless by the force of their trauma. (Figures E and
F). Horne and Kramer describe the power of rape against a community – an accusation of
impotence against the male population combined with the nakedness and abandonment of
the women – but continually showing the Belgian situation as a sort of rape essentially
accomplishes the same goal.52 It granted to Britain and America the power of saviors and
therefore engendered a latent inequality that became apparent at the Paris Peace
Conference, when Belgium was relegated to a council of the other small nations and it
became apparent that the Belgian case was no longer a priority.

Images of massacred children often went hand in hand with those of wronged
women – in fact, the two figures were often pictured lying next to one another in scenes of
atrocities. One of the greatest myths of the era was that the Germans cut off the hands of
Belgian children, an image of severed limbs which was incredibly potent.53 Another
fabricated image was the bayoneted baby, drawn numerous times in political cartoons
(Figure H). Again, these images pointed to the impotence of Belgian men to protect their
own family and the general helplessness of the Belgians in their situation. Obviously these
drawings and descriptions elicited much sympathy for the Belgian cause and perhaps aided
in raising funds for refugee groups, but otherwise cannot be said to have helped Belgium in
any tangible way later on.

52 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 200.
53 This was in itself a brilliant propaganda move on the part of the Belgians – not much earlier, King
Leopold of Belgium had been accused of cutting off the hands of his native colonial subjects in the Belgian
Congo.
Rape and child propaganda did, however, serve the purposes of British propagandists. It brought the war to the family and home front, and thus not only increased the moral tone of the crisis but pushed soldiers to fight to defend their own home from such terrors. Such propaganda did not fare well in the course of the war. As more accounts of atrocities against British and French soldiers and the brutalities of trench warfare trickled home, the public became less concerned with the suffering of Belgian women and children, and after four years of hosting the Belgians as refugees, hospitality and sympathy faded. The perception of Belgium as impotent, however, survived to haunt it in the post-war negotiations for power and reparations.

The second important theme in the Rape of Belgium propaganda was the war waged against German culture. German soldiers and citizens alike were subjected to almost every label for sub-human, uncivilized, barbarous creatures imaginable: Huns, Barbarians, Teutons, Goths, wolves, apes, thieves, robbers, the list goes on. These labels were not specific to German soldiers, but were applied to the entire race. One 1916 New York Times article headlined “To Spread Teuton Kultur” related in no way to the war effort or even to the atrocities – instead, it was a nondescript discussion of whether German universities had decided to raise tuition.54

After all German citizens were deemed responsible for crimes committed by soldiers, the whole of German culture was grouped under the heading of “Kultur,” a melding of Realpolitik and social Darwinism that emphasized individual subservience to the state in order to better the evolution of the nation.55 German Kultur emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with philosophers Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich

55 Nicholas Martin, “Nietzsche as Hate-Figure in Britain’s Great War: “The Execrable Neech,’” In The First World War as a Clash of Cultures, Ed. by Fred Bridgham (Rochester: Camden House, 2006): 171.
Schelling, and Georg Hegel, as well as the early German Romantic movement. It also
grew to include controversial philosophers such as Nietzsche, although his views can
hardly be applied to all Kultur. For much of the nineteenth century, German intellectuals,
writers, and philosophers were considered the pinnacle of European civilization. Often,
German Kultur was considered in opposition to French culture, and the two in some ways
divided Europe ideologically. The Germans saw Kultur as an “honest conscience,
spirituality, and high morality opposed to artificial forms of ‘mere civilization.’”

However, as tensions mounted in the years proceeding World War I, many British began to
doubt Kultur and instead viewed it as an abandonment of moral boundaries in exchange for
efficiency and progress. In many ways, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kultur
indeed represented the survival of the fittest, machine-like attributes of the new age of
mechanization, which were perceived in an increasingly negative light as the events of the
war became known, but was vastly over-applied and simplified by the wartime propaganda.
Increasingly, Kultur became synonymous with blind Prussian militarism and mindless
individual subservience to the state. This new definition Kultur remained in opposition to
French culture, but in the polarized viewpoint of the early 1910s, Kultur became the
antithesis of, and a grave threat to, the whole of Western civilization.

The propaganda which emerged out of the destruction of Louvain epitomizes
German cultural “de-civilization” propaganda. Louvain was a small Belgian town, home to
some remarkable examples of Gothic architecture and also to the University of Louvain
and its library which contained important medieval manuscripts. On August 24, 1914, the
German army marched into Louvain and mistakenly thought that it suffered attacks from

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57 Ibid.
franc-tireurs. In retribution, they executed the burgomaster and a number of other citizens, and set fire to the Church of St. Pierre and the University Library. This event provoked the most press coverage of any atrocity event, and was also the focus of later attempts at Belgian restoration and reparation. Propaganda immediately constructed the incident in universal terms and extreme juxtaposition. Louvain was an “intellectual metropolis,” the destroyed buildings “the jewels of Gothic art,” and its destruction “a blow to all of civilization.” An article in the New York Times quoted The Times as saying

It is treason to civilization. War on non-combatants is bad enough, but this is war on posterity to the remotest generations. It is tragic for individuals to die; but in a few years we must die, anyhow, and others will come after who may more than replace us. But these trophies of art and civilizations, these triumphs and stepping-stones of the human soul, need never have died; and now, dead, they are irreplaceable.

While certainly the treasures of Louvain were magnificent, that their destruction should elicit such a reaction is notable. Indeed, this propaganda aimed to build up Belgian civilization while simultaneously tearing down German Kultur.

Perhaps this dichotomy is best expressed in the “Huns sacking Rome” allusions used to describe the German invasion of Belgium. On September 1, 1914, the New York Times published a short story on page two with the heading “Roman Rebuke for the Germans.” The brief article simply read: “Dispatch to The London Daily News: The art loving Romans are indignant at the destruction of Louvain. It is proposed that they shall protest against the Germans by leaving their cards at the Belgian Legation.”

informative potential of this article is little, but it effectively links Belgian and Rome, the proposed home of Western culture. A political cartoon by American Boardman Robinson shows the German Goth, decorated with tiny human skulls, stampeding through a city which mixed classical Roman stairs with background Gothic spires – essentially conflating Louvain and Rome (See Figure G).

Often, reports of the sack of Louvain read like fiction. Richard Harding Davis’ story, published in most major U.S. newspapers, was full of literary flourishes, allusions and alliterations, and sensory images. He describes Louvain as a quaint Belgian town almost too in-line with typical American perceptions of provincial Europe: “I found the city clean, sleepy, and pretty, with narrow twisting streets, smart shops, cafes set in flower gardens, houses with red roofs, green shutters, and white walls… over those that faced south had been trained pear trees, and their branches heavy with fruit spread out against the walls like branches of candelabra” – this was not the scary, imperialist, and difficult Europe that America had taken so much care to avoid becoming involved with.\textsuperscript{61} Instead, Louvain was everything that is worth saving about Europe – culture, refinement, pastoral peace, and history. Germany, then, was the “new Europe,” mechanized and imperialistic, ready to take over and flood the world with bureaucracy and violence, entirely stamping out pockets of the beautiful old world such as Louvain.

According to the Rape of Belgium propaganda, German Kultur also threatened Judeo-Christian culture. Again, we find an example in Lloyd George’s “Through Terror to Triumph” speech: he impersonated the German view claiming “Christianity? Sickly sentimentalism about sacrifice for others!”\textsuperscript{62} Harding Davis also wrote on German Kultur


\textsuperscript{62}Gilbert, \textit{Lloyd George}, 49.
as the new German religion when he described “you felt it was only a nightmare, cruel and
uncivilized, and then you remembered that the German emperor has told us what it is. It is
his holy war.”63 Many cartoons of the time also portrayed Germany as some sort of
militaristic anti-Christ. One article compared German Kultur and Islam as “religions of the
sword.”64 The issue here was one of morality. Propaganda made the argument that
Germany had relinquished Christian morality for the hard doctrine of Nietzsche and social
Darwinism, thus lending even more weight to the moral call to action. As Edmond
Holmes’ poem, published in The London Times asked, “Christ or Nietzsche? Right or
might? / Truth of Heaven or lies from Hell? / Healing balm or busting shell? / Freedom’s
day or servitude’s night?”65

Another important symbol of terrorizing German Kultur was the Kaiser’s helmet
(Figure A, also labeled “militarism” for good measure), but this symbol points to a
particular difficulty presented by the demonization of German culture. As Lloyd George
said “We are not fighting the German people. The German people are under the heel of the
German military caste.”66 This was typical of many people’s views on German culture –
that pure, German, Goethe-centric culture had been hijacked by Prussian militarism to
create the new militarism that threatened the world. Blaming the Kaiser for the ills of the
war had staying power – into the Paris Peace Talks, leaders and middle-class civilians alike
called for the trial of the Kaiser for war crimes. One letter to the editor laid out the
argument well:

...the German sheer military point of view cuts off the human field of vision. The
failure to see the whole is an ingrained limitation of the German ruling class, while

64 “Culture by the Sword,” The Independent, December 21, 1914, American Periodicals Series online, 432.
65 Martin, “Nietzsche as a Hate-Figure in Britain’s Great War,” 154.
66 Gilbert, Lloyd George, 49.
insistence on measuring human values by the standard of military efficiency and the swordsman’s honor impair the wisdom of the Kaiser’s Government and may cause its downfall. The same failure to preserve the whole human is, let us hope, but the temporary infirmity of the admirable German people. In the end they will learn that it is not well even to conquer at all cost.  

Thus, the German people, while not irreproachable, were not bringers of the cultural apocalypse either. The militaristic Prussians, embodied in Kaiser Wilhelm II, were mostly to blame for the war and atrocities.  

However, it is not true that all Allied citizens immediately placed all blame for the war on the Kaiser. In some circles, the Kaiser was still viewed as a patron of the arts and supporter of culture. A number of Dutch artists, for example, intervened on him to spare the art of Belgium: “after declaring their admiration of German culture and their certainty of the sympathy of the civilized world, they urgently call upon Emperor William, as one of the co-promoters of humanity and civilization, to see that in the future works of our common humanity shall be spared under stress of war”  

The defamation of the Kaiser, then, was more a part of the wartime process of placing blame than it was indicative of overwhelming pre-war hatred for Wilhelm II.  

That popular opinion sought an outlet and scapegoat for its anti-German sentiment is not surprising, but also indicates towards a continuing desire, despite the events of 1914 and the propaganda surrounding them, to nevertheless believe in German culture. The anger directed at the Kaiser both during and after the war represented a need to separate that which was blameworthy in German culture from that which could and should be salvaged in the new world order. The Prussian militarism versus German culture argument, then, was less of an indictment of all things German than a disgust for the

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current state of events in concert with a latent affection towards that which had been quite popular and revered before the war. It also hints at the eventual abandonment of the Kultur argument—once Prussian militarism was defeated it was neither necessary, nor pragmatic, to demonize Germany as a whole (Figure J).

These shifts in the perception of the Rape of Belgium will be the subject of the remaining chapters, but for the time being it is important to note several main themes that ran through Anglo-American Rape of Belgium propaganda. First, the portrayal of Belgian civilians and culture may have elicited sympathy at the time, but it also segregated Belgium distinctly to its own international category—quaint, historic, and needing of protection. In the end, this played against the Belgian cause in the post-war negotiations in which the main goal was rebuilding a new world order. The Rape of Belgium propaganda drew from and was motivated by the events occurring in Belgium, but ultimately it targeted civilian populations in Britain and America. This portrayal of Belgium ran counter to visions of German which, while horribly negative, were redeemable in two significant ways. For one, Germany was still and active and potent force to be reckoned with, and second, an undercurrent of appreciation for German culture paired with scapegoating the Kaiser made cultural reconciliation fairly likely.

Further, the propaganda was set up so as to create moral outrage on both an emotional and an intellectual level. While this resulted in increased support for the war in the early years, as the conflict wore on even these images lost their power, truths about the alleged atrocities were discovered, and sympathy began to build towards the enemy. People realized the depth of manipulation in the “information” they had received from supposedly credible sources, and anger at this betrayal combined with general
disillusionment produced another effect of moral outrage, only this time it was directed against the propaganda images and those who produced them. This realization began with the 1918-1919 Paris Peace Talks and the Treaty of Versailles, where both politics and popular opinion played a crucial role in transforming the image of the Belgian atrocities. By this time the events in Belgium were one of many wartime atrocities: the shelling of British coastal towns, unrestricted submarine warfare, the treatment of prisoners of war, and others all conflated in the minds of many, thus making the Belgian cause but one face in a crowd of wartime horrors.
Chapter 2: “Between Jesus Christ and Napoleon”: the Political Problems of the
Versailles Peace Treaty

When asked how he felt the negotiations at Paris had gone, British Prime Minister
David Lloyd George replied “not badly, considering I was seated between Jesus Christ and
Napoleon.”69 In spite of Lloyd George’s sarcastic definitions of United States President
Woodrow Wilson and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, all these – the Big
Four (later three, when Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando left the
conference) – confronted similar dilemmas at Versailles: whether to be forgiving and
selfless, or to be vengeful and self-interested. On the one hand, all three sought to rebuild
the world in such a way as to prevent another war of such magnitude. On the other, no
country wanted to sacrifice its piece of reparations, its reimbursement for the long and
bloody struggle. In between these two polar pulls was a host of smaller issue: the pressure
of a large-scale international conference, general disillusionment with the war at large, and
personal problems between the diplomats and political leaders.

The case of Belgium was particularly problematic not only because of its actual
treatment during wartime, but because of the extensive publicity it had received in 1914
and 1915. In effect, the propaganda sensation around the Rape of Belgium created two
identities for the country that had to be dealt with – one in the “real world” of international
politics and diplomacy, another of symbolic importance which spoke to the idealistic desire
to remake the world order and enact justice, but which was less realistically attainable.
Those who discussed the Belgian issue at the 1919 Paris Peace Conferences engaged the
problem of what to do with an international humanitarian sensation in a very complex
international environment. And although this was probably subconscious, the same ideas

69 Cited in Zuckerman, The Rape of Belgium, 289.
fostered by the Rape of Belgium propaganda appeared in the work of the Peace Conference
diplomats. Specifically, they channeled a belief in the relative unimportance of Belgium in
comparison to Germany, as well as a restoration of German cultural standing thanks in part
to the defamation and attempted trial of the Kaiser. These trends, which truly had their
roots in the original 1914 and 1915 propaganda, were the beginnings of the interwar
revisions which that redefined the popular conceptions of the Rape of Belgium.

The Treaty of Versailles met the proverbial requirement that a good compromise
leave everyone angry. Belgium, while it eventually received a reparations check of $500
million and a transfer of all war debt to Germany,\textsuperscript{70} felt bullied by the large powers and
denied its promised voice. Germany still took the brunt of the blow and deteriorated
economically – Hitler’s interpretation of the Belgian propaganda and later German
aggression towards Belgium, as will be discussed later, more than hint at the anger felt
towards the treaty. In particular, the mechanisms and thought-processes by which the
peace agreement was achieved reveal much about how the perception of the Belgian
atrocities shifted in political circles. I will assess the importance of the Rape of Belgium
propaganda to the Paris Peace Conference on three main levels. First, as it was viewed by
both the British and American delegations and particularly the heads of these delegations,
namely David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson; second, as it influenced the issue of
reparations; and finally, as it was addressed in the argument over whether or not to try
Kaiser Wilhelm II for war crimes.

The structure of the Paris Peace Conference, which divided the councils into one
for larger powers (Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States) and another for
smaller countries, magnified the importance of personality and individual viewpoints and

\textsuperscript{70} Zuckerman, \textit{The Rape of Belgium}, 236-237.
prejudices among those top diplomats constructing the Treaty of Versailles. Lloyd George and Wilson, for their own part, played a very personal role in shaping the treaty, and were themselves influenced to one degree or another by the Rape of Belgium propaganda. Their viewpoints captured many revisionist sentiments, if not in part informing them as well.

A consideration of the effects of propaganda upon major politicians is a bit curious – should not these individuals be, to a large degree, more informed and immune to the effects of propaganda than the general population? In short, often not: consider the case of Lord Viscount James Bryce, the previously-mentioned British historian who, despite his academic and public service experience, remained susceptible to atrocities stories. Granted, Bryce must be given some leeway for his misunderstanding: he wrote early in the war before dissenting opinions were known, and his sources consisted of the testimonies of refugees, British and Belgian soldiers, and the diaries of captured Germans – not an entirely fair sample.71 Still, we should note how Bryce’s close quarters with the atrocities stories, often augmented by newspaper propaganda and rumor, biased his judgments. While other politicians did not articulate their prejudices to quite the extent that Bryce did, they were probably also influenced by the propaganda and thus took these messages, in conjunction with their previous prejudices, into negotiations.

Propaganda affected the various British politicians in different ways. Some, such as the previously mentioned Lord Bryce, Lord Northcliffe, and Mr. Rowntree, felt sympathy for the Belgian cause, while others like Lloyd George felt little sympathy for Belgium. In her dairy, Lloyd Gerge’s mistress Frances Stevenson recorded a November 30, 1914, argument between Lloyd George and Mr. Rowntree over whether to provide food for Belgium or to force the Germans to do so. “Mr. Rowntree, who is thinking only of the

71 Messinger, British Propaganda and the state, 76.
suffering of the Belgians, says it is a brutal view to take and that the Germans will not feed them: but C [Lloyd George] says they are bound to, though there may be suffering first… C says he and Grey and Kitchner fought hard against allowing the food ship from America to go to Belgium.”

Lloyd George was, as this incident indicates, less inclined towards the Belgian cause even early in the war and therefore even more unwilling to make post-war concessions for them. Lloyd George is an interesting case – as opposed to those who became enraged after discovering the propaganda to be false, he never believed the Rape of Belgium story in the first place. Instead he subscribed to the theory of Belgian helplessness and German political and cultural strength that would be crucial to the postwar world, and his pragmatic sensibilities further emphasized these beliefs.

As discussed in chapter one, Lloyd George harbored a dislike of the Belgians far before the Paris conferences. He found them cowardly: Stevenson recounts that on September 21, 1914, Lloyd George told her a story about how the Belgians were about to allow the Germans to pass through the country and only last minute threats by M. Vandervelde, the Belgian Prime Minster, to abandon Belgium for France convinced them otherwise.73 In a personal letter on October 20, 1914, Lloyd George spoke of his dissatisfaction with the Belgian army saying, “They [the Germans] can only frighten the Belgians – English and French stand their ground. The Belgians have been driven back today.”74

Early in the conflict, Lloyd George believed that Belgium was not pulling its weight, a conviction which would only grow stronger throughout the course of the war and which

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72 Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George: A Diary, 14.
73 Ibid., 3.
taught his views at the Paris Peace Conference. When the Belgian Foreign Secretary Paul Hyman, whom Lloyd George blatantly disliked, asked for more say in the conference and more relief for Belgium, Lloyd George responded that Belgium did not do enough for itself, nor nearly as much as Great Britain: “You don’t have any right to speak thus of France and Great Britain. English soldiers died by the hundreds of thousands for the liberation of Belgium.” Hyman then replied that “If we didn’t have more soldiers, that was because our country was occupied. You don’t know what an invasion is… We are waiting for the help which you promised us,” and Lloyd George countered that “It seems to me that we gave Belgium a promise which cost us the lives of 900,000 men. If you speak to us in this way, we won’t listen to you any longer.” At best, he viewed the Belgian situation as no different from that of most other countries after the war – all suffered massive loss of life, many, especially France, suffered cultural destruction, but all ultimately prevailed over German militarism. Belgian deserved no special treatment or place in the sun, and Lloyd George felt that its 1918-1919 requests were beyond the scope of other belligerents. In May 1919, he told Clemenceau and Wilson that “…the Belgians must accept being treated as we ourselves are.”

These conversations depict how unimpressed Lloyd George was with the Belgian war effort, as well as his personal hostility towards the Belgian diplomat. It also testifies to Lloyd George’s belief in large powers as the most important and deserving members of the international community, an opinion that inevitably favored German over Belgian needs. As mentioned in chapter one, Lloyd George was not inclined to feel sympathy for the Belgium situation even in 1914, when the atrocities stories were still fresh. Over the

76 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 456.
course of the war, such beliefs in Belgian inferiority were only amplified. Thus, despite Lloyd George’s participation in the forming of the British Propaganda Ministry and its propaganda, his pragmatic approach to the Belgian plight and German responsibility throws his behavior at the Paris Peace Conference into better light.

The American situation differed significantly from that of the British – geographically and culturally more removed from the events, they were naturally less reactive. However, Secretary of State Robert Lansing explained this disconnectedness as enhancing, rather than limiting, American interest and idealism: “While selfish interest undoubtedly impelled the principal Allied Powers to adhere to the covenant and to become members of the League of Nations, the United States was free from such influences. It had no territorial or trade ambitions to advance. The American people desired a just peace because it would remove causes for war.”

77 British Prime Minister Lloyd George in particular drew criticism: Lansing blamed him for dividing the conference into two groups out of the victorious belligerents, as well as for keeping the deliberations largely a secret due to his concern over public opinion. He explained the works of Lloyd George as “to these well-defined national policies, which were essentially selfish and materialistic, the British Prime Minister clung tenaciously and was able to obtain nearly all of them by skillful maneuvering.”

78 Lansing also felt that Lloyd George, along with Clemenceau, manipulated Wilson’s optimistic goals for their own national advantage: “As the leaders of the Allied Powers, with their practical ideas, came to a realization of the situation and saw that the President was willing to concede much in exchange for support of the covenant,

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78 Lansing, The Big Four, 79-80.
they utilized his supreme desire to obtain by barter material advantages for their own
nations.”

Indeed, President Wilson’s idealistic nature made him more a champion for the
Belgian cause than any other of the Big Four, but his American identity and personal
choices also rendered him more distant from the issue. Wilson made a conscious effort to
ignore atrocities stories: in one anecdote, Lansing recalls “…his attitude towards evidence
of German atrocities in Belgium and toward accounts of the horrors of submarine
warfare… [was that] he would not read of them and showed anger if the details were called
to his attention.” Wilson expected such a remote attitude during the peace talk; in April
of 1919 he commented that “Unless we wait a long time to go through the process, the
judgment will be passed in an atmosphere of passion. For myself, every time I read
documents on atrocities committed, I saw red.”

Perhaps the best characterization of the American delegation’s views on Belgium
was Wilson’s November 16, 1917, birthday card to the Belgian King Albert which was
polite and personal but expressed standard condolences and indefinite promises to
Belgium. Wilson wanted to “renew expressions of deep sympathy for the sufferings which
Belgium has endured under the willful, cruel, and barbaric force of a disappointed Prussian
autocracy.” He then asserted his “…determination… to secure for the future, obedience to
the laws of nations and respect for the rights of humanity.” These messages were
certainly kind and most definitely welcome, but they offered neither originality nor any

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79 Ibid., 50.
80 Robert Lansing quoted in Arthur S. Link, Wilson the Diplomatist: A Look at his Major Foreign Policy
81 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 122.
82 Woodrow Wilson, War and Peace: Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Public Papers (1917-1924) vol
1927): 126.
concrete guarantee of Belgian demands – instead, they acknowledged once again Belgium’s role and promise some sort of relief, although in what form or amount remained unclear. Other diplomats, such as Wilson’s foreign policy advisor Colonel Edward M. House, American minister to Belgium Brand Whitlock, and the chairman of the Commission for the Relief of Belgium Herbert Hoover, showed concern for the Belgian situation but were unable to prompt Wilson into any strong effort on Belgium’s behalf.

Lansing argued that in the end Wilson renounced some of his principles and abandoned the smaller nations that he should have protected during the Versailles conference. His rhetoric after 1917, at least internally in speeches to the American public and to Congress, focused not on the humanitarian crisis but on the economic consequences of the German occupation. Eventually, Wilson effectively denied any destruction in Belgium save for that which was economic. He did not trivialize the Belgian issue – in fact he maintained the importance of Belgium for the postwar order – but he changed his tack from one of just retribution for an atrocity committed to economic reparations. In a September 5, 1919 speech in Saint Louis, Missouri, Wilson explained

I have just seen that suffering country [Belgium]… You do not witness in Belgium what you witness in France, except upon certain battlefields – factories destroyed, whole towns wiped out. No! the factories are there, the streets are clear, the people are there; but go into the factories. Every piece of machinery that could be taken away has been taken away… This war, in its inception was a commercial and industrial war. It was not a political war.83

The decision to move away from the moral issues which typified the early portrayal of Belgium to the issue of restructuring and rebuilding dominated both Wilson’s personal views and the goals of the Paris Peace Conference.

83 Wilson, War and Peace, 638.
Perhaps those most influenced by the pro-Belgium propaganda early in the war were the Belgians themselves. While some with more diplomatic experience understood that radically pro-Belgium statements were by and large war rhetoric, Belgian diplomats “became addicted to this heady diet of praise and glory” and expected it to continue, and simultaneously took these Allied statements of support which called for “full reparations” and “complete reconstruction” as guarantees, which they were not.

Belgians had good reason to be confident in their reparations claims – they were legally blameless for the war, their country was economically and strategically important to the Allies, and the sympathy supposedly elicited by the destruction of their country and economy should have guaranteed them a privileged position. What is more, they believed themselves to be the standard by which justice would be doled out in the new system, a view which sprang from the Allied use of the Belgian cause precisely as moral fodder. During April 29, 1919, deliberations with Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau, Belgian Foreign Minister Hyman asked the Great Powers “Isn’t it true that the Belgian cause was like the flag of the Allies from the moral point of view during the entire war?”

However, the situation had changed significantly since the beginning of the war – more belligerents, and especially more small states, were involved which meant that the peace had to satisfy many more desires. In addition, all the countries felt the sting of the war and were now far less sympathetic to the Belgian plight. All in all, none of the Belgian arguments amounted to much during the conference itself.

85 Ibid., 62.
87 Marks, *Innocents Abroad*, 63.
The problem of economic reparations epitomized the limits of the Versailles Peace Treaty in giving Belgium what it felt it deserved. These misunderstandings set the stage for many a clash during the peace process, during which Belgium tried to redeem these rhetorical promises with little success. The result was that the Belgians came across as demanding and difficult to the Big Four. In the words of British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour “The attitude of the Belgians in this question has always been a bit brazen.”

Despite subsequent allegations of extreme vengeance and irrationality, an attempt at realism guided the negotiations of the Big Four, even in more ambiguous issues such as the new world order and the League of Nations, but especially in regards to reparations. Regardless of the claims of wartime propaganda, it remained the fact that Germany was simply more important than Belgium in terms of economic and political stability, as well as in cultural standing. This, combined with countries’ inevitable self-interest, left little room for Belgium. In many ways, the reparations decided upon by the Paris Peace Conference and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles fulfilled the unintentional trends begun in the pro-Belgium propaganda of the early war: Belgium as weak and useless to the new world order, and Germany as both culturally and politically relevant despite being deemed entirely at fault for the war.

Not surprisingly, the issue of reparations was one of the most discussed topics at the Paris conferences, and therefore it underwent a number of alterations. The Belgian requests remained, however, basically unchanged from beginning to end. Belgium sought reparations before other nations; like the others, they expected Germany to pay back their war debts; and they requested 500 million gold francs. The other Allies considered this

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88 Mantaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 263.
89 Zuckerman, The Rape of Belgium, 223-225.
impossible and unwarranted, and were unwilling to provide such terms to Belgium, especially when it came at their own expense.

The overwhelming attitude of the Big Four towards Belgian reparations can be easily summed up: self-interest with some interest in German preservation. This is a bit surprising considering today we see the Treaty of Versailles as essentially unequal and in part responsible for sowing the seeds for World War II, but in actuality this was not the intent of the signers. While each of the Big Four (primarily France and Britain) were interested in obtaining reparations for their own wartime sufferings, they were also concerned with preserving Germany for the sake of international stability to the point that they were willing to relegate Belgium, which they had earlier claimed to be the moral cause for which the war was fought, to ensure both these goals were met.

Often, the Great Powers considered the Belgian financial burden in contrast to their own and more often than not found it lacking. They were quick to decry Belgium’s claims to civilian loss or destroyed property as exaggerations, and wanted to focus more on military costs. According to Wilson and Lloyd George in particular, Belgium had not pulled her weight militarily and therefore deserved a smaller piece of the reparations pie. In part this stems from the later trend which sympathized heavily with the soldier experience on both sides of the trenches, and indeed valued this “atrocities” over those committed against civilians. On March 25, 1919, Wilson presented the reparations issue thus: “we can take as a base figure for each state’s costs for pensions granted to families of men killed or disabled by the war… Belgium, for example – where, even though the enemy deprived the country of much of its industrial equipment, direct devastation was limited – presents very exaggerated claims to us.”

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90 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 7-8.
Similarly, some of the Big Four believed that they had been pulled into the war on account of Belgium, shouldering its war costs and therefore deserving more in terms of reparations. On April 15, 1919 Lloyd George explained that “it is we who have paid Belgium’s war costs: France and Great Britain provided the money required for her army and her government, and even a civil list for her King. Are we to draft an express formula to assure Belgium a compensation which would be refused to France and Great Britain? That is impossible.”

This attitude is actually in keeping with the 1914 and 1915 claims that Britain was obliged by treaty and on moral grounds to enter the war to protect Belgium – only in this case the claim takes a negative bent. This is indeed the fate of many of the arguments presented by early atrocities propaganda at the Paris Peace Conference: they were discredited not by denying the atrocities themselves, as would be done at a later date, but by taking the logic of propaganda arguments in an entirely different direction.

It would be erroneous to claim that greed in no way drove the reparations talks at the Treaty of Versailles, for while the Big Four continued to express the moral importance of Belgium, they showed little restraint in their own reparations estimates, which would inevitably result in less for Belgium. Partially these claims were driven by a world view which privileged large powers over small ones and therefore obviously granted more to Britain and France than to Belgium. This world view was entirely endorsed by Lloyd George and, while not articulated by Wilson, nevertheless became his default policy as he allowed Lloyd George to divide up the peace conference and fought only half-heartedly for Belgium.\footnote{Ibid., 154-155.}

\footnote{As previously mentioned, Secretary of State Lansing blamed the other powers for pushing Wilson away from his ideals to work equally with all countries, but it should also be noted that Wilson continually refused to meet separately with Belgian representatives.}
This view, while obviously self-serving, also enforced a greater cause. All these powers felt that the new world would be controlled primarily by large powers and that therefore they deserved the most attention, financial or otherwise, from the conference. This, in turn, put a greater emphasis on preserving Germany than on repairing Belgium. In concert with the concerns over economic devastation in Germany and the ability to resist the forces of communism (a very real threat, considering the failed communist revolution in Germany in 1919), the scapegoating of the Kaiser for the war opened the door for a more pro-German settlement than had seemed possible during the war. The rhetoric of the Big Four during the Paris Peace Conference indicated that they put extensive weight on repairing Germany and not pushing it into desperate destitution. While they certainly did not succeed to the degree they hoped, it is nevertheless significant that these issues weighed heavily on their minds during the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles.

The top priority for the Great Power diplomats, despite later characterizations that each only sought to better his own country, was the creation of a new world order to safeguard against another such war and also against the spread of Bolshevism. It was in this order, as well as in the reparations question, that the promises made by pro-Belgium propaganda and rhetoric clashed most significantly with the reality of constructing a successful peace treaty. In this process, the main pro-Belgium propaganda arguments were dismissed. The idea of German culture as bent on conquering the rest of Europe, epitomized in the destruction at Louvain, was overturned as previous cultural affinity with Germany re-emerged, the German people were distinguished from the militaristic Kaiser, against whom most people directed their anger, and the realities of post-war construction realized the need for a stable Germany (Figure J). Similarly, the humanitarian aspect of the
attack on Belgium – the rape of Belgian women and the killing of Belgian children – was mostly forgotten as all belligerents dealt with the destruction and psychological toll of the war.

Despite differing philosophies of governance, Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson nevertheless arrived at the same conclusion concerning the hierarchy of nations in the postwar world: namely, that the importance of Germany trumped that of Belgium. This fundamental agreement led them to adopt complementary policies which could ultimately produce rapprochement with a self-sufficient and stable Germany. Lloyd George held social Darwinist beliefs which predisposed him towards favoring the German cause. In the early days of the war, Lloyd George articulated his belief in might makes right. Frances Stevenson explained on October 4, 1914, how he felt about the clash of civilizations.

If we are not able to keep out the Germans under these conditions – then the Germans are the best men, and it is essential for the welfare of the world that men who have reached such a pitch of perfection should govern the world for the next century. But he does not think they have reached the pitch of perfection, and he believes with every other Briton that we shall win.93

Such an understanding, along with his statements about fighting the German Kaiser and not the German people, point to Lloyd George’s idea that Germany was a critical piece of the new world and one which should not be sacrificed to provide for Belgium, as well as indicating yet again how Lloyd George’s pre-war views influenced his decision making at the Paris Peace Conference. While he favored reparations and justice, ultimately Lloyd George believed that the stronger countries which had led the war and were to later lead the world deserved primary consideration.

Woodrow Wilson’s world view seems diametrically opposed to that of Lloyd George, but in practice they were much the same. Wilson did not see the government by

93 Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George: A Diary, 5.
the “best” of civilizations as the path to international harmony – instead, he fought hard for his proposed League of Nations and the creation of an international community, as well as for the right to self determination. His Fourteen Points, while superficially dealing with the Belgian problem, also demanded that “…the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest.”94 However even Wilson, though perhaps indirectly, forced the predominance of larger countries over smaller ones. Lansing blamed Wilson for “… his apparent abandonment of the smaller nations and his tacit denial of the equality of nations by consenting to the creation of an oligarchy of the Great Powers at the Conference…”95 Although outwardly more polite and receptive to the Belgian cause than Lloyd George, Wilson nevertheless agreed to the hierarchy of nations at the Paris Peace Conference.

With British and American delegations in agreement over the importance of large countries for the creation of a lasting international agreement, the desire to preserve Germany and the fear of what her reduction might bring became a substantial component of the peace talks. Repeatedly the council discussed the situation in Germany and the importance of not weakening it too significantly. In April 1919, Lloyd George expressed his concern for Germany saying “…the situation in Germany is deteriorating and a catastrophe is feared.”96 He went on to explain how a weak Germany endangered the gains of the peace talks. This fear stemmed not just from a latent sympathy with Germany but

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95 Lansing, The Big Four, 73.
96 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 183.
from a realist understanding of human nature and international diplomacy, as well as the 1919 attempted Bolshevik revolution in Germany. The leaders of the Great Powers were concerned that too strong a blow would throw Germany into the arms of the newly-emerged Bolshevism (Figure K). On March 26, 1919 Woodrow Wilson articulated this idea: “We owe it to the peace of the world not to tempt Germany to plunge into Bolshevism; we know only too well the relations of the Bolshevik leaders with Germany… we musn’t ask ourselves too often what we have the right to demand because of our losses, but rather what it is possible and wise to demand.”\textsuperscript{97} In fact, the issue of Bolshevism caused such conversations that it prompted American General Tasker Howard Bliss to remark that “the word ‘Bolshevik’ comes up so often in these debates that it obviously sets the tone for all that has just been said.”\textsuperscript{98}

The Great Powers also hoped to avoid pushing Germany into despair and a desire for revenge. In a later speech titled “The Search for a Just Peace” Lloyd George articulated this concern: “You may strip Germany of her colonies, reduce her armaments to a mere police force and her navy to that of a fifth rate power; all the same in the end if she feels that she has been unjustly treated in the peace of 1919 she will find means of exacting retribution from her conquerors.”\textsuperscript{99} Ultimately, the Versailles Peace Treaty failed because it did just that: exacted an impossible penalty upon Germany which set the stage for a conquest of revenge.

Unfortunately, the Big Four’s concern for German cultural fortitude and stability mostly eclipsed the same concern towards Belgium: while sympathy towards Belgium weakened, sympathy towards Germany gained force. This is not to say that the powers

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{98} Mautaux, \textit{The Deliberations of the Council of Four}, 46.
\textsuperscript{99} Gilbert, \textit{Lloyd George}, 62.
were not concerned with Belgium – they were – but this obligation derived mainly from 
concern over setting a precedent for future judicial action in the League of Nations, which 
will be discussed in full later, or to appease public sentiment, or both. Lloyd George and 
others supported the trial of the Kaiser for war crimes in large part because he represented 
to many the face of German militarism and could symbolically serve to enact justice 
without directly harming the German population. As he told the other member of the Big 
Four on April 8, 1919, “Along with the question of reparations, this is the one of greatest 
concern to English public opinion.”

Balfour, speaking about both territorial reparations, 
struck a similar chord: “…if Belgium, after all the events which have earned her the 
sympathy of the whole world, gets nothing of what she asks, the impression will be 
deplorable.”

When viewed through the lens of the pro-Belgium propaganda of the early war, this 
view garners special interest. One of the main propaganda slogans was of Belgian cultural 
superiority to German culture, as seen in Lloyd George’s previously quoted 1914 “Through 
Terror to Triumph” speech, as well as in the coverage of the destruction of Louvain and 
other Belgian cultural landmarks. However, at the Versailles talks, what concerned the 
Great Powers was the loss of German culture, either to social unrest or Bolshevism. The 
preservation of Belgium or Belgian culture received little, if any, mention. This view 
STEMS in large part from the belief in the preeminence of larger countries which enveloped 
the entire peace process from the structuring of the talks, to the rhetoric used, to the 
decisions made. In other words, it is rooted, as were many of the political decisions 
surrounding the Belgian issue, in the difference between rhetoric and reality.

100 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 194.
The decision of whether or not to try Kaiser Wilhelm II for war crimes produced significant conflict between the Big Three throughout the spring of 1919. Clemenceau and Lloyd George, for whom the trial was a crucial step in abetting British public rage and outcry about German war crimes and making Germany pay in-full for the war damage caused to Britain – a platform which had carried him to electoral victory in 1916, wanted the Kaiser tried. Belgium did as well but felt uncomfortable, as a monarchical country, acting against another monarchy,102 while President Wilson and American representatives Robert Lansing and James Brown Scott absolutely opposed the idea.103

The Americans expressed their displeasure on a number of levels. Internally, the Americans felt that the French and British were too incensed to fairly try the Kaiser, and suspected the only motive was revenge. Outwardly, they maintained that a fair legal process was unattainable on a number of levels. First, that no international body existed in which to try the Kaiser, and Wilson was not ready to subject his premature League of Nations to such a task. Lansing cited the lack of direct international statute as a reason not to push charges: “no crime without law, no penalty without crime,” he claimed.104 Second, Wilson maintained that the trial could not be carried out in the emotionally-charged post-war atmosphere. He told that council that “unless we wait a long time to go through the process, the judgment will be passed in an atmosphere of passion. For myself, every time I read documents on atrocities committed, I saw red…”105

Finally, Lansing and Scott proposed that wartime atrocities could not be justifiably prosecuted at all. War itself, they claimed, was an atrocious crime against humanity and

102 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 269.
103 Zuckerman, The Rape of Belgium 228-230.
105 Mautaux, The Deliberations of the Council of Four, 122.
therefore all other “atrocities” were but a part of war and could not be separated.\textsuperscript{106} This argument was picked up in the interwar years by those seeking to revise the story of the Rape of Belgium propaganda and the overall treatment of Germany during the war and Peace Conferences. However, at the time they were hardly popular within political circles and even less so in public opinion – in the eyes of many, the Kaiser was single-handedly responsible for much wartime destruction.

Despite this general mood, the American delegation refused to budge from its “no-trial” position. In mid-March 1919, Lansing stated that American judges could choose withdraw from any international law tribunal, effectively crippling the legal process.\textsuperscript{107} Without American support, the movement to try the Kaiser internationally carried little force, but was nevertheless left on the table. Article 227 of the Treaty of Versailles stated that “The Allied and Associated Powers publicly arraign William II of Hohenzollern, formerly German Emperor, for a supreme offence against international morality and the sanctity of treaties… The Allied and Associated Powers will address a request to the Government of the Netherlands for the surrender to them of the ex-Emperor in order that he may be put on trial.”\textsuperscript{108} The Dutch refused to surrender him, and the Kaiser remained in exile in the Netherlands where he died in 1941, suffering no judgment save in the court of public opinion.

This conversation illuminates a number of the issues posed by the Belgian atrocities for the Allies during the Paris Peace Conference. First, it indicates how closely the figure of the Kaiser was tied to the wartime atrocities, as no serious international movement sought to prosecute any other German citizens except Wilhelm II. This close association

\textsuperscript{106} Zuckerman, \textit{The Rape of Belgium}, 228.
\textsuperscript{107} Zuckerman, \textit{The Rape of Belgium}, 228-229.
between the militaristic Prussian Kaiser and wartime atrocities was in a sense the saving grace of the German people and German culture: while Prussian militarism and the Kaiser were demonized and blamed by those involved in the Paris Peace Conference, everyday Germans were largely exonerated of the cultural guilt placed on them by wartime atrocities propaganda.

Second, while numerous individuals including Lloyd George and Clemenceau called for the trial of the Kaiser, it is crucial to note that no trial ever took place, and indeed the arguments against such a trial were later picked up by the interwar intellectuals revising the Rape of Belgium story. Lansing and Scott’s interpretation that war itself was an atrocity and therefore no other atrocities could be claimed was one of the driving philosophies behind interwar disillusionment with the entire war and specifically with the rewriting of the Rape of Belgium. That it was first used by American delegates to protest the proposed trial of the Kaiser indicates the importance of this incident in shaping interwar interpretations of the Belgian atrocities and German complicity.
Chapter 3: Destroying the mad brute: the evolution of the “Rape of Belgium”

propaganda

Between America’s declaration of war on Germany on April 6, 1917 but before the November 11, 1918 cease-fire, the Rape of Belgium propaganda had one last hurrah, a resurgence in the United States, most of which was produced internally by American writers and statesmen. And while some reported recent German outrages against the Belgians – such as an October 1918 report which claimed that “Germans murdered a family of four because they wanted to greet the Allies”\(^{109}\) – larger exposés and series still focused on the events of a few months in 1914.

*The Washington Post* series written by Brand Whitlock, the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, from June through September 1918, exemplified this reapplication. These articles could well have been printed in 1914 or 1915 as they follow the same characterizations and commentary. Whitlock recalled the events of 1914 in articles such as “The First War Christmas in Devastated Belgium: How the Germans Celebrated the Birth of the Lowly Nazarene and the Advent of Peace on Earth in the Capital of the Little Nation They Had Ground Under Their Iron Heels,” and he spent a large amount of time describing again the pattern of civilian executions and denying German claims of *franc-tireurs.*\(^{110}\)

Whitlock then proceeded to condemn most any element of German culture: from their lack of a sense of fair-play stemming from the fact that there existed no organized sports in Germany, to their “self-culture,” to their replacement of religion with the mysticism of militarism. One interesting section told what phrases the Germans had learned in preparation for their sojourn in Belgium: “I am thirsty; bring me some beer, gin, rum,’


‘Lead me to the wealthiest inhabitants of this village,’ ‘If you lead us astray you will be shot” and similar.

Whitlock’s accounts also included the typical nods towards superior Anglo and French culture. Even when spouting the same ideas as Germany, the French surpassed them in doing so: “Forty-four years, and whole libraries of ponderous tomes to define a theory that Louis XIV, without hypocrisy and with no illusions, with French clearness, French logic, French cynicism and French wit, put into a word – ‘L’Etat, c’est moi!’” Whitlock himself admitted that these stories had perhaps grown repetitious and that “there was a certain gruesome [sic] monotony in the stories, after all. They were all alike; the same thing over and over again everywhere in the land…”

There were however some important though subtle differences between these stories and those published in 1914. For one, Whitlock took special care to explain his sources and proclaim his objectivity. He claimed that “I was representing a neutral power, and I made it a point of honor to respect that neutrality and to see that it was respected.” That Whitlock felt it necessary to state this indicates that there was more suspicion towards the content and motives behind the atrocities stories. Also, the focus on civilian atrocities, so prominently displayed in the 1914 propaganda, had transitioned into an interest in the soldierly experience. An early 1919 article in the New York Times again told a story of Belgian atrocities, but this time recycled the style once used to describe the massacre of the Belgian innocents onto the horrors of military life. Both these instances point towards the first hints in disillusionment with and changing focus of wartime propaganda at the end of the war and into the Paris peace conference.

112 Ibid.
Still, this process was to be a long one. While the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles ushered in a new focus for Western political leaders, a reevaluation of the Rape of Belgium propaganda in the intellectual and public spheres occurred on a different level and timeframe. A reversal of sentiment on a subject which had struck so many chords inevitably required time, distance, and rumination. For Britain, who had experienced significant casualties during the war, had housed and fed refugees for four trying years, and was directly invested in the new European order, a disillusionment with the wartime atrocities came more swiftly. For America, torn between exercising international leadership and returning to an isolationist foreign policy but who had been inundated with pro-Belgium propaganda and more removed from other wartime atrocities, disillusionment was a slower and subtler process.

Pinning down an exact moment for the revision to the Rape of Belgium propaganda is an impossible task, but nevertheless I propose that constructing a rough timeline of the movement is indeed possible, as long as one considers that opinion was not unanimous, nor all revisions complete. Thus, in this chapter I will proceed first to situate the propaganda and its rebuttals from the ending days of the war through the 1920s and early 1930s. I then will discuss these revised views on Belgium in light of the trends developed in the original propaganda as well as those espoused by the statesmen and diplomats involved in the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles, and what they tell us about the mindset of the British and Americans in the years between the Great War and the outbreak of World War II. However, first it is necessary to state basic facts about European and American situations immediately post-war.
There is no doubt that World War I was one of the bloodiest and most destructive conflicts of the twentieth century. The casualty numbers alone are staggering: Germany saw 9% of its population die in the war; France, 15%; Britain, 6%; and Belgium, 7%. The United States fared better: America suffered only 262,725 military casualties. Total war dead, not including wounded or missing, is estimated at 3,500,000 for the Central powers, and 5,200,000 for the Allies – a grand total of 8.7 million dead.

Financially the war was also extraordinarily draining. As a result, reparations took center stage at the Paris peace talks, eventually setting the reparations debt at 132 billion gold marks to be paid by Germany. This amount was crippling. While the victorious Allies did not intend to utterly destroy Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, they were unable to simultaneously satisfy their own war debts and keep Germany self-sufficient while non-threatening in the post-war world. The consequences of the Treaty of Versailles dominated the interwar years but important modifications were made when Germany gained entry to the League of Nations in 1922 and when relations were further normalized after the 1925 Locarno Treaties. Despite some international conflicts, in general the 1920s saw a general acceptance of Germany, now the Weimar Republic, especially from Britain and the United States in a rapprochement called Locarno Diplomacy.

The issues and emotions surrounding the Paris talks and the Treaty of Versailles were complex and thus generated a wide variety of responses to the Belgian atrocities— in no way can one claim that public opinion was staunchly anti-Belgian in 1919 and 1920, as

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the general public was not yet interested in questioning the stories and propaganda.

Nevertheless, two important trends began the process by re-evaluating Germany and the
German condition. One line of thought considered the effects of harsh peace terms on the
German people and their future, while another line began to overturn four years’ worth of
cultural defamation. The two levels on which the German position was reevaluated are
consistent with 1914 propaganda which concentrated similarly on humanitarian issues and
culture. Both trends also parallel similar processes in the political arena where political
leaders expressed their understanding of Germany as crucial to the post-war order and their
frustration at constant Belgian demands. On November 5, 1918, before the war was
officially over, Robert Lansing told a New York Times reporter, “Attention is already being
given here to the next phase after Germany ceases fighting. Both in the United States and
in the allied countries the necessity is recognized of setting in motion the wheels of
peacetime industry at the earliest possible moment in order to afford employment and
support to the millions of discharged soldiers.”

Popular concern for Germany’s well-being was often accompanied by sympathetic
attitude towards the common people and a revival of interest in German culture sans the
Kaiser. In some cases, the concerned tone rang strikingly similar to those which had been
expressed towards Belgium in 1914. Lloyd George’s mistress Francis Stevenson recorded
in her diary on March 21, 1919 an incident which paralleled closely one she had told only
four years earlier:

Yesterday morning a man called Millard (actually Oswald Garrison Villard) came
to breakfast – an American journalist who has been in Germany lately. He says the
conditions in Germany are terrible… They are looking to the Allies for salvation.
They do not mind the armies of occupation, in fact they are glad to have them there

117 “Statement by Lansing” Special to New York Times, November 5, 1918,
to preserve order. They curse the Kaiser, and will hear nothing against the allies. They blame their own government which led them into this war. They describe themselves as a ‘betrayed people.’

Consider this anecdote in comparison to Stevenson’s recollection of meeting a Belgian refugee on November 4, 1915 (reprinted in chapter one). By 1919, the tables of sympathy had turned and brought a new wave of impoverished peoples to the attention of Allied civilians.

This diary entry also highlights another important element of popular re-evaluation of Germany – the attribution of all German war crimes to Kaiser Wilhelm II. While this opinion was far from accurate, public opinion and political figures alike pinned German war crimes on the Prussian emperor. Calls for the trial of Wilhelm were frequent and came from all of the Allies countries. The Kaiser himself had fled to Holland one day before the armistice where, despite extradition request from several political leaders, the Dutch refused to remove him.

While this extreme scapegoating was admittedly bad for the Kaiser himself, it released the German people from previous indictments of their barbarous nature. Almost immediately after the Kaiser’s departure, Allied civilians claimed to see a change in the German character. A November 30, 1918, article in the New York Times testified to the transformation of the Germans into a courteous, generous, and affable people – and also claimed that they were suddenly fluent in French. The article went on to assert that “… the Germans in overturning their Government also overturned most of their one-time customs.”

Another article in The Washington Post, supposedly based on the diaries of a former lady-in-waiting at the Prussian imperial court, painted a horribly negative picture of

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118 Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George: a Diary, 175.
the Kaiser in which his lack of education and appreciation for real culture, along with his
risqué tastes, could help “give our readers an insight into the instincts which caused savage
attacks on tens of thousands of women and children in Belgium and France during the great
war.” However, this article also exonerated almost all other members of the nobility who
were apparently “sickened” by court life, and even claimed the Kaiser’s wife as innocent,
instead asking in a very domestic tone “was the Empress happy?”

The reevaluation of German criminality and culture in both Britain and the United
States was based primarily on a forward-thinking concern for the future and Germany’s
role in it. Of course, the disillusionment that followed closely on the heels of the horrors of
the Great War, combined with the temporal distance of four to five years from the invasion
of Belgium, played a large role as well, but this only went so far and could just as easily
have pushed sentiment to an even more negative view of Germany. Instead, the British and
Americans largely considered the German and Belgian situations within a mindset of
concern for the post-war world.

The most immediate concern for the Allies was the threat of Bolshevism, a problem
which had been virtually non-existent when the original Rape of Belgium propaganda had
come out. Repeatedly, newspaper articles reused the terms once used to slander German
Kultur to describe Bolshevism. A January 26, 1919 article in The Washington Post painted
communism as the next threat to European culture, claiming, “The document [communist
council manifesto] declares the present is the period for the overthrow of the world
capitalistic system, and European culture with it.” Various articles in The London Times
claimed communist atrocities such as “outrages on schoolgirls,” “inhuman tortures,”

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121 “The Private Life of the Kaiser: From the Papers and Diaries of Ursula, Countess Von Eppinghoven
122 “Would overthrow European Culture,” The Washington Post, January 26, 1919,
http://www.proquesthistorical.com
“Soviet child victims, terrible treatment of the aged”, as well as reports of “War Against Christianity” which strike a familiar cord with those familiar with the Belgian atrocities.123

Especially among Americans, a more positive outlook on Germany and a fear of Bolshevism combined with a general dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles. The coalition against Versailles was a motley group. On the one hand, it contained liberals who felt that the peace treaty was too harsh on Germany (many agreed with John Maynard Keynes’ view in The Economic Consequences of Peace) but supported Wilson in his quest to involve the United States in the League of Nations. One Washington Post article conflated this pro-German and Wilson, anti-Versailles sentiment by asserting that “respectable Germans” were pro-Wilson and desperately wanted his aid in creating a more manageable treaty.124

On the other hand, the group was also composed of conservatives who were anti-Wilson, anti-League of Nations, and isolationist. They saw any further involvement with Belgium, Britain, or any European country for that matter as dangerous entanglement of the sort they sought to avoid before the war. A Washington Post article in this vein asked “Would the United States trust its fortunes to the council now sitting at Paris? If not, why are Americans asked to trust the fortunes of their country to an inferior body of gentlemen to sit at Geneva?” and claimed that America should not “[join] the league of nations and [assume] a large share of the work of governing remote and backward peoples like the Turks, Armenians, Albanians and others whose territory is so sterile or whose nature is so

warlike that the nations have not found it profitable to annex them.” Subscribers to either of these opposed viewpoints had reason to remove themselves from the inflammatory claims of atrocities propaganda, as well as motive to refute it as false: for the liberals, to strengthen their position that the treaty of Versailles should be reworked and, for the conservatives, to further prove the dangers of involvement in European affairs.

However, these friendlier views towards Germany did not themselves propose a reevaluation of the content and motive behind the Belgian atrocities propaganda itself, but instead sought to construct a new political order out of the wreckage of World War I. Instead, the propaganda revision was mostly a product of liberal intellectuals in Britain and America who wrote during the 1920s and early 1930s. Some had even been involved in propaganda production during the war effort and therefore had special insight into its internal workings.

One important work largely set off this round of critiques. Six months after the Treaty of Versailles was signed, John Maynard Keynes published The Economic Consequences of Peace, a stinging critique of the treaty that, Keynes claimed, was born of revenge and would entirely destroy Germany. The work was an instant success and was widely distributed and read. Historian Martin Gilbert claimed “Keynes destroyed British faith in Versailles… a feeling of guilt came to pervade all discussion… Keynes made appeasement public property.” The Times called Keynes “the candid friend at Versailles” and leveled harsh criticisms at Lloyd George who “instead of devoting all of his energies to the rapid conclusion of a just peace, kept one eye on by-elections in England,

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126 Martin Gilbert as quoted in Zuckerman, The Rape of Belgium, 260.
coquetted with Bolsheivism when it seemed that he might thus win the favour of the Labour Party, and changed his mind often… even on specific questions.”

Keynes’ criticism ushered in a new era of liberal intellectual critique of the Allied war effort, some of the most stringent of which was leveled against propaganda. C.E. Montague, a former newspaperman at the Manchester Guardian who had become involved in the war effort as a censor, published Disenchantment in 1922 in which he roundly criticized Allied war propaganda. Montague acknowledged that some German actions played right in the hands of the Allies, and that it was absurd to expect them not to use this information in a state of war. However, he went on the explain that “…some of our propagandists must go beyond it and try to make out that the average German soldier, the docile blond with yellow hair, long skull, and blue, woolgathersome eyes… was one of the monsters who hang about the gates of Vergil’s Hell.” He described how censorship had removed any good qualities about Germans from stories going to press, and revealed the close relationship between press correspondents and military staff which produced biased and outrageous propaganda.

Another influential work decrying the Allied propaganda was Arthur Ponsonby’s Falsehood in Wartime, published in 1928 in Britain and 1929 in America. Ponsonby systematically sorted through the lies propagated throughout the war and examined their falsity and force. He first explained that his work was not meant to redistribute blame and that he understood the necessity of propaganda in wartime. Ponsonby then categorically dismissed the notion that Britain went to war because of the German invasion of Belgium, that Germany was solely to blame for the war, the criminality of the Kaiser, various

129 Montague, Disenchantment, 100-101.
Belgian atrocities claims made throughout the war such as the baby with its hands cut off
(about which he logically concluded: “No one paused to ask how long a baby would live
were its hands cut off unless expert surgical aid were at hand to tie up the arteries (the
answer being, a very few minutes”), and numerous other atrocities stories.\textsuperscript{130}

Throughout the 1920s, revisionist sentiment about the propaganda grew stronger
and more radical. American Henry Elmer Barnes posited that none of the propaganda
contained any truth. Instead, he said,

It would also useful here to destroy for all time a phrase of Entente propaganda
which successfully aroused world opinion against Germany – namely, that of the
alleged atrocities of Germany during the War… the stories which passed current
during the War have been utterly repudiated by both Entente and neutral
investigators. Even Belgian authorities themselves have denied the truth of such
charges of German atrocities in Belgium as those embodied in the Bryce Report
and other similar publications.\textsuperscript{131}

Barnes went so far as to claim that the Kaiser was morally superior to Asquith’s Foreign
Secretary and subsequent leader of the House of Lords Sir Edward Grey, stating that, “…
the Kaiser acted as vigorously and consistently as any other person in Europe during the
acute crisis of 1914 in the effort to avert the development of the general conflict,” and that
“he may not have written more charmingly during this period than Sir Edward Grey, but he
backed up his pretensions to the desire for peace by important concrete acts of restraint,
something which cannot be claimed for Grey and his supporters.”\textsuperscript{132}

This swing to the other end of the spectrum of blame was typical of the later
revisionist trends. C. Henry Grattan, in \textit{Why We Fought} (1929), judged the German war
books to be the most pragmatic and fair war codes in existence. Whether they were or
were not is not the point, but consider this in contrast to early allegations against German

\textsuperscript{130} Ponsonby, \textit{Falsehood in War Time}, 82.
\textsuperscript{131} Harry Elmer Barnes, \textit{The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt} (New
\textsuperscript{132} Barnes, \textit{The Genesis of the World War}, 297.
political philosophy as the antithesis to Western civilization. In a most striking contrast, Phillip Gibbs in 1930 wrote, “If Germany had abandoned herself to despair after the war, there would have been no hope for Europe. If her people had staggered and fallen under the tremendous burdens imposed upon them by the Versailles Treaty, sinking into an abyss of ruin, the whole continent would have been dragged after them into the same pit.” Essentially, Gibbs claimed that Germany, in her postwar behavior, was the savior of Europe; again, this is in direct opposition to claims made in 1914 and 1915 that Belgium was a force of salvation for Europe. This stark reversal in opinion permeated long-term perceptions of the Belgian atrocities propaganda.

There were a number of common threads that bound the works of the revisionists of the 1920s. Their critiques of the propaganda itself, of their own governments and press, and finally of the nature of war and human nature, redefined the Belgian atrocities for the next era and beyond. On the surface, these critiques seem entirely reactionary and disillusioned, but their criticisms and observations are more than eloquent methods of lashing out against a difficult war. Instead they were part reflections on the experiences of war, part poignant social commentary written with the future of the world in mind, and with a goal of creating a more successful international society – it was not just the politicians and statesmen who thought proactively about the end of World War I. The works of these revisionist intellectuals demonstrate themes which were planted in the genesis of the Rape of Belgium propaganda itself, given some political voice during the Paris Peace Talks, and finally expounded upon in the reevaluation of atrocities propaganda.

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This is not to claim that the ideas of these revisionists were fundamentally correct, or that they accurately evaluated the situation and made a strong moral judgment, but it does indicate that rather than simply mourning the losses experienced in World War I, they looked to rebuild in the post-war era by exposing wartime falsehoods and by reintegrating the German culture and people into the post-war order.

To begin, the revisionists wholeheartedly denied the Belgian atrocities, or at least their definition as such. Instead, they understood war itself as an atrocity and therefore to delineate specific atrocities and hold individuals accountable for them was to them entirely counter-intuitive; the same used by the American delegation at Versailles to fight against a war crimes trial.134 Grattan described the problem of assuming an atrocity within an atrocity: “…it was never brought to the attention of the people that many quite terrible acts were a normal part of warfare, however much they may shock us when we compare them to peace-time conduct. Many of them can hardly be called atrocities.”135 Wartime brought out that which was most dismal in the human character, and reduced all involved to barbarism and savagery, therefore all wartime actions were but different degrees on a spectrum of atrociousness.136 This view is understandable coming from individuals who had recently experienced World War I and can in part be considered in concert with the rising interest in the horrors experienced by soldiers as opposed to those experienced by civilians.

The revisionists also emphasized the damaging effects of the manipulative propaganda on civilians who felt they could trust neither their governments nor their presses.137 Irene Cooper Willis accused the fraudulence on the part of the British

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134 Zuckerman, The Rape of Belgium, 229.
137 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 373.
government as entirely undermining liberal values: “The outbreak of the war – not its conclusion – destroyed them,” she claimed. “Liberalism was betrayed when Sir Edward Grey went in. And Reason was betrayed when the Holy War was proclaimed, and those who proclaimed it were among the earliest casualties of the mental and spiritual havoc produced by the war.” On a similar vein, Robert Graves, in his work *Goodbye to All That* (1929), described his exact reactions to the 1914 atrocities stories and his subsequent disillusionment: “I was out raged to read of the cynical violation of Belgian neutrality. I wrote a poem promising vengeance for Louvain. I discounted perhaps twenty percent of the atrocity details as war-time exaggeration. That was not, of course, enough.”

Ponsonby argued that, though the common people may not have understood it at the time, war was essentially a game between the nobility. He compared it to a game of chess, in which “you cannot take the King while the game is going on; it is against the rules. It would spoil the game. In the same way G.H.Q. (general head quarters) on both sides was never bombed because, as a soldier bluntly put it, “Don’t you see, it would ruin the whole bloody business.”

Ponsonby went on to assert that people first realized the depth of their deception upon discovering that the Kaiser, upon whom all their fury had been fixed, was never expected to be tried at all. Instead, the whole situation was a cover up:

The fiction having become so popular and being universally accepted in the Allied countries, it became imperative for the Allied statesmen to insert a special clause in the Peace Treaty… the Allies were obliged to go through the formality of addressing a note to the Netherlands Government on January 16, 1920… asking for him to be handed over… The refusal of the Netherlands Government on January

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140 Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War Time*, 76.
23rd was at once accepted and saved the Allied Governments from making hopeless fools of themselves.141

Indeed, such commentary was harsh, but the “crimes” of government-sponsored propaganda and total war were severe as well. These observations in part helped to heal the wounds of the war, in part set out to right the wrongs of the past so that life could move forward.

Revisionist intellectuals subscribed to an almost cynical pragmatism about the breaking of treaties and international law. They explained that the violation of the Treaty of London and Belgian neutrality was far from unique and was in fact something which the Allies were prepared to do as well: “we know now that had Germany not violated Belgian neutrality, France would have.”142 Grattan claimed that Britain, by repeatedly asking Belgium if she needed military assistance before any invasion or threat of invasion was known of, actually pre-empted German violation of Belgian neutrality.143

Comments such as this invoke a seeming lack of faith in international law and perhaps cynical adherence to Realpolitik, but were actually predicated on the perceived necessity of pragmatism for successful international relations. In the eyes of many revisionists, rapprochement was both practically correct and self-serving. Britain especially desired to bring Germany back into the international scene (although Germany had, by the time of Locarno, been admitted to the League of Nations) for reasons of self-interest, something articulated by George Bernard Shaw who stated that “it will be vital to England’s interest that Germany should not choose the east; and the only way to prevent her will be to let her into a western alliance.”144 Thus, while the revisionists may have been

141 Ibid., 74.
142 Ponsonby. Falsehood in War Time. 53.
143 Grattan. Why We Fought. 27.
critical of their governments’ past actions, they were not intent on damning their own
nations in future relations because of past mistakes; therefore critiques of international
relations in part reflected a desire to avoid the same mistakes in political theory as had
inflated tensions during the First World War.

Finally, the revisionists understood that the same political and psychological
theories cited to prove German guilt and barbarism applied to all the governments involved
in the conflict. Anglo-American propaganda had attributed German barbarism to its
autocracy, militarism, lack of respect for the individual, Nietzschean philosophy, and social
Darwinism. However, the same attitudes were expressed, if not literally, then in the actions
of the Allies throughout the war. While the Allies claimed to support liberal ideals, the
entire principle of “total war” and mobilization of the civilian population for the purpose of
a war of nation-states ran counter to the ideals of liberalism which held that the state was
for the individual, not vice versa. The revisionists also recognized, however, that wartime
was somehow distinct from peacetime, and therefore required a different set of
expectations and ideals, both of the state and the individual. Barnes explained that “The
type of mind and intellectual attitudes which are developed for and by war are those which
bring to fore practically all the baser traits of human nature and intensify hatred and
savagery, while reducing the potency of those mental operations which are conducive to
pacific adjustments and mutual toleration.”\footnote{Barnes, The Genesis of the World War, 706.} In other words, the state of mind required for
war is rarely that which produces a peaceful life in the post-bellum. These critiques,
however stinging, attempted in part to prepare the individual and the nation to move
forward into the post-war world by recognizing and then abandoning wartime standards in
the hopes of creating a pacific international society.
These processes of revision of the Rape of Belgium propaganda progressed on a number of fronts, at varying speeds and in differing directions. Some groups and individuals held out belief in atrocities for longer periods of time, while others were quick to denounce the propaganda as merely deception. However, even in its complete reversal, the Belgian atrocities propaganda stayed true to some of the trends created in its very beginnings: the problem of civilization versus Kultur was argued over on a philosophical level and sometimes even recycled onto other, more currently deserving groups such as the Bolsheviks. So too did the humanitarian element remain, again reformed in the form of sympathy for a German people betrayed by their government and suffering woeful conditions. The process of disillusionment and healing from a shocking war certainly played a large role in the revision.

Finally, the importance of Germany to the post-war world compared to the relatively small part played by Belgium, apparent even in the first atrocity propaganda and made blatantly obvious at the Paris Peace Conference, figured heavily in the views of those looking on the Belgian atrocities from the other side of the war. As George Bernard Shaw, even before the end of the war, put it,

The other fact to be faced is that non-German Europe is not going to spend the remainder of the duration of this planet sitting on Germany’s head…What we have to consider closely is what is to become of the Alliance when the pressure under which it was riveted is removed… Nobody now supposes that Germany can steamroll Europe, or that it was ever worth her while to try. The day after the peace we shall be more afraid of Russia than of Germany…  

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This, perhaps, was the most important sentiment of all: that despite Germany’s past actions, latent in the minds of Anglo-American statesmen was the memory of Germany as a major

146 Shaw, 179.
world player, not only politically but in culture and philosophy, and an understanding that future world stability relied on this. For Britain, such a large unstable block on the Continent would provoke revolution and disaster; for America, without a self-sufficient Germany the U.S. would constantly be tied into European affairs. Both feared the spread of Bolshevism to Germany and, if for no other reason, thus saw the need to rehabilitate Germany. These views were not annihilated by wartime atrocities propaganda but rather perverted in the furnace of total war, and their subsequent revival and restructuring both at Versailles (though hesitantly) and in the revisionist movement of the 1920s prove their continued significance.
Postlude: The abyss gazes back: World War II and beyond

Despite the large-scale changes made by the revisionists to the interpretation of the Rape of Belgium, they did not entirely reconcile the memory of the German invasion of Belgium and the subsequent propaganda in their interwar writings – in fact, while the Allies largely sought to move on from the events of 1914, both the Germans and the Belgians remained invested in debating the circumstances surrounding the alleged atrocities. This opposition between countries which wanted to apply the lessons of the Rape of Belgium propaganda process forward in the new world order, and those which had a national stake in considering the actual events ensured both that the Belgian atrocities would remain an international source of tension and simultaneously that powers such as the United States and Great Britain would resist efforts to constantly rehash the issue. Such a tendency is apparent in the treatment of monuments to the Belgian atrocities constructed during the interwar years, as well as in the later Nazi use of the atrocities and propaganda. It also offers insight into the continuity between interwar and post-1945 interpretations of the Rape of Belgium, despite another, far worse, German humanitarian disaster that potentially had the power to incite another revision of the 1914 invasion.

Of the numerous monuments and memorials to fallen civilians erected across Belgium during the interwar years, three were most important: two at Dinant and another, the rebuilt University of Louvain library.\textsuperscript{147} Dinant was the site of a large-scale civilian massacre on August 23, 1914, and thus important to the memory of the Rape of Belgium. The first Dinant memorial was inaugurated on August 25, 1927 and featured numerous plaques depicting the execution of civilians and inscriptions decrying the massacre of

\textsuperscript{147} Horne and Kramer, \textit{German Atrocities}, 384.
“innocent victims of German barbarism.” The inauguration of the monument and its explosive images resulted in outcry from Germany and even some Belgian leaders such as Vandervelde were uncomfortable with the inflammatory nature of the monument. Nevertheless, it was not the most controversial of the Dinant monuments and, while producing some problems for the proponents of Locarno diplomacy who sought to dispel international tensions, this early Dinant monument alone did not catalyze a major backlash.

The second Dinant memorial, conceived of by Dinant burgomaster Sasserath and designed by Belgian artist Pierre De Soete, was inaugurated on August 24, 1936 and immediately created a storm of controversy both locally and internationally. Members of the Belgian government such as Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak appealed to the monument committee to rethink some of the more provocative elements, and the international press was largely critical.

A number of factors made the memorial more problematic than others. First, it was a memorial to civilian casualties alone, while most other monuments of the time honored civilians in tandem with soldiers. While both Germany and the Allies respected the sacrifices made by the soldiers of the Great War, the civilian issue was far more loaded and therefore when presented alone provoked a far greater reaction. Second, the construction of the monument was blatantly provocative. The original plan called for a 150 meter high obelisk and while this was eventually scaled back, the final version consisted of a nine meter high hand swearing an “oath to Dinant” in the center, and on either side lines from the controversial Whitney Warren inscription for the Louvain Library (to be discussed later) “Furore teutonico” – “Teutonic fury.” (Figure L)¹⁴⁹ Finally, the timing was highly

¹⁴⁸ Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 384-385.
¹⁴⁹ Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 398-399.
problematic: 1936 saw a strong and vengeful Germany under Hitler, a larger Europe hoping for appeasement, and Belgium once again facing the threat of invasion.

As a result of all these factors, but most critically the timing of the second Dinant monument, the international outcry against the memorial was severe and politicians and civilians alike spoke out against what was perceived as dragging old hatreds out into a new world. Nevertheless, the city council and designer refused to change their plans, and many of the provocative elements remained. Germany was outraged by the monument – just how so was made apparent in their actions after the May 1940 invasion of Belgium. While with the first Dinant monument the Germans only stripped plaques showing atrocities against civilians but left the rest of the structure intact, they razed the second monument to the ground.\footnote{Ibid., 399.}

The final important monument was the rebuilt University of Louvain Library, a project which held special meaning for certain prominent Americans. Louvain was a focal point of atrocities propaganda and also American relief efforts, and the continued support for rebuilding Louvain throughout the interwar years indicates the depth to which the 1914 Belgian atrocities still stirred many Americans. The rebuilding was headed by three men: Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University; Whitney Warren, “a Francophile New York architect”; and Cardinal Mercier, a Belgian bishop who had repeatedly appealed to the Allies to help Belgium during wartime. Butler led the fundraising effort in the United States, while Warren and Mercier developed building plans.\footnote{Horne and Kramer, \textit{German Atrocities}, 388.}
The rebuilding of Louvain was easy for most people to get behind – although it had been an obvious target of the Rape of Belgium propaganda and therefore had been addressed by a number of revisionists, its destruction was also plainly visible and its importance to the greater, even international, community obvious. As a result, popular and political opinion largely supported the rebuilding of the Louvain Library. However, in 1921 Mercier suggested to Warren that an inscription be included on the library which read “Furore teutonico diruta, dono Americans restituta” (Destroyed by German fury, restored by American gift). Warren easily included the inscription in his 1921 plans, but with the library nearing completion in 1927, the inscription became a controversial matter. Mercier had died in 1926, and even Belgian politicians and other Belgian supporters such as Butler began to call for the removal of the inscription from the final plans for the library. They claimed that it went counter to feelings of academic collaboration and unnecessarily brought up bad blood. When the rector of the library sent a letter to Warren asking him to remove the inscription, the letter was published by numerous newspapers and set off a firestorm of coverage. While most of this press coverage still expressed deep sympathy for the plight of Louvain, it was also deeply entrenched in the notion of a new world free from such blatant hate. The New York Times claimed that “Race hatred, vengeful bitterness and memories of the war’s criminal acts fought against a spirit of forgiveness and conciliation in a painful drama in which each side considered the stand of the other that of blind weakness and failure to grasp the meaning of international events.”

152 Ibid., 388.
153 Ibid., 389.
Ultimately, the inscription did not go up on the Louvain Library, although the process was quite melodramatic: Warren arrived in Belgium bearing the inscribed balustrade only to have it confiscated by Belgian police. The same police force then had to block off the library from demonstrations during the inauguration while an unauthorized plane flew overhead dropping leaflets reading “furore teutonico diruta, dono americanus restitute” on the heads of visiting dignitaries.155 Nevertheless, the international community was relieved to have avoided that entanglement, and Warren took the phrase elsewhere (to Dinant, specifically on the 1936 monument which included the phrase “Furore teutonico”). Regardless, the new library was not long for this world – it too was destroyed during the German occupation of Belgium in World War II, although how exactly this came about is unclear – both the British and the Germans blamed one another for shots fired during a battle which sparked the fire. The library was again rebuilt after World War II, this time with much less hubbub, and Louvain has relatively faded from modern memory.

The controversy surrounding these three monuments tells us much about the interwar sentiment surrounding the Rape of Belgium. First, the monuments indicate the sustained importance of the atrocities to the memories of the war and national constructions in Germany and Belgium. While other countries were eager to move away from any discussion of the atrocities which would imperil the rapprochement with Germany and create instability, both Germany and Belgium were extremely committed to righting the wrongs of the Belgian atrocities, whatever they considered the “wrongs” to be. Thus, there was an intrinsic tension between the necessity of addressing the memory of the events for national healing in Germany and Belgium, and the requirements of the new world order to maintain stability by ignoring the issue. This tension became blatantly obvious in regards

155 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 390.
to Hitler’s expansion and Allied appeasement, but also in Nazi treatment of Belgian monuments and their interpretation of World War I Allied propaganda.

Second, these conflicts reveal the continued power of the propaganda images and diction despite near-complete revision. While revisionists and others made significant interpretations of the Rape of Belgium stories which essentially rotated the originals 180 degrees, they did not discharge them of meaning. This becomes critically important to the preservation of the Rape of Belgium in international memory into World War II and beyond. It also speaks to the success of the original propaganda: while sometimes deemed a crude first attempt at modern propaganda, the materials produced by the British government elicited a strong and lasting reaction which exists into the current day.

Both these factors heavily influenced the next great chapter in the history of the Rape of Belgium – Hitler’s interpretation and use of the atrocities propaganda in his war campaigns and strategy, and in particular in relation to his denial of the Holocaust. Hitler was greatly taken by the stories themselves and how they damaged the German army and German nationalism, and was also keenly interested in the process of propaganda and how the Allies had so effectively used it to their advantage. In shaping the Nazi party and in later creating his national strategy and war plan, Hitler engaged the Rape of Belgium on a number of levels: he denied the events themselves and listed, as did the revisionists, their damaging consequences; he reused the already-powerful images to fight his own propaganda war; and finally he called upon Allied suspicion of such stories to deny the Holocaust and other war crimes.
Although Hitler’s use of the Rape of Belgium propaganda, and its subsequent interpretation after 1945, falls outside my primary research area, this period saw important developments and interpretations of the propaganda, as well as the continuation of some trends from 1914 onwards. Therefore, I will trace a few general themes throughout Hitler’s rise and the course of World War II, although the subject deserves much more nuance and primary research than I have allocated it in this study. While I focus mainly on the interpretation of the Rape of Belgium propaganda throughout this period, which generally focused less on German guilt and humanitarian transgressions and more on the horrors of propaganda, it is important that there were many important movements focused on German guilt that are not a part of my cursory consideration. Nevertheless, it is quite interesting that despite the horrors of the Holocaust and the potential for anti-German backlash which could have carried over into another reinterpretation of the Rape of Belgium propaganda, little sentiment of this kind was directed Germany after 1945 and the propaganda for the most part retained its interwar revisionist interpretation, albeit a more nuanced one.

Much of the National Socialist Party’s foundation history rested on theories which exonerated Germany, and the German army in particular, from the crimes and failures of World War I\textsuperscript{156}, as such, the memory of the Belgian atrocities was crucially important. Hitler put extensive pressure on Belgium to not reference German atrocities or barbarism on monuments, and reacted with international outrage whenever the issue was momentarily highlighted.\textsuperscript{157} Hitler and many conservative Germans believed that Germany lost World War I not because of military failure but because the civilians and government on the home front essentially gave up and betrayed the army – commonly known as the


\textsuperscript{157} Zuckerman, \textit{The Rape of Belgium} 269.
Dolchstosslegende or “stab in the back legend.” The importance of this theory only augmented the necessity of exonerating the army of wartime misdeeds and did nothing to reduce international tensions.

At the same time, Hitler recognized the importance of propaganda in modern warfare and statecraft, and also realized that Germany had been utterly outdone by the Allies in the war of propaganda. In Mein Kampf, he stated that

“…the war propaganda of the English and Americans was psychologically sound. By representing the Germans to their own people as barbarians and Huns, they prepared the individual soldier for the terrors of war… After this, the most terrible weapon that was used against him seemed only to confirm what his propagandists had told him; it likewise reinforced his faith in the truth of his government’s assertions, while on the other hand it increased his rage and hatred against the vile enemy. For the cruel effects of the weapon, whose use by the enemy he now came to know, gradually came to confirm for him the 'Hunnish' brutality of the barbarous enemy, which he had heard all about; and it never dawned on him for a moment that his own weapons possibly, if not probably, might be even more terrible in their effects."

Nor did Hitler find the World War I propaganda itself an atrocity – instead he stated that

“since [the] criteria of humanitarianism and beauty must be eliminated in the struggle, they are also inapplicable to propaganda.”

Hitler also recycled specific images and phrases which had been particularly poignant during wartime. He embraced some of the characterizations of German Kultur and made the “man of iron” into a positive statement about German society. Hitler apparently conceived of barbarian-ness as “young, vital, unsentimental hardness” which was especially valued in his citizens. It was not just Nazis who adopted this new definition of barbarism: German economist and sociologist Werner Sombart, who was

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160 Hitler, 178.
161 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 400.
somewhat critical of Nazi ideology, wrote in 1934 that “we are barbarians and proud of being so, and will remain so.”

Most importantly, Hitler used Allied sensitivity to their World War I atrocities stories to his advantage early in the war and also in concealing the Holocaust. With this message, Hitler was speaking to a receptive audience – British and American civilians also believed that they had been lied to in the previous war and were on the lookout for similar behavior in the new conflict. In 1939, the American Institute of Public Opinion asked Americans “Why do you think we entered the last war?” and 37% responded that “America was the victim of propaganda and selfish interest.” The British were equally disposed to believe that the World War I atrocities stories bad been nothing but lies. With this in mind, the Nazis employed two main strategies that related directly to the Rape of Belgium propaganda.

First, Hitler gave strict orders that upon German invasions on the Western front, absolutely no civilians were to be harmed (besides, of course, the Jewish citizens). This decision was mutual – the Allies also sought to avoid civilian casualties to preserve their own reputations as well. Generally, the first engagements of World War II were marked by a visible respect for international convention, an aversion to situations in which civilian atrocities could be committed, a desire to engage only the opposing army, and a lenient understanding of the circumstances of war. Partly as a result of this early policy, and partly from fear of embarrassment over another overblown atrocity story, even when large-

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162 Ibid., 401.
163 Marks, Innocents Abroad, 269.
164 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 410.
166 Ibid., 40-41.
scale civilian casualties occurred later in the war, many people retained their belief in a
distinction between Nazi soldiers and German civilians.\textsuperscript{167} This is markedly different from
the treatment of Germans in World War I propaganda, and was a trend which largely
persisted after 1945.

Second, the Nazi government used Allied guilt over false World War I atrocity
stories to convince many that stories of concentration camps and mass executions were
similar fabrications. One of the most striking examples is the recycling of the “Destroy this
Mad Brute!” poster – the new Nazi edition displayed the same image and phrase, but with
the words “The same lies, the same hate” printed across. Although Holocaust denial was a
multifaceted endeavor, the atrocity propaganda was certainly powerful and even today the
Rape of Belgium is known as the event which made credible the denial of the Holocaust in
the next World War.

After the Second World War, the stories coming out of the Rape of Belgium
became desperately tangled with the myriad other horrors from the two World Wars, but
nevertheless its historical legacy has remained fairly consistent with interwar revisionist
sentiment. Overwhelmingly, the Rape of Belgium propaganda is understood as the
violation of Allied civilian trust which first put propaganda on the map as the dangerous
and often dirty word it is today. While I cannot provide extensive research into the post-
World War II interpretations, I posit that the Belgian atrocities maintained their reputation
largely due to continuities between the world situation and civilian mindset after World
War II as existed after World War I. Thanks to the Nuremberg trials and obvious horrors
perpetrated by the Nazis, justice and retribution were served while the German people were

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 44-45.
eventually exonerated, although the path was difficult. Focus could then be put on moving forward in yet another new world in which the greatest threat was again Russian (and later Chinese) communism and cooperation in Western Europe was seen as crucial to the containment of Bolshevism.

Just as the public damnation of the Kaiser after World War I allowed for the German people to resume their status as legitimate citizens of the Western world, the Nuremberg trials channeled some of the horror and outrage over Nazi war crimes away from the general German population. This time, there was a legitimate international avenue in which to prosecute Nazi leaders, and while Nuremberg was obviously imperfect in numerous ways, it nevertheless directed public fury and cries for justice away from the German people as a whole and allowed for citizens of the post-1945 world to continue to view Germany as a legitimate post-war ally. For one post-World War II portrayal of the typical German, as well as an interesting commentary on the views of the World War I propaganda, consider the 1955 blockbuster *East of Eden*. In the film, set during World War I, a German immigrant living in California is unfairly harassed by the townspeople after false Belgian atrocity stories are spread. This sympathetic portrayal of German citizenry, particularly in relation to the Rape of Belgium and in relatively close temporal vicinity to the Holocaust, illustrates how some Americans viewed the persecution of an entire nationality for the crimes (in *East of Eden*’s understanding of the Rape of Belgium, false crimes) of a few. It also reinforces the negative portrait of the Belgian atrocities reports into the post-World War II years.

Post-World War II Europeans and Americans saw the alliance of Western Europe and the U.S. as critical for combating Soviet influence and rising communist parties. It
served no one’s interests to push Germany, or any other country for that matter, towards communism by alienating them with overly cruel treaties or unequal international treatment. In this way as well, then, the concerns after World War II mirrored those after World War I, but in 1945 most countries had learned from the failures of Versailles the hard way, and could not justify a similar treaty. With the Russians already occupying Berlin, the Allies largely scrambled to reduce Soviet control over Germany rather than to punish the country for a war largely blamed on Hitler and the Nazi government.

These two situations – the Nuremberg trials and the continued threat of communism – in many ways explain why the Rape of Belgium was not reexamined after World War II, despite the possibility for anti-German prejudice following the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes: while the situations between World Wars I and II were significantly similar, there were also important lessons which had been learned in World War I and the interwar years that were not forgotten. At the same time, the specter of communism was spreading and required immediate attention, and the Allies focused their efforts on uniting anti-Soviet forces. In short, the Allies needed Germany, or at least West Germany, on their side.

Thus, the post-World War II world posed many of the same problems which had prompted the original revision of the Rape of Belgium propaganda and necessitated not only political but popular acceptance of Germany which was not conducive to a more anti-German rethinking of the Rape of Belgium. This world condition made it advantageous to continue with the revised interpretation of the Rape of Belgium propaganda rather than subject it to further historical scrutiny.
Today, propaganda is a four letter word. It carries connotations of extreme exaggeration, hidden agendas, and government oppression. The Rape of Belgium propaganda, with its twisted images and brutal stories, and the subsequent revisionist movement that questioned these stories, are in some part responsible for this opinion. However, contemporaries did not revise the Rape of Belgium propaganda by putting it in an academic crucible to watch the lies and manipulation melt away – revision was a far more complicated, and in some ways practical, than this. On one level, there was a deep ideological rejection of Anglo-American governments’ manipulation of civilian populations without heed to liberal values and or seemingly any care for the lies they told. The horrors of World War I prompted dark questions about the nature of war, atrocities, and human character; and disillusioned almost an entire generation of Europeans and Americans about the truths of the war. The Rape of Belgium was an integral part of such sentiment.

One another level, however, the revision to the Rape of Belgium propaganda was as pragmatic as the decision to create such propaganda in the first place. Certainly, there was no organized effort or stated goal behind the revision, nor was it any part grand scheme to reverse the effects of the original propaganda. Nevertheless, the revisionist movement responded to contemporary issues and the pressures of the post-war world even as it looked back at the Belgian atrocities propaganda. It chose reconstruction and reform over purely backward-looking disillusionment. For this very practical reason, the revisionist interpretation of the Rape of Belgium has experienced incredible staying power. Despite the anti-German backlash after the Holocaust and the misery of another World War, this revisionist viewpoint remained relevant and useful to contemporary issues as the Western
world squared off to face communism. In essence, the revisionist interpretation, in
demonizing the propaganda itself, endorses liberal values of state subservience to the
individual and personal freedom and skepticism that stand in stark contrast to the
totalitarian practices of communist Russia. Thus, while the images and stories from the
Rape of Belgium exhausted their utility with the end of the war, the revisionist perception
of the Rape of Belgium propaganda remained essential to the new world order years after
the distribution of such propaganda.

Such is the nature of inflammatory propaganda; aimed at short-term goals and
interested in immediate reactions, it is constructed for use in a single situation without the
flexibility to adjust to others. The simple and monochromatic opinions needed to prompt
such a response often fail upon closer inspection and produce an even more violent sense
of outrage at their fabrication. The viewpoints encouraged by extreme propaganda,
especially propaganda produced from a state of war, are rarely amenable to the foundation
of long-standing institutions or world orders. Of course, there are terrible exceptions which
produce prejudice, subjugation, and violence, but it has become incredibly difficult to
masquerade such a weighty façade of embellishments and falsehoods. The inherent
dangers of using such propaganda are many, not the least to those who first employ it. As
Nietzsche explains, in a fight against monsters, it is so very easy to become a monster. The
story of the Rape of Belgium propaganda gazes back from the abyss to tell us it is so.
Figure E. Ellsworth Young, “Remember Belgium” (1918), Persuasive Images: Posters of War and Revolution from the Hoover Institute Archives, Ed. Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, Paul Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 21.
Figure G: Boardman Robinson, Cartoons on the War, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1915): 22.
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