REHEARSALS

To the memory of the Belgian civilians killed in 1914
and to those among their descendants
who have not forgotten them.

And to Rita and Celeste and
in memory of Rita and Morey.

REHEARSALS

The German Army in Belgium, August 1914

Jeff Lipkes

Leuven University Press
2007

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Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)

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ISBN 978 90 5867 596 5
D / 2007 / 1869 / 17
NUR: 689

Cover Design: Geert de Koning
Cover Illustration: Richard Jack, De burgers op de vlucht voor de invasie in 1914 (1915, Oil on canvas, inv. 804238, © KLM-MRA, Belgium)

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Acknowledgments

I'm grateful for the help I've received from various archivists and their staffs. I'd especially like to thank Pierre-Alain Tallier of the General State Archives in Brussels, Dr. Françoise Peemans of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Manuel Duran, Sandrine Smets, Luc Vandeweyer, and Roger Vranken of the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History, Father Wally Platt of the American College of Leuven, and the late Abbé André Deblon of the Diocesan Archives of Liège. The staffs of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, the Imperial War Museum, particularly Anthony Richards, Stephen Walton, and Jenny Wood, and the manuscripts departments of the Bodleian Library and the British Library were also most helpful. I'm especially grateful to two archivists who offered assistance well above and beyond the call of duty, Canon Daniel Meynen of the Diocesan Archives of Namur and Gerrit Vanden Bosch of the Archdiocesan Archives of Mechelen. The latter translated several documents in Dutch and provided valuable guidance. Professor Francis Balace of the University of Liège, Dr. Alan Kramer of Trinity University Dublin, and Professor Laurence van Ypersele of the Université catholique de Louvain also offered useful suggestions, and Col. Bruce Vanderwort, editor of *Journal of Military History*, answered a quick question promptly. Professor Martin Swartz and Father Paul Janssens also kindly provided some information. I'd like to acknowledge as well the staffs of the Library of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, the Sterling Library at Yale University, the British Newspaper Library, and the Library of the University of South Florida, especially the interlibrary loan department of the latter.

Drs. Bruce Kinzer, Ken Rasmussen, and Sally Marks have read and commented on individual chapters. Mark Derez, archivist of the library of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, has read the book in its entirety with scrupulous care and has provided enormously helpful corrections

and comments. If I've negotiated the minefield of Belgian orthography successfully, it's thanks to him and to Beatrice Van Eeghem, my meticulous and hard-working editor at University of Leuven Press. I'm extremely grateful to all of the readers, and especially to Mark. The usual caveat – that they are not responsible for what follows – should perhaps be italicized and underscored.

My intellectual debts are acknowledged in the footnotes, but I would like to recognize a few Belgians and two Netherlanders who were especially zealous in gathering testimony about the events of August, and did so at some risk to themselves. They are, first and foremost, Canon Jean Schmitz and Father Norbert Nieuwland, along with Gustave Somville, Hervé de Gruben, Bart Mokvelt, and Lodewijk Grondijs. Each was also, in his own way, a notable stylist. It would have been a privilege to have had a chance to meet any of them.

I did meet plenty of helpful Belgians. I would like to thank the many individuals who shared with me the reminiscences of relatives who witnessed the events of August 1914, or provided other information. These include Father René Obbels of the Damiaan Instituut, Aarschot, and Simon Alexandre of Namur, who were particularly helpful, Dr. Robert Mordant, Ivo and Tom van Hees, M. Igual, Abbé Maurice Leonard, Patrick de Wolf, Staf Floridor, Gaby Lens, Bart Hendrickx, Jozef Hendrickx-Delvaux, Luc Devos, and Piet Reynaert. There were many more individuals whose names I unfortunately neglected to write down or misplaced, along with those of the staff members of tourist bureaus and communal archives who responded to emailed queries. The Premonstratensian Father in Leffe, the *échevin* in Dinant and a number of others I met fortuitously, particularly in Aarschot, Dinant, and Leffe, shared interesting and useful information. Members of the online community of Great War aficionados at the listserve hosted by University of Kansas (wwi-l@listproc.cc.ku.edu) generously offered their expertise, including Leslie Graham, Daniel Ross, Colin Fenn, David Heal, the late Ted Rawes, and the moderator, Dr. Geoffrey Miller. I'd like to thank also the following members of Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge for information on the invasion of Germany: Richard Glunt, Gerald Myers,

and Wayne Pierce. Juliana Cooper worked hard to make my conversational French less amusing, and Koen Janssens and Gaby Lens did some translating of documents in Dutch. Dick Gilbreath of University of Kentucky provided the map on p. 12 on very short notice, and cheerfully made several revisions. I'm indebted to Willy Schroeven and, again, Mark Derez for assistance with the illustrations, and to the Hertogelijke Aarschotse Kring voor Heemkunde, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and the Leuven Stadsarchief for permission to reproduce photos in their collections. I appreciate as well the help of Rita Ciresi and Celeste Lipkes in revising the index.

I'd especially like to thank Hilde Lens-Gielis, Marike Schipper, Beatrice Van Eeghem, and Ineke Deckers of Leuven University Press for their support and encouragement. I began this book in the summer of 2000 and Hilde's interest in the project five and half years later enabled me to conclude it at long last, for which my family and I are profoundly grateful. It has been a real pleasure working with Marike since she assumed the directorship in May, 2006, as well as with Beatrice and Ineke.

Perhaps I should mention why an historian of British economic thought strayed into the August 1914 combat zones of eastern Belgium. In the late 1990s I was asked to teach a number of classes on European and World History in the 20th century by departments perhaps hoping to capitalize on fin de siècle nostalgia. *Rehearsals* is one of a great many books, I imagine, that is a response (at far greater length than they or I anticipated) to questions posed by students, in this case about the fate of civilians in World War I. The book should probably be dedicated to those students everywhere who sit in the front row and raise their hands.

I occasionally told friends half-jokingly that the working title of the book was The Huns of August, but I truly hope I won't be accused of any animus towards Germany or Germans. When I was in graduate school, I spent a summer in Bavaria and, like most Americans (including soldiers after both World Wars), found the people I encountered congenial, sympathetic, *gemütlich*, and easily the most "American" of any European nationals, for better or worse. It should go without say-

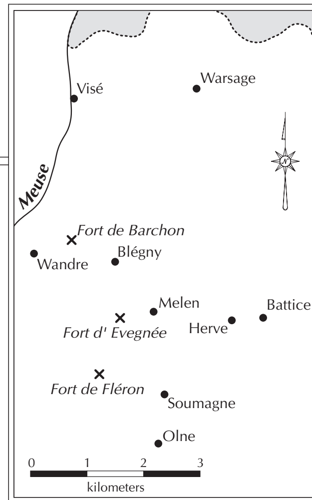
ing that precious few Germans alive today – and certainly no one in the generations born after World War II – bear any responsibility for crimes committed during the first half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the charge of "racism" is issued so promiscuously that what should go without saying sometimes needs to be said.

Finally, I read a great many fascinating and heart-rending accounts that I was unable to include, and, among other regrets, I'm sorry about this second injustice done to some of the victims of 1914.

Note: I refer to all towns, villages, and streets in Flemish-speaking regions by their Dutch names (though Leuven was, in 1914, a bilingual city). However, I have not altered the titles of books, articles, or chapters, nor, generally, without some evidence, the first names of individuals. I've used the English names for Belgium and for Brussels and Antwerp, and have opted for the modern spelling of all other places.

Abbreviations

DVF	Imperial War Ministry, Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Die völkerrechtswidrige Führung des belgischen Volkskriegs* (Berlin, 1915)
FR	Fonds Rutten, Diocesan Archives of Liège
FSN	Fonds Schmitz-Nieuwland, Diocesan Archives of Namur
GSA	Inventaire 298: Inventaire des archives de la Commission d'Enquête sur la Violation des Règles du Droit des Gens, Des Lois et des Coutumes de la Guerre (1914-1926), General State Archives, Brussels
IWM	Imperial War Museum, London
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels
NA	National Archives of the United Kingdom (formerly Public Records Office)
PRW	Parish Reports on World War I, Archdiocesan Archives of Mechelen
RBC	British Committee on Alleged German Outrages, *Report of the British Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (Sydney, Australia, 1915)
RDE	Commission d'Enquête sur les Violations des Règles du Droit des Gens, des Lois et des Coutumes de la Guerre, *Rapports et Documents d'Enquête*, premier vol., (Brussels, 1922-3), 1 (tome I), 2 (tome II)
Reply	Kingdom of Belgium, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Reply to the German White Book of the 10th May, 1915* (London, 1918)
RMAF	Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History, Brussels
RVR	Official Commission of the Belgian Government, *Reports on the Violation of the Rights of Nations and of the Laws and Customs of War in Belgium* (London, 1915), 1 (vol. I), 2 (vol. II)
SN	J. Schmitz and N. Nieuwland, *Documents pour servir à l'histoire de l'invasion allemande dans les provinces de Namur et de Luxembourg* (Brussels, 1919-1925)



NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
Schelde
Antwerp
Schelde
Dender
Aalst
Mechelen
Dijle
Aarschot
Demer
Hofstade
Elewijt
Gelrode
Tildonk
Rotselaar
Kessel-Lo
Brussels
Dijle
Leuven
Korbeek-Lo
Tervuren
Gete
Tienen
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
NETHERLANDS
GERMANY
0
5
kilometers
Aachen
Gemmenich
Liège
Verviers
Area of Detail
Fort de Marchovelette
Meuse
Huy
Namur
Andenne
Fort de Maizeret
Charleroi
Tamines
Sambre
Meuse
Dinant
Philippeville
BELGIUM
FRANCE
BELGIUM
GERMANY
Visé
Warsage
Meuse
Fort de Barchon
Wandre
Blégny
Melen
Battice
Herve
Fort d' Evegnée
Fort de Fléron
Soumagne
Olne
0
1
2
3
kilometers

Prologue

> "The truth transcends the limits of the probable."
> Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier

> "What a vast difference there is between the barbarism that precedes culture and the barbarism that follows it."
> Friedrich Hebbel

This book describes what happened when three German armies invaded Belgium in August 1914. In district after district, troops looted and burned homes and murdered the inhabitants. By the end of the month, nearly 6,000 Belgian civilians were dead, the equivalent of about 230,000 Americans today. The worst of the carnage took place during an eight-day period between August 19th and 26th.[1]

To anyone familiar with activities in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, there will be a striking sense of déjà-vu. In a series of organized manhunts, people were chased out of their homes, herded at gunpoint to isolated fields or, more often, to town and village squares, and then gunned down, without the pretense of a trial. Others – men, women and children – were forced into cattle-cars and, under deplorable conditions, transported east to concentration camps, where they were held for months. Still other captives were forced to march for days in the sweltering August heat, with little or no food or water, before being herded to Belgian lines or dispersed. Whenever residents were removed from their villages and towns, the homes were systematically looted and then set on fire. The stolen goods selected by officers were shipped back to Germany. Some 25,000 homes and other buildings in 837 communities were burned to the ground. About one and a half million Belgians fled the country, 20% of the population. The suffering was without precedent in modern Europe. For over two hundred fifty years civilians had not fled en masse before invading armies. They had not been targeted by the invaders. As in the 1940s, the German advance was preceded by end-

less columns of refugees, caked with dust, shuffling along under heavy bundles, feet bleeding, staring blankly ahead, numbed beyond despair.

Yet even today, particularly in the U.K. and the U.S., reports of German crimes in Belgium are frequently dismissed as Allied propaganda. Historians and popular writers treating the subject concede that the Germans retaliated harshly for attacks by "franc-tireurs" (guerilla snipers), but the stories told by survivors of murder, arson, rape, and pillage have generally been regarded as gross exaggerations, if not wholesale inventions.

Typical is the treatment in the 1996 PBS series "The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century." In terms of audience size, this is perhaps the most influential recent account of World War I. Sections of it are replayed in high school and college history classrooms throughout the U.S. each semester.[2]

The film approaches the subject from the point of view of German soldiers. "To their surprise, Belgian snipers known as franc-tireurs began shooting," the narrator declares. A German solider is then quoted: "The war became a hideous experience, because the population took part in the fight. Whenever they had a chance, they shot down German soldiers."

After briefly mentioning that "hundreds" of Belgian civilians were executed, the narrator informs viewers that "with each retelling, [the tales] became more vicious. Exaggerated stories were taken as fact." Host Jay Winter then discusses "the first substantial propaganda campaign in history," by which he means the attempt to tell the world about the massacres of Belgian civilians. The campaign freely indulged in racism, Winter claims. The image of "'poor little Belgium'" – the irony is unmistakable – "would haunt the Germans for years to come," the narrator concludes.[3]

In the most recent history book to make the *New York Times* best-seller list, apart from biographies of America's founders, readers are assured that "in fact, Belgium was not neutral at all; it had agreements with France and Britain, and forts dotted its border with Germany (unlike its border with France, which had none)." All of these statements are false. "After the war," the author continues, "it was well established that the Belgian atrocities were largely fabricated, but the lies did their damage."[4]

So why the unwillingness to acknowledge that war crimes took place in Belgium in 1914? There is, in the first place, a problem with the term adopted in Britain and America to describe the mistreatment of civilians. During the first two months of the war, stories were told of sadistic maimings both of Belgian civilians and German soldiers, though to an extent much exaggerated subsequently. (There are very few references to such crimes in the major British and American newspapers in August and September 1914 or in the reports issued by the official Belgian Commission investigating German war crimes.) Rumors circulated nonetheless that hands and fingers had been severed, eyes gouged out, breasts and genitals cut off. There were also reports of grisly executions: soldiers and civilians crucified on barn doors; infants roasted on spits or speared by bayonets, etc. Germans seemed to be particularly fascinated by gouged eyes, Belgians by severed hands, the British by severed breasts and by crucifixions. Though many hundreds of Belgians civilians were stabbed or slashed by bayonets, the stories of gratuitous cruelties were mostly without foundation. No cases of gouged eyes or severed hands were ever substantiated.[5]

Unfortunately, the term "atrocities" came to be applied both to these grisly allegations and to the more prosaic crimes that the German Army indubitably committed. The sack of Leuven and the massacres of civilians and the burning of villages in the provinces of Liège, Namur, and Brabant were all "atrocities." So were the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the execution of Edith Cavell. That nearly all of the sensational stories of sadistic mutilations were discredited permitted partisan historians to dismiss the more prosaic mass executions, arson, looting, abuse of "hostages," and rapes for which there is abundant and persuasive documentation. But no one familiar with the history of the 20th century needs to be reminded about how easy it is to murder innocent civilians without recourse to the particular refinements of cruelty that captivated gullible audiences in 1914. I will use the term "atrocities" to refer exclusively to the latter.

In addition to dismissing massacres because there were no maimings or dismemberments, those attempting to justify the behavior of German troops in Belgium during the first weeks of the war have insisted that the executions and burnings were legitimate reprisals for guerilla attacks by

Belgian civilians. The existence of a "franc-tireur" army, however, is as much a myth as the claim that German troops systematically hacked the hands off of Belgian children. There are only a few instances of trials of any kind, and these were farcical. The official defense of the conduct of the German Army in Belgium published no transcripts or summaries of such trials. Only two alleged franc-tireurs are identified by name – both incorrectly. No burgomaster, communal official, village priest, or *Garde civique* officer imprisoned in Germany was prosecuted for organizing resistance.

This is not to insist (as did the Belgian government) that not a single civilian fired on passing troops. It is conceivable that in the opening days of the war in eastern Liège province, Belgian gamekeepers and peasants fired on lone uhlans or small parties on patrol, though Belgian Army units were also operating east of the Meuse. There is simply no credible evidence, however, of the organized resistance the Germans claimed to have encountered repeatedly: townspeople shooting suicidally from their homes on battalions marching down the main street, with predictably disastrous results. The franc-tireur legend will be taken up in detail, but for any impartial observer, the only question that remains is whether the stories flared up spontaneously, fed by fears and inexperience, or whether they were deliberately contrived to foster the brutality considered necessary for a rapid passage through Belgium.

However, the underlying reason for the continued unwillingness of journalists and popularizers to acknowledge what happened in Belgium in August 1914 has to do with the seductive appeal of revisionism. Views inspired by the bitter reaction to the Great War during the 1920s and early '30s, though long rejected by most scholars, have retained their grip on public opinion. Briefly, revisionists believe that all the nations that went to war in 1914 were equally to blame. They "slithered into war," in Lloyd George's unfortunate phrase. Nonetheless, at the war's close, the victorious Allies imposed a draconian peace on Germany – which led inevitably to World War II. The fact that thousands of innocent civilians had been butchered during one week by an invading army violating international law and treaty obligations was simply not

compatible with the appealing myth of collective guilt in 1914 and Allied vindictiveness in 1919.

World War I was the first total war. Entire populations were mobilized to support the armies; immense sacrifices were demanded. The killing could not have been sustained for four years, the argument goes, unless people in all the warring nations had not been manipulated by their governments, whipped into a patriotic frenzy over the enemy's vileness. Hate is a more effective stimulant than pride, and easier to induce. Stories of German "atrocities" were especially useful in the recruitment campaigns in Britain and the Empire, and to seduce America into abandoning neutrality.

The history of the denial of the Belgian massacres is fascinating in its own right. The bulk of the book, however, simply chronicles in detail the systematic killing carried out in August 1914. The worst of the massacres took place between August 19th to 26th in the towns of Aarschot, Andenne, Tamines, Dinant, and Leuven, successively. There are chapters on events in each of these locations, preceded by a chapter on the killings in the towns and villages in Liège province just east of the forts, and in the city of Liège.

The accounts draw on published and unpublished testimony by eyewitnesses. When appropriate, I've let individuals tell their stories in their own words. The chapters consist mostly of a series of vignettes. Some are only a couple of paragraphs in length, and recount particularly vivid or revealing moments. Others provide fuller descriptions of what particular individuals and families experienced. Still other sections offer overviews of what transpired in each location, or summarize the military actions that preceded the killings.

The witnesses range widely in age, background, and perspective, and include Dutch, American, Australian, and British observers, as well as Belgians. I've made some use as well of captured German diaries and letters, and sworn depositions by German soldiers and prisoners of war. The witnesses told their stories in testimony collected by two Belgian commissions and a third investigation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by two committees in Britain, in interviews with numerous journalists and historians, and in their own written accounts. I have drawn on a large body of published and privately published narratives, and

have consulted original material in six archives in Belgium. I have also spoken and corresponded with some descendants of survivors and victims in Aarschot, Dinant, and Leuven.

Those who deny massacres took place in Belgium in August 1914 seldom fail to mention the unreliability of refugees. Uprooted from their homes, exhausted, hungry, badly frightened, those who had fled occupied Belgium, the argument goes, had already given credence to all kinds of irresponsible rumors, which now they, in turn, exaggerated with each retelling. "Truth is the first casualty of war," we are repeatedly reminded, and though, unlike their governments, most refugees did not intentionally lie, critics concede, their accounts are no more to be trusted than Foreign Office proclamations. The only appropriate response to this claim is that it is precisely the task of the historian to distinguish false or implausible stories from accounts that are likely to be credible. That the attorneys working for the Committee on Alleged German Outrages did not always do so, unlike, by and large, their counterparts on the Belgian *Commission d'Enquête*, is regrettable, but is no reason for historians to despair of accurately describing the transgressions of the German Army. In any event, given the long antipathy to Belgian testimony on the part of British and American historians, I have used all sources I've mentioned with great caution. The majority of the evidence, in any case, comes not from refugees, but from eyewitnesses who did not flee the country and who wrote or were interviewed after the war. Naturally, I would not wish to claim that there is not a single misrepresentation or exaggeration in any of the testimony I've drawn on, but I trust that any inaccuracies are slight.

A couple of questions may occur to readers at this juncture. It has been asked for at least a generation, and not only by Germans, how long citizens of the BRD must be made to feel guilty for the murders committed under the Nazi regime. Is it not unsporting to now add war crimes committed by soldiers of the *Kaiserreich* to the burden of German guilt? Scrupulous historians can only answer that the feelings of the descendants of the individuals whose actions they describe cannot be any of their concern. But it is also safe to say that few historians, unlike commanders

ordering executions in 1914, believe in collective guilt, and fewer still in transgenerational guilt. Nonetheless, the actions of the German Army in Belgium are part of the historical record, and anyone wishing to explain German history between 1871 and 1945 needs to account for them.

It is hardly surprising that the three major conflicts roiling the historical profession in Germany between 1961 and 1988 – the Goldhagen controversy of 1996 makes a fourth – all had to do with continuities in German history.[6] Despite the outcome of the latter, when the dust settled, no informed writer would wish to make the case that Adolf Hitler was a great aberration in German history. *Der schlechte Österreicher* (the wicked Austrian), as one of my German teachers invariably referred to him, did not seduce an unwilling nation, nor did he turn to mass murder under the inspiration of Lenin in an attempt to pre-empt a Bolshevik threat. But antisemitism played a comparatively small role in the seduction. The Nazi revolution was also a restoration. Bethmann Hollweg, Chancellor in 1914, certainly bore no resemblance to Hitler – though in some respects he anticipated Goebbels.[7] However, a predisposition to force and fraud and a contempt for the rights of civilians and for due process characterized German polity decades before the Nazi era.[8] "Necessity knows no law," the Chancellor proclaimed to the *Reichstag* on August 4, 1914. For many influential Germans, "necessity" had come to be defined as German hegemony in Europe with, ultimately, a great global empire, though the final reckoning with England to acquire the latter was not to have taken place until the former was achieved. The Belgians were the first victims of German lawlessness. They were not the last.

The invasion of Belgium precipitated a long chain of events that resulted in the murders of untold millions of civilians.[9] One of the most chilling facts about the 20th century is that we cannot estimate the death toll worldwide of those murdered by government order even to the nearest ten million.[10] Six thousand deaths is hardly a drop in the bucket. But it was the first drop. The staggering scope of the massacres that followed is precisely the reason to examine in detail what happened in the provinces of Liège, Namur, and Brabant during the German invasion.

CHAPTER 1

An ultimatum

Sunday, August 2, 1914, was not an auspicious day in the career of Karl-Konrad von Below-Saleske, German Minister to Belgium.[1] Suave and polished, recruited from the ranks of the aristocracy, like nearly all pre-war diplomats, the forty-eight-year-old envoy had served the German Empire in Turkey and China before assuming his position in Brussels in October, 1913. After the war broke out, Brand Whitlock, Below's American counterpart, recalled an encounter with the German diplomat earlier that summer. It had been at the end of a formal reception at the German Legation, the last of the season.

"Well, thank God it's over," Below had confided. "We can be tourists now, go where we please, do what we please."[2]

As the two men chatted, the American noticed that the silver bowl he had been using as an ashtray had a bullet hole in its side. Did it have a history? It did indeed.

"'In China,'" Below explained,

> it stood on my desk, and one day during the riots a bullet came through the window and went right through it."
>
> Several of the guests pressed up to see;...the German Minister had to recount the circumstances several times.
>
> "I have never had a post," he said, "where there has not been trouble; in Turkey it was the Revolution, in China it was the Boxers. I am a bird of ill omen."
>
> He laughed, standing there very erect and tall and distinguished, with his pointed black moustaches, raising his cigarette delicately to his lips with a wide and elegant gesture, while the guests purred about, examined the silver bowl, thrust their fingers into the bullet hole.
>
> "But now," he went on, "I have the most tranquil post in Europe; nothing can happen in Brussels."[3]

On Thursday, July 31, Below had received a sealed envelope from a special messenger dispatched from the German Foreign Office in Wilhelmstrasse. He was told not to open it until he was so instructed by telegram.

Below was one of the rare diplomats not to leave a written account of his activities on the eve of the war, but he must have been apprehensive. The Austro- Hungarian ultimatum was delivered to Serbia on July 23, four weeks after the assassination of Archduke Francis-Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Every professional diplomat understood that it was the prelude to a declaration of war; the Austrian ambassador to Serbia, indeed, barely glanced at the Belgrade government's conciliatory reply before breaking off relations. What was not clear was how members of the two great alliances would respond to Austria's transgression of international law.

The German High Command was parsimonious in the information it communicated to civilians in the Foreign Office and the Willhelmstrasse was itself not very forthcoming with its ambassadors, so it's unlikely Below knew much about the Schlieffen Plan, the grand strategy to launch an end-run around the French fortresses and take Paris from the west, flooding the Belgian plain with over 750,000 troops.[4] Nonetheless, Below must have guessed that the sealed envelope contained some unwelcome requests of Belgium, whose neutrality Germany had pledged to observe.

Whatever Below surmised about the contents of the envelope, he was obliged to put up a good front; this was precisely why the envelope had been sealed, of course. Called to the Foreign Office in the evening of July 31, he reassured Baron Léon van der Elst, the Secretary General, that he was aware of the solemn declaration his predecessor had made three years earlier that the *Kaiserreich* would respect Belgian neutrality. Van der Elst, regarded as sympathetic to Germany, reminded Below of similar commitments made even more recently, by the Chancellor in private and by the Foreign Minister in an open session of the *Reichstag*'s Budget Committee. Below replied that he was certain that the sentiments expressed on those occasions had not changed.

Later that night, at 10:30 p.m., the Belgian government learned that the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, had telegraphed Paris and Berlin asking if they intended to respect Belgium's neutrality. The French Minister showed up promptly the next morning to assure Count Julien Davignon, the stout, professorial Foreign Minister, that his country had immediately and unequivocally replied in the affirmative.[5] Dav-

ignon was regarded by foreign diplomats as a rather quaint character, overly sanguine and not especially energetic or effectual. He was, recalled the French envoy,

> very much an *honnête homme*, as they used to say in the eighteenth century, of extreme rectitude and imperturbable placidity. I enjoyed his company. In his room the sounds of the outside world seemed to arrive hushed and muted... In his charming optimism, M. Davignon must, I imagine have held the view that things have only the importance one attaches to them... In the anxious period we were passing through, which shook him somewhat out of his usual habits, his final remark invariably was: "Let us hope it will turn out all right in the end."[6]

The Foreign Ministry was actually run by Baron van der Elst, it was widely believed.

Germany's silence began to weigh heavily on Davignon and Van der Elst. Count Albert de Bassompierre, Secretary to the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, was dispatched to the German Legation to inform Below of the French response and to see what he had to say.

After he had delivered his message, the Secretary recalled, Below leaned back in his armchair, looked at the ceiling through half-closed eyes, and recited back to Bassompierre exactly what he had just said, word for word. The Belgian diplomat was impressed by the performance, but perplexed as to its significance. Below then thanked the Secretary for sharing the information with him. Another moment elapsed before the German Minister, looking directly at Bassompierre for the first time, stood up and offered him a cigarette. Officially, he told the Secretary, he could say nothing, but personally he was confident Belgium had nothing to fear from Germany.[7]

Increasingly concerned, Davignon invited Below to the Foreign Ministry the next morning. Again the German Minister regretted he could still say nothing officially, but Davignon, he was sure, knew very well his own feelings on the issue of Belgium's security concerns.[8] This was not especially comforting. Distinguishing their own feelings as honorable gentlemen from what they were obliged to communicate officially became something of a habit among German diplomats during the days just before the outbreak of the Great War.

The following morning, Below offered the Brussels *Soir* a less

guarded response. While he could not declare officially that Germany would respect Belgium's borders, his government firmly believed that its neighbor's neutrality must not be violated. "Grave events are about to take place," he said. "Your neighbor's roof may go up in flames, but your house will be spared."[9]

The Sunday edition of the *Soir* hit the streets around 3:00 p.m. Half an hour earlier, Below received the message he must have anticipated with mounting curiosity and dread. He was to open the sealed envelope. Below was still shaken when he presented the ultimatum to Davignon at 7:00 p.m. that evening, as the telegram had requested. (When Below had asked for the appointment half an hour earlier, Davignon and his aides were delighted. The Germans, they were confident, were now at last ready to confirm officially that they would observe Belgian neutrality.)

Ushered into Davignon's office, Below staggered in, ashen-faced. He may have experienced momentary heart palpitations, because he clutched his chest with one hand and slumped against a table. Davignon was alarmed. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you ill?" [10]

The German ambassador struggled to regain his composure. "I came up the stairs too quickly," he replied after a moment. "It's nothing."

Before Davignon could invite him to be seated, Below told him, "I have a most confidential communication to make to you on behalf of my government." He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to the Foreign Minister.

Unnerved by Below's demeanor, Davignon tore open the envelope. The document inside was handwritten, in immaculate script. It would have been considered uncivilized to have presented a typewritten communication. The agitated Foreign Minister read it through several times.

Davignon's German was very poor. Perhaps his eye traveled naturally to point one, with its ominous opening, "Germany intends no hostile act against Belgium." Or he may have deciphered the single sentence comprising point two: "Germany undertakes under the previous condition to leave the Kingdom as soon as peace is concluded."

Once he had registered its import, Davignon turned pale. "No, surely?" he gasped. "No, it's not possible!' His hand trembled and he dropped the paper. It fluttered to the floor between the two men.[11]

The sheet of paper lying on the parquet floor in the magnificent office on rue de la Loi represented one of the most fatal blunders in human history. Purporting to have "reliable information" about French preparations to invade Belgium en route to Germany, it announced that German troops were about to advance into Belgium. It urged the Belgians to adopt a "benevolent neutrality," permitting the German Army to pass through the Kingdom unhindered. In return, Germany promised to guarantee the country's "integrity and independence," to purchase all supplies in cash, and to make good any damages caused by troops. Then came the stick. If Belgium resisted, the Kingdom would be regarded as an enemy and "relations between the two states would be decided by the sword."

The carrot had originally been juicier. In the version actually sent to Below, the *Kaiserreich* had offered "compensation at the expense of France." However Chancellor Bethmann-Holweg had just promised Britain that Germany, in exchange for British neutrality, would leave France in tact (though not France's overseas possessions). That offer had been rejected, but the Chancellor still hoped to induce Britain to stand aside.[12]

Below was asked to introduce still another change in the document he was sent. The Belgian government had originally been given twenty-four hours to respond. But either the exigencies of the Army's timetable necessitated a more rapid response, or Foreign Ministry tacticians decided that it would be useful to keep members of the Belgian government up all night. Darkness, fatigue, and the ticking clock might make the ministers more malleable. And so a response was demanded of the Belgians by 7:00 a.m., twelve hours after the demands had been presented. [13] The ultimatum, moreover, was written in German. French was the language of diplomacy, as well as the native tongue of most of the ministers. As the Wilhelmstrasse had no doubt hoped, one of the allotted hours was spent translating the note.

Without the invasion of Belgium, Britain would not have entered the war when it did. If Germany had refrained from invading France as well, it's highly unlikely Britain would have entered the war at all. In

the event, the three German armies that remained on the defensive in the west, some 545,000 men, stopped cold the French offenses into Alsace and Lorraine between August 10 and 28, then drove the French Army out of the provinces. Meanwhile, the German Eighth Army in the East, about 225,000 troops, annihilated the invading Russians under Samsonov between August 26 and 30, then turned on the Russian First Army under Rennecamp, routing it by September 9th. These were crushing defeats for the Allies. Had the 750,000 men who invaded Belgium been ordered instead to amuse themselves in cafés, bars, and restaurants along the Rhine during August, it is conceivable that Germany would have won a war against France and Russia, possibly by Christmas, 1914. It's not likely we'd have heard of Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin. Tens of millions of Europeans, starved, shot, gassed, blown apart, and incinerated, would have survived into the second half of the 20th century. [14]

Perhaps it was during the moment that Davignon stooped down to retrieve the paper that Below recovered his poise, recalling who he was and who he represented. In any event, the German Minister detailed the arguments of the memorandum and elaborated on its sugary reassurances. Germany had the highest regard for Belgium, but had to act in its own defense in light of the impending French offensive through the Meuse valley. (Either because he thought it ill-advised, given Davignon's reaction to the ultimatum, or because he simply forgot, Below neglected to propose, as he'd been instructed to, that the Belgian government retire with its army to Antwerp. The Germans would take care of any internal disturbances.)[15] By the time Below had finished, Davignon's shock and chagrin had quickened into anger. "In an agitated and vehement tone, he poured out his indignation," according to one account. The idea of a French assault on Namur was a shameful lie. It was the Germans who were launching a sneak attack on their enemy, and in doing so were violating international law and their own repeated promises.[16]

The international law the Germans were abrogating was Article 7 of the Treaty of London, signed on April 19, 1839 by Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. This imposed permanent or "perpetual" neutrality on Belgium (as opposed to "occasional" neutrality, a temporary,

pragmatic expedient). The Great Powers had not bothered to obtain the consent of the Belgians themselves, but there was nothing inappropriate in this, in their view. Permanent neutrality was intended not so much to safeguard the existence of the neutral itself as to preserve peace in Europe by removing a centuries-old casus belli. Since the time of Caesar, as schoolchildren once were taught, Belgium had been "the cockpit of Europe." Either to seize the wealth of the inhabitants of the Schelde or Meuse valleys or en route to conquests east or south, European armies had trooped across Belgium's plains for two millennia. A cardinal principle of British foreign policy in particular had long been that no great power should occupy the European coast from Oostende to the North Sea islands.[17]

Davignon's protests may have been offered sotto voce. Other Foreign Office officials, on tenterhooks, listening intently, did not know what had transpired. As soon as they saw Below cross the courtyard and enter his car, once again haughty and impassive, they rushed to Davignon's office for news.[18] Whatever remonstrations he offered the German emissary, Davignon promised that the Cabinet would immediately consider the document.

The ultimatum accomplished what eighty years of royal cajolery had failed to achieve. It united all Belgians. Next morning, everyone in the Kingdom would share Davignon's outrage. But the unanimity was preceded by two acrimonious meetings of Belgium's highest ranking officials.

The document was carefully translated and read to the Prime Minister, Baron Charles de Broqueville, who had been summoned to the Foreign Ministry.[19] He listened intently, arms crossed, one hand supporting his chin. "Are we ready?" someone asked. De Broqueville also served as Minister of War.

Speaking slowly and calmly, he assured the Foreign Ministry officials that mobilization had gone well and was nearly complete. "But," he added, "there is a 'but': we don't have any heavy artillery."[19]

King Albert was then notified, and the Belgian Cabinet summoned for a 9:00 p.m. meeting. An emergency session of the Crown Council

was to follow at 10:00. In addition to the ministers with portfolios, the Crown Council was comprised of individuals who had been named by the king "ministers of state," and included senior diplomats and leading members of Parliament. Two generals attended both meetings as well.

At 8:30 de Bassompierre grabbed a hasty meal by himself at a restaurant in la Place Royale. Later, he vividly recalled studying the diners at neighboring tables in the brightly lit room.

> They knew nothing. They had read the afternoon papers, the *20ième Siècle*, *Le Soir,* containing the reassuring declarations made that morning by M. de Below-Saleski… They were happy, carefree… And I, I was crushed by the weight of what I knew, by the secret that would be revealed the next day and would prove such a cruel awakening to those surrounding me. I wondered if I were in the grip of a nightmare, or if I were truly awake.[21]

Exactly what transpired at the two meetings was the subject of dispute for decades. There were no official minutes and it was thought, until 1958, that no one had taken notes. In fact Georges Helleputte, Minister of Agriculture and Public Works, had jotted down extensive, if rather cryptic and not very legible, notes in pencil while the meetings were in progress.[22] Indeed, there was confusion even as to what was discussed at each meeting. The first, the Cabinet meeting, which began about 9:15 and lasted only 30 or 40 minutes, focused on the military situation and included a sharp disagreement between Belgium's two leading generals as to what strategy to pursue. It was only at the second meeting, of the Crown Council, that the ministers discussed how the government should respond to the ultimatum.[23]

At the Cabinet meeting, with the King presiding, Davignon described Below's visit and then read the translation of the ultimatum. A brief discussion followed. There were, no doubt, expressions of incredulity and outrage, but the conversation was quickly diverted by de Broqueville to a consideration of the country's military situation. Perhaps he thought that the larger, more representative body should determine the government's response. In any event, the Crown Council was bound to discuss the ultimatum, and there would be no point in soliciting opinions that would have to be repeated within an hour.

The King, whose efforts both to modernize the army and to prepare it for a German invasion had been frustrated for years, bitterly reproached the ministers for the woeful state of the country's military forces. For over four decades, his blistering remarks were suppressed in all published accounts of the meeting.

Announcing that the ultimatum was unacceptable, the King turned to the Army's Chief of Staff, General Antoine Selliers de Moranville. According to Selliers, there was no discussion of strategy. He was simply asked a number of questions about the capabilities of the army. His answers were not reassuring. The army had no chance of stopping the enemy. The reorganization of the army (begun only the year before) was incomplete; there were insufficient numbers of officers, especially reserve officers. The field artillery was inadequate and there was no heavy artillery. The mobilization, however, was proceeding well and Liège and Namur might hold out for a month. With the full deployment of the field army, Antwerp could withstand a siege, despite the fact that some of its fortresses were unfinished. [24]

At this point, according to Selliers, the King called on the army's second in command, General Louis de Ryckel, who, in what the Chief of Staff characterized as a brief outburst, urged that the army should move east immediately after concentrating, cross the Rhine and attack Köln. "We've mobilized before anyone else," De Ryckel claimed. "If we cross into Germany, we can scatter the first enemy concentrations and disrupt mobilization throughout the Rhineland."[25] Selliers was horrified. He immediately pointed out this strategy posed grave risks: the field army could be cut off from the Antwerp forts and face annihilation. The King listened in silence.

De Ryckel naturally tells a different story. The discussion, according to him, focused on where the army would be situated. Rather than await the enemy behind the Velpe, the army should march to the Meuse, Belgium's natural line of defense in the east, he argued. But only if the Germans disengaged from that front would the army proceed to Aachen, not Köln. His long speech, drawing on a memorandum he had drafted in January, was, according to de Ryckel, "listened to with rapt attention by the Ministers. 'I think, gentlemen,'" said the King, "'that there can be no hesitation. We can do nothing but follow this plan which as been so wisely devised.'"[26]

While its stirring denouement makes the account suspect, and four of the ministers queried seven years later supported Selliers' version (one, de Broqueville, claiming that Ryckel's narrative was "completely at odds with reality"), Helleputte's notes lend some credence to the Second-in-Command's recollections. Strategy was, indeed, discussed, and the King wound up over-ruling Selliers. The Chief of Staff had planned that Namur and Liège be defended only by the fortress garrisons and that the field army should give battle in the center of the country before retiring on Antwerp. Instead, the 3rd Division was deployed along the Meuse to support Liège, while the 4th was retained at Namur. The King, De Ryckel, and Albert's able and outspoken former fellow-student and Military Advisor, Captain Emile Galet, had had no illusions that the threat would come from the east. They had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to push through a war plan that would concentrate the entire army behind the Meuse, if a German invasion were imminent – a deployment, Galet was convinced, that would have thwarted von Emmich's forces. [27] For Belgian civilians in the eastern provinces, the Cabinet's decision was disastrous. The Germans were not stopped in front of the Liège forts, but they were engaged by Belgian forces – the worst of both worlds. In at least some locations, the casualties these encounters inflicted on the Germans led directly to savage reprisals against villagers and peasants.

One of the many myths about the war holds that the Crown Council, when it convened at 10:00 p.m., spoke with one voice. As Galet writes, "On hearing the Imperial demands, the meeting was swept by such a wave of patriotic indignation that in spite of the gloomy outlook for the future there was an immediate and impassioned expression of unanimity."[28] This was not the case. Charles Woeste, leader of the Catholic Party that had governed Belgium for a generation, did not wish to resist the German invasion. He was supported by an influential senior diplomat, his brother-in-law Baron Jules Greindl, for twenty-five years Belgium's Minister in Berlin.

In the version of the events that acknowledges Woeste's reservations, the Catholic leader's assent is made all the more dramatic by his doubts. Minister of Justice Henri Carton de Wiart describes him as speaking

"with great calm." "'We will lose. It will be terrible. There can be no doubt our army will sacrifice itself, our country will experience frightful ruin.' But he concluded: 'It doesn't matter. Despite what will happen, there can be no hesitation over the response.'"[29] (In another account, Woeste, "dry, sharp, precise and clear, as usual," after going over the consequences of the decision, hesitated for a long moment, and then said, "'We have to say *no*.'")[30] In fact Woeste and Greindl thought that the government should merely inform the Wilhelmstrasse that its information was incorrect. French troops had not entered Belgium. Woeste was very concerned that the government "not raise the German's hackles."[31] After asking several questions about the state of the army, he concluded, "The situation is very grave. We face a formidable power. Belgium is a small country. We can protest and invoke the treaties Germany herself has signed. We can fire on them. But after this demonstration...we must retire to Antwerp and do nothing."

Greindl repeatedly expressed his disbelief that Germany was preparing to invade Belgium. He had been assured many times of Germany's excellent intentions and "the Kaiser is a very honest man." The former ambassador worried about the possibility of Belgium's annexation by France if the Brussels government were to make common cause with its southern neighbor.[32]

At this point several ministers heatedly disagreed with the two Catholic leaders. Paul Hymans, the sole Liberal on the Crown Council, told Woeste that what he advocated was treachery toward Europe. Belgium was obliged to do its duty. Louis de Sadeleer, former President of the Chamber of Deputies and the future defense attorney for Edith Cavell, was angrier still. The German demand was "an abomination, a felony." Belgium should defend every square metre of its territory from the criminals. The enraged de Sadeleer began pounding the table with his fist. "It's a shameful act," he yelled. "I'm going to tell the Kaiser. I know him and I'm going to tell him what I think of him!"[33]

Such displays were not going to move Woeste. Frans Schollaert, former Prime Minister, reverted to the moral high ground, repeating that Belgium had no choice but to defend its honor. Antwerp was intended only to be "the refuge after a storm." His successor De Broqueville added a dash of realpolitik: "Let's not kid ourselves. If Ger-

many wins, Belgium, whatever its attitude, is going to be annexed by the Empire. It's necessary then, if we want to survive, to fight with all our strength. And if, despite our loyalty, our bravery, our heroism, Belgium is vanquished, the whole world will regard its death as an eternal symbol of Duty and Honor."[34]

Others appealed to Woeste on legal grounds. A neutral nation defending itself, argued one minister, was not in a state of war. Jules van den Heuvel, an eminent jurist, a professor at Leuven University and former Minister of Justice, who rushed back from Gent to attend the meeting, pointed out that to retire to Antwerp would be to violate the 1839 Treaty. Belgium was not only defending its own rights, but those of its guarantors.

He had not suggested that the army retreat immediately to Antwerp, Woeste pointed out. But faced with dire prospects – France would be beaten, England would not be able to offer much help – the government, he argued, should merely deny the allegations contained in the ultimatum. Here Helleputte's notes end. At some point Woeste must have abandoned his objections to armed resistance, or else yielded to the majority under protest.

Another critical issue arose at this juncture: what should be requested of the other guarantors of Belgian neutrality. Some ministers, including several who urged that the ultimatum be rejected, still hoped that Germany might not invade. Perhaps the request was a Machiavellian bluff. Strategists at the Military College believed that Germany's best bet in a war with France was to penetrate its enemy's right wing, as it had done so successfully in 1870, pinning the French to the coast and the Belgian border. A sweep around the north of the line of forts would allow the French ample room to regroup and resupply. Thus the ultimatum might be a feign to draw the French northward, and perhaps induce them to violate Belgian neutrality and antagonize the British.[35]

Some ministers, in addition, shared Woeste's fear that allies might turn into occupiers. Belgian independence would have to be guaranteed by France and England, some Council members demanded, and its army remain autonomous. The King insisted on the second point. At this juncture, Hymans objected heatedly, "When one is drowning, one does not ask the rescuer for his credentials."[36]

Van den Heuvel proposed a compromise. Until German troops actually crossed the Belgian border, the government would request only diplomatic assistance from Britain and France. (The scrupulous observance of Belgium's neutrality was indeed carried out. Until the moment the Germans crossed the frontier at Gemmenich at 8:00 a.m. on August 4, troops of the 4th Division were ordered to fire on any armed French soldiers entering the Kingdom.)[37]

Around midnight, a committee was selected to draft a response. The three men chosen, Carton de Wiart, Van den Heuvel, and Hymans, labored away at a large table in the corner of the Council chamber. They were repeatedly interrupted, however, by others seeking to add their two centimes. The trio retreated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where they found that the Political Director, Baron Gaiffier de Hestroy, had already prepared a draft. After some emendations by the Ministers, an eloquent response emerged, all the more forceful for its restraint. "No strategic interest justifies such a violation of law," it proclaimed, and concluded that "Were it to accept the proposals laid before it, the Belgian Government would sacrifice the nation's honor while betraying its duties toward Europe."[38]

While the committee polished the reply, Belgium's military situation was again discussed. When it was proposed to blow up the Meuse bridges, the impulsive De Ryckel leapt to his feet. "Oh no," he protested. "We need to drive the Germans back to where they came from."[39]

The King was more realistic. After dismissing the rumor that the French would at once dispatch five army corps to Belgium, Albert told the ministers that the war would be "long, harsh, and relentless. We cannot be lulled into foolish illusions. I know Germany. Its army is formidable. We'll need to fight with all our strength if we don't want to be conquered."[40]

Blind as they were about Germany's intentions, Woeste and Greindl nonetheless saw the disaster that Belgium confronted with greater clarity than did some of their idealistic colleagues. When the meeting broke up at 2:30 a.m., Greindl emerged pale and disheveled. He walked down the stairs with great difficulty, leaning heavily against his brother-in-law for support.[41]

Before he adjourned the meeting, the King, seeing the sky growing

light behind the steeple of St. Jacques, observed, "Gentlemen, this is the dawn of a dark day." After a pause, he added, "However it promises to become brilliant." Then he said, as if speaking to himself, "If we had been weak enough to yield, tomorrow the people would have hanged us in the streets of Brussels."[42]

While this account may have been embellished, the King's words no doubt reflected a reality that must have weighed on all the ministers. Public opinion would countenance only one response to the ultimatum.

Back at the German Legation, the hapless Karl-Konrad von Below, if he'd been able to fall asleep after delivering the ultimatum, was roused some time after midnight by an urgent telegram from the Wilhelmstrasse. He was ordered to the Foreign Ministry, where he showed up at 1:30 a.m., just after the reply to the German demands had been completed. Below had been instructed to announce various breaches of international law by the French, including an air attack, a border crossing by cavalry, and "eighty French officers in Prussian uniforms heading for Germany in twelve motor cars." These were all fabrications. Baron van der Elst, who received Below, icily inquired where these alleged incidents had taken place. The German Minister was caught off-guard. "In Germany," he replied.

"In that case," said Van der Elst, "I do not understand the object of your call."[43]

Below attempted to explain that these activities might be a prelude to other border violations and in any case revealed the duplicity of the French.

The indignant Van der Elst cut him off and began berating Germany. His angry words could be heard in Davignon's office at the end of the corridor.

Outside the Ministry of War down the street, groups of civilians and soldiers gathered, anxious that the lights were still blazing in the building's windows. Rumors spread rapidly, and the crowd began scanning the sky for German dirigibles.[44]

Below motored back to the embassy. He had already told his superiors, after delivering the ultimatum, that "the Foreign Minister could

not conceal his painful surprise at the unexpected communication."[45] Now, in a message dispatched at 3:50 a.m., he laconically observed that, though he had duly reported the incidents, "I do not believe this will influence the Belgian reply, which, according to my impression, is likely to be in the negative."[46]

Below received his answer promptly at 7:00 a.m. It was copied, and the original taken by the military attaché to Aachen, where General von Emmich impatiently waited with his invading force.

Several hours elapsed before Below was able to telegraph the full text of the reply to the Wilhelmstrasse. Ever the master of understatement, he added the terse comment: "Feeling against Germany strong."[47]

At about 2:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 4th, Brand Whitlock received the Secretary of the German Legation, Herr von Strum. Whitlock had just returned from a very emotional session of Parliament, addressed by the King.[48] The Secretary had come to ask that the Americans represent German interests until diplomatic relations were restored.

> Herr von Strum was nervous, agitated, and unstrung; I suppose that he, too, had been without sleep for nights on end. Tears were continually welling into his eyes, and suddenly he covered his face with his hands, leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, an attitude of despair. Presently he looked up.
>
> "Oh, these poor, stupid Belgians!" he said. "Why don't they get out of the way! I know what it will be. I know the German army. It will be like laying a baby on the track before a locomotive!"
>
> He bent over, stretching his hands towards the floor as though to illustrate the cruel deed.
>
> "I know the German army," he repeated. "It will go across Belgium like a steam-roller; like a steam-roller!"
>
> He liked the phrase, which he must have picked up in America – he had an American wife – and kept on repeating it.[49]

Later that afternoon, when a legal document had been drawn up, Whitlock walked across the street to the German Legation. Von Below was stretched out on a low chair, smoking a cigarette, a cup of tea at his side. "When I had seen him last, the night of his formal dinner, he had been so happily looking forward to a peaceful, idle summer. At the sight of me he flung up his hands, shrugged his shoulders and made a little

moue, as though he too remembered, as though words were unnecessary – or inadequate."[50] After signing the *procès-verbal*, the two diplomats watched in silence as an elderly clerk sealed the oak file cabinets with red wax.

Herr Below's counterpart in Berlin was Baron Napoléon Eugène Louis Beyens. He had a somewhat less sanguine view of Germany than did most of his colleagues in the rue de la Loi.

In Berlin, he recalled, during the years before the war,

> the air that one breathed was strangely oppressive; the ground quaked beneath one's feet, as in the neighborhood of a volcanic eruption. One never ceased gazing anxiously at the horizon, now towards the Vosges, now towards the Balkans, wherever the storm-clouds, charged with electricity, were gathering at the moment. A gust of fresh wind would scatter these clouds, but they would gather again after the briefest interval. [51]

Beyens was well aware of explicit threats that had been made to King Leopold II and to King Albert about Germany's intention to invade France, and the implicit threat made to both monarchs and to the Belgian military attaché, as well as the secret warning provided by the Kaiser's kinsman, King Carol of Rumania, as to the German Army's route into France – it would pass through Belgium.[52]

He himself had been warned several times. On one occasion, a friend, a colonel in the Potsdam Guards, though half-Belgian, remonstrated with Beyens after Brussels introduced universal military service in 1913. "'What is the good of enlarging the number of your troops? With the small number that you had before, you surely would never have dreamt of barring the way to us in a Franco-German war. The increase...might inspire you to resist us. If a single shot were fired on us, Heaven knows what would become of Belgium.'"

Beyens assured the colonel that, whatever the size of her army, Belgium was prepared to resist any invader.

"I had occasion to repeat this phrase several times to other Germans. They listened with smiles, but they did not believe me."[53]

Yet despite the many warnings, Beyens found himself "dumbfounded" when he learned by telegram on August 3rd of the German ultimatum.

Prewar diplomats kept bankers' hours, even in crises. The Foreign Ministry in Wilhelmstrasse was deserted when Beyens arrived at 9 a.m. the next day, but Gottlieb von Jagow, the Foreign Secretary, was busy at work and seemed eager to see him.

Before Beyens could launch into his protests, Jagow interrupted.

"Believe me that it is with acute grief that Germany decides to violate the neutrality of Belgium, and personally I feel the most profound regret on that account. But there is no help for it. It is a question of the life or death of the Empire. If the German armies do not wish to be caught between the hammer and the anvil they must strike a severe blow in the direction of France, in order that they may afterwards turn their arms against Russia."

Beyens pointed out that it was not necessary to cross Belgium to attack France. The French frontier, Jagow replied, was too strongly fortified. "And what are we asking of you?" he added reproachfully. Only to use your roads, bridges, tunnels, and railroads, and to occupy your fortresses.

There is only one response, Beyens told the Secretary of State. "Imagine that France had addressed to us the same invitation and that we had accepted it. Would not Germany have said that we had betrayed her in a cowardly manner."

Jagow did not reply.

The Belgian Minister persisted. "Have you anything with which to reproach us? Have we not always, for three-quarters of a century, fulfilled...all the duties of our neutrality? Have we not given Germany tokens of loyal friendship? How does Germany propose to pay us for that? By making Belgium a European battle-field. And we know what devastations and calamities modern war brings in its train...."

"Germany has nothing with which to reproach Belgium, and the attitude of Belgium has always been perfectly correct."

"You must recognize then," replied Baron Beyens, "that Belgium cannot give you any other reply than that which she has now given you without losing her honor. It is with nations as with individuals: there are not different codes of honor for peoples and for private persons..."

"As a private person I do recognize it, but as Secretary of State I have no opinion to express." There was no trace of irony in Jagow's expression.

The conversation was at an end. But when Beyens mentioned that he would shortly be asking for his passports, Jagow seemed genuinely upset. "Don't go yet. Perhaps we shall still have reason to talk." At the Wilhelmstrasse and at Potsdam hope remained that after a taste of war, the Belgians would be able to convince themselves that they had honored their pledges and the government would capitulate. Were there no pragmatists in Brussels?

As he was leaving, Beyens observed, with some malice, that the violation of Belgian neutrality would certainly mean a war with England.

Jagow just shrugged his shoulders.[54]

CHAPTER 2

Liège

GEMMENICH: CROSSING THE RUBICON The first Belgians to encounter the invaders were two border guards at Gemmenich, on the route to Visé, officers Thill and Conard. They were approached by about twenty-five uhlans at 8:05 on the morning of August 4th. The gendarmes stood their ground and ordered the patrol to halt. "Belgian frontier!" they announced.[1]

"I'm perfectly aware of that," said the officer commanding the squadron, "but the French have crossed the border and we're going to continue on our way." The lieutenant had with him a proclamation that officers had been instructed to read in the villages along the frontier. "To the Belgian People," it was entitled.

> It is with the greatest regret that the German troops find themselves forced to cross the frontier of Belgium. The are impelled by inevitable necessity, the neutrality of Belgium having already been violated by French officers who in disguise crossed Belgium in a motor to enter Germany.
>
> Belgians! It is our greatest wish that there may yet be found a way of avoiding a combat between two nations who have hitherto been friendly and at one time even allies. Remember the glorious day of Waterloo, when the German armies helped to found and establish the independence and prosperity of your country.
>
> But we must have a free road. The destruction of bridges, tunnels, and railways will be regarded as hostile acts. Belgians! It is for you to choose.
>
> I therefore trust that the Army of the Meuse will not be compelled to fight you. All we wish is to have a free road to attack the enemy who wanted to attack us.
>
> I give a formal guarantee to the Belgian people that they will not suffer from the horrors of war; that we will pay in money for the provisions that must be taken in the country; that our soldiers will show themselves good friends of a people for whom we feel the utmost esteem and greatest sympathy.
>
> It depends on your discretion and wisely conceived patriotism to save your country from the horrors of war.
>
> Von Emmich
> General Commander in Chief,
> Army of the Meuse[2]

The proclamation had been printed at a time when Germany still hoped Belgium would yield to its ultimatum, and was concerned that the country's communications network remain intact. If the Belgian government did resist, the Germans no doubt hoped that the sugary words still might sow a few doubts in the minds of conscripts and their parents.

The carrot would be dangled once more, on August 9th, but most Belgians recognized that the proclamation began and ended with a lie. No French officers were motoring through Belgium in disguise or otherwise. (It's not at all clear what they would have done when they crossed the German border.) And after the ultimatum of August 2nd, it was difficult to take seriously any expression of esteem and sympathy.

Watching the encounter from a concealed position was a third gendarme, Sergeant Béchet, the head of the station, who immediately phoned his superiors in Liège. "A platoon of cavalry crossed the frontier and is descending into Gemmenich," he told the officer monitoring communications in Liège.

In the Belgian "Grey Book" (*Diplomatic Correspondence Respecting the War*), the thirtieth document is the most laconic. Sergeant Béchet's message was communicated to Army Headquarters at Leuven and from there relayed to the Foreign Ministry in Brussels. Foreign Minister Julien Davignon immediately cabled the Belgian embassies in London and Paris: "The General Staff announces that Belgian territory has been violated at Gemmenich." The two Belgian ambassadors at once phoned the British and French Foreign Ministries with the news.[3]

Some of the Gemmenich gendarmes decided, rather quixotically, to pursue the uhlans, and at once set off on motorbikes. The two cavalry platoons that had been sent out by General Leman to monitor the invasion had been given strict instructions not to engage the Germans. The border guards reached Visé around noon, and were fired on by German sentries who had just arrived. Sergeant Boucko was hit in the head and killed instantly, the second combat fatality on the Western Front.[4] The gendarmes returned the fire and the sentries retired. However, a party of German cyclists arrived moments later, alerted by the shots. Sergeant Thill was killed, one guard was captured and two, though wounded,

escaped. There were apparently no German casualties. About twenty minutes later, Belgian troops entrenched on the far side of the Meuse opened fire on soldiers approaching the river, and the Imperial Army suffered its first losses.

VERVIERS: "IT WAS A MISTAKE" In retrospect, the two border guards at Gemmenich had acted with brash insouciance, even before they took off on their velos. But on the morning of August 4th, no one anticipated that the German army would make war on Belgian civilians. And in most places they didn't – initially.

Verviers, with a population of over 43,000 in 1914, was the only substantial Belgian city east of the Meuse. German troops passed through it as if on parade. Before entering the city gates they rested in a field outside town. At least one resident exchanged barbed pleasantries with the troops. He asked where they were going. "*Nach Paris*," he was told.

"Well, you've taken the wrong road," he retorted, "and you'll leave your skins upon it."

"We've brought our coffins with us," the Germans responded good-naturedly, and pointed to their enormous backpacks.

At one point the curious crowd that had gathered outside Verviers got in among the soldiers, who attempted to push them back to the road. Three shots were fired and a forty-year-old woman fell dead. The crowd surged around her, indignant.

The mayor of the suburb, wearing his tri-colored sash and accompanied by a policeman, located the commanding officer and demanded an explanation. "It was a mistake," the officer confessed. The soldiers were supposed to have used blank cartridges.[5]

But in other villages the Germans passed through that day there was indiscriminate shooting and no apologies.

Arriving in Battice at 2:00 on August 4th, some troops fired into the abandoned railroad station and broke into various homes to steal. At twilight, three young men returning from Verviers paused to stare at the German troops filing through the village. They were immediately arrested and told they would be shot. A bystander rushed off to tell the curé, who hurried over. He explained to the major in command of the

troops that the men were simply curious. One of them he knew personally, Charles Gorissen (or Goorissen), and he assured the major that the young man was honest and peaceable and belonged to one of the most respected families in town. The war, the pastor acknowledged, had unnerved him. He went around unshaven, with his collar up, and hat pulled low on his forehead. But he was incapable of harming anyone. He had no gun in any case, and had been talking with German soldiers in the middle of the main street when he was arrested.

The major responded that all three – who were unhinged by what was happening to them – had "unpleasant expressions." Gorissen, none the less, would have a trial. The priest was relieved; surely the misunderstanding would be quickly resolved. The trial, however, consisted of a statement that was read to the victim in German, which none of the civilians understood, while he was pummeled by rifle butts. Then he and the other two men were shot.[6]

In other places there were no such formalities. Throughout the eastern districts of Liège, as well as Limbourg and Luxembourg provinces, luckless individuals that the Germans encountered were gunned down at random. Usually they were outdoors, walking down the road or crossing a bridge or working in their fields. Sometimes they were watching the troops from their doorsteps or peering through their windows at them. Others were simply sitting in their homes.

At Herve, not far beyond Battice, the very first Germans who appeared – two officers in a car – shot down two young men who were standing by the road, Dieudonné Dechêne and Gustave Styne.[7] The former was killed, the latter badly wounded. In Melen, further along the same route, troops of the 165th regiment shot Henri Derkenne at around 6 p.m. as he walked along the road. When the village constable François Franck brought over the burgomaster to show him the body, Franck in turn was gunned down by soldiers hiding behind a hedge.[8]

In once instance, at least according to rumors circulating in Belgium, the Germans didn't wait until they crossed the border. Troops marching along the Amblève river reportedly opened fire on a German customs house at Ligneuville, deceived by the French-sounding name. The officials inside frantically waved the national flag and the firing stopped.[9]

LIÈGE PROVINCE: OVERVIEW The province of Liège, where the first mass executions took place, has been relatively neglected in the literature on German war crimes. The victims, by and large, were not literate and articulate middle-class townspeople, let alone professors and scholars with international reputations. (The crime of sacking Leuven was compounded by the folly of imagining that the world would not immediately receive graphic and credible accounts of the event.)[10] There was no outpouring of articles, pamphlets, and books describing the nightmare. The one exception was the searing *Vers Liège*, published in 1915 by a courageous journalist, Gustave Somville. He clandestinely toured the devastated region in the fall and winter after the massacres, collecting evidence from survivors and recording his impressions of the devastated towns.[11] The wartime Belgian Commission of Inquiry was unable to gather much evidence about the province; the investigation of events in Liège does not appear to have been a priority. Though the burning of Visé was mentioned in the Commission's third report, it was not until May 20th 1915, in their seventeenth report, that the members got around to describing the various massacres in the province. (The Commission claimed to have collected more than 600 depositions from Liège, mostly given under oath, but nowhere near this number remain in the Commission's archives. Testimony about the great massacres in front of Fort Fléron is particularly sparse.) The evidence published by the second, post-war Commission was also meager, given the scope of the killings. There are, for instance, only two depositions from Melen, where 108 residents were killed, including thirteen children under the age of 16, and only one of these describes any of the mass executions. When it comes to Liège, the double theft of the Commission's depositions is particularly devastating. Fifteen were in fact collected from residents of Melen, and another fourteen from civilians in Soumagne.[12]

In 1919, Mgr. Martin-Hubert Rutten, the Bishop of Liège, like his colleagues, asked each curé within the archdiocese to submit a report on events in his parish during the war. Only two of the ten questions the Bishop asked concerned the treatment of civilians, and the responses were often cursory. Partial exceptions in the extensive deanery of Soumagne include the abbé Joseph Hardy from the parish of Melen, the curé of Chênée, and abbé Oscar Madenfacher, curé of Retinnes.

The fullest published account of the killings remains volume two of *Liège pendant la Grande Guerre*, published in 1919 by two enterprising Liège journalists, Jules de Thiers and Olympe Gilbart. But while more thorough and systematic, though no less impassioned, than Somville's survey, and reproducing excerpts from some interesting written accounts – the journal of the curé of Blégny, abbé Remy-Joseph Labeye, the accompanying narrative of the Mother Superior of the convent of Blégny (also reprinted in Somville), the memoir of the feisty burgomaster of Warsage, Ferdinand Fléchet (which appeared as well in the Belgian government's 16th Report and its *Reply to the German White Book*), and a heartbreaking report by a young schoolmistress from St. Hadelin, Berthe Warnier – the descriptions are never as vivid and detailed as Somville's, or those provided by chroniclers of the great urban massacres.

The worst massacres in the province of Liège took place in a semicircular swathe just beyond the eastern forts, between Sprimont in the south and Blégny in the north. The savagery was most intense along a 7 or 8 kilometer arc facing Fort Fléron, running from between 11 to 14 kilometers east of the city of Liège. In the villages around Olne, Soumagne, and Melen, approximately 290 civilians were butchered, along with an additional 22 who were marched from Herve to a meadow outside Melen. A total of seventy-five civilians from Battice and Herve were murdered as well; the towns lie just east of the semicircle.

In some locations the violence began on the night of the 4th, but most of the killings took place on the 5th and 6th. The massacres were clearly a response to a decisive and unexpected German defeat. The commanders of the Army of the Meuse had anticipated that a frontal assault on the forts by massed infantry would rout the defenders. They underestimated the number of defenders as well as their resolve, imagining only about 6,000 garrison troops would be facing them.[13] The Belgian 3rd Division and the troops manning the forts stood their ground, and their rifle fire and machine guns, and the forts' 15 cm canons and 21 cm mortars, decimated the invaders. (The total number of Germans killed in the taking of the forts has been variously estimated at between 30,000 and 45,000. There are no German casualty figures on the operation.) As the survi-

vors retreated back to the villages they'd passed through unmolested en route to the forts, they looted, burned, and murdered indiscriminately.

In some cases there was not even the pretext of franc-tireur gunfire. In St. Hadelin, outside Olne, the Warnier family was massacred because a shell from Fort Fléron hit a German field hospital outside the family's residence. Victor Warnier pointed out in vain that as he had been in the Germans' presence for the past 48 hours, he could hardly have revealed the location of the installation to the fort, two miles away, even if he'd wanted to. In Labouxhe, a village of thirty dwellings outside Melen, homes were attacked and inhabitants slaughtered at 3:30 a.m. on the morning of the 6th. As at St. Hadelin, the executioners did not even bother to provide "franc-tireur" gunfire prior to their exploits. German investigators returning to the scene months later tried to get some of the widows to testify that there had been a dispute during one of the card games villagers had been invited to play with the soldiers the evening of the 4th, as if this might justify the killings.

In other instances, however, encounters with Belgian companies defending the gaps between the forts, or with reconnaissance patrols, provoked the massacres. This was the situation near Soumagne, where a Belgian machine gun, hidden behind a hedge in the hamlet of Les Viviers, panicked the Germans and was the pretext for the execution of forty-eight men in a meadow called Fond-Leroy.

A second wave of killings in Liège followed later in the month. Belgian commentators made much of the fact that it appeared to commence following the rejection of a second German demarche on August 12th, urging the Belgians to cease hostilities, and that there was a hiatus in the violence as the Germans awaited the Belgian response.[14] Belgian writers emphasized the warning about "the horrors of war"in the proposal (which repeated a threat already issued twice in Von Emmich's original proclamation), as well as a prediction in the Kaiser's cable to President Wilson of August 14th that the war would soon assume "a cruel character." There was indeed a lull in the killings. It ran, with a few exceptions, from the 9th through the 14th. While any connection with the overture to the Belgian government must remain speculative, circumstantial evidence supports the assumption that a halt was ordered. The point of the Belgian critics was naturally that the brutalities had been approved by

the highest authorities, and did not represent spontaneous outbreaks of violence. They could be terminated and resumed at will. There is indeed substantial evidence of premeditation in the massacres after the 14th, notably in the city of Liège, as well as Visé, Barchon, and Blégny.

For reasons having to do sometimes with their uniqueness, sometimes with their representativeness, but also with the quality and quantity of the surviving testimony, I've included accounts of events in the following towns and villages, all from the northern part of the devastated region of the province: Blégny, Warsage, Visé, Wandre, and Liège. The events occurred in the second phase of violence in the province, after all of the forts east of the Meuse had surrendered. These are preceded by descriptions of events in Olne, Soumagne, and Melen, where the first mass executions of civilians in western Europe in over one hundred years took place.

First, however, the franc-tireur question has to be addressed. It's appropriate to deal with it in the chapter on Liège province because it was here, it was widely assumed, that hot-headed peasants, villagers, and gamekeepers, inflamed by patriotic ardor and by drink, and totally oblivious to the scope of the invasion and awesome firepower of the enemy, could not resist taking pot-shots at uhlan patrols as they passed down country roads.

FRANCS-TIREURS Were there not any franc-tireurs? Abbé Guillaume Voisin of Battice addressed that question in a letter to the Minister of the Interior.

> I have often heard it said: 'There were francs-tireurs, because it is the most natural thing in the world for the inhabitants of an invaded country to resist the enemy. Francs-tireurs are the best patriots.' So people argue at a safe distance and *a priori*. But I was living on this side of the Meuse during the early days of the war, and I can say as a fact that the inhabitants did not consider it natural to resist that swarm of formidably armed soldiers who were spreading over the country. Certainly patriotism was not wanting. But it manifested itself only in the wish to see our soldiers greet the invaders with the welcome they deserved.... Yet they realized that to commit acts of violence would merely mean the sacrifice of one's life for nothing. In

> truth the dominating feeling was terror, especially in the countryside, where one felt oneself isolated and at the mercy of the soldiery; one was almost grateful to the enemy for allowing one to live.[15]

While there are numerous reports of "franc-tireur" gunfire in the German White Book (*Die völkerrechtswidrige Führung des belgischen Volkskriegs*), with only a couple of exceptions, no franc-tireur is identified by name, and these are incorrect.[16] If the guerilla attacks were organized or coordinated by the government, as many German depositions allege, logic dictates that the captured franc-tireurs be identified and closely questioned, if only to thwart future operations. Transcripts of a legitimate courts martial would also have made excellent propaganda.

There were rare occasions when victims appeared before some kind of military tribunal, but these hearings generally consisted of charges being read to the victim. Only in a few instances are there reports of civilians being questioned, and, needless to say, the accused never had the opportunity to cross-examine the German soldiers who claimed that they had fired.[17] In the case of mass executions, ad hoc death sentences were often read out to the victims prior to their being shot, but this was the extent of the legal niceties. More significant, no judicial proceedings were taken against any of the thousands of "francs-tireurs" deported to Germany. These included Civic Guard officers and communal officials in towns where the Germans claimed the Belgian government had carefully orchestrated attacks on troops. After the killings were halted, German investigators, over a period of six months, could come up with no Belgian or neutral witnesses who could provide details of a franc-tireur attack, though there was widespread collaboration with the occupiers during this period. And though it insinuated repeatedly that the "People's War" was organized by the Belgian Government, the White Book failed to produce a shred of evidence to back this claim. The machine guns and hand grenades so promiscuously distributed to civilians left no paper trail.

The many books written by apologists for the German Army after 1915 relied primarily on testimony from the German White Book for evidence of franc-tireur activity.[18] In lieu of additional reports from eyewitness, writers attempting to prove the existence of francs-tireurs fre-

quently cited Belgian, Dutch, and French newspaper accounts from the opening days of the war. However, when these are examined critically, they turn out to be long on patriotic ardor, but short on hard evidence. The reporters are never at the scene of the alleged incident. Typical is an article of August 5th from the Amsterdam *Telegraaf* quoted by Raf Verhulst, a particularly vitriolic proponent of the franc-tireur thesis: In Visé "women and children fired upon the Germans." The correspondent "was quite near the Liège frontier," Verhulst assures readers, and indeed, the story is filed from Maastricht.[19] But the best binoculars don't permit anyone to witness activities over twelve kilometers away, nor does the reporter cite evidence from anyone with a closer view. Testimony of this quality can be multiplied endlessly, and was. "The fury also seized a certain portion of the country populace where peaceful labor in the fields was disturbed. They were mad to defend the native soil against the treacherous Prussian... From cellar-windows, roof-apertures, made by removing tiles, from private houses, farms and cottages, a furious fire was opened on the onrushing uhlans and Sleswickers."[20] "At Bernot, advance parties came into conflict with the townspeople who fired like madmen on the invaders from the windows and roofs of houses. Even women took part in the firing."[21] Again, no dispatch originates from a reporter on the scene. There is no doubt a correlation between the paucity of evidence for franc-tireurs and the ferocity of the sarcasm of those arguing that there was assuredly a "People's War" in Belgium.[22]

Seemingly oblivious to the implications for their argument, apologists for the German Army sometimes quoted newspaper accounts suggesting the Germans were on the point of surrendering: "The Germans are dying from starvation and are giving themselves up to village policemen, gamekeepers and even to peasants. We are taking an enormous number of prisoners in this fashion."[23] "Show to the soldiers of the Kaiser a loaf of bread and a can of coffee and they will surrender."[24] They cited these and similar quotations to condemn the Belgian government for inciting resistance by permitting them to be published. However, apart from the fact that censorship was imperfectly enforced in the opening days of the war, after decades in which Belgium had enjoyed the freest press in Europe, the tales of German desperation at the very least call into question the veracity of reports by the same journalists about the suicidal tactics

of the valiant francs-tireurs. Bart Mokveld, a correspondent for the Amsterdam newspaper *De Tijd*, who was the only European journalist to travel extensively in Belgium during August, concluded that Belgian reporters, "in their nervous, over-excited condition...sat at their desks and listened to the gossip of refugees about civilians taking part in the struggle. In their imagination they saw hordes of barbarians overrun their native soil, saw man and man, woman and woman, shoulder to shoulder, resisting the invader without regard for their own life." Mokveld, who witnessed the destruction of Visé and Leuven, testified that he had:

1. Never seen any sign of a franc-tireur guerilla.
2. Never seen anyone who was arrested as a franc-tireur.
3. Never heard any German soldier, of whatever rank, assert that he himself had witnessed any action by a franc-tireur, although I questioned such soldiers times without number. They always mentioned others, who had left days ago, and were said to have gone through the miserable experience!
4. Never heard the name of any franc-tireur in answer to my question.[25]

In a book written expressly to prove the existence of franc-tireurs, Raf Verhulst could come up with nothing better in the way of direct testimony than a single third-hand account. A journalist told him that a friend of his had had to flee the country because his gamekeepers killed three uhlans on his property near Liège.[26] (The author cited another acquaintance who mentioned encountering a weeping young German cavalryman, who told him "*Kameraden all tot*." In lieu of any evidence that the comrades were not in fact killed by Belgian soldiers, Verhulst speculated that "if by any mischance this young fellow met any francs-tireurs...the probabilities are that he was shot down" – just as he might have been eaten had he encountered a party of cannibals.)[27]

If there is no solid evidence of franc-tireurs operating on Belgian soil, apologists for the German Army were on somewhat firmer ground when they criticized the Belgian government about the activities of the Boy Scouts and the *Garde civique*.

It is quite probable that Boy Scouts accompanied a few regiments and may have assisted troops engaged in combat on at least one occasion. There is one credible report to that effect, though there is no evidence that they were not in uniform or that they participated in guerilla activities.[28]

As for the *Garde civique*, there were, in the first place, two organizations, an "active" and a "non-active." The former served in towns of over ten thousand, wore full uniforms (which they were obliged to purchase) and drilled regularly. The non-active *Garde* was expected to perform police functions during emergencies, and only when it was activated by the King. It was to play no military role. In the chaotic days just before the invasion, the government called up about 100,000 non-actives, but failed to mobilize the 46,000 active *Garde* members, though it sent detailed descriptions of their uniforms to the German General Staff on August 8th. The non-active *Garde civique* was inundated with applications the first days of the war, and the new recruits, who normally wore a short blue tunic, were required, as of August 5th, to put on an arm-band and a cockade with the national colors and to bear their arms openly. Three days later, a blue shirt was required as well. Though some guarded bridges, railroad lines, and other sites of strategic importance in the opening days of the war, there is no credible evidence that any non-actives took part in combat.[29]

The role of the active *Garde civique* varied considerably. A few units did participate in the fighting. In Tamines, for example, a detachment from Charleroi gathered behind a cemetery wall beside French troops and fired on patrols approaching the town. Guards in Liège served under General Leman and defended the forts alongside units of the 3rd Division. In Sint-Truiden, the *Garde civique* fired on approaching cavalry. Frightened refugees told an English headmistress of a nearby school that the *Garde civique* killed an uhlan outside Linsmeau.[30] More typical were the activities in Brussels, where members of the *Garde* dug trenches and set up barricades, and then dismantled them. Whatever they were up to, active *Garde* members were required to wear their uniforms; there was no mistaking them for franc-tireurs. Most *Garde* detachments were disarmed and disbanded by August 18th. This was the case in Leuven, where those members who still hoped to take part in the fight against the invaders made their way to Antwerp.[31]

It would be rash to claim that there was not a single franc-tireur in Belgium. Some of the White Book accounts of gunfire in towns east of the

Meuse are plausible. An anonymous German sergeant, in a book published in France in 1918, actually provided the name and details of the trial of a would-be assassin, a policeman in Arlon named Louis Empereur. According to the *feldwebel*, the man, though a father of four, defied his German defense lawyer and proudly owned up to having fired at an officer, regretting only that he hadn't killed him. And a deserter with no axe to grind believed he saw gunfire coming from a home in Bertrix, near Bouillon; five men emerged after grenades were hurled in, and were promptly executed.[32] In the first case, however, the second Belgian Commission of Inquest reported that Emile Lempereur, an assistant police commissioner, was executed, without histrionics, as a reprisal for shots fired by soldiers who were amusing themselves by shooting off guns stored in the town hall. As for the incident in Bertrix, French troops were in the vicinity, and Belgian witnesses deny the men fired on the Germans.[33] The German claims in the White Book would be more convincing if one were not familiar with the extent to which German witnesses misrepresented events in Andenne, Aarschot, Dinant, and Leuven – where, unlike in case of many of the villages of Liège, very extensive and damning Belgian testimony is available. Particularly in the eastern provinces during the opening two or three days of the war, it is conceivable that individual cavalrymen and small patrols were ambushed by civilians. But Belgian patrols were also operating in Liège for two days, until they fell back to the other side of the Meuse. When the outrage over the invasion was replaced by fear of the invaders, when vast columns of heavily armed troops began moving toward the Meuse, it is unlikely that any sniping continued, especially after reports of the killing, burning, and looting began to be given credence. What *is* clearly the case is that in those towns where the worst massacres occurred, there is simply no credible evidence of franc-tireur activity. Troops were taking revenge on residents either for the stiff resistance of Belgian or French forces or for the panic and casualties that resulted either from friendly fire or from random shooting by undisciplined troops – or by agents provocateurs.

The franc-tireur stories that circulated throughout Germany from the opening day of the war, however, generally did not describe bands of

armed irregulars shooting at patrols or harassing the flanks and supply lines of the advancing armies. Rather, they were lurid accounts of gruesome, barbaric acts frequently committed by women and children against wounded soldiers. Mutilations of all kinds were a recurring motif. Fingers and genitals were chopped off, though never hands, and, more frequently, eyes were gouged out. The treacherous Belgians poisoned wells, passed out exploding cigars, and shot or stabbed generals with whom they were about to dine. (This latter exploit was frequently the handiwork of the burgomaster or his son or daughter.) Bernhard Duhr, a German Jesuit working for the Köln organization Pax, collected thirty-three stories that implicated priests or nuns. While these generally concerned espionage activities and incitements, Duhr also tracked down nine variants of the frequently-repeated tale of Belgian civilians gouging out the eyes of wounded soldiers. In each case he contacted the hospital where the victims were supposedly seen, and in each case the claims proved groundless. "There was certainly a mania for witnessing atrocities involving the putting out of eyes. Innumerable tales of this kind were spread around, and finally guaranteed as absolutely authentic – and yet they were all fairytales."[34] The unmistakable hostility to the Church coloring so many of the stories made Catholic authorities suspicious, and on August 16th, the influential *Kölnishche Volkzeitung* denounced atrocity propaganda, after having initially published several dubious stories.[35] On August 24th, *Vorwärts*, the national paper of the Social Democratic Party, also expressed skepticism. Karl Liebknecht, the left-wing SPD deputy whose outspoken criticism of the war would eventually land him in jail, visited Belgium in September 1914, and concluded that the idea that Belgian civilians were waging war was a myth. Atrocities were being committed, but it was by Germans.[36] Bethmann Hollweg himself toured Leuven in November, and not long after conceded privately that the German Army had indeed committed atrocities in Belgium.[37]

Only sixteen accounts of sadistic mutilations of German soldiers by Belgian civilians made their way into the White Book. But the descriptions of franc-tireur attacks that comprise the bulk of the volume are scarcely more plausible. Unlike their counterparts in other times and places, the

Belgians seldom ambushed troops from concealed positions in woods or ravines or from behind hedges. The modus operandi of the guerillas, stubbornly adhered to despite its obvious disadvantages, was to shoot down on large bodies of German troops from their homes. Even in Dinant, with the Citadel at their disposal, the franc-tireurs apparently preferred to fire on the invaders from the comfort of their living rooms. But when their homes were broken into, the reckless desperados never fired on the Germans, let alone held out to the last man. In town after town, seemingly oblivious to the lethal consequences of being caught, they meekly walked out of their homes, hands held high. Perhaps they were buoyed by the knowledge that they had managed to make their weapons disappear.

Some Germans, including even Major von Manteuffel in Leuven, were astute enough to recognize the implausibility of this scenario, and instead claimed that Belgian soldiers disguised as civilians had forced their way into homes and fired on soldiers. Needless to say, the notion that residents would quietly submit to this, and then breathe not a word about it subsequently, is hardly more plausible than that they themselves would fire from their residences.

No less suspicious are the insignificant German casualties. Witnesses in the German White Book repeatedly express their amazement that the aim of the franc-tireurs was so poor, even when the Germans were convinced the guerillas were wielding machine guns. In the heart of Leuven, according to the testimony of the *Kommandant*, the franc-tireurs succeeded only in shooting three men in the legs and killing a horse.[38] The authors of the White Book wisely made no attempt to tally the German dead and wounded from the "Belgian People's War."[39]

No informed writer now argues that franc-tireur attacks preceded the massacres of Belgian civilians. The issue that remains for historians is why German soldiers made such claims. Was it simply a case of spontaneous paranoia, or was the paranoia deliberately fostered?

A number of Belgian, French, and British intellectuals and eye-witnesses to the depredations in August were convinced that certain high-ranking commanders, if not the General Staffs of the First, Second, and

Third Armies, intentionally deceived their troops in order to facilitate a speedy passage through Belgium. If German soldiers were taught to regard Belgians of all ages as potential murderers, they would not hesitate to treat the civilian population with a brutality that would discourage actual resistance. As the message that was read in the villages of Liège province on the first day of the campaign made clear, the German Army viewed with great alarm the prospect of its advance being delayed by destruction of bridges, tunnels, railway lines, and other acts of sabotage. The Schlieffen timetable was unforgiving. Paris had to be taken within six weeks if the Army was to stop the Russian "steamroller" before it approached Berlin; Moltke's anxieties on this score are well known. Corps and division commanders had demanding assignments.

Accusations that atrocity stories originated with officers implied that the massacres of civilians were premeditated. The killings, in this view, were an essential part of the Army's game plan, not "collateral damage." As the Report of the British Committee on Alleged German Outrages concluded, "The excesses recently committed in Belgium were... too widespread and too uniform in their character to be mere sporadic outburst of passion or rapacity. The explanation seems to be that these excesses were committed – in some cases ordered, in others allowed – on a system and in pursuance of a set purpose. That purpose was to strike terror into the civil population and dishearten the Belgian troops, so as to crush down resistance and extinguish the very spirit of self-defence."[40] Gruesome tales of outrages perpetrated by civilians simply hardened troops to carry out this terrorist campaign.

The fact that the massacres of civilians appeared to have been suspended between August 9th and 14th added credence to this claim. The hiatus, Allied writers argued, coincided with a period when the Germans were awaiting the Belgian response to a communiqué urging the government to cooperate with the invaders. When it was rejected, the killings resumed with new ferocity, suggesting that the terrorism was controlled by the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL).

Clearly, tales of franc-tireur outrages also helped solidify support for the war at home. Despite the display of solidarity in the *Reichstag* on August 4th and the *Burgfrieden*, there was some lingering doubt about the willingness of socialists to support a war they had for so long vowed

to resist. Stories of barbarities by treacherous Belgians nicely complemented the strategy of presenting the war as an act of self-defense and deflected concerns about violating the territory of a peaceful neutral nation. Demonizing the Belgians was not only an adroit propaganda ploy; clearly, it also relieved the guilt of those who had engineered the war and those who were now devastating the small country. "We were forced to do this," German soldiers repeatedly told Belgian witnesses – often with expressions of regret.

A more benign interpretation of the franc-tireur legends also emphasizes psychological factors, like analyses suggesting the stories represent an attempt to assuage guilt and evade responsibilities. However, this approach, associated with Fernand van Langenhove, a Solvay Institute sociologist, begins by acknowledging the sincerity of many of the soldiers testifying in the White Book. It seeks to explain the grip the franc-tireur stories exercised on the imaginations of Germans by adopting the methodology of studies of the origins and survival of myths. Much as secular 19th century intellectuals tried to explain the success of Christianity in terms of the needs it fulfilled, rather than to dismiss it as a conspiracy of priests, like their 18th century predecessors, so this functionalist take on the franc-tireur stories sought to account psychologically for what Van Langenhove regarded as a singular episode of mass hysteria. Franc-tireur legends, he argued, were the result of the stresses of modern warfare, the surprising and disturbing resistance of the Belgian Army – including the use of isolated detachments roaming outside the battle lines – and the memory of the French franc-tireurs of 1870.[41] Further influencing the imagination of the ordinary soldier were the exaggerated claims of abuse reported by German residents of Belgium who had fled during the opening days of the war. Rather than originating the legends, the State simply gave its imprimatur to stories that began spontaneously. The myth trickled up, rather than down.[42] Van Langenhove clearly felt he was taking the scientific high road in interpreting the phenomenon as he did. Collective beliefs "differing from historical truth," as he delicately put it, needed to be explained, not condemned.[43]

He is followed by two recent scholars, John Horne and Alan Kramer,

who emphasize and elaborate upon the importance of the Prussian experience of French resistance during 1870 and 1871. The guerrilla campaign claimed the lives of about one thousand soldiers, and seemed to epitomize the horrors of republicanism for the Prussian officer corps. Raised by a levée en masse, without the uniform and discipline of a professional soldier, the French franc-tireurs not only disdained conventional tactics, but repeatedly engaged in what seemed to the Prussians dishonorable practices. They would fire on troops from concealed positions, then remove their armbands, hide their weapons, and assume the guise of innocent peasants or laborers.[44] To Van Langenhove's discussion of the franc-tireur "myth cycle" theory, Horne and Kramer add insights from George Lefèbvre's 1932 analysis of the Great Fear of summer, 1789.[45] (This was a widespread panic that bands of "brigands," supported by the aristocracy and foreign monarchs, were roaming the French countryside killing, looting, and burning crops.) This collective delusion was brought about by "auto-suggestion" – the fact that attacks were feared led to the belief that they were actually taking place. Thus was born what Horne and Kramer label a "myth-complex," colored as well by animosity toward civilians in general and Catholics in particular, frustration over the resistance of the Belgian army and the pace of the German advance, and re-enforced by fatigue, disorientation, and the firepower of modern weaponry.[46] (The latter promoted the myth in two ways: the high velocity of bullets fired by French Lebels and Belgian Mausers (over 2,000 feet per second) misled troops into imagining that a shot fired at a great distance came from nearby, the report arriving simultaneously with the bullet. Also, high explosive shells sometimes mutilated victims in ways that suggested the handiwork of barbaric civilians.)[47] The presence of so many men in the countryside was also disturbing to soldiers from a nation that knew only universal conscription; mobilization had left few twenty-to-forty-year-old men in German towns and villages.

While they acknowledge that the "myth-complex" may have been exploited by officers, Horne and Kramer emphasize the fear and anger of ordinary soldiers, rather than manipulation.[48] They follow Van Langenhove in believing that "the complex was generated essentially from below during the first phase of the invasion, by soldiers in the field...,"

while only during "the main invasion" did "the part played by the military command [become] much more pronounced."[49]

The relative merits of these two interpretations – that of Belgian and British investigators, on the one hand, and Van Langenhove and his successors on the other – will be discussed in Chapter 13. In any event, whether German soldiers were deliberately misled or whether the franc-tireur myths took on a life of their own, the conviction that they faced a vicious and unscrupulous civilian population undoubtedly contributed to the viciousness and unscrupulousness of German behavior in Belgium.

VON SCHLIEFFEN, VON EMMICH The Schlieffen Plan had called for a wide sweep through the Netherlands.[50] Troops were to cross the lightly defended border and march along the flat, straight roads into Western Belgium, bypassing the Liège fortresses. It made excellent sense, strategically. But German planners were convinced that though the English might connive in a violation of Belgium's neutrality, they would be less inclined to overlook the tens of thousands of grenadiers whose right sleeves would be sweeping along the length of the North Sea coast opposite East Anglia. A neutral Netherlands, the Germans also believed, would give them access to the shipping of other neutrals. (Both assumptions would prove wrong. England would not countenance the attack on Belgium and it would eventually deny the Germans shipping through Dutch ports.) And so Schlieffen's plan was scaled back. Additional troops, Moltke was also convinced, would be needed elsewhere, a still more compelling reason for narrowing the front and altering its trajectory.

But if the arc was flattened, the blow would have to come more quickly. Moltke's modification of his predecessor's plan meant that the Liège fortresses had to be captured in six days if the army was to keep to its timetable – defeat France within six weeks and entrain east before the Russian steamroller gathered momentum.

Liège's importance was obvious: it commanded the railroad network linking Germany with the plains of Brabant and northern France. But long before this major European trunk line was laid down, armies had

appreciated the strategic significance of the city. It straddles the Meuse where the river turns northward and it guards the southern end of the basin which fans out above the Ardennes forest. The forest was hardly impenetrable in 1914 – two major roads cut through it – but it was difficult to haul heavy artillery across and not where you'd chose to march soldiers with 30-kilo packs if time were of the essence. Below these two roads, which ran from Malmédy through Stavelot southeast and from Trier through Luxembourg to Longwy – was the heavily fortified French border, with intentional gaps left between the fortresses of Toul and Epinal and above Verdun to "canalize" invading German forces. The Metz Gap, the most likely route into France, was only 30 miles wide.

Another road led out of the Ardenne forest northward to Liège, from Malmédy over the Hautes Fagnes to Spa. But three roads led directly to Liège from Aachen, where the First and Second Armies were massing – one ran south to Verviers and then northwest down the valley of Vesdre, another straight across the open fields of eastern Wallonia to Visé, just below the Dutch border, and down the Meuse to the forts. Still another ran between these two, dipping south from Aachen just inside the Belgian border, and then running due west through Battice and Fléron. It was over these three routes that the main striking force would come, though troops would also sweep up from Malmédy. The invaders were von Emmich's "Army of the Meuse," cobbled together from three corps of von Bülow's Second Army and an additional brigade – about 130,000 soldiers in all.

Von Emmich's strategy was an imperfect microcosm of the Schlieffen Plan itself. The guns of the northern Liège forts guarding the Meuse did not cover the entire 14 kilometers to the Dutch frontier. A strong, rapidly moving force was to seize Visé, the northernmost Belgian town of any size on the Meuse, penetrate the 9 kilometer gap above the range of the guns of Fort Pontisse, and then swing south and attack the western forts and invest Liège. With Visé taken and its bridges secured, cavalry units could also fan across the plains of southern Limburg and mask the movements of the invaders. The two cavalry divisions under von Emmich's command were thus dispatched directly to Visé. At the same time, other brigades of the VIIth Army Corps were sent directly against

the eastern forts, Barchon and Fléron, and the "*fortins*" of Evegnée and Chaudfontaine. Fléron was particularly vital: it commanded the railroad link with Aachen. Waiting impatiently in and around Aachen were von Kluck's First Army and most of the remainder of von Bülow's Second Army. Additional brigades from the xth Army Corps (von Emmich's own) were to attack the ring of forts from the south. They would cross the Vesdre at Verviers and proceed over the rolling hills between that river and the Ourthe.

The German Army had begun concentrating along the Belgium frontier on July 29. On August 1 they received the green light from Potsdam to implement the German War Plan. Then the marching order was abruptly canceled by the Kaiser an hour later. A telegram from Lichnowsky in London had briefly convinced him that England might guarantee French neutrality, and spare Germany a western front. Lichnowsky corrected the impression with a second telegram and the armies were unleashed.

Until the morning of August 3rd, von Moltke thought the chances very good that Belgium would submit, albeit with bad grace, to the German ultimatum. But even after the Brussels government vowed to oppose the march through its territory, the Germans expected to encounter "chocolate soldiers" when they crossed the border. The Army would offer only token resistance, then retire on Antwerp. Certainly once the guns of the Liège fortresses had been silenced, the Belgians would sue for peace.

THE LIÈGE FORTS General Alexis Brialmont was responsible for designing the forts. It galled the general that he had never seen action. This was clearly an occupational hazard for anyone serving in the army of a country consigned to permanent neutrality, but one the general never reconciled himself to. He wrote bitterly to a woman who had witnessed the *Théatre Français* burn down, "I envy you, Madame: luckier than I, you have seen fire." In compensation he churned out some thirty-five books, seventy-four pamphlets, and innumerable designs for forts.

Work started on his final plans in June of 1888 and was completed by the end of 1891.[51]

Though trained in France, Brialmont had early in his career rejected the French star-shaped design, with its high, bastioned ramparts providing wide firing angles, and supplemented by extensive outworks. Instead, recognizing the ability of long-range guns firing high-explosive shells at steep angles to decimate the walls of conventional forts, Brialmont adopted the stark German model.

The Liège forts were a series of detached concrete bunkers buried under mounds of earth. Piston-like gun turrets slid up and down cylindrical shafts. A network of underground chambers housed machinery for maneuvering the guns, stores of ammunition and supplies, electric generators and ventilating fans, and living quarters for the garrison.

The entire system consisted of twelve such forts encircling the city of Liège, six principal forts and six smaller "*fortins*." Each of the former contained eight or nine cupolas, large and small, arrayed in a pentangular formation, their guns ranging from 21 cm howitzers (of which each fort had two) to rapid-firing 5.7 cm guns, ten of which were also placed on the parapet of each fort. The triangular *fortins*, situated between the large forts, also bristled with guns. Each had seven or eight cupolas with a smaller complement of weapons.

They were spaced less than 1,220 meters apart on average, so that if one were to fall into enemy hands, it would come under fire from both of its neighbors. The forts averaged about six and a half kilometers from the city center, and formed a defensive perimeter with a circumference of nearly fifty-two kilometers.

What may have been state-of-the-art in 1891 was no longer so on the eve of the war. The forts were engineered to withstand barrages from 22 cm guns. But bigger guns were being turned out from the late 1890s. At around the same time, an effective method of reinforcing concrete with steel was finally perfected by the German Wayss. The aggregate for the forts, moreover, was not cleaned, crushed, and graded as it would have been a quarter century later. The forts' vulnerability was increased by a structural design flaw: at their center was a large hall with an unsupported roof.[52]

Commanding the Liège garrisons in 1914 was General Gérard Leman, an engineer, a professor at the Belgian military school, and, fittingly, Brialmont's foremost living disciple. A somber, taciturn man, he inspired respect rather than devotion. His task, he knew, was not to hold off the enemy indefinitely, but to delay the German army as long as possible until French and British troops could reinforce the Belgians. While the forts were certainly formidable obstacles, Leman commanded only about 25,000 soldiers in addition to the 4,500 garrison troops, a force not sufficient to defend the Liège perimeter against the 130,000 invaders. (The entire Belgian Army consisted of only 117,000 men in August 1914, of whom 93,000 were combatants.) Worse, the 3rd Division and the mixed brigade from the 4th that augmented it had only twenty-four machine-guns, not even a quarter of the Belgian Army's meager arsenal, though it did have 500 sabres. How much time could Leman buy? Everyone looked anxiously westward. "Two questions recurred perpetually. 'Where are the Allies?' 'When will the great battle take place?'"[53]

Most Belgians did not doubt that the Allies would come soon. And perhaps the great battle might take place in front of Liège. Few Belgians, however, were aware of the existence of certain squat behemoths from the Krupp works at Essen – siege guns with a 42 cm bore through which a 1,150 kilo shell a meter long could be blasted nearly 14 ½ kilometers.[54]

The Krupp monsters, however, were not yet ready when war broke out. The chief technical difficulty to be overcome – apart from making the short-barreled, unrifled howitzer accurate – was to make the guns mobile. The original 1909 model had to be transported by rail and embedded in concrete before it was fired, so powerful was its recoil. A road model was tested in February 1914, but further refinements were necessary and the motor-driven version was not scheduled to be delivered until October 1914.[55] As the July crisis approached its climax, the Krupp plant, working twenty-four hours a day, managed to convert two of the *Dicke Berthas* into road-transportable models and rapidly trained the 280-man crew the two-gun battery required. But the howitzers would not be ready until August 10th.

Von Emmich didn't wait. He was convinced his crushing numerical superiority would enable his troops to penetrate the gaps between the

forts and overwhelm the garrisons. On the morning of the 5th, after a sustained barrage with 15 and 22 cm guns, the Germans attacked the eastern forts with massed infantry. The chocolate soldiers mowed them down. From their positions behind the parapets, it seemed to the Belgian machine-gunners that the German soldiers were advancing on parade. Column succeeded column. Men trampled over the piles of corpses. Such prodigality amazed the defenders of Fléron, Barchon, and Evegnée. Still the waves of infantry swept forward. As many as forty-three thousand Germans were to die before the last Liège forts surrendered, according to one estimate.[56]

At one point below Fort Barchon the Germans penetrated the barbed wire and broke though the Belgian lines north of the fort. They were repulsed by a bayonet charge from the 11th and 35th regiments of the 16th brigade. Across the entire front the Germans fled back to the villages on the 5th. And then the massacres began in earnest.

MELEN: "IL PLEUT, IL PLEUT BERGÈRE" After Battice and Herve, the next town on the road to Liège is Melen, about equidistant from the forts of Barchon and Fléron, and one and a half kilometers in front of the fortin of Evegnée. Lining the road to the east of the town is the little village of Labouxhe, consisting in 1914 of about thirty homes. Soldiers of the 165th regiment lodged there on the 4th. As elsewhere, the troops seemed well disposed toward the civilians on day one of the invasion. Soldiers invited some men of the village to play cards that first evening. The next day the guns of Fléron decimated the invaders as they attacked the forts, and the soldiers returned in a very different mood. At 11:00 p.m. residents were ordered into their cellars; they were told to expect "serious events."[57]

At about 3:30 a.m. on the 6th, intense firing broke out. Residents assumed that the Belgian army had launched a counterattack. The firing ceased. Germans entered the ground floor of most of the houses, shouting "*Draussen, schlechte Franzosen*!" As soon as the men emerged from their homes, they were gunned down at point-blank range. The males of at least ten households were slain. Women and children were driven into the street with blows from rifle butts. The houses were ignited and

several soldiers yelled in schoolroom French, "Bad French women, you, alive into the fire." (Only a few days later soldiers would be told horrific tales of Belgian francs-tireurs. But on August 4, some companies among von Emmich's forces were led to believe they had invaded France.)[58]

Not all of the women and children were so fortunate. Entire families were massacred in the early morning onslaught and in a second round of killings on the 8th: the Benoits, a father, three sons ages 19, 18, and 16, and his 12-year-old daughter Marie; the Cresson family, André and Marie and their four children, Guillaume, 16, Gilles, 13, Thérèse, 11, and Cathérine 7; the Brayeuxs, Joseph, Marie, and their twelve-year-old daughter Anna; the Lorquets, a father and four sons; the Weerts, the Weyenbergs, and the Wislets. Marie Wislet and her daughter Marguerite, 20, were handsome women. Perhaps her good looks and poise would enable Marguerite to leave her tiny village for Liège. But the mother and daughter were raped repeatedly in their basement by the rampaging troops in the early morning of the 6th, after Louis Wislet was butchered as he defended them. When they were finished, the Germans stabbed them in the chest, smashed in the women's skulls with rifle butts and then shot them several times for good measure.[59]

After the Thursday morning butcheries in Labouxhe, the troops swarmed into Melen proper. The residents were driven out into the street, and the Germans entered their homes, claiming they were searching for weapons. After allowing the inhabitants to re-enter their dwellings, soldiers once again forced them out at gunpoint. No weapons had been confiscated; no accusations were made. This time they were told that they would be marched toward Fort Fléron. Instead, about forty men were bound together and taken directly to a meadow belonging to the Falla family. Here they were lined up, with a soldier stationed two or three yards behind each victim. Among those selected were Henri Defooz and his two sons Guillaume, 20, and François, 18. The order was given; the shots rang out. Defooz was hit in the stomach and left arm, but survived. He lay perfectly still, pretending to be dead, listening intently for any sign of life from either of his sons. Soldiers approached, patted his pockets, and relieved him of 2,080 francs. Defooz held his breath and remained limp. Other groups of prisoners were marched out to the meadow and despatched. A total of one hundred eight men, women,

and children were murdered in Labouxhe and Melen, forty-eight from neighboring farms and villages. This does not include the twenty-two residents of Herve massacred at Labouxhe.[60]

Among the first to fall were the husband and daughter of Elizabeth Lambert Degueldre. On the 4th, the day of the invasion, she was walking with her family in a meadow behind their farm. They had gone to milk the cows. Eighteen-year-old Marie Degueldre became very apprehensive and wanted to return to the house. Suddenly, Elizabeth spotted a German soldier crouched in the meadow, his gun leveled. The next instant, shots rang out. Her husband and daughter fell. Marie, hit in the chest, died in half an hour. Olivier was badly wounded in the thigh. Neighbors helped carry the dying girl to a stable. But more Germans began firing when they returned for Olivier. Elizabeth, concerned that the soldiers might finish him off if they found him, decided to leave him in the meadow and attend to him there. He slowly bled to death, over a period of nine and a half hours. His final words: "Bernard will avenge me." His son was serving in the Belgian Army.[61]

Stunned by the gratuitous murders, Elizabeth focused on providing her husband and daughter with proper burials. In a peasant village in 1914, the rituals surrounding burial and mourning still had a sanctity and inviolability the war was to do much to erode. But the Germans had installed themselves in the Degueldre home, compelling the distraught widow to feed them and wait on them, and they forbade her from bringing the bodies back to the house for burial. On Saturday, the 8th, they finally gave their consent. Apparently, there was some entertainment value to be derived. After her neighbors helped Elizabeth Degueldre retrieve her husband and daughter, the soldiers compelled the neighbors' children to dance in front of the corpses and sing, "*il pleut, il pleut bergère*," a popular tune. The men did not appear to be drunk at the time, Degueldre testified. They also stole 400 francs and made off with several animals. As she watched, the soldiers amused themselves by beating the pigs until the animals fell dead. Further entertainment was on its way.

Two undertakers arrived from Herve with coffins to bury the father and daughter. No sooner had the two men entered the house than they were set upon by the soldiers, who battered them to death with their rifle butts. The terrified women were ordered into the cellar. Then the

Germans lit the curtains of the living room, and the women and children raced upstairs and out into the meadow, the neighbor dragging her hysterical five-year-old. Threatened repeatedly, the women were marched to the Polinard Cross outside the village, loaded into a cart and taken to Herbesthal. En route, the cart halted and the women and girls were raped over and over. After a brief interrogation at Herbesthal, Degueldre and her neighbor's family were escorted to a town near the Dutch border and told, "You are free."

Five years later, after offering a laconic account of the nightmare, the woman recalled an important omission: "I forgot to tell you that the bodies of my husband and daughter were consumed by the flames. I was not permitted to bury them."

On February 16th, 1915, the Germans re-entered Melen. This time they didn't molest the inhabitants. They'd been sent by the office of the *Kommandantur* of Liège, and their mission was to come up with some plausible pretext for the slaughter. The Germans were increasingly anxious about public opinion in the U.S. Seventeen witnesses were interviewed. By necessity, they were almost entirely women. The officers tried to get the women to concede that they were "not absolutely certain civilians did not fire; it is possible that they did so."[62] The witnesses steadfastly refused to lie. The investigators then focused on the card games. Was it not possible that some dispute over cards could have precipitated the violence? – as if accusations of cheating at vingt-et-un could justify the slaughter of over one hundred civilians. In the end, the Germans decided that the inventiveness required to vindicate the killings was beyond their capacities. The German White Book makes no mention of Melen and Labouxhe.

SOUMAGNE: "WE WERE NOT ACCUSED OF ANYTHING" Also unmentioned in the White Book is the village of Soumagne, about six and a half kilometers south of Melen, on the picturesque road winding from Verviers to Liège via Fléron. This was the site of the worst single massacre in the province. One hundred seventeen people from the town and surrounding villages and farms were butchered here on August 5th and 6th, fifty-

five in the meadow of Fond-Leroy. As at Melen, the soldiers were from the 165th and also the 27th regiment.

At Melen it was the hamlet of Labouxhe where the worst massacres occurred; at Soumagne it was the little village of Fécher, just north of the commune, that bore the brunt of the assault.

The killing commenced early Wednesday morning when several farmers attempted to return to their homes. They'd driven their cattle into Liège the previous afternoon and had been detained by Belgian troops securing the forts. The men were shot as they re-entered the village. No questions were asked, no inquiries made.[63]

Later that day, around 4 p.m., a large group of soldiers who were marching down the Bas Bois road toward the center of the village were targeted by a Belgian machine-gun hidden behind a hedge in the hamlet of Les Viviers. The Germans fled back to a colliery, regrouped, and were given orders. They marched back down the chemin de Bas Bois, raiding all the homes en route. Some three hundred residents were rounded up and placed at the head of the battalion. The Belgian machine-gun was silent when they arrived in its vicinity. Either it had already been withdrawn or the gunners chose not to jeopardize the lives of their compatriots. But instead of releasing the hostages, the Germans selected some forty-eight men and forced them along route de Fecher to a meadow called "Fond-Leroy." Thirty-two others were rounded up in Les Viviers itself. Luckily, a shell from Fléron hit this column of captives as it approached the meadow. One prisoner was killed, but thirteen men at the rear escaped in the confusion, including the burgomaster. A young boy managed to untie himself, and freed the rest with a pocket knife that had not been confiscated, as the men crouched behind a hedge.[64]

In the meadow, the prisoners were made to stand in two rows. The soldiers were lined up eight or nine meters in front of the men. No charges were read out. Two men, Léon Jerome, 48, and Joseph Lejeune, 33, whispered to a teenager, Joseph Dedoyard, to stand directly behind them. The two men moved together, shielding him with their bodies, and then fell on top of him. None of the three was killed, but Jerome and Lejeune were finished off with bayonet thrusts and blows from rifle butts. Dedoyard would have survived unscathed had he not imprudently raised his head. He, too, was stabbed several times in the back, but survived.[65]

A number of other captives were only wounded in the initial volley, especially those standing at the far end of the lines, furthest from the captain barking the orders. Some of the soldiers were apparently more merciful than their officers, firing high or wide when their actions couldn't be detected. But another order was shouted and a group of soldiers charged the victims. Those not dead were stabbed with bayonets, pummeled with rifle-butts, or whacked with hatchets. Nevertheless, eleven other besides Dedoyard survived by feigning death.

Dedoyard, or possibly another badly injured young man, Joseph Daniel, noticed, as he slowly inched away from the row of corpses, that seventeen-year-old Pierre Germay was still alive. He urged Germay to follow. "Impossible," the teenager whispered. "I'm suffering too much." But he was able to crawl as far as a hedge at the far end of the meadow, where his body was discovered two days later. [66]

Not all the men who survived the fusillade and the hatchets and bayonets were able to make their way from the meadow. On Thursday morning villagers continued to hear the moans of the wounded. But German sentries would let no one near the victims. It's not difficult to imagine the anguish of the women and children, not knowing if their husbands, sons, or fathers were still alive and in excruciating pain – and not being able to find out or to help them in any way. It was only on Friday that the Germans allowed the villagers to return to the fields. By this time, all the men were dead. An accurate count of the victims was only possible when exhumations and reburials were permitted the next year.

Similar scenes were enacted at other meadows – Chession, where nineteen were killed, Nevray, where eighteen were slaughtered. At the latter, the Germans were particularly vicious. The wives of the victims were permitted to accompany them. Some were crying and pleading with the soldiers, some hysterical with grief, others, aware of the futility of begging, shouted farewells or words of encouragement. The soldiers tormented the women: "Is that him, your husband? Well, then look!" And then they opened fire.[67]

"*On ne nous a rien reproché et nous n'avons jamais été interrogés*" – we were not accused of anything and never questioned – one of the survivors of the Fond-Leroy massacre recounted.[68] The following day, however, the

Germans thought it desirable to correct at least the former oversight. As René Varlet and his German-born maid Bertha Fraurenbath watched, an open car full of officers drove slowly down the road toward Herve. One officer fired a single shot in the air. Immediately, as if on cue, soldiers raced out from the houses where they were billeted, screaming theatrically, "Someone has fired on our wounded officers!"[69] This was the pretext for a few more murders and the burning of several more homes.

The German maid reproached several soldiers who were about to kill an old man. He was trembling like a leaf. How could he possibly have fired on troops? she demanded. The soldiers let him go, though they killed his son and burned his house down. Like so many other witnesses who hoped vainly for some redress after the armistice, she tried to provide what information she could for Belgian prosecutors. She didn't know the soldiers' regiment, but two of the men had told her their names – Godeker and Flechtener. She'd served the troops hot drinks the afternoon before. They had just come from Fond-Leroy.

While the executions were going on, other residents of Fécher were subjected to a German *Aktion*. More homes were broken into, families pulled from their cellars and first driven at gunpoint into a meadow and then forced into the largest building in the village, the hall of the Cooperative Society, which was serving as a church while a new church was under construction. In both places the men were compelled to keep their hands raised. When they lowered them, they were clubbed with rifle butts.

Several residents spoke German and appealed to the officer in charge, a captain. A witness recalled one exchange: "You see perfectly well that these people are innocent; why do you detain them? They are hungry, starving."

"That's not our business," the officer responded.[70]

By mid-afternoon the Germans decided to move their captives to the new church, which was nearly completed. As they were marched across the village, they saw the hamlet of Les Viviers in flames. The crowd was swollen by prisoners from Les Viviers and other small villages and farms nearby, so that by late afternoon more than a thousand

men, women, and children were crowded into the church. These were the fortunate ones. It was from this group that 412 men were selected to stand on the bridges to Liège and insure a safe passage for the Germans in their "assault" on the undefended city.

Two of the men lost their families while they were marched to Liège. In the Hopa and Lefin homes, the women and children had not been among those taken to church. The homes were set on fire. Mme. Hopa perished with her four children, aged five, three, two, and one month; Mme. Lefin with her one child, a nine-year-old boy. The shrieks were clearly audible from the trapped women and children, according to witnesses. The Germans knew what they were doing.[71]

SOUMAGNE: EXPATRIATES As in the towns close to the border, there were a number of German families in and around Soumagne. They fared no better than their neighbors at the hands of their former countrymen. Even a record of military service was of no help, as so many Jewish veterans were shocked to learn twenty-five years later. Jacob Rotheudt had served in the 1870 invasion of France. About to be executed as a franc-tireur, this former Prussian soldier identified himself and held aloft his discharge papers. His executioners hesitated; soldiers approached to take a closer look. An officer intervened. "Ta-ta-ta!" he said, dismissing the appeal. He then gave the order to fire.[72]

Nor were German women always treated more kindly. A Soumagne widow, Mme. Gorrès, sheltered her two daughters and a daughter-in-law. Everyone was driven out of the house and the sons-in-law shot on the spot. The women, hysterical with grief, were ordered to leave at once. One of the daughters was disabled and Mme. Gorrès helped her by taking her two-month-old son, Pierre. Moments later an enraged soldier killed the grandmother with a bayonet thrust. Pierre Gorres was yanked out of her arms and hurled to the ground. He died instantly. The child's mother was also knocked to the ground and beaten. Grief-stricken, she raced to the river and threw herself in. She was rescued and taken to the church. [73]

Soldiers killed two other children of German descent, thirteen-year-old Anna Ernestine Kramer and her ten-month-old brother Marcel. The

boy was shot as his mother held him in her arms. Crazed with despair and terror, she refused to put her dead son down after she was thrust into the packed church.[74]

And among the residents of Soumagne who were shot in Micheroux, the next village on the road to Fléron, there were several Germans, including a young girl named Elsa Goebels. On the same day, soldiers murdered still another German child in nearby Riessonsart, eleven-year-old Bette Schwiez. Not long afterward, a Micheroux resident who'd been born and raised in Germany bitterly admonished his former compatriots. "You kill more civilians than soldiers. This is not war."

"True," a soldier acknowledged, "but if we had carried out our orders to the letter, not a living person would be left where we have passed, nor one stone lying upon another."[75]

OLNE About one and a half kilometers south of Soumagne is Olne. Sixty-eight Belgians were murdered in the villages around this town, the highest death toll for any commune in the province, after Soumagne, Melen, and the city of Liège.

Olne itself escaped comparatively lightly. The Germans confined themselves to killing the vicar, the communal secretary, and two others. The incident that led to the murder of the former two nicely illustrates the paranoia that continually resurfaced among German troops in the opening days of the war. The delusions would be amusing if they had not so frequently had such tragic consequences.

On August 5th, troops passing through Olne on their way to Fléron, just over three kilometers to the west, were annoyed to see a large Belgian flag flying from the spire of the church. Soldiers climbed into the belfry, but there was no apparatus for lowering the flag, and they considered it too risky to clamber out onto the steeple, so the attempt was abandoned.

The battalion had a hearty breakfast in town – Olne residents were more than generous in distributing food – and headed for Fléron. By early afternoon they were back, their numbers drastically diminished. They were angry, vengeful, and fearful. This time the flag would be hauled down. And so it was, but only with a great deal of shaking and fluttering.

Later in the afternoon, a troop of cavalry arrived, enraged. They raced up to the church and began breaking down the door. The curé rushed up and opened it for them. He turned around and was looking up the barrels of a dozen rifles. "Someone has been making signals with the flag," he was told. "You are a traitor [a curious denunciation]. You will be killed."[76] The curé explained in German exactly what had happened. His words seemed not to register. The cavalrymen were convinced that Belgian soldiers or "civilists" were hiding in the church, and proceeded to search every corner of the building. They found no one, naturally. This didn't seem to matter; someone would pay for the shaking of the Belgian flag.

The curé did not take the threats seriously, and joked about the accusations a short time later with the vicar and communal secretary, who were curious about the source of all the ruckus. The uhlans dispersed when a high-ranking surgeon approached; he was seeking a suitable farmhouse nearby in which to set up a field hospital. When he left, the cavalrymen came rushing back and seized the vicar and communal secretary. The curé ducked into the presbytery and was not pursued. The villagers could not see what happened to the two men. They were forced back into their houses at gunpoint and forbidden to look out their windows.

The next morning, residents found the bodies of the two men. M. Pondcuir, the communal secretary, an older man, respected throughout the canton, had been badly mutilated. His head had been battered so severely that only the lower portion and one ear remained. His face was an unrecognizable pulp of mangled flesh, blood, and brains. The thirty-two-year-old vicar, M. Rensonnet, "a model of gentle kindliness," lay by his side, slashed, stabbed, and clubbed to death.[77]

SAINT HADELIN AND RIESSONSART: VIVE LA BELGIQUE! Though threatened with annihilation several times, Olne was spared further violence. The nearby village of St. Hadelin was not so lucky. The hamlet lies in a picturesque valley just below Olne, its houses situated along both banks of the little Magne river as it winds towards the Vesdre. As the Germans marched through the village on the morning of August 5th, rumors

circulated about the killings in nearby villages. At 4:30 p.m. a shell exploded just outside town, killing six soldiers and wounding ten, mostly Poles. The latter were carried to several buildings by the side of the road, and a Red Cross flag was hoisted. According to witnesses, a German gun began firing from behind the buildings. A shell from Fléron hit the improvised hospital. Angry soldiers swarmed through the village, pillaging all the homes. As always, the wine cellars were the first target. Most of the population, sensing that worse violence was imminent, took refuge either in the church or in an old weaving shed.

Troops eventually began deploying along the bank opposite these buildings, in a field planted with beech trees, known as the "Faweu," where they thought they'd have more cover from the fire of the fort. At one end of the field was the village school and the homes of the schoolmaster, Victor Warnier, and the constable, Jean Naval.

Warnier's two oldest daughters were schoolteachers and the younger son, Edgard, was studying to become one. The oldest boy, Victor Jr., was a clerk in a registrar's office; the youngest girl was only two. "There were seven in our family," recalled Berthe Warnier after the war, "happy, full of vigor and courage and faith in the future. Alas, only three of us remain now, miserable, without any means of support, without even a roof to shelter us. This was the work of the barbarians! And why such cruelty? Why? Who knows."[78]

On the first day of the war, cavalry troops knocked on the door and politely asked for detailed maps of the area, for which they offered to pay. Warnier informed them that he didn't have any and they rode off.

On the 5th, following the shelling of the field hospital, about a thousand soldiers camped in the woods in front of the family home. The Warniers busied themselves attending to the Germans. Edgard took some men around the village to purchase sheep for dinner, while Victor, who spoke German, chatted with a lieutenant. Nelly brewed pots of coffee for the troops and Bertha and her mother prepared a meal. The soldiers broke up benches in the school so there would be sufficient fuel for the stove.

After Edgard had been gone an hour, Mme. Warnier began to grow anxious. A French-speaking major reassured her: "You're being foolish. Don't worry. Your son is going to come back. We're not barbarians. I'll

go myself to find him. Calm down."[79] The officer returned with Edgard a few minutes later.

Around 10:30 p.m. the family, and the six officers who were sleeping in the entry hall, sheltering from a storm, were awakened by the crash of a shell in front of the home.

> The officers, frightened, rose and left, telling us to shut the door. I ran to get my little sister from her cradle and we descended once again into the cellar. Hardly had we arrived when a second shell struck. Then began a spectacle more terrifying than anything one is capable of imagining. Howling like enraged beasts, the soldiers battered down our door with rifle butts, rushed en masse into the house, knocked over my mother and brothers in the entry hall, broke the doors to the salon and dining room, doused the furniture with benzine and lit it. At the same time they shattered mirrors, the piano, knick-knacks, and slashed wall hangings. They raced up to the second floor and down into the cellar, their way illuminated by pieces of wood soaked in benzine.
>
> Having ransacked the house, they made us leave.
>
> Their hideous faces, the gleaming bayonets, our house in flames made an unforgettable tableau.[80]

The family was divided up. The brothers' hands were tightly bound. They briefly kissed their parents goodbye and were hustled off. "Have courage, children," Mme. Warnier called out after them. "We're prisoners, but we'll see each other again." Soldiers then forced the rest of the family forward, beating them with rifle butts. Bertha's arm was broken in two places from the blows. Horses galloped by pulling field guns, and the children lost sight of their parents. As she strained to look for them, Bertha suddenly noticed that soldiers were taking aim at her. She was hit in the head and passed out.

When she regained consciousness, she was lying face down in water in a pit twenty meters from the house. But she was soaked in something besides water. Blood was seeping over her – from her sister's body, lying on top of her. She heard some agonized groans and the savage cries of the German troops as they filed past, occasionally pausing to kick one of the victims. For three hours Bertha pretended to be dead, until it was quiet. Suffering terribly, she dragged herself along a hedge to a neighboring home that had been spared. Victor's body lay near by, along with Naval's, but she knew nothing about the fate of her parents or other siblings.

She learned later that her father and mother, still holding Andrée, had been made to stand side-by-side in a little street a hundred meters from the home. But this execution squad was more humane, firing only at the father, who was killed instantly. The next day, Edgard was found behind the school, shot in the head, his hands bound so tightly that there were blackened ridges around his wrists.

The Germans, as usual, provided fanciful excuses. Bertha Warnier was told that the family had been attacked because the father had refused to provide maps to the uhlans and had struck and killed a soldier. But clearly, as other witnesses testified, the Warniers and Nevals were blamed for the two shells from Fléron that hit the Germans encamped in the field in front of the school. Victor Warier and Jean Neval tried to point out to the Germans that there was no way they could have alerted the gunners at Fléron as to the presence of enemy troops, even if they'd wanted to. The fort was more than three kilometers away; both men had been in their homes all day, surrounded by troops. The shells that crashed into the troops in the beech grove, though they wounded a number of soldiers, had killed only a horse.[81]

For good measure, three other prisoners were shot as well, seized arbitrarily earlier in the day and tethered like animals. After still more murders, including a sixty-six-year-old paralytic, Mme. Desonay, and her daughter Joséphine, the Germans headed for the weaving shed. They drove off the women, who pleaded and cried, and marched the men toward the village of Riessonsart. When several people from this hamlet came forward with provisions, naively hoping to appease the Germans and secure the release of their neighbors, they, too, were seized and condemned to death. Among them was Jacques Maguet, "the model of the village, a man of generous and worthy character," and the Dewandres, "handsome young men noted for their good hearts and obliging natures."[82] Making allowances for eulogistic excesses, it was, given the circumstances, the more generous and courageous of this tiny hamlet who were made prisoner.

The executions began in small batches, at a site known as the Ash Tree. Somville reconstructed the event from survivors.

> One of the doomed men, Victor Polet of Ayeneux, a retired schoolmaster, a man of high character, was revolted by the cowardice of the executioners. When he was ordered to take up his position for execution, the old man refused with disdain; he was shot on the little hillock on which he stood, in an attitude full of dignity and courage.
>
> Survivors report that before the shooting began, Jacques Maguet, turning to the whole group of prisoners, recited in a loud, firm voice the act of contrition, which all repeated, sentence by sentence. Then, when his turn had come, and he was being pushed, with others, toward the place of execution, Maguet raised his hat and shouted: "*Vive la Belgique*!" "*Vive la Belgique*!" repeated his companions, as though electrified. And the patriotic cheer was raised again.
>
> "Listen to your companions cheering!" said an officer, who stood some distance away; he was greatly moved. But the demonstration merely increased the rage of the other Germans; they began to bawl insults at the Belgians.
>
> "Ah!" said one of the survivors, "when we heard that shout, *Vive la Belgique!* we felt a shiver run through our whole being; we plucked up courage, feeling that we, too, like our brave soldiers, were dying for our country."[83]

But they were not. They were only civilians guilty of living in a town shelled by Belgian artillery.

The massacre was halted rather dramatically when a cavalry officer came galloping up with orders that the soldiers were to depart immediately. Thirty-three men had been shot. The remainder were kept prisoner for sixteen more hours, hauling German guns toward Magnée, between Fléron and Chaudfontaine. "They were released without explanation. They were told: 'Go straight back to your homes.' But those homes were only a mass of smoking ruins."[84]

AFTERMATH In most accounts, the grisly and agonizing process of identifying the remains and burying the victims is passed over in silence. But the burgomaster of Olne dwelt at some length on this task in his testimony before the Commission of Inquiry. It was not until the 8th that the residents of the town were permitted to proceed with the burials. The stench was intense. The curé, M. Alers, presided, supervising twelve workers. Seven or eight butcher's and baker's carts were requisitioned. The victims were first placed against a wall to be identified. It wasn't always easy to determine who was who. "The heat was overwhelming. Since the morning of the 6th, the unfortunate victims had been left in the

sun, lying in their blood. It is futile to describe the atmosphere in the cemetery. Days like that are unforgettable."[85]

THE CURÉ OF BLÉGNY Blégny, about three kilometers north of Melen, sits at the top of the arc of villages stretching from a little below Fort Fléron to just above Fort Barchon, where the worst atrocities in the province took place. Nearly fifty people were killed in and around Blégny and nearby Barchon. There were actually more murders at the latter, but a more vivid and complete record remains of the events at Blégny.[86] The massacres in both villages, like those in the city of Liège, Wandre and elsewhere, took place after the hiatus in the killing between August 9 and August 14, while the Germans waited for a response to their appeal for a Belgian surrender. In Blégny there was a large religious house, the Blégny Institute, where the sisters cared for over seventy German wounded. After the war, the nuns collaborated on a detailed account of their experiences – comprising nearly twenty closely printed pages in the official *Rapports et Documents d'Enquête*. In addition, the much beloved curé of Blégny, sixty-two-year-old Remy-Joseph Labeye, kept a journal, which was carried off to the Netherlands and preserved. A schoolteacher also wrote an account of the events in Blégny. Not many of the depositions have the immediacy of these texts. And they clearly reveal the animus against Catholicism that surfaced so frequently in August. They also provide damning evidence that the execution of four leading citizens was a carefully calculated murder ordered by German authorities, without any legitimate pretext.[87]

Nearly everyone in Belgium had vivid recollections of the moment their village or town was abandoned to the invaders. The schoolteacher, Théophile Ghuysen, recalled seeing a group of Belgian riflemen on their knees in the middle of the road, facing the curé of Blégny, who was performing an absolution. "It's impossible to describe this scene, at once moving and majestic: the confession on a public route of young men full of life and vigor, whom death was watching over, like a hawk preparing to swoop down on its helpless prey."[88] A little later Ghuysen watched as an order was received by a young lieutenant on Place de l'Église. The detachment stationed in Blégny were told to resist *à l'outrance*. The of-

ficer drew his sword and announced to his men, with a smile, that they had been condemned to death. Moments later three strapping German prisoners were marched across the square, a scary-looking lot. But soon after, a sergeant up in the church tower observed masses of infantry descending from the north, and the platoon abandoned Blégny. From behind shuttered windows, residents soon heard the heavy tramp of boots in the streets. When an officer yelled "*Halt*," Ghuysen briefly imagined that it was the French who had arrived. He was disillusioned a moment later.[89]

The attacks on civilians in Blégny took place in two phases. Not long after the Germans entered the town on the 5th, the first victim lay dead, Joseph Smeets. Not surprisingly, in several villages near the forts, and in Liège proper, there were a great many munitions workshops and factories. Like Birmingham, the region was noted for its outstanding gunsmiths. Smeets was himself a teacher in a school of armory at Blégny. Naturally, many of the craftsmen had stockpiles of gun parts in their workshops, and they hastened to get certificates from German commanders authorizing them to keep what had not been requisitioned. The suspicion that Smeets had a cache of arms may have been responsible for his death, but the Germans acted so precipitously it is difficult to say. Smeets's home was invaded, and he was shot with a pistol. His body was tossed onto the road. His wife had just given birth. The widow and the victim's mother were clubbed with rifle butts and driven from the house. The 82-year old mother was also slashed in the face with a bayonet. Tears and blood streamed down her face, as she kept wringing her hands, crying, "They've killed my son." Soldiers looked on impassively.[90]

As the Germans came under the fire of the Barchon guns, they broke into a number of other homes, though only one additional resident was killed. The terrified residents fled en masse to the Blégny Institute. Soon around three hundred men, women, and children had crammed into its small rooms and corridors, many crying piteously. A sympathetic German soldier witnessing the scene was himself moved to tears. All night long there were prayers and lamentations. Meanwhile, soldiers thoroughly searched the convent for arms. None were found, but the people taking refuge with the nuns, their hands raised while the search was con-

ducted, suddenly noticed flames consuming the buildings on all sides of the Institute. The town had been set on fire. The people sheltering in the Institute had already been ordered to sit down, lie down, stand up, by a malicious officer. He now commanded everyone to stand outside, hands still raised, the better to witness their homes being consumed by flames. Another officer invited several of the nuns to admire the spectacle, "so much more impressive at night." The flames roared, children sobbed and shrieked, their stunned parents tried to console them.[91]

German troops continued moving through town. A howitzer rumbled by with a wretched old man lashed to it. It was the burgomaster of Julémont. A platoon of retreating Germans invaded the Institute, demanding Red Cross armbands.[92] There were more searches for weapons and threats to the Institute and the refugees. "*Demain la maison sera kaputt*," the nuns were told. And the capricious orders continued: at one point everyone was made to shout "*Vive l'Allemagne*!"[93]

The crowd in the Institute had swollen during the night. Then, at 5:00 a.m., the women and children were released and the men made hostage. The latter were ordered into the church, where they joined a great number of other men who'd taken refuge there with their families. The men were then taken outside and marched toward Battice. Smeets still lay unburied. The contingent passed a second corpse, that of Jules Herman, "the pearl of men, kind and obliging," one witness later recalled. "There was no end to his help for others." Herman had been reluctant to abandon his wife, who was seriously ill. He carried her to the cellar and stayed by her side when everyone else had fled to the Institute or the church. The Germans gunned him down in front of his four children.[94]

The men marching toward Battice were subjected to various indignities en route, but the worst treatment was always reserved for the curé, abbé Labeye. Even the irreligious were appalled. The men repeatedly surrounded him to protect him from the blows and kicks, but the Germans pushed them away and resumed their abuse.[95]

The curé's journal entries are worth recording, as are some of the comments of the nuns who rescued the book, taking it with them when they fled to the Netherlands.

6th of August, at 5 o'clock: a German battalion is occupying the village. The Belgian troops fire on it and retire upon Barchon. Wednesday afternoon the Germans search the houses, and send the people to the church, promising them security. Then they go and arrest them in their houses, and take them to the church, to the number of 250 or thereabouts. I go to the church. All is in an uproar. Fifteen soldiers are on guard over the people. I beg those present to be calm, to pray. I go up into the pulpit and we pray. Then I enter the confessional. Almost all those present come to me. Later I am forbidden to confess or to pray, and inquiries are conducted in the church. Presently we see the light of conflagrations started in the neighborhood. Taken outside to appear before the major, I find the public square burning. [The pastor lists the owners of the 32 buildings on fire, and three men dead.]

We pass the night in the church. Ernest Clermont is taken with a nervous attack; so is Léopold Dortu. About 5 o'clock someone comes to make a statement: the women and children can go; the men will remain; they will be sent to Germany… Could I have managed not to be included in this sentence? I doubt it. In any case, I shall not make any request. I'm sure it would be much more useful to accompany the 170 unfortunates.[96]

We leave. Past Gobcé we are made to enter a meadow; first alarm: we're convinced they are going to shoot us. I begin to recite the rosary. ("An eyewitness said that M. le Curé pronounced a general absolution for all the poor people…") After an hour we resume the march. Again we go into a meadow near Battice. We are gathered together in the middle, surrounded by sentinels. We're permitted to lie down, but we remain standing; here we'll spend the night. For food, some bonbons and breadcrusts; in the evening a few swallows of bouillon from some compassionate soldiers. I was the target of much of the bad behavior of the soldiers and subordinate officers; they accused me of having placed a telephone in the church tower (it was installed by the Belgian Army) and of having sent soldiers from there with orders to fire on the Germans. I heard a great many impieties against religion, Jesus Christ, and prayer. They wanted me to admit that I could speak German. As I did not understand, they shook their fists at me, kicked me, threatened me with their rifles, bayonets, with an axe and a dagger. Once an officer spat in my face and threw my hat on the ground and spat on it. Another struck me in the chest with his rifle-butt, and gave me a violent kick on the leg. A soldier pricked me three times with his bayonet and wounded me slightly. Others, in giving some apples to my companions, threw them at my head. Nothing very serious; however, they were so furious that if they had found me alone, I think they would have killed me.

Meanwhile they shot five of our companions: Gérard Custers, Jean Dortu, Godard, Jacques Flamant, and Renard. On two occasions they made us believe that we too were about to be shot. Another time they fired volleys over our heads to frighten us. Then they once more placed in front of us a second series of four men condemned to die, among others, Noël Nihan. These unhappy creatures had been there since 4 o'clock the previous day, their hands bound, and I know they were still there the day after our departure. What became of them?[97]

Another witness recalled that on the forced march of the men of Blégny and Trembleur to Battice, one of the two mock-executions was staged with genuine dramatic flair, with an officer on horseback riding up at the last minute and countermanding the order. The first of the actual executions also showed some imagination. The seven men selected were bound together. On arriving in Battice, the Germans lined up these men and told the rest of the captives to watch them closely. This time there was no reprieve. But for some reason only the five inner men were then shot. The men on each end were untied and told to rejoin their comrades.[98]

The four prisoners whose fate the curé was unsure of were eventually shot, after being prodded by bayonets and tortured with lighted cigarettes held to their ears and nostrils.

Finally, after twenty-four hours without food and water, a German-speaking doctor among the prisoners was able to buttonhole a German physician. The doctor's protests apparently moved his German counterpart to complain to his superiors. The men were released shortly thereafter.[99] Other witnesses, however, believed they owed their freedom to a captain who had appeared sympathetic to their plight for some time. It was he who approached Father Labeye and told him the men could return to Blégny, but they must go quickly. He accompanied the former captives most of the way back to town, to insure that they would not be rearrested by soldiers.[100]

Around 2:30 in the afternoon someone in Blégny spotted the first of the men trudging back into town. "*Les voilà,*" she cried out. The villagers were delirious with joy. People rushed up to embrace the bleeding curé and the others. Abbé Labeye was himself affected by the extraordinary emotional display and wept freely. But one woman circled frantically among the men. "Where is my son? Why isn't he with you?" she implored. No one could tell the distraught mother the truth, that her son was among those still bound when the others had been released. He'll return later, someone reassured her. As for the men who had been shot, the priest consoled the families and urged everyone to respond to the trials with a renewal of faith.[101]

Things remained quiet until the evening of Saturday, August 15th, Assumption Day. At 6 p.m. a note was left at the curé's home informing

him that if there were any firing in the village, he would be shot. Also made hostage were the burgomaster, M. Ruwet and, inexplicably, M. Delnooz, the father-in-law of a local doctor.

An officer ordered, in an ironic voice, that the curé be served "a good supper." Around 9:00 p.m., six officers entered the house to interview the abbé and burgomaster.[102] They brought along a translator, Jeanne Delnooz. "Are you aware of any arms still remaining in the village?" they asked the two men.

When M. Ruwet emphatically denied that there were guns in Blégny, he was told that weapons had been discovered in the basement of the Haikins. The burgomaster pointed out that these arms were unfinished and inoperable, and that the brothers had received permission from a German officer to keep them.

The Haikins were brought forward and flourished their permit. The officer interrogating them pocketed it. The two brothers were also vaguely accused of using the Red Cross flag to disguise their maneuvers against the Germans. No evidence was provided.

In fact the older of the Haikins (sometimes spelled Kaikin or Hackin) owned a thriving arms manufacturing business employing 128 laborers, who worked mostly in their own homes. When the Germans entered the town, he had 15,000 unfinished "Bull Dog" revolvers in his workshop – with no cartridges. A German officer ordered him to nail shut the doors of the workshop, and he complied, in the presence of witnesses.

In addition to his armament business, Haikin had recently purchased a large dance hall. When war broke out, the father of ten converted it into a Red Cross hospital. A number of German wounded were treated there, but these had been evacuated by August 15th.

After the arrival of the Germans, Haikin always carried with him four certificates: one issued by the German officer stating he could pass through German lines to make purchases, another from the same officer permitting him to retain the unfinished revolvers in his workshop, and two testifying that he was serving with the Belgian Red Cross. On August 16th these were only so many scraps of paper for the Germans.

Though all the certificates were missing when a relative was finally permitted to claim the body, he found that the Germans hadn't taken all his money. Perhaps they were satisfied with the 8,000 francs they stole

from the man's wife before they burned his house down. In any event, they had taken the precaution of mutilating the arms manufacturer with bayonet slashes after they had shot him. To spare the family the ordeal of seeing the butchered remains, the nuns concealed the brothers' bodies in a packing case.[103]

Following the cursory questioning of the burgomaster, there was not even the pretense of an interrogation of the priest.

Later that night, August 15th, at about 10:30, a sister who was staying up with a sick woman observed four soldiers furtively leaving the grounds of the Institute. One went barefoot. His boots were later found in the recreation room. A moment later the outside of the Institute and the presbytery were fired on. Soldiers immediately poured out, yelling and shooting. Several times a voice, in heavily accented French, called out, "Let's go, comrades. Jean, keep watch!"[104]

A dead soldier was brought in and the commander turned to several of the sisters and remarked, "You see how the civilians are firing on our poor men!" One of the nuns challenged the officer to surround the francs-tireurs, capture them and bring them back. After all, there were seven or eight hundred German soldiers in the village. But the Institute's physician, Dr. Reidemester, was meanwhile examining the body. There was no bullet wound. A "franc-tireur" had murdered his victim with a blow from a bayonet. When the doctor pointed this out to the commandant, he merely shrugged his shoulders.[105]

A short time later a wounded German was brought in. A soldier who had just been remonstrating with the sisters shouted in French to the young major accompanying the stretcher, "It's civilians who shot him, right?"

"No, it's certainly not the civilians," the officer responded brusquely.[106]

The truth, of course was what the nun had been telling the soldier: "The civilians are filled with terror, they're in hiding, and not one among them would fire on the German army."[107]

More shots were fired at 1:15 a.m. near the curé's house. An officer made a pretense of looking out the window. "They've fired again, the *Schweinehunde*!" he announced.