

A Story Few Have Heard

“There Once Was a Nice Little Town in That Place”

On a cold evening in late November 1914, a German officer was drinking with a boisterous group of fellow officers in the luxurious Hotel Astoria. Situated in Brussels, Belgium, on Rue Royale near the city’s major park, the hotel was in the fashionable upper part of town and had been commandeered by the German occupation forces for their officers, staffs, and privileged guests.

Nearly four months before, on Tuesday, August 4, the German Army had started World War I by invading neutral Belgium on its way to its real objective, France. The German officer had been a part of that invading force. A “fine-looking man” with “agreeable manners,” he was in his mid-thirties and had lived in England for years before returning to Germany to become a cavalry officer in the kaiser’s army.

Even though it was late—past midnight—and all the other Germans had stumbled off to bed, this cavalry officer stayed at the table and spoke

in perfect English to two Americans, war correspondent E. E. Hunt and neutral observer Lieutenant Victor Daniel Herbster of the U.S. Navy, both of whom were visiting the German-occupied city.

Referring to the August days of the invasion, the German calmly stated that the Belgians “do not understand war, and they do not understand the rules of war. I remember once riding into a little town down here in the South of Belgium and finding my four scouts lying dead in the streets. Civilians had butchered horses and men—shot them from behind.

“I ordered my men to go into the houses and kill every one they found. Then I ordered them to burn the town.”

The man sat back a moment, raised his glass, then took a drink.

“There once was a nice little town in that place. There is no such town now.”

Hunt would never forget the German’s calm, brutal words, and they would follow him when less than a month later, in December, he joined a small group of Americans who would try to save more than 9 million Belgian and French civilians from starving to death.

The interlacing stories of German brutality, Belgian resistance, the struggles against starvation, and the American men Hunt joined in the burgeoning Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), all began back in those chaotic days of August 1914, when the Germans attacked the little country. Few could have guessed it then, but the invasion acted like a toppling domino that would cause a tumbling together of extraordinary people into a chain reaction of life-and-death situations far from the trenches and killing fields of World War I.

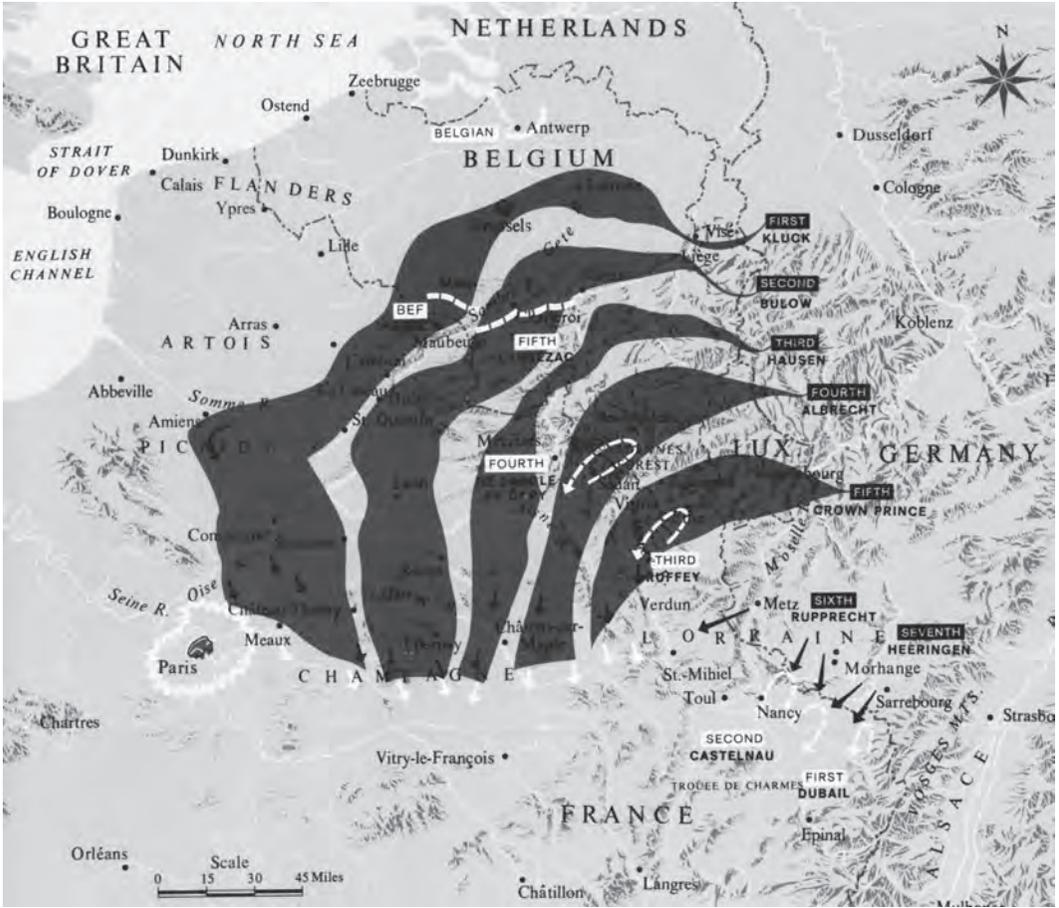
And hanging in the balance were millions of civilian lives.

It is a story that few have heard.

AUGUST 1914



INVASION



The paths that the five German field armies took through Belgium and France in August and where the British Expeditionary Force and the French unsuccessfully tried to stop them (broken white lines and arrows). (The American Heritage History of World War I, Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall, American Heritage Publishing Co./Bonanza Books, 1982.)

Setting the Stage

Practically Inevitable

“To understand Germany, you must think in centuries.”

While the German who said that believed he was speaking philosophically about his country alone, he was aptly describing the soul of every European power at the turn of the twentieth century. Major conflicts from the past—such as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)—were still very much alive in the hearts, minds, and attitudes of many Europeans. As a result, each country’s collective memory was as much comforting as it was confining and controlling.

So what happened next was practically inevitable.

By the summer of 1914, decades of European political posturing, diplomatic wrangling, treaty negotiations, and international skirmishes—inflamed by the June 28 assassination of Austria’s Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie—led inescapably to Tuesday morning, August 4, when

five German armies, numbering 1 million men, amassed along Germany's western border.

This was the largest invasion force ever assembled, and it was to follow Germany's revised Schlieffen Plan of attack, which called for the five armies to sweep in a wide westward arc through Belgium into France, overwhelming the French Army and capturing Paris to achieve a quick victory. Ensuring France's rapid defeat was essential, the German General Staff believed, so it could then shift troops to its eastern front and help its Austro-Hungarian allies defeat Russia before the tsar's armies could fully mobilize. It was critical to Germany's war plans that the sweep through Belgium be lightning fast, or the Germans would be caught in a prolonged and probably unwinnable two-front war.

Belgium was no stranger to invading armies. In fact, it was known as the cockpit of Europe, referring to the cockfighting ring where two fierce roosters would battle to exhaustion or death. On a map the three countries of Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg (known as the Low Countries because much of their land is below sea level or slightly above) appeared as a rough-hewn wedge driven between France and Germany. In the past, Belgium had always been a region without its own country—pieces of which had belonged at times to France, Germany, Holland, Spain, and Austria. Its people were eyewitnesses to many other nations' battles across their land—most notably the Battle of Waterloo, on the outskirts of Brussels, where Napoleon had his final defeat in 1815.

In 1830, however, this region that would later become Belgium successfully revolted and seceded from Holland; enthroned King Leopold I on July 21, 1831; and was recognized by the international community as a country for the first time. While only slightly smaller than Maryland, Belgium makes up for its lack of girth with its critical spot on the European map: Germany and Luxembourg lie on its eastern border, the North Sea and the United Kingdom are to the west, Holland is to the north, and France is to the south.

No one could deny the strategic importance of Belgium's location, and in an obvious move to prevent the past from repeating itself, the 1839 Treaty of London declared the little country permanently neutral. The treaty proved critical to Belgium's survival and was signed by Great Britain, Austria, Prussia (the precursor of Germany), Russia, France, Holland, and Belgium. Each signatory pledged to respect Belgium's neutrality and to defend it from any invader. Even so, the pragmatic

Belgians knew their own history well enough that they maintained a small defensive army of fewer than 150,000 men. No one was going to take away their hard-fought freedom without a fight.

It was no surprise, then, how the Belgian government responded to an August 2, 1914, German ultimatum, which basically stated: If you stand aside as the kaiser's armies pass through to invade France, you will remain a sovereign nation, and no Belgian will be hurt; if you resist, we will destroy you. Germany had already declared war on Russia the day before (August 1), and it declared war on France on August 3, the same day Belgium courageously refused the German ultimatum and said it would not allow

Germany to march through unopposed. That same day, in a rousing speech to the Belgian Parliament, King Albert declared: "I have faith in our destiny. A country which defends itself enforces the respect of all; such a country shall not perish. God will be with us in this just cause. Long live free Belgium!" The country then prepared as best it could for the coming onslaught, hoping its two major neutrality supporters, France and England, would honor their 1839 treaty commitment and come to its aid.

While the Belgians saw the Germans as aggressive invaders, the Germans described themselves, and their actions, quite differently. The Germans said they felt they had no choice but to fight, as explained by their chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. On August 4, only a few hours after the invasion started, Bethmann-Hollweg gave a patriotic speech to the German Reichstag (parliament) that admitted Germany had violated Belgian neutrality but insisted it had the right to do so because its preemptive assault against France was in self-defense. Germany was fighting for its national survival, Bethmann-Hollweg maintained, because France was bent on avenging the German victories of the Franco-



King Albert of Belgium was thirty-nine years old and little-known to the world before the start of World War I. (Public domain; multiple sources.)

Prussian War and had already developed a plan to attack Germany. The only way to thwart the French quest for revenge, the German authorities declared, was to attack first.

But violating Belgium's sacred neutrality was a huge gamble for Germany, which did not want to fight Britain as well as France and Russia. Germany hoped that Britain would not stand behind its 1839 treaty pledge to protect Belgium's neutrality. Bethmann-Hollweg even told the British ambassador to Germany, Sir Edward Goschen, that he found it hard to believe Britain would go to war over "a scrap of paper."

It was a statement that was quickly repeated—and condemned—around the world.

Within hours, Britain declared war on Germany, not only to honor the 1839 treaty but also to stop Germany's aggression. Britain's entrance into the war brought the last major power in Europe into the fight: Britain, Russia, and France as the Entente Powers or Allies against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (centered in modern Turkey) as the Central Powers. Across the Atlantic, the U.S. government, along with the majority of Americans, wanted to stay clear of the fight and declared neutrality on August 4, with President Woodrow Wilson detailing that neutrality to congress on August 19.

Back in Europe, it would take France and Britain precious days, if not weeks, to mount significant defensive maneuvers.

In the meantime, Belgium stood staunchly alone to defend its neutrality against one of the best-equipped and most mobile armies the world had ever seen.

Belgium Prepares for Invasion

With great precision and organization the Germans implemented their grand invasion plans. In fact, their general sense of preparedness was so well-known and accepted that they were given credit for some rather unorthodox (albeit untrue) war planning—most notably the absurdly unrealistic item reported as fact by the *New York Times* in a quote from a source: "In June the Germans ordered 80,000 road maps from the Brussels Motor Touring Club."

On the receiving end of the invasion, the Belgians had not thought to include a motorcar club in their war plans, so they were far less prepared—not to mention they thought they were protected by treaty-sanctioned

neutrality. As such, in late July and the first few days of August, they reacted with barely controlled bedlam to the coming invasion.

Thirty-nine-year-old King Albert and the military, which had mobilized July 31, took charge of the country's defense and immediately began strategic destruction of land and property to slow Germany's advance. Nonessential bridges were blown up, critical river crossings were fortified, and the country's extensive canal system was sabotaged by some of the blown bridges and even sunken barges. Around and near Belgium's renowned fortress system (rings of massive forts protecting critical cities such as Liège and Antwerp), whole forests were cut down, and buildings were blown up to gain better firing line-of-sight against the invader. Tree stumps within the then-dead forests were cut to jagged edges, while sharpened wooden lances protruded from defensive mounds and trenches—all in an effort to slow down the enemy. In cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, major thoroughfares were torn up, tram tracks wrecked, barricades of motorcars and trolleys erected, trenches dug into streets, and barbed-wire fences were strung up by the untrained but highly enthusiastic *garde civique* (civilian guard).

For civilians, life had a feel of near-blind confusion. Martial law was declared in Brussels because of anti-German rioting. Countrywide, banks closed or suspended critical financial services. Black markets prospered as food prices soared. Travel became difficult. Military checkpoints were established on major roads. Trains and trams were rescheduled at a moment's notice or commandeered by the military. Motorcars were requisitioned or banned from nonessential travel, and most horses were seized by the military. (Even with the then-recent advent of mechanized travel, armies still relied heavily on horses for transportation of everything from soldiers and materials to artillery and field kitchens.) The only way for most Belgians to get around was to walk, and rarely was that out of their neighborhood or village.

Communication within Belgium was severely restricted. It was nearly impossible to make a phone call, send a telegram, or receive a letter. Newspapers were still being printed, but they were hard to find and, in many cases, filled with more rumors than reliable news. In an age without radio or television, and at a time when telephones were more novelty than necessity, Belgium had, in essence, returned to medieval times—life became centered around a person's tiny slice of the world, whether it was a small village in the country or a neighborhood within a city.

With such uncertainty and lack of credible information, Belgians became justifiably concerned, fearful, and suspicious. Every day brought countless new rumors that could never be substantiated. Anyone not personally known was thought to be a spy in the employ of the coming invaders.

Belgian Woman Erica Bunge—"We Are Desperate"

In Antwerp, according to British reporter and photographer R. Scotland Liddell, crowds turned on residents who were Germans, wrecking "all the little German cafes and saloon-bars in the dirty, narrow slum streets around the docks, many of them cesspools of iniquity that ought to have been wrecked long ago in any case. They threw stones through every window and plate-glass sign. They set some places on fire. They entered upstairs rooms and threw out the chairs on which many of them had sat the week before, and tables and ornaments, and even the cheap German pianos whose tinkling notes had been the source of mingled pleasure and disturbance in the neighbourhood."

Young Erica Bunge wrote in her diary on Sunday, August 2: "There is talk of throwing out foreigners from [Antwerp] and the country. Tomorrow the army will purchase 400 horses. It is very probable that ours will be requisitioned. Our cars are still here. Every foreigner has left."

A twenty-two-year-old Belgian from a wealthy merchant family, Erica, along with two of her four sisters, Eva and Hilda, lived a privileged life with their widowed father, Edouard Bunge. Before the war they had moved effortlessly between their large townhouse at 21 Rue Marie-Therese in Antwerp and their chateau named Oude Gracht, which was on Hoogboom estate twenty miles northeast of the city.

Of average height and build, Erica had long brown hair that she kept pinned up and an oval, open face and pale blue eyes, which darkened when angry. Her broad smile was slow to come, but also slow to fade once it appeared. Her laugh was hearty and deep.

As a child she had always been a bit different from other young girls. She enjoyed time with her father in his study at Oude Gracht, watching him handle the business papers that he pulled from his worn dispatch case, and even staying when he and his business associates managed their varied corporate affairs. Years later her father had turned to her as a trusted business associate, asking her advice about problems with his worldwide shipping company, his agricultural concerns in South America, and his



From left: Hilda, Eva, and Erica Bunge. (Author's family archives.)

rubber plantations in Malaysia. Her family was not surprised when she announced she wanted to go to agricultural college in England—a rarity for women in the early 1900s—and when she returned with her degree, she began to participate in the management of Hoogboom's farm.

Nearly every day before the war Erica had had a ritual that she loved. She would rise early before many of her family members were up, quietly go downstairs, and gather her coat and hat from the *vestiaire* (cloakroom) in the right front tower of the chateau. Most times Isidore, Oude Gracht's *maitré de hôtel* (head butler), was there to assist her with her coat. She would then pass through the great hall, listening to her shoes echo off the part of the parquet floor that wasn't covered by the large Turkoman rug. Taking the French doors onto the back stone terrace, she would stand for a moment and start her day by looking out over the estate's small lake. Many times she would see two black swans gliding gracefully across the still water. Sheep were nearly always grazing on the other side while birds chattered and sang to the rising sun. A tiny island, no more than 100 feet across, lay in the middle of the lake. A ring of thick pines edged the island with five taller pines in the center representing the five Bunge girls. She never knew which tree represented her, but she hoped it was the strongest. It didn't need to be the tallest—just the strongest.

Taking a deep breath, she would then walk down the stone steps to the rim of the white gravel that circled the house like a moat. She would walk to the side of the chateau where a cobblestoned lane led to the farm. The path crossed a wooden bridge spanning one of the property's numerous canals that fed the lake.

In a few minutes she would reach the farm, which was the size of a small village. Buildings lined three or four converging cobbled alleys, and there were long barns for cattle, horses, and sheep. Surrounding these were the houses of the farm superintendent, the gardener, and the gamekeeper, as well as numerous smaller cottages for the farm tenants. All were red brick with thick thatched roofs, and they sported shutters and doors painted bright red and white.

Even at the early hour in which she would arrive at the farm, there would be workers already moving about. Dressed in traditional corduroy pants, coarse shirts, peasant caps, and *sabots* (wooden shoes), they would many times be working with the large draft horses, high-wheeled delivery wagons, or dog carts or simply be standing about talking and smoking as they waited for the day's instructions. They would respectfully raise their hats as Erica would go by; she would nod and say in Flemish, "*Goeiemorgen*," adding names when she knew them.

Walking to one of the smaller buildings, she would go in and meet with Verheyen, the farm's superintendent. He was hardened and big like many of the rest of the workers, but her father had said he had chosen him years before because his eyes had shown a shrewd intelligence and kindly nature.

When she had returned from British agricultural college, she was sure of herself and what she had learned. But in short order she had discovered from kindly Verheyen that academic knowledge sometimes had little to do with the realities of a working farm. He would always be waiting for her there in the mornings. When she was done conferring with Verheyen about the day's activities and the general operations of the farm, she would walk back to the chateau to join her family for breakfast.

By 1914, Erica was a serious-minded young woman who spoke thoughtfully and always with conviction. She confided to her diary, however, that she longed for a partner who would be her equal, but she despaired of ever finding such a man. In early August 1914, as the German invasion began, her diary entries were filled only with war rumors and apprehensions of what would happen to her family and her country. Excerpts from her

diary give insight into many Belgians' confusion, concern, and anxiety over the future.

Monday, August 3: "A day of terror in [Antwerp]. . . . The situation is very grave, the Germans have moved into Belgium and are coming from the North. We started to pack up everything and then we waited for news from Pereken [nickname for her father] who had to go to Brussels. At last a telegram by phone: news of the German invasion is denied, not a German soldier in Belgium. Do not worry, send a car for me as usual. . . . Three sacks of flour cost 70 francs."

Tuesday, August 4: "There is no more telephone for private people. The street [outside the Antwerp townhouse] is torn up in places and we can't get through. In the city there have been demonstrations against the Germans, the Consul and the Vice-Consul have left. . . . The Consulate's windows have been broken, also those of the German school. Stones and ladders were used."

Wednesday, August 5: "All the Germans were thrown out of Antwerp during the night . . . We are living from day to day. My God, don't let this war last long. . . . I went to Hoogboom, everything is quiet and calm. There is a lot of damage everywhere [from the digging of] trenches, many trees are down."

Friday, August 7: "I couldn't write yesterday, I was too sad and shattered. It was thought that Pereken was German! What an affront! An official came last night to ask Pereken if he would put something in the papers about what he does. . . . I hate those Germans, they are vile! . . . At Hoogboom there are a lot of [Belgian] soldiers [to set up defensive positions], and the cannons are on our land, pulled there by our oxen. At our place there were only small pine trees lost. Poor Guillot [the property's arborist] was howling when they touched his trees, and this morning he was taken to the hospital, totally out of his mind. . . . Spies are picked up everywhere, it's terrible, they are disguised as gendarmes, soldiers, anything. If only they could all be killed. . . . What news tomorrow?"

Saturday, August 8: "News is rare and everything is contradictory. We don't know anything officially. . . . Today we hear pessimistic news for the first time: there are many wounded, things are going badly, we really don't hear anything definite."



During the war, the Chateau Oude Gracht was home to Antwerp merchant Edouard Bunge and three of his five daughters, Erica, Eva, and Hilda. (Author's family archives.)

Sunday, August 9: "We wanted to go to Hoogboom but it was impossible. No permission."

Monday, August 10: "I went to Hoogboom, we were stopped nine times to show our permits. I arrived just in time. A detachment of [Belgian] Artillery is on our place, Commandant Nyssens, eight officers and junior officers, two orderlies, a stableman, and one cook are living in the chateau. We made ready 14 rooms, they all seemed very happy with the good beds and the baths. The soldiers have permission to bathe, to catch rabbits and other things; a good post! There are 400 infantry soldiers, a Commander and some officers, and the whole estate belongs to them! I hope they will respect it. . . . We came back [from Antwerp] by train and car. . . . The train was stopped before it reached the city and the permits were checked."

Tuesday/Wednesday, August 11/12: "No official news . . . Where are the Allies? . . . The waiting is awful, we cannot do anything. . . . We have 600 [Belgian] soldiers on the estate, 400 infantry and 200 artillery. Fifteen are in the chateau. 450 grams of meat a day, one loaf of bread, and the rest, 150 kilos of potatoes are taken per day. Soon there won't be anything left."

Thursday, August 13: "Where the devil are the French? . . . We don't hear anything, it's horrible to have to wait. . . . I went with Eva to collect donations for the Children's Soldiers' Fund."

Friday, August 14. “Still no news, we are desperate. The poor soldiers. We don’t know anything new. The great battle must not have been fought yet. The [Belgian] Commandant [at Hoogboom] believes that the Germans will march on Antwerp and will try to take the forts. It would be awful. And we have to wait. . . . There has been a lot of work done digging trenches [on Hoogboom] by the infantry. Perekon is very tired, beaten down. . . . What will become of us? Personally I’m not afraid, it’s so heartbreaking to think of those who are fighting.”

***Franc-tireurs*—“Wholly Against the Laws of War”**

Erica Bunge’s concern for the Belgian troops was well-founded, and she would have undoubtedly included civilians in her thoughts if she had known how well prepared the German Army was to wage a horrific war. One of Germany’s early statesmen, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), had written back in 1870 that to be truly successful an army had to have a strategy of destruction and intimidation, which was known as *schrecklichkeit*. “True strategy consists in striking your enemy and striking him hard,” stated Bismarck. “Above all things you must inflict on the inhabitants of invaded territories the maximum of suffering, in order to discourage them from the struggle. . . . You must leave to the people . . . nothing but their eyes with which to weep.”

And who was to inflict such devastation? They would be men who had been born and bred for war. As one World War I German officer explained, war “was not taught us at school, nor in the universities, nor even the barracks—we learned it in our mother’s womb.”

And it was their “father”—Kaiser Wilhelm—who issued an order the first week of August that stated, “After forty-three years of peace I call upon all Germans capable of bearing arms. We have to defend our most sacred possessions in fatherland and home against the reckless assault of enemies on all sides of us.

“That means hard fighting,” the kaiser continued. “I am confident that the ancient warlike spirit still lives in the German people—that powerful, warlike spirit which attacks the enemy wherever it finds him, regardless of costs, and which in the past has been the dread and terror of our enemies.”

As for Belgium, the Germans had little but disdain for such a small and insignificant country. Famous Belgian journalist Victor Jourdain wrote, “Belgium was represented [to the Germans] as a backward, barbarous,

and cruel country, inhabited by a race of *franc-tireurs* [civilian guerrilla fighters]; a country where the civilians mutilated the prisoners, where the women poured boiling oil upon soldiers, where the young girls tore out the eyes of the wounded; a country, in short, whose inhabitants deserved no consideration and must be treated with the utmost rigour of martial law.”

Jourdain continued, “The soldiers, as they set out [to invade Belgium], were taught that the war had been forced upon Germany and had been prepared by the Allies of the Triple Entente for two years, that they themselves were the army of civilization fighting the barbarians of Europe, that France was the home of immorality, England a self-seeking nation, and Belgium a country of *franc-tireurs*.”

Franc-tireur was a word repeatedly used by the Germans when speaking of the invasion. While the French army defined the word as “sharpshooter” or “sniper,” a more widely understood definition was “civilian or guerrilla fighter.” Traditionally warfare was left to professional soldiers; noncombatants usually stayed just that. For a civilian to take up arms against a professional soldier was quite a shocking development. The Franco-Prussian War had acquainted German forces with civilian insurgents, and they were determined to prevent a recurrence when moving against Belgium and France. The German troops of 1914 considered “civilian resistance . . . to be wholly against the laws of war and proper military conduct.”

Many Belgian burgomasters (mayors) believed the same, and in the early days of the invasion they posted placards and placed notices in local papers telling their residents to turn in all weapons, to do nothing aggressive against the Germans, and even, in some cases, to offer soldiers food and drink.

Nevertheless, from the start of the invasion the Germans insisted that Belgian *franc-tireurs* were killing their men, which left them no choice but to retaliate with the harshest of measures. Many Germans, from the kaiser and his generals down to the lowliest of foot soldiers, blamed *franc-tireurs* for inciting German reprisals, even though their belief was based on exaggerated fears of Belgian violence rather than actual sustained civilian resistance. The kaiser commented privately that “the population of Belgium behaved in a diabolical, not to say bestial, manner, not one iota better than the Cossacks. They tormented the wounded, beat them to death, killed doctors and medical orderlies, fired secretly . . . on men harmlessly standing in the street.”

The German government officially stated: “Men of all professions, workers, manufacturers, doctors, professors, even clergymen—yes, even women and children, were taken with weapons in their hands, in the regions from which the regular troops had retired. They were shooting from houses or from gardens, from roofs and from cellars, from fields and from forests, on the Germans. They used means that would never be employed by regular troops, shot guns and lead shot, old revolvers and old pistols, and numerous were the men found mutilated or scalded with boiling tar or boiling water. In short, it is not to be doubted that the German wounded were struck and killed by the Belgian population, and also greatly mutilated; nor is it to be doubted that women and even girls participated in these shameful exploits. German wounded had their eyes punctured, their noses and ears and fingers and their sexual organs mutilated, their bodies ripped open; in other cases German soldiers were poisoned, sprayed with boiling liquid, or roasted, so that they suffered an atrocious death.”

On the other side, Belgians accused German soldiers of countless atrocities against innocent civilians, everything from chopping off children’s hands to raping and bayoneting pregnant women. Many Belgians and foreign observers swore these stories were true. Others, like Horace Green—a correspondent for the *New York Evening Post* who was in Belgium during the invasion—countered general public opinion when he stated: “The reports of unprovoked personal atrocities . . . have been hideously exaggerated. . . . In every war of invasion there is bound to occur a certain amount of plunder and rapine. The German system of reprisal is relentless; but the German private as an individual is no more barbaric than his brother in the French, the British, or the Belgian trenches.”

While it’s true that some of the Belgian stories were exaggerated or fabricated, many of them were horrifyingly accurate. And the stories—real or imagined—changed the way the rest of the world saw the war and its participants. “The controversy over whether the Belgians had ambushed the Germans or the Germans had massacred the Belgians profoundly shaped feeling about the war,” stated historian Larry Zuckerman. “For many, Belgium defined a struggle between justice and lawlessness, civilization and barbarity. To a world that could not even have imagined death camps, bombed-out cities, or ethnic cleansing—or, in August 1914, the trench warfare that would soon bleed Europe—Belgium was a



*A column of German foot soldiers during the August invasion. (Public domain: *Fighting in Flanders*, E. Alexander Powell, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.)*

terrible shock. What had happened there challenged the axiom that cultured Europeans did not behave like savages.”

Of all the stories of German atrocities committed during the invasion and immediately after, three became well known to all Belgians and achieved worldwide notoriety. Two were the stories of what happened to the picturesque frontier villages of Visé and Dinant while the third told of the horrors that descended upon the world-renowned university town of Louvain.

Visé—“Vanished From the Map”

The town of Visé did not have long to wait for its story to begin.

On that first day of the invasion, Tuesday, August 4, it was a hot and surprisingly clear summer day in the normally cool, cloudy, and wet country. At 8 a.m. German *uhlans* (lance-carrying cavalry) thundered across the border, signaling the start of what became the deadliest war the world had ever seen, and what Pope Benedict XV called “the suicide of civilized Europe.” By evening six columns of German troops were two to three miles past the border.

Around noon the Germans entered the frontier village of Visé. Nestled on the right bank of the Meuse River, it boasted 3,800 people and 900

houses. When the Germans arrived, the Belgian soldiers withdrew from the town, crossed the Meuse, blew up the bridge behind them and settled onto the left bank, where they shot at any German who came close to the river.

According to historian Jeff Lipkes, within ten minutes of entering Visé, the Germans shot their first civilian. He was “Monsieur Istas, a cashier at the railway station, [who was] gunned down as he returned to work after an early lunch. . . . By evening, more than a dozen corpses littered the streets. Most of the murders seemed wholly arbitrary. . . . The Brouhas, father and son, brewers, were dragged out of their basement and executed in front of their house.”

One of the town’s barbers, Louis Kinable, was shot in front of his shop because he had a pair of clippers in his hand—hence he was seen as a *franc-tireur*. One boy was battered so badly by rifle butts “that his body could only be identified thanks to a card from his middle school proclaiming him an honors student.” Meanwhile, a Berlin newspaper reported that a sixteen-year-old Belgian girl in Visé had been executed for mutilating German corpses.

On August 10 the Germans burned down Visé’s church in the center of town, claiming its Gothic spire was being used by Belgian artillery to sight their cannons. Then, on the evening of August 15, eleven days after the town had been taken—and after the residents and their homes had been thoroughly searched for arms—the German troops began firing their weapons in response to what they said they thought were attacks by *franc-tireurs*. As terrified residents reacted to the guns, events escalated until the Germans were burning, looting, and killing. The destruction went on door-to-door for two days and nights. By August 18, the town was leveled, 631 citizens had been deported to Germany, twenty-three additional residents were dead, and more than 600 homes had been destroyed.

It was the “first systematic destruction of a Belgian town,” according to one history of German atrocities. Systematic or not, as one observer later described it, all that remained were “heaps of brick and mortar like a ruined Pompeii, the only difference being that the bricks of the walls which still stand look newer.” One German captain bluntly summed it up when he declared that Visé had simply “vanished from the map.”

Dinant—"The Town Is Gone"

A few days later, it was Dinant's turn.

A town of more than 7,500, Dinant was the second largest in Namur Province and sat on the right bank of the Meuse River at a major crossing. Known for its stalactite caverns and chased copper and brass wares, and for being the birthplace of Adolphe Sax (the inventor of the saxophone), the town had survived for more than 700 years, squeezing itself in between the river and the base of barren limestone cliffs, which were crowned by a ruined fortress. The most distinctive element of the town's skyline was the 200-foot-high "curiously Oriental spire" of the Church of Notre Dame, a restored thirteenth-century Gothic structure located in the town's *grand place* (main square).

Because of its strategic position at a major river crossing and its close proximity to the French border, Dinant was quickly fortified by French troops when war was declared. After heavy fighting, though, the town was finally occupied by the Germans on Sunday, August 23. They promptly accused the residents of fighting alongside the regular troops and in retaliation began to destroy the town and kill its civilians.

That Sunday morning, according to later testimony in a committee of inquiry, "soldiers of the 108th Regiment of Infantry invaded the Church of the Premonastrensian [*sic*] Fathers, drove out the congregation, separated the women from the men, and shot 50 of the latter. Between 7 and 9 the same morning the soldiers gave themselves up to pillage and arson, going from house to house and driving the inhabitants into the street. Those who tried to escape were shot."

In some cases the Germans lined up people against a wall and executed them with machine guns. Monsieur Wasseige, the forty-three-year-old director of a Dinant bank, refused to open the bank's safe, so he and his two sons, Jacques, nineteen, and Pierre, twenty, along with about 100 others, were machine-gunned down in the town's square, *place d'armes*. The Germans forced Wasseige's three youngest children to witness the murder of their father and two brothers. Later, an American observer said, "We saw the wall with the machine-gun bullet marks, breast high, along its entire length."

Another person said, with cutting sarcasm: "Those killed [in Dinant] ranged in age from Felix Fivet, aged three weeks, to an old woman named Jadot, who was eighty. But then Felix probably fired on the German troops."

When the Germans were finally finished, they had “killed 674 people, deporting an unknown number and destroying 1,100 buildings.” The town’s distinctive church spire was gone, as was nearly everything else. “Dinant is far worse than anything I have seen, or even dreamed the war could bring about,” said one American observer walking through the devastation later.

“The town is *gone*,” said another American. “Part of the church is standing, and the walls of a number of buildings, but for the most part, there is nothing but a mess of scattered bricks to show where the houses had stood.”

Louvain—“We Shall Make This Place a Desert”

The story of Louvain was different in some respects from the stories of Visé and Dinant, primarily because of its size and because it was already famous before the war began. Louvain (Leuven in Flemish) was a world-renowned university town only twenty miles west of Belgium’s capital, Brussels. Home to more than 42,000 residents, it was famous for its Catholic university (founded in 1426) and incomparable library, which boasted 300,000 volumes and contained one of the world’s greatest collections of rare medieval books and manuscripts. The Dyle River flowed through the town, and broad boulevards encircled it, having replaced the fourteenth-century ramparts that had protected Louvain for hundreds of years.

One journalist described the people as “brewers, lacemakers, and manufacturers of ornaments for churches. . . . The city [was] clean, sleepy, and pretty, with narrow twisting streets and smart shops and cafes set in flower gardens of the houses, with red roofs, green shutters, and white walls.” Giving another perspective, the famous German travel author Karl Baedeker had declared Louvain “a dull place.”

Regardless of its entertainment value, Louvain and its university library were world treasures that no one wanted to see damaged by war. Before the Germans appeared, the city had taken major steps to keep the peace. Belgian troops purposefully did not defend the town as a way of protecting it from German wrath; the local *garde civique* was disbanded, and all weapons in private hands were brought to the *hôtel de ville* (city hall). “All necessary measures had been taken to warn the inhabitants against protesting or shooting at the German soldiers. As elsewhere, weapons had been confiscated and posters warned the people not to take up arms;

reminders being issued daily in the newspapers and by the clergy,” according to one historian.

The German entry into the city seemed to bode well. On August 19 the army paraded in with marching bands playing and soldiers singing loudly “Die Wacht am Rhein” (“The Watch on the Rhine,” a patriotic anthem). Inhabitants remained calm but “were indeed terrified.” The Germans—nervous themselves and constantly on guard for *franc-tireur* attacks—established a curfew of 8 p.m. and declared “house doors had to be kept open at night and windows lit. Every day, hostages were taken to guarantee the conduct of the citizens. New troop arrivals increased the concentration of soldiers in Louvain to at least 15,000.” German commanders barracked soldiers in homes, and many of them looked the other way, or joined in, as their men looted whatever they wanted—everything from food and liquor to furniture and artwork.

On the evening of August 25, the real trouble began. Just before sunset sporadic shots were heard around town, which the Germans attributed to a significant attack by Belgian *franc-tireurs*. Residents believed the Germans were accidentally firing at each other. Regardless of how it started, the situation quickly escalated, and by nightfall, in almost complete darkness, it turned into a massive German rampage. Soldiers—many of them fearful and drinking—broke into houses, dragged out and shot residents, looted homes, and set buildings on fire. Horses “stampeded . . . and galloped riderless in all directions” as “panic spread like wildfire through the city.”

The aged were not spared. “Hubert David-Fischbach . . . a man of eighty-three who had had German officers quartered in his house, was tied up and made to watch his house burn, beaten with bayonets, and finally shot. Others were killed during the night as they fled from their burning houses.”

In the darkened and terrified city, the soldiers also broke into the university library and set it ablaze, using gas and other accelerants to do so; they then stopped any who tried to put the fire out. By some accounts it took nine to ten hours for all 300,000 books to burn.

But that wasn’t the end of it. The German soldiers continued to rampage through the town for days. From August 25 through August 30 more than 248 Belgians were killed, hundreds were deported to Germany, and more than 2,000 structures—about a sixth of the city’s buildings—were destroyed.



The ancient university town of Louvain in ruins after the Germans ransacked it August 25–30. (Public domain; multiple sources.)

On August 28, even though looting and burning were still going on, Hugh Gibson, the secretary of the U.S. Legation in Brussels, took a car and with three others drove east from Brussels to Louvain to see if the rumors of mass destruction coming from fleeing refugees were true. (There was no American embassy in Belgium, only the lesser diplomatic post of the U.S. Legation, located in Brussels, and the lesser-still consular offices, located in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, and Liège. The distinction between legation and embassy was slowly dropped after World War II.)

Gibson was able to travel around Belgium (albeit with difficulty) because he was a diplomat from a neutral country and had secured numerous passes and permits from the German military command to do so. Because the U.S. Legation was not well-equipped with vehicles, the motorcar Gibson used to go to Louvain had been donated by D. L. Blount, a young businessman living in Brussels, who also donated his services as driver. The Swedish and Mexican *chargés d'affaires* (heads of diplomatic missions, lower ranking than ambassador) went with them.

As the group approached Louvain, Gibson noticed: "The road was black with frightened civilians carrying away small bundles from the ruins of their homes. Ahead was a great column of dull gray smoke which completely hid the city. We could hear the muffled sound of firing ahead. Down the little street which led to the town, we could see dozens of white flags which had been hung out of the windows in a childish hope of averting trouble."

Gibson continued: "A lot of the houses were still burning, but most of them were nothing but blackened walls with smouldering timbers inside. Many of the front doors had been battered open in order to start the fires or to rout out the people who were in hiding. . . . Then we began to see more ghastly sights—poor civilians lying where they had been shot down as they ran—men and women—one old patriarch lying on his back in the sun, his great white beard nearly hiding his swollen face. All sorts of wreckage scattered over the street, hats and wooden shoes, German helmets, swords and saddles, bottles and all sorts of bundles which had been dropped and abandoned when the trouble began. . . . The boulevard looked as though it had been swept by a cyclone."

The group came across a German officer who spoke English and told them that because of the *franc-tireur* attacks an order had been given to destroy the city. "We shall make this place a desert," the officer declared to Gibson. "We shall wipe it out so that it will be hard to find where Louvain used to stand. For generations people will come here to see what we have done, and it will teach them to respect Germany and to think twice before they resist her. Not one stone on another, I tell you."

As the group surveyed the incredible destruction, one of the party wanted to take a photo with his Kodak. Very aware that he was in a city that was still under fire and filled with highly volatile German troops, the man, as Gibson later wrote, turned to the German officer and asked as politely as possible, "May I take a picture?"

The tired and distracted officer said magnanimously, "Certainly; go ahead. You will find some beautiful things over there on the corner in the house they are getting ready to burn."

Louvain burned and crumbled August 25 to August 30 when, reportedly, orders were finally received from Berlin to stop the destruction. Because of the city's renown, its story became much more than just another tale of German brutality. As newspaper journalist Arthur L. Humphreys explained, Louvain characterized "Belgium's ordeal to the outside world."

Marching Into Brussels

While Belgium's "ordeal" was a burden few countries had ever shouldered, its army did achieve the critical goal of slowing down the German invasion—although nothing at that stage had totally stopped the German juggernaut.

Liège, a large city in the east of Belgium near the German border, had been the first major objective of the invasion. While the city's ring of heavily fortified forts had held out longer than many expected, the Germans made short work of what the Belgians had thought were the forts' impregnable walls. The Germans accomplished this with their new 75-ton "Big Bertha" howitzer, which was designed to destroy concrete fortifications with its 2,052-pound projectiles. By August 17, Liège and its system of forts had fallen. The five German armies continued their arcing swing through Belgium and France.

On Thursday, August 20—a week before Louvain began to burn—Brussels, the capital of Belgium, was declared an open city, which meant