

# IOWA HISTORICAL REVIEW

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY JOURNAL

---

Volume 1 | Issue 2 ( 2008)

pps. 60-85

---

## The Historian Who Sold Out: James Bryce and the Bryce Report

Jameson Ryley  
*University of Iowa*

Copyright © 2008 Jameson Ryley

---

### Recommended Citation

Ryley, Jameson (2008) "The Historian Who Sold Out: James Bryce and the Bryce Report," *Iowa Historical Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2: 60-85.  
<https://doi.org/10.17077/2373-1842.1011>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by [Iowa Research Online](#). It has been accepted for inclusion in *Iowa Historical Review* by an authorized administrator of [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## The Historian Who Sold Out: James Bryce and the Bryce Report

Jameson Ryley\*

*He did not know her name,  
but he knew that she worked  
in the Fiction Department.  
– George Orwell, 1984*

In the early days of the First World War, there was clamor for the British government to investigate what had occurred in 1914 Belgium. The project was first developed by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who on January 22, 1915 gave vague instructions to the leader of the War Propaganda Bureau (WPB), Charles Masterman, to investigate “alleged outrages, the maltreatment of civilians, and breaches of law and established usages of war.”<sup>1</sup> The WPB was first created on September 2, 1914, and the prime minister considered Masterman as a wonderful choice to head the department because he was a renowned writer and journalist. The report that Asquith wanted would be presided over by James Bryce, the world famous historian and former member of Parliament who is the subject of this chapter. Masterman knew that Bryce’s reputation would not lead to further questioning of the report’s objectivity, and that Bryce was therefore the perfect person to preside over and subsequently pen what would become *The Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, published on May 13, 1915.

But who was James Bryce, and why was his report on the Belgian outrages considered so professional? The majority of information about Bryce comes from his writing career as an intellectual and a member of Parliament, and from his biography, which was published in 1927 by a colleague, H.A.L. Fisher. Fisher was a member of the Bryce Committee in 1915, and his biography on Bryce showed that he was the admirer of the famous historian. One of the main purposes of this thesis therefore is to provide a more accurate and critical view of Bryce than was presented by his admirer Fisher.

Bryce was born in Belfast, Ireland on May 10, 1839, where he would spend his early years living with his grandparents. The sources suggest that Bryce

---

I would like to thank my honors advisor Professor Jeff Cox. His patience, guidance, and proof reading were invaluable throughout the researching and writing process. I would also like to thank Professor Edward Erickson for being the main inspiration behind my interest in the origins of the First World War. I would also like to thank my parents, Harold and Jackie Ryley, who have supported and motivated me to write an honors thesis. A number of hardworking people also deserve recognition, such as Dr. Sid Huttner for helping me locate primary materials in Iowa City, and the workers at the Imperial War Museum and the British National Library in London for helping with my research abroad.

<sup>1</sup> Chicago Tribune. *Reports on German Atrocities in Many Place in Belgium, Civilians, Women*, May 13, 1915, pg. 4. paragraph 1.

did not come from an affluent family, but the seeds of intellectualism were set in place for the young boy. His father had graduated from Glasgow University in 1828, and his mother was known as an intellectual because of all of the literature she enjoyed from her father's personal library. At the young age of eight he moved to Glasgow, Scotland, where his father was a Presbyterian minister.<sup>2</sup> During his childhood, Bryce received a comprehensive education from his father in the tenets and dogma of the United Presbyterian Church.<sup>3</sup>

Bryce left Glasgow in 1857 for the University of Oxford<sup>4</sup> where he became a successful law student, even acquiring fame as an author of an historical piece on the Holy Roman Empire's laws that won the prestigious Arnold Prize. By winning this award, he was recognized by many in intellectual communities as an emerging historian of the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman system of law.<sup>5</sup>

At Oxford he also furthered his childhood interest in German, which led him to travel to Heidelberg in the summer of 1863 to study law with the famous German professor Karl Adolph von Vangerow. At the time, German was the fad in the intellectual circles of Europe because of the prestige of German research universities and the phenomenal work of such German intellectuals as Goethe, Schiller, Kant and Hegel. Bryce used his time in Germany to become well acquainted with German writings for his own aesthetic purposes.<sup>6</sup> He fell in love with Heidelberg, where he was able to build several personal friendships that would profit him for the rest of his life and cultivate an enthusiasm for German culture. Throughout his life, Bryce continued to declare that the happiest recollection of his life was when he lived in Heidelberg.<sup>7</sup> All of this makes it more difficult to understand why he would eventually write a major propaganda work against Germany in 1915.

In 1880, after several years of practicing law, traveling, and working on intellectual pursuits, Bryce decided to become a member of the House of Commons. At the age of forty-one, Bryce was elected into Parliament from the London borough Tower of Hamlets, and he remained there for the next twenty-six years.<sup>9</sup> During his political career as a follower of William Gladstone, he would champion several of the Liberal Party's causes such as Home Rule for Ireland. His few speeches in Parliament were candid and considered right-minded, despite the popular opinion that he did not have the stentorian voice that one needed to be a successful orator in the House of Commons. In fact, many within the House of Commons considered him to be too academic and professorial for the position, an appraisal demonstrated by an offer to be the History Chair at Cambridge.<sup>10</sup> In his early years of political life, Bryce had been drawn on grounds of both historical interest and political sympathy towards Lord Acton, and it was Acton who advised Bryce to accept the position at Cambridge. Perhaps Bryce should have

---

<sup>2</sup> H.A.L. Fisher *James Bryce* vol. I (New York: MacMillan, 1927), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> H.A.L. Fisher *James Bryce* vol. II (New York: MacMillan, 1927), 126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96.

accepted this offer, since many of his colleagues believed that his parliamentary duties would conflict with his already preoccupied intellectual mind.<sup>11</sup> Indubitably, they were correct. After only a few years, his political profession became a peripheral issue as he focused on other pursuits.

One of these pursuits was writing for the liberal *New York Weekly* as a political journalist. He was well known in the US for extensively writing about the US election of 1884 between Grover Cleveland and James G. Blaine. Before long, this writing developed into an interest in the American system of government, US-British relations, and the engaging question of why the two countries had not fought a war since 1812.<sup>12</sup> To try to answer the last question, Bryce visited the US in 1870 and the autumn of 1881, when he left for a four-month trip in only his second year as an MP. When he visited once more a year later, he started research for a book on American democracy – work that took him throughout the country and earned him many friends. His friends ranked among America’s elite: lawyers, politicians, captains of industry, journalists, and even the psychologist William James.<sup>13</sup>

These growing connections became solidified once his book about American democracy was finally completed. The two-volume book was entitled *American Commonwealth* (1888) and contained a novel notion of how the US government successfully worked with branches of governments at the federal, state, and local levels.<sup>14</sup> Signs suggest that Thomas Fleming was correct when he pointed out in his book, *The Illusion of Victory*, that Bryce’s work was well taken internationally and made him into a well-known historian.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it became so famous that he drew comparisons with, and was only outmatched by, Alexis de Toqueville’s book, *Democracy in America*, as the best study on American democracy during the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> After the success of this book, it would have been difficult to name a more accomplished or admired historian in the English-speaking world than Bryce.

Writing success engendered several honorary doctorates from American and German Universities, and he was even presented with the *Pour le Mérite* from Kaiser Wilhelm II, the highest honor which the Kaiser could bestow.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Bryce attained larger visibility within the US, especially within intellectual communities and universities. It was said that “everyone in America had heard of him, and that few intellectuals could have escaped reading him.”<sup>18</sup> Keeping in mind such critical acclaim, it is no surprise that Bryce was offered the position of

---

<sup>11</sup> Fisher *James Bryce*. vol. II, 177.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-79.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 225.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 52.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War* (Jefferson: North Carolina, 1996), 52.

<sup>17</sup> James Morgan Read, 201. The award was first found in 1740 by the Prussian King Frederick II. The German award given to Bryce was still in French because it was the language of the Prussian royal court during Frederick’s reign.

<sup>18</sup> Fisher *James Bryce*. vol. II, 3.

US ambassador in 1907 by the new Liberal government. He was delighted with the opportunity, accepting the offer with alacrity.

The appointment was viewed by the British government as an irreproachable triumph. Because of his knowledge of American affairs, his numerous friendships, and his sympathy for the American way of life, the British expected that he would produce successful contributions to the good feelings between the two nations.<sup>19</sup> Bryce was called a “natural American”<sup>20</sup> by those who knew him in England, and he entered Washington, D.C. already well acquainted with the US President, Teddy Roosevelt. Bryce had followed Roosevelt’s political career closely while writing for the *New York Weekly*, and he and his wife had had the honor of dining with Roosevelt and his family in the White House in the autumn of 1901.

In 1909, his fly-fishing friend and boss, the British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, gave him leave from Washington to write a report on South American affairs. The British government, and especially the foreign office, had an acute interest in “obscure” hinterlands, and it was believed that Bryce would be the perfect person to write a report on the construction of the Panama Canal because of his linguistic skills.<sup>23</sup> But this South American wandering was not limited to this particular trip, as when he was not working in the US, he continued to satisfy his penchant for travel by accepting invitations to speak in different parts of the US.<sup>24</sup> Once again Bryce built up a stronger base of friends within the US, as his erudition allowed him to ingratiate himself among several university presidents, including Woodrow Wilson at the University of Virginia. His major contributions as an ambassador preceded him, garnering him a reputation wherever he went in the US.

After six years abroad, Bryce returned to London in 1913, when Ireland was still the major issue of the day. But this time, Bryce’s title as a Viscount – awarded in 1913 for his service and historical writings – allowed him to vote and influence policy in the House of Lords, and he became a major advocate of Irish Home Rule.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, since he was born in Belfast and raised as a Scottish Presbyterian, he was probably one of the most unlikely to fight for Home Rule, but he felt that some concessions on Ireland should be made in London. He was tired of the injustice meted out to the Irish Nonconformists, and he felt that Home Rule was the only way in which the Irish question could be handled. Just as the Irish debate seemed as if it was going to lead to civil war, the outbreak of war swept throughout Europe.

As mentioned, Bryce had fond memories of his studies and travels in Heidelberg, but the outbreak of the First World War had a powerful effect on him

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. Even though it was said when he was in the US that he had a hard time sympathizing with the annual Independence day celebrations.

<sup>23</sup> Those being Latin, Greek, Icelandic, Spanish, German, and of course English. Bryce had already had knowledge of the region, for in 1907 he collaborated with Roger Casement to expose the horrendous exploitation of indigenous people on the Amazon by a British rubber company.

*Ibid.*, 23-4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-23.

that overruled these memories. He was shocked by the outbreak of hostilities, and his immediate reaction, which would last throughout the war, was that Germany was at fault for breaking its neutrality with Belgium. To explain his change of mind against Germany, it can be argued that he was always inclined to peaceful solutions. In a letter to James Ford Rhodes, dated August 1, 1914, Bryce reacted to Europe's decision to go to war as being "the most tremendous and horrible calamity that has ever befallen mankind."<sup>26</sup> But Germany's decision to attack Belgium incited Bryce's strong nationalist sentiments, since he felt that the culpability for the July crisis was on Germany and its ally, Austria. He reasoned that the violation of a small country's neutrality by a Great Power required Britain's defense, and, therefore, that Britain needed to take a stand against such a flagrant transgression of elementary morality.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, he became so fixated on Germany's action against Belgium that he decided that the war should continue until the Prussian military was irreparably crushed. This was a passion demonstrated by his letters, in which he wrote that:

Britain was fighting against the doctrine that treaties may be broken whenever it was to the interest of the stronger power to break them, against the doctrine that whatever is necessary becomes thereby permissible, against that terrible application of the doctrine which seizes innocent citizens and treats them as hostages for the good behavior of others, whom they cannot control.<sup>28</sup>

Further claims about his passion could be defended: perhaps he was upset over the outbreak of hostilities because he noticed that few people in Britain were upset about Germany's decision to break its neutrality with Belgium. And, invariably, disappointed that no protest had been made "against such a flagrant breach of public law as an invasion of Belgium."<sup>29</sup> This change of opinion on Germany led to his willingness to accept a job from the Propaganda War Bureau at Wellington House, which was the home of the British propaganda during the First World War.

Germany's decision brought Bryce into the war as the chairman to lead the British committee on the 1914 Belgian outrages. With such strong preconceptions, it is no wonder that he was willing to accept Masterman's offer to write a report. However, these preconceptions were not his only reasons: it is said he had felt like an outsider for his entire life by being a devoted religious Nonconformist, and that he felt that he owed it to the government to write the report as the project of a lifetime. All of these reasons eventually culminated in Bryce's decision to head the project when he was approached by the attorney

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

general, offering on behalf of the prime minister, to write the report as a patriotic assignment.<sup>30</sup>

He was also approached because of his US popularity, where the report would attempt to have the widest influence. His assertions, no matter how misleading, would be taken seriously in the US because of his credentials, and the sway that he might produce in such neutral countries was tantalizing for government officials desperate for transatlantic support.

Asquith's committee was rounded out by several other prestigious members with voluminous credentials. Four were knights, including Sir Frederick Pollock, Sir Edward Clarke, Sir Kenelm E. Digby, and Sir Alfred Hopkinson, and two were writers, H.A.L. Fisher and Clarke. The last member was Harold Cox, an editor of the *Edinburgh Review*. It was this report that he and his fellow members were willing to lend their time, which would attempt to be the most objective report on the subject of what happened in Belgium. This was the initial belief, but Bryce continually moved toward playing the role of willing propagandist as the project continued.

Since Bryce wrote so that the enemy nation would be internationally besmirched and that his nation's soldiers would be saved, he is the paradigmatic propagandist writer. And as historian Gary Messinger has observed, he was not a "full-blown" propagandist from the onset, but it seems that the longer he worked on the atrocity report, the more he substantiated a need to help his nation's cause.<sup>31</sup> This appears to be correct; Fisher mentions that Bryce had only taken the job when first offered because of his belief in the rights of small countries and that Germany's breach of Belgium's neutrality was a flagrant transgression.<sup>32</sup> His motivation is partly guesswork, but it might be partially explained by the British ethos that they could fight the Germans with their words. Journalists, authors, poets, and pamphleteers were not enlisted in Britain's military, but they still felt like they could use their "paper bullets" to fight the Central Powers. Bryce must have felt similarly, too.

As will be seen in the upcoming chapters, these "paper bullets" did, in fact, materialize. The goal will be to show that the report was tendentious, that it had a powerful effect on the minds of the citizens of neutral countries, and would serve to turn opinion internationally against Germany. Before summarizing what Bryce wrote in his propaganda pamphlet and its influence, attention must now be shifted toward an explanation of what actually occurred in Belgium.

### Man Hat Geschossen! –Someone shot!

The beginning of the story starts with the Schlieffen plan, which ordered the German armies to march into Belgium, a neutral nation by treaty ever since 1839. Schlieffen knew that the movement of his army through Belgium would most likely upset Britain enough to bring them into the war. Schlieffen

---

<sup>30</sup> Gary S. Messinger *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 81.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> Fisher *James Bryce*. vol. II, 127.

hubristically welcomed the landing of the small British army, and despite the illegality of this action, it had its reasons: the massive German army needed the flat plains of Flanders to ensure the offensive movements of their massive army. This territory had been referred to as “a rag doll for their stronger neighbors to squabble over”<sup>1</sup> ever since the time of Julius Caesar – even the Battle of Waterloo had been fought there – and Schlieffen surmised no differently since it was perfect terrain for offensive movements.

So Schlieffen’s answer to Germany’s strategic position was to have his armies envelop the French before the Russian armies could mobilize against the German borders. He felt that a *Blitzkrieg* march through Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands would be necessary for a quick victory. This march would allow his armies to outflank the recently constructed French fortresses along the Franco-German borders, and, it was the only option open to the German army to solve the conundrum of having to fight on at least two fronts.

The German war plan was constricted by time limits because of the threat of the Russian armies in the east, which was a predicament engendered by the Franco-Russian military alliance of 1892/4. Schlieffen also hoped that the French would march into the annexed territories of 1871, Alsace and Lorraine, so as to give his massively assembled right wing the ability to outflank the French forces in a movement that would be very similar to a revolving door that pivoted in Brussels.

None of this is surprising to historians contextualizing his beliefs: Schlieffen was a military historian, who did not believe in a facile victory against Russia. He thought that the Russians would use their enormous landmass to continually retreat into their interior, coaxing the Germans into a trap that would not end in a quick or decisive victory, but rather a crushing counter attack. He also believed that the Russian weather would be dangerous for his armies, in case of an extended war. He thought that the autumn rains would bog down his armies and that the weather climate would be harsh. His plan of defense in the east depended on using the Mansurian Lakes as a natural defensive which would divide the Russian army, and would buy his western armies enough time to defeat the French before having to shift troops from the fronts accordingly. This, he thought, would be the surest way toward a victory.<sup>2</sup>

But the Schlieffen plan’s logistics promised to complicate matters with Belgians. Historian Van M. Creveld, who attempted to put an end to the question of whether the Schlieffen plan would have worked in 1914 based on supply, is correct when he claims that the plan required that the roads and rails inside of Belgium be used to carry his armies through the territory to stave off exhaustion.<sup>3</sup> These transportation links were essential for the quick movements that would help defeat France, as well as alleviating the exigency of returning to the eastern front

---

Man Hat Geschossen! –Someone shot!

<sup>1</sup> Larry Zuckerman. *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I*. (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Viking Press, 2003), 44-5.

<sup>3</sup> Van M. Creveld. *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallstein to Patton The Wheel That Broke* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 113.



before the marching Russian armies could threaten. Because of this reliance, Schlieffen feared that Belgium would destroy their transportation systems, which would be a major setback for the German army, since it was well attested that marching such distances in such a short of a period of time was insuperable. This high priority on transportation may have led the Germans into reprisals against Belgian citizens in 1914, even if it had been the Belgian army that was responsible for destroying pivotal stretches of track. Their rail sabotage may have conditioned the German command into ordering terror tactics, though this theory cannot be proved for certain.

Another pertinent logistical issue involved feeding the massive armies, in which a quarter-million troops were in the right wing of Alexander von Kluck's First Army alone.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, this seemed to be an oversight on Schlieffen's plan, because a system of supply did not even exist. He planned for his troops to live off the land, bringing the German armies into close contact with the self-sufficient Belgium locals. Anecdotes about the violent Germans do exist according to stories of trying to find food and drink; and, true to their national reputation, the German troops may have consumed too much of the local liquor. With these few stories as evidence, it can be inferred that not everything in the Bryce Report is inaccurate, as some of the testimonies by the German soldiers attested to large consumption of wine and champagne.

When Germany declared war in 1914, the 1905 Schlieffen plan was still relevant. The reigning chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke "the younger," had made only a few minor changes to the plan: he turned the German right wing at Brussels to avoid breaking neutrality with the Netherlands', and, in one of his more controversial actions, he weakened Schlieffen's massive right wing by reinforcing the left wing. It was ready to be tested.

The German ultimatum was given to Belgium on August 2, 1914, requiring free passage through Belgium in return for war reparations and the respect of their sovereignty after the war, but the Belgians were unwilling to accept these terms. King Albert, commander of Belgium's military forces, refused the offer and declared war against the German attackers on the fourth of August, riling his country to fight for their honor and the benefit of their nearby allies, France and Britain. Britain, of course, quickly followed Albert's promulgation, declaring war on Germany.

The problem with all of this occurred once the German's declared that Belgian citizens were illegally firing on their troops. Von Kluck, who was the general in charge of the constructed First Army, said in his memoirs that the German troops had from the moment they crossed the Belgian borders "suffered from treacherous acts on the part of the population, apparently instigated thereto by the local authorities."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Kluck claimed that the violence had continued until the southern border of the Belgian frontier, where the illegal shooting by civilians "ate into the very vitals of the German army."<sup>6</sup> Not

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander von Kluck, *The March on Paris and the Battle of the Marne, 1914* (New York: Longmans, 1920), 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 29.

surprisingly, the other side claimed that these were German fabrications. Now we must begin our own inquiry, asking whose claims can be corroborated.

It is difficult to attain objective information about what occurred in Belgium during the early parts of the war for the reason that newspapers and other sources were purposely tendentious. The situation in Belgium was certainly not as black and white as these documents would lead one to believe. In fact, one must be very skeptical of anything being said because newspaper editors always had their nation's interests in mind.<sup>7</sup> It is known that the Germans used terror on the civilian population, as can be proved from photography, soldiers' diaries, and confessions made by Belgian citizens and refugees. It is hard to ascertain why or how they did so. Both the Germans and the Allies believed differently, and sources such as war newspapers, pamphlets, and books, all stress the enemy's guilt through apocryphal and slippery proofs. Several of the Western allies' writings on this topic began by claiming that they would indubitably prove German war guilt, but the information provided did not empirically support such a claim once the sources were consulted.

For example, in the war poster collections, such as the published *German Posters in Belgium*, the introduction clearly states that "the photographic evidence is irresistible."<sup>8</sup> The book then claims that, "a perusal of this collection will serve to illustrate the methods of the barbaric invader" and "[that] it is impossible for anyone to remain indifferent to the crimes after further reading."<sup>9</sup> The claims are tantalizing, but the book fails to produce more than a few proofs of German guilt, which leads one to believe that the author wrote out the thesis with the hope that the discussion would end with his introduction, and that the lazy reader would be fooled by his thesis.

The posters continually did the opposite of the editor's intent by opening up, for interpretation, several of the arguments which the Germans were trying to make throughout the war. These posters were the worst hermeneutic quagmires, as they left open the debate of whether the Germans were planning to use terror against the Belgian populations as a direct plan of action. For example, von Emmich's first poster on August 4, 1914 says:

*I feel the greatest regret that the German troops find themselves obliged to cross the frontier of Belgium" and that "the destruction of bridges, tunnels and railway lines will have to be regarded as hostile attacks," and "We are fighting the Belgian army solely in order to force passage into France. Or the peaceful population of Belgium is not our enemy; on the contrary, and we will treat it with understanding for its susceptibilities and with*

---

<sup>7</sup> *History of the Times: 1912-1920* vol. 5 (London: Written, printed and published at the office of the Times, 1935), 212.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Davignon. *German Posters in Belgium* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), viii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, viii, ix.

*kindness, provided that, by acts, it gives proof of its peaceful sentiments.*<sup>10</sup>

This poster seems to prove that the Germans were willing to avoid terrorizing the Belgian population, as long as they allowed the Germans safe passage. It is hard to judge the Germans as monsters based on some of the evidence.

As time went on, the posters became more graphic and confrontational. They went from saying, “Belgians, you must make your choice,” which meant to lay down their arms, to “it was with my consent that the General had the whole place burnt down and about one hundred people shot.”<sup>11</sup> The posters helped explain that the terror occurred once the German officers were fully convinced that the entire populace did not plan on stopping their resistance. Officer von Bülow, the leader of the German Second Army, illustrates this point by writing in one poster that “the inhabitants of the town of Ardenne, after having protested the peaceful intentions, made treacherous surprise attacks on our troops.”<sup>12</sup> Once it was believed that the civilian population was disturbing the German army with violence, the Germans began to act differently.

The German argument was built around the fact that *francs-tireurs*, which was the name the Germans used for French guerrilla fighters who disregard the laws of war, existed inside of Belgium and that the civilian population in Belgium had continually shot at the German army. Witnesses in Belgium did attest to the fact that the German troops greatly feared the *francs-tireurs* from the war’s outset.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, *francs-tireurs* had been common during the Franco-Prussian war, especially during the resistance to the terms of the treaty of Frankfurt 1871. During this time, the French people began to glorify their military, and the *francs-tireurs* were considered to be national heroes. The 1914 German military understood how dangerous civilian soldiers could be, a pestiferous threat that is amply demonstrated in documents within the appendix of the Bryce Report.

Kluck said that “firing from behind hedges was an act of daily occurrence,” and that “horrible murders of officers and men frequently occurred” at the hands of men in civilian clothing.<sup>14</sup> He does not seem cognizant that the shooters could have been Belgian soldiers in civilian clothing, despite the fact that he also argued that the Belgian government had goaded its civilians into shooting German soldiers. Kluck’s writing becomes less reliable when it descends into such feverish hyperbole, like his claim that, “the corpses of women were found with rifles in their hands who had been killed in the fighting,” or that in a certain

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. “C’est à mon plus grand regret que les troupes Allemandes se voient forcées de franchir la frontière de la Belgique” et “des destructions de ponts, de tunnels, de voies ferrées devront être regardées comme des actions hostiles.”

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 26. Belges, vous avez à choisir” et “C’est avec mon consentement que le Général en chef a fait bruler toute la localité et que cent personnes environ ont été fusillées.”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. “Les habitants de la ville d’Ardenne, après avoir protesté de leurs intentions pacifiques, ont fait une surprise traître sur nos troupes.”

<sup>13</sup> James Morgen Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1941), 88.

<sup>14</sup> von Kluck. *The March on Paris and the Battle of the Marne, 1914*, 25.

town – the name of which is not given – the “proclamations had been found in which showed that the Belgian government had incited its people to fire on the enemy.”<sup>15</sup> Just as in 1870, these guerilla fighters were not considered to be soldiers by the German military, but rather as obdurate criminals who deserved the harshest punishment.

Similarly, German fears of *francs-tireurs* were responsible for why they began to use vengeful practices against Belgian citizens. The German command inside Belgium believed that using terror could stop civilians from waging guerilla warfare, but the opposite seems to have been the case, as Kluck said that the Belgian population increased their violence after German reprisals.<sup>16</sup> To substantiate these actions, the Germans argued that, according to international law and the 1907 Second Peace Conference, they had the legal right to shoot any *francs-tireurs*.<sup>17</sup> Not to appear as hypocrites, the Germans also claimed responsibility for their actions, declaring that any deviant soldiers in their army would be prosecuted. But only two soldiers, who were caught assaulting a woman, were sentenced to penal service from the sources consulted. This happened to be the only case, of which the Germans knew, in which their soldiers had taken advantage of a woman.<sup>18</sup> But of course their veracity should be questioned for the reason that it would serve their purposes to deny that other cases occurred.

With this legality in mind, the German command was convinced that they had attempted to act appropriately. They felt that they needed to make examples out of civilian shooters, and this was how they explained the massacres at the medieval town of Louvain, where they incinerated the town to stop sporadic shooting.<sup>19</sup> The Belgian people firmly denied this firing, and it is not unlikely that the firing may have been friendly German fire. But the German soldiers let the civilians know that they were being ordered to burn down the city by a German high command that was vehemently opposed to any aggression by the *francs-tireurs*.

The Belgians’ substantiation of their violence was that it had been against international law for Germany to have invaded their country in the first place. When compared with the German argument, the scale of neutrality infringement seems much more convincing. Moreover, the Belgium government had argued that they had taken measures to warn their people about fighting against the German forces, arguing that the whole population would be exposed to nameless horrors for criminal behavior against the German enemy. Indeed, the

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> James Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1915), 275.

<sup>18</sup> *The Kaiser and His Barbarians: Crimes Against Humanity*. (Held at the Imperial War Museum, London) 56.

<sup>19</sup> The town of Louvain was massacred and led to a massive change of world opinion against the German nation. The Catholic University, which was founded in 1425, was destroyed by arson. The University libraries held about 230,000 volumes, including 800 ancient manuscripts and books. Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 30.

Belgian Ministry of the Interior and the communal authorities had told the populace not to provoke the German soldiers and, above all, not to resist the enemy.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the Belgian government argued that the population had, in fact, not shot at the German army. They argued that there probably had been no *francs-tireurs*, but rather German soldiers had fired upon one another. Essentially, their argument stated that the Germans had fabricated the story, because it was likely that skittish soldiers massed together would possibly fire upon each other by mistake. However, the veracity of this claim is questionable, as the German Army was one of the best-trained and well-prepared armies in the world. So it is highly unlikely that the well-trained German troops could have been so clumsy as to shoot upon one another.

The Belgians also brandished the argument that the German soldiers had been drunk often enough to shoot at one another. The Belgians claimed that “a German battalion arrived dragging along with it all sorts of things, particularly bottles of wine, and many of the men were drunk.”<sup>21</sup> Another written document asks the rhetorical question: “Whom could this shot have been fired by? Was it fired by an unnerved sentry, by a drunken soldier, or by a civilian?”<sup>22</sup> Here, the writer uses the loaded association of the adjective “drunken” in a parallel sentence to vilify the Germans, even though he tagged an unmodified civilian onto the end of the sentence.

The major problem with this argument is that, to the allies’ chagrin, the most trained and disciplined army was probably not chronically inebriated. It is true that some of the German soldiers’ diaries mentioned heavy drinking, but this was rarely found. If more proof can be provided to show that German soldiers were often drunk, then it should be concluded that this might have been a cause that led them to shoot upon each other. However, until then one should conclude that this was probably not the case.

Sorting out what occurred in Belgium in 1914 is mostly a matter of plausibility. There are so many holes in both arguments that the historian quickly concludes that this gossamer of facts is extremely difficult to disentangle. It should probably be said that there were civilians in Belgium who fired on German troops, even if it was just an aberration in normal Belgian behavior. This assessment disproves the arguments that were made by the Western allies during the conflict that the civilians had never fired on German soldiers, and that the latter most likely never shot on their own ranks.

As Larry Zuckerman pointed out in Belgium’s case, the Germans never prosecuted a single *francs-tireur*, although Belgian newspapers had admitted to rare Belgian firing.<sup>23</sup> This confession, however, does not exonerate the French: James Morgen Read correctly pointed out in his book, *Atrocity Propaganda*, that evidence does suggest from a postwar investigation that, “Shots were fired at the German army from French detachments hidden in Mon-ceau-sur-Sambre at one

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Van Der Essen, (Held at the Imperial War Museum, London), 193.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>23</sup> Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium*, 53.

point, and in particular the French had secretly used hidden machine gun detachments posted on the Sambre Bridge against German troops.”<sup>24</sup> This report also attested to the fact that newspaper extracts from Belgian papers proved that attacks on the German troops by civilian militia had occurred during the first four days of the war.<sup>25</sup>

This report, intriguingly enough, also proved that there had been *francs-tireurs* in 1914 Belgium. German Red Cross statistics show that one-hundred and eight officers and men in the German army had been wounded or killed by shotguns during the opening campaign. The likely weapon, the report claims, that the *francs-tireurs* would have used were shotguns, because the Belgian army did not use these short-range weapons.<sup>26</sup> The report also said that the Germans had the international right to shoot at such illegal snipers, but that it was unlawful to subject an entire village or town to such punishment in order to remedy the evil of the *francs-tireurs*.<sup>27</sup>

All things considered, the Germans were guilty of many crimes in Belgium, but there were only a few instances of perversion that may have matched the stories that Bryce was telling. Read is correct once again when he showed that the best evidence indicates that German actions were not always characterized by “cruelty and bestiality,” though five thousand civilian deaths were recorded during the opening year in Belgium at German hands.<sup>28</sup> It is well understood from this statistic that many Belgians died in 1914 because of the Germans, but the point is that the majority of these deaths occurred in less horrific fashion from the way Bryce and Allied nations newspapers led readers to believe. On the other side, the Belgians had not committed any egregious acts against the German troops in any significant cases in more than a few isolated areas, and the shooting by *francs-tireurs* was most likely to have occurred closer to the invasion date rather than during the German campaign.

The point of this chapter has been to state that the German armies entered Belgium because of the Schlieffen plan, and to explicate what occurred in Belgium so as to understand the propaganda within Bryce’s text. It should also have become apparent why the British government would have called for an investigation of the outrages. Though the topic had been written upon from the time of the invasion, the situation still remained nebulous in the minds of many governments. While the British government seemed to seek an end the myths and to provide, once and for all, for an objective viewpoint, in reality, the opposite

---

<sup>24</sup> James Morgen Read. *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1941), 84.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, 92. This of course contradicts Kluck’s argument that the violence continued to occur until the German armies reached the southern part of the Belgian border. Kluck though wrote his memoirs in an attempt to explain some of the major developments of the early part of the war. It is proved by the translator of the memoirs repeatedly that he lied about several things within his book. Because of this, it must be believed that the atrocity report in which came out after the war disproves much of what Kluck said as being true.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Read. *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 84.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-03.

would occur, as the committee used its vast resources to build one of the most successful propaganda reports of the First World War.

## The Bryce Report

The Bryce report on the Belgium outrages began as a motion from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, who wanted the project completed as quickly as possible so that the Germans could not investigate the story before Britain. He devolved the project to Charles F.G. Masterman, the head of British propaganda at Wellington House, and, in turn, he was given the duty to appoint a prestigious committee.<sup>1</sup> Masterman's prime choice to head the report was James Bryce. He knew that Bryce was a venerable scholar, that he was popular in the US from his extended stay in Washington, and that he was famous for his historical writings on American democracy.<sup>2</sup> He also knew that Bryce was well known throughout the world, especially in the USA, where the targeted reading audience of the report would be.

Masterman intended to use the Belgian narrative as propaganda. His propaganda doctrine consisted of two tenets: that keeping the operation covert was vital, and that the distribution of the stories would have to be selective, because only a certain audience would transmit the narrative in their communities. The idea was that it was highly important to influence the opinion of the higher classes, because they wielded influence over the lower classes. Demographically, this was a realistic viewpoint, because the top 2.5 percent of British citizens controlled 98 percent of the country's wealth in 1914.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Masterman knew that the propaganda had to have some factual basis, and the outrages in Belgium appeared to him as the perfect stick around which to spin his embellishments.<sup>4</sup>

It seems like he did not have to spend much time convincing Bryce to write the report as propaganda. On January 22, 1915, Masterman asked Bryce to head a royal commission to investigate the atrocity reports, an assignment that the latter cordially accepted.<sup>5</sup> Masterman was also responsible for appointing the rest of the committee, which included the men already given in Chapter One. Masterman's instructions to the committee were to undertake a "broad investigation of the alleged outrages, the maltreatment of Belgian civilians, and which breaches of law were broken by the Germans."<sup>6</sup>

---

### The Bryce Report

<sup>1</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 201.

<sup>3</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Peter T Scott, *The Secrets of Wellington House: British Covert Propaganda, 1914-1918* (N.p.: Antiquarian Book Monthly, 1996) n. pg. 7. Imperial War Museum, London.

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 52 and Chicago Tribune, *Reports on German Atrocities in Many Places in Belgium, Civilians, Women*. May 13, 1915, pg. 4, paragraph 1.

<sup>6</sup> Chicago Tribune, *Reports on German Atrocities in Many Places in Belgium, Civilians, Women*, May 13, 1915. pg. 4. paragraph 1.

To understand why Bryce accepted the job, it must be reiterated that he was overwhelmed by nationalism at the war's outbreak, and appalled by Germany's decision to break their neutrality with Belgium. Though it is true that Bryce had close ties with the German nation, he had even closer fraternal ties with the British soldiers, and he even claimed, "I would be doing the [British] soldiers in the fields a tremendous disservice by injecting fewer violent acts than alleged into the report."<sup>7</sup> Once he took over this project, he surmised that he would be undermining Britain's moral justification for going to war if he said that the Germans had done nothing violent against Belgian civilians. With that agenda in mind, Bryce ended up writing one of the most successful propaganda reports of the First World War.

The report's format was roughly a forty-page synopsis of the events with an attached 300-page appendix covering the 1,200 depositions that were collected for the committee's use. These testimonies were mostly taken from shell-shocked refugees living in Britain between January and April of 1915, all of whom had claimed to have seen nefarious German behavior.<sup>8</sup> These eyewitness accounts gave the report additional credence because it let the public have the depositions in which the report was based on. They contained dozens of grisly stories of alleged execution, torture, rape and mutilation of Belgian women and children. Other depositions were taken from British, French, and German soldiers. The German soldiers were not interviewed, though, despite the fact that their diaries were used within the appendix as a crucial source. These were supposedly found after the Marne retreat, and were translated in full for their reader's enjoyment.<sup>9</sup> Not one case of confessed "atrociousness" was in any of these German writings, though many narrate the German plundering and the execution of alleged *francs-tireurs*.

There are several problems with the authenticity of these depositions. The committee said that the atrocities had been faithfully reported by eyewitnesses and refugees, but this is a problematic claim.<sup>10</sup> Bryce and his committee did not interview the witnesses personally, since that work was done by twenty barristers who worked for the British government. These barristers, of course, never put the refugees under oath, which leads to the question of whether it is likely that any of their depositions were guided by patriotism, emotional excitement, or hysteria.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the report omitted the names of the witnesses so that the Germans would not be able to take any further reprisals against their family members who may have still been in the occupied zone of Belgium.<sup>12</sup> On an unrelated problem, the report did not mention whether the

---

<sup>7</sup> Gary S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 80.

<sup>8</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 53. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, 76. According to statistics of the Registrar-General 180,000 Belgian refugees were in England in April, 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War* (Jefferson: North Carolina, 1996), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 205.

<sup>12</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 3.



witnesses spoke Flemish or whether their testimonies had been translated. Though it is possible that all the witnesses spoke English, it seems odd since Flemish and French were almost universally spoken by the Belgian people at this time.<sup>13</sup> This is evident in the familiarly terse, dramatic prose of the testimonies, which shows that the report was constructed from questionable sources. The handling of the testimonies helps explain how inaccuracies and exaggerations constantly impinged on the text's credibility.

With this copious amount of material in hand, the Bryce committee began their report by stating, "There were in many parts of Belgium deliberate and systematically organized massacres of the civil population through isolated murders and outrages."<sup>14</sup> The report said that the killing took place under the orders of military command with deliberate purpose, which may not have been true, but the report failed to say what orders were given, or if they were given because of firing from *francs-tireurs*.

Alongside these claims, the report simultaneously concluded that there was little evidence that the Belgians had commonly fired on the Germany army. The report said that the firing was probably fabricated by the German army to excuse their behavior.<sup>15</sup> As the report states:

The colonel accused the population of firing on the soldiers, but there is no reason to think that any of them had done so. No evidence whatever seems to have been adduced to prove this, and, though there may be cases in which individual Belgians fired on Germans, the statements that the whole civilian population of Belgium was called out is utterly false.<sup>16</sup>

By denying that the *francs-tireurs* had existed, the Bryce report aimed to make the German story no longer seem like a convincing story for their behavior. The report's denial of *francs-tireurs* proved to be detrimental in Germany's cause for finding sympathy from neutral nations such as the United States.

Besides the denial of *francs-tireurs*, the report performed an exegesis of the murder sprees which had occurred in Belgium, giving accounts of murders in towns like Namur, in which the report says, "Troops signaled their entry by firing on a crowd of one hundred and fifty unarmed unresisting civilians, ten alone who escaped."<sup>17</sup> This example matches up well with the statistics in pamphlets, which averred "more than six hundred were killed at Dinant with 1,200 houses burnt down."<sup>18</sup> But perhaps no story was more successful than the story of what occurred in Louvain, in which "massacres, fire, and destruction

---

<sup>13</sup> Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Alice Colin, *Pamphlets: The Ransacking of Dinant, 1914* (Bruxelles: Imprimerie Financière et Commerciale, 1918), 27.

went on unheeded. Citizens were shot and others were taken prisoners and compelled to go with troops. Soldiers went through the streets yelling, 'Man hat geschossen!'"<sup>19</sup> These murder stories were not totally mendacious, since at least five thousand Belgian civilians died in the war's first year, but the report used these murders for emotional gain. In depicting the Germans as savages instead of explaining the reasoning behind their actions, the report succeeded in its smearing of German international reputation.

The most blatant propaganda use was that of ecclesiastical deaths. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the *Bryce Report*, the "burgomaster's brother and the priest were bayoneted by the Huns."<sup>20</sup> This story was written in the Bryce Report more descriptively:

In Belgium large bodies of men sometimes including the burgomaster and the priest, were seized, marched by officers to a spot chosen for the purpose, and there shot in cold blood, without any attempt at trial or even inquiry, under the pretence of inflicting punishment upon them as the village authorities did all in their power to prevent any further molestation by the invading force.<sup>21</sup>

The theme of brutality against priests was developed through the report to induce pathos. The *London Times* wrote that it was true that German spies had even "disguised themselves as priests and were arrested at Gard du Nord."<sup>22</sup> For whatever reason, the newspapers enjoyed this story, and they even made a "German Crimes" calendar to commemorate a German atrocity on each day of the calendar year with the atrocities in Belgium taking up more than two months of the dates.<sup>23</sup>

As already seen, another popular story aimed to portray the German soldiers as luses.<sup>24</sup> In the report's appendix, a German soldier named Fritz Hollman attested to heavy drinking, saying, "The only good thing is that one need not be thirsty [in Belgium or France]. We drank five or six bottles of champagne a day."<sup>25</sup> This diary excerpt was one piece of evidence that led Bryce and others to assume that the Germans had fired on themselves and that the shooting did not come from *franc-tireurs*. But there is no empirical evidence to back this

---

<sup>19</sup> *Reports on German Atrocities in Many Places in Belgium, Civilians, Women*, May 13, 1915. pg. 4. paragraph 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 4, paragraph 9.

<sup>21</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> *London Times*, August 6, 1914, pg. 6.

<sup>23</sup> M.L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914-18* (London: MacMillan Company, 1982), 141. Four of the months on the calendar were related to the Belgium atrocities in which one of the months was headlined with the arrest of Cardinal Mercier and his imprisonment.

<sup>24</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, appendix. 251. *Das einzig gute man braucht nicht zu dursten. 5-6 Flaschen Sekt nehmen wir jeden Tag.*

assumption. In fact, Hollman wrote nothing about German soldiers shooting upon each other.

On the other hand, if one read Hollman's diary further, however, they would read about his encounter with a Belgian farmer, who shot at him and other German soldiers while they were looking for food. This is solid proof that in at least one instance a *franc-tireur* shot upon German soldiers. Hollman also said, "When we got into a village the people shot at us out of the houses, so we burnt the houses, but it is impossible to describe how it looked."<sup>26</sup> Hollman never mentions that the German soldiers had fired upon each other, but he does attest to the Belgian sharpshooters, which contradicts the point made by the Bryce report which states that there were no shooters in Belgium.

Another story narrated that several German soldiers had brutally dragged inhabitants out of their houses in an attempt to set them on fire.<sup>27</sup> The report states that the Germans had used arson whenever they had believed that civilians were shooting from certain houses – a plausible scenario – but the report follows up on this proposition by reporting that civilians were capriciously dragged out of their houses for no particular reason.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes it was argued that the Germans set houses on fire with the knowledge that people were still occupying it, and then shooting at its fleeing inhabitants.<sup>29</sup> It was even reported that houses could not be extinguished in the ransacking because the fire brigades were forcibly turned away by German commanders.<sup>30</sup>

The report's second major claim asseverated that "women were raped and children were brutally murdered."<sup>31</sup> The report's myriad accounts of rape constantly reiterated that these stories were too graphic for description, including the rape of virgins, ill treatment of the elderly, and cruelty towards children.<sup>32</sup> Other reports accused the Germans of raping women in the broad daylight, totaling fifteen to twenty women in a city's main square.<sup>33</sup> Another report states that a girl was violently "dragged out into a field, stripped naked and violated, and was killed with a bayonet."<sup>34</sup> In many cases, the victims were handled brutally, like a pregnant woman who had two bullets in her breasts and a sword cut on the right shoulder. Stories like these had often been reduced to anatomical atrocities in the international press before the Bryce Report was released, as it quoted the

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Aber wir sind Fechten gegangen wie ich zu einem Bauer kam, da haben sie geschossen ,da sind wir rein gegangen und haben alles wekgenommen und haben sie totgestossen, wen wir in ein Torf kamen da haben die Hauser geschossen aber wir haben die Häuser in Brant gesteckt. Aber das kan ja nicht so beschreiben wie es aus gesehen hat.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>29</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Reports on German Atrocities in Many Places in Belgium, Civilians, Women*, May 13, 1915, pg. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 8, 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

newspapers on their remarks that “a woman’s breasts were cut off after she had been murdered.”<sup>35</sup>

Belgian children had been brutally killed as well. The most brutal story took place at Haecht, where “several children had been murdered who were two or three years old, and one was found nailed to the door of a farmhouse by its hands and feet, a crime which seems incredible, but evidence for which we feel bound to accept.”<sup>36</sup> A German soldier’s words were used for pathos in this context, as he was quoted as saying, “I am a father myself, and I cannot bear this. It is not war, but butcher!” Of course, the name of the soldier was not revealed, but it demonstrated that these horrible stories were even attested to by German soldiers. This story would cause some to question the report’s legitimacy, but very few actually questioned the stories.

In addition, the committee imputed several lesser charges to the Germans. They accused them of breaking the laws of warfare by wearing Belgian uniforms and abusing the white flag several times, both of which were blatantly against the rules of warfare. Another considerable body of evidence existed in reference to the German practice of using civilians, and sometimes military prisoners, as screens so that the Belgian troops could not return fire. In this regard, there is evidence that proves that the Germans used civilians as shields in Belgium, a practice which was also strictly forbidden by international law. But, once again, the Germans argued that the intent of using civilians as shields had to do with the safety of German troops against the shooting of the *francs-tireurs*.<sup>37</sup>

Other lesser charges evoked German jingoism. Supposedly, the Germans humiliated a few of the Belgians by making them recite a discourse extolling the greatness and glory of the German Fatherland. Alice Colin’s pamphlet, printed during the war, said that, “Many of the murders that occurred were said to have happened amidst German battle cries and savage roars such as ‘*Deutschland über alles*.’”<sup>38</sup> The pamphlet also said that, “With the cries of ‘*Schwein*,’ the German soldiers insulted their captives in the grossest manner, spat in their faces, and performed acts which do not permit description.”<sup>39</sup> The Bryce report argued that women were compelled to give three cheers for the Kaiser and forced to sing “*Deutschland über alles*.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, the Germans were accused of violating the neutrality of Luxembourg and Belgium, and crossing the French frontier before declaring war.<sup>41</sup> Only the former was supported by outside evidence.

The report’s main conclusion was that the Germans’ murder, rape, arson, and pillaging had been ongoing since they crossed the border. The report was lopsided in this analysis, since it attempted to prove that the Germans’ arguments

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. London Times. *Atrocities in Belgium: The Official Report: Outrages on Women and Non-Combatants*, September 16, 1914, pg. 6, paragraph. 6 and 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 87-8.

<sup>38</sup> Colin, *Pamphlets: The Ransacking of Dinant, 1914*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 197.

were empirically disproved by Bryce's inquiry. It concluded that no civilized nation had ever acted so brutally in history's annals, and, more importantly, that the *francs-tireurs* did not exist. By seemingly disproving their existence, the Bryce report was able to argue that the Germans had lied about the existence of *francs-tireurs* in order to hide their thirst for murder and pillaging. This belief was given much credence in the US, where the report would enjoy its largest publicity and its most sympathetic audience. The final section of this article will try to explain why.

## Conclusion

*It never occurred to me that newspapers  
And statesmen could lie. I forgot my pacifism,  
I was ready to believe the worst of the Germans.  
I discounted 20% of the atrocity details as  
Wartime exaggeration. That was not, of course,  
enough.*

– Robert Graves

Though the last chapter explained the major claims of the Bryce report, the goal is now to call into question some of their claims. The Bryce Commission did not produce a dishonest or fraudulent report in the sense that it reached conclusions that the evidence had shown to be untrue, but rather its fraudulence stems from the fact that it did not verify its evidence. A major concern with the report's objectivity depends on whether the sources used could reasonably be considered accurate. Many critics, such as Sir Roger Casement and Clarence Darrow, believed that the interviewed refugees were full of hysteria and war rage, and, therefore, contrived stories of German brutality in Belgium. Another valid complaint made by the few skeptics was that not a single witness was identified by their name in the report. Bryce's response to this criticism was that the names were not given because the Belgian victims may have had reprisals leveled against them. This may have been the appropriate decision by the committee, though, because it was possible that the Germans may have felt vindictive.

Initially, the report did have a few skeptics. The first was the Irish poet, nationalist, and revolutionary Sir Roger Casement, who is not a surprising pundit because during the war he was cooperating with the German government in an attempt to arm Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Casement argued that the atrocities had not been any different from the crimes committed by the English against his nation, or the Belgian atrocities in the Congo in 1885 to 1912.<sup>2</sup> Somehow, the latter atrocities were easily forgotten in 1914 as Lord Northcliffe's newspapers, the *Daily Mail*

---

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> The London Times, *Sir Roger Casement and Germany*, November 21, 1921, pg. 6.

<sup>2</sup> These atrocities were well known during the time. They sparked the twentieth century's first humanitarian movement. They were also witnessed by Joseph Conrad, and they would be the major influence of his classic, *Heart of Darkness*.

and *The Evening News*, raised a vociferous howl against the violation of “poor little Belgium,” drowning out the Congo stories.<sup>3</sup>

Another critic was the famous iconoclastic American lawyer, Clarence Darrow, who specialized in winning cases for seemingly guilty clients. Darrow’s main criticism was that Bryce’s stories about children were absolutely false. He decided to make an extended trip to France in 1915 to prove his point, looking in vain for one person who could confirm even one of Bryce’s stories, but he found no success.<sup>4</sup> To leave no stone unturned, he even had the temerity to announce that he would pay \$1,000 to anyone who could produce one Belgian or French child whose hands were amputated by a German soldier, but he was not surprised when there were no takers to this generous offer.<sup>5</sup> Historians have not fared much better: there has never been any photographic evidence that shows that children had had their hands amputated by German soldiers. It is believed by some that the story may have originated from the Congo atrocities, where children had actually had their hands cut off.<sup>6</sup>

These skeptics would have been unsurprised to hear that the report’s documents were never found after the war. In the introduction to the report’s appendix it is stated that the original depositions “remain in custody of the Home Department, where they would be available in the case of need for reference after the conclusion of the war.”<sup>7</sup> However, after the war, historians seeking the materials were told by the Home Department that the files had mysteriously disappeared. In a letter from B.E. Schmitt, a librarian of the foreign office, to Sir Stephen Gagelee on June 22, 1939, Schmitt finally confirmed the loss of the documents that the Bryce report promised were in good keeping.<sup>8</sup> A tenacious, comprehensive search yielded nothing. This blatant evasion has prompted most historians, such as John N. Horne, Larry Zucker, and Thomas Fleming, to dismiss 99 percent of the Bryce report as having been fabricated. One has even called the report “one of the worst atrocities of the war.”<sup>9</sup> After the war, the Germans called for an objective study of the atrocities, and this time the commission was headed by the Belgians themselves. What the Belgian commission concluded in 1922 was that there was little proof that the atrocious acts had occurred as they were related in the Bryce report. For a scholar of Bryce’s caliber, it should have been obvious that most of the material was of no real value. Instead of holding up to the high integrity of a historian, he played the role of the propagandist by interpolating the false stories in a general condemnation of the German Army. The harshness of this claim comes from the fact that historians have a responsibility to be disciplined and objective in their work. Bryce’s report was a betrayal of a historians *raison d’être*.

Despite the fact that it was highly insidious propaganda, the Bryce Report was influential in shaping public opinion. The Germans played a key role

---

<sup>3</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 208.

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Bryce, *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 206-07.

<sup>9</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 54.

in this success because they had provided the propaganda material in the first place, as well as a slew of other outrages which seemed to corroborate the report. Their use of poisonous gases, Zeppelin raids, U-boat sinkings, and a government led by their warlike Kaiser all led to the general reputation of Germans being both cruel and savage.

Perhaps more importantly, the Germans were completely blind-sided by the importance of propaganda in the First World War, particularly as an important measure to control the minds of their own people to mobilize support for the war, to find recruiting for their military, and to initiate a common goal against a hated enemy. The First World War was a unique war because it was the first industrialized war between the great powers of Europe. This meant that the home front and the control of opinion were just as vital to success as the armies out in the field. The obvious point is that the morale within the circles of the home front was vital to stave off calls for a solution to the conflict. The other was that a nation's manufacturing capability played a vital role in keeping soldiers out in the field. It has been said that for each soldier in the field, there had to be one person working in a factory.

The Germans did make an attempt to disprove the stories told within the Bryce Report, but they never attained Bryce's creditability. Their rebuttal to the Bryce report was entitled *The German White Book*, but its effectiveness was far less than the Bryce report because it cost ten marks. Much of its publishing problems resulted from the fact that the Germans could never match Wellington House's connections within the US to distribute the pamphlet; Thomas Fleming is correct in pointing out that the leaders of the British War Propaganda Bureau had several friends within America's journalist circles.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the Bryce report owed much of its success as a propaganda pamphlet because it was translated into twenty-seven languages, while Wellington House worked overtime to see that the *White Book* would never be printed in neutral countries and given a fair hearing.

Therefore, the Germans were unable to rebuke the Bryce report or even cross-examine its witnesses. Furthermore, their attempts to counter with their own propaganda all failed because many of the neutrals had already made up their minds about Germany's war guilt. Bryce's report aided in portraying the war as one of right versus wrong, and much of this can be seen in the writing of the *London Times*, which claimed that the war was a "holy crusade for the law of nations."<sup>11</sup> The Germans tried to evoke sympathy with a report on the monstrous deeds of the Russians on the Eastern Front, but these stories did not receive even an iota of sympathy.<sup>12</sup> When attempting to invent successful propaganda ideas, Berlin's early efforts were pathetic.

Bryce's report was a huge propaganda victory for Britain and its allies. It convinced millions of Americans and other neutrals that the Germans were beasts masquerading as humans. Furthermore, the Bryce Report may have been responsible for distorting the history of the Belgian atrocities, because most of what was written on the Belgium topic before the 1930s hedged its footnotes too

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 62.

heavily on such atrocity reports. The staying power of the report alone meant that it was partly responsible for turning the world against Germany and turning them into pariahs. Many believed in 1914 that they had been the most militaristic nation, though it was always overlooked that other great powers had displayed just as much of a love for military glory as Germany. For instance, French Nationalists had been supporting their nation's arms buildups for years, and most of their politicians were obsessed with winning the military arms race against their rival. France itself was determined to erase the strain of their crushing defeat by Germany in 1870-71 and the loss of their northern territories, Alsace and Lorraine.<sup>13</sup> Though the report was certainly a misguided enquiry into the outrages, it still had a massive impact upon the history of thought during the First World War.

The report's success can also be measured by its impact on the United States. Read pointed out that Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* reported that the Bryce report had an "overwhelming effect on the American mind and heart," and its effect was only outmatched by the story of the sinking of the *Lusitania*.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Bryce report owes much of its success in the US to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, because the report was released just six days afterward.<sup>15</sup> Some historians have argued that the printing of the Bryce report was to capitalize on the publicity of the sinking, but there is no empirical evidence to back this claim, since the document was finished several weeks before it was published and was sent out to the US for its release on May 13, 1915.<sup>16</sup> What can be said with certainty, however, is that Wellington House and the story of the *Lusitania* turned US opinion against Germany in thought, word, and deed.

The report owed much of its US success to its widespread reporting through America's 20,000 newspapers,<sup>17</sup> where it received its widest circulation and its profoundest influence. When the report was released on May 13, Wellington House had already seen to it that the report would go to virtually every major US newspaper. On the same day, the *New York Times* wrote that proof had been given that "German soldiers were guilty of cruel and dreadful atrocities in the report of the Bryce commission in which we publish today." The headline of the story read: "GERMAN ATROCITIES ARE PROVED, FINDS BRYCE COMMITTEE."<sup>18</sup>

The *New York Times* had noted that James Bryce was the report's chairman and that his prestige as a historian removed all skepticism. The report even overruled the commentaries from US reporters stationed in Belgium, who claimed that stories of the atrocities were groundless. In fact, several of the newspapers covering the Bryce report began their articles by establishing Bryce's

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Read, *Atrocity Propaganda: 1914-1919*, 203.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, *German Atrocities*, May 13, 1915, pg. 14, paragraph 4. Gary Mead, in his book, *Doughboys: America and the First World War*, and Stewart Halsey Ross in his book, *Propaganda for War*, make the claim without any backing that the process of publishing had been sped up to be mixed in with the *Lusitania* story.

<sup>17</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 46. Fleming gave this figure.

<sup>18</sup> *New York Times*, *German Atrocities Are Proved, Finds Bryce Report*, May 13, 1915, pg. 6.



untarnished and unquestionable credibility, which garnered the report its tremendous respect. Even Irish newspapers in the US – the perennial foe of Britain – did not make the slightest attempt to impinge on the correctness of the facts alleged in the report.

Its credibility was easily won in Britain as well, where the British newspaper *The Independent* wrote:

In village after village non-combatants by hundreds, without discrimination of age or sex, have been put to death, often with fiendish torture, without so much as the shadow of evidence of any guilt to condemn them; little children and the aged have been butchered like cattle in shambles; women of every age from young girlhood up have been ravished.<sup>19</sup>

British reporting was similar to the US reports, since the citizens of both countries believed that not a building in Belgium still stood, that the country's seven million people wore rags, and that they begged for their food each day.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, Bryce's friends were well aware of his impartiality of mind and his judicial temperament, and they were convinced from his report to start a campaign against Germany.<sup>21</sup> The Morgan partners officially said that, "In America there are 50,000 people who understand the necessity of entering the war on England's side, but there are one-hundred million Americans who have not even thought of it. Our task is to see that those figures are reversed."<sup>22</sup>

Little did the Morgan brothers realize that US political opinion had already turned against Germany. Opinion had soured in the previous decade because of their desire to aid Spain in its war against the US, and the US also accused Germany of attempting to create international friction during US negotiations with Columbia in regards to the construction of the Panama Canal.<sup>23</sup> Among other accusations, US papers argued that Germany hated democracy and that it would work to quell its influence.

The influence of the Belgium atrocities can also be seen in America's willingness to provide charity to the country. All Americans knew that Germany was the aggressive giant, and that "poor Belgium" was small and weak, leading to the building up of American sympathy. The *New York Times* reported that the charity had been admirable and the liberality shown by the US people was honorable.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in 1915, the British government sent Mme. Vandervelde to the US to collect donations, where, to prove the country's

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Independent*, *The Bryce Report on German Outrages*, May 24, 1915, pg. 309, paragraph 3.

<sup>20</sup> Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I*, 89.

<sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, *Bryce Commission to Blame Germans*, February, 21, 1915, pg. 3, paragraph 2.

<sup>22</sup> Fleming, *The Illusion of Victory*, 47.

<sup>23</sup> Maynard Butler, *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century German*, July, 1915, pg. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, *Bryce Explains America's Policy*, February 27, 1915, pg. 3.

kindness, she collected \$300,000 for Belgium relief.<sup>25</sup> It has been noted that US wartime contributions, headed by Iowa's Herbert Hoover, had kept the Belgian people from starving, and that the US government was even generous enough to offer up tracts of land in the south and in the west to be used as Belgian settlements – a response to the displacement of 1.5 million Belgians during the war.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the Americans deeply cared about the plight in Belgium.

Still, how much the propaganda report affected US opinion is difficult to judge: the US did not enter the war until April 2, 1917, which means that the report's effect was not enough to bring the US military into the war. What the report probably accomplished was that it changed the minds of Americans against Germans. US opinion had soured against Germany during their years in neutrality, and the report did much to put the US on a mental disposition in which they favored Britain and its allies.

The report's success can also be measured from the broad outlook that men like Masterman and Bryce were able to weaken Germany's cause, which may have been responsible for shortening the war and saving lives.<sup>27</sup> It must be reiterated that one reason why the Allies won was that American soldiers had flooded into Europe by 1918, which demolished German morale and ended the war. Though it is always difficult to measure public opinion, the Bryce report may also have injured Germany's morale within its army or on its home front. A quote from the German General Erich von Ludendorff may drive home the point, as he wrote in his memoirs that during the war "Germany [was] hypnotized by the enemy propaganda as a rabbit is by a snake."<sup>28</sup> If this is true, then the propaganda Bryce report played a role in undermining Germany's war effort.

In conclusion, Bryce wrote the report as propaganda because he knew that his countrymen were in battle, and that Germany could be accused with impunity because they could not speak on their own behalf or cross-examine the evidence produced against them. A historian of his ability should not have been so biased in the writing of the report, even though he and his biographer, H.A.L. Fisher, were unwilling to admit that they had served as official propagandists. Bryce held the belief that the war was a struggle between ideals – the ideal of German militarism, and the rule of law with peaceful communities dwelling in tranquility. Merely the fact that the interests of the latter were concomitant with Britain's interests was enough to make him write the report. Even Bryce was capable of being swayed by patriotic exigencies.

Furthermore, Bryce and his colleagues were probably surprised by the worldwide appeal that their report received just because it was signed by an eminent historian. The committee seemed either unable or unwilling to acknowledge or even apologize for the half-truths that they created. In the report's defense, Bryce had explicitly mentioned at the report's outset that "upon trial was not the German nation, but the ruthlessness of the methods employed by

---

<sup>25</sup> Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Chicago Tribune, *Plans Colonies in American For Belgium*, January 4, 1915, pg. 3, paragraph 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ross, *Propaganda for War: How the US Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

the German military's conduct of the war in Belgium."<sup>29</sup> However, his warning was ignored by the press, and the readers of his report obviously did not heed his advice, because his report sparked great hate against the German nation.

On a final note, the wartime French and Belgian investigations arrived at similar conclusions, but all three post-war commissions failed to substantiate most of the allegations that were written in the Bryce report.<sup>30</sup> The atrocities in Belgium were exaggerated through propaganda, but that does not detract from the people who actually did die in Belgium during the occupation of the First World War. Burnings, destruction, and murder did occur in 1914 through a general campaign of German terrorism. The historical revision that needs to be noted is that the atrocities in Belgium were perhaps not as barbaric as the Entente Allies had portrayed them during the war.

**Jameson Patrick Ryley** graduated with honors in history from the University of Iowa in May 2007. He is currently working as a history and German tutor at Black Hawk College in Moline, Illinois. He is also prepping for the June 2008 LSAT. He intends on serving with AmeriCorps and entering law school in the fall of 2009.

---

<sup>29</sup> New York Times, *Bryce Commission to Blame Germans*, February, 21, 1915, pg. 3, paragraph. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Sanders and Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914-18*, 144.