

Atrocities

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Summary

The term "atrocities" describes an act of violence condemned by contemporaries as a breach of morality or the laws of war. "Atrocities" are culturally constructed; by 1914, an international discourse on "civilized" war had defined "atrocities" as acts perpetrated by an enemy that was "uncivilized", or "barbarian". Victims of the "German atrocities" of 1914 were French and Belgian civilians; the killing of Germans in East Prussia by Russian troops featured less prominently. Habsburg forces killed numerous civilians in Serbia; all sides were charged with atrocities against captured soldiers and in naval warfare. Atrocity propaganda is discussed in a separate article.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction: Concepts and Contexts](#)

[2 Violence against Enemy Civilians](#)

[3 Violence during Occupation](#)

[4 Violence on Home Territory](#)

[5 Violence against Prisoners of War](#)

[6 Poison Gas](#)

[7 Blockades and Submarine Warfare](#)

[8 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction: Concepts and Contexts

The word "atrocities" is used to describe an act of violence condemned by contemporaries as a breach of morality or the laws and customs of war; the victims are usually defenceless persons (non-combatants or disarmed combatants).¹ The destruction of cultural monuments and the devastation of property beyond military necessity could also be described as atrocities. "Atrocities" are distinguished from the legal term "war crimes", first used in this sense by the British jurist [Lassa Oppenheim \(1858-1919\)](#) in 1906 to mean breaches of the [laws of war](#). Acts constituting "atrocities" were often "war crimes", but the perspective is different: the term reflects their cultural construction.

The hundred years since the Napoleonic Wars, an age of early globalization in which international law gained increasing significance, was in contemporary perception an age of progress. The attempts to “humanize”, if possible to prevent war, were expressed in the codification of existing laws at the Geneva conferences of 1864 and 1906, and the [Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907](#). The former were devoted to improving the lot of wounded soldiers and, by recognition of the [Red Cross](#), that of wounded and sick soldiers taken prisoner. The Hague conventions, in particular the convention “Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land” (the 4th appendix to the convention of 1907), attempted to confine the effects of military violence to combatants.²

That was the perspective in western and central Europe, and North America. However, these rules did not apply in the [colonial sphere](#), where asymmetric wars with indigenous peoples were conducted outside international law. Ruthless exploitation and violent rule by [forced labour](#), flogging, and shooting, were ubiquitous, whether in the Belgian Congo, the German Cameroons, or French Equatorial Africa. Although the United Kingdom had led the campaign for the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century, it profited equally from the colonial economy with all its attendant violence, as exposed by [Edmund Dene Morel \(1873-1924\)](#) and [Roger Casement \(1864-1916\)](#) in their investigations in the Congo and the Putamayo region. The “Belgian atrocities” in the Congo became an international *cause célèbre* in the years before the First World War. After international and domestic Belgian criticism of the brutal methods of exploitation in the Congo under [Leopold II, King of the Belgians \(1835-1909\)](#), [Belgium](#) annexed the territory and reformed its administration. Forced labour was banned, and the conditions of the indigenous population improved rapidly.³ Two other cases also had repercussions in the international public sphere: the death of some 25,000 Boer civilians in the British concentration camps in the South African War,⁴ and the German army’s “war of annihilation” against the Herero in South-West Africa.⁵ In both [Britain](#) and [Germany](#), outraged public opinion succeeded in enforcing a change in colonial policy to improve conditions. An international discourse on the nature of “civilized” war and “atrocities” was, in other words, well developed by 1914.

This was evident in the response to the [Balkan Wars](#). Liberal public opinion in the West condemned the atrocities committed by virtually all sides. The implicit assumption of liberal newspapers from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* to the *Manchester Guardian*, and in the impressive investigation published by the American Carnegie Foundation in 1914, was that these were the barbaric deeds of backward peoples.⁶ War between modern, civilized nations would be a different matter.

Violence against Enemy Civilians

This optimistic belief was soon shattered. By the end of August 1914, mutual charges of atrocities were raised, and did not cease with the end of the war. The German invasion of [France](#) and Belgium was followed within days by the news that German troops had committed atrocities against civilians. This not only confirmed the moral justification of the Allied cause, but also lent the Allies a [propaganda weapon](#) to mobilize home and [neutral](#) opinion. The [German government](#) and the [press](#) rejected the enemy's allegations and denied that peaceful civilians had been targeted. Any victims of military violence had been guilty of participation in fighting. In the German view, civilian resistance was illegal, and its perpetrators had been executed in just punishment.

The German interpretation thus rejected international law, which allowed civilian militias and volunteers to take up arms to resist invasion (Article 2 of the Hague Law of Land Warfare). The story told at the time in Germany, and largely believed in the army, was that victims of the executions were "*francs-tireurs*", or illegal civilian combatants. That remained the official German line throughout the war, and the rest of the 20th century. Between the Allied accusations of brutal German "atrocities", therefore, and the German claim of illegal resistance and justified punishment, lay an unbridgeable gulf, deepened by wartime hatred and lurid propaganda on both sides.

The truth was not somewhere in the middle. Some Allied [atrocities propaganda](#) notoriously exaggerated and invented stories (e.g., that German soldiers had amputated children's hands, or in one rumour crucified a Canadian soldier). Yet the reality was bad enough: from August to October 1914 the German army intentionally executed 5,521 civilians in Belgium and 906 in France; in 129 of these incidents, ten or more were killed. Most reports published by the official commissions of investigation set up by the Allied [governments](#) gave a correct picture of the nature and approximate extent of the violence. The majority of the victims were men of military age, but a substantial minority were women and [children](#); civilians were used as human shields; and there were instances of wanton cruelty and widespread incendiarism. There were many accounts of [rape](#), although the frequency of the crime is hard to assess, and German sources are silent on this issue. Despite the frequent allegation in Allied propaganda that rape was an integral part of the "German atrocities", there is no sign that it was part of army policy.⁷ More damaging for Germany's reputation as a cultured nation were the "cultural atrocities": the shelling of the world-famous Reims Cathedral, and the deliberate burning of the Louvain University Library.⁸

Statistics and lists are abstract and dry, and obscure the nature of the violence. The

perpetrators were soldiers who were almost always under the command of combat officers; their actions were usually covered or expressly ordered by senior officers at the level of brigade, division, and army corps commanders.⁹ Although a few of the victims were “hostages” – local notables who were supposed to guarantee the safety of the troops – the vast majority were not, despite Herfried Münkler’s reinterpretation of the victims as hostages, in an ill-judged attempt to show empathy with German military conduct.¹⁰ Both formalized executions and frenzied bouts of killing were accompanied by expressions of rage and hatred. German soldiers had been trained to expect “*franc-tireur*” resistance from civilians and punish alleged civilian fighters ruthlessly. This was problematic, even within its own parameters. In a [modern war](#) when [infantry](#) weapons had a range of 1,500 metres, the German troops interpreted shots fired by unidentified assailants, usually soldiers hidden behind hedges or in houses, as “illegal” fighting by civilians. In fact, there was virtually no shooting by civilians; properly constituted civic guard units, the active [garde civique](#), wore uniforms and were integrated into the armed forces. Some members of the non-active garde civique, who wore improvised uniforms of various kinds, may have participated in the defence of a few localities in Belgium, but their activity did not correlate with the pattern of German violence against civilians across the invasion zone.

The dynamic of unidentified firing, followed by vengeance on uninvolved civilians, is illustrated by the mass killings in Dinant, where a total of 674 civilians were killed, one-tenth of its population. The first German soldiers to enter the suburb Les Rivages on 23 August arrested a large group of inhabitants, apparently without harming them. When French troops began firing from cover on the opposite bank of the river Meuse, a battalion commander, Major Schlick, “his face contorted with rage”, gave the order to kill the civilians. The troops knew the captive civilians, who included many women and children, could not have been firing, for they had been guarding them from the start.¹¹ The majority of the seventy-seven civilians killed in this incident were women and children. Right across the invasion zone, orders were issued in similar wording: “All men capable of bearing arms are to be executed on the spot.” There was a causal connection between such orders and the mass killing of civilians, including women and children. As one soldier told his French captors, investigating the massacre in Dinant,

We were given the order to kill all civilians shooting at us, but in reality the men of my regiment and I myself fired at all civilians we found in the houses from which we suspected there had been shots fired; in that way we killed women and even children.¹²

Near the centre of Dinant, as Grenadier Regiment 100 descended towards the river Meuse, they came under fire from French units on the opposite bank. Furious with the inhabitants

whom they blamed for the firing, they drove families out of their houses, selected nineteen men, and shot them. In the late afternoon, under the command of Captain Walter von Loeben, men and youths were separated from their families and executed by firing squad. Loeben's extraordinary testimony to the Prussian war ministry internal investigation showed how hearsay and an officer's word sufficed to condemn people to death; this was not a punishment of *francs-tireurs* or "hostages". The soldiers knew the victims were "innocent", but they perceived the civilians to be collectively culpable. Here 137 civilians perished.¹³

Essentialist claims about unique German "barbarism" would be mistaken. The Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies treated suspicious non-combatants equally ruthlessly. The Russian army committed many acts of violence during the invasion of East Prussia in August/September 1914. Germany denounced the Russians for having devastated thirty-nine towns and 1,900 villages and killed almost 1,500 civilians. Research by [Alexander Watson](#) has confirmed these figures, and he concludes that 1,491 German civilians were deliberately killed in executions and individual murders. Given the smaller population of East Prussia (about 1.7 million people in the areas invaded by the Russians) this was directly comparable to the intensity of violence against civilians during the invasion of Belgium in August/September 1914.¹⁴

Russian soldiers also committed widespread violence against civilians in the Austro-Hungarian territory invaded in 1914/15. In Galicia and the Bukovina the [Russian occupation](#) targeted Jews, Germans and Polish notables, and pro-Austrian Ukrainians, and interned or deported thousands. The tsarist commanders incited peasants to pillage the property of their Jewish neighbours, and their troops set an example: they unleashed pogroms, for example in November 1914 in [Lemberg](#), killing twenty and injuring thirty Jews, and burning Jewish-owned houses and all the synagogues in Horodenka.¹⁵ It is impossible to provide an exact death toll; Austro-Hungarian figures indicate the total at the end of 1915 was less than 100.

Atrocities against the population accompanied the Austro-Hungarian invasions of [Serbia](#) in 1914 and 1915, the extent of which has not yet been fully researched. The Habsburg army treated the entire Serb civilian population as combatants or participants in helping armed resistance. This impression was the result of both expectations and realities: the pre-war [stereotyping](#) of the Serbian population as vicious, a military doctrine of the necessity for ruthless suppression of insurgency, and rumours of the brutality of the Serbian *Komitadji* (partisans) combined to create wild fear. Genuine confusion was produced on the one hand by the real resistance and on the other, by the poor state of the Serb army, in which many of the soldiers had no uniforms.¹⁶ In preparation for the fighting in Serbia and even Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Habsburg Army high command recommended "punishment expeditions"

against villages that supported the *Komitadji*, summary executions of suspected partisans and hostages, and the burning of settlements.¹⁷ The estimate of the Swiss observer, [Rodolphe A. Reiss \(1875-1929\)](#), that at least 3,500 civilians were killed in the first invasion in August 1914, has never been corroborated, but the Habsburg army leadership later admitted there had been widespread violence and “pointless reprisals”.¹⁸ In one incident in mid-August 1914, according to both Serbian and Habsburg testimony, between 100 and 200 unarmed men, women, and children in the town of Šabac were locked in a church and killed.¹⁹ Although there was again ruthless suppression of a *Komitadji* uprising in March 1917 in southern Serbia, the Habsburg army de-escalated violence against Serb civilians in the later years of the war.²⁰ In total, from 1914 to 1918, the army executed without trial at least 11,500, according to the diary of the last imperial minister of finance, [Josef Redlich \(1869-1936\)](#), or possibly up to 30,000 Serb civilians according to another estimate.²¹ Habsburg military violence against civilians on enemy, and, as we shall see, on home territory, thus far outweighed the German atrocities of 1914.

Violence during Occupation

It is essential to distinguish between the violence of combat and the effects of harsh state policies. As Germany established its [occupations](#) in western and eastern Europe, civilians everywhere were subject to exploitation and arbitrary rule. To prevent escape, the army erected a lethal [electrified fence](#) on the border between Belgium and the neutral [Netherlands](#). As many as 3,000 people may have died attempting to cross the border, but reliable figures have not been found, because of the loss of the records of the Prussian army in 1945.²² “Atrocities” need publicity to count as atrocities, and since the electrified fence did not feature in the international public sphere, it was not construed as an “atrocity”.

By contrast, Germany’s policy of forced labour and deportations did. Civilians were deported in two distinct phases in the west. In 1914, at least 23,000 French and Belgian civilians were deported to Germany. Some of the victims were local notables, so the army probably intended deportation as part of a security policy against resistance. Since many of the deportees were women, children, and the infirm, however, a second motivation must have been collective punishment for perceived resistance.²³ After internment under harsh conditions in camps, most were allowed to return, only to find that their homes had frequently been ransacked and all valuables and furniture stolen. Some, however, were held for the duration of the war: 1,500 citizens of Amiens were deported in September 1914 and incarcerated until 1918.²⁴

In the second phase, with the [German war economy's](#) insatiable demand for [labour](#), 58,432 Belgians were deported to Germany in late 1916; another 62,155 were forced to work behind the front in France and Belgium, sometimes under fire from Allied guns, and often subjected to corporal punishment.²⁵ Thousands of French men and women were forced to dig trenches and build infrastructure for the German army. This was not only contrary to international law, it was repugnant to people forced to work against the interests of their own nation.²⁶ The official Belgian report recorded that 2,614 of the forced labourers died (2.17 percent): a high proportion, given that most of them must have been men judged healthy enough to work, and according to another Belgian official report the death rate may have been as high as 4 percent. When they returned home, the percentage reported ill was 35.8.²⁷ Cardinal [Désiré-Joseph Mercier \(1851-1926\)](#), the archbishop of Mechelen (Malines) issued public protests, and interceded between the German governor-general and the Vatican. The [Belgian government](#) in exile mobilized world opinion, especially in the [USA](#), and the underground [newspapers in Belgium](#), above all *La Libre Belgique*, reported regularly.²⁸ The removal of 20,121 civilians, including 9,000 women and girls, from Tourcoing, Roubaix, and Lille in 1916, for forced labour, caused particular outrage in France.²⁹

In eastern Europe the German army made extensive use of forced labour and deportations; public corporal punishment, which included women, was standard practice. The conditions of occupation led to famine and epidemics in which thousands died in the winter of 1917/1918.³⁰ Yet the occupation policies in eastern Europe provoked far less international protest: another indication that east European victims of war were hidden from the international public sphere. The exception was Serbia, about which the western [press](#) reported even before the famous book by Rodolphe A. Reiss.

During its invasions of East Prussia, the Russian army deported a large number of German civilians, perhaps as many as 13,600, including 6,500 women and children. Transported in overcrowded cattle wagons, they ended up thousands of kilometres away in southern [Russia](#) or Siberia. The authorities treated many of them as [prisoners of war](#) and subjected them to forced labour. Only 8,300 of the deportees survived the harsh conditions to return home.³¹

During the first Russian occupation of Habsburg Galicia and the Bukovina, September 1914 to June 1915, Jews and ethnic Germans were regarded as politically unreliable, as potential spies and traitors. The [antisemitism](#) thus unleashed spread to Jewish subjects of the Russian Empire, and many members of both ethnic groups were taken hostage and deported to the interior. Thousands of Galician Poles were deported for fear that they sympathized with [Józef Pilsudski's \(1867-1935\) Polish legions](#). And although Russian nationalists regarded Ukrainians

as “Little Russians”, thousands of them were arrested and deported on suspicion of “Austrophilism”. [Joshua Sanborn](#) concludes that the Russian high command in the first year of the war “not only sanctioned, but ordered, mass population movements that fall under the rubric of “ethnic cleansing””.³²

In the second occupation of Galicia, June 1916 to January 1918, the Russian army attempted to show moderation, but the wartime measures of requisitioning and forced labour fell hard on the largely Ukrainian poor population. Moreover, military discipline had deteriorated to a point where soldiers engaged in uncontrolled looting, rape, and murder. Especially in the context of the attempted counter-revolutionary mobilization of 1917, [Jews were again the victims of pogroms](#), in which the “Savage Division” distinguished itself by its cruelty.³³

Violence on Home Territory

Civilians were also subjected to violence by their own governments. In Galicia and the [Ukraine](#), Habsburg troops killed a large number of civilians suspected of betrayal. As many as 30,000 Ruthenes (Habsburg Ukrainians) may have been executed without trial.³⁴ Anton Holzer has published a collection of [photographs](#) from [Austria-Hungary's](#) war that amply document the arrest of “suspects”, the hanging of civilians, alleged partisans, and spies, the shooting of captured soldiers, and the “grinning of the hangmen” (the title of Holzer’s book, *Das Lächeln der Henker*).

The Russian army adopted a policy of scorched earth in its retreat in 1915, destroying supplies and buildings, and deporting civilians. At least 300,000 Lithuanians, 250,000 Latvians, at least 500,000 Jews, and 743,000 Poles were driven east for fear they would assist the enemy.³⁵

By the beginning of 1917 there were no fewer than 6 million [refugees in the Russian interior](#) and the Caucasus.³⁶ Many, naturally, had fled the war zone from fear, but far more were the victims of forced resettlement. Critics of army policy estimated in 1915 that four-fifths of the [refugees](#) were the victims of forced displacement.³⁷ Ethnic Germans faced particular discrimination and prejudice, and in many cases their land, which they had farmed for generations, was sold off to Russians. Some 200,000 Germans from Russian [Poland](#) alone were deported to Siberia.³⁸ Estimates of the numbers of deported ethnic Germans vary from around 115,000 from all western regions of the [empire](#) to 520,000 from the Polish provinces alone.³⁹ Muslims in eastern Anatolia were expelled from Kars and Batum provinces (part of the Russian Empire since 1878), in order to make their land available for Armenian refugees;

Crimean Tatars, suspected of sympathy with Turkey, were also the victims of deportation.⁴⁰ However, deportation was not exclusively directed against [national minorities](#): at least 1.1 million Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were also evacuated from the war zone.⁴¹

The Russian army's policy, ostensibly based on the fear of betrayal, was a part of the historic shift in the nature of [warfare](#) since the French Revolution to war between mobilized nations, in which some ethnic groups were defined as the nation and others as "foreign". It thus contributed to the development of Russian ethno-[nationalism](#), one notable effect of which was the emergence of violent antisemitism in eastern Europe.⁴² Another aspect of ethno-national violence against civilians was the the Tsarist army's ruthless crushing of the revolt in central Asia by Kazakh, Kirgiz, and Uzbek radicals in 1916. Thousands of Kazakhs were deported, many were executed, and between 250,000 and 500,000 people fled across the border to [China](#). Over 3,000 Russian settlers were killed, and at least twice that number of indigenous people.⁴³

Ethnic nationalism and "nationalized warfare" were not the only cause of atrocities. In the Habsburg Empire, where there was [no dominant ethnic group](#) (at least in the Austrian half of the monarchy), imperial rather than national ideologies could also beget violence – on home and in occupied territories. Here the victims were defined as "disloyal" to the Habsburg emperor and imperial idea but not necessarily as "foreign". Here supra-national and supra-ethnic forms of military-imperial expansionism could equally provide the potential for violence against non-combatants.⁴⁴

Yet even the Russian Empire's panicked repression of ethnic minorities and Habsburg ruthlessness in Serbia and Galicia were overshadowed by the [Ottoman Empire's genocidal violence unleashed on the Armenians](#).⁴⁵ Following the mass arrest and "disappearance" of thousands of Armenian political leaders and intellectuals on 24 April 1915, as from May the Armenian population of Anatolia was deported to the deserts of Syria. Their [churches](#) were destroyed and their property was confiscated and auctioned off. Deportation, as United States Ambassador [Henry Morgenthau \(1856-1946\)](#) recognized, was a prelude to massacre; the Ottoman authorities freely admitted to him their intention to issue "the death warrant to a whole race."⁴⁶ Some were killed on the spot; during the forced marches many more were shot or hacked to death, and others died from exhaustion, starvation, and [disease](#). Plentiful testimony was provided by Armenian survivors, American and German diplomats, and by Turkish witnesses at the Istanbul trials held after the war.⁴⁷ Estimates of the number of deaths vary widely, but in March 1919 the Turkish minister of the interior produced the figure

of 800,000.⁴⁸ 1 million (out of the Ottoman Armenian population of 1.8 million) is the minimum consensus among international scholars.

The fate of the Armenians soon became known abroad, and the Allies condemned the “massacres”, as they were called at the time, as “crimes against humanity”, for which they would hold personally responsible “all members of the Ottoman government and those of their agents who are implicated in such massacres.”⁴⁹

Apart from the Armenian genocide, why were none of the events described in this section deemed to be atrocities? A similar dynamic of ethno-national stereotyping and new military cultures of nationalized warfare produced similar outcomes for the victims, whether in Belgium, Galicia, or Kazakhstan, but the essential feature was absent: the construction of these events as atrocities in the international public sphere.

Violence against Prisoners of War

The received wisdom that captured enemy soldiers during the war were treated humanely in the First World War has been increasingly questioned in recent research. Their treatment depended greatly on their rank (officers were almost always treated well, given relatively comfortable accommodation, and not forced to work), and on their nationality. In general, the Russians in German captivity were more ruthlessly exploited and beaten than prisoners from France and Britain.⁵⁰ Large numbers of Russians were forced to work near the front, often under shellfire.⁵¹ Yet their mortality rate probably did not differ greatly from that of the French and British (in total about 7 percent): on German figures it was about 5 percent, which may be due the fact that the Russians worked mainly on farms, where the standard of nutrition was better than in industry. Germans, German-Austrians, and Magyars in Russian captivity were more harshly treated than other nationalities.⁵²

Incompetence and neglect on the part of the administration and commandants led to the spread of disease in some camps. Typhus broke out among [French](#) and [Russian](#) prisoners of war in the German camp Kassel-Niederzwehren in 1915; 18,000 men were infected, and 1,300 (or according to the estimate of a French medical doctor, 2,300), died. This was held to be a war crime for which the British and the French attempted to prosecute the camp commandant after the war.⁵³ Some German prisoners in French captivity were sent to [North Africa](#). The French intended to humiliate the Germans before the native colonial population. To a German public that was expecting “civilized” standards, this was shocking: it was a galling inversion of racial hierarchy to the Germans that their men were under colonial guards, subject to a harsh, non-European environment, where almost all the men contracted

malaria. In turn, the French and British likewise denounced as an atrocity the German reprisal of sending Allied prisoners to work on the [eastern front](#).⁵⁴

In Russia the typhus epidemic in Tockoe camp in 1915/16 caused the death of between 10,000 and 17,000 men.⁵⁵ The prisoners sent to work on the construction of the Murmansk [railway](#) in the Kola peninsula were particularly unfortunate. Owing to the inhospitable climate – working in temperatures as low as thirty to thirty-five degrees Celsius below zero – and the lack of suitable accommodation, [food](#), water, and [medical treatment](#), some 25,000 out of 70,000 German-Austrians and Hungarians perished.⁵⁶ The conditions on Murmansk railway soon attained notoriety, with an article published in the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* on 30 August 1916 under the title “Dante’s hell in Russia”.⁵⁷

The deliberate maltreatment of the Italians by the Habsburg army began immediately after capture: the conditions, especially for the 270,000 men taken captive in the aftermath of the Italian army’s collapse at [Caporetto](#) in late October 1917, posed an immediate threat to the men’s health and survival. [Italian prisoners](#) were often deprived of their warm clothing and sent on long rail journeys in cattle-cars without adequate food, drink, and sanitation, arriving in Austria exhausted, frozen, and sick. Poor nutrition, in combination with exhausting physical labour and inadequate heating and shelter, accounted for the mass death of Italian prisoners in Austro-Hungarian captivity: out of 468,000 men at least 92,451 (19.8 percent on Italian figures) died.⁵⁸

The most dangerous time for prisoners of war was the moment of capture. The killing of a surrendering or defenceless soldier was perceived as an atrocity, and undisciplined elements on all sides committed such crimes, although it was not in their armies’ self-interest to do so. Most cases probably went unrecorded, being perpetrated in the heat of the battle. In several cases senior officers issued such orders verbally, although written orders have not been found. In August 1914 the German Major-General [Karl Stenger \(1859-1928\)](#) gave an order to kill captured French soldiers at Thiaville, and about twenty men were killed.⁵⁹ During the [battle of the Somme](#), some British officers also issued such orders, and several German soldiers were killed trying to surrender.⁶⁰ In the absence of any systematic investigation, however, it remains an open question how widespread the practice was. In the case of the British army, there are too many German witness statements alleging this atrocity to be ignored. Moreover, a number of British internal army reports, as well as soldiers’ and officers’ post-war published memoirs, testified to the killing of men surrendering in battle; several officers, even senior commanders, on occasion voiced the expectation that no prisoners would be taken.

[Brian Feltman](#) argues that British military culture tolerated such killings.⁶¹ In 1919 the Prussian War Ministry claimed that “the British have murdered German prisoners of war entirely systematically and on orders from above.” The German allegations were only half-heartedly published, mainly, it appears, for internal official use, and the issue did not feature prominently in wartime or post-war German propaganda, despite the fact that the Allies brought several cases of maltreatment and killing of prisoners of war to world attention through their demand for the extradition of German war criminals in 1920.⁶² Even the German official record of maltreatment of prisoners in Russia was only published for internal use.⁶³

The reason for German reticence with counter-claims may have been the awareness that Allied documentation was more convincing, or possibly the realization that since Germany had resoundingly lost the propaganda battle over the atrocities against civilians, world opinion was unlikely to take German counter-claims seriously.

While written evidence from the enemy on the killing of captured soldiers was not generally available in wartime, rumours and stories circulated throughout every army. The Belgian government accused Germans of having shot captured Belgian soldiers in several incidents in August 1914, e.g. in Aarschot, on 19 August when over twenty captured men were shot, and on 21 and 22 August in Ette and neighbouring Goméry, where up to 210 wounded French soldiers were killed.⁶⁴ The commander of the German 20th Infantry Brigade, Major-General von der Horst, confirmed in an internal report on Ette that he had “ordered the captured civilians and French soldiers, in total about one hundred men, to be shot on the spot”.⁶⁵ Allied “propaganda” was thus not a synonym for lies and fabrications, which the term came to connote in the period after 1918: Allied reports might differ from German accounts in details and interpretation, but they often agreed on the essential features.

Conditions after capture could be equally lethal. Before their transfer into regular captivity in camps, and in some cases after transfer into the camps, captured men on both sides were often put to work on the battlefield or behind the lines, in dangerous duties such as clearing unexploded ordnance or digging trenches within range of enemy fire. This was regarded by each side as a criminal act that warranted retribution. The result, as [Heather Jones](#) has shown, was a cycle of reprisals. The vast extent of such prisoner labour under dangerous conditions, on both sides, indicates that the illusion of the prisoner of war as a non-combatant with protected status had collapsed by 1916.⁶⁶

Poison Gas

The use of lethal [poison gas](#) was one of several atrocious aspects of industrialized war that contributed to a fateful dynamic of destruction. It was explicitly forbidden under Article 23 of the Hague Convention IV “to employ poison”. The Allies condemned as cruel and illegal its first use by the German army in April 1915, and promptly commenced preparations to respond in kind. Sir [John French \(1852-1925\)](#), Commander-in-chief of the [British Expeditionary Force](#), condemned the enemy for its “mean and dastardly practice, hitherto unheard of in civilized warfare, the use of asphyxiating gases.”⁶⁷ Poison gas inspired fear and loathing, and many German soldiers and commanders also regarded it as an atrocity.⁶⁸ Both the British and the French used gas grenades at the Somme in 1916, and by 1918 the Allies were making extensive use of chemical weapons. The adoption of the Geneva Protocol of 1925 prohibiting the use of chemical weapons indicates that most states recognized their atrocious nature.

Blockades and Submarine Warfare

Another aspect of the war that provoked reciprocal charges of atrocity was [naval warfare](#).⁶⁹ Did the [Allied blockade](#) of the Central Powers constitute an atrocity? The dominant scholarly (and popular) view is that the blockade was illegal and led to serious food shortages causing the [mass starvation of German civilians](#). According to post-war German estimates, 700,000 civilians died as a result. For German nationalist publicists in the 1920s it was self-evident that the “English hunger blockade” was an atrocity and a war crime. The legal situation in 1914 was straightforward: blockade and the confiscation of enemy goods or ships on the high seas were permissible in war under the Declaration of Paris of 1856. The Declaration of London of 1909, which extended the rights of neutral shipping and restricted the type of goods liable to seizure as contraband, but allowed blockades, had in any event not been ratified by any state when war began.

The main intention of the blockade was to prevent the import of military supplies, but it was soon extended to target the civilian population; it thus represented a step on the road to [total warfare](#), and it was contrary to the spirit of international law, which sought to protect civilians from violence. However, it was not the sole or even the main cause of mass death, since Germany imported only about 10 percent of its food before the war, and German nutritionists assured the government that the population was over-supplied in terms of calories and animal proteins. The complex reasons for the hunger, malnutrition, and disease suffered by Germany’s [urban population](#) (Austria in fact suffered even worse), are discussed elsewhere in this encyclopedia. The depiction of the blockade as an atrocity by the German government

and in the media is part of the cultural history of the war which is yet to be researched.⁷⁰

German [U-boat warfare](#) was also not as such an atrocity. The manner in which it was conducted, however, flouted the laws of war and customary international law, because the law of the sea and common humanity held that the crew and passengers of sinking ships had to be rescued. U-boats did not have the space to do so. In the same process of totalization that brought poison gas warfare, in February 1915 the German government, frustrated at the lack of progress in the land war and under pressure from radical nationalists, declared the waters around the British Isles to be a “war zone”, in which all ships would be sunk without warning. The first spectacular result of the policy came on 7 May, when the [Lusitania](#), a large British passenger liner, was torpedoed; it sank quickly and 1,198 lives, including 127

American, were lost.⁷¹ Germany suspended unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic after American protests in August 1915, but the army and the navy clamoured for its return. They finally had their way in February 1917, when Germany resumed all-out submarine warfare. The government believed the navy’s promise to sink so many ships that Britain would starve and be forced to sue for peace by 1 August, but it was conscious it was a last, desperate gamble, because this flagrant breach of international law would provoke the United States to enter the war. American entry in the war in April 1917 was thus prompted by what was recognized on all sides as a war crime. President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), in declaring war on Germany, condemned the U-Boats as “outlaws”: “submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind.”⁷²

Conclusion

At this point we should reflect on the nature of atrocities. For many people opposed to war, war itself is an atrocity. Atrocity propaganda stood in a multi-layered relationship to events. Enemy stereotypes (the “barbarian”, the “*franc-tireur*”) predated the events and framed the terms of their perception, but propaganda did not, by and large, invent the phenomenon. “Propaganda”, in the sense of cultural production that strove to make sense of the violence, was only to a limited extent state directed and was characterized by its origins in bourgeois self-mobilization. The role of states was often reactive rather than manipulative, and while states used the discourse of atrocities, they did not create it. “Atrocities” are culturally constructed; in some cases they are not identical to breaches of the laws of war, and some do not even directly involve violence. That is especially apparent in the German denunciation of the Allies’ deployment of colonial troops as a barbaric atrocity.⁷³

Soldiers employing violence against enemy armed forces (in general) act legally; soldiers employing violence against non-combatants act (in general) illegally, and this is regarded in

the victim societies as atrocity. Perpetrators of atrocities had a range of motivations and emotions. Most were ordinary soldiers, instructed by respected officers, and caught in a group dynamic of peer pressure, who obediently formed firing squads to execute suspects, or fired torpedos to sink passenger ships. Some soldiers, by contrast, evidently took pleasure in beating and humiliating their victims before killing them; others refused to participate or even acted to prevent arbitrary killings.

There was no self-perpetuating dynamic of violence that only ends when the ammunition runs out or all potential victims have been killed, as the sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky has argued.⁷⁴ This was not true of massacres during the invasions of 1914, ethno-national violence inside the Russian Empire, or even in the mass murder of the Armenians in 1915. Many of the witnesses to the killings were the survivors: women and children were usually (although not always) separated from the men and were often forced to watch the executions. In other words, perpetrators of such massacres followed a system, admittedly a perverse one, in which the perceived security threat in the form of the adult male population was targeted first. Above all, mass killings did not take place according to the rules of anthropological theory, but in a concrete historical situation, in which commanders were almost invariably in charge and in a position to unleash as well as to stop the killing. The study of atrocities reveals a pattern in the First World War that shows both a historic shift towards ever more “total” forms of war that involved ever greater sections of society, and conscious decisions taken in the context of specific military cultures. The killing of small groups of allegedly “guilty” non-combatants required strict military hierarchy with relations of trust in superiors, the high emotional tension of combat, and mentalities predisposed towards violence. The mass murder of large groups required more substantial ideological preparation and a determined state machine predisposed to genocide. That potential was becoming visible in 1914, was partly realized in 1915, and saw its full realization in 1939 to 1945.

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Notes

1. Parts of this article first appeared in Kramer, Alan: *Combatants and Noncombatants: Atrocities, Massacres, and War Crimes*, in: Horne, John (ed.): *A Companion to World War I*, Malden et al. 2012, pp. 188-201. Detailed references to the atrocities of 1914 are to be found in Horne, John/Kramer, Alan: *German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial*, New Haven et al. 2001 (German translation 2004; French translation 2005). A useful survey is in Horne, John: *Atrocities and war crimes*, in: Winter, Jay (ed.): *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, volume I, *Global War*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 561-584. [↑](#)

2. The most convenient source for the Hague Convention of 1907 is the Yale University Law School Avalon Project, online: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/lawwar.asp (retrived 2 November 2015). ↑
3. Stengers, Jean: Congo, mythes et réalités: 100 ans d'histoire, Paris 1989, pp. 101, 112, 116, 168-172. ↑
4. Van Heyningen, Elisabeth: The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History, Johannesburg 2013. ↑
5. Siebrecht, Claudia: Formen von Unfreiheit und Extreme der Gewalt: Die Konzentrationslager in Deutsch-Südwestafrika, 1904-1908, in: Greiner, Bettina/Kramer, Alan (eds.): Welt der Lager. Zur "Erfolgsgeschichte" einer Institution, Hamburg 2013, pp. 87-109. ↑
6. Keisinger, Florian: Unzivilisierte Kriege im zivilisierten Europa? Die Balkankriege und die öffentliche Meinung in Deutschland, England und Irland 1876-1913, Paderborn 2008; Segesser, Daniel Marc: Kriegsverbrechen auf dem Balkan und in Anatolien in der internationalen juristischen Debatte während der Balkankriege und des Ersten Weltkrieges, in: Angelow, Jürgen (ed.): Der Erste Weltkrieg auf dem Balkan. Perspektiven der Forschung, Berlin 2011, pp. 193-209; Segesser, Daniel Marc: Kriegsverbrechen? Die österreichisch-ungarischen Operationen des August 1914 in Serbien in Wahrnehmung und Vergleich, in: Dornik, Wolfram/Walleczek-Fritz, Julia/Wedrac, Stefan (eds.): Frontwechsel: Österreich-Ingarns "Grosser Krieg" im Vergleich, Vienna 2014, pp. 217-218; Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars, Washington 1914, online: <https://archive.org/details/reportofinternat00inteuoft> (retrieved: 28 October 2015). ↑
7. Horne/Kramer, German Atrocities 2001, pp. 196-201. ↑
8. On Reims Cathedral see *ibid.*, pp. 217-220. "Louvain" was the internationally known name of the town which is in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, where it is known as Leuven. In addition see Kramer, Alan: Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War, Oxford 2007. ↑
9. For example, on 8 August 1914, General Karl von Einem (1853-1934), commander of the vast force besieging Liège, ordered villages where troops suspected resistance by civilians to be burned and all the inhabitants shot: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA-MA), Freiburg, N 324-36, Karl von Einem gen. v. Rothmaler, letter to his wife, 8 August 1914. Einem's immediate superior, General Karl von Bülow (1846-1921), commander of the Second Army, endorsed his measures: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, N 324-26, war diary von Einem, 9 August 1914. ↑
10. Münkler, Herfried: Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914 bis 1918, Berlin 2014, pp. 248-254. ↑
11. Horne/Kramer, German Atrocities 2001, p. 51. ↑

12. Ibid., pp. 162-164. ↑
13. Deposition Major Walter von Loeben, commander of a battalion in Grenadier Regiment 100, 15 February 1915 (Loeben was captain at the time of the execution). In general and with much more detail on Dinant, see: Horne/Kramer, *German Atrocities* 2001, pp. 42-52. Further serious research on the "German atrocities" of 1914 ranges from works on international law, such as: Hull, Isabel V.: *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law During the Great War*, Ithaca 2014, to work on small-scale events hitherto ignored by historical scholarship. An excellent example of the latter is the research by local historian Karl Friedrich Eckhardt on the killing of three Belgians and three wounded French soldiers in the village of Roselies and a further ten citizens of Roselies in the neighbouring village in August 1914 by troops from the 92nd Infantry Regiment from Braunschweig, online: <http://braunschweig-spiegel.de/index.php/politik/politik-kultur/4772-der-name-roselies-ist-unertraeglich> (retrieved 2 November 2015). ↑
14. Watson, Alexander: "Unheard-of Brutality". Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914-15, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 86/4 (2014), pp. 780-825. I should like to thank the author for generously allowing me to consult his findings before publication. ↑
15. K.U.K. Ministerium des Äußern: *Sammlung von Nachweisen für die Verletzungen des Völkerrechtes durch die mit Österreich-Ungarn kriegführenden Staaten. II. Nachtrag. Abgeschlossen mit 30 November 1915*, Vienna 1916, pp. 93-5, 105-106. See the other reports in this series for instances of violence against civilians in the Habsburg territories occupied by the Russian Army. Further research is needed in this area; in particular, we lack corroboration from independent and Russian sources of these events. ↑
16. Gumz, Jonathan: *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914-1918*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 44-45. ↑
17. Segesser, *Kriegsverbrechen?* 2011, pp. 220-221. ↑
18. Hirschfeld, Gerhard et al. (eds.): *Serbien*, in: *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, 2003, p. 834. Jonathan Gumz, who is otherwise somewhat sceptical of Reiss, finds that between 3,500 and 5,000 civilians were killed in Serbia in a matter of two weeks: *Resurrection* 2009, pp. 44-59, especially p. 58; Reiss, Rodolphe A.: *How Austria-Hungary Waged War in Serbia. Personal Investigations of a Neutral*, Paris 1915, online: <https://archive.org/details/howaustriahungar00reis> (retrieved: 28 October 2015); Reiss, Rodolphe Archibald: *Report upon the Atrocities Committed by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First Invasion of Serbia*, London 1916, is an extended version (four times the length of the previous title), including much documentary evidence, online: <https://archive.org/details/reportuponatroci00reis> (retrieved: 28 October 2015). ↑

19. Gumz, Resurrection 2009, pp. 56-58. ↑
20. Ibid., pp. 201-5, 215-248. ↑
21. Holzer, Anton: Das Lächeln der Henker. Der unbekannte Krieg gegen die Zivilbevölkerung 1914-1918, Darmstadt 2008, p. 76. ↑
22. Vanneste, Alex: Het eerste "Ijzeren Gordijn"? De elektrische draadversperring aan de Belgisch-Nederlandse grens tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, in: Het Tijdschrift van Dexia Bank 54 (2000), pp. 39-82; Abbenhuis, Maartje J.: The Art of Staying Neutral. The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 164-169. The "Special Archive" in Moscow contains several German files that may cast light on the topic. ↑
23. Horne/Kramer, German Atrocities 2001, p. 166. ↑
24. Becker, Annette: Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre: Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre, Paris 1998, pp. 55-56. ↑
25. Kramer, Dynamic of Destruction 2007, pp. 44-45; see also De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale, Brussels et al. 2004, pp. 220-231, who explains the development of the policy and the harsh exploitation. According to Gerd Hankel, using German sources, 66,150 Belgians were deported to Germany between October 1916 and February 1917: see Hankel, Gerd: Die Leipziger Prozesse. Deutsche Kriegsverbrechen und ihre strafrechtliche Verfolgung nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg, Hamburg 2003, p. 387. Further detail on the deportation of Belgian workers to Germany, see Thiel, Jens: "Menschenbassin Belgien". Anwerbung, Deportation und Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg, Essen 2007. ↑
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28. On the Belgian and international protests see Thiel, "Menschenbassin Belgien" 2007, pp. 201-237. ↑
29. Hankel, Die Leipziger Prozesse 2003, p. 391. ↑
30. Liulevicius, Vejas Gabriel: War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I, Cambridge 2000, especially pp. 74-75. ↑
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32. Hagen, Mark von: War in a European Borderland. Occupations and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914-1918, Seattle 2007, pp. 4, 29-33; Sanborn, Joshua A.: Imperial Apocalypse. The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire, Oxford 2014, pp. 44-45, 53-55, 59-62. ↑
 33. Hagen, War in a European Borderland 2007, pp. 84-85. ↑
 34. Hans Hautmann, quoted in Holzer, Das Lächeln der Henker 2008, p. 76. Precisely because there were not even court martial trials, few records were kept. ↑
 35. Conze, Werner: Polnische Nation und deutsche Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg, Cologne et al. 1958, pp. 83-90; Judentum, in: Hirschfeld et al. (eds.), Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg 2003, p. 599. ↑
 36. Gatrell, Peter: A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I, Bloomington 1999, p. 3. ↑
 37. Ibid., pp. 31, 211. The true figure may have been far higher. Ibid., p. 212. ↑
 38. Gatrell, Peter: Russia's First World War. A Social and Economic History, Harlow et al. 2005, p. 179. ↑
 39. The higher estimate is from Lohr, Eric: Nationalizing the Russian Empire. The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I, Cambridge, Mass. et al. 2003, p. 130; however, he states that the 520,000 "faced deportation", and does not specify whether they were actually deported. The lower estimate is pieced together from apparently incomplete figures given by Fleischhauer, Ingeborg: Die Deutschen im Zarenreich. Zwei Jahrhunderte deutsch-russische Kulturgemeinschaft, Stuttgart 1986, pp. 508-510. ↑
 40. Gatrell, Russia's First World War 2005, pp. 182-183. ↑
 41. Fleischhauer, Die Deutschen im Zarenreich 1986, p. 511. ↑
 42. Lohr, Eric: The Russian Army and the Jews: mass deportation, hostage, and violence during World War I, in: Russian Review 60 (2001), pp. 2-3. ↑
 43. Gatrell, Russia's First World War 2005, pp. 188-190. ↑
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 49. Cited in: Dadrian, *Genocide as a problem of national and international law* 1989, p. 262. ↑
 50. Nachtigal, Reinhard: *Kriegsgefangenschaft an der Ostfront 1914 bis 1918. Literaturbericht zu einem neuen Forschungsfeld*, Frankfurt et al. 2005, p. 22. On differential treatment by nationality, see Jones, Heather: *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War. Britain, France and Germany 1914-1920*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 287-289. ↑
 51. Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War* 2011, pp. 132-133. ↑
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 59. On the Stenger order see Horne/Kramer, *German Atrocities* 2001, Chapter 9. Stenger's order and its consequences were well publicized in Allied countries: see Morgan, John Hartman: *German Atrocities: An Official Investigation*, New York 1916, p. 73, online: <https://archive.org/stream/germanatrocities00morg#page/72/mode/2up> (retrieved: 28 October 2015); and: *Germany's Violations of the Laws of War, 1914-1915. Compiled under the Auspices of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, London 1915, pp. 49-50, online: <https://archive.org/stream/germanysviolatio01fran#page/48/mode/2up>

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64. Horne/Kramer, *German Atrocities* 2001 pp. 14, 26, 58-60. ↑
65. Report by 20th Infantry Brigade, 1 September 1914, cited in: Horne/Kramer, *German Atrocities* 2001, p. 59. ↑
66. Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War* 2011, especially Chapters 1 and 2. ↑
67. Cited in: Moore, William: *Gas Attack! Chemical Warfare 1915-18 and Afterwards*, London 1987, p. 58. ↑
68. The rumour that the Allies attempted to have Fritz Haber (1868-1934), the brilliant chemist behind the German chemical weapons programme, extradited for trial as a war criminal in 1920, is often repeated, e.g. by Martinetz, Dieter: *Der Gaskrieg 1914/18. Entwicklung, Herstellung und Einsatz chemischer Kampfstoffe. Das Zusammenwirken von militärischer Führung, Wissenschaft und Industrie*, Bonn 1996, pp. 112-113. Haber was not in fact on the list presented by the Allies to Germany in February 1920. Szöllossi-Janze, Margit: *Fritz Haber 1868-1934. Eine Biographie*, Munich 1998, pp. 429-430. On Haber's role in the development of gas warfare, see *ibid.*, pp. 316-373. For a German commander's sense of regret over the use of poison because war "no longer has anything to do with gallantry" see Alter, Junius (ed.): *Ein Armeeführer erlebt den Weltkrieg. Persönliche Aufzeichnungen des Generalobersten v. Einem*, Leipzig 1938, letter 23 April 1915, p. 117. ↑
69. Kramer, Alan: *Blockade and economic warfare*, in: *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, volume II, The State, Jay Winter (ed.), Cambridge 2014, pp. 460-489; on international law in relation to blockades and submarine warfare, see Hull, *A Scrap of Paper* 2014, Chapters 5-8. ↑
70. Heather Jones (London School of Economics) is now working on this topic. ↑
71. *Lusitania*, in: Hirschfeld et al., *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* 2003, pp. 689-690. Other estimates speak of 1,201 lives lost, including 128 American. ↑
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[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Austria](#)
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[Eastern Europe](#) > [Russian Empire](#) > [Ukraine](#)
[Middle East](#) > [Ottoman Empire](#)
[South East Europe](#) > [Serbia](#)
[Western Europe](#) > [Belgium](#)
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[Violence](#)

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[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Forced labour](#)
[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Food and nutrition](#)
[Memory and historiography](#) > [War myths](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Domestic policy](#) > [Minorities policy](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Colonialism, imperialism](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Treaties and agreements, other](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Law and legislation](#) > [International law](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Law and legislation](#) > [Trials](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Antisemitism](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Nationalism, political](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Racism, xenophobia](#)
[Society](#) > [Crime and discrimination](#) > [Pogroms](#)
[Society](#) > [Demography](#) > [Epidemics](#)
[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Emotions, society](#)
[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Famine and starvation](#)
[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Occupation, society](#)
[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Scares and rumours](#)
[Society](#) > [Family, generation](#) > [Children and youth](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Minorities](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Refugees](#)
[Society](#) > [Women and men](#) > [Femininity](#)
[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, domestic](#)
[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, international](#)
[The media](#) > [Public opinion](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Internment and POWs](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Occupation, military](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Officers](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Crimes, atrocities, other](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Genocide](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Hostage taking](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Looting, devastation](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Mass executions](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Crimes, atrocities](#) > [Rape](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Trauma and medical care](#) > [Diseases](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Warfare, land](#) > [Chemical warfare](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Warfare, naval](#) > [Blockades](#)
[Warfare and the military](#) > [Warfare, naval](#) > [Submarine warfare](#)

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LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Atrocities](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) -- Atrocités](#)

Key Person(s)

[Leopold II, King of the Belgians](#); [Redlich, Joseph](#); [Oppenheim, Lassa](#); [Reiss, Rodolphe A.](#); [Stenger, Karl](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Casement, Roger, Sir](#); [Morgenthau, Henry, Sr.](#); [Piłsudski, Józef](#); [Mercier, Désiré Joseph](#); [French, John Denton Pinkstone, Earl of Ypres](#); [Morel, Edmund Dene](#)

Key Location(s)

[Aarschot](#); [Dinant](#); [Amiens](#); [Gomery](#); [Horodenka](#); [Liège](#); [Louvain](#); [Lemberg](#); [Kassel](#); [Lille](#); [Mechelen](#); [Murmansk](#); [Reims](#); [Šabac](#); [Roselies](#); [Roubaix](#); [Thierville](#); [Lwów](#); [Lviv](#)

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