

Version 1.0 | Last updated 24 September 2015

Stereotypes

By [Vanessa Ther](#)

This article summarises the main wartime stereotypes that defined war propaganda in Germany, France, Great Britain, the USA and Russia. It focuses less on particular details of each national enemy image and more on the basic make-up of wartime stereotypes and specific national perceptions of enemy soldiers.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Great Britain](#)
- [3 France](#)
- [4 Russia](#)
- [5 United States of America](#)
- [6 Germany](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

In 1914, all combatant nations had to secure popular support for the war effort, motivate men to fight, and forge national unity against a common enemy. In order to fuel the necessary antagonism, war [propaganda](#) reduced enemies to stereotypes: crude and clichéd generalisations based on [nationalist](#) and sometimes racist prejudice. In 1915, the German poet [Erich Mühsam \(1878–1934\)](#) summarised the crux of such wartime stereotypes, suggesting that while accusing each other of being “barbarians” all combatant nations were proceeding to devastate the world.^[1] The assumption that the respective enemy disregarded fundamental humanitarian principles and the laws of war implied

that military victory was a matter of life or death for one's own nation.

The basis for such allegations of barbarism against Germany lay in her army's conduct during the invasion of Belgium. This can, at least partly, be regarded as a consequence of one of the most fateful enemy perceptions during the war: the widespread German fear that seemingly harmless civilians would turn into guerilla-fighters, "franc tireurs", and attack unsuspecting German soldiers. This apprehension led the troops invading Belgium and France in 1914 to react to perceived threats with excessive violence and destruction. Similar allegations accompanied the conduct of Russian troops in Eastern Prussia and Austrian troops in Serbia.

Germany justified such atrocities by claiming them to be a proportionate retribution for the enemy's alleged breach of international law. This, in turn, set the tone for reciprocal accusations of barbarism and inhumanity. The depiction of both real and imagined German atrocities was a constant reminder in Allied propaganda that only a thoroughly defeated Germany would guarantee peace.

Great Britain

The initial British nickname for German soldiers – Fritz – presumed an unquestioning submission to military values, but also contained an air of respect for military prowess. This grudging respect, however, changed early in the war. Accusations of barbarism were first targeted at Wilhelm II, German Emperor (1859-1941), and were then extended to German soldiers, who were said to enjoy cruelty and murder. They were depicted as militarised, inhuman monsters, who were involved in torturing innocent civilians, cutting off children's hands and women's breasts, and were thus seen to be targeting the most helpless victims. Such images were central to British propaganda, which warned its citizens that, in the words of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), "The hun is at the gate".^[2] The destruction in Belgium and France, the mistreatment of civilians, the execution of the British nurse Edith Cavell (1865-1915), the U-Boat war and the sinking of the Lusitania, were repeatedly evoked to reinforce the stereotype that Germans were brutish, immoral, evil and homicidal.

France

France also defined the war as a struggle between civilisation and barbarism, arguing that the Germans could not claim to have made any cultural achievements or to even have human qualities. The French depiction of German soldiers as stupid, uncivilised and malicious brutes, who had internalised German militarism, was reflected in the term "boche".

Russia

In 1914, Russia was faced with the dilemma that her long-standing antagonist – Austria-Hungary – had been overtaken by Germany as the nation's main enemy. Borrowing from British and French propaganda, Russia particularly focused on Germany's crimes against enemy civilians, denouncing

the soldiers as violent, militarist savages, as well as pigs, bloodsuckers and henchmen. Referring to the nation's Christian traditions, [Russian propaganda](#) also associated the invading troops with Satan. Such stereotypes sought to inspire fighting spirit and unity within the very heterogenous Russian military. At this time, many Russian soldiers failed to identify with either the Russian nation or its reasons for war.

United States of America

The derogative term many Americans used to refer to the Germans was “*Krauts*”, referencing the excessive fondness amongst German immigrants living in the [United States](#) for sauerkraut. Once they had taken up arms, however, [U.S. propaganda](#) adopted the British stereotype of the Huns, and began to depict the soldiers as dehumanised caricatures, for example, gorillas with spiked helmets. In addition to barbaric enemy stereotypes, which aimed at dehumanising the enemy, both the Allies and the Central Powers ridiculed their adversaries in order to bolster their belief that their opponent could be defeated.

Germany

In 1914, [German propaganda](#) focused on England (representing [Great Britain](#)) and Russia as the nation's main adversaries. Britain's decision to enter the war was perceived as treachery on the part of a fundamentally kindred nation. Hatred, envy, and rivalry were regarded as England's main motivations, and these were considered to be intrinsic causes of the war. Such notions were rooted in Germany's perception of England as a perfidious Albion, driven by mercantilist rather than idealistic motives. In line with this tension between affinity and resentment, the German nickname for English soldiers – Tommies – conveyed both respect, real hatred, or both, but not condescension.

Such a courtesy was not extended to British and French [colonial soldiers](#), whom German propaganda depicted as allegedly deformed, ferocious, animal-like creatures. Conflict with Russia, whose soldiers were called *Panje* or *Ruscki*, was justified with classic racist prejudice against violent, half-asiatic [cossack](#) hordes, who were depicted as unclean, illiterate and brutish drunks. Accusations of Russian barbarism were strongest as Germany reacted to the Russian invasion of Eastern Prussia. German propaganda decried many atrocities, including the destruction of infrastructure, civilian deportations and [rapes](#).

Vanessa Ther, Independent Scholar

Section Editor: [Christoph Nübel](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Cited in: Bruendel, Steffen: 1914 Zeitenwende. Künstler, Dichter und Denker im Ersten Weltkrieg, Munich 2014, pp. 89f.
2. ↑ Koch-Hillebrecht, Manfred: Die Deutschen sind schrecklich. Geschichte eines europäischen Feindbildes, Berlin 2008, p. 131.

Selected Bibliography

Eimermacher, Karl: **Verführungen der Gewalt. Russen und Deutsche im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg**, Munich 2005: Fink.

Horne, John / Kramer, Alan: **German atrocities 1914. A history of denial**, New Haven 2001: Yale University Press.

Jeismann, Michael: **Das Vaterland der Feinde. Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1792-1918**, Stuttgart 1992: Klett-Cotta.

Koch-Hillebrecht, Manfred: **Die Deutschen sind schrecklich. Geschichte eines europäischen Feindbildes**, Berlin 2008: Wolf Jobst Siedler.

Medyakov, Alexander, Daniel, Ute; Gatrell, Peter; Janz, Oliver et al. (eds.): **Propaganda at Home (Russian Empire)**, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2014.

Müller, Sven Oliver: **Die Nation als Waffe und Vorstellung. Nationalismus in Deutschland und Grossbritannien im Ersten Weltkrieg**, Göttingen 2001: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Reimann, Aribert: **Stereotypen**, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard / Krumeich, Gerd; Renz, Irina et al. (eds.): Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg, Paderborn 2014: Schöningh, pp. 867-868.

Sanders, Michael / Taylor, Philip M.: **British propaganda during the First World War, 1914-18**, London 1982: Macmillan.

Citation

Ther, Vanessa: Stereotypes , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-09-24. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10734**.

License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/) - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.