

### German Atrocities 1914 – Revisited

**Veranstalter:** Sönke Neitzel, Universität Potsdam); Oliver Janz, Freie Universität Berlin; Peter Hoeres, Universität Würzburg

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**Bericht von:** Bastian Matteo Scianna, Historisches Institut, Universität Potsdam

The conference, jointly organized by Sönke Neitzel (Potsdam), Oliver Janz (Berlin), and Peter Hoeres (Würzburg), focused on the German behaviour in Belgium during the opening stages of the First World War. Over one decade ago, John Horne (Dublin) and Alan Kramer (Dublin) published their much-cited study „German Atrocities 1914 – A History of Denial“ in which they exposed the crimes committed by German soldiers. However, a recent book by Ulrich Keller (Santa Barbara), entitled „Schuldfragen. Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914“ has questioned some of their findings. Far from denying German atrocities, Keller has provided evidence on the existence of irregular Belgian resistance – the scale of which was one of the most hotly debated issues during this conference – which in his view was a root cause of German reactions.

ULRICH KELLER opened the conference with a presentation of the key findings of his book and raised objections against arguments put forth in „German Atrocities“. He maintained that German troops had not panicked or were reinforced in their fears of armed civilians by shooting at each other. He referred to German sources indicating irregular resistance (*Franktireurkrieg*), for example medical documents on shotgun wounds suffered by German soldiers which could not derive from regular soldiers' rifles. Thus, Keller outlined German actions – and atrocities – as a reaction to an irregular and illegal *Franktireurkrieg*. He thereby dismissed claims that the Belgians were in a clear-cut victim position in 1914, but stressed the political use of such portrayal.

In their reply, JOHN HORNE and ALAN KRAMER upheld their original argument that there simply was no organized Belgian resistance in 1914, claiming the Germans had overreacted due to mental mind maps (going back

to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71) and imagined enemies. Criticizing Keller's selection and use of primary sources, they cited many incidents of German war crimes where no prior resistance was recorded, nor *francs-tireurs* captured. In their opinion, the Belgian *Franktireurkrieg* remains a construct of German war (and postwar) propaganda to excuse war crimes.

The three speakers in the following session included experts who had worked on war crimes by other armies in Galicia, Serbia and East Prussia during the opening stages of the First World War and therefore provided also a comparative perspective on events in Belgium.

ALEXANDER WATSON (London) examined the propaganda war surrounding the *Franktireurkrieg* and described the aura of anxiety and suspicion in Germany at the time. Hence, he regarded the atrocities as a reaction to the fear of armed civilians, but also highlighted that the crimes stopped after the first weeks. In sum, Watson deemed the shotgun wounds as evidence of sporadic acts of irregular resistance, but doubted that there was an organized people's war.

OSWALD ÜBEREGGER (Bozen) explained the German behaviour with situational aspects – without excusing it. He hinted at the need for further research on the Belgian side, for example concerning the *Garde Civique*. Yet, he argued, even if there was a *Franktireurkrieg* one should not see it as the only cause for German atrocities: time pressure – the so-called *Vorwärtspanik* (foreward panic) –, inexperience, the heat of battle and predispositions all marked real and imaginary factors contributing to the (temporary) escalation of violence.

PETER LIEB (Potsdam), too, stressed the importance of situational aspects – including for the Belgian side. He concluded that a German *Franktireurpanik* and de facto resistance are not mutually exclusive. Focusing on Keller's arguments, he considered the existence of irregular resistance – based on reliable documents – as undisputable. In his view, the *Garde Civique* remains the black box and further studies will have to show if they resisted systematically based on orders and concepts – or merely occasionally.

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AXEL TIXHON (Namur) centered his presentation on the events in Dinant. In his opinion, the case illustrates Keller's omission of important sources, the absence of irregular resistance on the Belgian side and the systematic nature of German war crimes. He clarified that *Garde Civique* units had indeed fired at German cavalry patrols, but rebuffed ideas of an organized *Franktireurkrieg* as myths deriving from propaganda and imagination of frontline troops.

LARISSA WEGNER (Freiburg) split her contribution along two questions: was there a *Franktireurkrieg*? What were the German reactions? Citing her research on northern France, she described acts of irregular resistance – including mutilation of German corpses – and thought it unlikely that similar cases should not have occurred in Belgium. In general, she considered it problematic that Belgian and French testimonies and sources are frequently valued higher and trustworthier than German documents or reports. Regarding reactions, Wegner stressed the difference in the German army's penal code, which allowed harsher reactions (e.g. swift executions) and facilitated brutalization.

The session's chair, OLIVER JANZ stressed the unquestionable fact of sporadic attacks on German troops, but also mentioned their political instrumentalization in Germany as an alleged *Franktireurkrieg* in order to brush over one's crimes. He thus thought the key task for historians lies in establishing if there had been a widespread organized resistance – on which he raised some doubts. PETER HOERES mentioned that not all civilians who perished were subject to war crimes and hinted at regular German processes of questioning suspects (and releasing them) or court-martialing irregulars according to the laws of war.

During the final discussion, GERD KRUMEICH (Düsseldorf) demanded further studies to clarify the scale of the irregular resistance, after having established its existence. He also maintained that no answer can be definite and reminded all participants of their fundamental duty as historians to relentlessly question the academic status quo. In sum, the conference demonstrated the need for additional research, particularly on

the Belgian role in 1914 and the key question how widespread the irregular resistance had been. The evidence provided by Keller hints at a more than merely sporadic resistance by irregular Belgian fighters. Furthermore, the workshop showed the fruitfulness of open debate and the continuous media attention devoted to this subject.<sup>1</sup>

#### Conference overview:

Sönke Neitzel (Potsdam)  
Introduction

#### Session 1

Ulrich Keller (Santa Barbara)  
Schuldfragen. Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914

John Horne (Dublin) and Alan Kramer (Dublin)  
Comments

#### Session 2: Comments

Alexander Watson (London)

Oswald Überegger (Bozen)

Peter Lieb (Potsdam)

#### Session 3: Comments

Axel Tixhon (Namur)

Larissa Wegner (Freiburg)

#### Session 4: Final discussion

Tagungsbericht *German Atrocities 1914 – Revisited*. 27.10.2017, Potsdam, in: H-Soz-Kult 24.11.2017.

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<sup>1</sup>See also Klaus Wiegrefe, Furchtbare Reaktionen. Deutsche und Massaker im Ersten Weltkrieg, in: DER SPIEGEL, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/belgien-massaker-im-ersten-weltkrieg-studie-entlastet-deutsche-teilweise-a-1176413.html> (07.11.2017).