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German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial (review)

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understanding the tactical “paradigmatic crisis” which the British infantry faced in 1914. Indeed, *Command and Cohesion* as a whole may be better suited to the general reader interested in minor tactics in the British Army than to the professional looking for insight into how these tactics and the process of their change reflect British military thinking and culture.

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*German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial.* By John Horne and Alan Kramer. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-300-08975-9. Maps. Illustrations. Photographs. Figures. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xv, 608. \$40.00.

This impressive, multilayered study is a reexamination of the violent opening stages of World War I. From the war’s first weeks, as German armies plunged through Belgium and France to realize the sweeping victory charted in the Schlieffen Plan, reports spread of horrible atrocities against civilians committed by invading forces: summary mass executions, arson, use of “human shields,” rapes, and deportations. In the ensuing propaganda war, the Allies cited these reports as evidence of German barbarism. The Kaiser’s diplomats and generals denounced them as fabrications. In the disillusionment with great causes that followed this “war to end all wars,” many in Western Europe and the United States came to believe that the stories had indeed been manipulative propaganda sponsored by their governments.

In this study, however, the authors return anew to the original sources to reexamine an entire range of questions concerning German actions in 1914. They conclude that there indeed were over 6,400 civilians deliberately killed in the invasion from August to October 1914. To establish these concrete facts, they critically survey a variety of sources: records of Belgian, French, and German investigative committees, diaries, regimental histories, and contemporary press reports, substantiating in detail the claims of atrocities. The book includes excellent maps, vivid illustrations of propaganda, and an appendix with a detailed database of incidents showing locations and army units involved. The authors argue that the German reaction was caused by a mass delusion gripping the invading army of a million men: the false conviction that they faced a mobilized civilian populace resisting their onslaught with guerrilla tactics. The archetypal figure of the “franc-tireur,” an invisible sharpshooter lurking in ambush (as in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71) was “the unacceptable alter ego of the nation in arms” (p. 140) for the self-consciously elite German officer caste. In response, the army took brutal reprisals against civilians.

These human casualties, and the destruction of famous sites like the library of Louvain, soon became notorious. Rumors were supplemented by legends which were not true but symbolically expressed deep fears. The

emblematic image of children with severed hands, based on such a legend, became a touchstone in popular imagination. Allied propaganda concerning these incidents, the authors argue, was no better than the German propaganda of denials. Given the facts, the Allies simply had an easier case to make. Peace in 1918 also did not bring closure. Rather, the Versailles Treaty demanded war crimes trials, which were frustrated by the Weimar government, which continued to obscure the reality of the events, thus contributing to the poisoning of the international atmosphere. Today, as the world still seeks restraints on violence against civilians, the events of 1914 deserve the reexamination given them in this compelling study.

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*The POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front.* By Alon Rachamimov. New York: Berg, 2002. Distributed by NYU Press. ISBN 1-85973-578-9. Photographs. Tables. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 259. \$22.50.

Although clearly a doctoral dissertation in need of professional editing for a more general readership, this book, one in a series of recent works, examines a part of World War I history rarely addressed in the west. That large numbers of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners were taken on the Eastern Front between 1914 and 1918 has all but faded from memory, in part because of their victory over the Russians and subsequent peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks. That Alon Rachamimov addresses the issue, one that demands skill in German, Hungarian, and various Slavic languages, results undoubtedly in a distinct contribution to the field of historical POW studies.

The author poses several fascinating questions early in the text: did the large Russian POW camps preview the Soviet Gulag system and the Nazi Death Camp system later in the century? Rachamimov examines this thesis and concludes that the evidence shows pretty clearly that correlations remain historically circumstantial and do not prove causation. Second, did Czarist Russian Pan-Slavism usurp the POW provisions of the 1899 Hague Convention? Perhaps it did, in that the Czarist High Command ordered Alsatian and Slavic prisoners to be given better treatment in European Russia than Germans, Austrians, or Hungarians in Siberia. In the end, however, favoritism played a minimal role; over 90 per cent of all captured soldiers from all sides returned home after hostilities ended in 1918.

Even more important in the author's view were the stark differences in treatment accorded captured officers under the Hague Convention. Based on Joan Beaumont's concerns for hierarchal inequalities and lack of egalitarianism in military affairs, Rachamimov asks his readers to sympathize more with the plight of the lower rank and file—the "view from the bottom"—than