

British Society at War 1914-1918: Myth, Rumour and the Search for Meaning

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Abstract

The myths and rumours that circulated during the First World War originated with soldiers and the general public, excepting atrocity stories. The British population used these myths and rumours to construct a discourse to explain its involvement in the First World War. This discourse reconciled the experience and understanding of civilians with the new era of Total War, offering hope and consolation in a time of crisis. It also acted as a form of mass, popularly produced propaganda which promulgated pro-war views that supported the British and Allied causes, while demonising the Germans and their methods of warfare. Belief in myths and rumours was equated with patriotism, and criticism decried as pro-German and un-British. The myths were widely disseminated and widely believed by important sections of the population. They drew on concepts palatable to British civilians: ideas of ‘just’ war and a moral cause; the nobility of their sacrifices; the bestiality of the enemy; and the necessity for the subordination of all else to the war effort. Myths about atrocities, spies and the paranormal helped the British public to survive a war that surpassed previous human and disquietude, but also experience. They also hinted at vulnerability, while expressing the unequivocal support which the majority offered the British war effort.

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In memory of my nana, Elsie Sloane,
who passed away shortly before this thesis was completed.

Chapter 1. Introduction

*'Swift through the Libyan cities Rumor sped.
 Rumor! What evil can surpass her speed?
 In movement she grows mighty, and achieves
 Strength and dominion as she swifter flies.
 Small first, because afraid, she soon exalts
 Her stature skyward, stalking through the lands
 And mantling in the clouds her baleful brow...
 Feet swift to run and pinions like the wind
 The dreadful monster wears; her carcase huge
 Is feathered, and at the root of every plume
 A peering eye abides; and, strange to tell,
 An equal number of vociferous tongues,
 Foul, whispering lips, and ears, that catch at all...
 ...She can cling
 To vile invention and malignant wrong,
 Or mingle with her word some tidings true'.¹*

Throughout history myth and rumour have been politically and socially significant. Nero's rumoured involvement in the fire that destroyed Rome in AD 64 has become immortalised in proverb.² Since the twelfth century, Jews have been accused of ritually murdering Christian children and desecrating the host – a myth that sparked the massacre of twenty-one Jews in Röttingen in

¹ *Aeneid*, Book IV, quoted in G. Allport and L. Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1948), p. i.

² Allport and Postman, p. 160.

1298.³ In the fourteenth century, rumours abounded that Jews were responsible for the outbreak of the Black Death in an attempt to wipe out Christendom.⁴

The Indian mutiny of 1857 was sparked by rumours among the sepoys that rifle cartridges to be issued to soldiers were greased with a mixture of pork and beef fat. This offended both Muslim and Hindu religious doctrines, leading to accusations that the British officers were trying to subvert Indian beliefs in order to force Christianity on the Indian soldiers.⁵

In the twentieth century ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ was used as a tool by anti-Semites to justify the persecution of Jews, most infamously by the Nazis. Despite having been exposed as a blatant forgery, this work and its myth of a Jewish conspiracy of world domination is still promulgated today, most notably in the Middle East where it is a component of the Hamas charter.⁶

In 2003 the United States and her allies invaded Iraq on the pretext that ‘the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised’.⁷ Protests from several other countries pointedly remarked that the evidence overwhelmingly suggested Iraq no longer possessed such weaponry, and it is now generally accepted that she did not.

These myths and rumours did not exist in a vacuum, nor were they simply ‘stories’. There were discourses that surrounded each. Ritual murder and

³ R. S. Levy, *Antisemitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (California, 2005), p. 602; W. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 57; S. Jacobs and M. Weitzman, *Dismantling the big lie: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (New Jersey, 2003), p. xiii.

⁴ J. Marcus and M. Saperstein, *The Jew in the medieval world: a source book, 315-1791* (New York, 1999), p. 49.

⁵ G. Fremont-Barnes, *The Indian Mutiny, 1857-58* (Oxford, 2007), p. 28.

⁶ Brustein, p. 142.

⁷ D. Dionisi, *American Hiroshima: The Reasons Why and a Call to Strengthen America’s Democracy* (Victoria, 2006), p. 59.

the ‘protocols’ justified anti-Semitism, persecution and even murder. Rumours of Jewish responsibility for the outbreak of the plague explained the disease in a manner contemporaries could understand, as well as drawing on the prevailing stereotypes of the time. These myths and rumours were latent exhibitions of hidden emotions and attempts to understand potentially threatening situations. At the same time the myth about weapons of mass destruction provided justification for an invasion that was arguably being fought for reasons that neither the American public nor the international community would have found acceptable.

This study will demonstrate how myths and rumours were used to construct political and social discourses on the British home front during the First World War. These discourses reflected the fact that British society in this period was a dyslexic mix of tradition and modernity as industrialised societies transitioned into the era of Total War. Traditional ideas of ‘gentlemanly conduct’ and the ‘laws of war’ were abandoned as modern methods and tactics shattered conventional perceptions of conflict. In the domestic sphere the evolution heralded by the First World War invariably dragged civilians into the battle. On the one hand their participation and support was vital to national success, whether by voluntary enlistment or buying war bonds; on the other, civilians found themselves systematically targeted by the enemy.

As governments recognised the importance of the home front, morale became an essential commodity. Popular support was not inexhaustible and had to be cultivated to ensure the collaboration between state and the masses could be sustained for the duration of the conflict. The most effective method of

mobilising popular sentiment was through propaganda to convince people on the domestic front of the importance of the cause for which they were fighting. Historians, though, have largely conceded that British propaganda on the home front in the First World War was piecemeal and disorganised and Gerard DeGroot has concluded that propaganda efforts of the government had no discernible impact.⁸ The fortitude and stoicism displayed by the population is better explained by their ‘steadfast patriotism’ and an ‘unquenchable faith in eventual victory’ than by a ‘propaganda effort so chaotic [it] could not have contributed to mass mind control’.⁹ It will be the contention of this thesis that myth and rumour, seldom sponsored by the government, played a vital role in maintaining this will. It acted as a form of mass propaganda by creating discourses that demonised the Germans, marginalised dissenters and took for granted the virtues of the British and the justice of their cause.

Some myths and rumours were omnipresent for much of the war, while others circulated for only a few weeks or months. Because of this, it is necessary to restrict this thesis to the study of a selection of these myths. A complete assessment would prove too extensive and would not allow for detailed examination. This study will focus on three of the most prevalent types of myth and rumour: atrocity rumours linked to the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’; myths and rumours about enemy agents and spies; and finally, myths about the supernatural.

⁸ G. DeGroot, *Blighty: British society in the era of the First World War* (London, 1996), pp. 195-6; J. M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War* (London, 1989), p. 202; G. S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester, 1992); C. Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London, 1977).

⁹ DeGroot, pp. 195-6.

In order to investigate these myths and rumours thoroughly, I will focus on three things. First, I will examine the origins of the myths and rumours, and the methods of their dissemination. This is important as it will show how these rumours were introduced into popular discourse, and also indicate whether their origin and dissemination was popularly driven and whether they were given official sanction.

Secondly, I will assess how the rumours were received at both the popular and official levels. Only rumours which had a useful explanatory function or were meaningful would have gained importance in the domestic discourse, because ‘no other discourse [than rumour] better reflects [...] contemporary issues and attitudes’.¹⁰ My conclusions here will be tentative, because the evidence is fragmentary.

Finally, I will examine the function of the myths and rumours, and look at why they spread as they did. Examining the meaning – both implicit and explicit – will shed light on popular responses to a war that has been portrayed in the primary and secondary literature as an event that prompted an outburst of jingoistic celebration.¹¹

The secondary literature addressing the home front in the First World War has dealt haphazardly with myth and rumour. Historiography has tended to address these phenomena in broader discussions of non-governmental propaganda conducted by patriotic organisations – such as the strangulation of

¹⁰ G. A. Fine and P. A. Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line* (Berkeley, 2001), p. 6.

¹¹ Haste, p. 20; for a discussion of popular reactions to the declaration of war in Europe see Niall Ferguson’s chapter on the ‘The August Days: The Myth of War Enthusiasm’, *The pity of war 1914-1918* (London, 1999), pp. 174-186.

the press by the censor – and the increasing reliance on rumour and gossip for newspaper copy.¹² Others have described rumour as little more than ‘counter-productive’, or as being ‘at all times a social and psychological problem of major proportions [...] especially so in times of crisis [... when it] saps morale and menace[s] national safety’.¹³ Still more have talked of the ‘folk myths’ that ‘indicated the irrationality that permeated’ wartime Britain.¹⁴ Contemporary and post-war descriptions of rumour in World War I were equally as negative. Michael MacDonagh referred to ‘[t]hat jade Rumour’, while Philip Gibbs wrote of the ‘wild perversions of truth’, and Arthur Ponsonby, spoke of the ‘hysterical hallucination on the part of weak-minded individuals’, and ‘the lie heard and not denied, although lacking in evidence and then repeated and allowed to circulate’.¹⁵

Scholarly investigations of myths and rumours have tended to be narrow in their focus. Several historians have studied atrocity stories from different perspectives. Some, such as Read, have concentrated on their use as a tool of official propaganda. Others have detailed the reality of atrocity stories and the differing Allied and German perspectives on wartime atrocities. While these studies have discussed some of the myths surrounding atrocities, their analysis excludes the other genres of myth and rumour. These studies have also

¹² Haste, pp. 30-1.

¹³ P. M. Taylor, *British Propaganda in the 20th Century* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 154; Allport and Postman, p. vii.

¹⁴ P. Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism* (London, 1924), p. 217; T. Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 740-1.

¹⁵ M. MacDonagh, *In London during the Great War: The Diary of a Journalist* (London, 1935), p. 15; P. Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism*, p. 217; A. Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime*, p. 20.

neglected to place atrocity stories within a wider, popular discourse on the war.¹⁶

Studies on spy rumours have been sparse. Historians who have touched on spies tend to discuss them within two contexts: pre-war spy novels and literary contributions to the spy mania of the pre-war decades and the First World War; or official responses to the threat of espionage. The predominant theme seems to be demonstrating the irrationality of these rumours, rather than an investigation of their role in a popular discourse about the war.¹⁷

The treatment of the supernatural has also been negligible, although there has been one in depth study by David Clarke. He has studied the angel of Mons myth in detail, and its use in justifying and explaining the war, but seems

¹⁶ Studies that emphasise the propaganda use of atrocity stories are: J. M. Read, *Atrocity Propaganda, 1914-1919* (New Haven, 1941); T. Wilson, ‘Lord Bryce’s Investigation into Alleged German Atrocities in Belgium, 1914-15’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14:3 (1979), pp. 369-83; N. Gullace, ‘Sexual Violence and Family Honor: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War’, *The American Historical Review*, 102: 3 (1997), pp. 714-747; S. de Schaepdrijver, ‘Occupation, propaganda and the idea of Belgium’, in *European Culture in the Great War: The arts, entertainment and propaganda, 1914-1918*, (eds.) A. Roshwald and R. Stites (Cambridge, 1999). For investigations on the reality of atrocities, and the differing perspectives regarding atrocity stories see: J. Horne and A. Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial* (London, 2001); J. Horne and A. Kramer, ‘German “Atrocities” and Franco-German Opinion, 1914: The Evidence of German Soldiers’ Diaries’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 66: 1 (1994), pp. 1-33; J. Horne and A. Kramer, ‘War Between Soldiers and Enemy Civilians, 1914-1915’, in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, (eds.) R. Chickering and S. Förster (Cambridge, 2001).

¹⁷ For discussions of the literary contributions to the spy mania see: N. Hiley, ‘Introduction’, in *Spies of the Kaiser: Plotting the Downfall of England*, W. Le Queux (London, 1996), pp. vii – xxxii; D. Stafford, ‘Spies and Gentlemen: The Birth of the British Spy Novel, 1893-1914’, *Victorian Studies* 24:4 (1981), pp. 489-509; J. Symons, ‘Introduction’, in *Riddle of the Sands*, E. Childers (London, 1984), pp. ; T. Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser: German Covert Operations in Great Britain during the First World War Era* (Hounds mills, 2004); Haste, pp. 7-10. For discussions of the official reactions to the spy menace before and during World War One see: DeGroot, pp. 157-60; Haste, pp. 108-38; D. French, ‘Spy Fever in Britain, 1900-1915’, *The Historical Journal*, 21:2 (1978), pp. 355-70; N. Hiley, ‘The Failure of British Counter-Espionage against Germany, 1907-1914’, *The Historical Journal*, 28:4 (1985), pp. 835-62; N. Hiley, ‘Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain during the First World War’, *The English Historical Review*, 101:400 (1986), pp. 635-70.

to mention other rumours only as they provide context to his main study.¹⁸

Similarly, James Hayward's *Myths and Legends of the First World War* offers a detailed insight into the variety of rumours, but fails to assess their significance in any great detail or place them within the broader context of reactions to the war.¹⁹ Paul Fussel acknowledged that the Great War was 'especially fertile in rumor', but focuses on the post-war remembrance of the war and the 'general human impulse to make fictions'.²⁰ Other historians have mentioned the rumours in passing, seeing them as little more than reactions to the conditions created by the war.²¹

This study is based on primary sources, as far as possible. For the most part it has relied on newspapers, diaries, memoirs, letters and popular publications to gauge both popular and individual reactions to the myths and rumours of the time. The accusation levelled at the papers by contemporaries in the post-war years – that they were relying on rumour, hearsay and gossip – recommends them perfectly to this study.²² Three newspapers have been used consistently: *The Times*, *Daily Express* and *News of the World*. Other papers, including the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Observer* and the *New York Times* have been consulted when necessary. The relationship between the papers was somewhat incestuous, and they often published similar news items.

¹⁸ D. Clarke, *The angel of Mons: Phantom soldiers and ghostly guardians* (West Sussex, 2004); D. Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War', *Folklore*, 113:2 (2002), pp. 151-73; D. Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Response to Simpson', *Folklore*, 115 (2004), pp. 99-104.

¹⁹ J. Hayward, *Myths and Legends of the First World War* (Thrupp, 2005).

²⁰ P. Fussel, *The Great War and modern memory* (New York, 2000), p. 115.

²¹ P. Haythornthwaite, *The World War One Sourcebook* (London, 1992), pp. 372-76; P. Liddle, *Voices of war, front line and home front 1914-1918* (London, 1988), pp. 63-7; J. Terraine, *The smoke and the fire: Myths and anti-myths of the war 1861-1945* (London, 1980), pp. 19-30.

²² Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism*, p. 217.

Studies on other countries have shown that press representations were not necessarily reflective of the popular mood, but sometimes represented the class-based interests of their proprietors and editors.²³ However, newspapers are vital to this study. They were arguably the most important source of information that people on the home front had about the war. While opinions expressed about some issues may not have reflected the popular mood accurately, the most important factor here is the information that the papers were providing the population in regards to key myths and rumours. Because the newspapers contributed so much to the dissemination of myth and rumour, it seems unlikely that they vastly misrepresented the character of the reports that were in circulation.

This dissertation will be structured around the three main categories of rumour identified during the course of research. It will dissect each category to establish the origins of the myths and rumours, their means of dissemination, and their reception by the British population. The first chapter will deal in detail with atrocity rumours and the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’. It will demonstrate that these rumours were a mixture of both fact and fiction and that they provided a vital medium through which the British public defined its involvement. The second chapter will examine the myths surrounding enemy

²³ G. A. Parsons, ‘The Christchurch Community at War 1914-1918: Society, Discourse and Power’ (M.A. Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2003). Although this thesis focuses exclusively on the discourse of a single New Zealand city during World War One, her argument that newspapers represented class based discourse – primarily that of the ruling elite – applies to Britain. One example of this is the relationship between press barons such as the Lords Northcliffe and Beaverbrook, who also possessed substantial political clout. This view is supported by Alice Goldfarb Marquis, who outlines the intertwined relationship of government and press lords. See ‘Words as weapons: propaganda in Britain and Germany during the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13:3 (1978), pp. 467-498.

aliens and the ubiquitous German spy. It demonstrates that this rumour category reflected widespread anxieties linked to the advent of Total War, and that it also reflected some of the political and social tensions of British society. The final chapter will examine reports of a supernatural or paranormal character, revealing how they were not only reactions to the staggering losses suffered by Britain, but a way to prove that the British cause was ‘just’. All three chapters will reveal how, through myths and rumours, the British public attempted to make sense of a war that transcended previous experience, creating a discourse that not only explained their involvement but justified their sacrifices.

Chapter 2. Atrocity stories and the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’



‘The conquering hero [...] is a throw-back to an ancestral type far more remote than Attila, who was a comparatively polished person. He is the [...] *Urmensch*, a veritable monster, gross, bloated, abominable, compact of evil’.²⁴

²⁴ Arthur Shadwell’s commentary on Louis Raemaekers’ cartoon, ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes’, in *Kultur in Cartoons* (New York, 1917), pp. 160-1.

Atrocity stories were not an innovation of the First World War. Tales establishing the bestiality of the enemy were an old genre, long established in the annals of conflict. Atrocities invariably drew on both real and fabricated events which were decried as proof of the iniquity of the enemy. The First Crusade of 1098 was accompanied by pogroms against Jews and accounts of the atrocities committed by the Muslim ‘infidel’. Horrific reports were also inspired by the Mongol hordes of Batu who collected sacks of the ears of their enemies, and by Vlad Tepes, who was known for impaling his enemies on pikes. The Napoleonic and Franco-Prussian wars were also renowned for brutality, including sometimes well-founded accusations of castration and mutilation.²⁵ During the Irish Rebellion of 1641 there were rumours of cannibalism levelled against Catholics, one woman reportedly ‘grow[ing] fat from the eating of many Protestants’.²⁶

The viciousness of war and the terrorisation of civilians were by no means unique to the experience of 1914-1918. What differentiated the Great War from its predecessors was not the incidence of atrocities, but a greater awareness of the suffering that modernised war could inflict. Viewed in the context of the history of war, the experiences of the civilians of Belgium and

²⁵ R. Kastenbaum, *On Our Way: The Final Passage Through Life and Death* (Berkeley, 2004), pp. 195-6; T. Asbridge, *The First Crusade, A New History: The Roots of Conflict between Christianity and Islam* (New York, 2004), pp. 33; 84; D. Dutton, *The Psychology of Genocide, Massacres, and Extreme Violence: why “normal” people commit atrocities* (Westport, 2007), pp. 1-13; for a detailed account of the atrocities committed during the Peninsula Wars see G. Fremont-Barnes *The Napoleonic Wars: The Peninsula War 1807-1814* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 56-8.

²⁶ J. M. Read, ‘Atrocity Propaganda and the Irish Rebellion’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2:2 (1938), pp. 232-3.

France were not exceptional or unprecedeted. An increasing humanitarian consciousness simply made the brutality of warfare more apparent.

While atrocity stories were present throughout the history of conflict, they were particularly important in World War I. The atrocity stories – stemming from actions taken by the German army during the assault on Belgium and Northern France – that emerged over the course of the Great War became the foundation for arguably one of the most popular tropes of myth and rumour. It was the basis of much official and unofficial propaganda produced during the war and was used to motivate involvement in – and the ruthless prosecution of – the war.

Many of the atrocity stories that were recounted were entirely mythical, evinced by their parallels with stories from earlier conflicts. Others were based on the true events of the invasion of Belgium and Northern France – such as Louvain and Dinant – which were then blown out of all proportion or selectively recounted. But all stories, irrespective of whether they were partially true or entirely fabricated, served to construct the collective and omnipotent myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’.

This myth proved very useful to proponents of the British cause as it was evident in much of the jingoistic rhetoric used to describe and justify the war. For the government the ‘Bestial Hun’ was used primarily for soliciting domestic and foreign support through propaganda. For civilians the quickly adopted stereotype was of social and psychological significance: not only as one of the primary motifs seized on to explain Britain’s involvement in war, but

as a means of reconciling the newfound, xenophobic anti-German stance, with the traditionally cordial relationship between the two Anglo-Saxon countries.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’ in detail and to establish the origins of the rumours, their dissemination, reception and, most importantly, the political and social functions. The structure of this chapter is to look first at the reality of atrocities in the First World War; this will be restricted to the atrocities committed by the German army in Western Europe, as it was these stories which were most extensively promulgated. From this, the myths and rumours of atrocities will be examined, their dissemination, reception and the function investigated.

The German invasion of Belgium and Northern France

On 4 August 1914 the German army violated the neutrality of Belgium in direct contravention of the Treaty of London and commenced their drive towards Paris. There were three aggregate causes that from the beginning suggested the invasion was likely to lead to atrocities: the diktat of the Schlieffen Plan, fear of the franc-tireur, and the adoption of the *Schrecklichkeit* ('frightfulness') policy. The combination of these three factors predisposed the German army towards panic and revived phantasms that in reality had little role in the war.

The course of the war for Germany was theoretically dictated by the Schlieffen Plan. The underlying aim was to prevent the calamitous possibility of a two front war with France in the West and Russia in the East. Schlieffen allowed the German army only six weeks to defeat France – during which time

Russia laboriously mobilised its armies – before turning its attention eastward. To do this, the German army had to outflank French fortifications by passing through Belgium.²⁷ Any disruption to the progress of the army made the spectre of a two front war more imminent.²⁸

However, expectations about the course of the invasion, and the reality, proved to be diametrically opposed. From the beginning the German army began to fall behind schedule, it leaders underestimating the resistance that would be offered and encountering huge logistical and tactical problems that set them at a severe disadvantage. While the Germans trekked on foot, the Belgian and French armies were able to move men and resources quickly along their extensive rail systems. Without motorised transport or rail, the German army overstretched its supply lines. Its slow advance allowed time for defenders to destroy bridges, only threatening the timetable further.²⁹

Moreover, the Schlieffen Plan also had meagre provisions to cope with the impact of substantial advances in weaponry. The magazine rifle and machine gun gave defenders a distinct advantage, something that was demonstrated very early in the war by the outnumbered British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Mons, and the German attempts to take the Belgian forts.

The concerted resistance by the Belgian and French forces caused further pains for the invaders. The Schlieffen Plan provided no advice on how to cope with the rear-guard actions and retreats which hampered the German

²⁷ M. S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Harvard, 2005), p. 12.

²⁸ Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 39.

²⁹ S. Tucker, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (Bloomington, 1998), p. 22; Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 39.

advance and frustrated soldiers responsible for overrunning strategic points.³⁰

The Belgians' tactics were especially frustrating, as rather than face the Germans in concentrated battles, they used small contingents which were easily concealed, and could escape quickly.³¹

The fort of Liège exemplified this lacklustre foresight. To take it, the Germans needed more time and more men than had been anticipation in pre-war preparations. These plans had reckoned on the fort having a defensive strength of approximately 10,000 men. However, the garrison was bolstered, and in actuality the Germans faced a force of about 32,000 men. The German attackers had to be reinforced, swelling their numbers from 39,000 to 99,000 and effectively weakening their forces elsewhere. The one division designated by Schlieffen had proved totally inadequate.³²

The pressure of adhering to an impossible timetable – with the many setbacks which could so easily disrupt it – affected German treatment of civilians and enemy troops. German units had to place the timetable above all other considerations and this left no room for the soldiers to respect the niceties of war. There were multiple cases of civilians being used as leverage to induce compliance or to stymie resistance – often as human shields marched in front of German units, or as hostages to ensure good behaviour. At Liège, several influential citizens were taken hostage and threatened with death if the German

³⁰ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 117.

³¹ F. van Langenhove, *The Growth of a Legend: A Study Based on upon the German Accounts of Franc-Tireurs and “atrocities”* (New York, 1916), pp. 130-1.

³² Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 10-13.

troops, charged with taking nearby forts, came under attack.³³ The anxiety was also apparent in proclamations issued throughout Belgian towns. One notice, issued at Hasselt on 17 August 1914 by the Burgomaster, warned the villagers in no uncertain terms: ‘to abstain from [...] all acts of hostility which might bring terrible reprisals [... above] all [villagers] must abstain from acts of violence [...] *In case the inhabitants fire upon the soldiers of the German Army a third of the male population will be shot*'.³⁴ Another proclamation, issued by the Germans at Namur, warned of the retaliation citizens could expect in the event of resistance: ‘German guards [...] will seize 10 [sic] hostages in each street which is under their charge. If any hostile action is attempted in the street *the 10 hostages will be shot*'.³⁵ This punitive attitude was applied equally to enemy combatants. In 1915, a staff order dating from 1914 was revealed, allegedly instructing German soldiers to take no prisoners: ‘[from] today no more prisoners will be made. All prisoners will be put to death. The wounded, with or without arms, will be put to death. Prisoners, even if taken in large numbers, will be put to death. No living man must be left behind us.’³⁶

Taken on its own, the Schlieffen Plan, although problematic, did not mean atrocities were to be expected. A second – and powerful – reason for the predisposition towards atrocities was fear of franc-tireurs. Franc-tireurs were dangerous because they were anonymous; operating in small bands and civilian

³³ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 10-13.

³⁴ ‘Proclamation posted at Hasselt on the 17th August 1914’, in *Evidence and documents laid before the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York, 1915), p. 270.

³⁵ Proclamation issued on 25 August 1914 by Von Bülow, in *Why Belgium was devastated: as recorded in Proclamations of the German Commanders in Belgium [1914]*, p. 1.

³⁶ ‘“Kill Your Prisoners” – German Barbarity Proved Officially’, *News of the World*, 3 January 1915, p. 5.

attire, partisans could disappear easily among villagers after attacks and it could be difficult to distinguish the culprits from innocent civilians.³⁷ Their objectives were to harass the enemy, destroying communication lines, food supplies, roads, rails and bridges, and they also inflicted casualties.

By 1914, franc-tireurs had a long history in warfare. Two of the more notable examples were the Peninsula and Boer wars. The Peninsula wars in particular were exceptionally brutal. The partisan warfare was continuously punctuated with atrocities on both sides which merely fuelled mutual recrimination. The activities of the guerrillas, though, were ultimately successful. Indeed, R. Ernst Dupuy has argued that the efforts of the partisans ensured Napoleon's forces only ever controlled the land they were encamped on.³⁸

The example of which the German army of 1914 was most aware, however, was the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, during which franc-tireurs had been a major problem. The casualties they claimed had been negligible, accounting for only 1,000 German fatalities. The primary achievement of the 40,000 or so French partisans had been tying down a significant number of troops – 150,000 of the 450,000 German infantry – to protect the 250 miles of vital supply lines to Paris.³⁹ The German retaliation had been ferocious:

Bismarck [... exhorted] the army to hang or shoot all suspected *franc-tireurs* and burn the villages that sheltered

³⁷ R. Dupuy, 'The nature of guerilla war', *Pacific Affairs*, 12:2 (1939), p. 144.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 143; Terraine, p. 23.

them. Varice, Ourcelle and Ablis, near Orléans, were burned to the ground in November after villagers cut German telegraph wires or aided *franc-tireur* ambushes [...] Bismarck never went so far as his wife – “shoot and stab all the French down to the little babies” – [but] he insisted that there be no “laziness in killing” so long as France continued its futile resistance. If a French village refused German exactions, Bismarck wanted every male inhabitant hanged. If French boys spat at German troops from bridges or windows, Bismarck wanted the troops to shoot them dead. When French women and children picked through the trash or scavenged for potatoes on the fringes of Paris, Bismarck wanted the German gunners to fire into them. When 400 crudely uniformed *franc-tireurs* overran a Prussian outpost near Toul in January, the Prussian 57th Regiment furiously counter-attacked and burnt the nearest village, Fontenoy-sur-Moselle. Finding few “citizen soldiers” there, they went on a killing spree, spearing the inhabitants with their bayonets and heaving them into the flames.⁴⁰

During the invasion of 1914 the German army and leadership seemed genuinely, if incorrectly, to believe that franc-tireurs would again be a major obstacle.⁴¹ Given the historic success of such groups, the damage that civilian opposition potentially could inflict on the German timetable was significant, and worthy of concern. There is little question, however, that the German soldiers and civilians were indoctrinated with an irrational fear of the franc-

⁴⁰ G. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 279.

⁴¹ Horne and Kramer, ‘War Between Soldiers and Enemy Civilians, 1914-1915’, p. 157.

tireurs. The army was warned about treacherous civilians while it was still amassing in Germany and was told that the civilian population was being impelled to violence by the Belgian government and the clergy.⁴² In the very early days of the war German newspapers already were reporting atrocities allegedly committed by civilians. Sentries were reputedly discovered with their eyes gouged out and tongues cut off. Troop supplies were endangered by poisoned well water and nuns were rumoured to be poisoning the food of German invalids. Belgian women and girls were castrating wounded men, while priests fired on soldiers from behind their altars. One German soldier averred that several young girls were discovered cutting off ‘the ear lobes and upper parts of the ears of the most seriously injured’.⁴³ A boy was purportedly caught gouging out the eyes of a wounded soldier, and in Aix-la-Chapelle there was said to be an entire room filled with men – blinded – with their eyes torn out. Reports from the Eastern Front alleged that German children in East Prussia were being crucified before their mothers, who were themselves mutilated and murdered. These allegations against the Russians, however, were said to be surpassed in brutality by the actions of the Belgians. The rumoured atrocities were casting ‘the deeds of 1870 into the shade’.⁴⁴ The summation of the indictment of Belgian crimes in the *German White Book* alleged that in Belgium there were many occasions on which ‘the eyes of German wounded

⁴² Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 42-3.

⁴³ Paul Blankenberg quoted in J. H. Morgan, *German Atrocities: An Official Investigation* (London, 1916), p. 18.

⁴⁴ W. Bloem, *The Advance from Mons: The Experience of a German Infantry Officer* (London, 1930), pp. 20-5; Horne and Kramer, ‘War Between Soldiers and Enemy Civilians’, p. 154; excerpt from the diary of Piete Kuhr in, *A War of Words: The First World War*. (eds.) S. Palmer and S. Wallis (London, 2003), p. 50; van Langenhove, pp. 42; 95.

were torn out, their ears, nose, fingers and sexual organs cut off, or their body cut open'.⁴⁵

What matters is not whether the stories were true or not, but the fact that the German soldiers believed them to be true. This belief pervaded the German army from its lowest ranks, right up to its nominal commander-in-chief, the Kaiser, who remarked that 'the population of Belgium [...] behaved in a diabolical, not to say bestial, manner [...] tormented the wounded, beat them to death, killed doctors and medical orderlies, fired secretly [...] on men harmlessly standing in the street – in fact by prearranged signal, under leadership'.⁴⁶ General Ludendorff also abhorred the franc-tireurs arguing '[such] action was not in keeping with the usages of war; our troops cannot be blamed if they took the sternest measures to suppress it'.⁴⁷

The apprehension among regular soldiers dealing with the civilians was palpable. Many German sources – such as diaries and letters – authored during the war exposed the obvious and pervasive fear of civilian resistance. A German officer holding Belgian hostages informed his prisoners that they would be shot in retribution for crimes committed by fellow civilians in Andenne, who 'tried to poison our soldiers'. There were also allegations that the townspeople were guilty of 'cut[ting] off our soldiers' noses, ears, eyes and fingers'.⁴⁸ The village of Francorchamps was attacked by German soldiers on 8 August on the supposition the locals had opened fire from a nearby railway

⁴⁵ German White Book (Germany, 1915), quoted in Morgan, *German Atrocities*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ E. Ludendorff, *My War Memories* (London, 1919), p. 31.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 36.

embankment. This incident culminated in fifteen people being killed and the buildings burned. At Louveigné on 7 August, seventeen hostages were shot, purportedly for cutting the ears off a German major.⁴⁹ A soldier's diary exposed other rumoured cruelties carried out by Belgians. The man had heard that at Liège a surgeon general, invited to tea by the Oberbürgermeister, had had his throat slit when he sat down to dinner. He had also heard that in a hospital treating Germans, a Red Cross attendant found the wounded combatants with their eyes 'put out', and that one aide was found in the possession of several fingers he had cut off an officer to rob him of his rings.⁵⁰ There were also reports that German Red Cross nurses were being mutilated by franc-tireurs – one had her breasts cut off, the other her hand.⁵¹

Further evidence that the German troops were suspicious of Belgian civilians is demonstrated in the memoirs of Walter Bloem, a German officer who participated in the preliminary invasion. Bloem was adamant that there were no unprovoked atrocities committed by German forces, an assertion repeated by other primary evidence.⁵² In his eyes, taking hostages was a cautionary measure designed to ensure good behaviour of local villagers and discourage franc-tireur attacks. He excused the execution of civilians by saying that only franc-tireurs were punished in this way. He wrote that marches that pushed the troops to the brink of exhaustion were driven by 'the thought of the repeated tortures awaiting them at the hands of marauding bands of armed

⁴⁹ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ 'K. Barthel', in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 242.

⁵¹ van Langenhove, pp. 105; 113.

⁵² For examples see Appendix B in *Evidence and Documents*, pp. 239-68. Most of the testimony of German soldiers does address atrocities, but always within the context of some form of perceived civilian resistance.

civilians', and that 'falling into the hands of the Walloons was worse than sore feet'.⁵³

The third factor contributing to German atrocities was the policy of *Schreklichkeit* or, as it was known among the Allies, 'frightfulness'. Even before the German invasion, the High Command was expecting opposition from franc-tireurs and instructed troops to have no mercy in dealing with them. The German war book prescribed that 'certain severities are indispensable to war', while von Hartmann, a General and member of the German General Staff, believed that 'war in the present day will have to be conducted *more recklessly, less scrupulously*, more violently, more ruthlessly, than ever in the past'.⁵⁴

Reports of franc-tireur activity, however inaccurate, made the Germans even more determined to stamp out the problem with the utmost ferocity. Urgency prescribed that the German army would have to be prepared to go to any lengths to ensure a quick victory in France; consequently the High Command was willing to endorse methods of warfare that were hitherto unimaginable in a war between civilised nations.

In response to the threat of civilian resistance, and because of the necessity of a lightening war, an official policy of 'frightfulness' was adopted. Theoretically it dictated making severe examples of a few to prevent the majority from resisting. After war broke out the Kaiser allegedly wrote to the Emperor Franz-Josef explicitly outlining the adoption of the use of terror to subjugate the population: 'My soul is torn asunder, but everything must be put

⁵³ Bloem, pp. 29; 32.

⁵⁴ E. Lavisse and C. Andler, *German theory and practice of war*, translated by E. S. (Paris, 1915), pp. 26-7.

to fire and blood. The throats of men and women, children and the aged must be cut and not a tree nor a house left standing'. The aim of this policy was explicitly announced: '[with] such methods of terror [...] the war will finish before two months, while if I use humanitarian methods it may be prolonged for years'.⁵⁵ This letter does need to be treated with caution as it was published by the French government in 1919, but the adoption of a policy of frightfulness was acknowledged by Germany in August 1914 when it broadcast its intentions over the wireless. The *Daily Express* publicised the stratagem on 29 August, informing readers that the German army intended to quell civilian resistance 'with unrelenting severity and to create examples which by their frightfulness would be a warning to the whole country'.⁵⁶

Real-life atrocities and the British press

The fundamental reality of the German invasion of Belgium and Northern France was that atrocities did in fact take place, and were widely reported in the British press. Estimates of the casualties suggest that 5,500 Belgian civilians and 900 French civilians were killed, while 15,000 to 20,000 buildings were destroyed.⁵⁷ Two particularly infamous atrocities were the razing of Dinant and Louvain.

⁵⁵ 'Kaiser Wilhelm II to Emperor Franz-Josef I on the Subject of German Rule in Northern France, 1914', *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. III*, (ed.) C. F. Horne (1923), sourced from www.firstworldwar.com/source/wilhelm_germanrule.htm [September 2008].

⁵⁶ 'Vengeance of the Savages', *Daily Express*, 31 August 1914, p. 3; see also 'The March of the Huns', *The Times*, 29 August 1914, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 74-6.

Dinant was the scene of a fierce battle between French and German forces. The Germans took the town from the French forces only with difficulty. Assuming that local civilians had been involved in the resistance, the Germans fell on Dinant and conducted ‘a systematic, premeditated elimination of presumed civilian resistance’.⁵⁸

In response to this presumed participation, the German forces killed civilians and destroyed much of the town. Six hundred and seventy-four people were shot, in both scattered hunts and systematic executions, while another 400 people were deported into Germany. Many civilians sought refuge in the wool factory and when they surrendered themselves in the late afternoon the women and children were sent to the abbey while the manager and thirty-one men were summarily executed. At Tschoffen wall, 137 people were lined up and shot in a single incident. They were killed, not necessarily for their individual complicity, but under the assumption that as civilians were collectively responsible for any franc-tireur activity. The town was systematically pillaged and its public and historical buildings burned while its population was sacrificed as an example. Hundreds were deported and the city was left in ruins.⁵⁹ The German troops arriving in Dinant had been primed to expect franc-tireur resistance and they acted as though they had found it.

It was a similar story at Louvain. The Germans entered the city on 19 August and were met with a nervous, but peaceful population. Rumours of atrocities had reached the town’s citizens from refugees, and the city had been

⁵⁸ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 46.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 42-51.

warned in no uncertain terms by its own civic leaders to refrain from any violence against German troops. Alongside these existing warnings, the Germans posted further admonitions that any hostile action taken by civilians would be met with callous penalties. To further reinforce their point, and to ensure the good behaviour of the population, many leading townspeople were taken as hostages to be shot in the event of any hostilities.⁶⁰

Six days after the arrival of the Germans, chaos erupted. Historians have agreed, as did contemporaries, that the likely catalyst for the event was a case of accidental ‘friendly fire’. After shooting their comrades, and in a desperate attempt to cover this blunder, the Germans probably intentionally blamed the townspeople for inciting the shooting.⁶¹ Whether or not this was true, the costs of the subsequent rampage through Louvain were enormous. Two hundred and forty-eight civilians were killed, 10,000 were expelled under threat of bombardment, and 1,500 were deported into Germany.⁶² One-sixth of the historic municipality had been reduced to ashes or rubble.⁶³

That the Germans were cruel and intemperate in their treatment of Louvain’s population is unquestionable. Men and women were dragged from their homes and shot in the street, or were forced to perish in their burning homes. Exhumations that were carried out a year after the destruction indicated

⁶⁰ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 38-40; A. Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction* (New York, 2007), pp. 6-7.

⁶¹ ‘Vengeance of Savages’, *Daily Express*, 31 August 1914, p. 3; ‘Germans Burn and Sack Louvain’, *New York Times*, 29 August 1914, p. 3; ‘Louvain in Ashes – Terrible Act of German Vandalism’, *The Times*, 29 August 1914, p. 8; Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 41.

⁶² Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 38-40.

⁶³ Kramer, p. 10.

that some of the civilians had been tortured.⁶⁴ It is probable that many of the German troops involved were sincere in their belief that had been under attack. However, there was no attempt to establish the guilt of the people executed, and random victims unfortunate enough to fall into German hands were often shot.⁶⁵

Louvain and Dinant were particularly infamous because of the number of civilian casualties, but there were many other documented examples of real atrocities. The town of Barchon was razed after the surrender of a nearby fort, with 110 of 146 houses destroyed and twenty-two inhabitants executed.⁶⁶ In Battice, thirty-six villagers were killed and 146 houses burned. Over a ten day period in Herve forty-four people were shot, while in Tintigny forty hostages were executed and many others perished in the wild shooting, or were trapped in their burning homes. The men of Tintigny were then marched ahead of the German troops as a shield against French artillery and the town was largely destroyed.⁶⁷ Nine civilians were killed at Micheroux and forty-one in Retinne. At Aerschot 156 civilians were slaughtered and eighty-six houses destroyed. The Germans took 412 men of Fécher as hostages, forcing them to shield the Germans advance between Belgian forts. In Namur thirty civilians were killed and 400 taken hostage.⁶⁸ At Les Rivages seventy-seven were killed, half of this number was women and children, including seven infants.⁶⁹

Atrocities were not confined to civilians. There were also recorded incidents of Allied prisoners of war and wounded being killed. At Aerschot

⁶⁴ Kramer, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 38-40; 48-9.

⁶⁶ A. Toynbee, *The German terror in Belgium* (London, 1917), p. 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-2; Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 56-7.

⁶⁸ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, pp. 24-5; 65; 35-6.

⁶⁹ Kramer, p. 15.

twenty Belgian soldiers were executed and thrown into the river Demer.⁷⁰ In Herstal, Belgian prisoners of war were shot alongside civilians in retribution for a costly Belgian counter-attack.⁷¹ One hundred and fifty wounded French soldiers were massacred at Gomery after the Germans alleged they were fired on from the Red Cross station; several prisoners of war had also been executed as they were marched to Gomery as a human shield.⁷²

It took a while before most of these atrocities were reported in the British press. The initial weeks of the war were demonstrably void of reports of atrocities, which can be explained by the lack of information coming from the front and the fact that early reports of atrocities were met with some incredulity. On 14 August 1914 the *Daily Express* wrote that it was ‘still reluctant to believe the worst of German methods of waging war’, although it had printed reports of the burning of Visé, the stripping of the invaded territories of food supplies, some isolated shootings of civilians charged with espionage, and the taking of hostages at Liège.⁷³

The turning point in the reporting on atrocities was the destruction of Louvain, which entered the headlines on 29 August: ‘Town Reduced to Ashes – Louvain Destroyed by the Germans’.⁷⁴ The news of the fate of Louvain coincided closely with the publicising of the German policy of ‘frightfulness’,

⁷⁰ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 26.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 58-9.

⁷³ ‘The Barbarians’, *Daily Express*, 14 August 1914, p. 1; ‘Savage Reprisals’, *Daily Express*, 6 August 1914, p. 1; ‘Civilians Shot’, *Daily Express*, 10 August 1914, p. 5; ‘Citizens as Hostages’, *Daily Express*, 11 August 1914, p. 1.

⁷⁴ *Daily Express*, 29 August 1914, p. 1.

published in the press only one day before.⁷⁵ It is a reasonably safe assertion that news of the policy of ‘frightfulness’, followed so closely by the destruction at Louvain, served to demolish any doubts the British press had regarding the atrocities. It is possible to see from this time a burgeoning in atrocity reports being published in the newspapers, and by September, the *Daily Express* was carrying accounts of atrocities in every issue.

It is fair to say that the reporting of atrocities was at first fairly accurate. In the report on Louvain, for example, the only substantial inaccuracy was the claim the entire city had been destroyed, and this was apparently the result of misinformation supplied to a representative of the *Daily Express* by the Belgian Commission.

Not surprisingly, one matter the press did not report on was atrocities that were committed against German troops, and indeed Belgian civilians, by Allied soldiers. Representations of the merciless murder of any prisoner or wounded soldier by Germans were misleading. The simple reality was that this type of atrocity was committed by both sides. The instances when prisoners or wounded were killed on the Western Front were motivated partly by pragmatic reasons, as neither side could afford to guard or feed unnecessary mouths without compromising its own supplies and security.⁷⁶

However, the killing of some German prisoners was less pragmatic in its motivation. Some British soldiers killed their prisoners after losing friends in battle. After the first gas attack there were few prisoners taken as the allied

⁷⁵ ‘Rule of Iron in Belgium – Necessity for “Frightful” Examples’, *The Times*, 28 August 1914, p. 7.

⁷⁶ R. Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London, 1961), p. 163.

soldiers took their revenge for such a use of weaponry. Likewise, those who were considered to be ‘particularly detested opponents’ were often killed out of hand; in many cases this meant the snipers and machine gunners. Alan Hanbury Sparrow reported that his battalion was given an order to kill these men on the assumption that ‘the only way to stop it is to let these fellows realize [sic] it means certain death’.⁷⁷ One soldier reported that a young German who made his way to the British lines to surrender was shot.⁷⁸ There were even implications of orders not to take wounded – something that the German army was reviled for. Private Arthur Hubbard, fighting on the Somme, shot three badly wounded Germans who emerged from their dugout: ‘We had strict orders not to take prisoners, no matter if wounded [...] My first job was [...] to empty my magazine on 3 Germans [...] They cried for mercy, but I had my orders’.⁷⁹ Robert Graves also mentioned the frequent killing of German soldiers for pragmatic as well as emotional reasons. The wounded were killed because it was easier than trying to get them back behind the lines; others were killed in revenge for the alleged atrocities committed by the Germans.⁸⁰ This was, of course, an aspect of the Tommy’s behaviour that was kept from the home front.

The myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’

Although the press coverage of atrocities was at first fairly accurate, this soon changed. Already by September 1914, there was a move towards more lurid

⁷⁷ Alan Hanbury Sparrow quoted in R. Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918* (London, 2005), p. 549.

⁷⁸ Gerald Burgoyne quoted in Holmes, p. 546.

⁷⁹ Private Arthur Hubbard quoted in Holmes, p. 552.

⁸⁰ Graves, pp. 116-17.

tales that had little or no factual grounding. These were more common still from 1915 onwards and gradually replaced the reality of the Belgian experience. This tendency is particularly evident in the headlines, which used evocative and sensational language. The *News of the World* charged the Germans with being ‘savages’, and accused them of committing an ‘Orgy of Horrors’.⁸¹ Another aspect of the creation of the ‘Bestial Hun’ was the increased focus on brutality against individuals rather than the generalised reports of mass killings, although these were still publicised. The charges of ‘setting houses on fire, resorting to reprisals after the cessation of fighting, and shooting on peaceable citizens’, together with the ‘burning of Belgian cities and villages [...] the massacring of thousands of inhabitants, old and young [...] the carrying of the survivors into bondage’ was progressively supplanted by ‘the outraging of helpless women and girls [and] the unnumbered acts of bestiality and torture’.⁸² In 1914 one story accusing the Germans of intentional mutilation carried the description of the body of an elderly woman: ‘throat gashed with bayonet; two wounds on right hand, a bullet in right leg, end of nose cut off’.⁸³ While these injuries were horrific, it is not impossible to believe that they were sustained during panicked fighting. Only a few weeks later the public were being informed that bakers were pushed into their ovens to burn alive, people

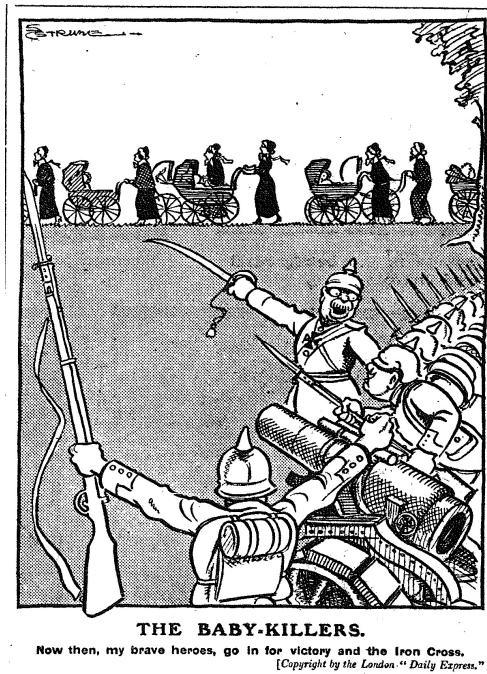
⁸¹ *News of the World*, 6 September 1914, p. 10.

⁸² ‘Uncivilised Warfare’, *Daily Express*, 14 August 1914, p. 1; Speech given by the Right Honourable D. Lloyd George, Prime Minister, in the House of Commons 19 December 1916, *War Speeches by British Ministers 1914-1916* (London, 1917), p. 249; ‘The Sinking of the Lusitania’, *The Times*, 8 May 1915, p. 9.

⁸³ ‘New Crimes Against Humanity – Women and Girls Mutilated by Germans – Wanton Horrors’, *Daily Express*, 28 August 1914, p. 2.

tortured, their eyes gouged out, and even a woman shot when she refused to consume the blood of her dead husband.⁸⁴

The increasing tendency was to characterise the experience in terms of mutilated women and dismembered children. Stories of mutilation, rape, torture and brutalisation held the public enthralled and redefined the discourse of German atrocities. The assertion that ‘the whip is a German national institution’ was only compounded by claims that the destruction of towns was only a backdrop for the real horrors. The main performance was ‘devoted entirely to the torture of old men, of women, and of children’.⁸⁵



[Source: *Daily Express*, 22 December 1914, p. 5]

This cartoon illustrates one of the underlying ideas of atrocities against women and children. While it does not portray any of the sadistic elements, it

⁸⁴ ‘Fiends Incarnate’, *News of the World*, 20 September 1914, p. 5; ‘Handiwork of Savages’, *News of the World*, 4 October 1914, p. 6.

⁸⁵ E. Verhaeren, *Belgium’s Agony* (Boston, 1915), pp. 27-8.

shows the commonly held belief that the war the Germans were fighting was directed specifically against the vulnerable.

There were three main subjects of the atrocity rumours, some of them false, that circulated in the press and helped to establish the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’: atrocities committed against Belgian and French women and children during the course of the invasion; the treatment of prisoners of war and wounded soldiers; and atrocities against British civilians.

The coverage of stories of the victimisation of Belgian women and children stressed their innocence and vulnerability. The reported violation of young women and girls portrayed them as ‘tender maidens’ and ‘stainless’, made martyrs for their country.⁸⁶ In many of the rumours, women were subject to brutal rapes, often followed by torture, mutilation and death; indeed it was alleged that ‘German military usage inevitably orders rape or violation as a preliminary’.⁸⁷ J. H. Morgan’s investigations of the conduct of the German army in France led him to conclude that ‘[there] is very strong reason to suspect that young girls were carried off to the trenches [...] and there abused by hordes of savage and licentious men’. The ordeal did not end there. After hearing the terrified screams of a young woman for most of the night the British soldiers testified to finding her the next morning ‘lying naked on the ground ‘pegged out’ in the form of a crucifix’.⁸⁸ One report alleged that an elderly woman of eighty-seven, and an eleven year old girl had fallen victims to the lascivious

⁸⁶ ‘A Ghastly Story’, *Daily Express*, 4 September 1914, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Verhaeren, p. 29.

⁸⁸ J. H. Morgan, *A Dishonoured Army, German Atrocities in France: With Unpublished Records* (London, 1915), p. 19.

German soldiers.⁸⁹ A French officer told Philip Gibbs that if he were to return to his home he would find his ‘wife and daughter both expecting babies whose fathers are German soldiers’.⁹⁰ A fourteen year old girl was driven ‘half mad’ after being raped by seven German Red Cross men.⁹¹ A seventeen year old girl was raped by three soldiers who then murdered her.⁹² One source alleged that ‘[n]ever within the last four hundreds [sic] years or more have any women ever been so brutally abused, so extensively raped by violence, often accompanied by murder in a Jack the Ripper fashion’.⁹³ This was an accurate description of the content of the rumours, even if the stories themselves were often dubious in their reliability.

One recurring motif in many stories was the particular focus on women having their breasts cut off. A Belgian soldier testified to finding a young woman with her left breast cut off and nailed to the floor in the form of a crucifix. She had been stabbed several times in the chest.⁹⁴ Another reportedly found the bodies of six women in a German trench; they appeared to have been violated. While the soldier could not tell definitively how they had been killed he reported that it looked as though their throats had been slit and their breasts

⁸⁹ ‘Hideous Atrocities – Appalling Stories of German Barbarities – Rapine and Murder’, *News of the World*, 10 January 1915, p. 6.

⁹⁰ J. Cathcart Wason, *The Beast* (London, 1916), p. 7.

⁹¹ ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 86’, in *Evidence and Documents*, pp. 110-111.

⁹² ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 140’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 129.

⁹³ Dr. W. Hornaday, *A Searchlight on Germany: Germany’s Blunders, Crimes and Punishment* (New York, [1917]), p. 26.

⁹⁴ ‘Belgian Soldier – c. 38’, in *Evidence and Documents*, pp. 65-66.

cut off.⁹⁵ Phyllis Campbell reported seeing ‘a naked girl of about twenty-three or four [...] who] was saturated with blood from her cut-off breasts’.⁹⁶

The fixation on this particular form of punishment is interesting as it obviously evoked sexual-sadistic images. There are some connotations associated with the specificity of mutilating the breasts. It could be interpreted as an attempt to strike Belgium at the very fount of its progeny, ensuring that its women would be unable to nourish and nurture their babies. A similar symbolism was conveyed by reports that pregnant women were ‘unfailingly’ bayoneted in the womb.⁹⁷ This could be construed as a radical – though implicit – expression of Germany’s well publicised belief that Belgium had no right to existence.

Another explanation is that this imagery was simply used to further the denigration of the German soldier into the ‘Bestial Hun’. Murdering innocent women was terrible, but it could theoretically be explained as retribution for the women’s participation in civilian resistance. However, the portrayal of victims being mutilated so horribly ensured that the perpetrators were perceived – not as frightened soldiers – but as perverted sexual-sadists who committed acts beyond the pale of humanity.

Other rumours that were especially popular involved the brutal mutilation and killing of children. The cruelty meted out to children could have no military justification. This was taken as further evidence of the bestial nature of the Hun. What threat could children really pose? To be sure, German

⁹⁵ ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 137’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 129.

⁹⁶ P. Campbell, *Back of the Front* (London, 1915), pp. 31-2.

⁹⁷ Verhaeren, p. 29.

allegations of atrocities committed by Belgian civilians included stories involving children as young as eight, but no one in Britain believed these to be true. Besides, an infant was no threat to a soldier; perhaps the interest lay in the fact that it was easy and natural for British readers to attribute a very different motive to the Germans who were said to have singled out very young victims: infants ‘can be tortured and will tell no tales’.⁹⁸ Popular rhetoric seized on this idea and the press increasingly referred to the Germans as ‘baby-butchers’ and ‘baby-slayers’.⁹⁹

An infant, allegedly only a few days old, was purportedly thrown from a window onto the point of a bayonet.¹⁰⁰ Another account alleged that a German soldier stabbed a toddler standing in the doorway of its house, before hoisting the bayonet back onto his shoulder with the baby still impaled on the end.¹⁰¹ In another incident, a Belgian soldier reported finding the bodies of a boy and his mother. The woman had been ripped open, and her son had been mutilated; his nose, lips and both hands had been cut off.¹⁰² A Sergeant-Major found a seven year old youth nailed against a door, and in the same town saw a German soldier thrust his bayonet out of window with an infant impaled on the end.¹⁰³ One six year old girl was allegedly butchered alive, the Germans systematically

⁹⁸ Verhaeren, p. 32.

⁹⁹ Reply to the letter to the editor by Jerome K. Jerome, who was belittled for his questioning of the more horrific accusations against the Germans. The newspaper criticised Jerome for ignoring findings that were ‘vouched for by the Belgian Government and denounced by the whole civilized world’. The paper then asserted that any attempts to ‘whitewash the baby-butchers [were] mischievous’. ‘Mr. Jerome K. Jerome’, *Daily Express*, 8 September 1914, p. 3; ‘Dance With a Baby-Slayer’, *Daily Express*, 8 September 1914, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Baby Bayoneted’, *Daily Express*, 10 October 1914, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ ‘Married Woman – d. 4’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 82.

¹⁰² ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 58’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 96.

¹⁰³ ‘Sergeant-Major in Belgian Army – d. 42’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 92.

cutting off her foot, hands, forearm and eventually her head, which was stuck on the point of a lance.¹⁰⁴ J.H. Morgan also alleged that children were also subjected to sodomy and rape, saying that it ‘did undoubtedly occur on a very large scale’.¹⁰⁵

The particular focus on atrocities against children revolved around the idea that German troops systematically cut the limbs off infants and adolescents: ‘[their] little hands [...] are delightfully easy to cut off’ and ‘[their] feet are barely attached to their legs at all’.¹⁰⁶ It was widely believed that children had their limbs severed and there were many reports – never verified – that there were hundreds of child refugees in Britain who had survived this dismemberment.¹⁰⁷ One refugee reported seeing a German soldier hack off the arms of a child as it grasped its mother.¹⁰⁸ In September 1914 the *Daily Express* recounted the alleged fate of a three year old boy who had ‘his arms [...] cut off’ and was then ‘bayoneted to death’ for crying ‘Vive l’Angleterre’ as the Germans entered the town.¹⁰⁹

Stories about chopping off the arms of children served the purpose of maximising the perversity of the perpetrators. Mutilating children in such a way inflicted maximum suffering and left the victims to bleed to death, and the German soldiers were said to have taken pleasure in meting out this atrocity.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Single Woman – e. 20’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁵ Morgan, *A Dishonoured Army*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁶ Verhaeren, p. 32.

¹⁰⁷ A. Clark, *Echoes of the Great War: The Diary of Reverend Andrew Clark, 1914-1919*, (ed.) James Munson (Oxford, 1985), p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Atrocities in Belgium – Accounts by Refugees’, *The Times*, 28 August 1914, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Arry K. ’Arry – Another Apologist for the Baby Killers’, *Daily Express*, 5 September 1914, p. 3.

The stories reinforced the assertion that Germans were ‘a race that is something apart from Humanity’.¹¹⁰

One story demonstrates particularly well the methodical, callous and brutal treatment that was said to be reserved for defenceless women and children:

I saw the Germans seize the baby out of the arms of the farmer’s wife. There were three German soldiers, one officer and two privates. The two privates held the baby and the officer took out his sword and cut the baby’s head off. The head fell on the floor and the soldiers kicked the body of the child into a corner and the head after it [...] After five or six minutes the two soldiers seized the woman and put her on the ground. She resisted them and they then pulled all her clothes off her until she was quite naked. The officer then violated her while one soldier held her by the shoulders and the other by the arms. After the officer each soldier in turn violated her. [...] After the woman had been violated by the three the officer cut off the woman’s breasts. I then saw him take out his revolver and point it at the woman on the ground.¹¹¹

The focus on women and children is strong evidence that these reports, collectively, were a myth that did not represent reality. Most of the victims of the well documented atrocities seem to have been men – they were the most likely sources of organised resistance to the German invaders. This contention is supported by comparing the incidence of German atrocities in Belgium and

¹¹⁰ Campbell, *Back of the Front*, p. 118.

¹¹¹ ‘Belgian Refugee – a. 33’, in *Evidence and Documents*, pp. 20-1.

France. During the initial invasion phase of the war, there were 129 incidents in which ten or more civilians were killed. Of these killings, 101 were in Belgium and the remaining twenty-eight were in France.¹¹² This can possibly be explained by the respective military conscription systems of the two countries. Belgium had no universal conscription in place at the outbreak of the war so men of military age were still residing in towns and villages rather than fighting off the invaders as part of the regular army. These men all represented potential franc-tireur resistance. On the other hand, France did have conscription, and experienced significantly fewer atrocities.¹¹³ This suggests that men were perceived as the greatest threat to the German invaders, although their atrocity myths did make women and children a secondary concern.

However, once the British rumour mills got under way, adult civilian males seem to almost disappear as victims. It appears unlikely that this represented the actual incidence of atrocities, as adult males of military age continued to represent the main threat to the German soldier. The focus on women, children and babies in the reports did not reflect the actual pattern of atrocities. Instead, these reports were selected, or invented, to propagate the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’.

The second theme of the atrocity stories was crimes against prisoners of war and the wounded. As with the myths and rumours surrounding women and children, the vulnerability of these victims was stressed. With the insolence shown to people supposed to remain physically untouched by war it could only

¹¹² Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914*, p. 74.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 94-5.

be expected that the Germans would have no qualms dealing out similar or worse treatment to combatants. There were accusations that wounded prisoners were being subject to intentional but unnecessary surgeries; one soldier reportedly had his leg amputated up to the thigh despite having only a very minor wound on his foot. The explanation allegedly was that '[he] will be a man less against us in the next war'.¹¹⁴ Wounded soldiers found in villages were thrown into burning buildings; in another incident they were placed in a hayrick and burnt alive.¹¹⁵ One of the more notorious cases was the allegation that a Canadian officer was found crucified by the Germans.¹¹⁶ While it began with a Canadian, very soon there were reports that several soldiers and officers had been executed in such a manner, including Scotsmen and Americans.

In German prisoner of war camps, inmates were allegedly forced to subsist on frogs and clover in lieu of starvation.¹¹⁷ Dogs were deliberately set onto prisoners, while others were pinned to the ground and had their eyes gouged out and tongues cut off.¹¹⁸

Rumours circulated in Britain that there would be few wounded or prisoners returning home because they were being killed by the Germans, or they were taking their own lives to avoid being captured. The rumours even went so far as to allege that those who were already prisoner in Germany were destined to be butchered.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ L. Mirman, G. Simon and G. Keller, *Their Crimes* (London, 1917), p. 37.

¹¹⁵ Morgan, *German Atrocities*, p. 112; 'Atrocities in Belgium – The Official Report', *The Times*, 16 September 1914, p. 6

¹¹⁶ 'Canadians Crucified', *The Times*, 13 May 1915, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Clark, p. 274.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274; Ponsonby, p. 97.

¹¹⁹ Clark, p. 72.

The veracity of these stories is thrown into some doubt by the reality faced by British soldiers in German prisoner of war camps. Demonstrably, the Germans did kill many prisoners, mostly soon after taking them. However, there is also good evidence that once they reached the prison camps British soldiers were not killed, except for a crime like trying to escape, and generally, they were well treated. Prisoners were allowed to receive packages from home which supplemented the often poor prison fare, which tended to mirror the scarce provisions also supplied to the German troops.¹²⁰ Most of the stories that have been mentioned were false, fed by a lack of information, fears for loved ones, and the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’. In turn, these stories contributed to the myth.

Much propaganda was made out of the final theme – atrocities against British civilians. These reports were true, but presented in distorted terms of gratuitous and cruel destruction. Aerial and naval warfare joined the ranks of poisonous gas and the ‘flammenwerfer’ (flamethrower), as treacherous and brutal methods of warfare engineered by the Germans. It was yet another example of technological advancement being bastardised and forced to serve the bestial motives of the Hun.

U-boat forays against shipping were denounced as piracy. The Germans were believed to intentionally target trawlers which could not fire back, thereby reinforcing the idea of the intentional attack on innocents. When a German submarine sunk a liner the *News of the World* accused the Germans of ‘taking a

¹²⁰ For a general overview of the conditions faced by prisoners of war in Germany, see S. Tucker, L. Matysek Wood, J. D. Murphy (eds.), *The European Powers in the First World War: An Encyclopedia* (Washington, 1996), pp. 571-73.

fiendish delight in murdering defenceless men and women', calling it '[their] Crowning Infamy'.¹²¹ The most infamous sinking carried out during the U-boat war was by far the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The American (and therefore neutral) ship was sunk on 7 May 1915 with the loss of over 1,000 lives.

The U-boat war was an attempt to blockade Britain, but the U-boat crews were accused of being 'pirates'. However, the attacks on merchant and neutral shipping were presented in terms of the loss of human life, rather than as a German attempt to disrupt British supplies. The attack on the *Hesperian* in September 1915 was presented as a deliberate attempt to 'murder over 500 unarmed, helpless men, women, and children'.¹²²



[Source: *Kultur in Cartoons*]

These two cartoons – 'Submarine Bags', and 'The Satyr of the Seas' – penned by Louis Raemaekers, were a vivid expression of popular sentiment about the submarine war being carried out by Germany, and the belief that they disproportionately targeted women and children.¹²³

¹²¹ 'The Crowning Infamy – German Submarine Sinks a British Liner – Pirates Laugh at Victims', *News of the World*, 4 April 1915, p. 9.

¹²² 'Allan Liner Sunk – Attempt to Murder Over 500 People – Another Black Crime by German Pirates', *News of the World*, 12 September 1915, p. 7.

¹²³ *Kultur in Cartoons*, p. 83; 179.

Later in 1915, when zeppelin raids became commonplace, they were presented in terms of a German desire to kill blameless civilians, particularly women and children. Michael MacDonagh, a journalist for *The Times*, summed up the popular attitude in his memoirs: ‘He [the captain of the L31 zeppelin brought down over England] did not wound a single soldier or knock a slate off a barrack [...] He had succeeded in killing and maiming hundreds of women and children and elderly men, for no other reason than they were British and living in London’.¹²⁴ After the raids over Bury St. Edmonds a local paper scathingly remarked that ‘perhaps the raiders mistook the old brick works for a cathedral, church, or possibly they thought it was a hospital or babies’ home’.¹²⁵



[Source: *News of the World*, 24 January 1915, p.1.]

The caption reads: ‘Zeppelin airships this week bombarded peaceful and unfortified towns on the East Coast and killed four persons and injured a baby girl’. Death rained on the undefended home; men being demonstrably absent.

¹²⁴ MacDonagh, p. 139.

¹²⁵ ‘The Watchman’ quoted in *Bury and Norwich Post*, May 1915, quoted in G. Jenkins, *Zeppelins Over Bury: The Raids on Bury St. Edmonds, 1915 and 1916* (Cornhill, 1985), p. 12.

This view was reiterated by Hornaday, who wrote ‘[it] has been the helpless women [and] school-children [...] who have been blown to pieces’.¹²⁶ The raiders were labelled ‘baby-killers’, and after the bombardment of Hartlepool the population was confronted with headlines proclaiming ‘Women and Babies Were Slaughtered’.¹²⁷ The *News of the World* poignantly spoke of the ‘Kaiser’s Child Victims’, and the ‘Dead and Maimed – Women and Children Trapped in their Homes’.¹²⁸ The victims were overwhelmingly portrayed as women and children, despite the fatalities of some men. It was the ‘Child Victims of the Kaiser’ who were mourned, and in another raid it was reported that there were ‘Forty Women and Children Killed, Wounded or Missing’, despite the other sixteen casualties being men.¹²⁹

The imagery, too, reinforced this perception. Several of Louis Raemaekers’ cartoons addressed this theme, as did newspaper cartoons, which focused exclusively on the victimisation of women and children:

¹²⁶ Hornaday, p. 22.

¹²⁷ *Daily Express*, 18 December 1914, p. 1.

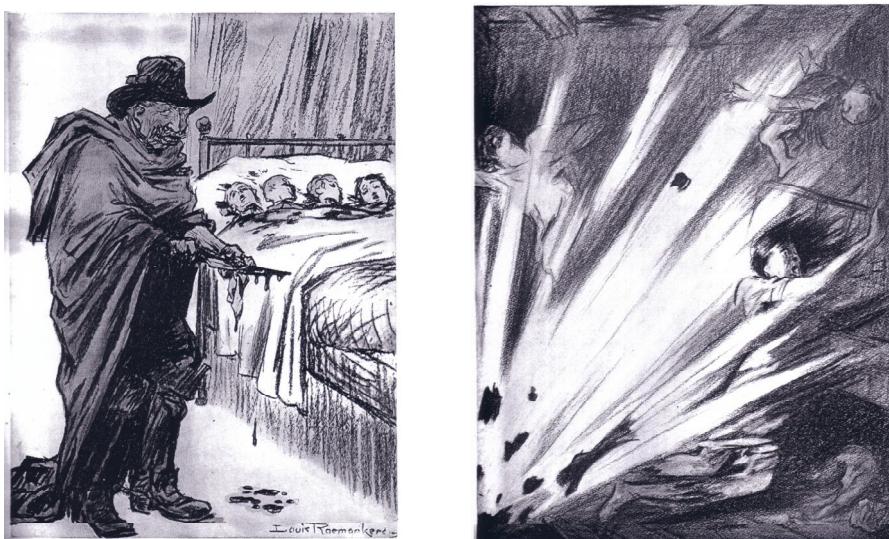
¹²⁸ *News of the World*, 20 December 1914, p. 9.

¹²⁹ ‘Child Victims of the Kaiser – Blood Sacrifice to the Lust for Power’, *Daily Express*, 16 September 1914, p. 5; ‘Another Raid Last Night – 56 Casualties in Tuesday’s Attack’, *Daily Express*, 9 September 1914, p. 1.



[Source: *Daily Express*, 28 May 1915, p. 2.]

A popular depiction of the Hun was to show German airmen being decorated for their child victims.



[Source: *Kultur in Cartoons*]

Louis Raemaekers' 'The Zeppelin Raider', and 'A German 'Victory'' also gave disproportionate attention to the theme of women and children as the Huns favourite victims.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ *Kultur in Cartoons*, pp. 3; 109.

Whilst U-boats and zeppelins were presented as evidence of German bestiality, the British blockades of Germany, and its consequences, were glossed over. The use of blockades was well established in military annals, and the British strangulation of German imports during the Great War did little to arouse protest, despite bringing great hardship to millions of German civilians. Trevor Wilson has argued that this was because responsibility for the starvation of civilians could be seen as lying ultimately with the German army.¹³¹ The soldiers could make the choice to lay down their arms and therefore save the civil population. This line of reasoning, of course, was never used to place responsibility for the submarine and zeppelin attacks on Britain's armed forces, which could have pre-empted them by surrendering.

Likewise, there seems to have been no mention of the fact that while German aerial attacks on Britain had killed 1,400 people by 1918, British aerial attacks on Germany had killed 740, the majority of whom were also civilians.¹³² The targets of British attacks were industrial and military, but given that there was no way of ensuring precision bombing with early aircraft, civilians were inevitable victims. Additionally, British sources largely ignored (if they were indeed aware of it) that the Kaiser had stringent restrictions on bombing forays over Britain, restricting attacks to military targets, and sought to keep Germany within the bounds of international laws on the subject.¹³³ This one-sided view of German bombing was also contradicted in comments made

¹³¹ Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 745.

¹³² S. Tucker, P. M. Roberts (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of World War I* (California, 2005), p. 709; C. Geinitz, 'The First Air War Against Noncombatants: Strategic Bombing of German Cities in World War I', in *Great War Total War*, p. 207.

¹³³ T. David Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare* (New Jersey, 2002), p. 21.

in 1918 by the chief of the Air Staff, Major-General Frederick Sykes, who said that ‘[the] wholesale bombing of densely populated industrial centres would go far in destroying the morale [of Germany]’.¹³⁴

The reporting of German attacks on civilians, but not those of the British, contributed to the collective myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’. It was not that the attacks were invented, or even radically distorted. However, the one-sided and obviously biased nature of the reporting suggested that the Hun intentionally waged a war against women and children, and that such ‘brutality’ directed against civilians was the exclusive forte of the Germans.

There were many routes by which these stories found their way to the British home front. Largely the responsibility for dissemination of the abhorrent and sadistic tales lay in popular channels. The most obvious form was the extensive press coverage where the discourse had significantly changed. The initial crimes had been met with statements that the papers ‘[were] reluctant to believe the worst of German methods of waging war’, which referred to the ‘evidence of incredible savagery’, including the ‘loathsome conduct [...] [of] German troops actually [using] prisoners bound together as a human shield’.¹³⁵

There was also surprise expressed at the ‘assertions that wounded Belgian soldiers were killed’.¹³⁶ Barely a month later there had been a significant departure from the reality of the civilian massacres, into the fantastical where the Hun revelled in the very worst crimes. Where once there had been disbelief,

¹³⁴ Quoted in Geinitz, p. 213.

¹³⁵ ‘The Barbarians’, *Daily Express*, 14 August 1914, p. 1.

¹³⁶ ‘Prisoners as Shields’, *Daily Express*, 14 August 1914, p. 4.

there were now assertions that the ‘Germans kill children [...] they are worse than animals’.¹³⁷

The fog of war which descended over the home front and obscured much of the news from the continent forced people to rely on accounts that were less than reliable. Philip Gibbs, a journalist, summed up the situation caused by this censorship succinctly: ‘the British press, as hungry for news as the British public whose professional little army had disappeared behind a deathlike silence, printed any scrap of description, any glimmer of truth, any wild statement, rumour, fairy tale, or deliberate lie, which reached them from France or Belgium’.¹³⁸ This atmosphere created the vacuum in which such unreliable tales could take hold.

Word of mouth was also important. Troops on leave and civilians who had contact with soldiers brought back accounts of their experiences from the front and passed them on. Robert Graves was told by one wounded soldier that he had seen three naked women hanging by their feet in a butcher’s window.¹³⁹ Vera Brittain recounted women she worked with ‘try[ing to] outdo one another in telling stories of war horrors’.¹⁴⁰ Andrew Clark, who kept a detailed diary of the life of his town during the war, transcribed many tales he had heard from other townspeople. One woman told him that at a nearby convent there was a young girl who had her hands hacked off by the Germans.¹⁴¹ A wounded soldier told Clark he had met a Belgian family whose daughters had both bled

¹³⁷ M. Riviere, a solider in the French army, ‘From the Front – Letter from Soldiers and Sailors’, *Daily Express*, 4 September 1914, p. 5.

¹³⁸ Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism*, p. 217.

¹³⁹ Graves, p. 71.

¹⁴⁰ V. Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London, 1935), p. 144.

¹⁴¹ Clark, p. 26.

to death as a result of their breasts being ‘hacked off’. His dentist also recounted having heard from Belgian refugees that during their exodus from the Germans they had passed the decapitated bodies of many children lying on the roadside.¹⁴² Another man told Clark that he had personally met a Canadian officer who had seen one of his men crucified with bayonets, while a man on leave from the front told Clark that British soldiers were committing suicide to avoid falling into German hands.¹⁴³ Even a passing tramp informed him the Germans had massacred a number of prisoners including interned women and children.¹⁴⁴

Letters from the front furnished further material for the rumour mill, and they were often reproduced in the press for general consumption. One British officer wrote home of there being ‘three girls in the trenches with us, who came to us for protection [...] having been outraged by the Germans [...] Another poor girl has just come in, having had both her breasts cut off’.¹⁴⁵ Not only was the man an officer, but his account was reproduced in *The Times*, one of the most reputable papers in Britain. One might question how these girls had managed to get through No Man’s Land without being shot on their journey through German lines to the British trenches. Particularly given their condition, and the behaviour established in many rumours that professed German soldiers often murdered their hapless victims after committing rape and mutilation.

¹⁴² Clark, pp. 33; 37.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 61; 72.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁴⁵ ‘British Troops at the Front – Personal Narratives’, *The Times*, 12 September 1914, p. 6.

Atrocity stories were magnified as they were told and retold, far surpassing any reality. Arthur Ponsonby demonstrated the birth and evolution of an atrocity story through newspapers. Its inception was innocent, but by the time the tale reached French shores it was yet another example of Hun brutality. The story began in the *Kölnische Zeitung* with the declaration that '[when] the fall of Antwerp got known, the church bells were rung (meaning in Germany)'.¹⁴⁶ In the next paper, *Le Matin*, it was alleged that when the city fell the priests of Antwerp were compelled to ring the bells. In *The Times* it was then said that the priests were 'driven away from their places' because they refused to ring the bells. In *Corriére della Sera*, the priests were said to have been sentenced to hard labour for their refusal. In the final stage, when the story returned to *Le Matin*, suddenly the 'Bestial Hun' had emerged and the priests had been punished by being hanged as 'living clappers' inside the bells of Antwerp.¹⁴⁷ The escalation and distortion that could affect the meaning of a rumour, or even a genuine story, is evident.

Sheer invention of atrocities also had a role. It is difficult to ascertain just how many rumours were fabricated, but some certainly were. In December 1914 a seventeen year old girl went to trial in Edinburgh for 'concocting and fabricating letters declaring that her sister [...] had been subjected to brutalities at Vilvorde'. The girl said she had received letters from her sister saying her final goodbyes. The dying nurse allegedly wrote a note deplored the cruelty of the Germans, and a friend of the woman also included a message stating that

¹⁴⁶ Ponsonby, p. 161.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

she had found the sister at the mercy of two Germans in the act of cutting off her left breast, the other already having been removed. The story was revealed as fraud when the nurse at the centre of the furore wrote to her father from Huddersfield where she was actually employed to let him know she was safe. The only defence the girl who had invented the story offered was that she had not heard from her sister for some time, and having read so much about German atrocities against women had imagined a similar fate had befallen her sister.¹⁴⁸ While this case went to trial and resulted in the exposure of the falsehood the young woman had invented, there were no doubt similar cases that were never revealed. The sudden proliferation of stories featuring women and children as victims as soon as the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’ took off implies that invention and imagination played an important role. Atrocities against civilian adult males, which were almost certainly still more common, were almost forgotten.

A British officer recorded in his memoirs the many fallacies that were penned in his men’s letters. Sitting in the trenches in the long spells of quiet the men invented farcical battles and encounters that never took place. One man wrote to his wife boasting that he had single-handedly killed hundreds of Germans in hand to hand combat.¹⁴⁹ It is possible that in their moments of boredom the men invented stories of atrocities to excite their loved ones at home and make their tour of the front seem more exotic. Imaginative invention

¹⁴⁸ ‘Mutilated Nurse – Girl’s Trial on a Charge of Forging Letters’, *Daily Express*, 29 December 1914, p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ M. Crofton, *Massacre of the Innocents: The Crofton Diaries YPRES 1914-1915*, (ed.) G. Roynen (Thrupp, 2004), p. 115; 122.

was certainly not confined to young women confined to the drudgery of the home front.

The Bryce Report

A particularly important vehicle for the dissemination of atrocity stories (both true and fictional) was the Bryce Report. The report was commissioned in December 1914 purportedly to establish the truth of atrocity stories that were rife by this time. It was not the first of its kind, since Belgium and France had already produced a multitude of reports investigating German atrocities. The publicised aim of the committee was to scrutinise the German invasion, particularly concerning the conduct of the army towards civilians, the wounded and prisoners of war. It was ‘to [investigate] outrages alleged to have been committed by German troops [... such as] cases of alleged maltreatment of civilians in the invaded territories, and breaches of the laws and established usages of war’.¹⁵⁰ It was generally expected that the committee would produce a balanced conclusion based on the available evidence. The charges targeted the accusations that had smattered newspaper pages: the killing of civilians, the targeting of women and children, the use of civilians as human shields, and the destruction of property.¹⁵¹

It is likely that the real purpose of the Bryce Report was not to ascertain the veracity of the atrocity stories but to provide useful publicity for the more credible ones. This hypothesis is supported by the actions of the Attorney-

¹⁵⁰ *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (New York, 1915), p. 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

General Sir John Simon. He took pains to assure the committee that the investigative groundwork had already been carried out by Scotland Yard, and that the information had already been sorted by barristers. The groundwork was so thorough, in fact, that '[members of the committee could] pass a judgement on it without themselves undertaking the work of interrogation'.¹⁵²

James Bryce was selected to head the commission – a prudent choice given his credentials. Bryce was a former student of Heidelberg University, a recipient of the Pour le Mérite, an advocate of German learning and former ambassador to the United States. He had also been firmly opposed to British intervention in the unfolding conflict in the final days leading to the declaration of war. The transgression of Belgium's neutrality had served to alter his views and he had become a firm advocate of Britain's cause. His reputation as a Germanophile, would add weight to his findings, and his political standing in America would ensure a favourable reception there.¹⁵³

These expectations were undoubtedly met. When the report was published, an assessment of the American press reaction compiled by Britain's propaganda headquarters, was able to state that 'in papers hostile to the Allies, there is not the slightest attempt to impugn the correctness of the facts alleged'.¹⁵⁴ Masterman, head of Wellington House, Britain's propaganda

¹⁵² Attorney-General Sir John Simon quoted in Wilson 'Lord Bryce's Investigation into Alleged German Atrocities', p. 373.

¹⁵³ Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, pp. 371-2.

¹⁵⁴ Report compiled by the British propaganda headquarters, quoted in Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 183.

bureau, told Bryce ‘even the most sceptical declare themselves converted, just because it is signed by you!’,¹⁵⁵

The report was based on 1200 depositions that were collected from refugees and Allied soldiers and supplemented with extracts from German diaries. Their testimony had been collected by a team of barristers who toured Britain. The finished piece consisted of two parts: a sixty one page report outlining the charges and assessing the evidence, and a 296 page compendium of the testimony. In Britain it was supplied to the public for less than the cost of a newspaper, ensuring its wide distribution, and it was proposed that a free edition be circulated from house to house.¹⁵⁶

Though the report tried to appear objective and factual, it was, in fact deeply flawed. The principal issue was that the witnesses be put under oath as the barristers had no authority to administer an oath. However, the barristers could cross examine witnesses if they believed there were points that needed clarification, and they were also encouraged to take notes on the demeanour of deponents.

The committee did use the opportunity to call on the barristers and ask for an assessment of the information they had gathered. It was at this point that the potentially dubious nature of many affidavits was exposed. When asked about two specific cases, the lawyer responsible for their collection said the pieces should not be treated as evidence.¹⁵⁷ This presented the committee with

¹⁵⁵ C. Masterman, quoted in Wilson, ‘Lord Bryce’s Investigation into Alleged German Atrocities’, p. 370.

¹⁵⁶ ‘Should We Love the Enemy’, *Daily Express*, 3 June 1915, p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ Wilson, ‘Lord Bryce’s Investigation in Alleged German Atrocities’, p. 375.

its first problem: without cross examining each of the barristers involved in the collection of the evidence there was no way of knowing how many other cases should be disregarded. On page six of the report the committee claimed it had rejected any evidence that had not impressed itself on the barristers, along with stories that were too sensational to be accepted on the faith of one witness. However, because it had not been interviewed each barrister thoroughly about individual pieces of evidence there was no way the commission could support this assertion. Moreover, depositions which seemed fantastic but had impressed the lawyers as intrinsically truthful had been included. Indeed, even testimony that the commission declined to use because it seemed dubious was included in the appendix, giving it apparent authority and making it accessible to a wide audience.

Bryce and his fellow committee members theoretically had the authority to call on witnesses to probe testimony further, but, the Attorney General made this avenue of enquiry sound both distasteful and ineffectual. It was asserted that the allegedly rigorous conduct of the barristers in determining the validity of the original testimony removed any need for the committee members to pursue the witnesses in person. Furthermore, the committee was informed that many of the witnesses wished to maintain their anonymity to protect family and friends still in Belgium from possible retribution. This was perhaps supportable given allegations that after the Belgium Committee had published its findings, 193 priests had been shot, injured, mutilated or taken prisoner because of the

evidence they had proffered against the Germans.¹⁵⁸ This sounds odd. To give evidence the priests must have been in territory controlled by the Allies. To be shot – or otherwise terrorised – they must have been in territory controlled by the Germans. This was not impossible as rapid German advances may have led to their falling into German hands, but it does seem unlikely.

The report made no mention of the fact that the barristers had tried and failed to confirm stories about particularly prevalent rumours. In particular, it found no evidence to confirm the hearsay stories that English homes were host to hundreds of Belgian girls made pregnant through rape, or the tales about the presence in England of a multitude of juvenile amputees mutilated by the Huns. Almost every Briton had a friend, relative or ‘friend of a friend’ who had seen the wretched victims taken in by English families. As part of the investigatory work carried out by the barristers, they had visited addresses where these victims were purportedly sheltered. Despite strenuous efforts, they were never able to find material evidence to support this widely reported aspect of German ferocity.¹⁵⁹

Despite its severe flaws, many of the stories included in the Bryce Report were probably true, such as depositions concerned the sacking of towns or the carrying out of well-documented executions. But there is reason to believe that many, like the stories of pregnant Belgian girls, or limbless children were fictitious. Individual stories of macabre and sadistic behaviour by German soldiers may have been true, but others were probably told, re-told, embellished

¹⁵⁸ W. Ward, ‘Evidence of German Atrocities’, *The Times*, 23 December 1914, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 185.

and believed because they recounted behaviour that seemed appropriate to the ‘Bestial Hun’. Stories like the following conformed totally to the stereotype:

We saw the corpse of a man and a woman. We inquired of the neighbours and they told us the woman was *enceinte*. She had been violated by German soldiers and had had her womb cut open by them in her husband’s presence. He had been previously bound to the banisters. They had removed the unborn child. We saw the latter half burnt. The flesh was more grilled than burnt. They had beheaded the husband ... They took the man’s head and thrust it into the woman’s womb after tearing out her child.¹⁶⁰

Another deponent reported finding a child missing both hands and feet, which the Germans had taken away with them. The child’s parents had not avoided a brutal death: the man had been shot in the face and his genitals had been hacked off while his wife had been ‘viciously raped’ before being murdered.¹⁶¹ A refugee recounted seeing the body of a newborn infant hanged from a door handle; witnesses had told him the child had been placed there and the mother forced to watch until the baby was dead.¹⁶²

The Bryce committee found the German Army guilty on all indictments. It concluded that there had been ‘deliberate and systematically organised massacres of the civil population’ and that ‘in the conduct of the war generally innocent civilians [...] were murdered in large numbers’. From the evidence the

¹⁶⁰ ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 86’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 110.

¹⁶¹ ‘Belgian Soldier – d. 90’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 113.

¹⁶² ‘Belgian Refugee – d. 125’, in *Evidence and Documents*, p. 125.

committee also resolved that the destruction carried out had not been arbitrary but ‘ordered and countenanced by the officers of the German Army’, and even went so far as to allege that ‘systematic incendiarism’ had been planned from the outset. The overall picture was one in which ‘[m]urder, lust, and pillage prevailed over many parts of Belgium on a scale unparalleled in any war between civilised nations’.¹⁶³ Much of this was, of course, true. It was the macabre fragments that were doubtful. However, the conclusions offered implicit support to the shocking and often doubtful stories in the appendix, irrespective of whether they received explicit endorsement in the main body of the report.

The Bryce Report was very widely distributed and widely discussed in the press. It was made readily available so the British public could purchase a copy of the report and digest the lurid details for themselves. For those who were not able to obtain a copy, the various British papers extracted sections of the report for republication in their pages. Newspaper headlines had been vicious in their accusations of German cruelty before, but with the release of the Bryce Report they reached new heights of malevolence. Headlines of ‘Rapine and Blood – Women Mutilated and Babies Bayoneted – Satanic German Soldiery’; ‘Baby Beheaded – Revolting Scene in Belgian Farmhouse’ and ‘Bavarian Butchers’, were followed by extracts from the report.¹⁶⁴ Needless to say, most of what was reproduced in newsprint was both sensational and disgusting. The narratives and testimony detailing massacres were overlooked

¹⁶³ *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, pp. 60-1.

¹⁶⁴ *News of the World*, 16 April 1915, p. 9.

in favour of presenting the public with evidence of German brutality that defied belief. The papers published case after case of cruelty. The articles assured the readers that the cases had not been published in the report until the testimony had been subject to ‘the most rigorous examination and cross-examination by trained minds’ and further misled the public by declaring that the depositions were ‘irrefutable’.¹⁶⁵ Before the report was even released the papers presented the atrocities under the blanket umbrella of a German Staff order and further asserted that no evidence had been accepted unless it was ‘capable of absolute proof’. There were also insinuations that the very worst evidence was in fact sourced from German diaries when in fact these only supported reports of mass executions and drunkenness rather than sadism, torture and cruelty.¹⁶⁶

The subheadings of the dedicated one page report in the *Daily Express* are enough to give an idea of the stories the public was presented with. ‘Fiendish Work’, ‘Babies Strangled and Shot’, ‘Hands Cut Off’, were followed with accounts of sadism and perverted behaviour.¹⁶⁷ The *News of the World* was equally virulent in indulging its readership: ‘Women Mutilated and Babies Bayoneted’, ‘Satanic German Soldiery’, and ‘Bavarian Butchers’, were followed by reports of disgusting outrages against vulnerable civilians and the wounded.¹⁶⁸

It is no wonder that these stories were circulating in public discourse. The worst instances of mutilation and torture had been ‘proven’ and given the

¹⁶⁵ ‘Rapine and Blood’, *News of the World*, 16 May 1915, p. 9.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Hun Atrocities in Belgium – British Committee’s Report Completed’, *Daily Express*, 26 April 1915, p. 1.

¹⁶⁷ ‘Should We Love the Enemy’, *Daily Express*, 3 June 1915, p. 4.

¹⁶⁸ ‘Rapine and Blood’, *News of the World*, 16 May 1915, p. 9.

stamp of truth by the Bryce Commission, and then avidly reproduced for all in the pages of the popular press. However, atrocity stories would not have gained such significance if there was not some role that they could fulfil in the popular imagination.

The political, social and psychological significance of atrocity stories

It is easy to document the fact that atrocity stories were widely disseminated. There are substantial physical records in the form of newspaper articles, posters, illustrations and personal diaries. What is more difficult to ascertain is how widely these stories were believed as the majority of the British population left no records of their experiences.

There is in fact some evidence to suggest that not everyone believed the more lurid of the stories. Jerome K. Jerome believed the executions and destruction but questioned the content of other stories in circulation. He ‘expressed contempt for [...] the people who are disgracing the English reputation [...] by disseminating lies and shrieking abuse’.¹⁶⁹ Those who had contact with the enemy were especially sceptical. One example of this was Vera Brittain who worked as a Voluntary Aid Detachment worker in France:

[It] was somewhat disconcerting to be pitchforked, all alone [...] into the midst of thirty representatives of the nation which, as I had been repeatedly told, had crucified Canadians,

¹⁶⁹ Jerome K. Jerome, letter to the editor of the *Daily Express*, 8 September 1914, p. 3.

cut off the hands of babies, and subjected pure and stainless females to unmentionable ‘atrocities’. I didn’t think I believed all the stories but I wasn’t quite sure. I half expected one or two of the patients would get out of bed and try and rape me.¹⁷⁰

An officer who served at the front, C. E. Montague, also experienced growing suspicion of the atrocity stories that had been so freely and authoritatively fed to the population. Montague commented that on rummaging through German pockets he could never find the ‘poison to put in our wells, [or] practical hints for crucifying Canadians; only the usual stuffing of all soldiers’ pockets’.¹⁷¹ Robert Graves ‘discounted perhaps twenty per cent of the atrocity details as wartime exaggeration’, he also stated that many soldiers

[No] longer believed the highly-coloured accounts of German atrocities in Belgium; knowing the Belgians now at first-hand. By atrocities we meant, specifically, rape, mutilation and torture [...] French and Belgian civilians had often tried to win our sympathy by exhibiting mutilations of children – stumps of hands and feet, for instance – representing them as deliberate, fiendish atrocities when, as likely as not, they were merely the result of shell-fire.¹⁷²

Generally though, the evidence suggests that the stories, even the most lurid and horrific, were widely believed. Vera Brittain, writing to her fiancé at the front, was deeply affected by official reports on the atrocities, despite her change of

¹⁷⁰ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 374.

¹⁷¹ C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London, 1924), p. 149.

¹⁷² Graves, pp. 59; 162.

heart in later years: ‘I don’t think I have ever read anything quite so terrible as the official report on German outrages in Belgium [...] their treatment of women and children is worst of all’.¹⁷³

Letters to the editor suggest that belief in these atrocity stories, including lewd versions, was not as clear cut. Some found the refutation of any charges against the Germans equally as disgraceful as Jerome found the promulgation of such stories. A Lewis Jones took exception to Keir Hardie’s assertion that many of the stories were the product of ‘the highly imaginative and thoroughly unscrupulous inventions of a school of pressmen’, especially tales of mutilation, and referred Hardie – a socialist and pacifist – to the reports produced by the Belgian commission and various finding of the Belgian socialist leader Emile Vandervelde.¹⁷⁴ A Miss Aitken also refuted Hardie’s claims and suggested he visit a Belgian shelter where the ‘question of mutilation at ‘first sight’ could be finally settled’.¹⁷⁵ One unnamed ‘Belgian refugee’ also took exception those who questioned reports of German atrocities, asserting that ‘about a million civilians, men, women, and children [...] have been tortured [and] slaughtered [...] in less than four months’.¹⁷⁶

Further indications that the stories were widely believed were the riots that periodically broke out in England in response to German actions on the continent. There were riots in London’s East End in the week that the Bryce Report was released, which also coincided with the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

¹⁷³ V. Brittain, *Letters from a lost generation: the First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends*, Roland Leighton, Edward Brittain, Victor Richardson, Geoffrey Thurlow, (eds.) A. Bishop and M. Bostridge (Boston, 1998), p. 110.

¹⁷⁴ Lewis Jones, letter to the editor of the *Daily Express*, 28 October 1914, p. 6.

¹⁷⁵ Miss E. M. Aitken, letter to the editor of the *Daily Express*, 30 October 1914, p. 6.

¹⁷⁶ Belgian refugee, letter to the editor of the *Daily Express*, 14 November 1914, p. 6.

Conversely, the almost palpable fear that a similar fate would befall British women demonstrated that not only did Britons believe what was purportedly happening in Belgium, but they believed the Germans were capable of much worse. One preacher warned his flock from the pulpit that should the Germans set foot on English shores they would murder every male child.¹⁷⁷ Newspapers published German threats that '[w]hatever was committed in Belgium cannot be called barbarism on the part of the German Army, but once let us get into England [...] no doubt the world will learn of atrocities being committed such as are unknown today'.¹⁷⁸ One woman was so concerned about her potential fate should the Germans invade, she sought counsel to ascertain whether suicide could be doctrinally forgiven if it was committed to avoid being violated by the invaders.¹⁷⁹

The obvious conviction in these accounts raises the question of why people believed stories that seem so fantastic. Noticeably, atrocity myths and rumours were useful to the government. The government wanted people to believe the stories and gave the myths official sanction; they were an integral part of the propaganda campaign conducted by the British government during the war. Rumours of brutalisation fulfilled multiple roles essential to fighting the war to a successful conclusion. Most importantly, though, they impelled the British population to hate the enemy. Demonising the foe was vital in any conflict, not only to motivate the masses, but to shore up their determination when the situation seemed bleak. As Harold Lasswell argued in his seminal

¹⁷⁷ Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 740.

¹⁷⁸ 'Atrocities for England – Goal of German Hatred', *The Times*, 13/04/1915, p. 8.

¹⁷⁹ 'The Teaching of the Church on Suicide', *News of the World*, 24/1/1915, p. 1.

work, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*; every war must be portrayed as a war of protection against an aggressor that was murderous and threatening.¹⁸⁰ Atrocity stories filled this role perfectly.

Atrocities were also significant because Belgium defined British involvement in the war. The invasion of Belgium and France succeeded in removing any obstacles the pro-war British faction of the government had in making its case for war. The support of the people and the opposing political parties was firmly established when the plight of neutral Belgium was made public. The reality of the factors that pushed Britain into declaring war on the Central Powers was more pragmatic than acting as the benevolent protector of Belgium. Britain's own interests were threatened by a Belgium under German control, with the ports not only compromising British trade but in a more sinister vein, offering a potential launching point for an invasion of England's shores.¹⁸¹ The complexities of the situation went beyond a diplomatic breach of borders, but it was the unlawful invasion that was used to symbolise to the British public the reasons why the government had plunged the nation into a continental conflict. Treaty obligations justified any declarations of war, but the intricacies of diplomatic manoeuvring and negotiations likely had little significance for the lay person with scant interest in politics. Instead, appeals to their sense of righteousness and honour were held up in stark contrast to the lawlessness of Germany, and firmly cemented public support behind the war.

¹⁸⁰ H. Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the World War* (London, 1927), p. 47.

¹⁸¹ Tucker, p. 9.

The British cause was ‘bound in honour’ to ‘maintain [Belgium] inviolate’.¹⁸²

Atrocities only vindicated this assertion of British Right versus German Might.

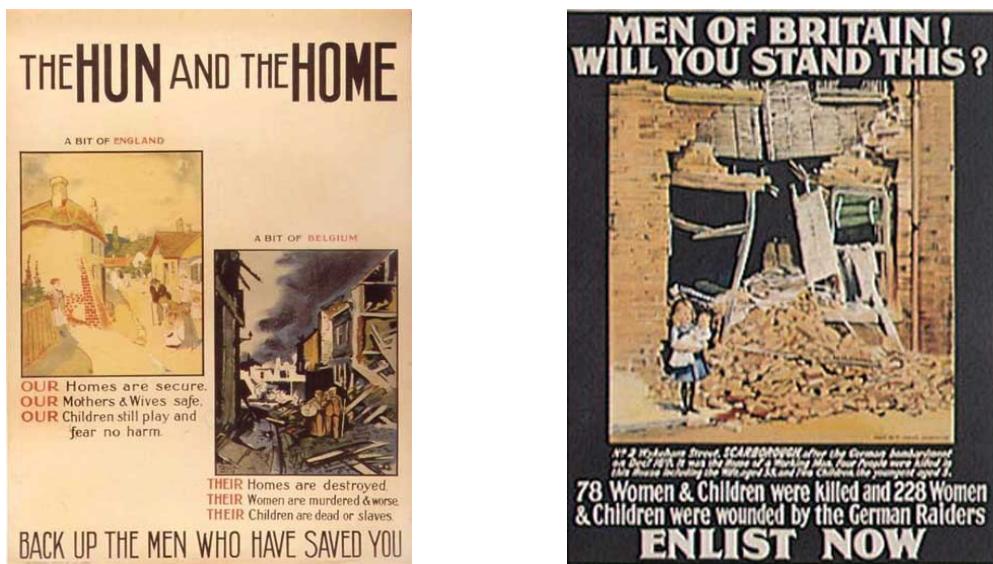
Reports of razed towns and murdered villagers furthered the condemnation of Germany while buttressing public support. The blame was laid firmly at Germany’s feet, both for the instigation of the war and for the degrading depths to which it would sink.

The myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’ was valuable for recruitment. Militarily, Britain was reliant on the spirit of volunteerism to fill the ranks of the army until conscription was introduced in 1916. Despite the pluck and courage of the regular army, it became evident very quickly that it would not be sufficient to stem the German onslaught. By the end of 1914 it had suffered massive casualties, and, in the atmosphere of democracy and liberalism that permeated the British attitude, it became necessary to convince men to enlist. The atmosphere of hate persuaded the population to fight and was demonstrably one of the most important motivations for men to join the colours.¹⁸³ Using atrocities in this manner possessed a twofold inducement. Not only was there the glory and honour of saving Belgium from the yoke of the Hun, but there was also the consideration that they might be saving Britain from a similar fate. Philip Gibbs also noted the effect that atrocities had on recruitment. The tales of outrages perpetrated against women and children ‘sent many men at a quick pace to the recruiting agents’, while Vera Brittain said of the Bryce

¹⁸² ‘Great Britain Declares War on Germany’, *Daily Mirror*, 4 August 1914, p. 1.

¹⁸³ Read, *Atrocity Propaganda*, p. 2.

Report that 'I don't know how any man can read it and not enlist'.¹⁸⁴ The stories' functional value was also evident at the trials of conscientious objectors. One man before a tribunal was asked what he would do if he 'saw a German trying to violate [his] sister'.¹⁸⁵ Posters encouraging recruitment also made extensive use of atrocities:



The emphasis in both of these posters focused on the plight of women and children and the need to protect the sanctity of the home.¹⁸⁶

The myth of the 'Bestial Hun' was used extensively in the diplomatic campaign to solicit support and participation of other countries in the Allied effort, especially the United States. All belligerents courted world opinion in an effort to gain military or material support. If this was not possible, then discrediting the Germans to limit collaboration from neutral countries was also

¹⁸⁴ P. Gibbs, *Realities of War* (London, 1929), p. 52; Brittain, *Letters from a lost generation*, p. 110.

¹⁸⁵ Graves, p. 56.

¹⁸⁶ Both posters were sourced from www.firstworldwar.com, British Propaganda posters, [September 2008].

the goal. While the Germans were somewhat desperate in their accusations against the Allied armies, resorting to tales of dum-dum and exploding bullets, the Allies had an unexpected advantage from having the war fought on their territory. German contact with Belgian and French civilians created an inexhaustible supply of atrocity stories to reinforce the illegality of the German cause and the righteousness of the Allied one. As the stories degenerated it was increasingly possible to attribute nearly any behaviour to the German army without arousing speculation as to its validity.

In 1917 rumours began to circulate that dead German soldiers were being rendered into military and domestic products. Glycerine was extracted for use by the munitions industry, and in the more disturbing rumours there were suggestions that it was going so far as to produce boot polish, soap and even margarine.¹⁸⁷ This story probably seemed more credible given the British blockade of Germany, as the factory would have acted as a means of counteracting some of the most vital shortages. Eyewitnesses testified to discovering railway wagons filled with corpses bound in bundles with extraneous limbs.¹⁸⁸ Among soldiers at the front there were rumours that it was not just German bodies being rendered into products, but also those of the British dead.¹⁸⁹ The story was revealed as a fraudulent invention aimed at rupturing ties between Germany and the East, where the dead were highly

¹⁸⁷ ‘The Germans and their Dead – A Prisoner’s Story’, *The Times*, 20 April 1917, p. 5; ‘The Kaiser and the War – Soft Soap from Corpses’, *The Times*, 16 September 1918, p. 8; N. Hanson, *Unknown Soldiers: The Story of the Missing of the First World War* (New York, 2006), p. 141.

¹⁸⁸ ‘German Corpses Packed in Bundles’, *The Times*, 22 June 1917, p. 6.

¹⁸⁹ G. Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai: A Story of the First World War* (London, 1999), p. 116.

revered.¹⁹⁰ The Chinese minister ‘was much horrified’ by the stories, viewing the ‘German desecration with a very special horror’.¹⁹¹

Likewise, the Bryce Report was designed to sway American opinion, although this was already favourable to the Allies in light of German actions. How much influence this propaganda actually had in deciding neutral involvement in the war is debateable. The combination of the Bryce Report, the sinking of the *Lusitania* – with the loss of American lives – and the first use of poison gas occurred within the space of a week, yet the United States remained neutral. It was the Zimmerman telegram and the clumsy German attempts to foment discontent in America’s neighbours which induced the Senate to declare war. However, it is a plausible argument that the propaganda had affected American opinion to such an extent that it was highly unlikely that the United States would have joined the Central Powers. The case of the corpse conversion factory was similar; it was not the deciding factor in China’s declaring war on Germany, but if the comments of the Chinese Minister are indicative, it certainly swayed them against the German cause.

Rumours of German atrocities were useful to garner support for the war effort, Allied war aims, and, particularly in the later years, to bolster British denials of a negotiated peace. The efficacy of atrocity stories did not dissipate as the war stagnated. Even as late as 1918 the National War Aims Committee, established to conduct the propaganda campaign on the home front, was using the invasion of Belgium and the atrocities of the Germans to further the war

¹⁹⁰ Hayward, p. 117.

¹⁹¹ ‘The Germans and their Dead’, *The Times*, 20 April 1917, p. 5.

aims of the government. Atrocities were used to sustain the push for harder peace terms than the population may have been inclined to support. In a pamphlet entitled *Aims and Efforts of the War, Britain's Case After Four Years*, the Committee used Belgium to demonstrate the fundamental differences in the causes of the Germans and the British. As the Allied effort supported national self-determination and the release of the all peoples in German bondage, the Committee fell back on the atrocity stories to prove the hideous nature of German rule. Rather than presenting the public with the 600 massacred at Dinant or the other crimes ubiquitous in the areas of German occupation, the committee defined German domination with descriptions of ‘a baby crucified [...] nailed like a rat to a barn [...] girls violated again and again until they died [and] men mutilated in ways that one man can hardly whisper to another’.¹⁹²

Atrocity myths were also useful to the larger society and to individuals, possessing important social and psychological functions. The experience of World War I for most civilians was deeply paradoxical. War was both omnipresent, yet also remote. On the one hand people were forced to endure shortages in foods and fuel, changes of occupation, restrictions on their individual freedoms, and above all, the absence or loss of loved ones. On the other hand, what they were told about the war was very little. Censorship and restrictions on reporters at the front ensured that civilian perceptions of the war would be far removed from its true nature. Myths and rumours – in this case atrocity myths – filled the vacuum.

¹⁹² National War Aims Committee, *Aims and Efforts of the War, Britain's Case After Four Years* (London, 1918), p. 47.

Atrocity myths served as a justification for the scale of the sacrifices the population was making and as proof of the righteousness of the cause for which the Allies were fighting. The polemic describing the war – in both official and popular discourses – defined the Allied cause as ‘the protection of the weak against the violence of the strong’. Britain had entered the conflict with ‘clear judgement and clean conscience [...] in this bloody arbitrament [sic] between might and right’.¹⁹³ Sylvia Pankhurst, as a well-known pacifist and socialist suffragette, recounted the reaction of fellow relief workers to her view of the war: “[what] would you do if you saw a great strong man killing a baby?” [...] ‘It was them as started it first: are we to let ‘em go on till they’ve killed everyone?”¹⁹⁴ British involvement was to protect the integrity of Belgium, brutalised by a state sworn to defend it, and to protect her defenceless women and children from the murderous German aggressors.

The myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’ was also useful as a way of drawing a distinction between the German ‘other’ – sadistic, domineering, militaristic, irreligious and cruel – with the British ‘us’ – honourable, libertarian, noble and Christian. Anti-German sentiment had no deep history in Britain; on the contrary, Germans were traditionally regarded as Saxon brothers. The animosity between the two countries was only decades old, and several notable Britons – among them Lord Haldane and Lord Bryce – considered Germany to be their ‘spiritual’ home.

¹⁹³ Right Honourable H. H. Asquith; Dublin 25 September 1914; Guildhall 4 September 1914, *War Speeches*, pp. 36; 16.

¹⁹⁴ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War* (London, 1987), p. 16.

The traditional enemy was France, now Britain's ally. The belligerence between Britain and France dated from the Norman Conquest. However, no matter the historical differences between the two countries, the French were not monsters guilty of mass murder. Like Belgium, they had been the victims of unprovoked war.

By demonising the German army, the British were able to divorce themselves from their shared history and, as some believed, their partly Germanic ancestry. Increasingly Germans were portrayed as animals and sadistic torturers. No longer considered 'civilised' in the traditional European sense of the word, they were shown to have a 'Kultur' which rejected the humanitarian conscience, and instead glorified might and militarism.

Another, simpler, explanation behind the attraction of these myths and rumours was that it gave license to talk about matters that were normally taboo. There was an element of vicarious excitement to discussing such topics, particularly those that were sexual in nature. This was evident in the fact that the plight of Belgium was so often described in terms of the raped and outraged women.

Conclusion

From the very inception of the war, atrocities were likely. The Schlieffen Plan exerted enormous pressures on the German army to adhere to a strict timetable but failed to take into account the logistical advantage possessed by the defending forces. Combined with the legacy of the franc-tireur warfare of 1870,

rumours rife on the home front, and the expectation that the ‘People’s war’ had re-emerged, the German High Command explicitly sanctioned severe and violent repression for any perceived resistance. The combination of these factors was a potent concoction which sparked nervous and spontaneous reactions from German troops in the face of any perceived civilian resistance.

That atrocities did take place along much of the line of German advance is historical fact, and many were reported in detail in the British press. Louvain, in particular, became synonymous with German devilry and really shattered the veil of cautious scepticism that had surrounded initial reporting of German atrocities. This coverage was naturally biased; the patriotic press was keen to undermine German justification for the atrocities by discounting franc-tireurs and particularly through the increasing focus on women and children as the victims. This skewed construction was furthered as there was no mention of the rape of civilians, or killing of prisoners or wounded that was committed by the Allied troops. After Louvain, which coincided with the release of the policy of ‘frightfulness’, the press barely questioned other reports even as they tended towards the sensational.

It was also in the early stages of the war that stories of the bestial and macabre emerged, which far transcended the bare facts. However, these were reported on as though they were not only real, but commonplace. Increasingly the plight of Belgium was defined in terms of ravaged women and mutilated children while Visé, Louvain, and Dinant – not to mention the multitude of smaller incidents – were all but lost amongst the rumours of rape, torture and sadistic cruelty.

While the press disseminated these rumours, propagation by word of mouth and unofficial reports from the front also contributed to the expanding myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’. Word of mouth invariably led to distortion and exaggeration of existing stories, while letters and correspondence from the front carried the misleading brand of authority through ‘experience’.

This promulgation was assisted by the most important piece of propaganda of the entire war: the Bryce Report. This contained the same mixture of fact, interspersed with fiction, as the unofficial coverage of German atrocities. However, its clever packaging and the stamp of being an officially sanctioned report gave credibility to stories that before had existed as mere rumour. It effectively destroyed any vestigial traces of doubt that some may have felt regarding German atrocities. The problems that prevented the report from ever being more than an article of propaganda were not revealed to its public, although what impact this would have had on popular acceptance of the stories is debatable.

No matter how unreliable the anecdote, in content or source, atrocity stories were widely believed because they were so useful. For the government, atrocities provided a means of soliciting foreign support for the Allied cause, and domestic cooperation in government drives that were so reliant on volunteerism. While evidence that atrocity propaganda actually encouraged neutrals such as America to join the Allied cause is negligible, they undoubtedly influenced neutrals and opinions against Germany.

For civilians they contributed to a larger Discourse on the Bestial Hun which provided meaning and significance to their sacrifices, particularly in

terms of human life. This discourse and the reports of atrocities made the war a moral crusade, not only to free Belgium from Germany's 'mailed fist', but to prevent the same fate befalling Britain. They also cast British involvement in unambiguous terms. Diplomatic manoeuvrings aside, the British were the defenders of right, intervening on the behalf of a small, downtrodden state. German and British identities were divorced with the de-humanisation of the Hun, and German 'Kultur' was removed from that of other 'civilised' nations.

Atrocity stories provided a way of understanding a war that was both omnipresent and remote, allowing people to come to terms with a war that required social cohesion and the effort of every individual. Total War was entirely new as no other war had been fought which required the complete subordination of life to the war effort. The war also had new connotations as civilians were increasingly targeted by belligerent nations. With the war being so far away, discussion of atrocities allowed Britons to imagine the war in terms that people could comprehend and empathise with. It enabled them to relate the war to people like themselves – the victims of a hideous enemy bent on the destruction of the hearth, home and innocent civilians.

Chapter 3. Enemy Agents: Spies, Saboteurs and Traitors

The myth of the ubiquitous German spy obsessed the British population. It was an idea that had been established for decades in popular literature, entertaining the people with tales of dastardly foreign agents and enemies who coveted Britain's vast empire. With the outbreak of war in 1914, it did not take long for the idea of the omnipresent, covert spy to possess the masses.

Of the stories that circulated on the home front, it is likely that the majority of them were purely myth. The early arrests of German spies in August 1914 reinforced the idea that espionage was a very real threat. However, the constant themes that ran through initial spy rumours were more indicative of fictional and imaginative influences than any reality.

The idea of the spy was important. While it appears to have had little apparent use to the government, for civilians the ubiquitous German agent was an important part of the domestic war experience. The rumours surrounding the evil machinations of Germany's malefic emissaries seem to have been an accurate reflection of many of the emotions surrounding the war.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore this experience and to consider how spy stories contributed to the popular understanding of the war. By examining the pre-war antecedents, the reality of espionage in Britain, and the various myths and rumours surrounding spies, it is possible to establish not only

how these ideas were received by the British population, but how they shaped conceptions of the war.

Pre-war backdrop to spy mania

From the late nineteenth century the British population was thoroughly primed for the spy scare that would erupt with the outbreak of war. There were two major agents: the burgeoning international tensions in Europe, and the increasing popularity of the spy novel in literature. The first created the anxieties and suspicions that fed the obsession with the notion of the insidious spy introduced into the social discourse by novels and the press.

European diplomacy had long been divided into traditional allegiances. For Britain, this included an amiable friendship with Germany, and cool suspicion towards France, Britain's historical enemy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, this underwent a significant change. With the inauguration and subsequent rule of Wilhelm II as Kaiser of Germany, the diplomatic map of Europe was redrafted. Arguably the most important factor of this realignment was the German adoption of the political ideology of *Weltpolitik*, to secure Germany's 'place in the sun'. This policy led to many indiscretions and blunders that produced a growing antagonism and suspicion between Britain and Germany. In 1896 the Kruger Telegram, which mentioned the prospective support Germany would offer the Transvaal government, aroused anti-German feeling among Britons.¹⁹⁵ In 1906 and 1911, the

¹⁹⁵ G. Wawro, *Warfare and Society in Europe 1792-1914* (New York, 2000), p. 176.

Moroccan crises further strained Anglo-German relations as Germany attempted to barge its way into Africa. The most divisive issue, however, was the Naval Act of 1898. Given Britain's reliance on its dominance of the seas, the proposed extension was seen by the British as a substantial threat.

In this atmosphere of tension and rivalry, there was a further concern. Improvements in military technology could mean the difference between victory and defeat in the field. New developments were jealously guarded secrets, so it is no surprise that there was concern that other countries would attempt to discover them. Obviously, naval technology was one such concern as Germany and Britain competed to develop the superior navy and gain the upper hand.¹⁹⁶

These diplomatic tensions were increasingly palpable and popular organs seized on them to great effect. Spy literature was one medium through which these strains were exploited and presented to the British public. As early as 1871 the themes of various novels had identified Germany as the greatest threat to Britain. After the end of the Franco-Prussian War, however, relations with Bismarck's Germany proved friendly, and these concerns ebbed away.¹⁹⁷ As late as 1904 France and Russia were still antagonising fictional heroes with their espionage – *The Campaign of Douai* (1899), *The Coming Waterloo* (1901) and *The Death Trap* (1907) are all examples of these anti-French sentiments – however, this virtually ceased after the signing of the *Entente Cordiale*.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ S. Wade, *Spies in the Empire: Victorian Military Intelligence* (London, 2007), p. 209.

¹⁹⁷ Boghardt, p. 21.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 22. For a summary of spy literature produced in the pre-war years see Ferguson, pp. 1-6.

Perhaps drawing on the idea of *Weltpolitik*, there was an increasing tendency in many spy novels – particularly from the early 1900s onwards – to portray the German threat as something more sinister than an external, rival, military power. German aggrandisement was portrayed at the expense of Britain, a situation wrought from the jealous ambitions of an imperial late-comer.

Despite the apparently copious production of novels with an espionage theme, there were some which proved more influential than others. Erskine Childers' novel *Riddle of the Sands* received immediate attention from contemporaries, particularly Conservatives and military reformers who recognised in Childers' work support for their own cause.¹⁹⁹ William Le Queux, a prolific author with an obsession for spies, penned a multitude of novels which demonstrably affected popular conceptions and official attitudes to espionage.²⁰⁰

Riddle of the Sands was first published in 1903. The plot revolved around the summer maritime adventures of two young British men in the North Sea and along the East Frisian coast. During their voyages the men unwittingly uncovered a German plot to invade England with a flotilla of barges specifically designed to transport German troops to the East Coast. In this instance, the spy was an Englishman in the pay of the Germans, supplying his employers with information concerning billeting and how to provision the

¹⁹⁹ Symons, p. ix.

²⁰⁰ Between 1891 and 1930, William Le Queux published approximately 158 novels (thirty-three of which were published during 1914-1918) and thirty-six short stories. ‘William Le Queux Bibliography’, <http://www.classiccrimefiction.com/william-le-queux.htm> [September 2008].

invading army from local supplies.²⁰¹ Interestingly, Childers' book was not presented as a piece of fiction. Childers opened his novel with a preface that gave the impression that the novel was more than a work of fiction:

In October last (1902), my friend 'Carruthers' visited me in my chambers, and [...] told me frankly the whole adventure described in these pages [...] At the end of his narrative [...] he added that the important facts discovered in the course of the cruise had [...] been communicated to the proper authorities, who [...] had, he believed, made use of them, to avert a great national danger.²⁰²

Giving his novel the air of credibility, Childers went on to assert that he had written the tale at the behest of his friend, who, feeling that 'the national security was really being neglected', despite the revelations made to the relevant officials, decided to make his story public.²⁰³ It is interesting to note that Childers claimed to have changed the names of the characters because an Englishman 'bearing an honoured name' would be implicated to the detriment of his family.²⁰⁴ This prefigured claims during World War One that important British figures were being swayed by German influences to the injury of the British war effort.

It is easy to discount the impact that works of fiction could have on the workings of officialdom. But, in the atmosphere of the early twentieth century,

²⁰¹ E. Childers, *Riddle of the Sands* (London, 1984).

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Childers' book resulted in the formation of a parliamentary subcommittee to investigate the viability of a German invasion in the manner described in *Riddle of the Sands*. The committee found such an event nearly impossible. For it to succeed, the invasion force would need to be 70,000 men strong, with 200 boats and a twenty-hour crossing. The prospect that such a crossing could take place secretly was negligible, and the British navy would have sufficient time to intervene.²⁰⁵

Another influential novel, *The Invasion of 1910*, was published in 1906. It was the brainchild of William Le Queux, who abandoned his traditional adversaries of France and Russia in favour of Germany. His story unfolded in London where two journalists discovered early one Sunday morning that the telegraph wires were not functioning. Upon further investigation, it was revealed that all contact with the continent and east coast of England had been interrupted. Speculation was rife that a storm, or perhaps an earthquake, was responsible. Conjecture was gradually replaced by fear when a man telephoned, reporting that he had seen figures interfering with telegraph wires the previous night. While the man thought they were carrying out repairs, his assumptions were quashed when they opened fire on him. Other chilling accounts emerged, and the realisation dawned that the German army had successfully and secretly invaded England, without resistance. By destroying Britain's communications, rendering the British navy useless, Germany deprived England of her most powerful defence.

²⁰⁵ Boghardt, p. 23.

The book's main theme was the extensive preparation of the spy ring that made the entire episode possible. This insidious element had been secretly at work in Britain, and when the time came to strike the German invasion force had all the logistical information needed to ensure that man and beast alike could be fed and housed. The spies severed cables and wires, incapacitated coastguards and stripped England of any chance to react.

The book's salient theme was the threat lingering within Britain, a malignant element, silent and unnoticed, prepared to act when given the word. The spies had come from Germany, having completed their compulsory military service, and taken work 'as waiters, clerks, barbers, hairdressers, and private servants'.²⁰⁶ They were unscrupulous individuals ready, after the siege of London, to lead the conquerors among the rubble and ruin to requisition goods, and further the advance of the army through the Midlands.²⁰⁷

Over one million copies of *The Invasion of 1910* were sold. The tale was also serialised in the *Daily Mail*, ensuring a wider audience. In order to publicise the book, columns of men were sent marching Oxford Street in London wearing Prussian uniforms and sandwich boards. This stunt may have increased the dramatic effect when the story was released.²⁰⁸ The story was a solemn warning of the ultimate consequence of Britain's naïve reliance on the navy. With no army in a viable position to defend against an invader, the capital was quickly besieged and the country overrun. In the book's introduction, Le Queux said that he was attempting to

²⁰⁶ W. Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910* (London, 1906), p. 395.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 395.

²⁰⁸ Boghardt, p. 24.

illustrate our utter unpreparedness for war, to show how, under certain conditions which may easily occur, England can be successfully invaded by Germany, and to present a picture of the ruin which must inevitably fall upon us on the evening of that not far-distant day.²⁰⁹

The details outlined in the scenario led to the formation of another parliamentary subcommittee to assess the potential threat posed by a German invasion. The conclusions were the same as before: as long as the navy remained in charge of the seas there was only a negligible threat to Britain's shores.²¹⁰

Le Queux's compilation of short stories – *Spies of the Kaiser* – was perhaps his most influential. The tales followed the adventures of three young English patriots who succeeded in uncovering and thwarting the activities of the German espionage network in Britain. Le Queux opened his work with the assertion:

No sane person can deny England is in grave danger of invasion by Germany at a date not far distant. [...] That German spies are actively at work in Great Britain is well known to the authorities. The number of agents [...] [is] believed to be over five thousand. [...] As I write, I have before me a file of amazing documents, which plainly show the feverish activity with which this advance guard of our

²⁰⁹ Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910*, p. vi.

²¹⁰ Boghardt, p. 25.

enemy is working to secure for their employers the most detailed information [...] as well as the secrets of every detail of our armament, our defences, and our newest inventions; [...] I have refrained from giving actual names and dates, for obvious reasons, and have therefore been compelled, even at risk of being again denounced as a scaremonger, to present the facts in the form of fiction – fiction which [...] will point to its own patriotic moral.²¹¹

The book was not meant to be treated as a work of fiction. According to Le Queux it was presented in this medium only because the information was ‘politically sensitive’. Whereas in *The Invasion of 1910* the advance force of agents was insignificant, numbering only one hundred or so, in *Spies of the Kaiser* Britain was host to a veritable army of spies numbering in the thousands. Under the guidance of a chief spy in London, the agents conducted a complete and detailed appraisal of the country in preparation for the eventual invasion. The billeting and supply capacities of towns were scrupulously noted, along with available modes of transport. Supplies of ammunition were being stockpiled all over the country in preparation for ‘The Day’ to equip the army of spies, with several depots laid down in London.²¹²

There were analogous themes that ran through all three of the novels. The first was the exclusive focus on Germany as Britain’s antagonist. This anti-German sentiment grew from idea that Germany coveted not only Britain’s

²¹¹ W. Le Queux, ‘If England Knew’, *Spies of the Kaiser* (London, 1996), pp. xxxiii-xxxv.

²¹² Hiley, ‘Introduction’, p. viii; Le Queux’s story ‘How the Germans are Preparing for Invasion’, in *Spies of the Kaiser*, outlined this scenario with the spy-hunters uncovering a German barman stockpiling weaponry, pp. 58-74.

command of the seas but her extensive and bountiful Empire.²¹³ *The Invasion of 1910* had the Germans demanding the cession of several British possessions to Germany, including Malta, Gibraltar and Tasmania. An indemnity was imposed to be paid over a period of ten years, and until full payment was made Germany was to occupy important English ports.²¹⁴

The second theme that ran through the novels was the increasing importance of the role played by the spy. In Childers' tale the spy remained comparatively undeveloped with the focus on the idea of invasion. Le Queux, however, developed this, focusing on preliminary events that would facilitate an invasion. The idea that there might be an army of spies in Britain, concealed as civilians, and biding their time until their Fatherland was ready to strike was enough to inject fear into many, aggravated by the fact that this threat was virtually undetectable. As Bernard Porter put it, 'This Trojan horse scenario [of thousands of German civilian-spies within Britain] seemed plausible enough to set to thousands of men and women hunting the menace in their midst'.²¹⁵ *The Times* observed in August 1908 that the 'spy mania seems to have established itself in our midst in quite a virulent form'.²¹⁶

It is easy to discount popular reactions to the German menace as sheer paranoia from an excitable population that had little idea of the real diplomatic or military situation that existed between Britain and Germany. However, the visible impact that spy fiction had on officials shows that they, too, were not

²¹³ Boghardt, p. 22.

²¹⁴ Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910*, p. 396.

²¹⁵ B. Porter, *The Origins of the Vigilante State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch before the First World War* (Suffolk, 1987), p. 167.

²¹⁶ 'The Spy Mania', *The Times*, 21 August 1908, p. 9.

immune to the trepidation that gripped many. True, there were those in government who were amazed at the belief that was so ardently invested in the stories, and regarded the threat posed by foreign espionage rings as little more than a fantasy. Others, though, were not as dismissive. One of these men was James Edmonds, appointed in 1907 to head MO₍₅₎, the army intelligence sector. Edmonds was not only a firm believer in the spy menace, but he was also adamant that Berlin had an extensive ring operating within Britain. On this basis, Edmonds set out to prove his assumptions. He never sought to establish the validity of this fundamental aspect of his belief. Instead, he sought evidence that confirmed it.²¹⁷ The investigations of MO₍₅₎, then, worked on the supposition that a German invasion was an impending threat, in spite of the two committee enquiries that had concluded that it was nearly impossible.²¹⁸

Edmonds never lacked ‘proof’ to support his assertions, although its credibility was highly suspect. He received much of his material from Le Queux, who in turn claimed that he had received it from members of the public concerned about the spy peril. It was these accounts that were integrated into Edmonds’ 1909 report and presented to a subcommittee on foreign espionage as confirmatory evidence of the insidious German plot.²¹⁹ According to Edmonds’ enquiries, the spy threat was increasing. Investigations in 1907 had only uncovered five cases, by 1908 the number had jumped to forty-eight, and within the first three months of 1909 there had been twenty-four cases. A map prepared by Edmonds, showing the location of the sources, showed a

²¹⁷ Boghardt, p. 28.

²¹⁸ Hiley, ‘The Failure of British Counter-Espionage’, p. 838.

²¹⁹ Boghardt, p. 30.

concentration in the south east of England and London. Not surprisingly, these were places established in the literature as the hubs of spy activity, London as the capital, and therefore one of the most important cities, and the south east as the likely landing place of an invasion force.²²⁰ This is probably more indicative of local feelings of vulnerability than a reflection of real espionage.

Edmonds was not the only official concerned. In 1908 Lord Roberts claimed in a speech to the House of Lords that there were already 80,000 trained German soldiers in England, ready to assist in the event of a German invasion.²²¹ Sir John Barlow also asked Haldane – a Liberal member and former Secretary of State for War and Lord Chancellor during the war – in parliament if he was aware of the 66,000 trained German soldiers (men who had done their compulsory time in the German military) within England. In a scenario reminiscent of Le Queux's buried ammunition, Barlow also alleged that in London cellars there were 50,000 Mauser rifles and seven million rounds of ammunition stored.²²²

It is possible that these claims made by parliamentarians were simply propaganda to support the push for compulsory military service in Britain that was going on at the time. It was probably no coincidence that Lord Roberts was president of the National Service League.²²³ This Conservative sect agitated for increased military expenditure, the expansion of the army and navy and the

²²⁰ Hiley, 'Introduction', p. xiv.

²²¹ Stafford, 'Spies and Gentlemen', p. 505; Boghardt, p. 26.

²²² Boghardt, p. 34.

²²³ Haste, p. 8.

establishment of some form of military service.²²⁴ Both Le Queux and Childers were proponents of this view, believing Britain's reliance on her navy made her weak in light of burgeoning military expansion on the continent. Promulgating the view that there was a sinister 'civilian army' within Britain, making ready for an invasion and subjugation of Britain, probably made the necessity of these steps seem more important. In July 1908, *The Times* carried a letter to the editor which indicated that spy stories were particularly popular among those agitating for military reform: 'It is good that the [spy] scare should have made its appearance just as [...] certain Ministers [...] desire to carry out the already commenced defence-stripping process still further [...] [presenting] us to the world as a military "nude"'.²²⁵

Studies investigating the extent of German espionage in Britain in pre-war years have revealed it to have been insignificant and harmless. The people, however, were not aware of this. They only knew what the press and popular literature (which had the presumption to assert their tales were, in reality, fact) fed them, and they saw the government responding with subcommittees and investigations. Newspapers urged people to report suspicious characters, or any encounters with 'spies'. The *Morning Post* alleged that there were 90,000 Germans living in Britain, both spies and reservists, for whom there were ammunition stores hidden all over the country.²²⁶ There was a £10 reward offered to people for sharing their experiences with the *Weekly News*; this

²²⁴ Haste, pp. 6-13.

²²⁵ Lonsdale Hale, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 17 July 1908, p. 9.

²²⁶ French, p. 356.

material was then passed onto Le Queux so he could ‘supplement his investigations’.²²⁷

Some historians, such as David French, assert that it was the increasing inclusion of these types of stories in the press which stimulated the public imagination, neutralising the fictional basis of the paranoia and progressively inculcating the masses with the fear of a real threat.²²⁸ The responsibility cannot be laid solely on the press though. There was a tendency for authors to make their works more important than they really were. As has already been mentioned both Childers and Le Queux were guilty of passing their fictional works off as ‘fact’ and accusing the authorities of negligence.

Another incident which caused concern in the pre-war years was the ‘Prince Henry Competition’, a car tour around Britain. While it was a race of sorts, many believed, when considering it retrospectively in light of the war, that it had ‘a political purpose’.²²⁹ Le Queux took this one step further and alleged that the car tour had been organised after a secret meeting at Potsdam in which the invasion of England was discussed; the ‘car tour’ was really a front to disguise spying.²³⁰

The turbulence affecting European politics made Britons acutely aware that traditional alliances had shifted, a fact reinforced in the spy literature which identified Germany as the greatest threat. While Childers and Le Queux counted for only a fraction of the popular fiction produced on spies in the pre-

²²⁷ Hiley, ‘The Failure of British Counter-Espionage’, p. 844.

²²⁸ French, p. 356.

²²⁹ A. Conan Doyle, *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (Hertfordshire, 2007), p. 271.

²³⁰ W. Le Queux, *German Spies in England: An Exposure* (Toronto, 1915), p. 35.

war years, their works were influential in stimulating ‘awareness’. This was particularly evident in the subcommittees that periodically met to redress the invasion issue. Unfortunately, the more realistic scenario involving the reconnaissance of military or naval developments was largely overlooked in favour of sensational fantasies of an imminent German invasion. This atmosphere almost ensured that when war broke out the myth of the spy would obsess the imagination of the British public.

The outbreak of war: government responses to the spy menace

To many of those who believed that spies were a very real threat to British national security, the government attitude towards enemy aliens and naturalised Germans may have seemed negligent. This attitude was starkly obvious in newspaper columns which intermittently criticised the government for its evident indifference to the spy question, saying that the government was ‘not taking sufficiently strong measures to render these alien enemies impotent for harm’.²³¹ There was little recognition that officials were, in fact, monitoring the situation, irrespective of whether this was apparent to the public.

Officials approached the spy threat fully informed and prepared. When war broke out the government was not blinkered by the same illusions as the masses. Not only were there laws designed to prevent the betrayal of sensitive or useful information to the enemy, but agencies devoted to monitoring enemy aliens and foreign agents.

²³¹ ‘Matters of Moment – The Spy Peril’, *Daily Express*, 14 November 1914, p. 4.

There were two vital pieces of legislation to combat the threat of espionage: the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and the Aliens Restriction Act (also known as the Aliens Restriction Order – ARO). DORA was hurriedly pushed through parliament in the first days of war. This assortment of laws was designed to protect national security. Under its regulations espionage became a crime punishable by court martial and death.²³² The ARO was intended to monitor alien enemies resident in Britain. After ordering all enemy aliens not of military age to leave the country by 10 August 1914, it inhibited possible espionage activity by those remaining aliens by preventing them from residing in prohibited areas or around sites of military or naval interest. Additionally, it required that aliens register with the local police and to inform the relevant authorities if they moved. The ARO also prevented enemy aliens from possessing firearms, vehicles, homing pigeons and wireless sets. Such was the nature of the law in later additions enemy aliens were not allowed to send any correspondence overseas.²³³

In addition to legislative acts restricting aliens' freedom, there were departments dedicated to counter-espionage in Britain. The first was the special agency of MO_(t) under Vernon Kell, a subsidiary section of MO₍₅₎. The second was CIDs: the Special Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, initially established in the 1880s to combat Irish terrorism.²³⁴ While the responsibility for investigation and arrest ultimately lay with Kell's department, his efforts were assisted by the Postal Censors of the War Office

²³² Haste, p. 111; Wilson, *The Myriad Faces*, p. 154.

²³³ DeGroot, p. 157; Haste, p. 111; Hayward, p. 5; French, p. 366.

²³⁴ Hiley, 'Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain', pp. 635-6.

and the Cable Censors which examined suspects' correspondence, the Military Port Control Service which monitored incoming individuals, the Military Control Officers in allied and neutral countries, who had the power to refuse visas, and also Britons living in Holland who provided the names of suspect individuals.²³⁵

The first act of these bodies on the outbreak of war was to shatter the German espionage network by immediately rounding up twenty-two known agents. This ring had been known to the authorities since 1911, being run from a barber shop by a naturalised German Karl Gustav Ernst, and was so closely monitored that no useful information had been passed onto Berlin. Another 200 people were placed under close monitoring.²³⁶ Many other suspects were investigated vigorously; in the first month of war alone the metropolitan police investigated between 8,000 and 9,000 individuals.²³⁷ The *Daily Express* reported that by the end of November 1914 over 120,000 reports had been investigated with 342 arrests and 6,000 homes searched.²³⁸

After destroying the German spy ring on the outbreak of war, counter-espionage worked to prevent the re-establishment of new enemy networks. Monitoring individuals in neutral countries allowed Kell's unit to identify agents who could potentially restore a system of spying in Britain. Internally, using postal and telegraphic surveillance ensured no information was passed to Germany and identified any individuals who were potential agents. This

²³⁵ Hiley, 'Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain', pp. 637-9; 643.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 637.

²³⁷ Hiley, 'The Failure of British Counter-Espionage', p. 859.

²³⁸ 'Enemies on Our Flank', *Daily Express*, 27 November 1914, p. 5.

method of observation proved effective. In 1914 it uncovered one Carl Hans Lody, a German ex-naval officer posing as an American tourist.²³⁹

Counter-espionage was generally successful in preventing the re-establishment of spying in Britain. Attempts in 1915 to re-establish the network proved useless. The seven new agents were rounded up within a matter of weeks. The increasing efficiency of Britain's counter-espionage meant by 1916 enemy agents could only communicate by travelling to Berlin directly; any other method of transmission – be it telegraph, post or invisible ink – was intercepted and altered, or held back entirely. Statistics are more instructive: in the first months of 1916 there were, on average, ten reports intercepted weekly. A year later this had dropped to less than one a fortnight. From 1917 no more German agents were being brought to trial as the authorities knew when agents were leaving for British shores.²⁴⁰

For the enemy aliens who lived in Britain during the war, their freedom was subject to the fluctuating emotions of the population amongst whom they lived. By September 1914 there were 10,500 enemy alien civilians interned. However, there was little room for more due to the demands of supplying accommodation and supplies for the new recruits in Kitchener's army and 1,000 had to be released.²⁴¹ The government decided that only those that posed a direct threat to British security would be interned, however, the public outcry

²³⁹ Hiley, 'Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain', p. 638.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 638-45.

²⁴¹ French, p. 368.

against this decision pushed the government to reconsider and re-intern all free aliens.²⁴²

Enemy agents in the popular imagination

The number of enemy agents actually uncovered was small, but popular fear of spies and saboteurs ran riot from the beginning of the war. The public was haunted by the visages of an anonymous civilian army hidden in its midst. Until the internment of enemy aliens was conducted in a systematic and thorough manner, the public was going to continue agitating its concern that potential spies were at large. However, the pragmatic reasons of why wholesale internment was impossible fell on deaf ears. Measures of space and supply did not convince the public that internment of every enemy alien was impossible, but only that the Home Office was making weak excuses to explain their failure to properly manage the threat.

Newspapers encouraged vigilance and printed reports of both the real – for example Ernst and Lody – and alleged cases of enemy activity. On 3 August, the day before the British ultimatum to Germany, the first ‘spy’ was arrested attempting to photograph the entrance to Portsmouth harbour. Two others were arrested at Southampton.²⁴³ By the end of the first month of war a number of people had reportedly been detained, including territorials and several military officers.²⁴⁴ The *News of the World* warned its readers of ‘The

²⁴² DeGroot, p. 158.

²⁴³ ‘German Spies Arrested’, *Daily Express*, 3 August 1914.

²⁴⁴ ‘Raids on Germans – Ex-Naval Officer Charged at Bow Street’, *Daily Express*, 6 August 1914, p. 2; ‘Spies Arrested – Soldier Shot During a Chase’, *Daily Express*, 4 August 1914; ‘The

Danger From Within', telling them it was the 'duty of the public to warn the authorities of any suspected treachery'.²⁴⁵ While they published many stories of spies, papers also reported extensively on aliens being tried under the ARO and DORA. It is possible that the continued publication of these stories – for reasonably minor infringements in many cases – made the presence of enemy aliens seem more insidious than it really was. One man was fined £100 for failing to register as an alien.²⁴⁶ Another was remanded after a woman apparently saw him release four pigeons, while a naturalised German was charged with failing to register and acting as a Special Constable.²⁴⁷

Vigilance was also encouraged by stories coming from the continent which suggested that civic awareness had netted several spies. One was captured when a passer-by noticed that the man appeared to be affixing a stamp over minute writing on the envelope. In this way the agent had been able to convey secret information to Berlin, despite the fact he was being monitored.²⁴⁸

The *Daily Express* went so far as to emulate the actions of some pre-war papers at the height of the spy furore and offer a reward for public 'vigilance'. It offered a £10 reward (later increased to £20) for 'vigilance [which] enables the authorities to discover enemy [...] apparatus'.²⁴⁹ Other rumours suggested

Danger From Spies – Many Arrests in Important Naval Centres', *The Times*, 6 August 1914, p. 3.

²⁴⁵ 'The Danger From Within – Great Hunt For German Spies', *News of the World*, 16 August 1914, p. 3.

²⁴⁶ 'Alien Peril', *Daily Express*, 27 October 1914, p. 5.

²⁴⁷ 'Alien Enemy as Special Constable – Six Months for Failing to Register', *Daily Express*, 9 September 1914, p. 4.

²⁴⁸ 'Secrets Sent to the Enemy – Wily German Spies and their Methods', *Daily Express*, 30 October 1914, p. 4.

²⁴⁹ '£10 For Information About Spies', *Daily Express*, 12 November 1914, p. 5; 'Enemies on Our Flank', *Daily Express*, 27 November 1914, p. 5.

that the War Office was willing to pay substantial amounts of money for information on spies. A woman travelling from St. Andrew's became suspicious of a man in her carriage, and wired his name to York. Six months later she allegedly received a cheque for £100 from the War Office for 'information received'.²⁵⁰ The cheques seemingly became part of an urban myth in Britain. Another woman accidentally trod on the toe of a British soldier as she was waiting for a train at a station. When the man swore in German, she reported him and six months later, she too, received a £100 cheque.²⁵¹

Vigilance was encouraged by popular organisations formed to combat the 'menace'. One of these was the Anti-German Union. This group advocated watchfulness, but also reinforced existing stereotypes and irrational suspicions. In 1915 the League warned the public of the extent of the menace in a pamphlet about its 'Intelligence Department' which

[deals] with all cases of suspected espionage [...] enemy aliens at large, or naturalised aliens whose movements are suspicious. [...] **HAVE YOU SEEN** any Germans at large who are passing as Swiss or using English surnames? Any German employees in Hotels, Restaurants, factories, etc? **HAVE YOU NOTICED** any suspicious-looking new tenants of long-unoccupied houses? Any suspicious-looking packages of cases arriving at lately unoccupied premises? Any motor cars travelling rapidly before or after air raids? [...] **IF SO**, keep your eyes on them, and let us know **at once** [...] **EVERY MAN, EVERY WOMAN**, can help; keep your eyes and ears open for anything in the least degree

²⁵⁰ Clark, p. 110.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 112.

suspicious [...] if we cannot [...] go to fight [the enemy] there, it is OUR DUTY to fight him here.²⁵²

Politicians, among them Haldane and McKenna – a Liberal MP and Home Secretary – were believed to be playing down the threat posed by spies. McKenna denounced many of the actions attributed to the spies as ‘unfounded rumour’, with no evidence of ‘actual malpractice’ made known to the authorities.²⁵³ Alarmists, like Henry Dalziel, were more influential and obviously in tune with popular sentiment. When confronted with a crowd at parliament protesting the freedom of naturalised Germans, Dalziel alleged:

There are thousands of German in London, naturalised and unnaturalised, enjoying practically complete liberty, who have their allotted posts in case of a Zeppelin attack on London. I am convinced that if ever Zeppelins drop incendiary bombs on London many of those Germans among us would set fire to the city in twenty or thirty different places.²⁵⁴

Germans – naturalised or not – were the objects of immediate suspicion. This suspicion was not itself irrational. Counter-espionage had already uncovered an obvious Teutonic influence in the isolated incidences of spying. However, the suspicion was often pushed to irrational lengths. One example of this was the allegations that there were ‘Zeppelin clubs’ in London. After raids,

²⁵² Anti-German League, ‘Intelligence Department’, leaflet no. 7 (London, 1915), pp. 1-2.

²⁵³ ‘Spy Peril Decried – Mr. McKenna Waiting for “Evidence”’, *Daily Express*, 29 August 1914, p. 4.

²⁵⁴ MacDonagh, p. 62.

the rumours went, Germans would converge on secret meeting places to celebrate the success of the raids and the casualties they had claimed, and also offered advance warning of raids to the members.²⁵⁵ Other ridiculous manifestations of anti-German feeling were directed against dachshunds; in some instances the dogs were stoned to death, or were put down. After the war dogs had to be imported as the bloodlines in Britain had been severely diminished.²⁵⁶

The most unreasonable of these lengths was the sporadic outbreak of riots in England, with violence being directed against German shops and their owners. There were isolated incidents early in the war. A West-end office of the German Steamship Company had its windows broken in August 1914.²⁵⁷ In October 1914 several German-owned shops were wrecked by mobs. The precursor to this violence was apparently the arrival of Belgian refugees in the area which stimulated anti-German feeling.²⁵⁸ The most notorious episode occurred in May 1915; within the space of a week the Germans sunk the *Lusitania*, allegedly crucified a Canadian officer, and the Bryce Report was released. These also coincided with the first use of gas a month earlier. The popular sentiment tended towards outrage. Shops were wrecked, stores looted,

²⁵⁵ ‘Naturalised Treason – Toasting the Kaiser in London – Zeppelin Soup’, *Daily Express*, 11 May 1916; ‘Hun Centres in London – Advance Warning of Zeppelin Raids – Secret Haunts of Treachery’, *Daily Express*, 27 April 1915.

²⁵⁶ Hayward, p. 7.

²⁵⁷ ‘Germans in London’, *The Times*, 12 August 1914, p. 3.

²⁵⁸ ‘Anti-German Riot in London – Shops Wrecked by an Angry Crowd’, *Daily Express*, 19 October 1914, p. 6.

property destroyed, and shop vendors chased. Anger was vented against anything German.²⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, the main categories of suspect Germans were those established by pre-war spy literature. Waiters in particular fell under acute suspicion. Basil Thomson recounted one incident in which an elderly couple reported a suspicious German waiter. The man declared himself to be Swiss; however, they suspected that this was simply a cover. The couple alleged that the waiter had a drawing which they recognised to be a plan of Kensington Gardens and the Palace. Under Thomson's questioning, the man admitted that they were indeed plans, but of the table layout of the restaurant where he had recently been employed.²⁶⁰ There were frequent cries in the paper to rally the national spirit and sack foreign waiters with allegations that many had proven to be 'first-class spies in the pay of the German Secret Service'. One article accused a hotel which employed several foreigners of signalling. It also encouraged hotels to display certificates proving they had no foreign waiters in their employment.²⁶¹ The public was implored to verify the claims of any waiters professing to be Swiss by asking to see their passports.²⁶² Some individuals even claimed that German waiters had betrayed their true allegiance; when diners turned to German waiter and asked him at what port he was to report when the German invaders arrived, he would inevitably click his heels and answer 'Portsmouth', or something similar, having been taken by

²⁵⁹ 'Rioting in London – Shops Plundered and Wrecked', *The Times*, 13 May 1915, p. 10.

²⁶⁰ B. Thomson, *Queer People* (London, 1922), p. 46.

²⁶¹ 'Spies in London Hotels – Need for a Clean Sweep of Alien Enemies – Hints to Guests', *Daily Express*, 17 October 1914, p. 5.

²⁶² C. E. Peel, *How We Lived Then, 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England During the War* (London, 1929), p. 40.

surprise.²⁶³ Under the simple headline ‘Waiter!’, the *Daily Express* informed readers that Berlin boasted of having ‘an army corps in the very middle of London’ which was apparently doing them a very ‘useful service’.²⁶⁴ A concerned citizen – ‘F’ – agitated for all aliens to be interned in concentration camps, irrespective of naturalisation. This individual asserted that

[t]hose who behold in this ubiquity [of German waiters and hoteliers] not only a network of espionage, but a systematised preparation for invasion, may not be far wrong, judging by the light of the Belgian and French experience. The French have discovered that attached to every German battalion is one man or more perfectly familiar with the district where the battalion is operating. More often than not he had been employed in a local hotel or restaurant.²⁶⁵

Barbers, too, were subject to this distrust. At Aldershot it was rumoured that a man who had been a hairdresser in the area for over twenty years had been arrested at the waterworks with poison stashed up his shirt.²⁶⁶ Other rumours in circulation suggested that barbers slit the throats of their British clientele; however, given the arrest of the spy ring being run from a barber’s shop, the suspicion was not surprising.²⁶⁷

Other service occupations came under suspicion too. Bakers were suspected of harbouring Zeppelins in their yards. MacDonagh mentioned that

²⁶³ Thomson, p. 37.

²⁶⁴ ‘Waiter!’, *Daily Express*, 21 October 1914, p. 1.

²⁶⁵ ‘Germans in British Hotels – The Threat of the Ubiquitous Enemy Waiter’, *Daily Express*, 20 October 1914, p. 3.

²⁶⁶ E. S. Turner, *Dear Old Blighty* (London, 1980), p. 56.

²⁶⁷ MacDonagh, p. 15.

his charwoman, along with some of her acquaintances, did not believe that Zeppelins could not travel from Germany to England, and back again. ‘Don’t you believe it!’, she said, ‘[we] know in Battersea that these ‘ere Zeppelins are hidden away in the back-yards of German bakers!’²⁶⁸ Just how the giant dirigibles were supposed to be hidden was not revealed. Grocers and other ‘purveyors of food’ (which quite feasibly encompassed bakers) were suspected of putting slow poisons into the commodities they sold.²⁶⁹ Governesses were also common targets of rumours. Many a person had a ‘friend of a friend’ who had discovered a false bottom in their governess’ trunk. It was invariably packed with revolvers, maps, explosives or some other incriminating article.²⁷⁰

Although they were obviously the immediate suspects, this suspicion was not confined to Germans. Anyone who aroused distrust could come under scrutiny. Britons were reported as spies because they ‘looked odd’ or because they were seen whispering.²⁷¹ This was probably inflamed by reports of native Britons being charged with espionage. One British subject received a life sentence of penal servitude for ‘collecting, recording, and attempting to communicate to the enemy information concerning his Majesty’s military forces, works, and munitions’.²⁷² Basil Thomson recorded that the cumulative effect of the suspicion was that it was ‘positively dangerous [for someone] to be seen in conversation with a pigeon’.²⁷³ A man in Maldon, Essex, had his house

²⁶⁸ MacDonagh, pp. 85-6.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 33; Thomson, pp. 39-40.

²⁷¹ Peel, p. 39.

²⁷² ‘Life Sentence on a British Spy – Found Guilty at Old Bailey’, *Daily Express*, 26 October 1915, p. 1.

²⁷³ Thomson, p. 38.

surrounded by a crowd, and searched by police, after a pigeon landed on the roof of his house.²⁷⁴ A foreigner walking through a park was arrested simply because someone saw a pigeon flying away from him. It was assumed the man had released it, and he was detained.²⁷⁵ One German man was sentenced to six months imprisonment after a woman claimed she had seen him release a pigeon, although she did admit that she never actually saw the pigeon leaving his hand.²⁷⁶

Government workers were subject to frequent harassment; it became a form of occupational hazard. Andrew Clark noted the attempts of an ordinance surveyor to carry out his work. The man was arrested multiple times – even presenting his official documentation was not sufficient to placate suspicious locals.²⁷⁷ A British archaeologist was arrested as a spy by an overzealous station master suspicious of the number of maps and diagrams the man was carrying.²⁷⁸

Sometimes this scrutiny had tragic results. A forty-year-old professor died from an illness caused by stress; rumours had been circulating that he was a German spy. A coroner ruled that the stress these unfounded rumours had caused resulted in the illness which ultimately took his life.²⁷⁹

Early in the war, the fear of a German invasion led to fantasies about plans among resident Germans to assist in its organisation and execution.

²⁷⁴ Hayward, p. 15.

²⁷⁵ Thomson, p. 38.

²⁷⁶ DeGroot, p. 158.

²⁷⁷ Clark, pp. 24-5.

²⁷⁸ ‘Englishman Arrested as a Spy’, *Daily Express*, 4 January 1915, p. 8.

²⁷⁹ ‘A Wronged Man – False Rumours Cause Death of an English Professor’, *News of the World*, 16 August 1914, p. 8.

Letters to the editors of various papers betrayed the concern felt by the population. Just as authors had imagined in pre-war fiction, many civilians believed Britain was infested with a German army silently awaiting the arrival of the German army. On 1 September 1914 the *Daily Express* carried a letter written by ‘ex-volunteer’. The anonymous writer alleged that Britain was host to an army of spies; under pre-war emigration rules German subjects were obligated to move to a Reich protectorate but if they were willing to undertake certain duties on behalf of their country they could go where they pleased, and at the same time significantly reduce the period of compulsory military service. There were three conditions to this arrangement: that they had to learn the language of the country so as to pass as a native; that they report on occasion to the ‘Chief spy’; and that they provide in minute detail the particulars of the area in which they chose to live, including billeting capacities. ‘Ex-volunteer’ went on to allege that ‘every spy of the 30,000 here is a man trained to arms’ that has ‘made a thorough study of his district in every single particular’.²⁸⁰

One newspaper feature asserted that a spy ring uncovered in France had a counterpart in England and proceeded to detail the threat posed by at least 160,000 Germans within London. These ‘peaceful citizens’ were allegedly deployed to strategic points, just as their equivalents had done in France and Belgium.²⁸¹ Another article informed its readers that a force of 200,000 Germans were to help the enemy in the event of an invasion; 30,000 of these

²⁸⁰ ‘Kaiser’s Secret Service – 30,000 Armed Germans in England’, *Daily Express*, 1 September 1914, p. 4.

²⁸¹ ‘Network of Spies – Tricks of Germany’s Widespread Secret Service’, *Daily Express*, 13 August 1914, p. 2.

individuals were residing in London. The article used this as evidence to back its assertion that all Germans in England should be under close surveillance to prevent them assisting the enemy.²⁸² Weapon caches were said to have been uncovered and seized in London and several other parts of England. Presumably, these were the armaments for the spies when the invasion happened and the agents would be called to do their duty. The reason this had not been widely reported was to avoid causing panic.²⁸³ In August 1914, *The Times* reported the discovery of a significant quantity of arms in London. However, the fact they had been abandoned in empty lots and vacant spaces suggested that the weapons were dumped by aliens wanting to avoid prosecution under the ARO.²⁸⁴

The numbers offered in these accounts of German misdeeds did not tally with 1911 figures which showed there were only 53,000 German born immigrants lived in Britain; 27,000 of whom lived in London.²⁸⁵ Obviously the public focused their attentions on naturalised Germans too, but arguably immigrants would have been the dangerous components of any pre-invasion force as male immigrants likely would have undergone their compulsory military training, a factor referred to in several of the articles.

Proof of this civilian army was found everywhere. One Hubert Rhodes informed the *Daily Express* that while travelling by train he found himself sitting next to a German. He asked him ‘Wie gehts?’ (How are you?) upon

²⁸² ‘Amazing Discoveries’, *Daily Express*, 11 August 1914, p. 1.

²⁸³ Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, p. 86.

²⁸⁴ ‘More Arms Seized in London’, *The Times*, 12 August 1914, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ P. Panayi, ‘German Immigrants in Britain, 1815-1914’, in *Germans in Britain since 1500*, (ed.) Panikos Panayi (London, 1996), pp. 73-74.

which the German asked Rhodes for his code word.²⁸⁶ ‘A Coast Dweller’ had it from the mouth of a naturalised German doctor that all Germans in England were to ‘mobilise and march on London’ when the Kaiser’s forces landed on the coast. The doctor, and another German in the area, openly signalled out to sea and also had family members in the territorials.²⁸⁷ A spy arrested early in the war was rumoured to have been found with details of the extensive arrangements to be put into place after a German invasion, including a list of the people to be taken hostage.²⁸⁸

Evidence of the fear of invasion was palpable in several other rumours and fantasies. Stories circulated on the continent that a German pre-invasion force, in preparation for war, had left information on the back of signs and advertisements for the German army. In this way spies had been able to communicate all the pertinent information about the locality. As the first enemy troops arrived in French and Belgian towns, signs were removed and the information gathered. When this story reached Britain, London was overrun with concerned civilians in screwdriver parties, removing advertisements and road signs to ensure German agents had not employed similar tactics to betray their host.²⁸⁹ Andrew Clark noted a rumour alleging that road signs affixed to the sides of houses in France were found, when removed, to have a loose brick or stone behind them. In these cavities agents had stashed information about the district including available supplies, roads, and housing. It was revealed that the

²⁸⁶ ‘German Asks for the Code Word – Strange Incident on the Underground’, *Daily Express*, 13 January 1915, p. 1.

²⁸⁷ ‘Alien Doctor’s Boast’, *Daily Express*, 2 December 1914, p. 2.

²⁸⁸ Clark, p. 59.

²⁸⁹ Thomson, p. 40.

road sign contract had been won, and undertaken, by a German firm before the war.²⁹⁰

Agony columns were also suspected by some of providing a medium of communicating important information to Germany. This was believed to stem from the habit of Belgian refugees to correspond with friends abroad in this manner. A British man became obsessed with the idea and was convinced that many advertisements were actually communications between German submarines and their bases, or forewarned of events such as air raids.²⁹¹

Another popular expression of the invasion fears was the gun platforms. This set of rumours alleged that houses, tennis courts, lake beds and even factory roofs were, in fact, reinforced concrete platforms to support the heavy Krupp guns to be used against Britain in the event of the German invasion.²⁹² A factory – found to have in its employ several Germans – garnered headlines in the *Daily Express* when it was found to have a concrete roof four feet thick, capable of holding artillery. The factory site commanded views of London, major railways and the Crystal Palace.²⁹³ Basil Thomson recounted the effect these rumours had:

[given] a British householder with a concrete tennis-court and pigeons about the house [...] it was certain to be discovered [...] that heavy cases had been delivered to the house by night, that tapping had been overheard, mysterious lights seen in the

²⁹⁰ Clark, p. 28.

²⁹¹ Thomson, pp. 42-3.

²⁹² Ibid., p. 40; Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, p. 89.

²⁹³ ‘Concrete Roof Mystery – 20 Germans Taken From a London Factory’, *Daily Express*, 17 October 1914, p. 5.

windows, and that on the evening of the sinking of the *Lusitania* he had given a dinner-party to naturalised Germans.²⁹⁴

The raid on Great Yarmouth – carried out after German mine laying was interrupted by the British navy – was believed to have been facilitated by spies. The German cruisers had descended on Yarmouth at ‘full speed’ despite the harbour being fully mined for defence. Locals deduced that information about the town’s defences had been passed to the Germans to enable the success of the raid.²⁹⁵ After the bombardment of Hartlepool and Scarborough, popular sentiment was convinced that German spies had been responsible for its success. Hartlepool was believed to be particularly infested with spies, and at Whitby it was rumoured that one well known spy had not been arrested until well after the war broke out; he was the spy assumed to be responsible for supplying the German navy with information to make the attacks possible.²⁹⁶ Both of these incidents proved that the German navy could get within close range of British shores, aggravating concerns of invasion even more.

Fantasies also focused on sabotage, attempted sabotage, and intended sabotage. Newspapers and circulating gossip recreated scenarios reminiscent of pre-war fiction. Some of these stories carried subtle inferences of preparation for an invasion; others – particularly those later in the war – seemed to be directed against the war efforts of Britain and her allies. Mysterious figures

²⁹⁴ Thomson, p. 40.

²⁹⁵ ‘The Premier and German Spies – Refusal to Consider a Committee of Public Safety – Peers on Enemy Alien Peril’, *Daily Express*, 19 November 1914, p. 6.

²⁹⁶ ‘Coached by Spies – Raiders Helped by Germans on the East Coast – Work of the Kaiser’s Agents in England’, *Daily Express*, 18 December 1914, p. 5.

skulking in the night, attacking sentries and cutting telegraph wires, were reminiscent of the actions of Germany's advance force in *The Invasion of 1910*. One signalman was attacked and found, upon recovering consciousness, his telephone had been destroyed and the wires cut.²⁹⁷ A sentry was shot by two men loitering near petrol tanks.²⁹⁸ A railway patrol near Aldershot was attacked by two foreigners.²⁹⁹ Given that officials declared that no alleged attacks on sentries had been substantiated, and that there had been no incidents of sabotage in unison with the attacks, these incidents were probably the result of fertile imaginations and fictional influences than reality. But there was no admission by the *Daily Express*, which carried these stories, that they were not substantiated. The alleged attempts of sabotage were reported as everyday fact. When one considers the nature of the alleged sabotage attempts, their implausibility seems evident. Attacking a single station, telegraph line or works would have achieved little unless they were co-ordinated with other, simultaneous attacks, which they were not.

Other early sabotage reports were more malevolent; Andrew Clark's daughter reported that five men had been arrested attempting to poison London's main water reservoir at Chingford in Essex.³⁰⁰ Interestingly, a similar story was in circulation in Germany, with reports of attempts on Berlin's water

²⁹⁷ 'Search for Armed Motor Cyclists – Signalman Attacked and Police Fired At', *Daily Express*, 29 August 1914, p. 4.

²⁹⁸ 'The Spy Danger – Sentry Shot and Guard Found Dead', *Daily Express*, 17 August 1914, p. 3.

²⁹⁹ 'Attack on a Patrol – Shots Fired by Foreigners Near Aldershot', *Daily Express*, 7 August 1914, p. 1.

³⁰⁰ Clark, p. 9.

supply.³⁰¹ In 1915 rumours circulated to the effect that people should ‘beware’ of the Tubes as they would be subject to a gas attack.³⁰²

Even after the war settled into the stalemate of the trenches, and the immediate threat of invasion had passed, spy stories continued to circulate widely. But the role of the alleged espionage activities shifted from facilitating an invasion to sabotaging the British war effort. In 1917, the explosion of a munitions plant in London fostered rumours that spies had been responsible. Although only sixty-nine people were killed – popular gossip had this number in the thousands – and an official investigation showed it was nothing more than a tragic accident, the public remained convinced of foul play.³⁰³ An explosion that destroyed a grain elevator in New York was rumoured to have been caused by a bomb. While there was no explicit mention of German sabotage, the headlines proclaimed otherwise: ‘More German Outrages in New York.’³⁰⁴ An incendiary fire in a Pennsylvanian factory destroyed guns and other war materials destined for the Allied war effort, worth millions of pounds. As a result of this attack five men were ‘awaiting trial [...] on charges of plotting to destroy ships and factories’.³⁰⁵ Britain’s other allies were also under attack. In Canada, German saboteurs were accused of blowing up a club.³⁰⁶ In one of the most devastating accidents of the war, a fully loaded munitions ship

³⁰¹ J. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany* (London, 1917), p. 95.

³⁰² Thomson, p. 41.

³⁰³ MacDonagh, p. 170.

³⁰⁴ ‘£200,000 Bomb Fire – More German Outrages in New York’, *Daily Express*, 15 October 1917, p. 1.

³⁰⁵ ‘War Factory Burnt – Incendiarism by Germans in the United States’, *Daily Express*, 11 November 1915, p. 5.

³⁰⁶ ‘Club Blown Up – Another German Outrage in Canada’, *Daily Express*, 18 January 1916, p. 5.

exploded in Halifax, Canada, on 6 October 1917. Two thousand were killed, 9,000 injured and two square kilometres of the town were obliterated. Although it was the result of a collision between the *Mont-Blanc*, carrying the munitions, and the *Imo*, British newspapers were quick to question the role spies may have had.³⁰⁷

As the threat of invasion faded, fantasies linked this scenario became less common. They began to focus on threats that now seemed more relevant like attempts by enemy agents, or traitors, to signal Zeppelins or submarines. These were particularly relevant due to the inevitable civilian casualties that would result from successful raids, and it proved to be one of the most common complaints received by authorities. From the time of the first raid on British shores in December 1914, it became an entrenched belief that spies assisted raiders by leading them to their targets, or that spies signalled important information to German submarines lying off the English coast, just as Le Queux's nefarious spies had in 'How the plans of Rosyth were stolen'.³⁰⁸ It was announced that '[every] movement of the Fleet, every military disposition, is almost certain to be signalled in one of a hundred ways to the German authorities.'³⁰⁹

In countless incidents that were repeated throughout the war, there were reports of roaring motor cars – headlights on full beam – guiding the Zeppelins from town to town. Rider Haggard recounted a friend who professed to have been followed by a Zeppelin, which mistook the man for its guide, when he was

³⁰⁷ 'Halifax Disaster Due to a Plot?', *News of the World*, 11 December 1917, p. 3.

³⁰⁸ Le Queux, 'How the plans of Rosyth were stolen', in *Spies of the Kaiser*, pp. 1-19.

³⁰⁹ 'The Spy Danger a Menace to Our Security', *Daily Express*, 14 November 1914, p. 1.

driving home in his motor car; the craft even gave the individual three minutes to get away before it started dropping bombs.³¹⁰

Basil Thomson heard many of the more ridiculous allegations in his work with Scotland Yard; a person was reportedly signalling to submarines in the North Sea. However, the suspect light was only visible to the house directly across the street.³¹¹ The slightest trace of a light fuelled suspicions of enemy signalling; an acquaintance of Rider Haggard found the esplanade outside their house ‘filled from side to side with a mob who swore that signalling to the Germans was going on from the house’, after a light was glimpsed through the blinds.³¹²

By 1916, potential German spies had mostly been interred or arrested. However, the fact that the war continued to drag on with no chance of victory in sight caused growing frustration. The need to explain the long stalemate on the Western Front led to the scapegoating of two groups: ‘unpatriotic’ elements in the British working and middle classes, and alleged traitors amongst the British upper classes and ruling party.

Labour organisations involved in industrial unrest were said to be encouraged by German agents who fostered disaffection among workers, wanting them to believe ‘they would be just as well off under the Kaiser as under the King’.³¹³ This had immediate connotations of undermining the war effort by interrupting vital munitions work needed to supply the front. Anti-

³¹⁰ R. Haggard, *The Private Diaries of Rider Haggard 1914-1925*, (ed.) D. S. Higgins (London, 1980), p. 76.

³¹¹ Thomson, p. 43.

³¹² Haggard, p. 37.

³¹³ ‘Looking Round – Clear Thinking’, *Daily Express*, 22 February 1915, p. 4.

conscriptionists were also increasingly associated with German espionage. In 1916 the detective branch of MI5 raided the No-Conscription Fellowship and the National Council Against Conscription under the suspicion that they were ‘a dangerous weapon whereby the loyalty of the people is being prostituted’ and that ‘if they are not for the success of our country it is not unreasonable if they are classed as pro-German. That, at any rate, is what the mass of the public considers them; and the public is substantially right.’³¹⁴

Pacifists and anti-war feminists were also suspected of harbouring pro-German sympathies. In 1915 the *Daily Express* warned its readers that spies were responsible for carrying out subtle anti-war propaganda in Britain. Agents were visiting women’s suffrage societies with their ‘permeation polices’. In addition, these anti-British elements were carrying out a ‘campaign of insinuation and discord-sowing’, claiming that the cordial relations between the *Entente Cordiale* were a farce. The article warned readers to disregard these claims as it was the aim of the agents to undermine recruitment and ensure better terms for Germany when she was finally defeated.³¹⁵ The *News of the World* cautioned the public to be weary of the ‘Masked Treason of Pacifism’, arguing that there was a pro-German influence in pacifist groups, accusing them of either being ‘intentional traitors’ or ‘dupes’.³¹⁶ Individuals associated with pacifism were subject to police raids; one woman, who became a pacifist

³¹⁴ Major Victor Ferguson, quoted in Hiley, ‘Counter-Espionage and Security in Great Britain’, p. 651.

³¹⁵ ‘German Spies in London? – Sowers of Discord’, *Daily Express*, 27 April 1915, p. 6.

³¹⁶ ‘Masked Treason of Pacifism – Network of Seditious Societies’, *News of the World*, 30 November 1917, p. 2.

after serving at the front as a nurse, was not only raided but accused several times of being a German spy.³¹⁷

The suspicion of these groups reflected genuine fears that unpatriotic elements, perhaps encouraged by German agents, were handicapping the war effort. However, they were also an expression of resentment, directed at groups that had emerged as threats to the established social, economic and political order. Although many Labourites and socialists saw the war as instigated by the ruling elite, but fought by the workers, many were willing to put their differences aside and support the British cause. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and numerous other suffragettes also put their campaigning aside to support the war effort in the belief that this was a better way to gain the vote than agitating.³¹⁸ In spite of this widespread support there were elements of these groups which were not willing to suspend their efforts – such as Sylvia Pankhurst – and it was these elements that came under popular attack.

Evidence of the sentiment levelled at dissenting ideologies is evident in an Anti-German League pamphlet entitled, ‘Are You Pro-German’. The pamphlet unequivocally equated pacifism with being ‘pro-German’:

Do you want to help the Germans to conquer England? If you do, go and join the Fellowship of Reconciliation, or the Union of Democratic Control, or the No-conscription Fellowship, or any other anti-war or peace-at-any-price society [...] Don’t listen to the pro-German and the peacemonger, but “do your bit” for your

³¹⁷ T. Thomson (ed.), ‘Man’s Militarism’, in *Dear Girl: The diaries and letters of two working-class women 1897-1917*, Ruth Slate and Eva Slawson (London, 1987), p. 235.

³¹⁸ P. Bartley, *Emmeline Pankhurst* (London, 2002), p. 8.

Country by joining the Anti-German League [...] **Britain for the British!**,³¹⁹

The consistent insinuations that pacifists worked to undermine the war effort bore fruit in March 1917 when four individuals – including two women – were arrested for devising a plot to kill members of government. They specifically targeted Lloyd George, as he was held responsible for the prosecution of the war, and Arthur Henderson, for betraying his socialist values.³²⁰ Not only did they seek to poison the men with curare, but they were also known for harbouring conscientious objectors avoiding conscription.³²¹

The suspicion levelled at these groups was also a reflection of anxieties about the social stresses and disaffection that emerged as the war went on. As the months dragged out, the sacrifices asked of the population increased: food economy, rationing, donations, investment in war bonds, and more men were all required to sustain the war effort. The possibility of a negotiated peace before total victory could be achieved was anathema to many. General Botha argued that '[the] War must be prosecuted with all determination. Peace at the present time could only result in preparations for an even more appalling struggle. No lasting peace is possible without complete victory.'³²² In this atmosphere it was to the advantage of patriots to associate anti-conscriptionists and pacifists as 'pro-German'. Ostracising the dissenting ideologies in this way

³¹⁹ Anti-German League, 'Are You Pro-German?', pamphlet no. 4 (London, 1915), pp. 1-2.

³²⁰ MacDonagh, p. 180.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 180.

³²² General Botha quoted in a speech delivered by the Right Honourable A. Bonar Law at Queen's Hall, London, 4 August 1916, *War Speeches by British Ministers 1914-1916*, p. 346.

and vilifying their beliefs made such ideas untenable among the general population who considered themselves patriotic.

These pressures did not just make people more susceptible to pacific attitudes – the prolongation of war and increasing deprivation prompted the need to find a scapegoat to explain why the war had not been won.

There was substantial agitation about alleged traitors amongst the British upper classes. This was most apparent in the ‘Hidden Hand’ accusations that supposed influential figures in governmental, political, economic and social circles, were betraying the nation to the Germans. There were rumours of ‘high-placed men in England who have lived for years in the enjoyment of generous allowances from a mysterious source.’³²³ The public was warned about suspecting the wrong people for betraying Britain: ‘[people] have been suspecting the waiters and servants, whilst the spies are in high social positions.’³²⁴ The idea of the ‘Hidden Hand’ had been established in the pre-war spy fiction; the spy in *Riddle of the Sands* was an Englishman bearing an ‘honourable name’. Cynthia Asquith also suggested that such stories had been in circulation well before the war.³²⁵

Several British figures fell victim to these insinuations. At any given time rumours suggested that a sizeable portion of the peerage, including the Crown Prince, was locked in the Tower, or had been ‘shot at dawn’.³²⁶ Prince Louis of Battenberg was forced to resign his position in the admiralty due to

³²³ Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, p. 20.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³²⁵ C. Asquith, *The Diaries of Lady Cynthia Asquith* (London, 1987), p. 447.

³²⁶ Thomson, p. 42.

rumours of his German birth.³²⁷ Highly placed ladies were rumoured to have been arrested for passing on military information to the Germans for air raids, which led to bombings on days that had military movements.³²⁸

Lord Haldane was a popular target, described by some as a ‘German in disguise’.³²⁹ His pre-war expression of admiration for German learning and culture, and his identification with Germany as his ‘spiritual home’, in combination with his objections to introducing compulsory military service made many question whether Haldane was actually a pawn of the Kaiser. John Schooling expressed this view in 1915, arguing that Haldane had intentionally kept Britain’s army weak and undermined attempts to strengthen British forces after ‘being duped by the flattery of the German Emperor’. He encouraged the *Daily Express* to ‘continue [its] patriotic endeavour to get rid of Lord Haldane’, arguing that ‘his right place is Berlin – not Westminster’.³³⁰ Rumours even went so far as to allege that Haldane and the Kaiser were actually illegitimate brothers.³³¹ Haldane’s chauffeur was also said to be German. After the outbreak of war he took a holiday to Switzerland where he was suspected of carrying on into Germany and transmitting information to the authorities there.³³²

MacDonagh recorded that there were many – among them Radical member Henry Dalziel – that believed naturalised Germans were occupying high positions in government. Dalziel went so far as to allege that these trusted

³²⁷ The Prince was actually Austrian, although this probably would have made little difference.

³²⁸ ‘Women Spies of High Position – M.P.’s Startling Story of £30,000 in Gold – How Germany Gets Information’, *News of the World*, 10 July 1917, p. 1.

³²⁹ MacDonagh, p. 69.

³³⁰ J. Schooling, ‘Lord Haldane’, *Daily Express*, 5 January 1915, p. 1.

³³¹ Turner, p. 59.

³³² Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, pp. 40-1.

figures were more dangerous than the Germans barbers.³³³ This allegation of high-level corruption emerged again in 1916 after Kitchener drowned at sea. Rumours abounded that the wife of a cabinet minister, or a minister, gave the information to Germany that a ship was about to sail with important military figures on board.³³⁴ Interestingly, this suspicion did not affect other members of the British ruling class who shared a similar pro-German outlook. Lord Bryce shared Haldane's high opinion of Germany; however, his condemnation of German atrocities in the Bryce Report possibly sheltered him from the same animosity directed against Haldane.

The most infamous incident of the war that fuelled speculation into the existence of the 'Hidden Hand' was the trial between Pemberton Billing and Maud Allen in 1918. Allen sued Billing for defamation and libel after he accused her of sexual perversion for her part in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. At some point in proceedings, the trial degenerated into a sensationalist farce when Billing made the startling revelation of a 'Black Book'. This book supposedly contained 47,000 names – men and women – of influential British figures and their spouses; while also listing their particular sexual predilections and perversions, exclusively for the purpose of blackmail to extract information. The book was said to hold the names of the whole of the Royal household, and accused various ministerial wives, including Prime Minister Asquith's wife, of

³³³ MacDonagh, pp. 62-4.

³³⁴ Clark, p. 133; 'Did the Germans Know? – Newspaper that was ready for Lord Kitchener's Death', *Daily Express*, 10 June 1916, p. 1.

lesbianism.³³⁵ While sensational and seemingly ridiculous, it did offer an explanation as to why the war was interminably dragging out.

Popular reception and function of spy rumours

It is starkly obvious that spy myths and rumours were well established in British society during the war. But this prevalence does not necessarily indicate widespread acceptance. So, did Britons believe them? An analysis of contemporary sources would suggest that the majority did. There was ample mention given to spies in memoirs, diaries, and clearly the popular press, in which the subject of spies maintained a consistent presence. Michael MacDonagh's memoirs indicate that not only were spy rumours rife, but were popular among the public. Even stories that were verbally transmitted – such as tales of 'outrages' by bands of German spies, and the stockpiles of weaponry discovered in the trunks of governesses – were believed as true, but allegedly disguised behind the veneer of press censorship.³³⁶ The subject of spies, aliens and internment occupied a significant aspect of his commentary on the London home front which serves as evidence that the myths surrounding the enemy agent were generally believed.

The commentaries provided by memoirs and diaries also indicate that spies were a lasting concern for the population at home. This is supported by the incidence of stories, such as those outlined above. Although they underwent

³³⁵ C. Asquith, pp. 445-7; MacDonagh, p. 299.

³³⁶ MacDonagh, p. 33.

significant changes in their themes as the war progressed, the central concern of the spy remained static.

There were times when the spy issue was somewhat diminished in importance. However, the stories invariably returned and were not recycled in the same manner as atrocities which – even in the later years of war – tended to focus on the events of the 1914 invasion of Belgium. This suggests that the stories evolved to match the explanatory needs of the British population. During the first months of the war while combat was highly mobile, the primary concern was of a possible invasion of Britain. This was heightened as the German army pushed for the Channel ports in Belgium. However, as the danger dissipated, the rumours instead began to focus on sabotage and damage to the British war effort.

Another indicator of the prevalence of belief in the spies, and the rumours surrounding them, was the number of people who joined in agitation against Germans in Britain. In 1918, the British Empire Union, whose catch-all was ‘the Extirpation – Root and Branch and Seed – of German control and influence from the British Empire’ had a membership in the region of 10,000 – including Conservative member Lord Beresford – and fifty branches throughout Britain.³³⁷ The National Party, which campaigned for more stringent internment of enemy aliens, collated a petition which exhibits just how strongly many

³³⁷ Quoted in P. Panayi, ‘The Destruction of the German Communities in Britain during the First World War’, in *Germans in Britain since 1500*, (ed.) P. Panayi (London, 1996), p. 127.

Britons felt on the subject. The petition, presented at parliament on 24 August 1918 held 1,250,000 signatures.³³⁸

It is probable that the prevalence of spy myths was reinforced by two things: the pre-war basis laid down in fictional literature, and the few isolated cases of espionage that were uncovered in Britain. The popularity of the spy genre in the years leading up to World War One can be linked to the spy mania that broke out in 1914. There were obvious parallels between the rumours of espionage activity and the scenarios fashioned by authors like Le Queux. Many of the stereotypes established in fiction were regurgitated during the war and cast suspicion on various service occupations. Claims by Le Queux that a civilian army lay dormant were revisited in various letters to the editor which wove scenarios of a well-trained and well-equipped menace. Le Queux continued to exert his old influence as a popular ‘authority’ on spies, possibly indicative of the weight his pre-war works carried. In 1915 Le Queux published *German Spies in England*, assuring readers that ‘[few] men [...] have been more closely associated with, or knew more of the astounding inner machinery of German espionage in this country [...] than myself’.³³⁹ This book, which detailed the ongoing espionage, and more pre-war incidents, sold over 40,000 copies in one week in February alone.³⁴⁰

Much like the myth of the ‘Bestial Hun’ was supported by the incidence of real atrocities, spy rumours were supported by the arrest of real – though of insignificant numbers – enemy agents. The first case, which was uncovered and

³³⁸ Panayi, ‘The Destruction of the German Communities in Britain’, p. 127.

³³⁹ Le Queux, *German Spies in England*, p. 7.

³⁴⁰ Panayi, ‘The Destruction of the German Communities in Britain’, p. 125.

publicised extensively in the first days of the war, involved the arrest of a naturalised German barber. While the threat was downplayed by authorities, the fact that there was palpable proof of spies within Britain no doubt gave implicit reinforcement to the rapidly emerging stories.

Although rumours of spies were widely believed, there was some scepticism. This disbelief was similar to that experienced by atrocity stories – it did not question the fact there were spies in Britain, but it did question the rumoured *extent* of the problem, just as others questioned the extent of German atrocities. However, primary sources suggest that this scepticism was perhaps most notable among those who were affected or those who had access to accurate knowledge on the reality of the spy menace. Cynthia Asquith expressed her disgust at the rumours of the ‘Hidden Hand’, evidently due to the lurid accusations levelled at her mother-in-law, Margot.³⁴¹

The myths and rumours surrounding spies did have sociological and political roles. The stories fulfilled a function, although it was quite different to that filled by atrocities. Where the ‘Bestial Hun’ of the German army united Britons against all Germans, spies proved to be divisive in Britain. It not only divided it along class lines – as the élite were accused by the lower classes of pro-German sympathies – but also rent British society. The idea of the ubiquitous spy caused suspicion that was applied to anyone that aroused mistrust among British patriots, and undoubtedly caused a great deal of heartache for some. Author D. H. Lawrence was forced to endure house

³⁴¹ C. Asquith, p. 447.

searches and was eventually forced to leave his home in Cornwall – considered a prohibited area – because he was married to a German.³⁴²

This discordant aspect of the spy genre goes some way to explaining why the stories were not promulgated by the incumbent governments. The anxiety the rumours caused, and the often baseless accusations against innocent people likely proved that there was little positive benefit that could be wrung from the trope. Also, the mass belief in the indolence of the government when it came to the spy question – springing from a lack of popular understanding about the reality of the situation – made it likely that the government could derive little positive effect from taking part in their propagation and so chose not to stress the problem. Given Conservative members of parliament, such as Henry Dalziel, seized on the stories and used them to rouse popular opinion against the government this seems likely.

The link between spy stories and tensions within the British population suggests that they were a medium through which people could express their discontent at the perceived inertia of the government or the potentially demoralising effect of dissenting ideologies, within the confines of a patriotic motif. There was a clear anti-government tone to many rumours, particularly those of the ‘Hidden Hand’. These articulated the dissatisfaction, felt by many, that not only was the government taking insubstantial steps to combat the spy menace, but also to win the war. Creating a ‘Hidden Hand’ to explain this was effective. It not only described why the British government was not doing more, but laid the responsibility for the problem firmly at German feet. These

³⁴² C. Asquith, p. 355.

rumours allowed people to express anti-government sentiments in terms that still left no doubt of their own patriotic allegiance to the British cause.

Conservatives were able to vilify and marginalise groups with ideologies they found threatening to the social order in wartime. This was evident in the warnings the *Daily Express* – a conservative bulletin – gave concerning the suspected ‘pro-German’ influence within feminist groups and other pacifist organisations.

These could be interpreted as implicit expressions of uneasiness at the seemingly flux nature of society during the war which saw women leaving the traditional confines of the home to work, a great increase in governmental powers, and the perception that British society was being threatened by an internal enemy that was virtually impossible to detect.

On a personal level the spies offered the British population on the home front a chance to participate in the war. Confined to British shores, the spy ‘peril’ allowed patriotic Britons to do their bit for the war effort, and to protect their shores from the sinister plots being hatched to the detriment of their country. This possibly explains the number of reports the authorities received of espionage activity, despite them being largely unfounded.

Conclusion

Paranoia about spies and enemy agents had its more remote origins in the rising international tensions that preceded the First World War, and the consequent

spate of alarmist literature warning that Britain was vulnerable to spies, saboteurs, traitors, and invasion.

However, the paranoia also stemmed from the fears, stresses and responsibilities of a nation involved in the trauma of ‘Total War’. The extensive reporting of German atrocities made people fearful of an enemy that had committed such horrific crimes against Belgian and French civilians. The British population feared an invasion by Germany and the resultant anxiety led people to not only look for threats, but to imagine them.

In an era when whole populations were mobilised for war, the British people expected German nationals and those with German connections to be mobilised by the Fatherland to assist its war effort. This again fed the paranoia and motivated calls for widespread deportation and internment.

The myths and rumours of the German spy amounted to the creation of a larger discourse – the Discourse of Hidden Spies – which allowed the British to incorporate the enemy agent into a wider explanation of the war, and also gave it meaning. It did this in several ways. In an era of nationalism and Total War, patriotic Britons wanted desperately to contribute to the war effort. In heeding calls to report any suspicious activity, they felt they made their contribution to defeating a nefarious enemy.

This larger discourse also marginalised dissenting ideologies which were identified as ‘pro-German’. As Britain’s Germans were interned, the threat from specifically German agents diminished and both patriotic fears and paranoid fantasies turned focus on potential enemies *within* the British nation. These fears and fantasies did not focus on the British middle classes, but on

groups that recruited disproportionately from echelons above and below them: the upper classes, who were targeted with accusations they were concealing in their midst a Hidden Hand that protected traitors and betrayed information to the Germans; and the lower-middle and working classes, who provided the bulk of the disaffected unionists, anti-conscriptionists, pacifists and anti-war feminists who seemed to be helping the German cause. In this vision of reality, patriotism was predominantly a middle-class virtue, and the claim that Britain was beset by spies, saboteurs and traitors carried the stamp of a middle-class fantasy.

Despite the furore that surrounded the myth of the German spy and the multitude of rumours of espionage, by 1917 the bare facts show how fantastical and unrealistic the popular outcry was. Only twenty-four spies had been tried and convicted: twelve were executed; six had their sentences commuted to penal servitude from death; and six were sentenced to penal servitude.³⁴³ The ubiquity of the German agent was exposed as a mirage.

³⁴³ Haste, p. 113.

Chapter 4. The Supernatural: Angels, Ghosts and Prophecies of War

‘On that most awful day of that awful time’, at a decisive point on the British salient, a solitary English company stood between an army of 300,000 Germans and the destruction of the entire British army. For the better part of a day the 1,000 strong band of soldiers withstood constant bombardment to which the British artillery had no reply. When only 500 of the brave troops remained, the German infantry began their advance. As the doomed men made their final stand against the encroaching sea of grey uniforms, one young soldier uttered four words: *Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius*, ‘May Saint George be present to help the English’. At that very moment, a shock passed through his body and the noise of battle ebbed away. A distant cry of ‘Array, array, array!’ echoed over the field as thousands of voices solicited the aid of England’s protector. Looking up the young Tommy saw a line of bowmen stretched along the British line, loosing their arrows into the seething horde of Germans. The cries to Saint George continued and, before long, 10,000 strong German soldiers lay dead on

the battlefield.³⁴⁴ This short story, published by Arthur Machen in the *Evening News* in September 1914, spawned one of the most enduring myths of the war – the so-called ‘angels of Mons’.

Stories of the supernatural have often emerged during times of war, but in few previous conflicts did they become so firmly rooted in the popular imagination as during World War I. These stories can be roughly divided into three categories: stories of divine intervention, which told of saints and angels fighting with the Allies; stories about the return of the dead, which asserted that fallen comrades continued the battle against Germany; and stories about the omens, prophecies and portents which, it was claimed, had foretold the coming of a cataclysmic war. It will be the purpose of this chapter to explore the origins, dissemination, reception and function of supernatural tales to examine how they contributed to the construction of a discourse about the war on the home front.

Three types of supernatural stories

The first category of supernatural story consisted of omens and prophecies that were made concerning the war. Many of these stories, though current during the war itself, actually focused on events that were alleged to have taken place before its outbreak. These events were then interpreted retrospectively during the Great War, within the context of contemporary events.

³⁴⁴ A. Machen, ‘The Bowmen’, *The Angels of Mons: The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War* (London, 1915), pp. 29-38.

In the years preceding 1914, there had been several such incidents which, once the war had broken out, provided material for the making of myths. On Sedan day in 1911, for example, in the town of Arten, the statue of Bismarck allegedly dropped its sword. This was followed shortly thereafter by the sword arm. The outbreak of the Balkan war soon after this episode convinced some that the dropping of the sword was an omen. In Switzerland, a small lake near Lucerne was believed to signal an approaching war by turning the colour of blood. The lake had turned crimson before the Franco-Prussian war, and again before the outbreak of the Balkan wars.³⁴⁵ The significance of the Balkans was by no means slight; many contemporaries believed it was a direct antecedent of the First World War. Therefore, the omens that were originally seen as portents of the Balkan wars were subsequently reinterpreted as harbingers of the Great War. All across Europe there had been signs of imminent disaster, had anyone cared to take notice. The bell of Rouland in Ghent, Belgium, widely held to be a symbol of liberty, had cracked. During World War One this was interpreted, with the benefit of hindsight, as a sign of the peril that Belgium was to face.³⁴⁶

Meanwhile, men on the Western Front attached great meaning to a statue of the Virgin Mary on the Albert Basilica. The statue at the top of the dome had been damaged in January 1915, and hung at a precarious ninety degree angle with the ground. Rumour had it that when the Virgin fell the war

³⁴⁵ R. Shirley, *Prophecies and omens of the Great War* (London, 1914), pp. 46-47.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

would end, which gradually evolved to whichever side caused the statue to fall, would lose the war.³⁴⁷

During the war there were records of other portents although these tended to be based on more natural phenomena. Andrew Clark recorded the effects of a cloud formation at sunset – the effect had produced the vision of a cross which some in Great Leighs took as a signal of the end of the world.³⁴⁸ In 1917 several people remarked on a strange phenomenon over the Thames estuary. One woman reported seeing a cloud in the shape of a woman – something she had never seen before – and, because her husband was away at sea, she interpreted it as ‘a wonderful thing’ and its meaning as ‘something over the water’.³⁴⁹

Many rumours circulated during the war about events which had allegedly happened before the war, and which were interpreted as explicitly foretelling the coming of the conflict. One of these events was a prophecy, made 300 years before the outbreak of the First World War. ‘The Antichrist’ forewarned the world not only of the approaching conflict, but of the bestial nature of the Germans who ‘[would] massacre the priests [...] the women, the children, and the aged’.³⁵⁰

A correspondent with the *Occult Review* claimed that on a visit to Belgium in May 1914 he had been accosted by a gipsy who warned him that a world war would break out before the year’s end. The man met the story with

³⁴⁷ Fussel, pp. 131-2. Fussel gives an interesting discussion on the diverse stories surrounding the Virgin’s statue, and shows the various meanings the soldiers in the region ascribed to the figure.

³⁴⁸ Clark, p. 165.

³⁴⁹ Hayward, p. 61.

³⁵⁰ Shirley, *Prophecies and omens*, pp. 20-25

scepticism and gave it no more thought until July 1914 when the prophecy seemingly came true.³⁵¹ There were various other stories in a similar vein: a prophecy giving the date of the outbreak of war, but reassuring those who received it that France would be triumphant, and another allegedly foretelling the assassination of the Archduke.³⁵²

The second main genre of supernatural story that circulated during World War I focused on the return of the dead. Soldiers at the Front reported, or were alleged to have reported, seeing the ghosts of their fallen comrades. Robert Graves, for example, was adamant that he saw a man – who had been killed at Festubert – salute him in a mess hall.³⁵³ Vera Brittain noted a conversation she overheard between patients in her care. They were apparently speaking of comrades lost at the Somme in 1916. One of the men spoke of his captain who had been killed, who always promised his aid whenever his men were in trouble. When the company of soldiers got into ‘a bit of a fix’, the captain returned to help them to safety.³⁵⁴ The second man told of a party of stretcher bearers who had been killed in a shell blast. The officer was adamant that he, and some of the other soldiers, had seen the men carrying the wounded out of the trenches. He even knew of one man who ‘swears’ he was borne out by them.³⁵⁵ Another allegedly had shared his biscuits with an ill looking soldier on the march from Pérrone. After he had lost sight of the man in the masses of troops, he realised that the man was ‘the chap I ‘elped Jim to bury more’n a

³⁵¹ Shirley, *Prophecies and Omens*, pp. 38-40.

³⁵² See H. Carrington, *Psychical Phenomena and the War* (New York, 1920), chapter vii, p. 141-71.

³⁵³ Graves, p. 106.

³⁵⁴ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 414-416.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 414-16.

week ago'.³⁵⁶ British newspapers also reported that the Russian General Skobeleff – dead since 1882 – was seen on a white mount riding across the battlefield.³⁵⁷ There were even reported sightings of the ghost of a Boer General which was significant given that he was seen leading the Allies.³⁵⁸

At home people reported more indirect, though no less significant, encounters with the dead. The *Daily Express* reported in 1916 that a woman had dreamt of her son standing by her bedside. Over the course of the previous day her son's dog had been whining and unsettled. The morning after her dream the mother received notification that her son had died at the front.³⁵⁹ There were also multiple incidents in which people reported seeing loved ones suddenly materialise in lounges and bedrooms. Most often, these apparitions were alleged to have coincided with the time of death of the loved one at the front. One example cited was of a woman whose husband was serving at the front. While she was sitting with a friend, she suddenly saw a vision of her husband in the room with them. She was touched by 'the expression of sadness in his eyes'. A few days later, the woman received notification that her husband had been killed in the battle of Loos on the very day he appeared in her rooms.³⁶⁰ While these reports involved the deceased returning apparently of their own volition, an additional facet of the return of the dead was the contact with the spirits of their loved ones through mediums and séances. An anonymous man,

³⁵⁶ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, pp. 414-16.

³⁵⁷ 'Skobeleff's Ghost', *Daily Express*, 4 August 1915, p. 5.

³⁵⁸ Clarke, *Angels of Mons*, p. 196.

³⁵⁹ 'Dream that Came True- Mother Forewarned of Her Son's Death', *Daily Express*, 14 January 1916, p. 6.

³⁶⁰ Carrington, pp. 172-3; for a discussion of more stories that were reported during the war see chapter viii, pp. 172-200.

whose nineteen year old son died of his wounds in France, made contact with his spirit through a medium. Later, his spirit appeared at his mother's bedside, in an experience 'of an almost sacred nature'.³⁶¹ In another case, a young woman made contact with the spirit of her cousin – an officer killed at the front – using an ouija board. The spirit informed her that she was to give his pearl tie pin case to his fiancée, of whom the family had no knowledge. The name the spirit supplied was found on letters in the dead officer's possessions from France sent from the War Office.³⁶²

The third and most famous type of supernatural story focused on divine intervention. Usually, 'the divine' in such tales manifested itself in the form of an angel or a saint. Sometimes, however, the Virgin Mary or even Jesus himself put in an appearance. The stories, at first, concerned military intervention, in which the heavenly body interceded between British and German forces, shielding the British from harm. Tales of divine intervention sometimes had an angel intervening which gave rise to the title of the 'angels of Mons'. One soldier reported a light hovering over the British lines which gradually took the form of three angels.³⁶³ Another reported seeing an angel interpose between the British and German lines with 'outspread wings' after an engagement with the Germans that left the witnesses overwrought and 'dog-tired'.³⁶⁴ Others mentioned seeing angels with extended wings and 'loose-hanging garment[s] of

³⁶¹ Carrington, pp. 270-76.

³⁶² Ibid., pp. 279-80.

³⁶³ H. Begbie, *On the side of angels: the story of the angel at Mons, an answer to Arthur Machen* (London, 1915), pp. 31-3.

³⁶⁴ R. Shirley, *The angels warriors at Mons: including numerous confirmatory testimonies, evidence of the wounded, and certain curious historical parallels: an authentic record* (London, 1915), p. 8; Begbie, pp. 31-3.

golden tint'.³⁶⁵ The *All Saints' Clifton Parish Magazine* printed the account of a German officer, passed on through a 'Miss M.', to the effect that a 'troop of angels' had allowed the British to escape the Germans when they were being hard pressed during the retreat from Mons. In another episode, the angels caused a stampede among the German cavalry that were pursuing the British.³⁶⁶

Though the stories of divine intervention of angels became more famous, it was actually more common for stories to focus on the intervention of saints. The most common figure in the tales was Saint George, the patron Saint of England. However, Saint Joan of Arc and Saint Michael also made appearances for the French, as did the Virgin Mary. A French soldier claimed to have seen the 'Maid of Orleans' leading French and British forces.³⁶⁷ Russian soldiers at Suwalki reported an apparition of the Virgin Mary, and a young British dispatch rider claimed to have seen the Virgin in bursts of exploding shells, as well as the mysterious apparitions that seemingly protected the Allied forces.³⁶⁸

Later, as the war dragged out and the hope of a quick victory was lost, there were an increasing number of reports about a mysterious stranger ministering to the wounded in No Man's Land. This was a distinct shift, moving away from military intervention in battles, to medical intervention. The figure was identified by the stigmata on his hands and feet. A story published in *Bladud* detailed a wounded soldier (a sceptic of the stories) trapped out in No Man's Land under intense enemy fire. The wounded man saw a figure advancing which

³⁶⁵ Begbie, p. 31.

³⁶⁶ *The All Saints' Clifton Parish Magazine*, May 1915, quoted in H. Verrall, 'An enquiry concerning 'The angels of Mons'', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 17 (1915), p. 107.

³⁶⁷ R. Stuart, *Dreams and visions of the war* (London, 1917), p. 60.

³⁶⁸ Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, pp. 10-11; Begbie, pp. 40-1.

could not have been the medical services due to the bullets. The man lost consciousness, and when he revived he was apparently out of immediate danger and being ministered to by the mysterious stranger. The soldier noticed the man's hands and feet were bleeding and realised his saviour was Jesus.³⁶⁹ On the Western Front there was a story of another inexplicable figure that was seen on occasion of gas attacks. The man would walk along the frontline trenches offering Allied soldiers a drink of salty water, and all present would testify that those who drank from the cup suffered no ill effects from the gas.³⁷⁰

The origins of Supernatural Reports

The emergence of the supernatural trope in World War One was the result of a combination of factors. Some – for example the strong historical traditions and the ramifications of Total War – were significant to all three sub-genres of supernatural stories. Other factors – such as pre-war trends and particular wartime events – were characteristic of only one or other of the sub-genres.

The development of many of the stories can be located within a wider historical theme which taught that preternatural events were a familiar element of chronicled warfare. The Israelites of the Old Testament were often assisted by divine hosts, most notably when they were at a severe disadvantage. The story of Elisha in the *Book of Kings* is one example. Elisha was protected from the Syrians by 'horses and chariots of fire'.³⁷¹ In classical times legend told that the battle of Lake Regilus (495 BC) was decided by the intervention of Castor

³⁶⁹ Dr R. F. Horton in *Bladud*, June 1915, quoted in Hayward, p. 63.

³⁷⁰ Hayward, p. 66.

³⁷¹ Clarke, *The Angels of Mons*, p. 18.

and Pollux, the twin children of Jupiter and Leda. The siblings fought mounted at the head of the army and then carried news of the victory to the city.³⁷² In later centuries divine intervention began to manifest in battles against the ‘infidel’. Saint George purportedly appeared to exhausted Crusaders at Antioch during the First Crusade in 1098, leading them to victory against the Muslims.³⁷³ Saint James was rumoured to have appeared to Cortes in several battles against the Moors in the tenth and eleventh centuries and at the head of the conquistadors in 1519 during an engagement against the native Indians in Mexico.³⁷⁴ During the Boxer Rebellion a Chinese insurgent revealed during questioning that his compatriots had not fired on the English because of the figures in white (the suggestion was ‘angels’) that positioned themselves between the Chinese and the British.³⁷⁵

In military folklore there were legends of apparitions of national heroes returning to the battlefield to fight alongside their compatriot armies. During the battle of Gettysburg in the American Civil War it was rumoured that George Washington’s spectre appeared to the Confederate troops, scaring them into retreat, and saving the Unionists from certain annihilation.³⁷⁶ Marco Kralievitch, a medieval Serbian hero, was said to have led the charge against Turkish positions during the Balkan war of 1912. Entire companies declared

³⁷² T. Babington Macaulay, *The Lays of Ancient Rome with Ivry, and the Armada* (London, 1867), pp. 87-8.

³⁷³ C. W. Chadwick Owens, *Unfortunate Colonel Despard and Other Studies* (New York, 1922), p. 65.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 65; Macaulay, p. 89.

³⁷⁵ Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, pp. 8-9.

³⁷⁶ D. Kaczmarek, *Haunted Battlefields*, <http://www.ghostresearch.org/articles/battle.html>, [September 2008].

that they saw him riding up impossible slopes and with his help they were able to overrun trenches full of Turks with little effort.³⁷⁷

Omens were also recurrent. Portents had often occurred before, or after, momentous events. The Battle of Edgehill was one of the most famous and was recounted by many occultists during the Great War. Rumour had it that two months after the battle of 22 October 1642, several local people witnessed the battle being re-played in the sky. According to another legend, the battle of Mook Heath, when the Dutch fought Spain in 1574, was witnessed two months before the actual battle took place. By all accounts the real battle followed the spectral presage exactly.³⁷⁸

It is feasible to argue that contemporaries of the First World War were well aware of this aspect of history. Many soldiers, most officers and the public at home were far more familiar with the Bible than subsequent generations. Additionally, knowledge of classical history and mythology was also widespread. Arthur Machen commented in 1915 that ‘all nations and ages have cherished the thought that spiritual hosts may come to the help of earthly arms’.³⁷⁹ While instances of the returning dead concerned the United States and Serbia, there was a mythology long current in Britain that King Arthur would return should Britain ever be in peril, although there is no evidence myths of this kind were in circulation.³⁸⁰ Ralph Shirley, editor of the *Occult Review*,

³⁷⁷ Owens, pp. 65-66.

³⁷⁸ Shirley, *Prophecies and omens*, pp. 48-49.

³⁷⁹ Machen, p. 11.

³⁸⁰ I. Bryden, *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 15; K. K. Ruthven, *Myth: The Critical Idiom* (London, 1976), p. 9.

cited historical incidents of divine intervention and omens in his works, including mention of the Boxer uprising and the phantom Battle of Edgehill.³⁸¹

The impact of pre-war social and intellectual trends was also notable. These trends were often instrumental in creating a mindset which made rumour scenarios seem feasible and were particularly important for the return of the dead. The foundation of some of the stories that emerged during the war is traceable to the spiritualist movement, which developed in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1848, in upstate New York, sisters Kate and Margaret Fox claimed to have made contact with the spirit of a murdered peddler which purportedly communicated with them by rapping on the walls. What differentiated this rapping from that generally attributed to poltergeists was the apparent ability of the spirit to answer questions.³⁸² This single incident led to the emergence of the spiritualist movement.

After the English civil war of the seventeenth century, an era of modernity had emerged. The world was increasingly defined in terms of immutable scientific laws and supernatural agency was increasingly dismissed as superstition.³⁸³ Spiritualism emerged as a way to eschew this gravitation towards atheism and rationalism, although it did claim to use scientific investigation to prove the existence of the spirit.³⁸⁴ Underpinning the drive to

³⁸¹ Shirley, *Prophecies and omens*, pp. 47-8; Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, pp. 8-9.

³⁸² F. Podmore and B. Gilbert, *Modern Spiritualism: A History* (London, 2000), pp. 180-181.

³⁸³ R. Noakes, 'Spiritualism, science and the supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain', in *The Victorian Supernatural*, (eds.) N. Brown, C. Burdett and P. Thruswell (Cambridge, 2004), p. 23.

³⁸⁴ D. C. Rawson, 'Mendeleev and the Scientific Claims of Spiritualism', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 122:1 (1978), p. 1.

establish the spirit in scientific law was the desire of the educated classes to reconcile their traditional religious beliefs with the increasing rational and materialist tendencies of the modern age. Religion dictated the spirit survived death. Materialism cast doubt on this. Spiritualism offered followers the opportunity to establish the existence of life after death in scientific law, and therefore abolish residual doubts as to its veracity.³⁸⁵

This movement became especially important during the war. Spiritualism diverged from traditional religious doctrines on one distinct point which became particularly significant: communication with the dead was possible, and knowledge of the afterlife was not restricted to the understanding imparted by the Bible. This explains the popularity of the movement during World War One, and the post-war years. Rather than having to wait for the afterlife to be reunited with loved ones, spiritualism offered grieving individuals a chance to communicate with the lost almost immediately following their death. The movement was compared with Christianity by an anonymous man who had found solace being able to contact his fallen son through a medium. He was ‘no longer satisfied with dogmatic creeds or cut-and-dried phrases reduced [...] to a meaningless jangle of words by centuries of reiteration’.³⁸⁶ Sir Oliver Lodge, who had written extensively in support of spiritualist matters before the war, found personal use for the movement when his own son, Raymond, was

³⁸⁵ Rawson, p. 1.

³⁸⁶ Quoted in Carrington, pp. 270-1.

killed at the front. He had extensive communications with his son through a medium and various séances.³⁸⁷

It is difficult to ascertain which factor, if any, played a greater role in the origin of the supernatural genre. However, one vital component was the experience of the war. This was of material significance for all three aspects as it was the conditions created by the conflict – affecting both soldiers and civilians – which served to generate many stories of the paranormal. For Britons remaining at home, despite the material hardships, the most important impact of the war was both the scale and destructiveness, and the separation from loved ones – either by spatial distance or death. The nature of the war meant that the position of loved ones at the front was always tenuous, which became apparent through the steadily lengthening casualty lists. News of friends and family was often sporadic, particularly when soldiers were heading into battles. Vera Brittain succinctly summed up the constant apprehension faced by those on the domestic front: '[even] when the letters [from the front] came they were four days old, and the writer since sending them had had time to die over and over again'.³⁸⁸

At the front conditions affecting military personnel were significantly different. The early stages of the war were ones of movement, often over long distances, in the heat of the late summer. Frequently such activity was undertaken during conditions of extreme duress with enemy forces in pursuit. Officers fell asleep riding their horses and men stumbled along the cobbled

³⁸⁷ O. Lodge, *Raymond or Life after Death: With Examples of the Survival of Memory and Affection after Death* (New York, 1916).

³⁸⁸ Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 142.

stoned roads barely conscious of their surroundings. Even when the soldiers were not marching their living conditions were trying and weariness was prevalent. Soldiers spent their nights skirmishing in No Man's Land, and their days repairing damage to the trenches. Sleep was often interrupted by shellfire, a problem that afflicted even those on reserve behind the lines. The nature of the war meant that often, men killed in the course of bombardments and battles could not be given a proper burial; others were buried alive in trench collapses caused by shell fire, or left to rot strung in the barbed wire dividing No Man's Land. In the front lines, the quality of living conditions meant it was not uncommon for soldiers to have the bodies of dead comrades close by. It also was not unusual for corpses to be used to rebuild the sides of wrecked trenches. Death was omnipresent in the life of the soldier.

In light of these conditions and under such duress, hallucinations were common, and men reported experiencing delusions ranging in severity from the innocuous to the terrifying. These delusions go someway to constructing a picture of how the stories of the supernatural emerged during the First World War. C. E. Montague, an officer at the front, recounted that:

Upon a greasy road with a heavy camber I have seen a used-up man get the illusion, on a night-march back to billets, that he was walking on a round, smooth, horizontal pole or convex plank above some fearsome sort of gulf. He would struggle hard to recover imaginary losses of footing, pant and sweat and scrape desperately sideways with his feet.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁹ Montague, p. 54.

One soldier recounted constantly ducking to avoid arches he believed were spanning the road on a night march, while another mistook copses of trees for villages.³⁹⁰

There were men at the front who believed their experiences were genuine instances of divine protection. One colonel detailed his encounter with the supernatural in an account published in the *Evening News* on 14 September 1915. The colonel's division fought at Le Cateau on 26 August 1914, from dawn until dusk, at which point, under heavy shelling from the Germans, they were forced to retire. For two full days the division marched 'with only about two hours' rest', and by his own admission by the night of 27 August he was 'all worn out [...] both bodily and mental fatigue'.³⁹¹ On this evening, he and two fellow officers were riding with the column of men, trying to stay awake. He became aware of a body of horsemen, cavalry, riding in the fields alongside the road. The mysterious figures kept level and continued in the same direction as the column for about twenty minutes, at which point they disappeared. The colonel did admit that this was by no means remarkable in light of his fatigue; what made it so noteworthy was the two other officers reported the same phenomenon. His hallucinations could not be discounted due to this confirmatory testimony from the other men. A reconnaissance party despatched after the mysterious horsemen had disappeared could find no trace of them. The observation of the apparitions had not been restricted to the

³⁹⁰ Clarke, *Angels of Mons*, p. 49.

³⁹¹ Verrall, p. 115.

officers; many of the men marching along the road testified to seeing the horsemen.³⁹²

It is not impossible that the man believed he had witnessed the ghostly accompaniment. The men were under severe strain and many experienced delusional mental states, which under more forgiving conditions (where the men were rested and not undertaking gruelling marches with little sleep) probably would not have occurred. The colonel, however, was quick to attribute his experience to an instance of divine protection, believing the horsemen were there to safeguard the division as they retreated. This is a crucial point. It was his interpretation of an unexplained visual phenomenon that he and many others experienced. There are two alternative explanations that are plausible: firstly, a troop of real, but unidentified, horsemen actually rode past, only to be misidentified by the desperate and credulous as divine protectors; or a type of mass illusion spread amongst the exhausted and frightened men, in which one soldier's report of his hallucination led someone else to imagine that he had seen something similar, which in turn led to other reports. It is possible that his mindset, in making this assumption, was influenced by other reports of divine guardianship that were circulating at the front.

It is interesting to note that a month before the publication of the colonel's letter, a lance-corporal detailed a similar experience on a march. The incident took place at dawn after marching for twenty-four hours with no rest. As day broke 'we saw in front of us large bodies of cavalry'. The young soldier believed the men were French cavalrymen, but as they approached the men

³⁹² Verrall, p. 115.

disappeared, to be replaced by ‘banks of white mist, with clumps of trees and bushes dimly showing through them’.³⁹³ Instead of interpreting the hallucination as the appearance of a divine protector, the man attributed it to their state of mind; the men were ‘babbling all sorts of nonsense in sheer delirium’, so ‘you can well believe we were in a fit state to take a row of beanstalks for all the saints in the Calendar’.³⁹⁴

Interpretation of these episodes, then, was a component important to promoting the creation of the supernatural. The experiences of hallucinations were no doubt genuine; indeed such stresses seemed common among soldiers at the front. What differed, though, was the manner and meaning which the men read into the incidents. One man was willing to testify that his cavalrymen were divine saviours; the other that he was simply dog tired and seeing things.

Many at home also interpreted the hallucinations of soldiers to suggest that divine intervention had taken place. In a letter sent to a woman in England, a young officer detailed his experiences as he alternately marched, and fought a rearguard action. The man testified that, on the long marches, he and others had experienced ‘amazing hallucinations’ and deduced they were probably fast asleep at the time. On successive nights he ‘saw all sorts of things, enormous men walking towards me and lights and chairs and things in the road’.³⁹⁵ The author who published this account in her book *The Crucible*, Mabel Collins, interpreted the officers’ encounter as the loosening of physical restraints. The soldier was able to feel, and experience, another plane of existence. From the

³⁹³ Verrall, p. 116.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 116.

³⁹⁵ Quoted in M. Collins, *The Crucible* (London, 1942), pp. 14-15.

man's seemingly innocent account of exhaustion and delirium, borne from a situation of extreme stress, Collins distorted this with her own elucidations into proof that during the war the membrane between the planes of existence and consciousness was becoming permeable. The 'enormous men' of the officer's letter Collins believed were spirit guides who assisted the marching soldiers in their hours of need. Whether this was the real meaning intended in the letter is difficult to determine as Collins did not reproduce the original in its entirety. But, the extract quoted fits into the common and widespread experience of hallucinations and delirium resulting from extreme fatigue. In the 1915 edition of his short stories, Arthur Machen recognised the likelihood of hallucinations as a source of testimony.³⁹⁶ He also mentions that this was a factor suggested in various newspaper speculations on the topic, among them the *Daily Chronicle* which suggested the 'scientific explanation of the hallucination' as a means of understanding reports of the supernatural.³⁹⁷

Interpretation was also a key factor in genesis of stories about the return of the dead. A nurse was told by the soldier that he had heard from a German, captured during a charge, that there were 'thousands of troops' behind the British, when in fact there were only 'two regiments'. The man could not explain it; the nurse, however, who '[believed] in life after death, but [... not] in angels on earth' proffered an explanation the dying man found palatable. The woman speculated that the spirits of the men who were killed, because of their 'angry passions' being roused before they died, remained on earth for some

³⁹⁶ Machen, p. 48.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

time ‘unable to tear [themselves] away from the battle’.³⁹⁸ Whether this interpretation was, in fact, accepted by the soldier it is impossible to know. However, it is obvious the nurse imposed her own attitudes and beliefs on the experience of the wounded man, who himself had only heard the story second-hand (from the German prisoner who likely experienced similar conditions to the Allied soldiers, and similar delusional mental states). This goes to show that testimony generated from second-hand sources could be very unreliable as the experience was manipulated to fit within the instances of which the nurse had heard (obviously something of the ‘angel of Mons’), but also manipulated to fit with *her* beliefs. There seemed to be no question that the German soldier may have been hallucinating or that in the excitement of battle with smoke and other obscuring factors, the conditions may have simply played tricks on his eyes. This story had its origins in the interpretation imposed by a nurse on a story told by a dying man about what a German prisoner thought he saw.

Another factor that may have led to the formation of supernatural stories was shell-shock. Given the fact that this neurosis caused delusions, as well as physical symptoms, it is conceivable that shell-shock may have contributed to reports of the supernatural. The number of men afflicted with shell-shock was not insignificant. After the war there were still 65,000 ex-servicemen drawing pensions for the problem, and of these 9,000 men required ongoing hospital treatment.³⁹⁹ Contemporary accounts given by doctors treating the distressed

³⁹⁸ Begbie, pp. 84-85.

³⁹⁹ T. Bogacz, ‘War Neurosis and Cultural Change in England, 1914-22: The Work of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into ‘Shell-Shock’’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24:2 (1989), p. 227.

soldiers and officers with shell-shock suggest that stories of the apparitions could be the result of delirium induced by their disorder. Among the victims doctors treated were those who claimed they had been given occult knowledge of the enemy's plans, and another who asserted that Joan of Arc had personally designated him to show the Allies the way to victory against the Germans.⁴⁰⁰ Taken in context with the beliefs circulating on the front at the time then it is not unreasonable to suggest that shell-shock may have played a role in contributing to the mythology of the supernatural, and could perhaps explain why some soldiers ardently believed what they had seen was not the tricks of their mind.

Although the aforementioned factors informed the development of the stories and contributed to the emergence, they were no guarantee that the genre of the supernatural would originate. There were events – taking place during the war – that had particular influence over the emergence of stories of divine intervention. The two factors were largely intertwined: the retreat of the BEF from Mons in August 1914, and the publication of Arthur Machen's short story, 'The Bowmen' in September 1914.

The BEF's engagement with the German at Mons was the first meeting of the two armies and an antecedent to the emergence of the genre of divine intervention in World War One. The engagement between British forces and the German First Army was remembered as one of the great battles of the war, and was a source of great pride for England, not least because it was fought against a numerically superior foe.⁴⁰¹ Although the BEF was eventually forced to

⁴⁰⁰ 'Insanity from the War Less than Expected', *New York Times*, 18 July 1915, p. 17.

⁴⁰¹ M. Rudkin, *Inside Dover* (London, 1933), p. 51.

retreat, the ‘contemptible little army’ was by no means shamed by its efforts to delay the German advance and withstood the odds stacked against them to emerge victorious in spirit, if not in battle.

The British force landed on the continent on 14 August 1914 with 70,000 men. The other Allied armies were being forced back under the German onslaught; the Belgians were in retreat and the French were faltering in their efforts to hold the Germans on the southern point of the front. A significant portion of the BEF – 36,000 men – was to stem the German tide by setting up a defensive line along the Mons-Conde canal, with orders to hold it for a full day to allow the French to regroup and fall back. It was here, after four days of marching, that the British met General von Kluck’s First Army: 160,000 troops and 600 heavy artillery guns.

Despite their best efforts, the staunch resistance of the BEF was not sufficient to stem the German advance and the British were forced into retreat. The British casualties were 1,600 killed, wounded and missing. Although the retreat was efficient, the BEF was harassed by rear guard actions and forced to march in order to outstrip the Germans.⁴⁰²

The plight of the British forces was disclosed to the home front when *The Times* published the ‘Amiens dispatch’. What followed in Britain was a report from the mists that had so far obscured the continent. The strict censorship that impinged on war news and the knowledge of the army’s movements was allowed – by the main censor – to lapse for a brief moment, confronting the population with a stark admission that the BEF had suffered

⁴⁰² Clarke, ‘Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War’, pp. 153-154; Tucker, p. 28.

heavy losses and was retreating in the face of a far superior foe. Arthur Moore, correspondent to *The Times*, wrote:

with the Germans advancing incessantly [...] the tidal wave of German troops [...] will spread still further unless a miracle happens. Our small British force could not stand before a volume so powerful, so immense. It has been scattered all over the country. [...] I hope I have not been guilty of exaggeration. [...] I have aimed at telling a plain tale of misfortune and defeat. It is a bitter tale to tell of British troops, but they were set an impossible task. [...] England should realise and should realise at once that she must send reinforcements [... we] want men, and we want them now.⁴⁰³

This account shattered perceptions in Britain. The erroneous belief that the British would be able to stem the German advance with little effort was destroyed and the reality laid bare. There were some who believed the contents of the dispatch were German attempts to spread misinformation and sow discontent. However, the bleak announcement of the tribulations of the army with ‘exhaustless valour’, who had been set an ‘impossible task’, enforced a belief among many that the survival of the army had been nothing short of miraculous:

How was it, people asked each other, that, after the French line at Mons had feebly crumpled up, our three

⁴⁰³ ‘The Truth from the British Army – German Tidal Wave’, *The Times*, 30 August 1914, quoted in L. MacDonald, *1914-1918: Voices and Images of the Great War* (London, 1988), p. 23.

Divisions had not been completely annihilated by the six hundred German guns? That there should have been any survivors was one miracle.⁴⁰⁴

Mabel Rudkin, the wife of a clergyman, addressed the myth of the angels at Mons in her memoirs, *Inside Dover*. In 1915, Rudkin met an officer who had been present at the retreat from Mons, and her enquiries about the angels produced no sound or conclusive evidence. The officer, though, was convinced that something was with the men on their retreat because '[how] the men had the strength to push on [...] was the crowning mystery. Everyone was completely played out – dead beat – when the order to retreat was given'.⁴⁰⁵ Just as there were those on the home front who were convinced that some supernormal force must have saved the BEF at Mons, it would seem that there were those in the army who felt keenly the 'miracle' of their escape.

Popular fiction seized upon the courageous stand of the Tommies, and from this engagement a gothic author, Arthur Machen, wove a tale of stoicism, bravery and heavenly deliverance. He acknowledged that he had drawn inspiration from *The Weekly Dispatch* which detailed the ordeal of the British troops in their retreat from Mons.⁴⁰⁶

'The Bowmen' was published in the *Evening News* on 29 September 1914. Machen, touched by what he had read of the experiences of the British in their first encounter on the continent, wrote a story of the remnants of a

⁴⁰⁴ Rudkin, p. 51.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁰⁶ Machen, p. 7.

battalion of Britons in their final stand against a German onslaught. Narrated by one of the surviving 500 soldiers, the young man invoked the assistance of Saint George using a phrase he had seen on the edge of a plate in a vegetarian restaurant in London. As cries of ‘Ha! St. George! a long bow and a strong bow’ rang out, the trench in which the doomed men sheltered was lined with the shimmering figures of the Agincourt bowmen, interposed between the two armies. The mystical figures wiped out entire regiments as they loosed their arrows into the ‘heathen hordes’ leaving the Germans dead, but their bodies unmarked.⁴⁰⁷

It is salient to note that Machen unwittingly attributed the story with more authority than it deserved by invoking the censor: ‘It was during the retreat of the Eighty Thousand, and the authority of the Censorship is sufficient excuse for not being more explicit’.⁴⁰⁸ Machen’s mention of censorship authority may have convinced the readership that the article before them was, in fact, true.

Other ‘true stories’ of divine intervention were not current until after the publication of ‘The Bowmen’ in September 1914, and did not become a common topic of rumour until April 1915 – a full six months after ‘The Bowmen’ entered circulation. The fact that many of the subsequent narratives bore such striking similarities to ‘The Bowmen’ – and in all instances seem to have succeeded it – suggests Machen’s claim that he had set ‘the snowball of

⁴⁰⁷ Machen, pp. 35-37.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

rumour [...] rolling' was astute.⁴⁰⁹ One story published in a Catholic paper told of a party of about thirty men who became isolated in a trench; rather than face capture, they decided to make a last ditch sortie in an attempt to escape. They ran from their trench yelling 'St. George for England!' and apparently, as the men continued their dash, they became aware of a 'large company of men with bows and arrows'. In an interview with a German prisoner after this brave manoeuvre the officer leading the men discovered that there had also been another figure on the battlefield; a man on a 'great white horse'. The officer also felt it necessary to report that none of the German dead had wounds.⁴¹⁰ This story bears a striking resemblance to 'The Bowmen': the hopeless situation, the prayer to Saint George, the appearance of bowmen, and the unmarked German dead.

A similar story appeared in *Light* in May 1915. A sergeant, trapped in a forward trench with his men, was telling them the story of Saint George. Suddenly, there was a 'charge of grey-coated Germans in greatly superior numbers'. The British soldiers advanced on the Germans crying 'Remember St George for England!' at which point the German advance crumbled and the enemy fled in disarray. One German prisoner wanted to know the identity of 'the horseman in armour' who led the British charge.⁴¹¹ The parallels are evident in this testimony, too. The officer had not seen Saint George on a plate in a restaurant like the young protagonist of 'The Bowmen'; he had seen a picture of

⁴⁰⁹ Machen, p. 15.

⁴¹⁰ This story was passed onto Begbie by an 'Editor of a respectable Roman Catholic organ', presumably the *Universe*. It was professed to be from an 'accredited correspondent'. Begbie, p. 73.

⁴¹¹ 'St George and the Phantom Army', *Light*, 15 May 1915, p. 233, quoted in Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War', p. 157.

the saint slaying a dragon in a house of the Young Men's Christian Association, and again, the invocation of the saint was similar to that of 'The Bowmen'. Yet another officer testified to seeing an apparition of Saint George when fighting at Mons where he recognised him as 'an exact counterpart of a picture that hangs today in a London restaurant'.⁴¹² Although there was a significant departure from 'The Bowmen' – the fact that Saint George appeared on the battlefield – the essentials were consistent with the initial fiction.

It has been widely assumed, including by Machen himself, that 'The Bowmen' was the catalyst for the emergence of this genre of the supernatural stories. 'The Bowmen' was the first published story of this kind, it received a great deal of public attention, and all subsequent stories certainly bore striking similarities to Machen's short story. But there is one small piece of evidence that has been taken to suggest that supernatural stories of this kind could have originated before the publication of the 'The Bowmen'.

Brigadier General John Charteris' memoir, *At G.H.Q.*, mentioned rumours circulating among the soldiers to the effect that the Lord had appeared on a white horse, with a flaming sword, forbidding the Germans to advance any further.⁴¹³ The entry in his post-war memoir has been contentious as it was dated mid-September 1914, and is therefore significant because it preceded Machen's story. However, the memoirs were not compiled until 1931, and were drawn both from letters Charteris wrote to his wife and his post-war

⁴¹² Letter sent to Miss Callow, secretary of the Higher Thought Centre, quoted in Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War', p. 158; also mentioned in Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, p. 9.

⁴¹³ J. Charteris, *At G.H.Q.* (London, 1931), p. 25.

recollections. It is entirely possible that the dates were confused and may not be entirely reliable.⁴¹⁴ What can be said is that Machen's story was the first to be widely publicised, and its publication was followed rapidly by a spate of divine intervention stories – several of which mirrored 'The Bowmen' on important points. No other story got the publicity to act as an effective trigger for the stories which suggests further that Machen's story inspired those that followed it.

Charteris concluded that the story probably originated from a religiously minded soldier writing home of his experiences at Mons saying 'that the Germans halted at Mons, AS IF an Angel of the Lord had appeared in front of them'. He hypothesised that the letter had then been published in a parish magazine and then sent back to men at the front, who in turn sent the story back to England with the 'as if' omitted.⁴¹⁵ This mention of a parish magazine is indicative that he confused his dates; the first mention of divine intervention in a publication of this sort was April 1915, although his memoir entry was dated February 1915.⁴¹⁶

Despite claims of divine intervention early in the war, it did not go well for the Allies, and reports of intervention by angels, saints or cavalry seem to have dried up after the battle of the Somme. These worsening conditions seem to have inspired another work of fiction, 'In the Trenches'. The themes of this story were more appropriate to an army and a population that had to deal with the shocking numbers of dead and wounded produced by attempts to break the

⁴¹⁴ Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Response to Simpson', p. 99.

⁴¹⁵ Charteris, p. 75.

⁴¹⁶ Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Response to Simpson', p. 99.

stalemate on the Western Front. Stories of a ‘Comrade in White’ told of a mysterious figure roaming No Man’s Land and ministering to wounded soldiers. Like the stories of angels and saints proffering divine aid, the Comrade stories had their origins in a piece of fiction produced by William Leathem, a clergyman, in 1915. Just as individuals seized on Machen’s work as a narrative of actual events, Leathem’s story struck a chord on the home front and were accepted by some, as ‘literal fact’.⁴¹⁷

The influence of the work was evident in an account reproduced in *Life and Times* called ‘In the Trenches’ in June 1915. This story was identical to the story mentioned earlier, published in *Bladud* in 1915. Interestingly, while the magazine professed the tale to be an account furnished by a soldier, it also appears to be a virtually verbatim reproduction of Leathem’s story ‘In the Trenches’ – even going by the same name – published in his short story compilation, *The Comrade in White*.⁴¹⁸

The origins and evolution of the myths and rumours concerning the supernatural followed the same basic patterns of the other two genres studied (i.e. atrocity stories and spy stories). Historical traditions supplied a foundation for the growth of such stories during World War I and they implicitly reinforced comparable tales that surfaced during the war by suggesting such incidents could – and did – happen. The supernatural also shared similarities with the spy trope, in that both were significantly influenced by pre-war trends. Although the trends were quite different – spy literature versus spiritualism – their ideas

⁴¹⁷ Clarke, *The Angel of Mons*, p. 176.

⁴¹⁸ Anonymous soldier in *Life and Times*, June 1915, quoted in Hayward, pp. 64-5; W. H. Leathem, ‘In the Trenches’, *The Comrade in White* (New York, [1915]), pp. 11-22.

suffused the Great War and contributed to their respective emergences by providing a template against which the population could compare their own experiences. Wartime events – be they the destruction of Belgian cities, the rounding up of a solitary spy ring, or the ‘real’ hallucinations of soldiers – also provided catalysts which ensured that the public was provided with links that would connect history and pre-war circumstances with their own experiences in the current conflict.

Some of the reports of prophecies and supernatural intervention were simply inventions – deliberately contrived fictions. This was evident particularly with ‘The Bowmen’, the *Comrade in White*, and the ‘300 year old’ prophecy foretelling the war. Other stories had their basis in the experiences of the soldiers at the front, but these experiences could always be given a naturalistic interpretation, calling them hallucinations, and some commentators on the home front gave a similar analysis. Other soldiers gave their experiences a spiritual interpretation, seeing them as instances of divine intervention – a view that again gained support on the home front.

There was also a large element of imitation in the reports. Machen’s avowedly fictional story produced a slew of reports in which British soldiers were saved by supernatural intervention and Leathem’s fictional tale inspired the ‘Comrade in White’ genre. In both cases, a well-told piece of fiction caught the imagination of the general public. It became both a model for deliberate invention and an influence on both the form of and the interpretation of hallucinations.

Dissemination

The methods of disseminating the supernatural rumours mostly conformed to the patterns established by atrocities and spies. The printed word, and in particular newspapers, were central to the dissemination of stories about omens, the returning dead, and divine intervention. Although some newspapers, such as *The Times*, made no mention of supernatural stories, others discussed them in detail. Both the *Evening News* and *Daily Mail* seized on the genre and particular focus was directed at the ‘angels of Mons’. Given the *Daily Mail* alone had a readership of over one million people in May 1915 and 10,000 copies were shipped daily to the front, it can be safely assumed that through this medium alone the stories received a wide audience.⁴¹⁹ A mention by Arthur Machen suggests that the stories were widely reported in smaller publications and ‘provincial papers’, although it seems as though a reasonable quantity of the mention of angels was given over to discussions of the ‘exact nature of the appearances’.⁴²⁰

This distribution of discussion is indicative of which sections of the British public participated in the discourses on the supernatural provoked by the war. That *The Times* – the voice of the highly educated British Establishment – refused to touch the stories, suggests that it had no desire to become the subject

⁴¹⁹ J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, the Press, and Propaganda: Lord Northcliffe and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Ohio, 1999), p. 2.

⁴²⁰ Machen, p. 20.

of ridicule for intellectuals. By contrast, the popular press did not cater to intellectuals, and its less educated readership was more credulous.

While it is difficult to ascertain the extent of reporting on omens and return of the dead across the popular press, evidence suggests that the discussion of these was not as animated. It is possible that this is due to the fact that spiritualism and omens were not as influential as Christianity, which had much to gain from stories of divine intervention. The idea of supernatural intervention held more universal appeal as people could interpret the apparitions as Britain's national hero, Saint George, or as angels. Outside of intellectual circles, spiritualism was still only relevant to those who were bereaved.

The printed word also encompassed journals and books. The *Occult Review*, *Journal for the Society of Psychical Research* and *Master Mind Magazine* published articles investigating the phenomena of divine intervention and return of the dead. There was also a reasonable quantity of books published during the war on spiritualism, which included discussion of the returning dead. Arthur Conan Doyle, a proponent of spiritualism for over thirty years, published *The New Revelation* in 1918. Harewood Carrington published *Psychical Phenomena* (1918) which was detailed in its accounts of experiences with the spirits of dead soldiers. Sir Oliver Lodge, an author and noted physicist, penned *Raymond or Life and Death: with Examples of the Evidence for Survival of Memory and Affection after Death* (1915).

Phyllis Campbell, one of the main proponents of divine intervention, was published in the *Occult Review*, in addition to producing a booklet of her experiences – *Back of the Front* (1915) – in France which dealt in detail with the

appearance of saints to the Allied forces.⁴²¹ Ralph Shirley published two books: one, *The angel warriors at Mons*, in support of the angels, and *Prophecies and Omens* as a discussion of the signals of the coming of the great conflict. Harold Begbie too, wrote in avid support of the stories of the angels when he published *On the Side of Angels*.

Personal contacts – in the form of verbal and written communication – played a vital role in the dissemination, as it had with other myths and rumours. Word of mouth and correspondence fed both home and battle front with various versions of the supernatural. Vera Brittain's reproduction of the tales of the return of the dead, told to her by invalided soldiers, is an example of the channels through which the stories travelled to the public forum.

Those at the front detailed their supernatural experiences in letters home, but few, if any, of these original letters were given up for public perusal. One correspondent – who happened to be the Reverend Horton – received a letter from one of his ‘young men’ at the front, in which he proclaimed his belief in the ‘Companion in White’, although he had not seen the figure himself.⁴²² However, the letter was not reproduced for the newspaper; the information was passed on second hand through the Reverend. Several of the accounts scrutinised by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) also suggest that many stories making it into mainstream channels – particularly popular newspapers – were demonstrably devoid of the original author’s name and were supplied by individuals removed from the actual incident.

⁴²¹ Campbell, *Back of the Front*, see also her article ‘The angelic leaders’, in the *Occult Review*, 22 (1915).

⁴²² R. F. Horton, ‘Spiritual Forces’, *The Times*, 5 August 1915, p. 7.

The dissemination of omen stories is much harder to trace. Their mention in memoirs suggests that for some it was a matter of personal interpretation that may not have necessarily been a commonly held belief. There was discussion of similar phenomena in some newspapers, for example the *Grays and Tilbury Gazette*. However, the tendency in the press was to explain them as the result of the Northern Lights, or some other natural occurrence rather than as any portent.⁴²³ This lends additional support to the contention that the meaning derived from omens was largely due to personal interpretation.

One derivative factor was the role played by religious organs. This was important for divine intervention which had strong traditional religious overtones. However, similar support for omens and return of the dead was not shown from the pulpit. Aside from the interest exhibited by parish publications, stories of divine intervention were promulgated extensively in sermons. Doctor R. F. Horton, for instance, delivered a sermon in which he assured his audience that many of the reports on the battlefield had been ‘completely authenticated’, including stories of the *Comrade in White*.⁴²⁴ Reverend W. Muirhead Hope told his congregation that the appearance of the angels at Mons was ‘in the highest degree probable’.⁴²⁵ Parish magazines such as the *Light* and the *Universe* published a stream of testimonials from eye-witnesses, or other sources, to the phenomena at the front.

⁴²³ Hayward, pp. 60-1.

⁴²⁴ ‘Miracles on the Battlefield – Remarkable Sermon by Dr. R. F. Horton’, *The Guardian*, 15 June 1915, p. 3.

⁴²⁵ ‘Angels Seen at Mons’, *Observer*, 25 July 1915, p. 10.

One aspect of dissemination that is less apparent in the supernatural than the other genres was the intervention of the government in the promulgation of such stories. Unlike atrocity stories there was no visible government hand in their propagation – unlike spies there was no overt and consistent repudiation of the rumours. The silence of official sources about the supernatural is not necessarily indicative of a lack of interest. On the contrary, its silence can be interpreted as an unexpressed recognition of the role that the supernatural could play.

There is no evidence to suggest that the government did originate the stories, and no organ identified with the government helped to disseminate them or acknowledged them. There is a good reason for this: the government did not want to destroy its own credibility with the very large body of educated opinion, at home or abroad, that was well-versed in very plausible secular and scientific explanations of the ‘apparitions’ seen or imagined by people under severe stress.

However, the government did absolutely nothing to discourage the stories. Had it done so, it possibly would have provoked a divisive quarrel amongst its own very patriotic supporters. Instead, it allowed the stories to do their work of encouraging hope, consolidating national will, and giving consolation to the bereaved in a religious idiom that meant a great deal to many and was tolerated by the remainder.

Knowing how the government made use of rumours, this ambivalent attitude towards useful gossip was not uncommon. There are other examples of gossip being used by the government to further Britain’s cause, in which the attitude was again, one of apparent uninterest. This is demonstrated particularly

well by the rumour of the Russians in England which was exceptionally popular for a few weeks in September 1914. There was no obvious government hand in the dissemination of this rumour, which some authors, such as Richard Deacon, have argued played a contributing role in the Allied victory on the Marne.⁴²⁶ Popular reports that tens of thousands of Russian troops – even hundreds of thousands in some strains of gossip – were passing through Britain on the way to the Western Front were allowed to filter to Berlin. There is speculation that two divisions of the German army moved to the coast were to protect against the landing of the Russians, which may have sufficiently weakened the German forces to allow the Allied victory. It was only after the Marne that authorities released an explicit statement through the Press Bureau that the Russians had been entirely mythical.

The government was probably aware of the benefits of this rumour – aside from the confusion and apprehension it could cause German authorities, it had obvious morale benefits for the British population. The apathy towards the stories lasted for as long as the rumours were useful, and this factor could explain why the government and officialdom remained silent about stories of the supernatural. As long as they had a socially cohesive and worthwhile function the government – while not actively participating in their promulgation – was content to allow the rumours to flourish without official interference.

⁴²⁶ Hayward, pp. 45-6.

Reception of stories of the Supernatural

Rumours of the supernatural seem, on the whole, to have been quite widely believed. Judging the reception of the component parts, though, is a little more difficult. Belief in stories of divine intervention was probably confined to a smaller quantity of the population than other aspects of the genre. Primarily this was due to the fact that belief in this required significant religious faith. Invocation and worship of saints was something closely associated with Catholicism and possibly smacked of papist idolatry to the predominantly non-conformist and Protestant population. This also possibly explains why the legend evolved into apparitions of angels and moved away from saints – it made it more palatable to the rest of the religiously minded population. This idea was also postulated by Machen, who said that appealing to saints was ‘held Popish by most of our countrymen’.⁴²⁷ The reproduction of stories suggests this was an influence. Very few religious publications seem to have reproduced stories of saints, focusing instead on the *Comrade in White* or angels.

It is likely that among many of the religiously minded they were well received. Certainly, the rumours were seized upon by some members of the clergy – for example Boddy and Horton – who then promulgated the stories to their audiences, many of whom probably believed them. Boddy may have carried particular weight with his parishioners, given that he had spent some months at the front investigating the stories of divine intervention. Additionally, initial printings of ‘The Bowmen’ by parish magazines proved exceptionally

⁴²⁷ Machen, p. 19.

popular and, in the period between late 1914 to early 1915, the proprietors of the magazines approached Machen for permission for additional runs of the story.⁴²⁸

What is interesting, though, is that some clergyman made no mention of the rumours of angels or saints. Reverend Andrew Clark, who devotedly kept a detailed diary of the various rumours and gossip in circulation, made no mention of any form of the stories. This absence, however, does not necessarily imply that the stories were not in wide circulation. It is possible that Clark had indeed heard such stories but failed to record them because he did not believe them. Alternatively, it is also conceivable that such stories had simply failed to reach the town in which he lived.

Though there were certainly many people who believed in the veracity of the supernatural stories, there were those who were sceptical of the phenomenon in general, and of divine intervention in particular. Judging by the promulgation, and the organs which disseminated the stories, there is a suggestion of a strong vein of religious interest. Some believers were determined to prove that the divine intervention did happen. When Machen claimed to have instigated the reports of divine intervention, there were several who were quick to refute this. Even though a month lapsed between the retreat from Mons and the publication of 'The Bowmen' in the *Evening News*, with no interest in any such happenings exhibited before this point, there was speculation that Machen had heard the story himself and then passed it off as his own.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Machen, p. 14.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Negating Machen's responsibility for the conception of the legend allowed believers to refute the fictional basis of the story, and thereby lend support to their own claims that the story was true. Harold Begbie, for instance, who was a dogged believer in the appearance of angels at Mons, asserted that Machen, 'when he read with supreme sympathy that "awful account" in the newspaper [...] may have received from the brain of a wounded or a dying British soldier in France some powerful impression of the battlefield at Mons'.⁴³⁰ The language used by Machen in his introduction did lend itself to this interpretation: he spoke of a 'furnace of torment and death and agony and terror'.⁴³¹ What had simply been an emotional reaction to the Amiens dispatch was reinterpreted as telepathy. Ralph Shirley conjectured the same explanation saying 'if we are to accept the now generally admitted fact of telepathy, nothing is more likely than that a record [...] might have reached Mr. Machen's subconscious intelligence'.⁴³² This line of argument also conveniently explained why many of the stories conformed so closely to Machen's plot.

Machen's story emerged at the end of September 1914. The efforts of interested clergymen notwithstanding, the story could not survive without confirmatory evidence from 'witnesses' of the apparitions. Seven months later, in April 1915, the furore began. At this point an anonymous 'military officer' came forward and proffered his testimony that supported Machen's fictional thesis that the British had been guarded by some form of divine protection. This

⁴³⁰ Begbie, pp. 20-1.

⁴³¹ Machen, p. 8.

⁴³² Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, pp. 9-10.

story was published in the *Light* magazine, and Clarke argues that this explains the gap in discourse.

Proponents of the angels claimed to be able to quote instance after instance of testimony coming from men who served at the front, claiming to have seen the heavenly bodies. Begbie and Campbell both asserted that there were no first-hand stories because the military authorities had issued explicit orders forbidding the men from speaking of their experience until after the war.⁴³³ This seems highly unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, papers regularly published letters received from soldiers at the front detailing their experiences. Secondly, it seems unusual that authorities would attempt to repress something that would be a propaganda coup for the morale of the Allied forces and their respective domestic fronts. The Reverend A. A. Boddy of Sunderland conducted his own investigations on the continent and concluded the evidence was ‘remarkably cumulative’.⁴³⁴

Those who tended towards scepticism pointed to the lack of definitive and reliable supportive testimony. Fundamentally it was not the quantity of testimony that was deficient, it was the identities of the men who reportedly saw the phenomenon. What is most interesting about these stories is the fact that while they were alleged to be the independent testimonies of various officers and soldiers, they all reached their publishers through other mediums. The story of the three angels hovering over the British lines was related by the

⁴³³ Begbie, p. 30.

⁴³⁴ Reverend A. A. Boddy, quoted in Begbie, p. 66.

nurse who had treated the man, a Miss C. M. Wilson.⁴³⁵ One soldier's testimony was taken by a nurse, who passed it on to her 'Lady Superintendent of the Red Cross', who in turn submitted it to a London newspaper.⁴³⁶ The evidence submitted by A. A. Boddy was based on an account that had come from a nurse in a convalescent home, who heard the story from a patient.⁴³⁷ The tale of the company of men with bows and arrows who came to the protection of the men isolated in their trench was told by a correspondent, not the officer in question.⁴³⁸

There were no men who could be traced through the nurses; even interested clergymen who had visited the front could not find any who would admit to having seen the heavenly manifestations first-hand. Reverend Boddy spent two months working at the front and used the opportunity to try and investigate the rumours further. Despite his claims that the 'evidence [was] remarkably cumulative', he did acknowledge that the evidence 'was not always direct'. Boddy asserted that the 'channels' through which he got his information 'were entitled to respect'. He never extrapolated on precisely what these channels were but his mention of a nurse suggests that this is where his confirmatory testimony came from.⁴³⁹ Machen summed up the view of the sceptics perfectly: '[someone] (unknown) has met a nurse (unnamed) who has talked to a soldier (anonymous) who has seen angels'.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁵ Shirley, *The angel warriors at Mons*, p. 3.

⁴³⁶ Begbie, p. 27.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴³⁹ 'The Mons "Angels" – Vicar Gives His Reasons for Believing in Them', *Observer*, 22 August 1915, p. 9.

⁴⁴⁰ Machen, p. 24.

The profound interest that was exhibited in the stories of divine intervention led the *Journal of the Society of Psychical Research* to investigate the phenomenon more thoroughly. Many of the stories avidly disseminated in the popular press and parish magazines were uncovered as springing from third or fourth hand evidence. Individuals credited with possessing knowledge of the actual witnesses admitted upon further questioning that they ‘[could not] give you the names of the men referred to [...] as the story I heard was *quite* anonymous, and I do not know who they were’.⁴⁴¹ This declaration came from the young woman attributed with knowing ‘personally’ the men at the centre of the reports of angels scattering German cavalry. Apparently her assertions that ‘she knew two officers both of whom had seen the angels’, was not entirely correct.⁴⁴² H. Verrall, author of the article, attempted to qualify the validity of a few of the multitude of cases presented by Harold Begbie but was met with a similar responses. One man cited by Begbie as having ‘first-hand information’ replied that he could not help Verrall’s enquiries. A second referred Verrall to a friend as the source of the story.⁴⁴³ What is interesting is that the Society of Psychical Research took a great interest in such happenings. It was precisely instances like the ‘angel of Mons’ that they sought to verify as fact to further the investigation of psychical and super-normal phenomena. That the investigations of just such a group failed to turn up anything marginally conclusive – particularly when they were predisposed to believe – goes to show just how tenuous the evidence supporting the apparitions really was.

⁴⁴¹ ‘Miss M.’, quoted in Verrall, p. 108.

⁴⁴² Quoted in Verrall, p. 107.

⁴⁴³ Verrall, p. 114.

Machen too, conducted his own investigations. He was adamant that if the apparitions had in fact taken place, then at least 30,000 men should have seen it. Men he wrote to at the front, and who had been present at Mons, knew nothing of the occurrence at the time and Machen believed that if even 100 of those men had seen the angels then it would have spread through the trenches. There were, according to this friend, no stories on the front lines of angelic intervention, despite there being an abundance of other rumours and stories.⁴⁴⁴

The sceptics were assisted in their views by the obvious cases of invention. One such case, published in the *Daily Mail* on 24 August 1915, asserted that a young man, a Private Cleaver, was not only willing to give his name (something distinctly lacking from other testimony) but to swear an affidavit that he had witnessed an apparition at Mons which caused the German cavalry to bolt; had this not happened then Cleaver and his comrades ‘would have been annihilated’. The man who had been witness to Cleaver’s claims, a Mr G. S. Hazlehurst, wrote to the *Daily Mail* to share the story with the nation. Barely a week later though, Mr Hazlehurst wrote again; he had heard a rumour that Cleaver had not been at Mons and so had queried this claim with the Salisbury headquarters. The response informed Hazlehurst the Private Cleaver had, in fact, landed in France on 6 September 1914. The apparitions at Mons had taken place during the retreat of 23-26 August. There was no way he could have witnessed what he claimed.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁴ Machen, pp. 35-37.

⁴⁴⁵ Verrall, p. 110.

It is interesting that after the story of the three hovering angels was published, a French officer wrote explaining that the apparition the captain had seen was in fact the Northern lights.⁴⁴⁶ Even Verrall suggested that the sightings might be explained by smoke lingering over the battlefields, combined with men who ‘are not likely to be in a state conduced to accurate observation’, and it possible that with the type of flares, signals and weaponry being used, that this explanation could account for some of the delusions.⁴⁴⁷

The wide dissemination of the sceptics’ views and a greater appreciation of the prevalence of hallucinations under the stress of battle, combined with the worsening situation at the front, potentially help to explain the demise of the stories of divine intervention in the later years. Experience with men returned from the front – with their nightmares, hallucinations, or psychological disturbances – might have made people more aware of the impact of dreams and hallucinations could have on the psyche.⁴⁴⁸

A great deal of scepticism was voiced in public about the truth of the stories of divine intervention. The accuracy of the stories about the return of the dead were not so widely or so publicly questioned. There are a number of possible reasons why stories were not attacked so vociferously as stories about divine intervention. Firstly, there was substantial public support given to these stories by prominent figures such as Conan Doyle. Secondly, there may have been an unwillingness to injure the feelings of individuals who had suffered loss

⁴⁴⁶ Clarke, *The Angels of Mons*, p. 61.

⁴⁴⁷ Verrall, p. 113.

⁴⁴⁸ This was recognised by some at the time. In 1918 H. Carrington mentioned the effects of shell-shock, and also the impact of dreams that soldiers were subject to as a result of their experiences, pp. 61-100.

but who gained some comfort from their belief in such stories. Finally, ghost stories did not require the same degree of religious belief as tales of divine intervention.

A significant section of the clergy backed reports of divine intervention early in the war and the reports got a good deal of support from believing Christians. The popular press also entered into considerable discussion on the subject of divine intervention. All of these are a good indication that they had a significant popular following outside of elite circles. What did people who accepted these stories get from them? Particularly in light of the decades preceding the war being relatively void of such stories? The spiritualists acquired far less publicity, but they also acquired a following. There are three main factors that explain the popularity of supernatural stories.

Firstly, rumours of this type seemed to resonate with existing mentalities of a ‘just war’. Divine intervention in particular gave implicit support to this idea by suggesting that divine aid further reinforced the contention the British cause was ‘just’, and therefore right. These stories also, by implication, demonised the enemy. By claiming that God was on the side of the British, stories of divine intervention inferred that the Germans must be in the service of the Devil. One soldier, for instance, warned Campbell and her fellow nurses to leave the front with the words: ‘Get awa’, lassie [...] They Germans is no men; they’re devils. All Hell is open now’.⁴⁴⁹ As far as Campbell was concerned, it was precisely the demonic nature of the Germans (as exemplified by the atrocities they committed,

⁴⁴⁹ Campbell, ‘The angelic leaders’, p. 76.

and which she described in detail), which made it necessary for God to intervene on the side of the Allies:

Is it strange that that the cries of virgins violated, of crucified sons and fathers – of brothers and sons carbonized, of nuns tortured and burnt – of priests tortured and impaled, of little children done to death in such ways that they cannot be spoken of, is it strange that the torment of these has dragged at the feet of the Ruler of the Universe till He sent aid.⁴⁵⁰

Secondly, supernatural stories provided yet another form of moral justification for the sacrifices being made, and for the decision of the British to enter the war in the first place. This was especially evident in the stories of divine intervention. It is probable that, for patriotic individuals, the stories provided a medium through which the righteousness of the war could be demonstrated. It offered support to the claim that the Allied cause was ‘just’, and that their sacrifices were not in vain and encouraged resilience and faith in the face of a drawn out conflict. There is support for this in the experiences published by Phyllis Campbell in her book, *Back of the Front* and her article, ‘The angelic leaders’ printed in *The Occult Review*. Campbell’s pieces, both heavily laced with accounts of divine intervention, were riddled with references to the idea of a divine cause: ‘[of] one thing all were assured – that the Germans represented the powers of evil, and that so doubtfully did victory hang in the balance, that the powers of good found it necessary to fight [...] with the Allies,

⁴⁵⁰ Campbell, *Back of the Front*, p. 119.

lest the whole world be lost'.⁴⁵¹ In the face of the realisation of the enormous effort that would be required to win the war, and the already dashed hope that the war would be 'over by Christmas', the prospect of the sacrifices ahead required the support of the population: '[the] Allies will win; it may take a long time, it must be a pretty hard case for us, when the Almighty sends His best fighting man to help'.⁴⁵² The reassurance that God was on the Allies' side, and that the cause was so important as to elicit divine aid, was one way this determination could be assured.

Finally, on a personal level, the stories offered comfort to those with loved ones at the front. The invocation of divine protection not only afforded this solace, but buoyed morale at home and the front, something alluded to by Campbell: '[the] men's wounds were horrible [...] yet not one of them was depressed or despondent'.⁴⁵³ She went on to say:

[the] wounded were in a curious state of exaltation – they talked not of defeat, but victory, and spoke of Joan of Arc and St. Michael riding white horses and turning back the foe. Some of the men spoke also of the Germans falling dead in their ranks where Joan of Arc and her Companion, Michael the Archangel, had intervened between the contending hosts.⁴⁵⁴

This was in stark contrast to the early trainloads of men being treated who 'bore their sufferings with unexampled heroism; but [whose] very dumbness

⁴⁵¹ Campbell, 'The angelic leaders', p. 79.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁵³ Campbell, *Back of the Front*, pp. 94-95.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

suggested the hopeless silence of defeat'.⁴⁵⁵ In *Master Mind Magazine*, Campbell asserted that she '[believed] these experiences of the Allied soldiers have been of great spiritual comfort in thousands of bereaved homes; and I want [...] to keep alive that divine spark of consolation'. She also doubted the patriotism of those who chose to question the phenomenon saying she '[thought] it wicked to write or say anything that may tend to stem the great wave of spirituality which these awful days have caused'.⁴⁵⁶

The first Total War caused immense fear, and stress, in Britain. The Amiens dispatch cast a harsh light on the realities at the front, which were gradually compounded by the increasing casualty lists and the failure to achieve a quick and absolute victory. The number of deaths inflicted on the British forces was greater than experienced historically, and the omnipresent threat of the Germans on the channel coast undoubtedly inflamed anxieties. There had been massive battles during the first year of the war but they had failed to decisively evict the Germans. The 58,000 British casualties at Ypres in October 1914 had saved the Channel ports but effectively marked the degeneration of the war into stalemate and trenches.⁴⁵⁷ The smaller skirmishes between October 1914 and April 1915 had achieved little except enormous casualties. On 24 April 1915, when the story of the 'mysterious officer' was published in *Light*, the Germans were preparing to release a second batch of chlorine gas on the Ypres salient. The first attack, two days earlier, had caused 15,000 Allied casualties including 5,000 dead. The final casualty list for the British when the

⁴⁵⁵ Campbell, 'The angelic leaders', p. 76.

⁴⁵⁶ P. Campbell in 'The Lord of Hosts is With Us', *Master Mind Magazine*, 13:6 (1918), p. 177.

⁴⁵⁷ Tucker, p. 35.

Second Battle of Ypres ended on 25 May was 60,000.⁴⁵⁸ The idea that divine beings were assisting the Allies no doubt alleviated, for some, a degree of the worry and stress they felt about the situation at the front.

Divine intervention filled a vital role in the war effort by maintaining morale and buttressing support for British contentions that they fought for a righteous cause. While this was certainly the slant proffered by the likes of Campbell and those who were responsible for its dissemination, the disappearance of the stories after the Somme suggests that for many the genre's main function was to offer comfort as '[neither] the members of the Expeditionary Force [...] nor those who waved cheery farewells, foresaw the inferno which was to swallow up the luckless combatants'.⁴⁵⁹ The inferno continued to consume Britain's manhood and gradually the concept of divine intervention, or protection, could no longer disguise or explain the death and maiming of tens of thousands of the nation's men.

Stories of divine intervention in war virtually disappeared after July 1916. This marked the beginning of the battle of the Somme, which resulted in 20,000 dead British soldiers on the first day alone. The protection afforded by the angels perhaps was not as convincing in light of the enormous casualties and a further loss for the Allies. It is at this point that Clarke alleges the stories of the Comrade in White began circulating in earnest.⁴⁶⁰ The comfort afforded by divine intervention in moments of danger dissipated – there had been no miraculous salvation for the 420,000 killed, wounded or missing soldiers – to

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

⁴⁵⁹ Rudkin, p.46.

⁴⁶⁰ Clarke, 'Rumours of Angels: A Legend of the First World War', p. 165.

be replaced with the rumour that a mysterious stranger was ministering to the wounded and vulnerable stranded in No Man's Land.

A further indicator of the personal comfort the supernatural afforded can be seen in the resurgence in spiritualism during the Great War. For those who had already experienced loss, and who could not be buoyed by the solace of divine protection, an avenue was offered which would salve their grief. Arthur Conan Doyle theorised that the extreme loss of life during the war left so few people untouched by sorrow that spiritualism provided an opportunity through which their anguish could be alleviated through contact with the dead. Doyle, like many, had lost a son in the war and he claimed to have found consolation in being able to contact him.⁴⁶¹ Others followed him in the belief that spiritualism would give them a means to grieve their dead and prove that the spirit could survive death, offering comfort that the mourners left in the physical world would be able to meet their loved ones again.

There was also the reassurance offered by their comrades. Men facing death on an hourly basis, going over the top for their country, probably found comfort in the stories of the apparitions. There was obviously some form of life after death so it perhaps allowed them to face death with an understanding that it would not be the end.

It is more difficult to identify the psychological and social reasons for the popularity of stories about omens and prophecies. They can perhaps be interpreted as a form of comfort, although in a slightly different form to that provided by stories of divine intervention and the returning dead. Rather than

⁴⁶¹ A. Conan Doyle, *A History of Spiritualism Volume II* (San Diego, 2007), pp. 226-227.

offering proof of heaven's support of the Allied cause, or the chance of maintaining contact with dead loved ones, this aspect of the supernatural suggests that people were attempting to embroider their lives with a sense of predetermination and meaning. Omens, be they clouds or some other occurrence, suggest that individuals sought to find meaning in their surroundings which would enable them not only to understand the war, but their place in it. When Reverend Clark recorded the unusual sunset of 29 October 1916 – ascertained by many of his fellow villagers to be an impending signal of the end of the world – it is possible this was because they interpreted the sight within the context of current events. At the time, the battle of the Somme had been raging for three months, which claimed hundreds of thousands of casualties among the British with no demonstrable gain, let alone decisive victory. Prophecies, particularly those made 300 years before the outbreak of the war, implied that the course of events had been decided and therefore, perhaps could not be averted. This fatalism was also evident on the front among soldiers. There was an erroneous, but undoubtedly comforting belief that if one's time was up, nothing could be done to avoid death. While this seems macabre, it can be seen as an attempt to remove the sense of randomness from the slaughter.

There were striking similarities between the genre of the supernatural and the other genres studied. Like atrocities and spies, the supernatural meshed well with existing mentalities. All three offered explicit and implicit opportunities with which to demonise the Germans and create an 'other', rejecting the previously close relationship between the two countries. That the

country which professed to be Britain's friend secretly coveted her Empire and worked towards its downfall with foreign agents and plots, that its soldiers raped and pillaged their way through an guiltless population, and that God was on the side of the Allies, only completed this segregation further as it made the Germans the antithesis of all things to do with the British cause.

Again, the supernatural also fulfilled the quest for justification. This was not exclusively confined to justifying going to war, but also reconciling the massive sacrifices the population had to make with the seemingly endless nature of the conflict. In this the supernatural and atrocity stories worked particularly well. Atrocities established an enemy that was so bestial it could only be beaten by an absolute military victory. The idea of the supernatural supported this by not only bolstering morale, but suggesting that as God was on Britain's side, it must eventually be victorious.

But, there were also striking differences. Primarily it was that neither atrocity nor spy stories were driven by a need for comfort, whereas this was a significant vein in the supernatural. While there were other considerations that certainly contributed to the adoption of this genre, one of the main underlying themes was that it offered hope and comfort to the population that they would survive the war, be victorious, and that loved ones would be protected at the front.

Conclusion

There was a strong historical tradition of the supernatural in warfare. Stories of divine intervention, the return of fallen comrades, and of omens, were not an innovation of World War I. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, with the advent of a more scientific world view, stories that linked the supernatural with war became rather less popular than in previous centuries. Between 1914 and 1918, however, the extreme stresses of fighting a Total War caused a remarkable revival of the tradition.

The common theme of all three rumour types of the supernatural genre was the interpretation of phenomena under the pressures of war. Hallucinations experienced under conditions of extreme duress by soldiers were commonly interpreted as incidents of divine intervention. Sunsets, cloud formations, and seemingly innocuous incidents were interpreted, sometimes retrospectively, as signs of impending doom or certain victory. On the home front, worried relatives sought comfort in stories and beliefs that confirmed the existence of an after-life.

All of these were examples of people seeking order and consolation in a disordered and uncertain world. The ways in which the phenomena were interpreted seemed dependent on the individuals own presuppositions of reality. Christian clergymen tended to promulgate stories of divine intervention as they matched their own beliefs, and used them to promote further religious devotion. The return of the dead was encouraged by the spiritualists whose outlook indicated this was possible and whose beliefs were not constrained by orthodox

religious values. Omens were an age old phenomena that offered meaning through the interpretation of simple events.

Within the category of the supernatural the rumours and myths were exceptionally diverse, but they all contributed to the creation of discourses. The Discourse on Divine Favour and the Discourse on Survival after Death exhibited the search for meaning and explanation that could be ascribed to the war, and to alleviate their own feelings of helplessness. That they were predominantly faith based myths, but still gained such popularity shows just how much of an impact the war had on Britain, and just how much the population was in need of some kind of reassurance that their cause, and sacrifices, were not being made in vain.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

An examination of the myths and rumours circulating on the British home front in the First World War suggests that these stories were a form of discourse that people used to explain their involvement in the war. Vera Brittain recalled in her memoirs how the myths were viewed:

They sounded ludicrous enough now, these rumours, these optimisms, these assurances, to us who still wonder why, in spite of all our incompetence, we managed to “win” the War. But at the time they helped us to live. I cannot, indeed, imagine how long we should have succeeded in living without them.⁴⁶²

These rumours did not exist in a vacuum, nor did they result purely from a fevered popular imagination. They were linked to historical traditions in which people accused enemy troops of brutal atrocities and reported supernatural intervention on behalf of their troops. They were also linked to developments in the pre-war decades: to the spread of the spiritualist belief that contact was possible between the living and the dead; and to the growing international tension, which contributed to the fear of spies and traitors.

However, these developments and traditions did not in themselves ensure that so many myths and rumours would emerge during the war. In countless minor conflicts over the previous century there had been no rumours

⁴⁶² Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, p. 163.

of divine intervention at all. Moreover, the fact that other countries had accused their enemies of bestial atrocities did not necessarily dictate the British would do the same, for the British and Germans had a history of mutual, amicable regard. Indeed, the British newspapers were initially sceptical of the reports of German atrocities.

In order to explain the prevalence of myths and rumours, we need to take into account the fact that World War I was a conflict on an unprecedented scale between opponents that were relatively evenly matched. It was also the first Total War. These facts imposed unprecedented stresses on the British population, creating an environment in which people were tempted to suspend their disbelief. In the words of Dorothy Peel, a British civilian, ‘the state of tense excitement in which we existed upset our judgment and made any event seem possible [...] war stories [myths and rumours] were a feature of our life’,⁴⁶³

The experience of a massive conflict involving Total War was very different from the British experience of war over the previous hundred years. Since the end of the Napoleonic wars, Britain had not been seriously threatened, and had been engaged largely in small-scale colonial wars on distant frontiers. In World War I, by contrast, millions of men volunteered – or were conscripted – for service in an army that suffered horrific casualties just across the Channel. The reality of a devastating war was right on Britain’s doorstep. Its people feared that German victories could eventually see their country engaged in a struggle to defend its own soil against German invaders.

⁴⁶³ Peel, p. 43.

The scale of the war also indicated that the victory would not be gained exclusively by military strength. Economic strength was important in a war that showed increasingly that supply capabilities were just as essential as men. This produced a potentially deadly threat to civilians as the belligerents increasingly considered their respective home fronts legitimate targets. While Britain was spared the worst examples of German brutality, the Zeppelin raids were a constant reminder to civilians that they were no longer immune to the cruelties of war. Civilians began to suffer more than in earlier wars, where they were not directly targeted.

For the most part, the rumours that flourished during World War I were popularly driven. Press reports drew on myths and rumours that had their origin in word-of-mouth stories circulating in the community, and the press reports in turn inspired more such stories. Only in the case of atrocity stories did the government, through the Bryce report, give direct support to the rumours. Indeed, although the government's own concern to root out spies encouraged public reports of suspicious activity, these reports ended up being a bane for the government, because the British population held it immediately responsible for any continuing espionage. It probably also recognised that the rumours were socially divisive. However, there were obvious patriotic advantages in allowing even the stories of spies to circulate, and the government did nothing to stop them. Moreover, few people in official circles minded if pacifists, conscientious objectors and striking workers were identified as having 'pro-German' elements in their midst.

During the war, there was specific legislation in place which made it illegal to ‘spread false reports or make false statements’.⁴⁶⁴ Technically, this encompassed rumour, but the law was applied only to those who spread stories detrimental to the British cause. The myths and rumours that are the subject of this thesis rarely fell into this category, and the government was happy to let them flourish. They were clearly manifestations of popular patriotism with the potential to rally many ordinary people behind the Allied cause.

If the myths and rumours were useful and the government did nothing to discourage them, it nevertheless studiously refrained from endorsing one important category of them: stories of a supernatural character. Why? Here, we must remember that the primary targets of British propaganda until 1917 were allied and neutral countries. In a secularising age, most diplomats would have reacted with incredulity if spokesmen for the government had endorsed stories of divine intercession and of visitations by spirits of the dead. Such endorsements would have brought the government’s veracity into dispute. In a secularising age, most diplomats would have reacted with incredulity.

It is difficult to judge just how well myths and rumours with supernatural themes were received amongst the British public, but the government’s failure to endorse them suggests that opinion was divided. The impression was confirmed by the fact that *The Times*, the premier voice of the British Establishment, completely ignored them. This suggests that in most intellectual circles, and amongst the British upper classes more generally, there was considerable scepticism. The negative conclusions reached by

⁴⁶⁴ DeGroot, p. 183.

investigations into the reports conducted by people like Machen and the Society for Psychical Research tend to confirm this. By contrast, the fact that the more ‘popular’ newspapers carried such reports implies that they had greater credibility lower down the social scale, at least amongst a section of the population. Devout Christians were strongly represented in that group, if sermons by some of the Christian clergy and the views expressed in religious publications are any guide.

What about the claim that the spirits of dead soldiers had in some circumstances communicated with their loved ones? This belief was clearly accepted amongst spiritualists, and in the wider community it probably had a receptive audience amongst at least some of the bereaved. However, the reservations of the Christian clergy about spiritualism no doubt helped to limit its influence, as did the fact that some people had a more general suspicion about spiritual claims.

No doubt the most widely believed rumours were those about spies and atrocities, for it was almost impossible to deny rationally that they had at least some basis in fact. Judging by newspaper copy and mentions in memoirs alone there would have been few people untouched by these two classes of stories. Some must have suspected that a good deal of the spy talk was paranoia, but it was difficult to say this without seeming unpatriotic. Similarly, there were some who doubted the more lurid atrocity stories, but we do not know how many because those who spoke up were condemned. Both Jerome K. Jerome and Keir Hardie were attacked in letters to the editor of the *Daily Express* for

questioning the extent of German atrocities, particularly reports of sadism and mutilation.

The myths and rumours in circulation on the home front constituted a mutually supporting series of discourses that had both social and political significance. Myths of German atrocities and sexual-sadism created a Discourse on the Bestial Hun; rumours of enemy agents, espionage and traitors constructed a Discourse on Hidden Spies; stories of divine intercession formed a Discourse on Divine Favour; and stories about the return of spirits of dead comrades contributed to a Discourse on Survival after Death.

These discourses did not simply fill the void created by censorship and the restrictions on news from the front. They provided hope, reassurance, inspiration and comfort, and they gave the war a wider meaning. The Discourse on the Bestial Hun justified British involvement in the war and made sense of it by suggesting that the British cause was to protect the weak, the innocent and the defenceless – women and children especially – from a cruel and despotic enemy. The Discourse on Divine Favour enlisted God in the allied cause with its stories of divine intervention on the field of battle, and by implication it put the Germans on the side of the devil. Moreover, since God and his allies were assured of victory, the discourse gave hope and comfort as well as a sense of moral righteousness.

Hope and comfort of a different sort were provided by the Discourse on Survival after Death. It offered consolation to those with friends and relatives at the front, and to those who had lost loved ones in the war. Moreover, when it

told of ghostly soldiers who returned to assist their comrades, it boosted morale with its message of support and assistance from beyond the grave.

The Discourse on Hidden Spies gave every Briton the satisfaction of contributing to the war effort by assisting in the detection of enemy agents. It was also used to marginalise pacifists, striking workers and other troublemakers who in the eyes of patriots seemed bent on undermining the war effort. Such people, it seemed, had placed themselves in opposition to their country and God's cause, supplying witting or unwitting aid to the Bestial Hun.

To see the myths and rumours simply as irrational and unfounded gossip would be to diminish the importance they had for the people who circulated them. Through myth and rumour, many ordinary Britons participated in the wartime experience, justifying and explaining the conflict to themselves and their neighbours. As they did so, they produced and circulated a type of people's patriotic propaganda that ran parallel with the official propaganda sponsored by the state. At times, the two streams of propaganda joined and fed off each other, as happened in the case of atrocity rumours at the time of the Bryce Report. However, for the most part they remained separate, while still moving in the same direction. It was because they moved in the same direction, serving the purposes of the state, that the government left them alone to flourish. As a result, millions of ordinary British people were left free to make sense of a terrible conflict in their own way, through myth and rumour.

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