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The Rape Of Belgium: The Untold Story Of World War I



Synopsis

In August 1914, the German Army invaded the neutral nation of Belgium, violating a treaty that the German chancellor dismissed as a "scrap of paper." The invaders terrorized the Belgians, shooting thousands of civilians and looting and burning scores of towns, including Louvain, which housed the country's preeminent university. The Rape of Belgium recalls the bloodshed and destruction of the 1914 invasion, and the outrage it inspired abroad. Yet Larry Zuckerman does not stop there, and takes us on a harrowing journey over the next fifty months, vividly documenting Germany's occupation of Belgium. The occupiers plundered the country, looting its rich supply of natural resources; deporting Belgians en masse to Germany and northern France as forced laborers; and jailing thousands on contrived charges, including the failure to inform on family or neighbors. Despite the duration of the siege and the destruction left in its wake, in considering Belgium, neither the Allies nor the history books focused on the occupation, and instead cast their attention almost wholly on the invasion. Now, *The Rape of Belgium* draws on a little-known story to remind us of the horrors of war. Further, Zuckerman shows why the Allies refrained from punishing the Germans for the occupation and controversially suggests that had the victors followed through, Europe's reaction to the rise of Nazi Germany might have taken a very different course.

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Customer Reviews

Growing up in Post WW2 Belgium, I never understood why those who lived through the war could not stop recalling their experience. Couldn't they just leave the past behind? And then I grew up and I began asking questions? My father's parents lived on the Dutch border, by Vise and so were some

of the first to witness the invasion. My grandfather was deported to Bavaria for 5 years. His wife was left to fend for herself and their 6 year old son. My mother's parents lived a few days' walk from the border, in Jauche. They, along with many others, fled Belgium with only the clothes they had on their backs. Watching the horizon for advancing German troops from the second floor of their homes, those who had survived WW1 had encouraged their adult children to just run. Why? Was that not cowardice? I found the answer. It was not cowardice. It was survival instincts. In its horrifying retelling, the book presents a sort of play rehearsal for the Holocaust. The invaders' total disregard of the law and treaties but most of all their ability to get away with it all, set the tone for the next war. A German population, lulled by false propaganda, believed they had been victimized by the Allies. When the 'right' leader came along how could they resist seeking what they felt was righteous vindication. How wrong they were though! How Belgium and the Belgians ever managed to get back on their feet amazes me... WW2 might not have happened had the issue of War Crimes been taken seriously. Millions of lives might have been spared. But hindsight is 20/20. A must-read for anyone truly interested in learning from the Past.

The propaganda wars in the First World War produced a strong reaction against the distortions on both sides. But, as the author shows, the result in the case of Belgium was to forget the reality of the German invasion and occupation, which in many ways was the first episode of the twentieth century savagery of warfare against civilian populations. The term 'totalitarian' had not yet entered the language, but the war system created to plunder and repress the Belgians was in many ways the first instance of the type. Sixth place in the ranks of industrialized nations, Belgium was plundered of its industrial capital and infrastructure. This history was a premonition of the tactics of the Nazis to come. Sets the record straight in an area where it is difficult, short of the archival research provided, to maintain objective judgments.

I have long held the view that the United States should have stayed out of World War I. Larry Zukerman is making me think twice about our involvement. Germany was guilty of war crimes against the people of Belgium. Its behavior during the invasion simply cannot be explained away. The German military did indeed seem to deliberately terrorize the population. Unfortunately, the shabbily put together Bryce Report encouraged outsiders to dismiss all reports of atrocities as mere exaggerations and outright lies. I consider this current review as incomplete. Am I perhaps too reluctant to admit being wrong in the past? Whatever, I strongly recommend *The Rape of Belgium* to all those interested in the history of this savage war. I will also be adding future insights in the

comment section.

While I don't generally read historical texts for fun, I do read them frequently as I research my novels--and I can usually tell right away if it's going to be a book I enjoy reading or one I have to force myself through. This one was gripping right from the start, painting so vividly the picture of what the Belgians faced in the first World War. I got it first from the library, but after attaching so many Post-It notes to interesting sections that it looked like a rainbow porcupine, I decided it was time to buy my own copy. Zuckerman does a fabulous job of treating the invasion fairly, looking at things from both sides, and also giving the modern reader a deep understanding of what led Germany and Belgium to this pass, and how it in turn gave us a foretaste of what was to come in World War II. Before reading this book, I really didn't understand what it meant for a country to be neutral--now I do, I appreciate it, and I'm looking forward to weaving this sad history into my fictional work. This should be on the reading list for any WWI or WWII student! Rarely have I read a book of this nature that so expertly paints a picture of, not only what happened, but why, and how it affected the lives and hearts of those who lived through it.

This is an amazing book. While the subject matter involved WWI Belgium which, even for a Belgian like myself, can be distant enough to blur History and myth, I found Zuckerman's approach to be clear, rational, and, on the whole, balanced. The book explains the rationale for Belgium's perceived inactivity in the early phases of the war, recounts fairly the early atrocities (Louvain...) before shifting to war crimes that are less dramatic (destruction and theft of industrial machinery, 'relocation' of labor to Germany...) but indeed more damning since clearly premeditated, and more damaging to Belgium in the long run. Zuckerman also recounts and critiques the diplomatic efforts of the exiled government and the mixed feelings that the Western powers exhibited toward Belgium. Finally the book clearly explains the legalistic side of atonement and punishment, not least the legal impunity of having invaded a neutral actor and the myth of 'unbeaten' Germany which, of course, had its own consequences. There are interesting side notes, such as the involvement of Herbert Hoover or the fostering of Flemish nationalism, which could be developed further as they have their own historical significance. It is said, for instance, that Hoover's reluctance to large-scale relief during the Great Depression was based on his experiences in Belgium. If I have one gripe, it is that the book as it progresses becomes more focused on the interplay of Great Powers. We are told that the Allies are annoyed at Albert's reluctance to join a unified command, but Albert's motivations are not explored in depth. The German gas attacks at Ypres could also have been discussed in more depth. As it is,

anyone interested in International Law, the psychology of armies on the march, or the genesis of similar WWII atrocities should absolutely read this book.

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