

## A Story Few Have Heard

### **“There Once Was a Nice Little Town in That Place”**

On a cold evening in late November 1914, a German officer was drinking with a boisterous group of fellow officers in the luxurious Hotel Astoria. Situated in Brussels, Belgium, on Rue Royale near the city’s major park, the hotel was in the fashionable upper part of town and had been commandeered by the German occupation forces for their officers, staffs, and privileged guests.

Nearly four months before, on Tuesday, August 4, the German Army had started World War I by invading neutral Belgium on its way to its real objective, France. The German officer had been a part of that invading force. A “fine-looking man” with “agreeable manners,” he was in his mid-thirties and had lived in England for years before returning to Germany to become a cavalry officer in the kaiser’s army.

Even though it was late—past midnight—and all the other Germans had stumbled off to bed, this cavalry officer stayed at the table and spoke

in perfect English to two Americans, war correspondent E.E. Hunt, and neutral observer Lieutenant Victor Daniel Herbster of the U.S. Navy, both of whom were visiting the German-occupied city.

Referring to the August days of the invasion, the German calmly stated that the Belgians “do not understand war, and they do not understand the rules of war. I remember once riding into a little town down here in the South of Belgium and finding my four scouts lying dead in the streets. Civilians had butchered horses and men—shot them from behind.

“I ordered my men to go into the houses and kill every one they found. Then I ordered them to burn the town.”

The man sat back a moment, raised his glass, then took a drink.

“There once was a nice little town in that place. There is no such town now.”

Hunt would never forget the German’s calm, brutal words, and they would follow him when less than a month later, in December, he joined a small group of Americans who would try to save more than nine million Belgian and French civilians from starving to death.

The interlacing stories of German brutality, Belgian resistance, the struggles against starvation, and the American men Hunt joined in the burgeoning Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), all began back in those chaotic days of August 1914, when the Germans attacked the little country. Few could have guessed it then, but the invasion acted like a toppling domino that would cause a tumbling together of extraordinary people into a chain reaction of life-and-death situations far from the trenches and killing fields of World War I.

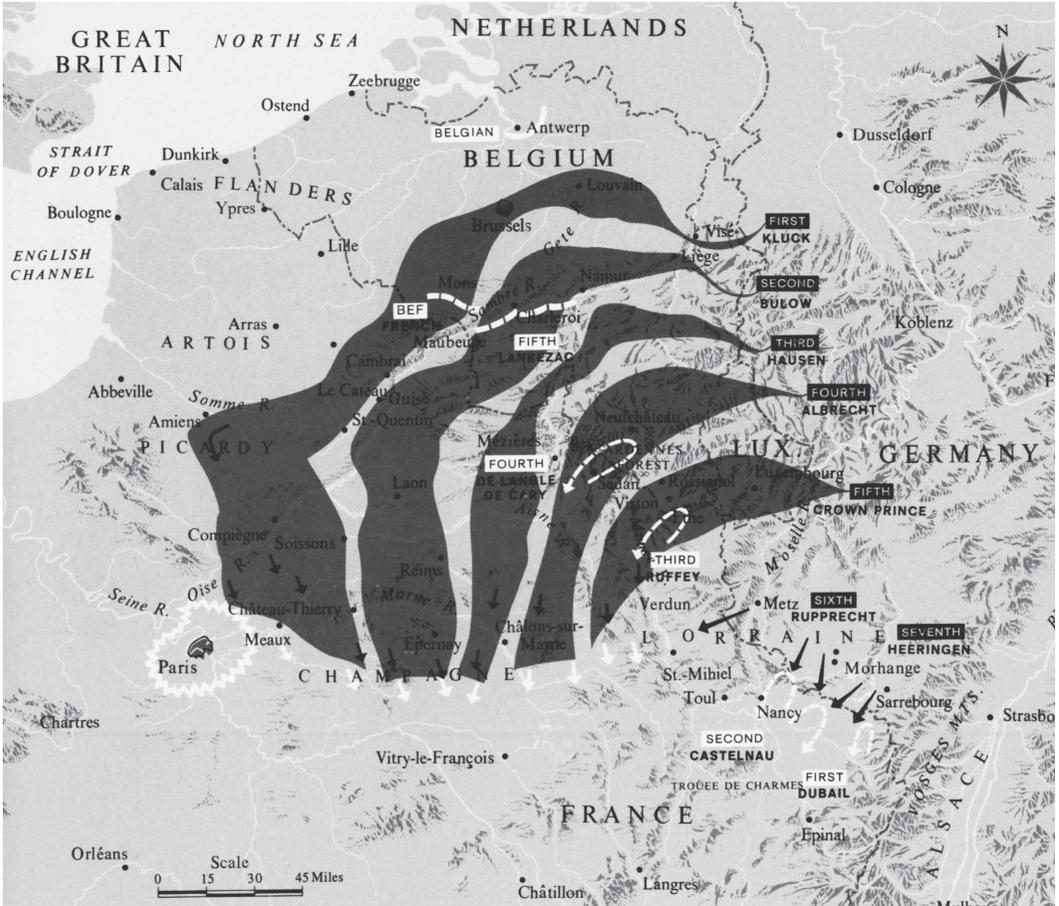
And hanging in the balance were millions of civilian lives.

It is a story that few have heard.

SECTION ONE



AUGUST 1914  
INVASION



*The paths that the five German field armies took through Belgium and France in August, and where the British Expeditionary Force and the French unsuccessfully tried to stop them (broken white lines and arrows). (The American Heritage History of World War I, Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, American Heritage Publishing Co./Bonanza Books, 1982.)*

## Setting the Stage

### **Practically Inevitable**

“To understand Germany, you must think in centuries.”

While the German who said that believed he was speaking philosophically about his country alone, he was aptly describing the soul of every European power at the turn of the twentieth century. Major conflicts from the past—such as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871)—were still very much alive in the hearts, minds, and attitudes of many Europeans. As a result, each country’s collective memory was as much comforting as it was confining and controlling.

So what happened next was practically inevitable.

By the summer of 1914, decades of European political posturing, diplomatic wrangling, treaty negotiations, and international skirmishes—inflamed by the June 28 assassination of Austria’s Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie—led inescapably to Tuesday morning, August 4,

when five German armies, numbering one million men, amassed along Germany's western border.

This was the largest invasion force ever assembled, and it was to follow Germany's revised Schlieffen Plan of attack, which called for the five armies to sweep in a wide westward arc through Belgium into France, overwhelming the French Army and capturing Paris to achieve a quick victory. Ensuring France's rapid defeat was essential, the German General Staff believed, so it could then shift troops to its eastern front and help its Austro-Hungarian allies defeat Russia before the tsar's armies could fully mobilize. It was critical to Germany's war plans that the sweep through Belgium be lightning fast, or the Germans would be caught in a prolonged and probably unwinnable two-front war.

Belgium was no stranger to invading armies. In fact, it was known as the cock-pit of Europe, referring to the cock-fighting ring where two fierce roosters would battle to exhaustion or death. On a map the three countries of Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg (known as the Low Countries because much of their land is below sea level or slight above) appeared as a rough-hewn wedge driven between France and Germany. In the past, Belgium had always been a region without its own country—pieces of which had belonged at times to France, Germany, Holland, Spain, and Austria. Its people were eyewitnesses to many other nations' battles across their land—most notably the Battle of Waterloo, on the outskirts of Brussels, where Napoleon had his final defeat in 1815.

In 1830, however, this region that would later become Belgium successfully revolted and seceded from Holland, enthroned King Leopold I on July 21, 1831, and was recognized by the international community as a country for the first time. While only slightly smaller than Maryland, Belgium made up for its lack of girth with its critical spot on the European map: Germany and Luxembourg lay on its eastern border, the North Sea and the United Kingdom were to the west, Holland was to the north, and France was to the south.

No one could deny the strategic importance of Belgium's location, and in an obvious move to prevent the past from repeating itself, the 1839 Treaty of London declared the little country permanently neutral. The treaty proved critical to Belgium's survival and was signed by Great Britain, Austria, Prussia (the precursor of Germany), Russia, France, Holland, and Belgium. Each signatory pledged to respect Belgian neutrality and to defend it from any invader. Even so, the pragmatic Belgians knew

their own history well enough that they maintained a small, defensive army of less than 150,000 men. No one was going to take away their hard-fought freedom without a fight.

It was no surprise, then, how the Belgian government responded to an August 2, 1914, German ultimatum, which basically stated: If you stand aside as the kaiser's armies pass through to invade France, you will remain a sovereign nation, and no Belgian will be hurt; if you resist, we will destroy you. Germany had already declared war on Russia the day before (August 1), and it declared war on France on August 3, the same day Belgium courageously refused the German ultimatum and said it would not allow it to march through unopposed. That same day, in a rousing speech to the Belgian Parliament, King Albert declared, "I have faith in our destiny. A country which defends itself enforces the respect of all; such a country shall not perish. God will be with us in this just cause. Long live free Belgium!" The country then prepared as best it could for the coming onslaught, hoping its two major neutrality supporters, France and England, would honor their 1839 treaty commitment and come to its aid.

While the Belgians saw the Germans as aggressive invaders, the Germans described themselves, and their actions, quite differently. The Germans said they felt they had no choice but to fight, as explained by their chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. On August 4, only a few hours after the invasion started, Bethmann-Hollweg gave a patriotic speech to the German Reichstag (parliament), that admitted Germany had violated Belgian neutrality but insisted it had the right to do so because its preemptive assault against France was in self-defense. Germany was fighting for its national survival, Bethmann-Hollweg maintained, because France was bent on avenging the German victories of the Franco-



*King Albert of Belgium was thirty-nine years old and little-known to the world before the start of World War I. (Public domain; multiple sources.)*

Prussian War and had already developed a plan to attack Germany. The only way to thwart the French quest for revenge, the German authorities declared, was to attack first.

But violating Belgium's sacred neutrality was a huge gamble for Germany, which did not want to fight Britain as well as France and Russia. Germany hoped that Britain would not stand behind its 1839 treaty pledge to protect Belgium's neutrality. Bethmann-Hollweg even told the British ambassador to Germany, Sir Edward Goschen, that he found it hard to believe Britain would go to war over "a scrap of paper."

It was a statement that was quickly repeated—and condemned—around the world.

Within hours, Britain declared war on Germany, not only to honor the 1839 treaty but also to stop Germany's aggression. Britain's entrance into the war brought the last major power in Europe into the fight: Britain, Russia, and France as the Entente Powers or Allies, against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (centered in modern Turkey) as the Central Powers. Across the Atlantic, the U.S. government, along with the majority of Americans, wanted to stay clear of the fight and declared neutrality on August 4, with President Woodrow Wilson detailing that neutrality to congress on August 19.

Back in Europe, it would take France and Britain precious days, if not weeks, to mount significant defensive maneuvers.

In the meantime, Belgium stood staunchly alone to defend its neutrality against one of the best-equipped and most mobile armies the world had ever seen.

### **Belgium Prepares for Invasion**

With great precision and organization the Germans implemented their grand invasion plans. In fact, their general sense of preparedness was so well-known and accepted that they were given credit for some rather unorthodox (albeit untrue) war planning—most notably the absurdly unrealistic item reported as fact by the *New York Times* in a quote from a source: "In June the Germans ordered 80,000 road maps from the Brussels Motor Touring Club."

On the receiving end of the invasion, the Belgians had not thought to include a motorcar club in their war plans, so they were far less prepared—not to mention they thought they were protected by treaty-sanctioned

neutrality. As such, in late July and the first few days of August, they reacted with barely controlled bedlam to the coming invasion.

Their thirty-nine-year-old King Albert and the military, which had mobilized July 31, took charge of the country's defense and immediately began strategic destruction of land and property to slow Germany's advance. Non-essential bridges were blown up, critical river crossings were fortified, and the country's extensive canal system was sabotaged by some of the blown bridges and even sunken barges. Around and near Belgium's renowned fortress system (rings of massive forts protecting critical cities such as Liège and Antwerp), whole forests were cut down, and buildings were blown up to gain better firing line-of-sight against the invader. Tree stumps within the then-dead forests were cut to jagged edges, while sharpened wooden lances protruded from defensive mounds and trenches—all in an effort to slow down the enemy. In cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, major thoroughfares were torn up, tram tracks were wrecked, barricades of motorcars and trolleys were erected, trenches were dug into streets and barbed wire fences were strung up by the untrained but highly enthusiastic *garde civique* (civilian guard).

For civilians, life had a feel of near-blind confusion. Martial law was declared in Brussels because of anti-German rioting. Countrywide, banks closed or suspended critical financial services. Black markets prospered as food prices soared. Travel became difficult. Military checkpoints were established on major roads. Trains and trams were rescheduled at a moment's notice or commandeered by the military. Motorcars were requisitioned or banned from non-essential travel, and most horses were seized by the military. (Even with the then-recent advent of mechanized travel, armies still relied heavily on horses for transportation of everything from soldiers and materials to artillery and field kitchens.) The only way for most Belgians to get around was to walk, and rarely was that out of their neighborhood or village.

Communication within Belgium was severely limited or restricted. It was nearly impossible to make a phone call, send a telegram, or receive a letter. Newspapers were still being printed, but they were hard to find and, in many cases, filled with more rumors than reliable news. In an age without radio or television, and at a time when telephones were more novelty than necessity, Belgium had, in essence, returned to medieval times—life became centered around a person's tiny slice of the world, whether it was a small village in the country or a neighborhood within a city.

With such uncertainty and lack of credible information, Belgians became justifiably concerned, fearful, and suspicious. Every day brought countless new rumors that could never be substantiated. Anyone not personally known was thought to be a spy in the employ of the coming invaders.

### **Belgian Woman Erica Bunge—“We Are Desperate”**

In Antwerp, according to British reporter and photographer R. Scotland Liddell, crowds turned on residents who were Germans, wrecking “all the little German cafes and saloon-bars in the dirty, narrow slum streets around the docks, many of them cesspools of iniquity that ought to have been wrecked long ago in any case. They threw stones through every window and plate-glass sign. They set some places on fire. They entered upstairs rooms and threw out the chairs on which many of them had sat the week before, and tables and ornaments, and even the cheap German pianos whose tinkling notes had been the source of mingled pleasure and disturbance in the neighbourhood.”

Young Erica Bunge wrote in her diary on Sunday, August 2, “There is talk of throwing out foreigners from [Antwerp] and the country. Tomorrow the army will purchase 400 horses. It is very probable that ours will be requisitioned. Our cars are still here. Every foreigner has left.”

A 22-year-old Belgian from a wealthy merchant family, Erica and two of her four sisters, Eva and Hilda, lived a privileged life with their widowed father, Edouard Bunge. Before the war they had moved effortlessly between their large townhouse at 21 Rue Marie-Therese in Antwerp, and their chateau named Oude Gracht, which was on Hoogboom estate twenty miles northeast of the city.

Of average height and build, Erica had long brown hair that she kept pinned up and an oval, open face and pale blue eyes, which darkened when angry. Her broad smile was slow to come, but also slow to fade once it appeared. Her laugh was hearty and deep.

As a child she had always been a bit different from other young girls. She enjoyed time with her father in his study at Oude Gracht, watching him handle the business papers that he pulled from his worn dispatch case, and even staying when he and his business associates would manage their varied corporate affairs. Years later her father had turned to her as a trusted business associate, asking her advice about problems with his worldwide shipping company, his agricultural concerns in South America,



From left: Hilda, Eva, and Erica Bunge. (Author's family archives.)

and his rubber plantations in Malaysia. Her family was not surprised when she announced she wanted to go to agricultural college in England—a rarity for women in the early 1900s—and when she returned with her degree, she began to participate in the management of Hoogboom's farm.

Nearly every day before the war Erica had had a ritual that she loved. She would rise early before many of her family were up, quietly go downstairs and gather her coat and hat from the *vestiaire* (cloakroom) in the right front tower of the chateau. Most times Isidore, Oude Gracht's *maitr  de h tel* (head butler), would be there to assist her with her coat. She would then pass through the great hall, listening to her shoes echo off the part of the parquet floor that wasn't covered by the large Turkoman rug. Taking the French doors onto the back stone terrace, she would stand for a moment and start her day by looking out over the estate's small lake. Many times she would see two black swans gliding gracefully across the still water. Sheep were nearly always grazing on the other side while birds chattered and sang to the rising sun. A tiny island, no more than one hundred feet across, lay in the middle of the lake. A ring of thick pines edged the island with five taller pines in the center representing the five Bunge girls. She never knew which tree represented her, but she hoped it was the strongest. It didn't need to be the tallest—just the strongest.

Taking a deep breath, she would then walk down the stone steps to the rim of the white gravel that circled the house like a moat. She would walk to the side of the chateau where a cobblestoned lane led to the farm. The path crossed a wooden bridge spanning one of the property's numerous canals that fed the lake.

In a few minutes she would reach the farm, which was the size of a small village. Buildings lined three or four converging cobbled alleys, and there were long barns for cattle, horses, and sheep. Surrounding these were the houses of the farm superintendent, the gardener, and the gamekeeper, as well as numerous smaller cottages for the farm tenants. All were red brick with thick thatched roofs, and they sported shutters and doors painted bright red and white.

Even at the early hour in which she would arrive at the farm, there would be workers already moving about. Dressed in traditional corduroy pants, coarse shirts, peasant caps, and *sabots*, or wooden shoes, they would many times be working with the large draft horses, high-wheeled delivery wagons, dog carts, or simply be standing about talking and smoking as they waited for the day's instructions. They would respectfully raise their hats as Erica would go by; she would nod and say in Flemish, "*Goeiemorgen*," adding names when she knew them.

Walking to one of the smaller buildings, she would go in and met with Verheyen, the farm's superintendent. He was hardened and big like many of the rest of the workers, but her father had said he had chosen him years before because his eyes had shown a shrewd intelligence and kindly nature.

When she had returned from British agricultural college, she was so sure of herself and what she had learned. But in short order she had discovered from kindly Verheyen that academic knowledge sometimes had little to do with the realities of a working farm. He would always be there waiting for her in the mornings. When she was done conferring with Verheyen about the day's activities and the general operations of the farm, she would walk back to the chateau to join her family for breakfast.

By 1914, Erica was a serious-minded young woman who spoke thoughtfully and always with conviction. She confided to her diary, however, that she longed for a partner who would be her equal, but she despaired of ever finding such a man. In early August 1914, as the German invasion began, her diary entries were filled with only war rumors and apprehensions of what would happen to her family and her country. Excerpts from her

diary give insight into many Belgians' confusion, concern, and anxiety over the future.

*Monday, August 3:* "A day of terror in [Antwerp]. . . . The situation is very grave, the Germans have moved into Belgium and are coming from the North. We started to pack up everything and then we waited for news from Pereken [nickname for her father] who had to go to Brussels. At last a telegram by phone: news of the German invasion is denied, not a German soldier in Belgium. Do not worry, send a car for me as usual. . . . Three sacks of flour cost 70 francs."

*Tuesday, August 4:* "There is no more telephone for private people. The street [outside the Antwerp townhouse] is torn up in places and we can't get through. In the city there have been demonstrations against the Germans, the Consul and the Vice-Consul have left. . . . The Consulate's windows have been broken, also those of the German school. Stones and ladders were used."

*Wednesday, August 5:* "All the Germans were thrown out of Antwerp during the night. . . . We are living from day to day. My God, don't let this war last long. . . . I went to Hoogboom, everything is quiet and calm. There is a lot of damage everywhere [from the digging of] trenches, many trees are down."

*Friday, August 7:* "I couldn't write yesterday, I was too sad and shattered. It was thought that Pereken was German! What an affront! An official came last night to ask Pereken if he would put something in the papers about what he does. . . . I hate those Germans, they are vile! . . . At Hoogboom there are a lot of [Belgian] soldiers [to set up defensive positions], and the cannons are on our land, pulled there by our oxen. At our place there were only small pine trees lost. Poor Guillot [the property's arborist] was howling when they touched his trees, and this morning he was taken to the hospital, totally out of his mind. . . . Spies are picked up everywhere, it's terrible, they are disguised as gendarmes, soldiers, anything. If only they could all be killed. . . . What news tomorrow?"

*Saturday, August 8:* "News is rare and everything is contradictory. We don't know anything officially. . . . Today we hear pessimistic news for the first time: there are many wounded, things are going badly, we really don't hear anything definite."



*During the war, the Chateau Oude Gracht was home to Antwerp merchant Edouard Bunge and three of his five daughters, Erica, Eva, and Hilda. (Author's family archives.)*

*Sunday, August 9:* "We wanted to go to Hoogboom but it was impossible. No permission."

*Monday, August 10:* "I went to Hoogboom, we were stopped nine times to show our permits. I arrived just in time. A detachment of [Belgian] Artillery is on our place, Commandant Nyssens, eight officers and junior officers, two orderlies, a stableman, and one cook are living in the chateau. We made ready 14 rooms, they all seemed very happy with the good beds and the baths. The soldiers have permission to bathe, to catch rabbits and other things; a good post! There are 400 infantry soldiers, a Commander and some officers, and the whole estate belongs to them! I hope they will respect it. . . . We came back [from Antwerp] by train and car. . . . The train was stopped before it reached the city and the permits were checked."

*Tuesday/Wednesday, August 11, 12:* "No official news . . . Where are the Allies? . . . The waiting is awful, we cannot do anything. . . . We have 600 [Belgian] soldiers on the estate, 400 infantry and 200 artillery. Fifteen are in the chateau. 450 grams of meat a day, one loaf of bread, and the rest, 150 kilos of potatoes are taken per day. Soon there won't be anything left."

*Thursday, August 13:* "Where the devil are the French? . . . We don't hear anything, it's horrible to have to wait. . . . I went with Eva to collect donations for the Children's Soldiers' Fund."

*Friday, August 14.* “Still no news, we are desperate. The poor soldiers. We don’t know anything new. The great battle must not have been fought yet. The [Belgian] Commandant [at Hoogboom] believes that the Germans will march on Antwerp and will try to take the forts. It would be awful. And we have to wait. . . . There has been a lot of work done digging trenches [on Hoogboom] by the infantry. Perekén is very tired, beaten down. . . . What will become of us? Personally I’m not afraid, it’s so heartbreaking to think of those who are fighting.”

### ***Franc-tireurs*—“Wholly Against the Laws of War”**

Erica Bunge’s concern for the Belgian troops was well-founded, and she would have undoubtedly included civilians in her thoughts if she had known how well prepared the German Army was to wage a horrific war. One of Germany’s early statesmen, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), had written back in 1870 that to be truly successful an army had to have a strategy of destruction and intimidation, which was known as *schrecklichkeit*. “True strategy consists in striking your enemy and striking him hard,” stated Bismarck. “Above all things you must

inflict on the inhabitants of invaded territories the maximum of suffering, in order to discourage them from the struggle. . . . You must leave to the people . . . nothing but their eyes with which to weep.”

And who was to inflict such devastation? They would be men who had been born and bred for war. As one World War I German officer explained, war “was not taught us at school, nor in the universities, nor even the barracks—we learned it in our mother’s womb.”

And it was their “father”—Kaiser Wilhelm—who issued an order the first week of August that stated, “After forty-three years of peace I call upon all Germans capable of bearing arms. We have to defend our most sacred possessions in fatherland and home against the reckless assault of enemies on all sides of us.

“That means hard fighting,” the kaiser continued. “I am confident that the ancient warlike spirit still lives in the German people—that powerful, warlike spirit which attacks the enemy wherever it finds him, regardless of costs, and which in the past has been the dread and terror of our enemies.”

As for Belgium, the Germans had little but disdain for such a small and insignificant country. Famous Belgian journalist Victor Jourdain wrote, “Belgium was represented [to the Germans] as a backward, barbarous,

and cruel country, inhabited by a race of *franc-tireurs* [civilian guerrilla fighters]; a country where the civilians mutilated the prisoners, where the women poured boiling oil upon soldiers, where the young girls tore out the eyes of the wounded; a country, in short, whose inhabitants deserved no consideration and must be treated with the utmost rigour of martial law.”

Jourdain continued, “The soldiers, as they set out [to invade Belgium], were taught that the war had been forced upon Germany and had been prepared by the Allies of the Triple Entente for two years, that they themselves were the army of civilization fighting the barbarians of Europe, that France was the home of immorality, England a self-seeking nation, and Belgium a country of franc-tireurs.”

*Franc-tireur* was a word repeatedly used by the Germans when speaking of the invasion. While the French army defined the word as sharpshooter or sniper, a more widely understood definition was that of civilian or guerrilla fighter. Traditionally warfare was left to professional soldiers; non-combatants usually stayed just that. For a civilian to take up arms against a professional soldier was quite a shocking development. The Franco-Prussian War had acquainted German forces with civilian insurgents, and they were determined to prevent a recurrence when moving against Belgium and France. The German troops of 1914 considered “civilian resistance. . . to be wholly against the laws of war and proper military conduct.”

Many Belgian burgomasters (mayors) believed the same, and in the early days of the invasion they posted placards and placed notices in local papers telling their residents to turn in all weapons, do nothing aggressive against the Germans, and even, in some cases, to offer soldiers food and drink.

Nevertheless, from the start of the invasion the Germans insisted that Belgian *franc-tireurs* were killing their men, which left them no choice but to retaliate with the harshest of measures. Many, from the kaiser and his generals down to the lowliest of foot soldiers, blamed *franc-tireurs* for inciting German reprisals, even though their belief was based on exaggerated fears of Belgian violence rather than actual sustained civilian resistance. The kaiser commented privately that “the population of Belgium behaved in a diabolical, not to say bestial, manner, not one iota better than the Cossacks. They tormented the wounded, beat them to death, killed doctors and medical orderlies, fired secretly. . . on men harmlessly standing in the street.”

The German government officially stated: “Men of all professions, workers, manufacturers, doctors, professors, even clergymen—yes, even women and children, were taken with weapons in their hands, in the regions from which the regular troops had retired. They were shooting from houses or from gardens, from roofs and from cellars, from fields and from forests, on the Germans. They used means that would never be employed by regular troops, shot guns and lead shot, old revolvers and old pistols, and numerous were the men found mutilated or scalded with boiling tar or boiling water. In short, it is not to be doubted that the German wounded were struck and killed by the Belgium population, and also greatly mutilated; nor is it to be doubted that women and even girls participated in these shameful exploits. German wounded had their eyes punctured, their noses and ears and fingers and their sexual organs mutilated, their bodies ripped open; in other cases German soldiers were poisoned, sprayed with boiling liquid, or roasted, so that they suffered an atrocious death.”

On the other side, Belgians accused German soldiers of countless atrocities against innocent civilians, everything from chopping off children’s hands to raping and bayoneting pregnant women. Many Belgians and foreign observers swore these stories were true. Others, like Horace Green—a correspondent for the *New York Evening Post* who was in Belgium during the invasion—countered general public opinion when he stated: “The reports of unprovoked personal atrocities . . . have been hideously exaggerated . . . In every war of invasion there is bound to occur a certain amount of plunder and rapine. The German system of reprisal is relentless; but the German private as an individual is no more barbaric than his brother in the French, the British, or the Belgian trenches.”

While it’s true that some of the Belgian stories were exaggerated and/or fabricated, many of them were horrifyingly accurate. And the stories—real or imagined—changed the way the rest of the world saw the war and its participants. “The controversy over whether the Belgians had ambushed the Germans or the Germans had massacred the Belgians profoundly shaped feeling about the war,” stated historian Larry Zuckerman. “For many, Belgium defined a struggle between justice and lawlessness, civilization and barbarity. To a world that could not even have imagined death camps, bombed-out cities, or ethnic cleansing—or, in August 1914, the trench warfare that would soon bleed Europe—Belgium was a terri-



*A column of German foot soldiers during the August invasion. (Public domain: *Fighting in Flanders*, E. Alexander Powell, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.)*

ble shock. What had happened there challenged the axiom that cultured Europeans did not behave like savages.”

Of all the stories of German atrocities committed during the invasion and immediately after, three became well-known to all Belgians and achieved worldwide notoriety. Two were the stories of what happened to the picturesque frontier villages of Visé and Dinant while the third told of the horrors that descended upon the world-renowned university town of Louvain.

### **Visé—“Vanished from the Map”**

The town of Visé did not have long to wait for its story to begin.

On that first day of invasion, Tuesday, August 4, it was a hot and surprisingly clear summer day in the normally cool, cloudy and wet country. At 8 a.m. German *uhlans* (lance-carrying cavalry) thundered across the border, signaling the start of what became the deadliest war the world had ever seen, and what Pope Benedict XV called “the suicide of civilized Europe.” By evening six columns of German troops were two to three miles past the border.

Around noon the Germans entered the frontier village of Visé. Nestled on the right bank of the Meuse River, it boasted 3,800 people and 900

houses. When the Germans arrived, the Belgian soldiers withdrew from the town, crossed the Meuse, blew up the bridge behind them and settled onto the left bank, where they shot at any German who came close to the river.

According to historian Jeff Lipkes, within ten minutes of entering Visé, the Germans shot their first civilian. He was “Monsieur Istas, a cashier at the railway station, [who was] gunned down as he returned to work after an early lunch. . . . By evening, more than a dozen corpses littered the streets. Most of the murders seemed wholly arbitrary. . . . The Brouhas, father and son, brewers, were dragged out of their basement and executed in front of their house.”

One of the town’s barbers, Louis Kinable, was shot in front of his shop because he had a pair of clippers in his hand—hence he was seen as a *franc-tireur*. One boy was battered so badly by rifle butts “that his body could only be identified thanks to a card from his middle school proclaiming him an honors student.” Meanwhile, a Berlin newspaper reported that a 16-year-old Belgian girl in Visé had been executed for mutilating German corpses.

On August 10 the Germans burned down Visé’s church in the center of town, claiming its gothic spire was being used by Belgian artillery to sight their cannons. Then, on the evening of August 15, eleven days after the town had been taken—and after the residents and their homes had been thoroughly searched for arms—the German troops began firing their weapons in response to what they said they thought were attacks by *franc-tireurs*. As terrified residents reacted to the guns, events escalated until the Germans were burning, looting, and killing. The destruction went on door-to-door for two days and nights. By August 18, the town was leveled, 631 citizens had been deported to Germany, twenty-three additional residents were dead, and more than 600 homes had been destroyed.

It was the “first systematic destruction of a Belgian town” according to one history of German atrocities. Systematic or not, as one observer later described it, all that remained were “heaps of brick and mortar like a ruined Pompeii, the only difference being that the bricks of the walls which still stand look newer.” One German captain bluntly summed it up when he declared that Visé had simply “vanished from the map.”

**Dinant—“The Town is Gone”**

A few days later, it was Dinant's turn.

A town of more than 7,500, Dinant was the second largest in Namur Province and sat on the right bank of the Meuse River at a major crossing. Known for its stalactite caverns and chased copper and brass wares, and for being the birthplace of Adolphe Sax (the inventor of the saxophone), the town had survived for more than 700 years, squeezing itself in between the river and the base of barren limestone cliffs, which were crowned by a ruined fortress. The most distinctive element of the town's skyline was the 200-foot-high “curiously Oriental spire” of the Church of Notre Dame, a restored thirteenth-century Gothic structure located in the town's *grand place* (main square).

Because of its strategic position at a major river crossing and its close proximity to the French border, Dinant was quickly fortified by French troops when war was declared. After heavy fighting, though, the town was finally occupied by the Germans on Sunday, August 23. They promptly accused the residents of fighting alongside the regular troops and in retaliation began to destroy the town and kill its civilians.

That Sunday morning, according to later testimony in a committee of inquiry, “soldiers of the 108<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Infantry invaded the Church of the Premonastrensian [sic] Fathers, drove out the congregation, separated the women from the men, and shot 50 of the latter. Between 7 and 9 the same morning the soldiers gave themselves up to pillage and arson, going from house to house and driving the inhabitants into the street. Those who tried to escape were shot.”

In some cases the Germans lined up people against a wall and executed them with machine guns. Monsieur Wasseige, the 43-year-old director of a Dinant bank, refused to open the bank's safe, so he and his two sons, Jacques, 19, and Pierre, 20, along with about 100 others, were machine-gunned down in the town's square, *place d'armes*. The Germans forced Wasseige's three youngest children to witness the murder of their father and two brothers. Later, an American observer said, “We saw the wall with the machine-gun bullet marks, breast high, along its entire length.”

Another person said, in cutting sarcasm, “Those killed [in Dinant] ranged in age from Felix Fivet, aged three weeks, to an old woman named Jadot, who was eighty. But then Felix probably fired on the German troops.”

When the Germans were finally finished, they had “killed 674 people, deporting an unknown number and destroying 1,100 buildings.” The town’s distinctive church spire was gone, as was nearly everything else. “Dinant is far worse than anything I have seen, or even dreamed the war could bring about,” said one American observer walking through the devastation later.

“The town is *gone*,” said another American. “Part of the church is standing, and the walls of a number of buildings, but for the most part, there is nothing but a mess of scattered bricks to show where the houses had stood.”

### Louvain—“We Shall Make this Place a Desert”

The story of Louvain was different in some respects from the stories of Visé and Dinant, primarily because of its size and because it was already famous before the war began. Louvain (Leuven in Flemish) was a world-renowned university town only twenty miles west of Belgium’s capital, Brussels. Home to more than 42,000 residents, it was famous for its Catholic university (founded in 1426) and incomparable library, which boasted 300,000 volumes and contained one of the world’s greatest collections of rare medieval books and manuscripts. The Dyle River flowed through the town, and broad boulevards encircled it, having replaced the fourteenth-century ramparts that had protected Louvain for hundreds of years.

One journalist described the people as “brewers, lacemakers, and manufacturers of ornaments for churches. . . . The city [was] clean, sleepy, and pretty, with narrow twisting streets and smart shops and cafes set in flower gardens of the houses, with red roofs, green shutters, and white walls.” Giving another perspective, the famous German travel author Karl Baedeker had declared Louvain “a dull place.”

Regardless of its entertainment value, Louvain and its university library were world treasures that no one wanted to see damaged by war. Before the Germans appeared, the city had taken major steps to keep the peace. Belgian troops purposefully did not defend the town as a way of protecting it from German wrath; the local *garde civique* was disbanded, and all weapons in private hands were brought to the *hôtel de ville* (city hall). “All necessary measures had been taken to warn the inhabitants against protesting or shooting at the German soldiers. As elsewhere, weapons had been confiscated and posters warned the people not to take up arms;

reminders being issued daily in the newspapers and by the clergy,” according to one historian.

The German entry into the city seemed to bode well. On August 19 the army paraded in with marching bands playing and soldiers singing loudly “Die Wacht am Rhein” [“The Watch on the Rhine,” a patriotic anthem]. Inhabitants remained calm but “were indeed terrified.” The Germans—nervous themselves and constantly on guard for *franc-tireur* attacks—established a curfew of 8 p.m. and declared “house doors had to be kept open at night and windows lit. Every day, hostages were taken to guarantee the conduct of the citizens. New troop arrivals increased the concentration of soldiers in Louvain to at least 15,000.” German commanders barracked soldiers in homes, and many of them looked the other way, or joined in, as their men looted whatever they wanted—everything from furniture and artwork to food and liquor.

On the evening of August 25, the real trouble began. Just before sunset sporadic shots were heard around town, which the Germans attributed to a significant attack by Belgian *franc-tireurs*. Residents believed the Germans were accidentally firing at each other. Regardless of how it started, the situation quickly escalated and by nightfall, in almost complete darkness, it turned into a massive German rampage. Soldiers—many of them fearful and drinking—broke into houses, dragged out and shot residents, looted homes, and set buildings on fire. Horses “stampeded . . . and galloped riderless in all directions” as “panic spread like wildfire through the city.”

The aged were not spared. “Hubert David-Fischbach. . . a man of eighty-three who had had German officers quartered in his house, was tied up and made to watch his house burn, beaten with bayonets, and finally shot. Others were killed during the night as they fled from their burning houses.”

In the darkened and terrified city, the soldiers also broke into the university library and set it ablaze, using gas and other accelerants to do so; they then stopped any who tried to put the fire out. By some accounts it took nine to ten hours for all 300,000 books to burn.

But that wasn’t the end of it. The German soldiers continued to rampage through the town for days. From August 25 through August 30, more than 248 Belgians were killed, hundreds were deported to Germany, and more than 2,000 structures—about a sixth of the city’s buildings—were destroyed.



*The ancient university town of Louvain in ruins after the Germans ransacked it Aug. 25–30. (Public domain; multiple sources.)*

On August 28, even though looting and burning were still going on, Hugh Gibson, the secretary of the U.S. Legation in Brussels, took a car and with three others drove east from Brussels to Louvain to see if the rumors of mass destruction coming from fleeing refugees were true. (There was no American Embassy in Belgium, only the lesser diplomatic post of the U.S. Legation, located in Brussels, and the lesser-still consular offices, located in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, and Liège. The distinction between legation and embassy was slowly dropped after World War II.)

Gibson was able to travel around Belgium (albeit with difficulty) because he was a diplomat from a neutral country and had secured numerous passes and permits from the German military command to do so. Because the U.S. Legation was not well-equipped with vehicles, the motorcar Gibson used to go to Louvain had been donated by D. L. Blount, a young businessman living in Brussels, who also donated his services as driver. The Swedish and Mexican *chargés d'affaires* (heads of diplomatic missions, lower ranking than ambassador) went with them.

As the group approached Louvain, Gibson wrote, "The road was black with frightened civilians carrying away small bundles from the ruins of their homes. Ahead was a great column of dull gray smoke which completely hid the city. We could hear the muffled sound of firing ahead. Down the little street which led to the town, we could see dozens of white flags which had been hung out of the windows in a childish hope of averting trouble."

Gibson continued, "A lot of the houses were still burning, but most of them were nothing but blackened walls with smouldering timbers inside. Many of the front doors had been battered open in order to start the fires or to rout out the people who were in hiding. . . . Then we began to see more ghastly sights—poor civilians lying where they had been shot down as they ran—men and women—one old patriarch lying on his back in the sun, his great white beard nearly hiding his swollen face. All sorts of wreckage scattered over the street, hats and wooden shoes, German helmets, swords and saddles, bottles and all sorts of bundles which had been dropped and abandoned when the trouble began. . . . The boulevard looked as though it had been swept by a cyclone."

The group came across a German officer who spoke English and told them that because of the *franc-tireur* attacks an order had been given to destroy the city. "We shall make this place a desert," the officer declared to Gibson. "We shall wipe it out so that it will be hard to find where Louvain used to stand. For generations people will come here to see what we have done, and it will teach them to respect Germany and to think twice before they resist her. Not one stone on another, I tell you."

As the group surveyed the incredible destruction, one of the party wanted to take a photo with his Kodak. Very aware that he was in a city that was still under fire and filled with highly volatile German troops, the man, as Gibson later wrote, turned to the German officer and asked as politely as possible, "May I take a picture?"

The tired and distracted officer said magnanimously, "Certainly; go ahead. You will find some beautiful things over there on the corner in the house they are getting ready to burn."

Louvain burned and crumbled from August 25–30 when, reportedly, orders were finally received from Berlin to stop the destruction. Because of the city's renown, its story became much more than just another tale of German brutality. As newspaper journalist Arthur L. Humphreys explained, Louvain characterized "Belgium's ordeal to the outside world."

## Marching into Brussels

While Belgium's "ordeal" was a burden few countries had ever shouldered, its army did achieve the critical goal of slowing down the German invasion—although nothing at that stage had totally stopped the German juggernaut.

Liège, a large city in the east of Belgium near the German border, had been the first major objective of the invasion. While the city's ring of heavily fortified forts had held out longer than many expected, the Germans made short work of what the Belgians had thought were the forts' impregnable walls. The Germans accomplished this with their new 75-ton "Big Bertha" howitzer, which was designed to destroy concrete fortifications with its 2,052-pound projectiles. By August 17, Liège and its system of forts had fallen. The five German armies continued their arcing swing through Belgium and France.

On Thursday, August 20—a week before Louvain began to burn—Brussels, the capital of Belgium, was declared an open city, which meant

both sides had acknowledged there would be no defensive resistance by the Belgians as the Germans marched in, and no unprovoked destruction by the Germans. This saved the city from damage but meant the Belgians had to endure the pain of having the Germans march in as a conqueror that had paid nothing in battle to do so.

### **A Chance Meeting of a Businessman and an Abbé**

During the morning of Thursday, August 20, on a hill within a newly built suburb east of Brussels, a small crowd of neighbors and passersby gathered. Such a coming together normally would have been filled with greetings, handshakes, embraces, and conversations, but that day nearly everyone stood silent and still. Those who did talk did so in frightened and anxious whispers. Parents held tightly to their children.

They had come to watch the beast enter their city. Off in the distance they saw the long, waving line of soldiers marching resolutely along “like some monstrous grey reptile.” The head had long since passed from view, moving with relentless resolve toward the heart of the Belgian capital, while the end was miles away.

Standing in the small crowd on the hillside, watching this spectacle of massive force, were two men who were nearly a head taller than those around them. Neither man would ever have thought that a few inches of height would make the difference between life and death for people they had not yet met, nor give hope to an entire nation. History would say otherwise.

Eugene van Doren was “for a Belgian . . . uncommonly tall,” slim, and with sloping shoulders. He had a scholarly look that was accented by close-cropped hair and pince-nez (glasses with a nose clip rather than ear pieces). At thirty-eight years old, with a wife and five young children, van Doren was a successful cardboard manufacturer with strongly held political beliefs. His blue eyes “were mild and thoughtful, but . . . they quickly reflect his feelings and occasionally flash with unexpected fire. His mouth, extremely mobile, smiles easily, and he has a ready laugh, when his eyes gleam boyishly.” Altogether, he was a passionate, enthusiastic man who was never afraid to show both.

Standing not far away, the Abbé Vincent de Moor, vicar of the nearby Church of Saint Albert, was “no ordinary priest.” He was “broad-minded, iron-willed, fearless and as strong as a horse,” with black hair and the “jaw



*Eugene van Doren, a thirty-eight-year-old Belgian cardboard manufacturer, became a driving force in the underground against the German occupation. (Underground News, The Complete Story of The Secret Newspaper That Made War History, Oscar E. Millard, Robert M. McBride and Company, 1938)*

of a fighter. There was devil in his dark eyes and his mouth was like a steel trap. But the hard mouth frequently softened into a broad smile which, with the twinkling eyes, gave the aggressive features an unexpected and wholly attractive gaiety." That day, no doubt, de Moor's jaw was set, and the mouth was tightly resolute.

If not for their height, the two men might have missed sharing a look of disgust and anger. Though they had never met, van Doren was compelled by the moment of eye contact to move through the crowd and introduce himself to the priest. "In that chance meeting van Doren found the man who was to become one of his staunchest allies and a life-long friend." And, together, they would accomplish the nearly impossible, all the while bedeviling the German civilian government,

generating a 50,000-franc reward for their capture, and creating an obsession to stop them in the mind of the German governor general of Belgium, Baron Moritz Ferdinand von Bissing, a 76-year-old Prussian officer.

But their actions would also lead ultimately to the imprisonment of many and the execution of some, including a heroic twenty-three-year-old Belgian girl, Gabrielle Petit, who gave up a chance for freedom and said good-bye to her fiancé so she could work for their cause. She was to be one of eleven women the Germans tried, convicted, and executed by firing squad in Belgium during World War I.

### **Brand Whitlock, U.S. Legation Minister**

As van Doren and the abbé began to talk, closer to the city's center Brand Whitlock, the newly appointed minister to the U.S. Legation in



*The Abbé Vincent de Moor (pictured in a later army uniform) was vicar of Saint Albert Church in Brussels and underground partner with van Doren. He also worked with British intelligence against the Germans. (Public domain; multiple sources.)*

Belgium, was racing around in a motorcar trying to find the advancing army.

Whitlock was forty-five years old and had taken office only six months before. Born in Urbana, Ohio, he had had a successful career as a journalist, working as a reporter in Chicago, before entering politics and becoming mayor of Toledo, Ohio, in 1905. He had been reelected in 1907, 1909, and 1911.

Whitlock was tall and slender, with a long, thin nose and eyes that had the “tense look of constantly straining to see something too close to him.” With his rimless pince-nez, he had the appearance of a scholar or professor and, just like one, he longed for the solitude of a writer’s garret. When President Wilson had appointed him to lead

the U.S. Legation in Brussels, it was just what Whitlock had hoped for. The post was known as a quiet one, with more diplomatic show than substance. That suited Whitlock perfectly, for all he wanted to do was have time to write literary novels.

If he had known what the next four years would be like—and what history would call on him to do—he probably would not have taken the position. And while Whitlock was as yet little known in Belgium, he would, during the next few years, become a figure who was both respected and ridiculed, beloved and belittled. But in the spring and early summer of 1914, Whitlock saw Brussels and Belgium as blessed islands of solitude and peace for his work as a novelist.

All that changed on Saturday, August 1, as the war clouds had gathered. At six that morning, Whitlock was awakened by Omer, one of his servants, who told him that even though he had finished his Belgian national military service years ago, he had been called up and had come to say good-bye. Later, as Whitlock walked through Brussels, he noted “the dim, familiar

streets seemed strangely deserted, and yet, almost palpably, panic, fear, stalked through them.”

At the legation, crowds of American tourists showed up in a panic as their vacations were suddenly cut short. As Whitlock later wrote about the first days of August, “all our patience was absorbed by the crowds of Americans that filled the corridors of the Legation day and night. . . . Many of them were without money; their traveler’s checks suddenly worthless, they were at their wits’ end. I find a note in my journal to the effect that the women were often calmer, braver, more reasonable than the men.”

Whitlock told the story of a young, newly married couple from the Midwest who came to the legation and patiently waited their turn in the crowd. They were both school-teachers and were on their “bridal trip.” For the first time in their lives they were in Europe and “doubtless for the first time in their lives away from home.”

Whitlock explained, “All the bridegroom had was a ticket which, as he unrolled it, revealed yard on yard, in almost interminable convolutions, a series of coupons—coupons for everything, steamships, railways, trams, omnibuses, hotels, in short, one of those tourist tickets that provide for every need of a determined voyage, themselves the itinerary and the means of following it.”

But now, with the advent of war and all its chaos and uncertainties, “the young couple found their coupons suddenly worthless: no one would accept them, not a steamship, railway, bus or hotel—and the bridegroom had no money; all that he and his wife had was invested in that preternaturally elongated ticket, which was to have supplied every possibly human want, and to have spared them every care and annoyance, so long as they did not depart from the narrow, defined groove of travel it marked out



*Forty-five-year-old Brand Whitlock had taken the appointment of minister of the U.S. Legation in Belgium in June 1914 because he thought it would be a quiet, uneventful post. Less than two months later, the Germans invaded Belgium. (Public domain: Robert Arrowsmith papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, California.)*

for them. . . . The whole scene was vividly present—the little town, the high school, the Chautauqua, the faint apprehension of the thing called culture—my heart went out to them.”

Whitlock wanted to do everything possible to help all stranded tourists and enlisted the offered aid of prominent Americans living in Brussels, including Dannie Heineman, Millard K. Shaler, William Hulse, and J.H. Fleming. As Whitlock explained, “Funds were raised, a house was rented where Americans might find shelter, and thus by the admirable and efficient efforts of these gentlemen, all the Americans who wished to go home were enabled to go to England and eventually to find their way to their own land.” Through the next two weeks, these Americans, along with Whitlock, Gibson, and the rest of the U.S. Legation staff, would work to help the stranded tourists get out of Belgium and on their way home.

But on the day the Germans entered Brussels, Whitlock had just made his first big mark toward diplomatic fame. He was no doubt justifiably proud that the Germans were merely marching into Brussels, not fighting their way in. Whitlock, along with the Spanish minister in Brussels, Marquis de Villalobar y O'Neill, had helped to convince city leaders—most notably the larger-than-life Burgomaster Adolphe Max—to declare Brussels an open city and save itself from the destruction that had befallen so many other places by then. It had been days and nights of tense negotiations, but in the end, the ancient monuments, medieval churches, and broad, tree-lined boulevards of Brussels (compared favorably by many to Paris) were spared from bombardment and devastation.

After that, all Whitlock wanted to do was see the great German army march into Brussels. It was history in the making, and he was well aware of the fact that Brussels had not seen foreign occupation since Napoleon in 1815; nor had any European capital been occupied by an enemy in forty-four years. Whitlock would not miss observing such a historic event.

He found what he thought was the main body of men near the city's majestic Cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula. He stood on the upstairs terrace and saw “riding in column of twos, in . . . field-gray uniforms, their black-and-white pennants fluttering from their lances, a squadron of German *bussars* [cavalry] . . . It was very still, the crowds sullen and silent, there in the glitter of the sunlight—the horses' hoofs clattering on the stones of the uneven pavement, the lances swaying, the pennants fluttering and that deep-throated chant [“Heil dir im Siegerkranz”

or “Hail to Thee in Victor’s Crown”] to the tune that the English know as ‘God Save the King’ and we as ‘America,’ and over us the gray facades of the stately old church. The scene had the aspect of medievalism; something terrible too, that almost savage chant and those gray horsemen pouring down out of the Middle Ages into modern civilization.”

When no other soldiers followed after the cavalry, Whitlock and his group thought they had seen it all and drove away in their motorcar. Suddenly, as they rounded a corner, they came face-to-face with the main column. “All we had seen was but an advance-guard. . . . for there, up and down the boulevard, under the spreading branches of the trees, as far as we could see, were undulating, glinting fields of bayonets, and a mighty gray, grim horde, a thing of steel, that came thundering on with shrill fifes and throbbing drums and clanging cymbals, nervous horses and lumbering guns and wild songs.

“And this was Germany!” he continued in a literary vein. “Not the stolid, good-natured, smiling German of the glass of beer and tasseled pipe, whiling away a Sunday afternoon in his peaceful beer-garden, while a band plays Strauss waltzes. . . . [It was] this dread thing, this Frankenstein, this monstrous anachronism, modern science yoked to the chariot of the autocratic and cruel will of the pagan world.”

### **Hugh Gibson, U.S. Legation Secretary**

Whitlock’s able assistant, U.S. Legation Secretary Hugh Gibson—who would venture to Louvain eight days later—was also out and about in Brussels on the day the Germans marched in. He, too, wanted to be part of the historic event. Gibson, like Whitlock, was new to the legation in Brussels, although, unlike his boss, he wasn’t new to diplomatic service. At thirty-one Gibson was energetic, passionate, and filled with a lively, cutting sense of humor that was never far from the surface. Photos showed him to be a well-groomed, impeccably dressed, stylish man with an impish look.

Gibson had been born in Los Angeles and started in the foreign service in his twenties. Like many others in that field, he had pinballed from job to job: secretary of the U.S. Legation in Honduras (1908); second secretary of the American Embassy in London (1909–1910); private secretary to the assistant secretary of state in Washington, D.C. (1910–1911); and secretary of the U.S. Legation in Havana, Cuba (1911–1913).



*Thirty-one-year-old Hugh Gibson was the secretary of the U.S. Legation in Belgium. He was energetic, passionate, and filled with a lively, cutting sense of humor. (Public domain: Prentiss Gray papers, CRB portrait book, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Archives, West Branch, Iowa.)*

In a very short time at his new post in Brussels Gibson had made a good name for himself, as “his wit and fearlessness were the talk of Brussels.” He was nothing if not hardworking, and as one observer commented, Gibson always seemed to be the busiest person in the legation.

On this day, Gibson had heard that the bulk of the German soldiers were to march down the broad *Chaussée de Louvain* in the northeastern part of the city and then move right through the city to the other side, leaving behind an occupying force within the older, lower downtown. As he watched the first contingent of troops heading down the hill into the lower town, he and his companion/driver D.L. Blount decided to find a better

vantage point from which to watch. They motored across and through some side streets and found a better viewing spot.

“There was a sullen and depressed crowd lining the streets,” Gibson observed, “and not a sound was heard.” The Germans, he supposed, were tramping through the city “to impress the populace with their force and discipline.” For Gibson, it certainly worked: “I never expect to see [it] equaled as long as I live. They poured down the hill in a steady stream without a pause or a break; not an order was shouted nor a word exchanged among the officers or men. All the orders and signals were given by whistles and signs. The silence was a large element of the impressiveness.”

First came hundreds of lancers—soldiers on horseback in the full regalia of *pickelhaubens* (spiked helmets) and long lances, and officers with electric searchlights on their chests that were attached to batteries that were in their saddlebags. The Germans were so precise and prepared that when the occasional horse, which was shod for campaigning in the country, slipped on the smooth cobble pavements, “a man was there with a

coarse cloth to put under his head and another to go under his forefeet, so that he would not hurt himself slipping and pawing at the cobbles.”

Later, as Gibson and Blount moved on, they came across Whitlock. The minister was accompanied by “the ladies of the family who had been brought out to watch the passing show. We [Gibson and Blount] had hesitated to bring them out at the beginning for fear that there might be riots. . . . Fortunately, there was nothing of the sort.” A short time later, the newly expanded group all motored out to the country to watch “the steady stream nearer its source; still pouring in, company after company, regiment after regiment, with apparently no end in sight.”

In conclusion of a long day, Gibson wrote with his characteristically dry sense of humor, “We watched until after seven [p.m.], and decided that the rest would have to get in without our assistance.”

Gibson also noted that for the Belgians watching the Germans marching into Brussels “the humiliation has been terrible. The Belgians have always had a tremendous city patriotism. . . . and it must hurt them more than it could possibly hurt any other people.”

Some reports say it took three days for the army to pass through the city.

## London

### **American Tourists in Harm's Way**

In late July and early August, as war tensions grew before the actual invasion, anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 American tourists (an accurate count was impossible) found their European vacations brought to an abrupt end. Suddenly, letters of credit, traveler's checks, and sometimes even paper money were no longer accepted at banks, hotels, restaurants, or shops. Telephone and telegraph services were restricted, limited, or simply overwhelmed. Most modes of travel, including horse-drawn, automotive, rail, and ship, were canceled, unavailable, or overbooked.

A trickle of travelers who had been alert to the first signs of trouble had quickly made their way from the continent to England in hopes of finding early passage home. That trickle soon turned into a raging flood—Belgian and French ports were overwhelmed by those trying to get to England, while English ports and train stations were inundated with har-

ried travelers who were lucky enough to have secured passage across the English Channel.

None was luckier—or, more likely, better served by being wealthy—than Mrs. Otto H. Kahn, wife of a famous American investment banker, collector, and philanthropist. According to a *New York Times* story, she was traveling with an entourage that included her four children, a dozen servants, two automobiles, and sixty-five trunks. The group somehow caught the last channel boat from Dieppe, France, to Newhaven, England, on invasion day, August 4. As for her sixty-five trunks, “she was lucky enough to get this record-breaking quantity of baggage through owing to the exertions of a special agent of an American express company.” She was forced, however, to leave the autos behind.

Hers, though, was a one-in-a-million story. More representative was the tale told by W.E. Walters of Boston. He caught the last train from Paris to Dieppe at 9:30 a.m. Sunday, August 2. He recounted to the *New York Times* how the crowds had started gathering at the Paris station at 6 a.m., and 15 percent were Americans. “Eventually, tired of waiting for the gates to open, the crowd poured forward, smashed the gates, overflowed the platforms and the tracks, and fought desperately for places on the train. Even after the train was pulling out men tried to jump on, or held to the window sills in the hope that friends inside would pull them in. Once on, all were wedged so tightly in their seats or standing places that they were unable to move during the long hours of the run to Dieppe.”

Under these kinds of chaotic conditions, nearly all American travelers were happy to simply get themselves off the continent and to England, with or without bags. When they got there, though, they were confused and bewildered as to what they should do next. They were still far from home and in desperate need of help, especially because all British sailings to America had been indefinitely suspended.

### **Organized Assistance Stumbles into Existence**

Walter Hines Page, the U.S. ambassador to Britain, cabled the State Department, “Thousands of perfectly solvent Americans possess letters of credit but can not cash them. No banking transactions have taken place since the closing of banking hours on August 1.” And because the only way to get across the Atlantic was by steamship, it wasn’t surprising when the *New York Times* reported on August 5: “It is estimated that it may take

four months to bring home the many thousands of Americans who are marooned in Europe.”

But those trapped American tourists also needed immediate assistance with housing, food, and clothes. Most turned to the London offices of the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Consulate for help. Both offices and their staffs were instantly overwhelmed and knew that any substantial help from the U.S. government—such as gold to handle the financial crisis, extra personnel for processing multiple tasks, and ships for transport back—would likely take weeks to organize and get across the Atlantic.

Into this void stepped American businessmen, and men and women of substantial means, who were then living in London or had been stranded there because of the war. They all wanted to help their countrymen. By Tuesday, August 4, an American Citizens' Committee had been formed, and its headquarters was in the main ballroom of the luxurious Savoy Hotel in London. That day the American Express office also reopened after being closed since Saturday, August 1. The manager estimated that his office had handed out \$200,000 to more than 6,000 people on reopening day, with no one receiving more than \$30. Tens of thousands more still needed help.

Beleaguered and exhausted Americans also sought assistance from Robert Skinner, U.S. consul general, at the consulate, which had a separate office from the U.S. Embassy. As fate would have it, the consulate was only a block away from the office of a young American mining engineer, Herbert C. Hoover.

Hoover had been born and raised until eleven in West Branch, Iowa, a small “Quaker settlement of poke bonnets and abolitionist politics.” He remembered life there to be one of “breakfasts of milk and mush, an aunt who held winter sledding to be a godless activity and parents who were dead by his tenth birthday.”

That hardscrabble start was followed by attendance at newly opened Stanford University in northern California, where he earned a degree in geology. Years of hard work and international travel to mining operations in such out-of-the-way places as Australia and China had transformed him into an extraordinarily successful businessman. He served as director on “eighteen financial and mining companies with total capital in the range of \$55 million. He controlled investments in major Australian, Burmese, South African, and Russian mines. In terms of sheer size alone, his Russian mining and forestry holdings had a combined area larger than Belgium.”



*At the start of the war, Herbert C. Hoover was a forty-year-old mining engineer who was a no-nonsense, ambitious, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-it-done kind of American. He would go on to organize and build the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) which would become the largest food and relief drive the world had ever seen. During four years of war, more than nine million Belgians and northern French would be saved from starvation by the efforts of the CRB and its Belgian counterpart, the Comité National. (Public domain: Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Archives, West Branch, Iowa.)*

Hoover was a no-nonsense, ambitious, roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-it-done kind of American who was highly skilled at tackling complex problems and organizing massive operations. He also had little patience for trivial things, such as clothes, as evidenced by one colleague's dry remark that "his dress never varies—he merely writes to his tailor, 'Send me another suit,' and seldom gives himself the bother of a try-on."

In August 1914, Hoover and his wife, Lou Henry Hoover, were living in London and trying to secure European nations' participation in the upcoming Panama-Pacific International Exposition to be held in San Francisco in 1915. They both realized their mission was stillborn the moment the war started.

Additionally, though, Hoover, who would turn forty on August 10, was contemplating what he should do in his next stage of life. He was restless and not content to sit back and manage his worldwide mining operations. Options included the presidency of Stanford University and the purchase of a California newspaper as two different pathways into public service and politics—two areas that deeply interested the mining engineer. He was a wealthy man, but as one associate later wrote, "He didn't want to become just richer. He wanted sincerely . . . to do public service and help people, but

in a wholesale way. I don't think he was terribly sympathetic to the fellow selling lead pencils on the corner, but I think he was very desirous to create a society where that fellow wouldn't be selling lead pencils on the corner."

On the chaotic German invasion day, Hoover showed up at the U.S. Consulate and offered his assistance. While there is a question as to whether or not he came unsolicited or if Skinner called and asked for his help, there is no doubt Hoover jumped in that day with both feet. According to historian George Nash, Hoover gathered "all the cash he could find in his office and from business associates, and telephoning his wife for £100 more at their home, [Hoover] opened an office at the consulate that very afternoon. Here, with some assistants, he proceeded to loan small sums (at no interest and often without security) to more than three hundred Americans who had no other cash to live on."

As the days went by, Hoover became better acquainted with the needs of the people and more aware of the other assistance groups that had been formed in London. And, in doing so, he also learned much about the intricacies involved in charity work, which not only demanded an understandable amount of diplomacy, but a surprising amount of subtle intrigues and backdoor maneuverings.

Lou Hoover immediately became involved in the American Citizens' Committee and began serving the needs of American women at the Savoy Hotel. "The all-male [American] Citizens' Committee promptly added her to its membership—the only woman to be so selected."

### **Hoover Makes his Move for Dominance**

Hoover, seeing a chance to serve the public as he had hoped, decided to move forward independently from the American Citizens' Committee and on Wednesday, August 5, brought together a group of respected Americans living in London, many of whom were business associates and mining engineers he had known for years. They formed the Committee of American Residents (also known as the Relief Committee, or Residents' Committee), with Hoover as its chairman, and immediately went to work building a viable operation to try and meet the tremendous need.

Reflecting Hoover's ability to see quickly to the heart of any problem, his Residents' Committee chose to focus on the primary concern of many stranded American travelers: money. His group quickly established two funds—one that would loan money to those who could afford to pay

it back, and one that was for charitable giving. The group then began soliciting money from private citizens to bankroll both funds. Hoover personally gave £1,000 to the loan fund and £500 to the benevolent fund.

As the *New York Times* reported on August 6, “Another who did admirable relief work was Herbert Clark Hoover, a California mining man, who opened an office of his own in the American Consulate and advanced sums of \$25 or more in coin to over 300 Americans who had nothing but paper money. He declares that he will continue to do so till his stock is exhausted.”

But Hoover didn’t want to be just “another” relief worker. Neglecting not even the smallest item, Hoover and his committee “moved rapidly. . . . Within twenty-four hours of its founding it had its own stationery and masthead. Within forty-eight hours it established a branch adjacent to the Citizens’ Committee’s headquarters in the Savoy as well as three other locations.” And to man those locations and do the basic relief work, Hoover began recruiting volunteers such as Edward Curtis, an American student studying at Cambridge who had heard of the need and came to help.

Hoover also showed that he understood the power of the press and how to use it. On August 8 American papers ran a press release his group had sent out earlier. Hoover was not letting fate take its course; he would tell fate where it should go and hope it got there soon after. Part of the press release, as published in the *New York Times*, read, “With the object of co-ordinating the system of giving assistance to traveling Americans and restoring order among the somewhat chaotic conditions arising from the multiplicity of committees[,] an authoritative committee of American residents in London was formed today under official auspices. Walter Hines Page, the American Ambassador, has been appointed honorary chairman, and Consul General Robert Skinner vice chairman.”

There were two problems with this statement: One, the American Citizens’ Committee was still very much alive and active and would beg to differ with Hoover’s group about its being the “authoritative committee.” And two, Page had not yet agreed to serve as honorary chairman. (He would do so later.)

Unimportant details, some might have believed, when there were tens of thousands of travelers in need of help. Even so, Hoover’s Residents’ Committee and the American Citizens’ Committee did work together over the course of the next two weeks—the demand was simply too big for any one grassroots group to handle at that stage. So, the Citizens’ Committee

“worked mainly with banks in New York and London to open channels of cash and credit. Hoover’s group took charge of immediate relief.”

But Hoover’s actions during this time seem to indicate he would have preferred to have been the sole organizer of relief. He probably felt he could be more efficient and effective making quick decisions without having to consult or coordinate with other groups—much as any good mining manager had to do when in distant lands and far from owners or boardroom politics. Undoubtedly, Hoover simply wanted to do what came naturally after all those years of mining work.

In the meantime, the American government had been flooded with official and unofficial pleas for help. Even though President Wilson was focused on his gravely ill wife (she died August 7 of the chronic kidney ailment Bright’s disease), he was aware of, and sympathetic to, the travelers’ plights and moved the government to action. On August 5 congress unanimously appropriated \$2.5 million to assist American travelers; the secretaries of state, treasury, and war met and developed a plan for aiding the travelers; and by the evening of August 6 the armored cruiser USS *Tennessee* set sail from New York. Aboard was the American Relief Expedition— comprised of the assistant secretary of war, Henry Breckinridge, more than twenty army officers, numerous clerks and treasury officials, and millions of dollars in gold. The ship and its precious cargo arrived in England on August 16. The cavalry had arrived.

That didn’t mean the crisis was over. There was still a lot of work to do. But now the stakes were much higher—the U.S. government’s substantial financial resources were available to be distributed to needy American travelers, but any work using government funds would be much more scrutinized than work by private individuals using private funds.

The big question was: Which group would be chosen to distribute the funds?

During the previous few weeks, Hoover had built his Residents’ Committee, sparred with the Citizens’ Committee, and vied for the attention and support of Page—not to mention helped thousands of American travelers. Throughout, it became apparent that the young, energetic mining engineer was not afraid to do what was needed to protect and expand his traveler-assistance group. In a series of maneuvers, which many times utilized the power, resources, and support of Page’s position as U.S. ambassador, Hoover and his group emerged as the preeminent organization responsible for aiding American travelers. It was a testament to his innate

organizational skills and his ability to convince diplomats, businessmen, and the press that his way was the best way.

On August 17, Breckinridge and Page formally invited Hoover and his group to, in Hoover's words, "take over the entire distribution of funds' in London." That was followed two days later by the disbanding of the American Citizens' Committee and the transfer of all its duties to Hoover's group.

While part of the reason the transfer took place was that many of the American Citizens' Committee officers were themselves heading home, it was still a victory for Hoover. And coupled with the fact that Hoover and his group were now responsible for distributing the U.S. government funds, it meant he was the number one relief game in town.

Through the rest of August, Hoover would turn his considerable skills and business acumen to aiding all American travelers trying to get home from England. During the week of August 16–22, eighteen ships sailed for America carrying 20,000 U.S. citizens. On August 29 Hoover and his American Residents' Committee issued a detailed report on what had been done so far. While the report no doubt pleased the American government, it reflected Hoover's admirable desire to always be transparent and open about the financial operations of any group he led. The report showed that an estimated 14,000 were departing that last week of August for America, while 45,000 had been helped with passage home from August 5 through August 29. Additionally, in the month of August 4,135 people had been given some form of financial assistance.

Even though it had been nearly a month since the war began, problems were still arising. More than 3,000 Americans arrived from the continent during the last week of August, and on August 28 the majority of 800 stranded Americans had no housing for the night. "Many were absolutely without financial means, being principally the wives and children of naturalized Germans who have been visiting relatives in Germany, but are now anxious to get back to America." Hoover and his committee found them all places to stay.

Still the travelers kept coming, and Hoover kept working to solve their problems.

In those last days of August with little end in sight, Hoover undoubtedly had no idea that within two short months he would be called upon to do so much more. But the next time the consequences of failure would not be simple traveler inconveniences; it would be potential starvation for millions.

## Back in America

Starting in late July and throughout August, war-related news made the front page of nearly every newspaper in America. First came the coverage of European diplomats working to avoid war, the posturing of political figures, and the proclamations of national unity by each European country. Then came the actual war news—overall strategies, statements by generals, battle plans, confusing reports from the field, conflicting stories of atrocities and casualties, and human interest pieces about the average foot soldier or the frightened civilian. And, whenever possible, photos of the devastation and destruction were used by publishers and editors to bring home the realities of war to the American public.

While most Americans supported neutrality, there were definitely divided loyalties, as indicated by demographic breakdowns alone: The 1910 census showed that 13.5 million, or 15 percent, of Americans were foreign born. And of those, the two largest groups were from the United Kingdom (2,573,000) and Germany (2,501,000). These population num-

bers did not take into consideration the millions who were only one or two generations away from leaving their home countries. Sympathies—if not outright support—were definitely divided between the Allies and the Central Powers.

Generally, though, the nation's mood and feeling was that this was Europe's fight and the United States should have nothing to do with it. Even though the United States had declared neutrality on August 4, President Wilson addressed congress on August 19 to clarify America's policy of neutrality.

"The effect of the war upon the United States," Wilson proclaimed, "will depend upon what American citizens say and do. Every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned."

Wilson specifically acknowledged and addressed the large partisan groups in America. "The people of the United States are drawn from many nations, and chiefly from the nations now at war. It is natural and inevitable that there should be the utmost variety of sympathy and desire among them with regards to the issues and circumstances of the conflict. Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle. It will be easy to excite passion and difficult to allay it."

The president went on to caution those who would incite others, and he warned his "fellow countrymen . . . against that deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality which may spring out of partisanship, out of passionately taking sides."

Wilson felt America's "duty" in the conflict was as "the one great nation of peace, the one people holding itself ready to play a part of impartial mediation and speak the counsels of peace and accommodation, not as a partisan, but as a friend."

In no uncertain terms, the president was telling the country that he would not tolerate any form of civil war at home over Europe's struggle. America would be a bastion of peace, a sanctuary, in a world rapidly deteriorating into total war.

Wilson was speaking to a nation that had been changing drastically during the last few decades. In August 1914 America was in the midst of a major demographic shift it had never seen before. For the first time in its history, more people were living in cities than on the more than six million farms that dotted the countryside. At that time, slightly more

than 50 percent of the approximately ninety-nine million citizens were urban dwellers.

That didn't mean, however, that people were living on top of each other. Because of the country's massive size, America's density was a very low 31 people per square mile, compared with France's 189, Germany's 310, the United Kingdom's 374, and Belgium's impressive 652, which made the little Low Country the most densely populated country in the world. And only three U.S. cities had more than 1 million residents: New York was the largest, with 4.7 million, followed by Chicago, with 2.1 million, and Philadelphia, with 1.5 million.

In August 1914 unemployment was approximately 7.9 percent, and many people made less than two dollars a day. The average cost of a year's food supply for an average workingman's family was between \$439 and \$493, depending on the area of the country. That meant that if there was only one breadwinner in the family, more than half the yearly wages would have gone for food.

Most Americans didn't go to college or university—less than one-half of 1 percent of the total population attended a school of higher learning. And more than 5.5 million U.S. citizens could not read. Those who did learn, learned by reading the Bible and other classical pieces of literature and by attending tent chautauquas that would visit a town like a traveling circus, setting up big tents that contained lectures, musical performances, dramatic readings, and other cultural events.

Probably the biggest event—besides the start of World War I—that took place in the world in August was the opening of the Panama Canal on August 15. It had taken ten years and \$375 million to build, and was the single most expensive construction project in U.S. history. While it was a distinctly American project, it was something the entire world should have celebrated. Great things had been planned for the official opening, but it became a very modest affair when World War 1 broke out. Not one international dignitary showed up.

As America quietly celebrated the building of something incredible and useful for all mankind, a large part of the rest of the world was engaged in tearing itself apart. As British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey famously put it: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

American newspapers ran as many details as possible of that tearing apart. And right from the start, Belgium was a significant part of that

news coverage. Its treaty-guaranteed neutrality was a pivotal point in shaping the war, and its location on Germany's path to France dictated that Americans would soon be learning the names of Belgian villages, towns, and cities, not to mention the feats of its courageous little army and tall, stately looking King Albert. Most of all, Belgium received U.S. news coverage about German atrocities such as the burning of Louvain.

Rarely in August, though, was there mention of the critical Belgian harvest, which had basically been lost through destruction by troops, requisitions by both armies, or because no one was there to gather it in. Nor did Americans learn of Belgium's heavy reliance on the importation of food and clothes that had always been paid for by exports from its numerous industries, which now lay shuttered or in ruins.

Beyond the battlefields, a perfect storm of potential starvation for millions was converging on Belgium, and few had any idea it was coming.



*By September, more and more Belgians throughout the country had no choice but to join the soup-kitchen lines as the country quickly consumed its dwindling supplies. (Public domain: In Occupied Belgium, Robert Withington, The Cornhill Co., 1921.)*