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Home/Front: Belgium under German Occupation

This paper addresses a particular type of civilians' war experience: that of life under military occupation. The historiography of World War One has long neglected the experience of occupation. Yet its study deepens general understanding of the conflict. First of all, World War One was a "total" war, in the sense of overshadowing all of citizens' other priorities (either through coercion or through consent). This "totalization" of warfare also obtained in the occupied territories, where the regime of war touched all lives, moreover under specific circumstances of repression, spoliation, forced immobility, and forced silence. Second, World War One was an immense collective effort bolstered by "war cultures", i.e., representations of the conflict as a justified crusade and of death in warfare as sacrifice. Again, the same obtained under military occupation: the war culture of the occupied populations (which was of necessity an underground culture) created a vision of the occupation as a kind of front, and aimed to keep citizens mobilized against the invader.

This generates the question of what kind of a "front" an occupied country could represent. Could it serve as a "home front" comparable to that of other belligerents? The answer to that question is no: a country in enemy hands could not offer any material or moral support to its troops. Yet occupied Belgium was a "home front" in another sense: a locus of confrontation that was singularly domestic in nature. From the "railway spies" renting rooms next to train junctions to observe enemy troop transportation, to the publishers of clandestine papers hiding on relatives' rooftops during *Polizei* razzias, battles were waged in a setting that was at once familiar and had become intensely *unheimlich* by the very presence of the invader.

To shift the perspective to the other side: what kind of a "front" did the occupied country represent to the occupier? The question takes on added importance given the enormous impact of Germany's invasion of Belgium in August 1914, which damaged

Germany's image even in neutral countries. The continued German presence in Belgium, with its attendant repression and exploitation, extended that state of affairs until the end of the war. In the face of this, attempts were made by German authorities – in Berlin and Brussels – to launch a different approach to the occupied country, in which a battle waged on the cultural front would transform the *unheimlich* country of 1914 into a home, receptive to German effort, and whose long-buried Germanic elements would finally be allowed to flourish. Much of this effort was rendered moot by the General Staff's insistence on exploitation as a priority; in the end, German rule over Belgium did not achieve any degree of legitimacy. Occupied Belgium was still a "front". Yet, fifty months of occupation had unsettled some of the certainties of 1914.