

ED KLEKOWSKI & LIBBY KLEKOWSKI
Americans in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918. Accounts of the War from Journalists, Tourists, Troops and Medical Staff

Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2014, 283 p.

JEFFREY B. MILLER

Behind the Lines. WWI's little-known story of German occupation, Belgian resistance, and the band of Yanks who helped save millions from starvation. Beginnings, 1914

Denver, Milbrow Press, 2014, 442 p.

In 2014, at the start of the centenary of the First World War, two books were released that propose a history of occupied Belgium from an American perspective. Ed and Libby Klekowski became engrossed in Belgium's First World War after having visited the University Library of Leuven. The story of its destruction and the role many Americans played in its reconstruction struck a chord with them. Jeffrey B. Miller's interest in Occupied Belgium can be traced back to family stories. His grandfather, Milton B. Brown, was a delegate of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), while his Belgian grandmother Erica Bunge lived in Antwerp during the occupation. Hence, this sudden preoccupation from American authors with a "little-known story" is mainly motivated by personal interest. The authors did, however, manage to transcend personal interest by highlighting the relevance of this episode in history. The Klekowskis point out that Belgium was "the first country invaded, the longest occupied and (...) the first forgotten" (p. 1). Miller, on the other hand, calls attention to the CRB as "one of America's finest humanitarian achievements" (p. xxiii).

The two books are quite similar, which facilitates a comparison. They both focus

on Americans in occupied Belgium, as the book titles hint at, though some chapters also consider the front war. The authors all discuss the CRB and its humanitarian mission, but the Klekowskis give a more general overview, while the CRB delegates take center-stage in Miller's account. The Klekowskis' book covers the whole four years of the war, whereas Miller's book is the first instalment of a series of three books and thus only recounts the events of 1914. *Americans in occupied Belgium* and *Behind the lines* are fast-paced and well-written accounts, but their chronological structure occasionally results in a simple chronicle of historical events. The authors are all amateur historians who write for a large audience, although the detailed notes and the long bibliography at the end of the books reveal that they aspire to do more than just good storytelling. Their professional background might explain this: Miller, a journalist, has a bachelor degree in history, and Ed Klekowski is a professor emeritus of biology.

Both the Klekowskis and Miller base their book on primary source material, mainly press articles and egodocuments of the American Legation officials and of the CRB delegates, and Miller's own family archive was also at his disposal. The Klekowskis seem to have studied these sources with a more critical eye though. While Miller simply states that there were some "bad seeds" among the CRB delegates (p. 247), the Klekowskis found proof that the American Legation officials themselves were not too satisfied with them (p. 141). Furthermore, Miller occasionally reveals the motives of protagonists without quoting a source, for instance, when he argues that "Francqui wanted a purely Belgian-run program" (p. 206) or that the CRB office in

Brussels needed a stronger position “to keep Francqui in check” (p. 209). Interestingly, the Klekowskis do not ignore silences in the sources, such as the fact that none of the American eyewitnesses “commented upon the degradation of Belgian women through prostitution during the German occupation” (p. 117). They see this as a form of self-censorship, since it would have subverted the narrative of ‘Poor Little Belgium’.

As the long bibliography at the end of the two books prove, the authors have clearly pursued extensive reading, but oddly enough, they do not seem to be familiar with the Belgian historiography on the First World War. John Horne, Alan Kramer, Tammy Proctor and Larry Zuckerman are mentioned, but few Belgian historians have made the list, notably only when their research was published in English. Not even Sophie De Schaepdrijver’s well-known reference book figures in these bibliographies, thus demonstrating the importance of having it translated into English. The books, however, do not seem to contradict the findings of Belgian historiography, with one remarkable exception: on the question why the German army sacked Leuven, the Klekowskis assert that “even after a century, the answer is still nearly impossible to disentangle from the conflicting German and Belgian accounts” (p. 49). A consensus between Belgian and German historians that there had been no *francs-tireurs* in Leuven, and that the Germans had experienced a collective delusion, was nonetheless already reached in 1958 when Peter Schöller published *Der Fall Löwen*. The research of the Irish historians John Horne and Alan Kramer confirmed his findings in 2001, and their book is widely recognised in the international historiography of the First World War, even

though German publications opposing their position still surface from time to time.

Because both books address an American audience, the question remains what they can offer to the community of Belgian First World War historians. It is clear that the authors do not provide any new interpretation of occupied Belgium or the CRB. Moreover, they focus mainly on Americans and give less significance to the occupied. The Klekowskis describe them simply as passive victims of the German occupation. Miller does consider them as historical actors, but only calls attention to those whom resisted, ignoring the ‘collaborators’. The Klekowskis and Miller do, however, explore some sources that are less known on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and that might be useful to Belgian historians. Especially Miller’s family archive seems to contain a wealth of information for those interested in the history of the CRB or occupied Antwerp.

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