

## REVIEWS

JEFF LIPKES

***Rehearsals : The German Army in Belgium, August 1914***

Second edition, Revised and abridged,  
Wesley Chapel, Florida, The Brabant Press, 2014, 675 p.

*Rehearsals*, by American historian Jeff Lipkes, was published in 2007 by *Universitaire Pers Leuven*. His was the third book in a short period of time that tackled the German war crimes of the first months of 1914, after the classic *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial* (Yale UP, 2001, 608 p.) by John Horne and Alan Kramer and *The Rape of Belgium : The Untold Story of World War I* (New York UP, 2004, 337 p.) by Larry Zuckerman. It was also the most controversial of the three, because unlike the other authors, Lipkes depicted the German horrors as some sort of German *Sonderweg*, like Daniel Goldhagen did with the Second World War. This also explains the clear but loaded title, “*Rehearsals*”.

According to Lipkes, there was no collective psychosis triggered by the presence of alleged *franc-tireurs*. He claims that the German army’s actions were part of a consistent German high command strategy, whose aim was to ease the passage of the German armies by terrorizing the population. Nevertheless German sources do not support this affirmation – in fact, Lipkes does not consult any. It is also illogical to state that German officers planned a terror strategy in order to guarantee faster troop movement without expecting possible actions from *franc-tireurs*. Sophie De Schaepdrijver criticizes Lipkes’ book and asserts that the author’s scope is too limited to carry out a systematic study of important aspects such as the chronology of the violent acts, the choices of unarmed citizens, or why some

areas were hit by this violence while others were spared.

The author focuses on an extremely detailed description of the towns which were most affected by the violence in August 1914, but provides no description nor analysis – or mention, for that matter – of similar events in Northern France, the Ardennes, the Hainaut or East and West Flanders. There is no reference whatsoever to notable cases such as Quaregnon (23 August 1914 : 66 dead, 137 houses destroyed), Arlon (26 August 1914 : 133 dead, 100 houses destroyed), Dendermonde (4 and 5 September 1914 : 450 houses destroyed) or Roeselaere (19 October 1914 : 31 dead and 252 houses destroyed), which would require consideration in an accurate judgment of the supposed terror strategy.

The question is thus to what extent Jeff Lipkes met this fundamental critique, and to what extent this edition is different from the former. When comparing the two, we immediately notice that the two last chapters of the 2008 edition are left out. This is strange and even regrettable, since for many readers these were the most valuable chapters. By tackling the negation and omission of the German atrocities by German, British and American intellectuals, these two chapters stood somewhat apart from the general narrative. Given Lipkes’ understanding of intellectual history – he wrote a book on British philosopher John Stuart Mill and his followers – the chapters were fairly consistent. They are conspicuously missing in the second edition. Instead, the author adds a summary of the Leipzig trials, which were supposed to investigate German war crimes but instead resulted in a total fiasco.

SECOND EDITION, REVISED & ABRIDGED



# REHEARSALS

The German Army  
in Belgium, August 1914

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Jeff Lipkes

The author nevertheless consciously sticks to his provocative title, even though he realizes that it might overly influence the reader beforehand. In his introduction to the second edition, he deems it necessary to state that he does not see the atrocities of 1914 as a repetition of those perpetrated in the 1940s and that there is a strong difference between the German occupation of Belgium in WWI and the occupation of western Europe 25 years later. He also comments on these differences. In this sense, we can state that the second edition is a more proper one. It leaves out sentences like “The vintage burgundies and champagne went down a lot more easily than the Ukrainian vodka that served the Einsatzgruppen executioners a generation later, but they performed a similar function” (2008). Conversely, the prologue describing the alleged continuity of German history is left untouched. The question of why he stuck to his controversial title remains. In the prologue, the author states his intentions regarding Horne and Kramer more clearly by asserting that his purpose is to write narrative history and produce “an account of the events themselves, largely from the standpoints of the victims”. Fair enough, and certainly a defensible choice. The chapters on the atrocities were mostly left untouched and make up 90 % of the book. But why would a work of narrative history feature such a title? Why does he use ironic remarks and focus so narrowly on what happened in Liège, Namur and Brabant in August 1914 ? In addition, overly detailed descriptions and long – sometimes too long – quotes do not add anything in terms of narrative history. Moreover, focusing on the point of view of the victims does not make up for the almost complete lack of a German perspective, nor for the title and the prologue, which both hint at it.

The first five pages of the important “Explanations” chapter are left out. These contained an outline of the most important refutations of the *franc-tireurs* theory of the German white paper. Their absence in the new version is no loss, nor is the absence of several other paragraphs. In the rest of the chapter, he changes the order of the arguments against Horne and Kramer’s mass-psychosis hypothesis, without further conspicuous changes or additions. Only certain claims are moderated: “much credible evidence”, for instance, became “a great deal of credible evidence”.

The most important addition to the new version of *Rehearsals* is a 25-page long afterword containing new evidence to support the author’s thesis and to strengthen his original argument. In this version Lipkes insists on German anti-Catholicism, and declares it is “not far-fetched to compare it to anti-Semitism”. He even describes the parallel between German anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism in the antebellum years for several pages. He asserts that the hatred of the Church which born from the *Kulturkampf* of the empire’s first years still lingered. This somewhat contradicts his former claim against Horne and Kramer’s assertion that regular soldiers were afraid of the *franc-tireurs* : “No soldier who invaded Belgium in 1914 had also participated in the invasion of France forty-four years earlier”. If Lipkes wishes to underscore this claim, he needs to support it with German (ego-)documents and with full-fledged research on the possibly significant difference in the treatment of regions with a Catholic majority (for example, Bavaria, Rhineland, Silesia or Alsace-Lorraine) from that of other German regions. The claim largely ignores that by 1914, the German

realm and its army were a cultural and religious patchwork; Lipkes seems to reduce the German realm to Prussia and Saxony. It is true that most of the atrocities of August were committed by units from those two regions, but the author nevertheless admits that the period he studied leaves out two-thirds of the civilian victims.

He brings forward another argument, which he calls 'greed'. He uses it to draw a direct link between the battles of August 1914 and their implied plunder and the general economic exploitation of Belgium, including the German occupant's forced labour policy. In a confused paragraph, he even discusses the theft of art pieces such as Bouts' Last Supper and Van Eyck's Lamb of God, notwithstanding the complete absence of organized art theft during WWI. The lateral panels of both paintings were sold to German buyers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were brought back in 1920 as war compensation. This is thus by no means an early manifestation of what would happen during WWII. Other parts of the afterword also vindicate the title. With "Rehearsing the Rehearsal", the author depicts the bloody response of the German troops during the Boxer rebellion in China, the Herero rebellion in South-eastern Africa and the Saverne Affair. Under the ironic title of "Strolling down the *Sonderweg*", he provides a short summary of the new barbarian fighting methods and weapons used by the Germans during the war (airstrikes, submarine warfare, gas, etc.), a comparison to the anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a comment supported by the British example that all nations have walked the *Sonderweg* at some point. This might count as relativism. "Other Rehearsals" draws some hasty parallels between other events of WWI and the following

decennia, such as the "appeasement politics" of British PM Grey in July 1914 and the Vatican's silence.

Lipkes finishes with "A Rehearsal is not a Performance", briefly stating that he is aware of the huge differences between the actions of the Second and the Third Reich. According to him, the events of August 1914 anticipate the treatment of West-European civilians rather than the treatment of the Jews during WWII. He concludes that the fact that relatively fewer Jews were deported from Belgium than, for instance, the Netherlands during WWII, besides the differences in the nature of the occupation, is certainly linked to the fact that after the atrocities of 1914 and the subsequent occupation, the Belgians were used to the Germans. This afterword is far from convincing. Lipkes seems to freely pick up events to support his claims, not accounting or searching for situations that could contradict or weaken the German *Sonderweg*. And German is even referred to as Prussian.

In a way, this second edition is a missed opportunity, and it is regrettable, because Lipkes' book has its merits. Indeed, a detailed narrated history of the German atrocities of August 1914 told from the point of view of the victims has obvious worth. He seems nevertheless to fail to give solid arguments regarding the reasons for these war crimes. I believe this book is largely a victim of its controversial title. The author felt obliged to further explain the title in this edition, and in this he gets totally lost.

**Dominiek Dendooven**

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