

Intimate Relations between Occupiers and Occupied (Belgium and France)

By [Emmanuel Debruyne](#)

During the invasion and occupation of 1914-1918, German soldiers had sexual relations with local women in Belgium and France. There were many cases of rape during the invasion, but the occupation itself was more characterized by a rise in prostitution. Other forms of intimate relations also emerged, but they generally did not outlast the war itself.

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1. War Sexuality and Occupation

World War I caused upheavals in the sexual order of all the warring societies. War exposed women and men to a significant reconfiguration of their sexuality, and even of their gender identity, and opened the door to new sexual experiences. However, the military [occupations](#) provided a particular space for war [sexuality](#), especially for the German soldiers, who did not generally operate in friendly territory but instead often fought, moved around or rested in enemy territory. The occupation of enemy territory also required the presence of a certain number of staff, assigned to administrative, operational and control activities. Two populations were therefore forced to live side by side in the occupied territories. The first group was characterized by a gender imbalance in favor of women due to the fact that the local men had gone to war. It was local, under occupation and, therefore, under

control. The second group was almost exclusively male (except for the presence of [nurses](#) and employees of the occupational administration). It was foreign, it was the occupier and, thus, it was the controlling element. These two groups of people could have been characterized by gender complementarity, but were first and foremost enemies as well as strangers to each other.

2. Invasion and Rapes

The first instances of sexual intercourse between these two groups took place during the outburst of violence that accompanied the initial offensive of the German army in the west. The so-called "German [atrocities](#)" of August 1914 in [Belgium](#) and [France](#) were not only characterized by the destruction of towns and the execution of 6,427 civilians, but were also accompanied by numerous cases of [rape](#). Testimonies concerning sexual abuse were collected by Allied commissions of inquiry, but it remains impossible to provide precise figures on the extent of the phenomenon. As an indication, in France alone, hundreds of [children](#) born from such cases of rape were given to public assistance organizations by their mothers after the spring of 1915.

One of the main consequences of this first phase was that the collective image and reputation of Germans abroad, as well as in the occupied territories, became that of barbarians and sexual brutes. The "rape of Belgium" was not only a symbolic image used to denounce the Germans' non-compliance with international law, but also echoed the rape of the Belgians themselves.

3. Prostitution in the Occupied Countries

However, sexual aggression was far less prevalent during the [occupation period](#) than during the invasion period. Order had to be maintained in the territories controlled by the German army, and such behavior was now prosecuted by the German [military courts](#). Additionally, soldiers' sexual desires could now be satisfied through [prostitution](#), which increased significantly in the occupied cities from the autumn of 1914. Behind the [Western Front](#), cities such as [Brussels](#) and Lille became hubs of prostitution for German [soldiers on leave](#). Smaller towns, however, were not spared from the phenomenon either, especially those situated close to the front. Prostitution was not only practiced in existing or newly created brothels; the sex industry was mainly made up of numerous new entrants, often driven by poverty and hunger caused by the war and occupation. These new prostitutes generally worked in their place of origin, sometimes casually and often illegally.

The increasing prevalence of [venereal disease](#) among the troops worried the German leadership during the first winter of the war and prompted the occupation authorities to take preventive measures in the territories under their control. Influenced by the neo-regulationist movement, which sought to frame prostitution in a public health perspective, the occupying authorities imposed strict and very coercive policies for regulation to be implemented with the participation of occupied police forces and administrations. From 13 February 1915 onwards, German morality police units were created in the occupied cities, and those regarded as prostitutes were systematically monitored and

were subject to compulsory medical examinations (usually twice weekly). Women whose screening revealed that they were infected with a venereal disease were immediately placed in specialized treatment centers established by the German authorities in the main occupied cities. There, they were both cured and incarcerated until their recovery. First experienced in the west, this system was subsequently transposed to the east, following the German conquests.

Such measures were intended to regulate prostitution and to stop the alarming spread of venereal disease, but were not specific to the circumstance of occupation. However, the war was used to justify giving them new vigor and their large-scale application, while the occupation regime allowed the occupiers to push this logic even further, as they did not have to worry about the sensitivity of public opinion in their own country and could place the financial burden on the local occupied authorities. The German army also tried to limit the relations of its soldiers to those between soldiers and prostitutes in the brothels, who were easier to submit to health controls. This also limited the risk of fraternization with the local population, and therefore avoided possible interference with military discipline. As in many armies, a clear differentiation was made between brothels for soldiers and non-commissioned officers, and those reserved for officers, which were more luxurious.

4. War Couples

The wish to confine sexual relations with the occupied people to the brothels was roughly equivalent to considering sexuality in terms of genital and trade relations. It was in fact a much larger issue. Many soldiers did not find personal satisfaction in the brothels, preferring to seek intercourse with street or casual prostitutes, who, importantly, could offer some illusion of seduction. Others engaged in more lasting intimate relationships with women from the occupied areas. It is generally difficult to determine the role of interest and of feelings between these war couples, but some of these relationships showed certain attributes of conjugality. Some examples are: when a soldier formed a couple with a lady living in the house where he was billeted, took part in the upkeep or care of the children of his war consort, or even accepted paternity of a child born to him.

However, few such war couples seem to have survived beyond the end of the conflict, although a few cases of marriage have been recorded here and there (for example three in Bruges in 1918). Some French and Belgian women did accompany their German partners during the retreat, but we do not know whether their main concern was to stay with their lover or to flee reprisals from the local population. Indeed, women accused of sleeping with the enemy were often stigmatized and ostracized by their communities during the conflict and were subject to threats. From 19 October 1918 onwards, the liberation of Belgian (and to a lesser extent French) territories also led to a wave of street violence against those who had compromised themselves with the occupiers. In the days following the liberation of localities like Bruges, Roubaix, Ghent and Brussels, women were paraded through the streets, jeered at and molested by the crowd, before having their hair cut off. Such humiliating scenes were a forerunner of the reprisals that occurred on a larger scale upon the liberation of Western Europe at the end of World War II.

Whatever the form, sexual relations between the occupiers and those occupied certainly involved tens of thousands of women in Belgium and France, and probably resulted in thousands of illegitimate births, but a precise figure for these children born of German fathers is impossible to establish. Violent or not, commercial or not, these relations were characterized by multiple forms of domination. Gender inequality continued to be reinforced in the context of war, by the domination of the military over the civilian population and of the occupier over those occupied. If such relations were, for most German soldiers, only sporadic and without any real social impact, they conversely signified social decay for the women concerned, which hasn't yet been addressed by historical research.

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