The Blame for the Sack of Louvain

The two articles published herewith touch an international controversy which has raged between the Belgian and the German Governments, unaffected either by the close of the World War or by the accession of a republican regime in Germany, since August, 1914.

Professor Christian Meurer of the University of Würzburg and Professor Fernand Mayence of the University of Louvain debate in these articles, written specially for CURRENT HISTORY in German and French, respectively, the responsibility for the sack of the city of Louvain by the German army in 1914.

This controversy recently flared out anew as a result of the publication in Germany of the official report of Professor Meurer and the verdict of the Reichstag commission, on the one hand, and Professor Mayence's formal reply to both, on the other.

The inauguration of Louvain's new bells not long ago and the projected dedication of Louvain's new library, donated mainly by American friends of Belgium, to take place on July 4, 1928, with elaborate ceremonies, give this clarification of the issues involved in this international controversy a special timeliness—EDITOR OF CURRENT HISTORY MAGAZINE.

I—The Case for the Germans

By CHRISTIAN MEurer

Professor at the University of Würzburg, Germany

On Aug. 25-27, 1914, there occurred in Louvain bloody events which are still the subject of warm dispute today.

On Aug. 30, 1914, a German account of the happenings was printed in the Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant and was reprinted in The Frankfurter Zeitung on Sept. 5, and the White Book, issued on May 10, 1915, by the Foreign Office in Berlin under the title “The Conduct of the Belgian People’s War in Defiance of International Law,” occupied itself with the details of the Louvain events, supporting a comprehensive report with numerous sworn declarations by witnesses, assembled in an appendix. The accounts in the Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant and in the White Book agree in the main.

The essential points of the German account are these:

On Aug. 29, the first German troops marched into Louvain and occupied quarters in the Old City. On Aug. 25 there was a sudden change in the good relations that had existed at the beginning between the townspeople and the troops. On that day Belgian troops from Antwerp undertook a drive in the direction of Louvain. The German troops in and near Louvain went out to meet them. Already at this point they were subjected to a hot fire by the inhabitants in Herent as well as from the houses south of Bucken. Persons caught in the act of firing were shot and their houses burned. The attack ended with the defeat of the Belgians, who in the evening were thrown back toward Antwerp. But the inhabitants of Louvain, who knew about the impending attack and believed that the drive of the Belgian Army was bound to succeed, with the help of English troops, were strengthened in the belief that the Germans had been beaten through the return march of the German troops, and in various places in the city, after a rocket had been sent up, a furious fire was opened upon the German soldiers. Shots came from cellars, windows and especially from the roofs. A particularly hot fire was turned upon the market square and the first section of the general command stationed there. The hot fire of all was upon the railroad station and in the railroad street, as well as upon the Place du Peuple.

The German troops penetrated into the houses from which shots had been fired, searching them for the culprits who, according to military custom, were shot, while the houses were set afire. While the street fights were raging General von Below commanding the Ninth Reserve Corps returned to the city from the battlefield. It was about 10:00 P.M. He, too, was fired upon repeatedly on his way to the City Hall. He had some respected citizens seized as hostages. They were led through the city and had to urge the citizens to stop hostilities. But these efforts were in vain. Shots were fired even from houses flying the Red Cross and from hospitals. Explosives and bombs were also employed and hot water was poured upon the troops. And hot water was poured upon the troops. And hot water was poured upon the troops. And hot water was poured upon the troops. And hot water was poured upon the troops.

In reprisal there was a brief artillery bombardment of a section of the city after the inhabitants had been requested to leave their homes.

The Belgian Version

In contrast to this, the Belgian account is altogether different. Already on Aug. 28, 1914, a telegram was sent from the Belgian Foreign Ministry to the Belgian Ambassador in London, the dissemination of which was looked after by the Northcliffe press. In this message the happenings at Louvain were presented as follows:

After a defeat a German Army was streaming back toward Louvain in disorder. German troops had mistaken their own defeated comrades for Belgians and had fired upon the fugitives. In order to cover up their own mistake the German military authorities had asserted that the inhabitants had done the shooting.

The Gray Book, entitled “Answer to the German White Book,” issued by the Belgian Ministry of Justice and Foreign Affairs in 1917, clings to this version. The Germans, defeated by the Belgian Army, it says, returned in disorder to the City of Louvain. There was an exchange of shots between them and the troops in the city. At this moment there suddenly began a hot fire in quite distinct parts of the city.

After a more detailed description, the question of the reason for the destruction and mass murder is posed and the following statement is made: “A great many witnesses declared at the hearing that the civilian population had refrained from any action that would give grounds for the opinion that the German authorities, in order to admit the soldiers’ mistakes, made the city responsible for the shots which were exchanged among the troops. Other believe that the German Commandant only used the alleged attack by the civilian population as a pretext to destroy the city, according to a plan worked out in advance and in cold blood. The German White Book, it is declared on Page 501, ‘false history.’ Who has falsified history? That is the question.

The German Supreme Court instituted a thorough investigation, which resulted in the corroboration of the essential part of the German Government’s view. And the Parliamentary Investigation Committee of the Reichstag also occupied itself with our problem. As the Third Sub-Committee had to investigate the violations of international law during the World War, it also had something to say about the Belgian people’s warfare and about the events in Louvain, which were only a special phase of that warfare. It expressed the result of its deliberations in a resolution, reading in part, as follows:

The Committee is convinced that the Belgian people’s warfare is a fact which cannot be wiped out of existence by subsequent denials. The sworn statements of numerous German eyewitnesses of all ranks and classes as well as the statements of the Belgians themselves do not appear to be refuted. A general denial, as made in the
The main hall of the University Library before its destruction

Belgian Gray Book, cannot shake the detailed German evidence and does not stand up under objective criticism.

I participated in the work of the Sub-Committee as an adviser. In my written report on the Belgian people's warfare, which is now in print ("International Law in the World War," third series in the work of the Investigating Committee, published by Joh. Bell, Chairman of the Third Sub-Committee, 1917, Vol. II, 143 ff.), I said:

Decision can be made only by an impartial court possessing the means of verifying the testimony. I must limit myself to observations of opinion. And here the complete untenability of the Belgian viewpoint will be apparent.

A LABORED EXPLANATION

First of all one is struck by the fact that the Belgian Foreign Ministry, which was located far from the scene and was deprived of the means of investigating and review, was ready with its verdict as early as on Aug. 29, the day after the investigations were finished. The Belgian Investigating Commission, because of the circumstances, was not in any position to examine the correctness of the rumors brought before it and to grasp the continuity of the events. But the account in the Gray Book is based upon the work of this Investigating Commission, which had been created already on Aug. 8 for the purpose of collecting the facts and reports of German violations of military law during the war in order to make them public through the press, or through penny pamphlets, in the interest of the State. In this connection the public was invited to send suitable information to the Ministry of Justice. The Belgian Investigating Commission was in existence before the world and the inhabitants of Belgium themselves were able to know anything about German atrocities. The imagination of the Belgians, who were naturally enraged by the German invasion, who had been frightened out of their peaceful life and dragged into the turmoil of war, worked under high pressure. But a collection of such depositions and reports, mostly supported by mere hearsay, has no value as proof. One notes how laboriously the Belgians explain the cause of the shooting. The Germans were supposed to have been defeated by the Antwerp troops and to be streaming back toward Louvain, whereas in fact the battle had ended with a German victory. But when one considers that the people of Louvain regarded the return of the German troops which, because of weariness perhaps, was to a certain extent disorderly, as a retreat, one understands their eagerness to attack and the local extension and the stubbornness of the firing. Furthermore, the fighting is supposed to have been merely stupid shooting between the guards and the German troops. This is certainly the most idiotic thing a person could have thought out. The Frankfurter Zeitung of Sept. 2, 1914, tersely labeled such an account as "foolishness" and expresses its opinion as follows:

The assertion that Germans had fired upon the German troops by mistake can spring only from the brain of a man who either has lost his reason under the pressure of events or who considers any means justified if he believes he can thus avenge himself upon the Germans.

It is outrageous to assert that the Germans wished to cover up their own lack of discipline by accusing the Belgian population, or that they had trumped up the civilian attacks in order to destroy the city in cold blood according to a plan already prepared.

Moreover, the firing continued for days and the hostages were led through the city in order to induce the inhabitants to cease shooting. According to the Belgian assumption, this march of the hostages would have been a mere carnival procession.

A GERMAN WITNESS

On Sept. 5, 1914, the Frankfurter Zeitung printed the following letter, which a German officer had sent to his parents on Aug. 27:

From Liége we proceeded with the train on the 23th as far as Louvain. We arrived in Louvain at 9 o'clock in the evening. Even before the train stopped bullets were rattling against our cars, and when we got out they were whistling around us. We had no idea of what really was going on, and as we stood in the station, which was far back from the street, we were wholly in the dark.

It is true that we had heard about a battle with the English in the neighborhood of Louvain, and we believed that the English had broken through and had defeated our men. But we were soon to learn something different. The citizens of Louvain, among whom were Englishmen and Belgian soldiers in civilian clothes and who had conducted themselves very calmly and in a friendly way toward us until that day, had suddenly fired upon our soldiers and upon transports of foodstuffs, munitions and so forth, and, in fact, the shooting had begun over the whole city as if by command. They had even set up a machine gun in a window of a house standing diagonal to the main street. It was a dangerous situation for our corps and division staffs which were quartered in the city. Because of the friendly attitude of the population the city had been stripped of troops, except for a small guard at the railroad station. And of course they had counted upon this. The staffs and the station guards simply would have been butchered off and the railroad station blown up. But, thank the Lord, they had reckoned without their host.

Naturally, they had not suspected that in the evening two more bulletins would arrive. Five minutes ahead of us another
battalion had arrived. A few volleys were fired at the houses, and it became quiet. I was the first one to receive orders to take two detachments of about eighty-five soldiers and search two houses, bringing along the men and seize all munitions and arms. I stated that this was my detachment in the broader spaces between the buildings and the search for houses. Everything went well. Right then another detachment was to do the same. The houses were searched with rifles, and suspicious persons had been found immediately set on fire and the men were shot. Thus in the night of Tuesday and Wednesday about thirty were shot. Afterwards firing suddenly began again and a number of our men were killed and wounded. That whole section of the city was set on fire. A fearful sight. But the people got what they deserved. Yesterday (Wednesday) we had to guard the station again, for we had been fired upon again. Now there were again set on fire and about sixty or seventy persons shot, among them several Belgian soldiers in civilian clothes. Then I searched several more streets that had not been bombarded, for arms and munitions, and here heartrending scenes took place. But one has to be hard. Last night we were left in peace, but nevertheless our troops again were fired upon in another section of the city.

In the investigation procedure of the National Supreme Court it was testified that during the search of a hotel a woman had fired a pistol while standing under her skirts. It was also testified that in a hotel two built-in machine guns were found, with about 250 discharged cartridges lying near one another. As knapsacks of Belgian soldiers, with uniforms packed inside them, were also found, one has to assume that soldiers in civilian clothes were also in action, together with rash civilians. The participation of citizens is also proved by the numerous wounds by small shot found during the medical examination.

TESTIMONY OF DOMINICANS

German newspapers immediately sent reporters to the scene after the Louvain uprising in order to see the state of affairs and they absolutely confirmed the correctness of the official German account. It is interesting to note what the Koelische Volkszeitung printed at that time about the Beligian Dominicans who had been eyewitnesses of the fighting in Louvain. According to this paper, the Belgian Dominicans (remember, not German soldiers) said:

On Tuesday, the 25th, in the morning, an automobile with the above-mentioned group arrived for in the churches. At about 5 o’clock in the afternoon of that day fresh German troops had preceded them and who in the meantime had left Louvain, were quartered in the city.

Soon afterward the rumor was spread throughout the city that English and French arms were approaching from the north and sides and that on the evening the fires were wiped out. It was then that the rumor was spread that they were engaged in an assault and that those who were not in the church were captured in the streets and streets of the city by the soldiers. The houses were burned out and the residents killed. The men did not resist and the women and children were not hurt. The soldiers then burned the houses containing the bodies of the men who had resisted.

In the afternoon the church was burned, and although the soldiers did not resist, they were unable to prevent the burning. Many of the inhabitants of the city were killed in the street fighting, and therefore could not be taken prisoner. With a weapon of a Citizen Guard and that, further, that in the street fighting, they condemned such treacherous conduct. Nevertheless, they complained greatly because so many innocent persons had to suffer with the innocent. They could agree with them in that. But this is certainly unavoidable in such cases. The ruthless action was much more valuable cooperation with the firing of the citizens.

The clergy had arrived in Aix-la-Chapelle and from him I heard the following. He had been designated as a hostage, to not establish a single case of armed resistance by the civilian population. The investigating procedure of the National Supreme Court also brought out the fact that the Belgians in conversation never really believed that the shooting had been begun by the Belgian side. But they always believed that the population as such had participated in that, as the Belgian Foreign

Interior of the library after its destruction
Exterior of the library in 1914, showing the havoc wrought by the Germans

the Third in Dinant, not to speak of other places mentioned in the White Book. At first the Belgian newspapers proudly reported these patriotic deeds until the Government apparently warned them against it. And, as one can see from the incomplete collection of these press accounts in my report, not merely here and there a paper, but practically the whole Belgian press used the same tone, just as today it contrarily unanimously disputes any hostile action by the population. Either there was lying then, or there is lying now. At all events there was lying. I pointed out in my opinion, that in Belgium the Citizens' Guard, with its uncertain field of activity, was largely responsible, that, besides, the most favorable preliminary conditions for international war had been created in Belgium and that during the war the seed sprang up that had been scattered in time of peace.

It is remarkable that the German troops, which were so on many fields of battle, encountered armed resistance by the population in Belgium only. Naturally, the Germans, thus treacherously attacked, acted vigorously.

We have always been able to understand the American General, Sherman, who issued the following order in 1864:

> In case inhabitants of the country or bushwhackers disturb our march, or in case the inhabitants burn bridges, cut roads, or make any such local resistance, army commanders should order and enforce a devastation more or less relentless according to the measure of such hostility.

**LOUVAIN NOT "HEAP OF RUINS"**

The Belgians do not want to admit that they themselves were guilty of acts of destruction. Moreover, they take pleasure in boundless exaggerations. For example, immediately after the bloody events the city went out from Belgium through the world: "Louvain is a heap of ruins!"

Regarding the appearance of Louvain after the fighting already described, the Frankfurter Zeitung of Sept. 3, 1914, printed the following report by a wholesale merchant of Aix-la-Chapelle, who had made a trip through the occupied Belgian territory:

> It is certainly a fact that a large number of the inhabitants of Louvain carried out a contemptible, murderous attack upon our troops and killed or wounded quite a number of our soldiers, among them many members of the Landsturm (last reserves), and
saved. The hardest hit were the railroad street and its side alleys, Namur and Tite-mont Streets and some others. It was noted everywhere that only the houses from which shots had been fired were involved, because in every street houses were intact. The population has returned and is beginning to resume its regular life.

The Germans were absolutely justified in using drastic reprisals to crush the Belgian people's war, now that the Belgians fill the world with their complaints about German terrorism. Of course reprisals, which pile one wrong upon another, must also be kept in proportion to the misdeeds and, just as self-defense can exceed its legal limits, so, too, reprisals under international law can go too far. We shall not oppose an impartial examination of the facts along this line. But first of all the cardinal question of the people's warfare must be decided. As the Belgians deny the fact of the people's warfare, they declare the Germans to be common murderers and incendiaries. But from the viewpoint of reprisals everything looks different. We shall not allow attention to be diverted from the cardinal point, i.e., that of the people's warfare, which first forced the Germans to reprisals, by complaints about German harshness and the telling of touching, or even irrelevant details.

BURNING OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

The world, Germany included, was horrified at the burning of the university's library. It was a matter of one of the "halls," which consist of the administration rooms of the university and of a large anteroom of the Court of Justice (Salle des pas-permis), from which a stairway led to the library on the first floor. The Belgian "Rapports et Documents d'Enquête," (Premier volume—Tome II, p. 73) declare briefly that the Germans must have set this on fire: "Fire must have been set to several sides of the building," and then further along they say, "Latter, where one digs through the ruins one will find several kinds of incendiary devices." [1] But no German soldier had entered the library, the doors of which, as the "Rapports" themselves pointed out, were bolted and barred on the inside. German soldiers were quartered only in the basement and they had left after a little while. At 10 o'clock in the evening the porter had found everything all right, and when he went up into the library a second time he was met by smoke. That German soldiers would especially seek out the library to set it on fire is more than improbable, as they could hardly have been aware of its existence. Rather, according to all the circumstances to be considered, it can very well be taken for a certainty that it was set on fire by the sparks from the burning houses in the immediate vicinity. Indeed, several Belgian eye-witnesses saw the sheets of fire and the rain of sparks themselves. With the wind that was blowing and the extremely rich wooden decorations, the flames found plenty of food.

It probably would have been possible to have saved the university building, together with the library, from the flames if even the simplest provisions against the danger of fire had been at hand. The Swiss architect, Eugen Probst, writes about his actions as follows in a pamphlet published in Zürich in 1916: "The windows of the extensive library opened, protected, upon the rear walls and the yards of small houses, and there was no arrangement of any sort for protecting the library from the danger of fire. In no place did a fire-wall separate the library from the adjoining houses, and close to the entrance of the university, in the same building, a saloon was kept, where there were no hydrants in the interior of the building. Neither the house warden, nor the librarian, Delamay, nor any one of the professors was on the spot, to save the most valuable manuscripts or to direct the work of rescue."

German troops at that time carried the valuable paintings from the burning church in safety to the City Hall opposite, and they probably would have done the same with the most important contents of the library, if they had been aware of their presence. There is not a single word in the official report about the rescue work of the German troops in those days, which were carried on under the two-fold danger of the flames and the fire of the Belgians and which was chiefly responsible for the saving of the City Hall, although they are accused, again without more exact charges, of having wrecked the water conduits, one again something that would have been quite nonsensical.

A short time after the fire the city architect, Vingerhoet, and the Professor of Archeology, Lemaine, searched the still-glowing ashes for books, and in all probability found some. The rumor that valuable manuscripts were saved and brought to Germany is first of all opposed by the German soldiers then in Louvain could hardly have been true, for there were valuable printed works and manuscripts, had been destroyed by the fire.

In August, 1917, the Germans, with the knowledge and consent of the officials of the Library, University, had excavations made by experts in the fire debris, at places two meters deep, and the remains of charred books were found. And also at that time it was suggested by the Germans that they were willing to participate, by giving up duplicate copies from the university libraries and by taking part in the collections, in the reproduction of the library during the war. Nevertheless, these suggestions had not resulted, because the university circles of Louvain refused to cooperate.

BOOKS AND TREASURES NOT STOLEN

The frequently recurring assertion that the Germans carried off books and valuable articles during the burning of the university can only be characterized as a lie out of whole cloth. The German troops engaged in an advance indeed had no time and no means of taking anything with them. Furthermore, during the steady advance they would hardly have thought about stealing such things.

These assertions may be countered rather by the little known fact that immediately after the burning of Louvain there was plundering by Belgian inhabitants. This has been attested to by the Belgian Attor-
through the testimony. The fine gradations in the charges are almost outdone by the carefully selected scale in the admissions. Persons who are desirous only of avenging themselves upon an enemy do not testify that way.

But nevertheless I must make the following declaration for my dear countrymen (Praters in "International Law in the World War") I have avoided the mistakes of our opponents in charging accusations as truths. In fact, the so-called established truths of our opponents are only accusations. War psychology in military affairs accepts things invented by one's self as truths. This is true generally. The contradictory procedure of accusing a different picture than one might have expected after the preliminary examination. In my reports there were certain, only sure charges as must be taken seriously and which must be reckoned with in every case. Opposing side still tries arrogantly to shake off the charges, then let destiny have its way.

In my reports on the "Belgian people's warfare" (ibid. II, 185) I again remarked with especial emphasis: "Why did the victors after the war refuse the German demand for an international investigation?"

A short while ago it looked as though my wish might be realized. The Belgian Foreign Minister, Vandervelde, had declared to the German Government that he was willing to consent to an investigation by an international commission, but under the pressure of the Belgian Cabinet and presumably of still other forces, he had to withdraw his assent.

The matter cannot be left standing this way. The Germans, as well as the Belgians, are partisan. Only a non-partisan establishment of the facts can allay the strife and bring us back to the condition of genuine peace. Not by speeches, but by deeds, will the world receive what it wants: real peace, true security.

II. The Belgian Rejoinder

By FERNAND MAYENCE

PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUVAIN, BELGIUM

The sack of Louvain constitutes one of the tragically celebrated episodes of the invasion of Belgium by the German Army in 1914. On August 25 and the following days the German Imperial troops, at the order of their commanders, put to death 200 inhabitants among whom were eight old men over 70 years of age, twenty-one women, seven of whom were over 60 years of age, and eleven children, among whom was one 18 months old, and one only 6 months old; they burned the St. Pierre Church, the university halls and the large library which it contained, the Palais de Justice, the Academy of Fine Arts and over 1,100 private houses; they deported to Germany 600 inhabitants of Louvain, 100 of whom were women and children; finally, they expelled all the population of Louvain (about 40,000 people) from their homes, leaving what remained of the old Brabant city to the mercy of their soldiers.

The pretext for these horrors was a so-called attack by the population who, in execution of a plan, allegedly assailed the German troops. Some days after the town was sacked Emperor William, in a famous telegram, informed the whole world that his army, in order to defend itself against the inhabitants of Louvain, had been compelled to destroy the University City * * * and that his heart was bleeding.

The charge was made, it must be supported. In the month of September, 1914, the Imperial Government organized an investigation, the results of which appeared in May, 1915, in a White Book entitled "Die Völkerrechtswidrige Führung des Belgischen Volkskriegs" ["The Conduct of the Belgian People's War in Defiance of International Law"]. This publication appeared in every impartial mind to be a tissue of improbabilities, contradictions and errors; it was not difficult to show the groundlessness of its conclusions. [F. Mayence: L'Armée allemande à Louvain et le livre blanc. Louvain, 1915.]

After the fall of the Imperial Government the Government of the new Germany, though it did not disavow the investigation, maintained silence regarding the destruction and massacres committed in Belgium during the first weeks of the invasion. Many Belgians naively imagined that the legends invented by the 1914 commission had been definitely abandoned; they were not far from believing that no one in Germany, with the exception of a few fanatics, gave any further credence to the fantastic tales that had sprung from what has been called the "war psychosis." They were soon forced to admit that this was a delusion. And, in fact, the Parliamentary Commission of the Reichstag, recently created to investigate and report upon the conduct of the German troops during the invasion of Belgian territory, declared that the guerrilla warfare charged with it was proved as a proved fact; it declared, moreover, that numerous acts of inhuman cruelty were committed by Belgian civilians against the German soldiers, while the Imperial army, in the reprisals to which it was compelled to resort, did not depart from the duties imposed by the laws of humanity.

These charges are based on the report of the expert, Professor Meurer, of the University of Würzburg, published in 1927 in the official publication Völkerrecht im Weltkrieg, International Law in the World War, 1914-1918, Vol. II, pp. 129-261. The author takes up at once the theme, it takes up at times modifies all the assertions of the White Book of 1915. The Reichstag Commission, disagreeing with the protests raised against this report, not long ago (on March 29, 1928) confirmed purely and simply its previous statements.

This new offensive of error, more pernicious because based on the prestige of German scholarship, must be met by a propaganda after the war charged and supported by the Municipal Government, the judicial authorities and the whole population of Louvain, we have undertaken on the strict basis of scientific research a campaign against the charges of Professor Meurer and the Reichstag Commission. A pamphlet, with a preface by legal representatives of all the inhabitants of our city, has recently been published under the title: La Légende des Francs-tireurs de Louvain ["The Legend of the Irregular Sharpshooters of Louvain"]. It will be widely distributed in English, German, French and Spanish among all educational institutions on the continent and even among University circles and will reveal to the intellectual elite of all nations the true value to be attributed to Professor Meurer's charges.

Certain organs of the German press accuse us of carrying on a Germanophile campaign and of opposing the magnificent efforts being made on all sides to restore harmony among the nations. Should we then permit Professor Meurer and the Reichstag Commission to distort the facts and dishonor the memory of the victims of the Imperial army? And when the unanimous voice of a whole humiliated nation rises, without hatred, without passion, but with the entire sincerity of being convinced of the justice of one's cause, to reply to the unjust attacks made upon it, should it be accused of betraying the cause of peace? To track down error and reveal the truth, is not working for the establishment of firm and just peace and for reconciliation between all men of good will?

We give in the following pages, in brief form, the story of the tragic days as it was revealed after a minute investigation made on the spot immediately after the event. We give in accordance with all principles of historical method.

The first German troops entered Louvain on Wednesday, Aug. 19, 1914, about 12 o'clock in the afternoon. During the first week of occupation, the population was subjected to iron discipline: excessive requisitions, taking of hostages, searches, threatening proclamations speaking only of burning and shooting without mercy—every means was employed by the military authorities to terrorize the inhabitants.

On Aug. 25 during the afternoon, numerous troops arrived in Louvain; they took
quarters in the citizens' houses, intending to pass the night in the city and to resume their march the next day. Suddenly toward 6 o'clock, the alarm was sounded. The roar of far-off cannon was heard; the Belgian army had made a sortie from Antwerp and had reached a point within ten kilometers of Louvain. The troops, now awake and active, marched to the place of assembly; certain detachments were sent to the front; others remained in the city.

Eight o'clock had just rung, when, in several parts of the town, one or two shots resounded. Who fired? Where the investigation made it possible to ascertain the facts, it was proved that the shooting was done by German soldiers. These shots spread panic among the troops; the frightened soldiers began to shoot in every direction. Machine guns were brought into action to repel the attack of the enemy, who, according to the description of the Germans themselves, could not be identified as Belgians, British or French. Repeated and continuous shots rang out. Soldiers and officers fell, runaway horses dragged drivers and carts behind them; wild confusion prevailed. The commanders had a difficult task to restore a degree of order, and only after many efforts did they succeed in putting a stop to the firing. Dead and wounded lay sprawled on the ground. Of whom had they been the victims?

The judgment was speedily pronounced; of the irregular sharpshooters. Whereupon the German soldiers and officers burst brutally into the houses whose frightened inhabitants, through fear of the fusillade, had taken refuge in the backrooms and in the cellars. A few hapless victims were struck by the bullets of certain soldiers who, to defend themselves against an imaginary enemy, raked inside the houses. Men, women, old men, children were all driven out of their homes; some were assassinated; others were led, under a strong guard, amidst shouts and insults of every kind, to different places of concentration. The soldiers and officers began their sinister work of incendiarism, setting fire to the houses, to public buildings, to the Library of the University.

On Wednesday, the 26th, the pursuit of the so-called forth runners began still more energetically in the district, many had escaped the flames. The men were arrested; the women were notified to assemble at the railway station whence a considerable number—perhaps 100—some of them with infants, were deported to Germany. Packed into stock cars, these unhappy women had to endure a terrible journey of more than sixty hours, their only sustenance a little black bread and water. They were liberated only on Sept. 27.

GERMAN CRUELTIES

As for the men arrested, they had diverse experiences; some had to march at the head of the troops and food convoys, across the city and they were the luckier ones; others were treated like playthings by the soldiery, were made to kneel, then to lie down, then to kneel, and then to run again. They were told that they were to be shot, and when all was ready for the execution, the order was given to march on until a more favorable spot was found, and this infernal comedy was repeated several times, renewing in the soul of these unhappy wretches the agony of belief that their last moment had come. Others were led to the station square, where they were tied together that they could not even move, and were forced to remain in this position until 6 o'clock in the morning of the next day (Thursday). In the rain, without food or drink, exposed to the abuse of officers and soldiers who threatened even to finish them off. Other groups of prisoners were deported to Germany, where they had to endure five months of captivity.

On Thursday, the 27th, under the ridiculous pretext that the inhabitants of Louvain were continuing to fire on the German troops, all the inhabitants were ordered to evacuate the city before noon, for that hour the town was to be bombarded and not one soul would be left intact. Then began the tragic episode of the whole civilian population starting out with a few articles of clothing and scanty provisions, snatched up at random upon the sad road of exile. The bombardment that had been promised was limited to a few cannon shots. The evacuated city was delivered over to pillage.

CONTRAST WITH GERMAN VERSION

Such is the history of the sack of Louvain. And here follows this account of the German Commission of Investigation taken up by Professor Meurer and twice confirmed by the Reichstag Commission:

The inhabitants of Louvain, paid especially by means of public contributions, had long been preparing a revolt against the German troops. On the evening of Aug. 25 they judged the moment for carrying out their project. A signal was given, and they opened a terrible fire on the German soldiers with guns, revolvers, pistols and even machine guns and hand grenades; they poured burning tar on the troops in their fury; they attacked members of the medical staff, and sick and wounded men; they committed nameless cruelties and injured the German soldiers acts of sadism on the German soldiers acts of sadism. The men worthy of respect and savage tribes. The men worthy of respect and savage tribes. The battle lasted all through the day of Aug. 26, all through the day of Aug. 26, all through the day of Aug. 26, and the German Army, unable to

The improbable of such an account is obvious. Who will believe that it took the German army three days to crush the unhappy population of Louvain, completely disarmed and terrorized since the first evening of the alleged revolt by massacres and burnings? The people are accused of having used machine guns and hand grenades. But they hardly knew the name of this war weapon; moreover, hand grenades were not used in the Belgian Army until the beginning of 1915. And how explain that after four years of occupation the German military authority, aided by numerous secret sources, was not able to find the least trace of this alleged conspiracy? Is it not absurd to suppose that 40,000 conspirators, representing every shade of political opinion and belonging to all parties, remained invisible to this day the most complete silence regarding a plot which so lamentably failed? If any franc-tireurs had existed, would there not have been one or two to boast after the war, when it was no longer dangerous to speak of an exploit which he considered glorious? And would we see the population of Louvain so divided from all points of view, rising up today en masse to protest against the conclusions of the report?

The fantastic tale of the revolt of the inhabitants of Louvain taken up by Professor Meurer is the work of the Commission of Investigation of 1914. Now, what confidence can one have in the labors of that commission? It was charged over by Dr. Ivers, who subsequently (Nov. 29, 1916) was sentenced by the Criminal Court of Berlin to nine months of imprisonment for extortion of funds and exacting of money in the course of his professional occupation. The trial revealed that this Dr. Ivers was an inebriate and an addict of morphine. His counsel appealed to the pity of the judge on the ground that his client could not have any comprehension of justice, inasmuch as he was utterly lacking in moral sense.

Effect of machine gun fire on house in Louvain when attacked by German troops

The commission summoned before it a number of notable people of Louvain, among them Mr. Leguillou, rector of the university, and several professors. The questions to those witnesses were farcical; they were unable to speak freely; they were allowed only to answer the questions asked of them, and the investigating Judge even tried to distort their answers. Even taken under such conditions, those depositions must have appeared to the commission too iniminating, for they were not reproduced in the report. With one exception (a simple sworn statement by M. A. Lafraye, professor at the university, declaring that the German soldiers billeted in his house during the week preceding the sack of the town had given no cause for complaint), the White Book contains only German depositions.

GERMAN POINTS CONTRADICTED

We cannot, in the space of this brief article, refute point by point the assertions of the report, so we will limit ourselves to citing a few examples which will suffice to form a judgment of its value: 1—The report declares that the fire was accidentally spread to the Saint-Pierre
A photograph of the theatre in Louvain almost immediately after it was wrecked by the Germans in 1914 and its famous mural paintings were destroyed.

3—The commission declares—and Professor Meurer repeats this—that the inhabitants killed during those tragic days were convicted of having taken part in the revolt. We deny this statement categorically. We have been able to reconstruct the circumstances under which each one of the victims met death, and we can assert most emphatically that all these unfortunate beings were murdered without cause and perished suffocated in the burning of their houses.

4—Professor Meurer, repeating one of the conclusions of the investigation of 1914, says that the inhabitants of Louvain inflicted revolting mutilations on the German soldiers. To support this infamous charge he can invoke only the evidence of the soldier Westerkamp (Deposition No. 37). Now, what does this witness say?

I saw a soldier pass by, borne on a stretcher. I learned that during a patrol of the city he had been surprised by several inhabitants, and that they had inflicted on him an odious mutilation. A few days later I met Lieutenant Forster. He told me that acts of savagery defying all imagination had been inflicted on German soldiers.

These German soldiers—who are they? This is not revealed and it is solely on the basis of these stories that the Commission of Investigation and Professor Meurer bring such infamous charges against the inhabitants of Louvain!

The formal act of accusation drawn up by the defenders of the Imperial army contains only depictions in which vagueness vies with improbability.

That a number of German officers and soldiers may have been sincere in declaring that they had been attacked by the population, we are far from denying. These witnesses were caught in the darkness by a violent affray in which they could not recognize those who were handling the guns whose shots they heard and saw. And to the German soldiers, whose minds had been excited by the menacing fear of the franc-tireur, as soon as a shot rang out it could be only the work of those terrible enemies who could never be seized and who were never more than phantoms. Most of the German witnesses declare that they heard shots; only a few of them allege that they saw the franc-tireurs; each one of these witnesses may be convicted of bearing false witness (we ourselves have demonstrated this in the work cited above).

What shall we say of a method like that of Professor Meurer, who accepts without control or criticism all evidence, even the most open to suspicion, from German sources, and systematically ignores all Belgian reports on the same subject, which has been published in Belgium about the sack of Louvain? He even goes so far as to declare, regarding the investigations of Cardinal Mercier and the other Bishops of Belgium, that “the evidence of the Bishops bearing on events which developed far from the seat of their Bishopric, has no value.” For Professor Meurer the statements made under oath by Cardinal Mercier are not worthy of consideration! Bad faith or incompetence? We find it difficult to find any other alternative.

We had the right to expect from Professor Meurer’s report an explanation of the act of vandalism involved in the burning of the university library; like the Commission of Investigation of 1914 he maintains that subject the most obstinate silence.

On our part we have neglected no source of information. In our refutation of the White Book we have thoroughly discussed and examined all the German depositions without omitting one. At a point was left obscured, all the official documents of the trial were placed before the reader. We are convinced that scientific honesty.

But without believing in a methodical attack against us, we do not suppose that certain statements based on a patriotism as a few shots at the German soldiers? On the day following the events, on the repeated statements of the military authorities that civilians had fired the shots, we believed this ourselves; like many others we could not imagine that the German Army would take such cruel reprisals if at least a pretext therefor had not been afforded. It was in that state of mind that we began our investigation. Well, we declare honestly and conscientiously that despite all our researches we have not been able to conclude that a single shot was fired by a civilian.

The advocates of the Imperial Army, utterly unable to prove the truth of their thesis, seek a last argument in the refusal of the Belgian Government to agree to the proposal of an international investigation made in 1927 by the German Government. They do not realize that this argument turns against themselves. As a matter of fact it was Belgium who first, in 1915, asked for an international investigation:

IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION DESIRED

For our part, we ardently long for the day when a commission of historians will come, free from all political ideas, to determine the true value of the investigation made by the Belgian Government and the German Government. This would not be a case for the discussion of questions like that of war responsibility, where the interpretation of the facts plays a certain role and where, consequently, the opinions of people of equally good faith may be diametrically opposed; it would be solely a case for setting forth facts, the evidence for which convinces every mind which respects the truth.

We believe we do not err in declaring that the intellectual élite of Belgium would welcome an initiative for such a project by some great and impartial institution of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In so doing it would perform a signal service to history and would greatly contribute to raising the standards of international morality.