

A brief overview of the recent discussion about Francs-tireurs in Belgium in 1914, by Peter Hoeres

Abstract: Since the Franco-German War of 1870-71 the phenomenon of irregular voluntary troops became known as ‘francs-tireurs’ in Western Europe. Recent research shows that numerous francs-tireurs fought against the German army in Belgium in summer 1914.

1. Irregular Warfare as Historical Phenomenon

“Francs-tireurs” were irregular combatants who fought in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 and in the German invasion of Belgium and northern France in the first few weeks of World War I.

However, the phenomenon of irregular guerrilla fighting against invading troops is much older. At the beginning of the 19th century the Spanish guerilleros, Andreas Hofer’s riflemen and later Garibaldi’s partisans operated outside the contemporary customs of war. Even in Prussia, there was a short period during the Campaigns against Napoleon, when the people were called to rise up against the occupying forces.

2. The Franco-Prussian-War of 1870/71

While asymmetrical fighting was widespread, the French term ‘francs-tireurs’ (free shooters) came – besides some rare usage before – into existence in the second phase of the Franco-Prussian-War of 1870/71, when the regular French army was beaten. In 1870-71 there were two kinds of francs-tireurs. On the one hand, there were small, marginal bodies of irregular voluntary troops who fought against the invading or occupying army in a secretive way, out of ambushes, without uniforms and without carrying their arms openly, as demanded by the then customs of law. They were not recognized by the Prussian army as lawful combatants, and some were executed when caught.

On the other hand, Léon Gambetta recruited and hastily trained large irregular troop bodies, which were often called “francs-tireurs”, too, but were uniformed, carried their arms openly and fought openly side by side with the remnants of the regular army. In other words, in spite of their name, these were not really illegal combatants engaging in asymmetrical warfare, and the Germans recognized them as legitimate combatants.

3. The Legal Status: The Hague Convention

The Hague Convention of 1907 provided in keeping with earlier traditions that militiamen have the same rights as regular soldiers, if they have fixed distinctive emblems recognizable at a distance, carry their arms openly and are organized in a hierarchical structure (Art. I). They have to respect the laws and customs of warfare in any case, even if there is no time to organize (Art. II), and they should not hide their arms.

If francs-tireurs failed to act in conformity with Art I or II or if the territory was already pacified, the occupying army had according to customary law the right (which is not spelled out in the Hague Convention however) to treat them as criminals rather than prisoners of war.

4. The Invasion of Belgium

At the beginning of World War I in 1914 the German army aimed to conquer Belgium quickly to fulfill the time table of the modified Schlieffen Plan. During the advance German armies encountered greater resistance than expected. The German troops were also exposed to attacks by francs-tireurs. The German troops responded with harsh measures. According to John Horne and Alan Kramer 6500 civilians were killed.

5. The Historical Debate: Belgium 1914

The question, if there had been a war of francs-tireurs in Belgium at all, was an integral part of the interbellum debate on Germany's assumed "war guilt" ("Kriegsschuldfrage"). After the Second World War, the German side gave in and accepted the allied version.

Since then international research has explained the German reprisals and atrocities then as the result of nervousness induced by a strong Belgian army resistance, friendly fire and a purely imaginary perception of francs-tireur activities, brought on by supposedly traumatic remembrance of the events of 1870/71. John Horne and Alan Kramer defined in this respect in 2001 a widely accepted consensus.

Although there have been other perspectives, from the German White Book to scientific critics the consensus of unprovoked German atrocities gained credence by the German crimes in World War II and the wish to calm down the feelings of the occupied Belgians who suffered twice by German invasions. But on the basis of much relevant archival documentation recent authors have revived older German assertions that the German army did, in fact, encounter irregular attacks from francs-tireurs in occupied communities which broke international law. New research by Gunter Spraul and by Ulrich Keller shows that many sources, like radiographs of injuries from shotgun pellets, sworn testimonies, newspaper reports from all sides, war diaries, regiment stories, testify the existence of an irregular war of francs-tireurs. Massacres as those committed by German troops in Dinant, however, far exceeded any legitimate punitive purpose.

In sum, in August 1914 both sides committed war crimes as many other troops did at other war theatres, among them Russians in East Prussia and Galicia, the French army in Alsace-Lorraine, the Royal Navy with the sea blockade. There were illegal attacks by Belgian francs-tireurs as well as German atrocities against civilians. It was a stimulus-response-situation, but not all of the German punishments or reprisals were against the law of war. But it is still highly controversial, if the activities of Belgium francs-tireurs were organized and instructed.

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