

# Twentieth-Century Thermopylae: Liège 1914 and the U.S. Public

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## I Introduction: Mass Death Overseas

The clash of the German and Belgian armies at the fortress of Liège,<sup>1</sup> on August 5, 1914 spelt sudden, shocking, industrial-strength violence. The horrified German stretcher-bearer describing his dismay over the sudden emergence of death, in an atmosphere that was “so to speak poisoned with shattered, lacerated, stinking lead, now flying here and there, then rising up in tornadoes of dust... »<sup>2</sup>; a fortnight later, the Belgian troops in the bombarded concrete bulwarks, choking in pitch darkness - both represented the fate of

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<sup>1</sup> NB Although, in 1914, the name of the city was still spelled Liège - it was changed to Liège after the war – I will use the present-day spelling.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous [Rudolf REQUADT] *Aus den Kämpfen um Lüttich, von einem Sanitätssoldaten*, Berlin, 1915, pp. 15, 27.

men barely out of civilian garb, now enrolled in the terrorizing task of inflicting and suffering extreme violence.

Both represented a fate which contemporaries in neutral nations congratulated themselves on avoiding. Among citizens of the USA, gratitude for this blessing was palpable. “*Again and ever I thank Heaven for the Atlantic Ocean,*” wrote the American ambassador in London;<sup>3</sup> one Chicago newspaper gave “*a hearty vote of thanks to Columbus for having discovered America.*”<sup>4</sup> The Americas were seen as a blessed isle, sagely remote from the senseless, evilly retrograde tangle in Europe. The New York Times of August 16 opined that “*the European ideal bears its full fruit of ruin and savagery*” and contrasted it to the enlightened, peace-loving American way of being in the world.<sup>5</sup> The USA, it was widely believed, was spared Europe’s regression to barbaric bloodshed because, as an enlightened democratic republic, it had exorcized the old motives for aggression, such as, first and foremost, dynastic greed. The overwhelming desire to stay out of the fighting<sup>6</sup> was thus bolstered by a sense of the USA’s *mission*, to wit, that of showing the developed world that a Great Power could be perfectly peaceful. On the day the battle of Liège broke out, President Wilson sent out his offer to mediate among the belligerents, a significant coincidence. Given American public opinion’s “prevailing feelings of detachment and superiority”<sup>7</sup> vis-à-vis the fighting in Europe, what was the perception of the early, bloody example of industrial warfare that was Liège?

It would be impossible in the space of this contribution to analyze all manifestations of that elusive entity known as “public opinion”. I will, in the following, largely limit my analysis to the news media, to which the outbreak of “the European war” gave a considerable boost, given the keen interest of the U.S. public, which, as one

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Hines Page to Woodrow Wilson, July 29, 1914; quoted in John M. Cooper, *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism and the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1969), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *America’s Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Cooper, *The Vanity of Power*, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Zieger, *America’s Great War*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, *The Vanity of Power*, p. 20.

observer griped, saw the war as “an immensely interesting spectacle provided for [its] entertainment”.<sup>8</sup>

## II American News Media and the War, 1914<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the escalating international tension of July had left American editors indifferent, attention was duly mobilized once the war broke out. As the Chicago Daily News' Paris correspondent Paul Mowrer later wrote, “*The same American public that had been indifferent to the signs and portents were fascinated now by the cyclonic fury of this war in which they had not believed. The papers told of little else.*”<sup>10</sup> In 1914, the U.S.A. possessed the second largest contingent of war correspondents in Europe after Britain: an estimated 75 journalists. News agencies and papers greatly increased their expenditure on war coverage (largely concentrating on the Western Front). The great demand for war news offered career opportunities for journalists to pursue “*the variety, adventure, or chance to make their mark that overseas service might offer.*”<sup>11</sup> The glamour of war-correspondentship attracted militarily knowledgeable intrepids; among them was a friend of Theodore Roosevelt's by the name of Granville Fortescue, a “*soldier of fortune with sufficient money to live abroad and avoid regular employment*”<sup>12</sup> who had been a military observer of sorts during the Spanish-American and Russo-Japanese Wars. Vacationing in Knokke and noticing the departure of German tourists from the Belgian coast, he packed off his family to England, and, “*determined to cover the coming war as a*

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<sup>8</sup> Thus the – admittedly jaundiced – opinion of the British ambassador to Washington, Sir Cecil Spring Rice, in a letter of April 16, 1915; quoted in Cooper, *The Vanity of Power*, p.22.

<sup>9</sup> In the absence of an in-depth scholarly synthesis on the U.S. press and World War One, this section relies on the following works: Emmet Crozier, *American Reporters on the Western Front 1914-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Robert W. Desmond, *Windows on the World: The Information Process in A Changing Society 1900-1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980); Morrell Heald, *Transatlantic Vistas: American Journalists in Europe, 1900-1940* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1988); Rodney Stephens, “Shattered Windows, German Spies, and Zigzag Trenches: World War I Through the Eyes of Richard Harding Davis,” *The Historian* 65 (1), 43-73. The otherwise solid Alfred M. Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of A Social Instrument* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), barely mentions World War One.

<sup>10</sup> Desmond, *Windows*, p.276.

<sup>11</sup> Heald, *Vistas*, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Crozier, *Correspondents*, p. 10.

correspondent”,<sup>13</sup> took a train to Brussels on August 2. Two days later, Britain having declared war on Germany for violating Belgium’s neutrality, Fortescue was authorized by the London Daily Telegraph to cover the war on the Belgian front.<sup>14</sup> In the afternoon of August 5, he arrived in Liège; at midnight, almost losing his way among the coal dumps, he ventured out to a hill near Fort Fléron to observe such snatches of fighting as were discernible to him (“*Even in the resplendent moonlight it is almost impossible to distinguish German from Belgian,*” as he recounted it in his 1937 memoirs).<sup>15</sup> On the following day, taking a refugee-laden train back to Brussels, he wrote up his report and sent it to the Telegraph as well as to the New York Tribune. “*Although he had witnessed only an obscure and confused segment of the fighting, his imagination and background of military experience enabled him to construct a long and readable, if somewhat breathless, account of the German attack on Liège and the Belgians’ stout resistance. No other newspaperman in Brussels had as fresh or vivid a report on Liège.*”<sup>16</sup>

At midnight on August 5, as Fortescue was watching “*the tide of battle sweep through the forest valley*” near Fléron,<sup>17</sup> the steamer *Lusitania* left New York harbour; on board were five seasoned U.S. war correspondents, among them Richard Harding Davis, the U.S.’ most famous journalist, who had covered five previous wars and was the best-paid correspondent in the world. He, like many of his colleagues, was headed for Brussels, which was now, as New York had urgently been informed, the very “CENTER OF ALL WAR NEWS.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, from the outbreak of the fighting until the taking of Brussels a fortnight later, the Belgian capital was the crucial hub of communications regarding the war – although, as correspondents were to discover, “*the sources of information in Belgium were completely disorganized.*”<sup>19</sup>

The following analysis of Liège coverage concentrates on four newspapers:

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<sup>13</sup> Granville Fortescue, *Front Line and Deadline: The Experiences of a War Correspondent* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1937), p.31.

<sup>14</sup> Fortescue landed this assignment because of a scoop regarding a German reconnoitering party near Visé on August 2; see his memoir, *Front Line*, pp. 27-34.

<sup>15</sup> Fortescue, *Front Line*, p.45.

<sup>16</sup> Crozier, *Correspondents*, p.22.

<sup>17</sup> Fortescue, *Front Line*, p.45.

<sup>18</sup> Crozier, *Correspondents*, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> Desmond, *Windows*, p. 303.

1. the New York Times (hereafter NYT), the most pro-Allied of the four, was to win a Pulitzer prize in 1918 for its war reporting of the preceding year. At war's outbreak, the NYT increased its European staff (in Brussels, its correspondent was Wythe Williams, a reporter highly regarded for his independence of views), ran pictures of the theatre of fighting (including Liège) in its Sunday issues, added a "Mid-Week Pictorial" and the monthly magazine *Current History*, and overall provided intense day-by-day coverage of events complemented by special reports from qualified writers. As a result, cable charges soared, because the editors authorized correspondents to use so-called "double-urgent" rates for important reports; when war coverage required extra space, editors would jettison up to 70 columns of advertising at considerable sacrifice in revenue. This new orientation, then, did not come cheap, but it paid off: the paper's circulation increased 48 percent during the war's first two years.
2. For the Midwest, the Chicago Tribune (hereafter CT), offered less intense but solid war coverage. Among other correspondents in Belgium, it sent the famous cartoonist-correspondent John McCutcheon and the reporter James O'Donnell Bennett; both were to be "embedded" with the German Army after the taking of Brussels.
3. The Washington Post (hereafter WP), close to government circles and emphatically intent on the strictest neutrality.
4. On the West Coast, the Los Angeles Times (hereafter LA), an anti-labour paper buoyed by considerable advertising revenue.

In addition to these, coverage of the war has been studied in three weekly publications: the mass-circulation Collier's Magazine, the scholarly Atlantic Monthly, and the pro-German The Fatherland.

### **III Reporting on Liège**

As early as July 27, the NYT reported, in a short front-page article under the headline "INTENSE ALARM IN BELGIUM" that the bridges at Liège had been mined. The strategic

importance of the stronghold was thus made clear to American readers; in the following days, further preparations at Liège were mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

“KAISER HURLS TWO ARMIES INTO BELGIUM (...) LIÈGE ATTACK REPULSED”: on Wednesday, August 5, the invasion of the preceding day made the NYT’s front page, as did a report – sent by the Associated Press that same Wednesday – of the German demand for Liège’s surrender and the ensuing “*engagement, in which the Germans were repulsed.*”<sup>21</sup> On the next day, August 6, the German setback made headlines in all dailies: “SEVERE CHECK TO GERMAN ARMS IN THE FIRST BELGIAN FIGHT”;<sup>22</sup> “BELGIUM WINS BATTLE, THOUSANDS DIE” (CT);<sup>23</sup> “BELGIAN DEFENDERS INFLICT A TERRIBLE DEFEAT” (WP);<sup>24</sup> “VICTORY FOR BELGIANS ALLEGED IN BATTLE OF LIÈGE” (LA).<sup>25</sup> The overseas reports – which in all four cases hailed from the same source, though the published articles differed somewhat in length - were not editorialized upon. The messages, though overall written in an unadorned Associated Press style, qualified the Belgian defense as “heroic”, “vigorous”, “fierce” and “admirable”. They painted a picture of a severe, possibly decisive setback for the invaders and quoted de Broqueville’s statement as to the Belgians’ success in combating the German invasion, and the “trifling” Belgian losses compared to the German ones. Indeed, the severity of German losses was emphasized from the report’s opening line: “*Several thousand dead and wounded is the toll paid by the German army of the Meuse for its attack on Liège*”...

The extent of German losses suffered at the initial clash remained a *Leitmotiv* throughout the first week of Liège reporting. Though the reports remained matter-of-fact in tone, the image they conveyed was one of the unequal pitting of men against machines: the defense of Fort Barchon was described as “*terrific slaughter*”, with the attackers,

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<sup>20</sup> NYT, July 27, p.1; see also August 3, pp. 2 and 7.

<sup>21</sup> NYT, August 5: New York Times-London Chronicle Special Cable Dispatch (Brussels, August 4) and Associated Press report (Brussels, August 5), both p.1. The AP report also in LA, August 5, p.1. The other dailies mention the invasion (see CT, ““TO ARMS”, IS BELGIAN CRY”, August 5, p.1) but not yet the German setback at Liège.

<sup>22</sup> NYT, August 6, p.1, Brussels via Paris, August 6, 1.38 a.m. Two smaller reports on the front page from New York Times-London Chronicle Special Cable Dispatch (Brussels, August 5); Brussels (via the London Daily Mail), August 5, 5.30 p.m.

<sup>23</sup> CT, August 6, pp.1-2 (Brussels via Paris, August 6).

<sup>24</sup> WP, August 6, pp. 1-2 (Brussels via Paris, August 6, 1.38 a.m.). This is a lengthier version of the report appearing in the NYT.

<sup>25</sup> LA, August 6, p.2 (with mention on front page) (Brussels via London, August 6)

mown down by Hotchkiss gunfire, reduced to “*heaps of dead and wounded*”.<sup>26</sup> After the taking of the city proper (see below), a few articles dwelt on the extent of the battle’s toll so far, comparing it to the inferior body count – relative to the number of troops engaged - of the preceding century’s wars (including the U.S. Civil War). “GERMAN LOSS OF 25,000 AT LIÈGE MAKES FIGHT BLOODIEST IN HISTORY,” as the Sunday, August 9, edition of the WP headlined, noting that what made the combat so “*sanguinary*” was the “*obstinate character*” of the attack on Liège, due to “*the desperate haste of the Germans to force a road before the French mobilization is complete*”.<sup>27</sup> The NYT noted that the enormous human cost was typical of the new century’s waging of war: “*It was not until the time of the Russo-Japanese war that the casualties of battle became so fearful.*” Liège being a case in point: “*this opening engagement in the war of Europe records a heavier loss than the victors sustained in [19<sup>th</sup>-century battles], and it must be reckoned only a minor engagement*”, as “*the main armies of the French and Germans have yet to meet.*”<sup>28</sup>

For all the losses inflicted by the defending forces, they were not reported capable of routing the invader for long; on August 7, the NYT reported that by the preceding day “*It seemed certain that the fortifications could not stop the German Army, and the only question was whether their advance could be delayed.*”<sup>29</sup> That same August 7, all four newspapers printed the Associated Press’ cabled message (arriving from Brussels via Paris near midnight on the 6<sup>th</sup>) to the effect that “*Despite the heroic resistance of the Belgians, it was felt in Brussels tonight that the invaders, by reason of their greater strength, could not much longer be denied and that ultimately they must gain the city of Liège, whence they are expected to press onward to Namur in the effort to cross Belgium to the French frontier.*”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> NYT, August 7, p.2, also p.1 (Cable from Brussels, August 6, probably a.m.); WP, August 7, p. 3 (“mounds of dead”); CT, August 7, p.4; LA, August 7, p.2 (“the slaughter is reported to have been appalling”).

<sup>27</sup> WP, August 9, p.6 (New York, August 8); see also the quarter-column report on p.2 under the title “DEAD FIVE DEEP IN LIÈGE TRENCHES”. N.B. The number of 25,000 quoted by the WP refers to German dead and wounded. The NYT of the preceding day, in a cable message by the editor of the Indépendance Belge, mentions 25,000 German dead, wounded, *or captured*. (NYT, August 8, p. 1.)

<sup>28</sup> In other words, Liège is considered “a minor engagement” in terms of the number of troops engaged, not in terms of the battle’s strategic significance. NYT, August 8, p.6.

<sup>29</sup> NYT, August 7, p.1 (Brussels via Paris, August 6, 4.45 p.m.)

<sup>30</sup> NYT and LA, August 7, p.1 and p.2, respectively (both Brussels via Paris, August 6, 11.30 p.m.); WP, August 7, pp. 1 and 3; CT, August 7, pp.1-2 (Brussels via Paris, August 7, 5 a.m.)

On the next day, August 8, the invaders' entering the city was reported on the NYT's front page, in a short article headlined "FOES GET PAST THE FORTS" ( the use of the term "foes" being, for an ostensibly neutral daily, significant). Readers were informed that, Liège being a modern fortress defended not by a wall but by a ring of detached forts, *"the occupation of the city does not mean the capture of the fortress."*<sup>31</sup> The CT mentioned, almost in passing, that a *"large section of Liège"* had been taken, but that the forts held out; the paper quoted an unnamed report to the effect that "the German troops which entered the city later retired".<sup>32</sup>

On the following Sunday, reporting on Liège had intensified, though ambivalence reigned as to which camp was gaining the upper hand. The papers ran the official Belgian retrospective account of the first clashes (August 3-5), which stressed the German setback, quoted a total of five thousand German dead, and described the German attack as *"[lacking] cohesion"*, as *"listless"* and *"without dash"* – in contrast to the *"energetic"* defenders' *"consummate skill"*.<sup>33</sup> Poincaré's awarding Liège the cross of the Legion of Honour was reported. *"In France,"* the WP informed its readers, *"it is a mighty important thing."*<sup>34</sup> (The German-American *New York Staats-Zeitung* caustically remarked that *"the taxpayers of Liege will have to bear that cross for many years to come."*<sup>35</sup>) One article noted the "Belgian spirit" apparent in Liège university's continuation of classes despite the German shelling of the city.<sup>36</sup> The NYT ran verse by the English poet Stephen Phillips, hailing what he described as Liège's checking of the German Emperor's "mad" ambition and generally portraying Belgium as the stumbling-block of imperial aggression, as evidenced at Waterloo; the latter point was also made in a letter to the editor printed that day (*"The check which the Belgians have given the Germans at Liège is not the first instance of the kind in Belgian history"*).<sup>37</sup> Yet, for all that, an indistinctness hung over the ongoing events at Liège, as expressed in CT's headline

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<sup>31</sup> NYT, August 8, p.1 (report dated Amsterdam, August 7); see also p.2.

<sup>32</sup> CT, August 8, p.2; see also the next day's ambivalent front-page headline: "LIÈGE FALLS, SAYS BERLIN". WP does not report the fall of Liège until the next day, as does the LA.

<sup>33</sup> NYT, August 9, p.2 (Brussels via Paris, August 8); CT and LA, August 9, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> WP, August 26, p.5.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *The Fatherland*, August 17, p.2.

<sup>36</sup> WP, August 9, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> The letter, signed G.H. Crawford and dated August 7, referred to a decisive stand taken by Belgian troops at Quatre Bras on June 16, 1815. NYT, August 9, p.14.

“KAISER AND FOES BOTH LAY CLAIM TO LIEGE VICTORY”.<sup>38</sup> All papers ran a dispatch on the celebrations in Berlin over news of the fall of the city, noting the German press’ satisfaction over the fact that “*false reports which are known to have been circulated in foreign countries that the Germans suffered a severe reverse before Liège will no longer serve to conceal Germany’s triumphs.*”<sup>39</sup> Yet equal space was given to a Belgian official statement of August 8 to the effect that the situation remained unchanged, and reports of continued German losses (“*the dead lay five deep in the trenches*”) were reprinted.<sup>40</sup> Another report stated that “*Berlin has been celebrating “the fall of Liege”, but reports from other quarters indicate that the German troops (...) are attempting to get around [the fortresses]. This is a hazardous undertaking, as the Belgian guns cover the roads.*”<sup>41</sup> London, it was noted, “*was disturbed this morning [the morning of August 8, SdS] by conflicting reports relative to Liège*”: with Berlin rejoicing and Brussels claiming the forts still held, it was unclear where the truth lay; for the taking of the city necessarily entailed (so the report assumed) that of at least some of the forts.<sup>42</sup>

It was not until the next day that the fate of the city proper and that of the forts were dissociated. As the NYT headlined on its front page, “LIÈGE INVESTED, FORTS SAFE. BELGIANS AND GERMANS BOTH RIGHT, FROM THEIR POINTS OF VIEW.”<sup>43</sup> The paper reprinted a London Daily News dispatch explaining that the city was well and truly “*invested*”, but that the fortresses were “*quite as capable of inflicting damage as ever*”.<sup>44</sup> Yet, on the next page, another report sent via London expressed concern over the fortresses, now left to fend for themselves, and admitted that “*It must be confessed that for the Germans to have forced an entry into the town through the zone of powerful forts around it is a very considerable success.*”<sup>45</sup> Still, these belated admissions of General von

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<sup>38</sup> CT, August 9, p.2.

<sup>39</sup> Associated Press dispatch (Berlin via London, August 8, 11.25 p.m.) in NYT, CT, WP, LA, August 9, p.1.

<sup>40</sup> NYT, August 9, p.1 (“BRUSSELS SAYS DEFENSE CONTINUES,” Brussels, August 8); WP and CT, both August 9, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> NYT, August 9, p.1 (Associated Press report, Brussels via London, August 9, 2.35 a.m.)

<sup>42</sup> “LONDON REPORTS CONFLICT”, NYT, August 9, p.1 (London, Aug 9, 1 a.m.)

<sup>43</sup> NYT, August 10, p.1 (Brussels, August 9).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., untitled report (Brussels via London, August 10).

<sup>45</sup> “PARTIAL ADMISSION BY BELGIANS”, NYT, August 10, p.2 (Brussels via London, August 10).

Emmich's success<sup>46</sup> were counterbalanced, in the very same issue of the NYT, by short messages from Belgian sources, minimizing if not outright denying the German advance,<sup>47</sup> as well as by reports on the invaders' lack of provisions, "*having undertaken to force their way into the country without making adequate preparations*", as a result of which "*isolated patrols are said to be surrendering in order to obtain food.*"<sup>48</sup> (After the Belgian retreat, the story of the German soldier surrendering for a *tartine* was bitterly resented among the occupied population as a prime example of *bourrage de crâne*.) An emphatically triumphant note was struck in a long front-page report by the NYT's and London Daily Chronicle's special correspondent, Martin Donohoe, starting with the words "*Everything goes well at Liège. Though it is still invested, it is holding out heroically*", for the invaders were crushing themselves against the forts in vain. Indeed, "*the initial loss sustained by the German invaders is the most serious encountered by any army in modern times*". The "*terrible slaughter*" at Fort Bonnelles, another example of the fateful German predilection for human-wave attacks ("*The attack in mass and flinging of immense bodies of men against a selected position is a pet theory of the German General Staff*"), had, Donohoe asserted, "*failed lamentably thanks to undaunted courage of a mere handful of Belgian defenders*". The resulting "*general demoralization*" in the German ranks was compounded by the lack of ammunition and food, and Donohoe concluded, in a by now classic mixture of optimism and Hohenzollern-bashing, that "*once more German Imperial impulsiveness has outrun discretion with disastrous consequences for the Prussian Army autocrat, who foolishly counted on the twin weapons of terror and surprise to overcome Belgian resistance.*"<sup>49</sup>

In all, the NYT ran fourteen articles on Liège on Aug 10; reporting was not nearly as elaborate in the other dailies. But all ran the aforementioned Daily Mail dispatch

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<sup>46</sup> See also the – albeit more reticent – messages on p. 2: "the Germans continue to issue affirmations that Liège is in their hands" (Havas dispatch, Paris via Copenhagen, Aug 9, 7.25 p.m.); a "semi-official message" from Berlin to the same effect (Berlin via Amsterdam via London, Aug 9, 6.30 p.m.).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.1, reprint from Indépendance Belge, August 9: the Belgian Ministry of War asserts that, in spite of the taking of Liège, "tout va bien", and vouches for the "buoyant confidence" of the Belgian field troops; on p.2, a short message (Brussels via London, August 10, 2.40 a.m.): Minister de Broqueville has authorized the correspondent of the London Standard "to state that Liège has not been occupied by the Germans."

<sup>48</sup> NYT, August 10, p.2, official statement by Belgian Ministry of War (Brussels via Paris, Aug 9, 7.20 p.m.); a much more cautious assertion of German logistical difficulties in the aforementioned London Daily News dispatch on p.1 (untitled, Brussels via London, August 10).

<sup>49</sup> NYT, Aug 10, p.1 (Brussels, Aug 9)

explaining the difference between the city's and the fortresses' fate, plus a smattering of conflicting articles regarding the exact issue of the clash. Under the title "WON'T BELIEVE LIEGE IS FALLEN", the CT reported on a speech held before an audience of 200 at the Belgian-American Society by a retired Belgian sergeant major claiming the impregnability of the fortifications (whether he meant the actual forts or the city's defenses, was unclear) and the invincibility of Liège's defenders: "*I know the class of men behind those forts, and they never know when they are licked. No, indeed! Liège has not fallen yet',*" [the speaker] concluded, while the throng cheered."<sup>50</sup>

Shortly after the capitulation of Forts Flémalle and Hollogne, an angry reader from Hamburg expressed his indignation to the NYT over the enemy press' distorted reporting on German triumphs. "*Liège,*" he stated, "*has been taken by storm by the Germans.*"<sup>51</sup> This reader's assertion echoes a wider German (and Austrian) desire to broadcast the German victory at Liège, resulting among other things in the launching of a new verb, viz., *lüttichieren*, or, "to liègify", meaning the taking of a modern fortress with overwhelming force. (The verb never caught on.)<sup>52</sup> Having said this, the reader was not unjustified in denouncing lopsided reporting: in the papers studied here, German successes at Liège tended to be kept somewhat under wraps.<sup>53</sup> To give just one egregious example, none of the reports mentioned Ludendorff by name. Other underestimations were more implicit; they can be found especially (though by no means exclusively) in the NYT. One British-American August 20 report did admit that "*all the indications suggest that the town of Liège and its ring of forts have been finally destroyed*", but qualified that statement by suggesting that the advance through Belgium might only be a "*flank movement*".<sup>54</sup> (This reading of the German strategy contradicted earlier acknowledgements of the crucial importance, for the German offensive, of the Belgian

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<sup>50</sup> Report of August 9 meeting, CT, August 10, p.4.

<sup>51</sup> Letter dated August 20, printed in NYT, September 25, p.10.

<sup>52</sup> Victor Klemperer, *LTI [Lingua Tertii Imperii]. Notizbuch eines Philologen*. Leipzig: Reclam, [1957] 1975, pp. 162-163.

<sup>53</sup> This is true even for the LA, which might have relied on German communications via the transpacific cable (in operation until August 23, unlike the transatlantic German-American cable, cut on August 4).

<sup>54</sup> NYT, Aug 20, report by G.H. Perris, correspondent for the NYT and London Chronicle, p.2.

route, voiced when Liège still seemed a German setback).<sup>55</sup> On August 21, a report still quoted news that “on Tuesday [August 18], all the Liège forts were holding out”.<sup>56</sup> The departure of Entente and American war correspondents after the capture of Brussels had by then rather confused NYT’s Liège reporting; on August 24, the purported blowing up of Fort Chaudfontaine by its own commander was hailed as an “act of heroism” that “affirms once more the brilliant valor of the Belgian Army”.<sup>57</sup> Leman’s capture was not reported until the next day.

Finally, on August 26, a symbolic report on an eight-day-long stand by 500 Belgians between Forts Chaudfontaine and Embourg struck an elegiac note on the defunct defense of Liège.<sup>58</sup> This defeat had been, to be sure, adumbrated in reports published in the preceding weeks: on August 12, the NYT stressed the crucial importance of the arrival of the German siege guns and printed Emperor William’s statement to U.S. ambassador Gerard regarding the fall of the city;<sup>59</sup> in the following week, it printed an account by an American traveler describing Belgium as largely overrun by the “superb” German “military machine”,<sup>60</sup> a report by “a daring newspaperman” on the German satisfaction regarding the advance,<sup>61</sup> and an August 18 dispatch from Berlin entitled “LIEGE FORTS FELL”.<sup>62</sup> Yet, other reports stressed deficient German logistics<sup>63</sup> and,

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<sup>55</sup> E.g. the editorial “OPERATIONS OF THE WAR”, NYT, August 8, p.6. Also the lengthy article by Donohoe dated August 10 in NYT, August 11, p.1 (“Liège still shows a defiant front to the Teutonic foe (...) these are disastrous days for the Prussian war eagle.”)

<sup>56</sup> NYT, August 21, p.2. Likewise, the CT of August 22 ran two conflicting reports. The first one was an official denial, relayed by the Daily News correspondent at Ostend, of the fall of the Liège forts and the capture of General Leman, in response to a Berlin message declaring that the forts had fallen and the commander had been captured. (Ostend via London, Aug 22, p.2) The second one contained an eyewitness statement by an American traveling businessman to the effect that the fortresses *were* taken, calling the idea that they could still be holding out “ridiculous” (Denver, Colorado, Aug 21, p.2). The considerably more neutral WP, by contrast, ran several articles reprinted from the German-American *New York Staats-Zeitung*, e.g., on August 20, the assertion that the fortresses could easily be circumvented, printed under the eloquent title “GERMANS PRESSING ON LIKE CLOCKWORK ARMY, STAATS-ZEITUNG ASSERTS” (p.5).

<sup>57</sup> CT, Aug 24, p.2

<sup>58</sup> “FOUGHT EIGHT DAYS AT LIÈGE – LITTLE BELGIAN FORCE GOT NO ORDERS, SO HELD THEIR POST”, NYT, August 26, p.2.

<sup>59</sup> NYT, August 12, p.2 (“SIEGE GUNS BEFORE LIÈGE”) and p. 1 (“KAISER CLAIMS COMPLETE VICTORY AT LIÈGE”)

<sup>60</sup> “GERMANS WINNING AS HE PASSED BY”, NYT, August 14, p.2.

<sup>61</sup> “GERMAN OFFICERS SATISFIED”, NYT, August 18, p.2.

<sup>62</sup> NYT, August 19, p.1. This statement, by General Stein, also claimed French military presence in Liège before the declaration of war.

<sup>63</sup> NYT, August 16, p.1; on the same day, the CT ran a report by an English stockbroker who had escaped the occupied city, stating that its capture was an “empty victory” because the “deadly” fortress guns prevented the German troops from breaking out of the city (CT, August 16, p.4).

especially, horrific German losses,<sup>64</sup> and kept offering a sanguine perspective on the Liège outcome.<sup>65</sup> At the very least, stated a London Standard article, reprinted on August 15, the fortresses – described as all twelve still standing – would have decisively slowed down the German offensive: “*Even if the forts are reduced they will have done more than their duty.*” The American vice-consul at Liège was quoted as saying that the invaders “*paid a terrible penalty*” for their underestimation of Belgian “*fighting qualities*”.<sup>66</sup> A day later, General von Emmich was reported as having committed suicide over his failure to take Liège by storm.<sup>67</sup>

“*Even to this day many American readers are under the impression that the gallant general is dead. This belief, needless to say, is not shared by the general,*” quipped a pro-German editorial in late September.<sup>68</sup> The editorial appeared in a New York weekly entitled The Fatherland (subtitle: “FAIR PLAY FOR GERMANY AND AUSTRIA-HUNGARY”), which had been launched on August 10 with the expressly stated aim of counteracting the “*Germanophobia*” of the American press, specifically “*the large Manhattan dailies,*” all too eager to reprint the “*lies*” of news reported “*via London.*”<sup>69</sup> The Fatherland, being a weekly magazine specializing in editorials, commentary, and press overviews, ran no direct reporting of the Liège clash; it did however devote some modest effort to chip away at the prevailing image of Liège as a German setback. On August 10, commenting on the avalanche of reports on the German hecatomb at Liège, the editors complained that “*the news of slaughter seems important only when Germans and Austrians are the victims, not when the enemy loses men*”.<sup>70</sup> It took The Fatherland

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<sup>64</sup> NYT, Aug 13, p. 2 (a detailed report on losses in one Schleswig district); Aug 14 (“slaughter”), August 15 (a description of packed corpses), August 19 (an eyewitness account of “slaughter” by a Belgian officer).

<sup>65</sup> Likewise, the official Belgian affirmation reprinted in the LA as late as August 24 under the title “BELGIANS HOLD FORTS” (Ostend via London, Aug 23, p.7); the CT ‘s front-page “DAY’S WAR NEWS” column stated “uncertainty” as to the fate of the fortresses as late as August 26, though one week earlier it had relayed General Stein’s statement as to the “ruin” or outright capture of the fortresses (CT, August 19, p.1).

<sup>66</sup> “3,000 IN FORTS HARASS 250,000”, NYT, Aug 15, p.1; “UNDERRATED THE BELGIUMS [sic]”, *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>67</sup> “VON EMMICH’S PRIDE BROKEN,” NYT, Aug 16, p.1 (also in CT and LA, both August 16, p.2; see also CT, August 15, p.1).

<sup>68</sup> “LIES, LIES, LIES”, front-page editorial (unsigned, but in all probability by G.S. Viereck), The Fatherland, September 30.

<sup>69</sup> “PREAMBLE” (unsigned, but in all probability by G.S. Viereck), The Fatherland, August 10, p.1.

<sup>70</sup> The Fatherland, August 10, p.5. The article compared the ample coverage of the German dead at Liège with the dearth of attention given Serbian losses. Perhaps significantly, the issue contains no other mention of Liège.

considerable time to pay attention to Liège; the battle received virtually no attention until the August 24 issue, the press overview of which berated the “*prejudiced papers*” for minimizing the German successes in Belgium: “*if Liege has really been captured it portends to be an important victory...it might have taken months to get possession of the city; that they have taken it in one week shows that the heroic spirit of 1870-71 is still alive in [the Germans].*” (The reported facts were out-of-date because the article was a two-week-old reprint from the Jewish-American Morning Journal.)<sup>71</sup> The Fatherland’s first and only article uniquely devoted to Liège appeared on August 31 under the title “HOW THE NEWS IS MISUNDERSTOOD”. “*Only a non-military nation*”, it informed readers, could consider Liège a serious German setback, because such a reading hinged on an inflation of the facts: “*A deployment of skirmishers becomes an ‘invasion’. An encounter between advance guards becomes a ‘battle’. The masking of a fortress is exaggerated into a ‘siege’.*” The German expeditionary corps sent to Liège – no more than a small contingent of frontier garrisons, a mere 30,000 in number or perhaps “*only half that*” – was never meant “*to take the forts of Liège by storm. All that they could reasonably be expected to do was to mask the fortresses and invest the city.*” Nor was the fall of the Liège fortresses, the author asserted, “*‘Rocking chair’ critics to the contrary notwithstanding*”, essential to the German advance against France.<sup>72</sup> The press’ surprise regarding the heaviness of German losses “*only goes to show how sadly informed are the pens who pretend to mould public opinion in this war. Surprise would be in order were the German losses not heavy. If the Germans have not lost more than three soldiers to every Belgian bayonet, they have not suffered a whit more than military tactics would ordinarily demand.*” Attacks on armoured fortresses were by their very nature costly. The author doubted that Von Emmich had recklessly thrown his men against the fortresses.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> “The Jewish Press,” The Fatherland, August 24, p.6, reprint from The Morning Journal, August 10. (N.B. The pro-German slant of the Jewish-American press stemmed from its hostility to pogrom-ridden Russia.)

<sup>72</sup> N.B. The article was factually outdated, as it only reported three forts fallen at the time of writing.

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. the statement written by German General Staff member Ulrich von Ritter at the invitation of the German-American Chamber of Commerce of New York, printed in the NYT, Aug 16, p.5, minimizing “*the German loss in storming so formidable a fortified place as Liège*” and denying reports of human-wave attacks: “*The severe criticism of German operations, especially at the seat of war in Belgium, on the part of the American newspapers is based on the impressions gained by people that have not been trained in military matters.*” Yet, three days later, the NYT ran a Daily Telegraph article that reported statements from “*a Belgian officer engaged in the defense*”, repeating the assertion of close-rank attacks resulting in carnage: “*it was slaughter, just slaughter.*” (NYT, August 19, p.2)

“His objective was undoubtedly to perpetrate a frontal attack en masse as a screen for a flanking movement calculated to throw a flying wedge between the forts and thus capture the city.” At the very least, “Liège has been taken by the Prussians at the usual price of human flesh attending such military risk – that is all.” And “the Kaiser’s army is better off than if the sacrifice before Liège had not been made. Not to attempt it at all would have been stupidity.” Liège was probably “only a demonstration in force”, destined to “divert the enemy’s attention from the main attack” by the Moselle or Rhine armies. To sum up, The Fatherland’s readers were informed that the German army – “the most efficiently drilled and equipped army ever produced – and every German knows it and feels it”<sup>74</sup> - had fought efficiently and bravely in a “hazardous operation” that was certainly costly, though not alarmingly so, and at any rate not essential.<sup>75</sup> This less-than-triumphant and not altogether consistent appraisal was to remain The Fatherland’s sole sustained comment on the Liège operation.<sup>7677</sup>

## IV Judging Liège

It is probably safe to say that protestations such as these did little to change the overall view of the Liège battle as it emerged from the American print media, viz., of an altogether admirable defensive stand against overwhelming force. The central notion is that of defense: sympathies went to the camp that defended itself against an aggressor, especially if the fight was an unequal one.<sup>78</sup> Not for nothing did the CT give pride of

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<sup>74</sup> The same note of pride in German organization was sounded in an Atlantic Monthly essay, “THE KAISER AND HIS PEOPLE”, by Kuno Francke, stating that “Germany today is the best-governed country in the world,” and that Germany’s dignified, admirable working men were “now in the regiments that have been hurled against the forts of Liège and Namur”. The Atlantic Monthly, October 1914 (vol. 114, no. 4), pp. 566-570.

<sup>75</sup> “HOW THE NEWS IS MISUNDERSTOOD,” by Baron von Detwitz, The Fatherland, August 31, pp.10-11.

<sup>76</sup> For the sake of completeness, it can be mentioned that the September 30 editorial briefly noted how Von Emmich’s success in conquering “an almost impregnable fortress with small loss of life after a few days siege was never brought out in the dispatches of the Allies”.

<sup>77</sup> N.B. This German-American press did not express the views of all German Americans, many of whom were critical of the “German cause” in wartime. See Barbara Wiedemann-Citera, Die Auswirkungen des Ersten Weltkrieges auf die Deutsch-Amerikaner im Spiegel der New Yorker Staatszeitung, der New Yorker Volkszeitung, und der New York Times, 1914-1926 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993).

<sup>78</sup> Hence occasional reports on individual defensive valour, e.g. the report “HEROIC BELGIAN HALTS GERMANS” appearing in the LA on August 16, p.4. Even this paper, which occasionally disparaged the defense of Liège as strategically unimportant (see August 9, p.3, though contradicted by statements on

place to a Belgian-American editorial stating that “*By invading Belgium Germany not only has violated a sacred contract, but she has done Belgium the injustice of using this little country as a battleground, and every Belgian who has died was killed while in defense of his home and fireside.*”<sup>79</sup> As Suzanne Tassier noted in her study of the impact on American public opinion of the “Belgian cause”: the war at first was seen as a reprehensible, undifferentiated *mêlée* offering nothing much to choose between either camp. The invasion of neutral Belgium, however, generated a degree of moral differentiation between belligerents. Henceforth, a degree of blame was attributed to the aggressor, and it was perfectly possible to continue to abhor the war while expressing the “deepest sympathies” (as the CT wrote) for a small nation forced to fight because it had chosen to uphold its duties as a neutral.<sup>80</sup> An article in the September 26 issue of Collier’s Magazine, extolling the endurance of the hapless Belgians awaiting complete occupation, invoked the memory of those “*brave artillerymen who, for twenty days, have been waiting in the forts at Liege the help so many times promised by the allies...*”; the report noted that the invaders were “*not ogres after all,*” but that “*the world must crush them.*”<sup>81</sup>

Hence the praise lavished on the Liège defense in early August: “*The unexpectedly formidable opposition of the Belgians (...) has won for them the admiration of the world,*” wrote the NYT on August 7, going on to state that “*Naturally the Belgians have never been thought of as a fighting folk. In this case it was necessary for them to fight, not merely to protect themselves, but in performance of their international obligations.*” The paper then explained these obligations to its readers (using an example from the Civil War) and concluded that the delay caused by the “*stubbornly fought*” Liège defense “*will derange [the Germans’] plans and deprive them of some at least of*

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August 8, p.1, and August 16, p.5), on August 19 ran a large-type front-page banner stating that “*LIÈGE IS FALLEN, HER FORTS BATTERED INTO RUINS (...), BUT THE DEFENSE OF THESE FORTS TO THE VERY LAST HELD OUT AGAINST SIX GERMAN ARMY CORPS.*”

<sup>79</sup> CT, Aug 17, p.4, “BELGIUM DEFENDS TREATY PLEDGES”, two-column statement signed by Felix Streyckmans, President of the Federation of Belgian American societies of Chicago.

<sup>80</sup> Suzanne Tassier, *La Belgique et l’entrée en guerre des États-Unis (1914-1917)* (Brussels: La Renaissance du Livre, 1951), pp. 37-39. Quotation from the CT, October 15, on p.38. N.B. In his thoughtful study of American isolation 1914-1917, Ernest R. May asserted that Americans’ “*profound sympathy for Belgium*” obtained “*long before biased news or propaganda could have had any effect*”: *The World War and American Isolation* (Harvard, The University Press, 1959), p. 36 (see also pp. 34 and 64).

<sup>81</sup> “THE GERMANS ARE COMING”, by Arthur Ruhl, pp. 8-9, 34, 36.

*the advantages they hoped to gain by choosing this forbidden route.*<sup>82</sup> In other words: Liège, by checking the German advance, restored a measure of justice to the ongoing warfare because it ensured that an offensive plan that rode roughshod over international law would not pay. *“The dogged defense of the town will be of incalculable value to Europe;”*<sup>83</sup> Liège’s *“gallant defense has given an important moral, if not military, check to the German movement upon France.”*<sup>84</sup> In commenting on the enormous German losses, the WP opined that the *“final lesson of Liège”* might well be a salutary one for mankind, emphasizing as it did *“the great advantage of defensive positions, to the discouragement of wars of aggression.”*<sup>85</sup> Ten days later, the WP ran British verse hailing the Liège defense:

*“Betwixt the foe and France was she (...)*

*He dreamed that none his tide would stay,  
But when he bade her to make way  
She through her cannon answered, “Nay,  
Not I.”*

*No tremor and no fear she showed;  
She held her pass, she barred the road,  
While death’s unsleeping feet bestrode  
The ground.*

*So long as deeds of noblest worth  
Are sung midst joy and tears and mirth,  
Her glory shall to the ends of earth  
Resound. (...)*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “THE PROWESS OF THE BELGIANS,” NYT, August 7, p.10.

<sup>83</sup> Cable to NYT from NYT and London Daily Chronicle special correspondent, August 8, p.1 (Brussels, August 7).

<sup>84</sup> NYT, August 9, p.1 (Brussels via London, Aug 9, 1 a.m.) The preceding day’s editorial, which still held out the possibility of a successful Liège defense, called the German attack on Liège and, more generally, the plan of attack through Belgium, “a disaster that is moral *as well as* military” (italics SdS):

“OPERATIONS OF THE WAR”, NYT, August 8, p.6.

<sup>85</sup> WP, August 9, p.6 (New York, August 8); see also the quarter-column report on p.2 under the title “DEAD FIVE DEEP IN LIÈGE TRENCHES”. N.B. The number of 25,000 quoted by the WP refers to German dead and wounded. The NYT of the preceding day, in a cable message by the editor of the Indépendance Belge, mentions 25,000 German dead, wounded, or captured. (NYT, August 8, p. 1.)

<sup>86</sup> “LIÈGE”, by William Watson, reprint from the London Chronicle, WP, August 19, p.2.

One result of this moral elevation of the Liège defense was another vision of death in battle. No longer was all death in battle equally deplored as senseless: the newspapers' insistent emphasis on the human cost of the German attack on Liège suggested casualties on the *offensive* side to be somehow more wasteful. To be sure, the Entente sources providing most of the war reports in U.S. newspapers<sup>87</sup> were most likely to maximize German losses and minimize casualties on their own side. But there was another noteworthy emphasis besides the tweaking of numbers. The insistent reporting on the German dead “mown down like corn” or “laying five deep in the trenches” focused attention on the questionable way in which the actual attacks were conducted: the German troops, these reports asserted, were herded again and again against the fortresses in an unequal, wasteful confrontation. The German strategists were described as indifferent to the human cost of their methods: *“Incredible as it may seem, there appears to be no doubt that these unhappy German soldiers were marched to death almost shoulder to shoulder. (...) The German Generals (...) apparently hoped to satiate the greed of the guns in the forts by a holocaust of victims. The result of their disastrous policy was terrible upon those closely knit ranks, these men who, according to some accounts, were being driven forward by officers – terror dividing itself betwixt discipline and death. (...) Yet still they came, more, more of them, sheep driven ruthlessly to slaughter according to time table and without the slightest allowance made for any possible change in circumstances.”*<sup>88</sup> (The Fatherland's callous appreciation of the frontal attacks on the fortresses as “[screens] for a flanking movement” (see above) was unlikely to change this perception, as was the statement by a German officer that *“We can afford to lose a million men as the price of victory, but the allies cannot afford to lose thousands. The perfectly welded mass of the people of the German Empire is bound to overcome the badly united troops of the allies.”*<sup>89</sup>) The general impression left by these reports was that the attack on the fortresses of Liège mirrored the invasion in general: morally and militarily questionable; expressing rigid authoritarianism and disregard for

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<sup>87</sup> The German transatlantic and transpacific cables were cut on August 4 and 23, respectively; U.S. correspondents in Germany were able to use wireless transmission (until 1917), and news from German sources also reached the U.S. via telegraph through neutral countries (Desmond, *Windows*, pp. 277-278).

<sup>88</sup> NYT, August 10, p.2, a report on the attacks of August 8 by the Rotterdam correspondent of the London Daily Mail, filed on August 9 and sent from London on August 10, 2.15 a.m.

<sup>89</sup> “GERMAN OFFICERS SATISFIED”, NYT, August 18, p.2.

human life. Of all this, the German dead were the first victims. Their courage was not in dispute; but it was ill spent. “*It is not courage but a good cause and good leadership which are lacking. The days of the automatic machine army are dead.*”<sup>90</sup> The German dead, in short, had been forced to die in the service of unjustifiable aggression, whereas the “*Lads of Liège*” (see below) had given their lives to defend justice. Liège, then, introduced something of a moral differentiation in the perception of death in battle. Hitherto, it had been uniformly abhorred; henceforth, a difference was made between *slaughter* (senseless death) and *sacrifice* (death for a good cause). This was a departure from the fundamentalist pacifist stance of the first days of August, and a first step toward a culture of war.

## V Conclusion: Liège, Thermopylae, and Progress

To reiterate a point made in the introduction to this essay: at the outbreak of the war, the USA was widely believed to have been spared Europe’s regression to bloodshed because, as an enlightened republic, it had exorcized the old motives for aggression, especially dynastic greed. Greed motivated all of Europe’s dynasts and condemned their unhappy subjects to senseless deaths: that was the gist of a famous July 28 cartoon by John McCutcheon entitled “THE SPORT OF KINGS”, showing Europe’s bellicose monarchs – including, surprisingly, King Albert – wreaking havoc upon their subjects. This image of undifferentiated conflict of interests between “kings” and “people” disappeared after the invasion of Belgium, which introduced a fundamental contrast between monarchs’ images: on the one hand, the aggressive, pompous Emperor; on the other, the dignified, unpretentious King as staunch defender of liberties. An example in the Liège context: Albert was depicted as laconically answering “*Try.*” to William’s personal warnings that the forts would be taken by force if they did not surrender.<sup>91</sup> Henceforth, the only victims

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<sup>90</sup> NYT, August 10, p.2 (See note 87.) The WP described the Germans as “*dashing heroically into doom*”, August 12, p.3.

<sup>91</sup> “ALBERT DARES THE KAISER,” NYT, August 15, p.1.

of dynastic greed were the German dead: “*They had waged the war of monarchs – and they died the death of pawns.*”<sup>92</sup>

The main point to be made here is that Belgium, though no republic, now took its place in the Whig view of history-as-progress that swayed so much of the educated or self-taught U.S. public. Belgium, like the United States, was seen as an enlightened nation on the side of progress; and this was proven by its defense of its neutrality, ergo of international law. Belgium now shone forth as an enlightened nation attacked by an unenlightened one (as proven by Germany’s attack on neutrality - ergo on international law). The image of the “European War” shifted accordingly: from regressive mêlée to crusade for embattled Progress. In this recast historical narrative, Liège promptly took its place as a heroic defensive stand for Civilization. This status was confirmed by a historical parallel: “*There has been nothing like it since the Thermopylae of old,*” wrote the NYT.<sup>93</sup> Its educated readers in all probability had no difficulty recognizing the reference to the successful defensive stand against a superior Asian invasion force taken by the Greek troops under General Leonidas in 480 B.C., a battle famous for having, as generations of high-school students had been taught, saved Greek civilization from a barbarian onslaught. Liège, then, took its place alongside Thermopylae in the millennia-spanning grand narrative of the battle between plucky Civilization and its brutal enemies. And this remained true even after Liège’s fall. The American poet Percy MacKaye, eulogizing “THE LADS OF LIEGE”, assigned them a definite place in history:

*“The lads of Liege, beyond our eyes  
They lie where beauty’s laurels be  
With lads of old Thermopylae  
Who stayed the storming Persians.*

*The lads of Liege, on glory’s field  
They clasp the hands of Roland’s men,  
Who lonely faced the Saracen*

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<sup>92</sup> From the poem “THE BATTLE OF LIÈGE” by the American poet, Saturday Evening Post story-writer, and Broadway playwright Dana Burnet (1888-1962), in George Herbert Clarke, ed., A Treasury of War Poetry. British and American Poems of the World War 1914-1917 (1917).

<sup>93</sup> “GERMAN COLUMNS BREAK INTO LIEGE DEFENSE – BELGIANS FIGHT ON”, NYT, August 7, p.1 (special cable from Brussels, August 6).

*Meeting the dark invasion.*

*The lads – the deathless lads of Liege,  
They blazon through our living world  
Their land – the little land that hurled  
Olympian defiance.*

(...)

*O lads of Liege, brave lads of Liege,  
Your souls through glad Elysium  
Go chanting: horum omnium  
Fortissimi sunt Belgae!”<sup>94</sup>*

MacKaye (New York City 1875 – Cornish, N.H., 1956) was a poet and playwright with a distinct progressivist bent, who saw his life’s mission in restoring mass community drama to its rightful place in democracy.<sup>95</sup> MacKaye, in other words, was well placed to assign Liège to its rightful place in the grand narrative of Progress.

The specifics of the Liège defense would subsequently fade into the background, though “Liège” remained vaguely associated with valour. An example from boys’ literature is the 1915 The Boy Allies at Liège, or, Through Lines of Steel,<sup>96</sup> the first in the Boy Allies series,<sup>97</sup> and a thrilling succession of car chases, escapes by aeroplane, horseback pursuits of prairie wagons (scenes that disregarded the fact that Belgium was the most densely populated country in the world at the time), black-mask conspiracies and narrowly escaped executions. The Belgians are portrayed as heroic “*fighters to the last drop*” – again, Chaudfontaine’s commander commits sublime suicide – and there is no question but that the defense serves “*the cause of right*”, though it is not explained why this should be so. The industrial nature of the clash is totally obfuscated: the battle scenes are purely Napoleonic – confrontations in the open field featuring dashing cavalry charges, drawn swords, golden eagles held aloft. It is precisely this vagueness that feeds Liège’s status

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<sup>94</sup> Percy MacKaye, “THE LADS OF LIEGE”, NYT, September 2, p.8.

<sup>95</sup> His theoretical work *The Civic Theatre, in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure* (1912) was appreciated by Woodrow Wilson.

<sup>96</sup> By the boys’ adventures author Clair Wallace Hayes; New York: A.L. Burt Company, 1915.

<sup>97</sup> As the editor advertised, “*In this series we follow the adventures of two American lads unable to leave Europe after war is declared. They meet the soldiers of the Allies, and decide to cast their lot with them. Their experiences and escapes are many, and furnish plenty of good, healthy action that every boy loves.*”

as, so to speak, a brand name – an appropriate theater for the crusader bravery of the young American heroes, who, after saving the day, go on to do their bit on the Marne and on the Eastern Front.<sup>98</sup> “Liège”, by now a generic good cause, was ready to be enrolled in the Preparedness campaign.

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<sup>98</sup> See *The Boy Allies on the Firing Line, or, Twelve Days along the Marne* and *The Boy Allies With the Cossacks, or, A Wild Dash over the Carpathian Mountains*. By 1918, the youngsters had joined their own army in *The Boy Allies Under the Stars and Stripes; or, Leading the American Troops to the Firing Line*.