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978-0-521-83761-3 - Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914–1918

Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Prologue

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The shelling of the Belgian village of Dickebusch in April 1916 was hardly unexpected. Well within range of German guns when the mobile operations of summer and fall 1914 had given way to the trenches of 1915, its destruction was, if anything, overdue.

While most of the inhabitants voluntarily evacuated, the remainder were compelled to do so by order of the Belgian military on 14 May 1916.<sup>1</sup> Though the reaction of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), which held the line in the vicinity, is not recorded, it is safe to conclude that they were not unduly dismayed, since the proximity of the inhabitants, it was thought, compromised security, complicated logistics and adversely affected the troops' discipline and health – affected, in other words, the smooth operation of the military machine. They were, in Clausewitzian terms, friction.

If for no other reason than that local people ran shops, sold beer and wine, and were reminders of the civilian life they had left behind, not to mention just what they believed themselves to be fighting for, the troops themselves probably had mixed feelings about Dickebusch's demise. On the other hand, they took to wrecked villages like vultures to carrion, picking over building materials and household contents, just about anything that would make trench and billet a little more comfortable. Only days later it is no surprise, then, that an inhabitant armed with a pass stumbled across a group of 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion men huddled around an officer. Obscured by the gas mask that he had donned specifically for the purpose, the officer was harvesting honey from the inhabitant's hives – the crime at Dickebusch.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Despite this study's subtitle, its subject matter includes all inhabitants, not just French but also Belgian and sometimes Flemish speaking, behind the British western front, to which the Prologue speaks. Prevailing French names of places will be used in this study, though places such as Dickebusch are now typically referred to by their Flemish name, in this case *Dikkebus*.

<sup>2</sup> The investigation of the crime at Dickebusch can be followed in War diary, Assistant Provost Marshal, 2nd Canadian Division, RG 9 III D 3, volume 5050, Library and

Cambridge University Press

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Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Prologue

Categorizing the incident at Dickebusch as a crime may seem overly dramatic, but that is exactly what it was, war or no war. On 26 May 1916, Major Arthur Murray Jarvis, Assistant Provost Marshal, 2nd Canadian Division, recorded the receipt of a claim for 175 francs for loss of honey and damage to an evacuee's beehives.<sup>3</sup> In charge of divisional policing, Jarvis took his duties, including the nightly writing up of the unit war diary in which the details of this western front snapshot are recorded, very seriously indeed. Though the British were willing to compensate inhabitants whose property had been accidentally damaged by the troops, they were not prepared to do so in instances of wilful damage or theft, which this most certainly was and which were considered disciplinary issues.

As the infantry were regularly rotated between front and rear, the investigation of the crime at Dickebusch, or any crime involving combat troops, was no straightforward undertaking. Though the 28th had returned to the trenches since the claim's receipt, when it was next relieved the 6th Brigade appealed to the accused officer to step forward of his own accord.

While an identification parade of all 28th Battalion officers was slated for 8 June, the war intervened, with two companies of the 28th all but wiped out by the detonation of four German mines. During subsequent counterattacks to recapture what became known as the Hooze craters, part of the larger action known as the Battle of Mount Sorrel, 2–14 June 1916, the battalion's two remaining companies sustained heavy casualties.<sup>4</sup> At least part of the explanation for the derailment of Jarvis's investigation can be attributed to the fact that it was a near certainty that

Archives Canada, Ottawa [henceforth: APM, 2nd Cdn Div, RG 9 II D 3, vol. 5050, LAC]. See the dates of 5, 22, 24, 25, 27, 30 April; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 30, 31 May; 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 20, 21 June; 2, 3 July; 5, 8 August 1916. Though the war diary of 28th Battalion does not mention the incident, it does confirm the unit's movements. See War diary, 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion, RG 9 III D 3, volume 4935, LAC.

<sup>3</sup> If known, ranks will follow the custom of that held at a particular moment, not the most senior eventually held. In the interests of space, I have largely dispensed with what could have been lengthy discussion of soldiers' wages, prices on the western front and exchange rates. If the value or cost of something is not explicitly mentioned, its value or cost should have been made clear, either in comparison or by way of contrast. In this instance, for example, the value claimed – 175 francs – was large enough to cause the authorities to take notice, either by insisting or resisting that it be paid. On wages then prevailing in Britain, currencies and exchange rates, see, for instance, Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. xxv–xxvii; and Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 148–9.

<sup>4</sup> On this action, see Norm Christie, *The Canadians at Mount Sorrel: June 2nd–14th, 1916: A Social History and Battlefield Tour* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000).

the suspects were among the 700 casualties sustained by the 28th at Sorrel. While Jarvis had come to the conclusion that the ringleader was a Lt Murphy, since killed at Hooge, as days became weeks and as other matters demanded attention, the sad affair of the ‘honey-loving’ officer was quietly, it seemed, laid to rest.<sup>5</sup>

When the Canadian Corps suddenly insisted that matters be ‘cleared up at once’ at the end of June 1916, Jarvis appealed to the 28th to settle the claim out of regimental funds. Though the unit initially agreed to do so, more obstruction and flip-flopping ensued. For reasons not altogether clear, the unit eventually disavowed any responsibility whatsoever, instead pinning the blame on a lone survivor, a Pte Dennis, from whom it had obtained a confession.<sup>6</sup>

With a move to the Somme looming, Jarvis concluded that the case had ‘died a natural death’, at least, that is, until 5 August 1916 when the 28th Battalion offered a token payment of 50 francs, which a Belgian official thought ‘derisive’ and rejected out of hand. With national sensibilities at stake, the affair was taken out of Jarvis’s hands once and for all. ‘The theft of honey case appears to be drawing to a close’, his final entry on the matter reads. ‘The G.O.C. has asked for a resumé of the whole proceedings & will adjudicate upon the matter finally.’

Unfortunately just how or even if the matter was ultimately resolved shall likely remain a mystery. The only narrative on the subject that has been uncovered – Jarvis’s – ends. That the crime at Dickebusch bears an uncanny resemblance to Ralph Hale Mottram’s *Crime at Vanderlynden’s*, in which a fictional claims officer, Lt Dormer, fruitlessly and absurdly chases the ‘469 Trench Mortar Battery’ across Flanders in an attempt to fix blame for the desecration of the local shrine in ‘Hondebecq’, this is perhaps only fitting.<sup>7</sup>

Art, it seems, does imitate life.

<sup>5</sup> 6 June 1916, 28th Cdn Inf bn, RG 9 III D 3, vol. 4935, LAC, records the fact that a Lieutenant G. G. D. Murphy had been reported missing.

<sup>6</sup> On the challenges faced by Jarvis, see Craig Gibson, “‘My Chief Source of Worry’: An Assistant Provost Marshal’s View of Relations between 2nd Canadian Division and Local Inhabitants on the Western Front, 1915–1917”, *War in History* 7, no. 4 (November 2000), 413–41.

<sup>7</sup> R. H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy, 1914–1918* (consisting of: *The Spanish Farm* [1924], *Sixty-Four, Ninety-Four!* [1925], and *The Crime at Vanderlynden’s* [1926] (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927)).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

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The north of France is habited to war, and the French Army keeps its habits ever present in the minds of *les civils*. There was no tenderness for the non-combatant section of the population.

Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography*<sup>1</sup>

It was axiomatic during the Great War that while civilians living in German-occupied territory were suffering inordinately, those on the French, or more precisely Anglo-French, side of the line were not, a conviction clearly shared by a Jeanne Thomassin, who, living on the German side of the line, penned the following on 15 October 1917.

The other day, I thought of the difference in life of a young girl of the *pays envahis* and another of the *pays non occupés*: We, we work against our country, we work to grow their food; we are under their domination and God knows that it is sometimes hard! we earn very little: 20 *sous* at most per day, we are like prisoners: you can't go for a walk in the fields or woods, and the young women on the other side, with what joy they work for France, either in the factories or in the fields, etc.; they are free, do not know the German yoke; they make plenty of money and are not like us wondering if we'll survive another winter.<sup>2</sup>

Within the construct of total war in which all the territories of the empire were thought to be necessary for final victory, the German military looked to the occupied Belgians and French, persons such as Mlle Thomassin, as another resource to be exploited.<sup>3</sup> Foreshadowing disturbing trends in twentieth-century German history, the occupation operated on a deeper cultural level, too, something that was evident during the war's opening months as German forces swept through central Belgium and northern France, paying little heed to legal niceties

<sup>1</sup> Guy Chapman, *A Passionate Prodigality: Fragments of Autobiography* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933; 2nd edn, London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Philippe Nivet, *La France Occupée, 1914–1918* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), p. 373. All translations are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre: Humanitaire et Culture de Guerre, 1914–1918: Populations Occupées, Déportés Civils, Prisonniers de Guerre* (Paris: Éditions Noësis, 1998), p. 74.

and leaving a swathe of destruction in their wake.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent requisitioning of Catholic churches for German Protestant services and the use of German-French dictionaries containing only the imperative of French verbs continued the policy of humiliation and subjugation.<sup>5</sup> The history of occupied Belgium quickly became largely one of victimhood, the recipients of either rapacious German occupation policies or humanitarian intervention. Even worse, refugees from the invaded territories were often treated with ambivalence if not outright antipathy and disparaged as ‘Boches du Nord’ by their countrymen. Founded as it was on the sacrifices of the *poilu*, the French narrative of victory included little if any room for refugees or the occupied.<sup>6</sup> The history of the occupied French has been thus largely disengaged from the history of the nation at war. Thought to be ‘missing in action’ or part of a ‘long silence’, only recently have the *occupé* and *envahis* been subjected to increasing historical scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

But were the *unoccupied* French as free, wealthy and carefree as Mlle Thomassin thought they were? Of course not. Certainly in the French interior, Thomassin’s belief holds true to a certain extent, but even here full employment and rising wages were tempered by inflation, labour strife and the breakdown of families and domesticity concomitant with changing roles for women, the wartime movement of vast numbers of citizens and the casualties sustained by the French military.<sup>8</sup> Closer to

<sup>4</sup> On the German 1914 campaign see John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Becker, *Oubliés*, pp. 47, 79–81.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Nivet, *Les Réfugiés Français de la Grande Guerre (1914–1920): Les ‘Boches du Nord’* (Paris: Economica, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Besides *ibid* and Becker, *Oubliés*, see Tammy M. Proctor, ‘Missing in Action: Belgian Civilians and the First World War’, *Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine* 35, no. 4 (2005), 547–72; Helen McPhail, *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France, 1914–1918* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999; reprint, 2001). See also Sophie de Schaepdrijver, ‘Occupation, Propaganda and the Idea of Belgium’, in *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914–1918*, ed. Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 267–94; Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare: The Modern History of International Law of Armed Conflicts* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), pp. 224–8; Annette Becker, ‘Life in an Occupied Zone: Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing’, in *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), pp. 630–41; and Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1983; English translation, Leamington Spa: Berg Publishers Ltd, 1985; reprint, 1993). The tendency of French historians towards a form of ‘abstract universalism’ has likely affected such judgments. See Pierre Purseigle, ‘Beyond and Below the Nations: Towards a Comparative History of Local Communities at War’, in *Uncovered Fields: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 117–18.

Cambridge University Press

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Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Introduction

the front, in the *zone des armées* (ZA), governed by the French military and subject to a wide variety of restrictions and regulations, her belief breaks down entirely. And while many hardships can be traced to the state of war, some were more explicit in their denunciations. ‘It is beyond belief’, wrote a resident of Cerisy-Gailly in the British-occupied Somme to M. Le Blanc in Montauban in August 1917; ‘the English do not want to give any beds so that we can sleep. No one in the region is a master in his own home; everyone is more than unhappy . . . we are neither safe nor secure.’<sup>9</sup>

Such musings raise several questions. What happened after 1914 when the lines as well as the armies became immobile and British troops became intimately acquainted with the land and people of northern France and Flanders? While it is surely impossible to categorize civilians living among the British as collaborators, resisters and the rest, is it even possible to describe the British as *occupying* northern France and Flanders? Did the inhabitants *feel* occupied? Did the British *behave* as occupiers? These questions and others have been far too easily overlooked. In considering the behaviour of German and British officers and men during the Great War, especially with regard to the civilian populations of the territories they occupied, the well-documented German atrocities of August–September 1914 overshadow all else. It was the pre-1914 British, not the Germans, who had had extensive experience as colonial masters and in suppressing dissent throughout a vast empire. Was such a military culture inculcated in the Territorials, New Armies and conscripts who followed the original BEF in the field?

This study is concerned with the neglected relationships that developed between British troops and local inhabitants, the organizations and laws that governed them as much as the informal systems of communication that ultimately determined their success or failure, and what they mean for the history of the BEF during the Great War. Though it is only tangentially interested in the BEF as an army of occupation, it is about the interplay between the groups, the one military, the other civilian, and is therefore a discourse on military occupation, even if not the one usually anticipated. While Tammy M. Proctor has recently categorized the trials faced by civilians living under military occupation, she says nothing about friendly occupations, which though entirely understandable semantically (i.e., since the BEF was not a hostile army, the French and Flemish were not strictly speaking *occupied*) ignores the

<sup>9</sup> Commission de contrôle d’Amiens [CCAm], 16 August 1917, no. 33, 16/N/1448, Archives de l’armée de terre, Château de Vincennes, Paris [AAT].

Cambridge University Press

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Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

fact that many of the privations experienced were similar.<sup>10</sup> Parallels with hostile occupations became evident at an early stage.<sup>11</sup>

For reasons other than the overwhelming interest in the hostile German occupations, relations between British troops and local inhabitants have been marginalized. In attempting not only to explain the war's strategy and political direction but also its accompanying bloodshed and economic, social and revolutionary changes, the functioning of the Anglo-French alliance at its highest political and strategic levels is of profound interest.<sup>12</sup> Certainly communication problems and divergent national interests made the work of the French liaison organization, the *Mission Militaire Française* [MMF] and British liaison officers sensitive and important.<sup>13</sup> Little work, however, has been carried out on relations between the foreign troops who came to France by the million during the Great War and the local inhabitants they encountered there. While two French studies have made a start on relations between American troops and locals, there has been far less interest and clarity on the British impact.<sup>14</sup>

Even more problematic is the fact that in some scholarly and most popular circles the narrative of the western front is constructed as an

<sup>10</sup> See Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918* (New York University Press, 2010), p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Roy A. Prete and A. Hamish Ion, eds., *Armies of Occupation* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), and, more recently, Mark Grimsley and Clifford J. Rogers, eds., *Civilians in the Path of War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain, 1900–1940: Entente and Estrangement* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> See Elizabeth Greenhalgh's admirable, 'Liaisons Not So Dangerous: First World War Liaison Officers and Marshal Ferdinand Foch', in *Finding Common Ground*, ed. Keene and Neiberg, pp. 187–207. For the work of a senior liaison officer in 1914, see Br. Gen. E. L. Spears, *Liaison, 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (London: William Heinemann, 1930).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Bruno Barbier, *La Grande Guerre à Amiens* (Amiens: Encrage Édition, 1992), barely acknowledges the presence of British troops. On the Americans, see André Kaspi, *Le Temps des Américains. Le Concours Américain à la France en 1917–1918* (Paris, 1976), and Yves-Henri Nouailhat, *Les Américains à Nantes et Saint-Nazaire, 1917–1919* (Paris, 1972). Anglo-French relations have been touched upon by Richard Cobb, *French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Interpretation of France under Two Occupations, 1914–1918/1940–1944* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983); Peter Simkins, 'Soldiers and Civilians: Billeting in Britain and France', in *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War*, ed. Ian F. W. Beckett and Keith Simpson (Manchester University Press, 1985); and Robert and Isabelle Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), pp. 474–84. A GHQ staff officer penned a postwar effort on the workings of Haig's headquarters, but says nothing about relations. G. S. O., *G. H. Q. (Montreuil-sur-Mer)* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1920).

Cambridge University Press

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Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Introduction

arena of military operations alone. Admittedly, it is where the armies of Belgium, Germany, France and Britain fought the battles that decided the war's outcome and shaped the course of twentieth-century history. Though its life as history is book-ended by the battles of movement in 1914 and 1918, the western front has become synonymous with the trenches, barbed wire, machine guns and the attritional battles of Somme, Arras, Verdun and Ypres of the intervening years. Indeed, the trench has become the 'most ubiquitous and evocative image of the Great War in popular culture'.<sup>15</sup> In popular if not always scholarly discourses, the soldiers of the trenches have come to be seen either as the heroic manifestation of the nation at war or as pitiable victims of a particularly horrific warfare, with little middle ground.<sup>16</sup> As a military world, whether a trench or battlefield, civilians did not exist, or, if they did, it was fleetingly, usually laden with danger, and only until the responsible military authority evacuated them. The French of the time conceived of the war zone as cleansed of women entirely: 'war was to occur in a zone of pure masculinity. The feminine should cease to exist.'<sup>17</sup>

But the erasure of French women or any other inhabitant just behind the front does a disservice to our understanding of the life of British troops as much as to the history of the inhabitants themselves, who continued to exist, often at their extreme peril, on the cusp of the western front, on the very edge, as it were, of the civilized world. If the boundary between noncombatant and combatant has indeed become increasingly blurred during the age of total war, the civilian who supports the war as

<sup>15</sup> Richard Espley, "'How Much of an 'Experience' Do We Want the Public to Receive?": Trench Reconstructions and Popular Images of the Great War', in *British Popular Culture and the First World War*, ed. Jessica Meyer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 325. See also Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 9–10, 306–7.

<sup>16</sup> The role and meaning of veterans, the last of whom has now passed on, was complex and often conflicted: 'The rhetoric associated with veterans emphasizes the heroism and sacrifice of individuals in a manner seemingly at odds with the war's popular reputation as a futile, mistaken, misfought conflict.' See Dan Todman, 'The First World War in Contemporary British Popular Culture', in *Untold War: New Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Heather Jones, Jennifer O'Brien, and Christoph Schmidt-Supprian (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008). On the controversies sometimes generated by scholarly investigations into otherwise sacrosanct national commemorations, see Pierre Purseigle and Jenny Macleod, 'Introduction: Perspectives in First World War Studies', in *Uncovered Fields*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret H. Darrow, 'French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I', *American Historical Review* 101 (1996), 80–1. On French women see also Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000) and Françoise Thébaud, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1986).



Cambridge University Press

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Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

legitimate a target as the soldier who fights it, nowhere was this more explicit than behind the western front, where the boundaries separating trench, battlefield and rear were constantly being redefined, with consequences for those who continued to inhabit both worlds simultaneously. While the British mixed with civilians from the moment of their disembarkation in August 1914, their intertwining and friction with allied communities continued unabated and intensified during trench warfare, an entirely unexpected occurrence, as troops were rotated between front and billet. They experienced war in a way that was at one and the same time unique but a foretaste of friendly twentieth-century occupations to come.<sup>18</sup>

National sensitivities, too, have undoubtedly shaped the history of the western front. No matter how significant the BEF's successes in 1918 as measured in miles advanced, villages and towns liberated, or numbers of German prisoners taken, the French are still reticent on the role played by their allies in the Third Republic's finest moment, the 1918 armistice and the return of the lost provinces.<sup>19</sup> Though Jean-Yves Le Naour's study on French wartime sexuality briefly discusses the impact of the American presence, that of 2 million British and Dominion troops is, for reasons which are only clear to the author himself, barely acknowledged let alone discussed.<sup>20</sup> But British historians, usually but not exclusively of the military persuasion, are no less guilty of air-brushing the French and Flemish civilian population out of existence. The western front is barely conceived of as French and Belgian territory at all but rather a sort of supra-national military stage. Granted, the troops were not above such feelings. When the battalion was at the front, troops rarely came into contact with inhabitants. It was a venue to which civilians neither had nor would have wanted access. And soldiers could not leave without risking

<sup>18</sup> Some examples of friendly occupations include David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942–1945* (London: HarperCollins, 1995); K. S. Coates and W. R. Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II: The U.S. Army of Occupation in Canada's Northwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Michiel Horn, 'More than Cigarettes, Sex and Chocolate: The Canadian Army in the Netherlands, 1944–1945', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 16, nos. 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 1981), 156–73; Donald F. Bittner, 'A Final Appraisal of the British Occupation of Iceland, 1940–42', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies* 120, no. 4 (December 1975), 45–53.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français, 1914–1918* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Misères et tourments de la chair durant la Grande Guerre: Les mœurs sexuelles des Français, 1914–1918* (Paris: Aubier, 2002). On the Americans see pp. 250–60. An older but still standard work on French civilians also says next to nothing about the British. See Gabriel Perreux, *La Vie Quotidienne des Civils en France pendant la Grande Guerre* (n.p.: Librairie Hachette, 1966).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83761-3 - Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914–1918

Craig Gibson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Introduction

charges. Devoid of civilians, this was also the zone that Bernard Adams, for one, had trouble conceiving of as French at all. ‘I think we often forgot that we were on French soil, and not on a sort of unreal earth that would disappear when the war was over; especially was No Man’s Land a kind of neutral stage, whereon was played the great game . . . Perhaps people will not understand this: it is true, anyway.’<sup>21</sup> Richard Holmes’s marvellous *Tommy* contains a map entitled ‘The Western Front: The British Sector’ that illustrates this point well. Though the map embodies exclusively the territory of France and Belgium (with the exception of the very south-eastern-most coast of England) neither country is named nor is their common international boundary marked, much less those of the Belgian provinces and the French *départements* (to rectify this omission see Map 1). The same holds true for the two smaller-scale maps of the Ypres and Somme fronts.<sup>22</sup> In British studies Belgium has become a ‘landscape’,<sup>23</sup> the muddy and bloody Ypres salient, not an unoccupied corner of an ostensibly sovereign allied nation. The same could be said of the French departments occupied by the British. Perhaps, as John Keegan pointed out four decades ago, this simply reflects a desire of military historians for a ‘pure’ battlefield, unencumbered by civilians.<sup>24</sup> In the commemorations and casualty rolls surrounding the military events at Ypres and in the Somme, however, it is sometimes too easily forgotten by military historians that these same battlefields were also the most productive farm lands in Europe. (The war’s impact on the countryside remains a neglected subject of inquiry.)<sup>25</sup> Furthermore French industry and mines in the ZA continued to feed the Entente war machine and heat Parisian flats, and when allied resolve was so sorely tested by German submarines in 1916 and 1917, the farmers

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Adams, *Nothing of Importance: A Record of Eight Months at the Front with a Welsh Battalion October, 1915, to June, 1916* (London: Methuen, 1917; reprint, Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, n.d.), p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Holmes, *Tommy*, pp. xxix–xxxi. In Holmes’s defence, R. H. Mottram himself described the Belgian village of Locre, the comings and goings of British troops across the nearby Franco-Belgian border, and the disappearance of any semblance of an international wartime frontier, including the customs officials that he did notice upon his return to the western front in the 1930s. See *Journey to the Western Front: Twenty Years After* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1936), p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Proctor, ‘Missing’, p. 547. For the state of the historiography of occupied Belgium, see *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Their ideal being naval engagements on the high seas and the battles between the Eighth Army and Afrika Korps in the vast and largely unpopulated desert of north Africa during the Second World War. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 26–7.

<sup>25</sup> Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 155, 165.