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# The British Conceptualization of Belgium, 1914

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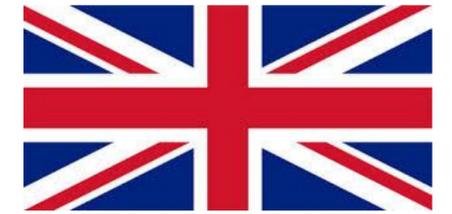
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# The British Conceptualization of Belgium, 1914

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## Method:

First I will study the language that the British used in reference to Belgium during July and August 1914. The focus will be on what pronouns were used to represent Belgium, which Belgian leaders portrayed as the most active forces, and the general tone used to describe the country. This will produce an understanding of the British conceptualization of Belgium and what they believed their role was in defending it. For example, if the British saw Belgium as defenseless and victimized, then they likely thought that it was their responsibility to protect it. This mindset would have affected their war decision by inclining them to enter. If a general conception is attained, it is likely that the primary sources will yield some outliers; individuals or institutions whose idea of Belgium differed from the rest. I will research the responses to these outliers in order to understand how they were answered and thus, how they affected the public mentality.

## Primary Sources:

This research will rely on a variety of sources constructed by the British during the pre-war period and the start of the war. In order to attain a comprehensive understanding of British conception of Belgium, I will refer to sources constructed by individuals and the media, including the private and public sphere. Media representations referenced are *The Daily Herald* and *The Evening Despatch*, which are accessible online through the British Newspaper Archive. Political references will be derived from *The Belgian Grey Book*, an online collection of the correspondences between Belgian foreign ministers during July and August 1914, and the Hansard collection of Parliamentary debates, accessible to Chapman University students through the Leatherby Library. Preliminary research into these sources indicates that typically, the British refer to Belgium as “she,” rarely providing specific names as the sources of action. Thus, the country was presented as one unified body that responded unanimously to the German threat. This portrayal of Belgium as one, anthropomorphic female ignored the deep cultural divide that separated the north and south Belgian communities and instead described the nation as a single woman, who was victimized by the German Hun.

## Introduction:

The origin of World War I is a highly contested matter; one enshrouded in complex alliances, ancient prejudices, and political strategies. Great Britain officially entered the conflict on the side of the Allies in response to Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality, which had been established since the signing of the Treaty of London in 1839. This research will investigate the meaning that the British assigned to Belgium, which in turn, explained why they considered it a country worth defending. I will use a variety of primary sources, such as newspaper articles, politicians’ private papers, and Parliamentary debate records, constructed by the British during the July Crisis of 1914 and the outbreak of the war to determine the British conceptualization of Belgium. A clear, inclusive understanding of Belgium in the 1914 British mind is imperative to the historical field because it would explain Britain’s decision to enter the war.

## Results:

Preliminary research indicates that the British viewed Belgium as inferior in terms of power and influence. Articles in the British press which mentioned Belgium included few references to individuals and instead attributed actions to the country as a whole. This portrayal was negligent of the deep cultural divide which existed between the Northern, Dutch region of Belgium and the Southern, French region. The British saw Belgium as one united body, and often described it as a “she.” This illustration of the country as an anthropomorphic female alluded to the British conceptualization of a weak victim in need of defense.

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The Cover Page of The Daily Herald, 5 August 1914. Photo Courtesy of The British Newspaper Archive.

Map of Europe, 1914



Map Courtesy of The United Kingdom National Archives.

