

Resistance to Military Occupations in Europe from the 19th Century

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Abstract

Since the nineteenth century military occupations in Europe have often provoked hostility and opposition among the occupied population. Yet resistance to military occupations occurred for a variety of complex reasons, and is itself a complex phenomenon. There is no single definition of “resistance”. Resistance therefore took numerous forms, from armed resistance to withdrawing labour, from organised action to spontaneous opposition. Hostility to the occupier was often driven by religious, nationalistic or political ideology, as well as the occupier’s own policies. Explaining and defining this complex, perhaps inevitable, phenomenon and gauging its success remains a difficult but fascinating task.

Article

Military occupations, whether in times of war or peace, often provoke hostility and opposition among the occupied population. Particularly after the French Revolution, the presence of foreign troops and administrations was understood as an affront to developing notions of national sovereignty, autonomy, and identity. Yet resistance to military occupations occurred for a variety of complex reasons, and is itself a complex phenomenon. There is no single definition of “resistance”, although some scholars distinguish between “resistance” and “opposition”. Many agree that resistance involves explicit actions opposing the occupier, usually involving an element of transgression and a risk of punishment to the resister. Resistance therefore took numerous forms, from armed resistance to withdrawing labour, from organised action to spontaneous opposition. This contribution will highlight some key examples of resistance from the 1800s, considering motivations, the actions themselves, and their success.

In late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, there was widespread, usually armed resistance to occupation. The Napoleonic army occupied Spain from 1808 until 1814, and from the beginning it was plagued by attacks on troops, comprising a popular rebellion. In May 1808, the population of Madrid rose in revolt against the 30,000 occupying French troops, who eventually crushed the rising and summarily executed hundreds of civilians. These began as spontaneous actions, but hostility to the French was eventually encouraged, co-ordinated and organised by local clergy, nobles, and Spanish government officials. Armed groups organised themselves into provincial *juntas* (committees) and engaged in what became known as guerrilla warfare. These insurrectionaries even fought French troops in battle, and although they were reduced to coastal and mountainous regions by 1811, they were never fully defeated and forced the French to commit an additional 300,000 troops to Spain. Religion was central to this resistance, as Catholic Spaniards feared what they perceived as secular France. Such fears were related to the looting of church property or execution of Spanish priests carried out by invading and occupying troops. Spanish propaganda was produced depicting the French as the anti-Christ, in some senses comprising a ‘cultural’ form of resistance, although anti-French sentiment was also born out of opposition to Napoleonic conscription. Throughout the

occupation, the French responded to attacks with harsh reprisals, which further increased Spaniards' desire to rid their country of the occupier.

Later in the century, similar resistance occurred in the Balkans. At the July 1878 Congress of Berlin the Great Powers permitted Austria-Hungary to occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it did until 1882. Habsburg commanders expected to be welcomed as liberators, but in fact spent the next four years waging a counter-insurgency campaign against a mixture of regular Turkish troops and Bosnian volunteers numbering the tens of thousands. This resistance was therefore particularly militaristic and, like the previous example, centred on religious differences and military grievances: resisters were overwhelmingly Muslim or Orthodox men opposing Vienna's Catholic rule and the imposition of conscription. Unlike the Napoleonic armies in Spain, however, Austro-Hungarian troops eventually crushed this resistance with a combination of military campaigns and clemency, avoiding harsh reprisals which would alienate the wider population.

In the twentieth century, occupations during and after the two World Wars saw many more instances and forms of resistance. Improved literacy levels and means of communication aided organised, as well as often non-military, opposition. In occupied France and Belgium in 1914-1918, a small minority helped Allied personnel caught behind enemy lines escape *via* the Dutch border, working for organised networks such as the Comité Jacquet in Lille, or spontaneously offering shelter to these men. Others published clandestine newspapers, or engaged in espionage for the Allied secret services, such as the Belgo-French network Dame Blanche. A maximum of about 6,000 men and women engaged in such resistance, which was punishable by death; and resisters were executed. What might be called "symbolic" resistance was more common, such as singing the national anthem, wearing national colours, or making jokes mocking the Germans: all punishable offences. Armed resistance to German dominance was practically inexistent, but more common on the Eastern Front.

The inter-war Allied occupation of the Rhineland (1918-1930), a peacetime occupation of guarantee, also saw non-armed resistance. This was particularly noticeable during the Franco-Belgian economic occupation of the Ruhr (1923-1925) to force Germany to pay reparations. German Chancellor Gustav Stresemann officially sanctioned "passive resistance" whereby German workers stopped producing goods, although they were soon replaced by French workers, and this economic and political resistance was abandoned in 1925.

The occupations of the Second World War provoked well-known acts of resistance. Active resistance to Nazi domination was never more than a minority phenomenon, involving between 1-3% of the French, 2.4% of Belgians, 1-2.5% of Danes, and 10-15% of Poles. Organised resistance often began with establishing networks based around clandestine publications, creating further hostility to the occupier among the wider population, or (as in Poland) opposing Nazification by preserving local identity and culture. Armed resistance movements sprung up in Eastern Europe after the Nazi invasion, and became more frequent in occupied Western Europe from 1942, spurred on by Nazi losses in North Africa and eventually in Russia. Political and ideological motivations were important, as anti-fascists and Communists often spearheaded this opposition. Distrust and hostility between different resistance groups was common, and there was no one "resistance" movement in any country. Active resisters engaged in assassinations, sabotage, escape networks for Jews or Allied personnel, and more. Some worked with foreign secret services such as the British Special Operations Executive, or were overseen by external national groups, as with Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement, which successfully united disparate resistance networks by late 1943. Resisters also targeted and punished local collaborators, especially during the liberation of 1944-1945, although individuals could and did engage in both resistance and collaboration at different times. Passive/symbolic opposition was more widespread, with many occupied Europeans, for example, listening to the BBC, or wearing national symbols, such as the Dutch and Danes wearing royal

carnations and buttons. Not all scholars consider this resistance. Overall, even active resistance contributed little towards the liberation. Attacks on Germans usually led to harsh repression (such as summary executions), provoking criticism from compatriots who sometimes perceived armed resisters as bandits, with some justification. Yet organised resistance did disrupt the German war machine, if only on a small scale.

European men and women have engaged in numerous forms of resistance to military occupations, from armed to symbolic, passive or cultural resistance more common in the twentieth century. Hostility to the occupier was often driven by religious, nationalistic or political ideology, as well as the occupier's own policies. Explaining and defining this complex, perhaps inevitable, phenomenon and gauging its success remains a difficult but fascinating endeavour.

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