

Propaganda Iron Crosses of 1914 by Simon Wilson

Like so many things, there used to be a lot of these about. Generally known as “Propaganda Iron Crosses”, these are crudely made cast crosses, often bearing the names of French and Belgian cities. Some have words like “For Kultur” on them and some have the names of Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool, the British towns that were attacked in 1914. Unlike the later Lusitania medallions, not much is known about them.



LEFT: Four different propaganda Iron Crosses (obverse). RIGHT: The same crosses (Reverse) The 'Rd' in a diamond echoes the Registered Design mark used until the 1880s. Some of this design also appear without the mark.

One thing that does seem to be “known” about them, according to a number of threads on the internet, is that they were made to be dropped into German trenches, either from aircraft, or by being thrown across No-Man's Land by British soldiers. I'm sure that if this were the case there would be



reports in memoirs, or that dozens of rusty examples them would have been recovered from the fields of the Western Front. A letter to the Whitby paper from a collector seeking information says they are not known to German collectors, suggesting they were not distributed to Germans by any means. For the moment I am going to disbelieve this story until someone can show me reliable evidence.

The main sources of information about these crosses are newspapers and the crosses themselves, plus eBay, which offers a range of examples. They seem to come in two varieties – the ones bearing the names of towns, and the ones bearing other things.



They appear in newspaper reports at random – being variously described as toys or as prizes or, in one case, a sarcastic reward for helping the Germans by being late for work. It is all very disorganised and unlike the Lusitania medals there seems to be no central organisation.

The types with a town may have a single town or a list of towns. At this point I am starting to regret that I didn't pay more attention to them over the years. The example I have (*left*), with one town name is "Louvain", which is now known as "Leuven". It is about fifteen miles east of Brussels. Sebastien Artois, whose name still lives on in the Stella-Artois brand, was a brewer here and there is a bar in town

which claims to stock 3,000 different beers. In 1914, 248 people were killed by German forces, and 1,120 homes destroyed, about one eighth of the city. At the University Library around 230,000 books were burned, including 800 early printed works dating from before 1500, and 750 Mediaeval manuscripts,

Other towns listed on propaganda Iron Crosses are Scarborough, Hartlepool, Whitby, Rheims, Amiens, Antwerp, Dinant and Ghent. The names all relate to actions around September/October 1914, apart from the English ones, which were bombarded in December.



They appear to be an attempt to exploit the German actions in what was known as the Rape of Belgium. It was a real event in 1914, which was exaggerated by British propagandists with fictional stories, and was used as justification for the war. The treaty of London, signed in 1839, and often characterised as "a mere scrap of paper", was not a compelling reason to enlist – going to the aid of maltreated civilians, including children and nuns, was far easier to justify.

The reports have been investigated many times since the war, with the conclusion that the Germans did commit many crimes in Belgium, but that the British also made many of them up. The Germans murdered 6,000 Belgian civilians and, in 1914, destroyed 25,000 homes and other buildings in 837 communities. By the end of the war over 17,000 Belgian civilians had been killed or died due to mistreatment and 120,000 were deported to serve as slave labour.

A very dull cross – no propaganda and no mockery – but one of the commonest types.

The result was that even in 1918 “Remember Belgium” was used as a slogan in an American War Bond campaign.

The German forces of 1914, despite the Prussian military reputation, were not universally well-disciplined or well-led. They were also fearful of francs-tireurs. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 francs-tireurs (literally “free shooters”) fought as irregular infantry. They caused approximately 1,000 casualties and tied up around 120,000 German troops guarding lines of communications. As civilians under arms, they did not have the protection of regulars and the Germans were legally entitled to treat them as criminals. This led to a number of executions and reprisals against civilians, which continued to be standard German policy in two World Wars.

Regardless of the legal position, Germany's actions in 1914 did not go down well with neutral countries. Italy distanced itself from the Central powers before entering the war on the side of the allies and America would still be using reports of atrocities years later in War Bond drives.

The Iron Crosses with other inscriptions “For Kultur”, “For Brave Conduct” and “For Brutality 1914” were clearly aimed at ridiculing the Kaiser and the German People. This was also a feature of newspaper stories, which made a point of emphasising the numbers of decorations being awarded, with the implication that standard for awards was very low.

The town crosses appear to date from 1914 as the actions took place in 1914 and they were on sale by Christmas of that year at the Penny Toy Market on Ludgate Hill. The ones with wording are probably from the same period. There appears to be no design referring to events of 1915 or later, and by then the Lusitania Medallions were easily available.

They were produced by a number of foundries and distributed by a toy company – C E Turnbull & Co, or CETANDCO – who were makers and importers of dogs, lead figures, dolls houses and forts. These were sold in paper envelopes, and I have never seen an example with a maker's mark on it.

There is a report from a Lancashire paper about a local iron-founder who produced 22 Iron Crosses to reward participation in a football match to raise funds for Belgium, and an advert from J J Leaver of Weston Super Mare for Iron Crosses (such as the one pictured below) with Antwerp, Amiens, Dinant, Ghent, Louvain and Rheims named. Leavers pursued the trades of “Ironmonger, Gunsmith and Mechanic” and had a shop on the High Street. The crosses were a penny each, with trade terms



available. The date of the advert was 28 November 1914. The cross and “W” is believed to be an expression of a wish that the Kaiser might die.

This seems to be typical of the way they were used – they were associated with charity events, but not specifically sold for charity, and they were sold as toys or novelties, with a propaganda slant. Eventually, the Lusitania Medal would become the main medallic propaganda medal, and paper flags would become the favoured means of fund raising.

One was even sent, according to an exchange on the Letters page of the County Herald in Flintshire (16 April 1915) to an anti-drink campaigner in Wales. He was not amused.