

# THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON THE CITIZENS OF YPRES: A DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

- Pieter Trogh -

In 2018 the In Flanders Fields Museum (IFFM) organised an exhibition entitled *To End All Wars? A reassessment of the First World War*. This exhibition featured the story of a family from Poelkapelle that was separated by the war. One branch spent the war in occupied Belgium, first in the German military zone and later deep in the *Etappengebiet*. The other branch spent the war in the Westhoek and then in exile in France. After the war, both branches were confronted with the same painful choice, a dilemma that faced thousands of Belgian families who had lived in the front region: would they return to their destroyed village and rebuild their lives there, or stay where they had ended up during (and because of) the war? As both branches of the family were farmers, this was not an obvious choice, given the total destruction of the landscape. One branch eventually chose to return, and the other decided to stay in France. Thus, one remained Flemish while the other became French, but they kept in touch, generation after generation, until today. This story prompted me to investigate the issue of fleeing the war and the dilemma of whether or not to return 'home', for the population of Ypres.

The impact the First World War had on the demographics of populations that lived in places that became war zones, has seldom received proper attention. The war uprooted millions of people, be they civilians or soldiers. A difficult return home awaited many after the war. Against this backdrop, Ypres was a special case. Thousands of refugees had flocked to the town in the early stages of the war, but by October 1914 the city found itself on the frontline of the assault that so many had hoped to flee. After eight months of shelling – which claimed hundreds of victims – the situation became untenable for civilians during the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April 1915 to 24 May 1915); those who had not yet fled were forced to evacuate. The remainder of town's population ended up scattered throughout Belgium and abroad, notably France and Great Britain. Ypres remained a war zone until after the Armistice. The conflict had brought about the complete destruction of Ypres. Not only did this have far-reaching consequences for the physical reconstruction of the city, but also for its repopulation. This contribution examines the impact of the war on the citizens of and in Ypres during the war and it reconstructs the dynamics of Ypres' early post-war repopulation. The identification of people before, during and after the war was undertaken in order to investigate a pre-war and post-war comparison.

In order to tackle this subject, I followed the approach of the IFFM's Names List project: extensive individual identification and compilation of demographic data. The Names List aims to draw up an inclusive register of all victims - civilian and military, of any origin - whose death is linked to the First World War in Belgium. In that pursuit, it attempts to map out as much information as pos-

sible on each individual.<sup>1</sup> This particular study – about refugees and resettlement in Ypres – contributes to furthering our understanding of the war in several ways. The research on the fortunes of the Ypres citizens serves as a pilot case for a larger research project on Belgian refugees that the IFFM will establish in the coming years, in preparation for a temporary exhibition on Belgian refugees of the First World War in 2025. At the same time, the identification of the refugees aims – in the long run – to upgrade the Names List with other groups of 'historical persons' (survivors of the First World War in Belgium). Gathering personal information about individuals forming a group offers a richer and more sophisticated picture than figures and statistics. In time, a database compiling such qualitative information could provide opportunities for prosopographic research into the First World War. In the short run, the collected data can already be used for various applications of the museum's public activities (for example in exhibitions or for genealogical research).

In this context, I want to expose the dynamics behind this identification process in this contribution. At the same time, the data offer a vivid picture of the wartime fate that befell Ypres' citizens. Key questions in this research concern the whereabouts of the citizens and the repopulation of the destroyed city in its early post-war years, with special attention to the return of citizens who originated from Ypres.

## Ypres before 1914

Before the outbreak of the First World War, Ypres was a somewhat dormant but charming provincial town with a glorious past.<sup>2</sup> With its riding school

1. Based on public and private archives, casualty lists, war graves commissions registers, (aerial) photographs, literature, witness accounts and memories or material from direct relatives, the Names List maps out as much information as possible on each individual. All information is preserved in a well-structured database. This makes the Names List a unique tool, revealing nuances or unknown aspects of FWW history; enabling commemoration on individual and collective levels from inclusive perspectives (involving often 'forgotten' groups like for instance colonial troops or civilians); feeding into scientific military analysis, educational means, visualization and animation in exhibitions, and grassroots projects. The list can be consulted via <http://www.inflandersfields.be/nl>

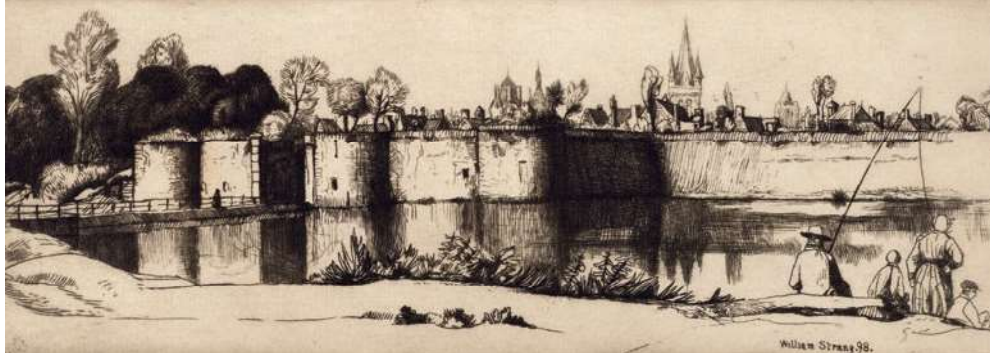
2. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN; JAN DEWILDE, *The reconstruction of leper: a walk through history* (s.l., Openbaar kunstbezit in Vlaanderen, 1999), p. 7.



*Ypres, as seen from 400m altitude, 1918 (49Fi1655, Fonds Berthel , Toulouse).*



*Former justice of the peace Kamiel Gravet surveys the city from the ramparts at the Menin Gate, next to Kauwekijnstraat, April 1919 (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



*View of the Lille Gate with Ypres' ramparts towers in the background and fishermen in the foreground.  
Etching by William Strang, 1898 (Collection Stedelijke Musea, Ieper).*



*View of pre-war Ypres: the market, 15 July 1911 (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



and infantry barracks it was a garrison town. Officers, local bourgeoisie and several noble inhabitants formed a considerable group of Ypres citizens and lead a comfortable existence. Most of the inhabitants, however, were active in the manufacturing sector, which was small-scale and mainly focused on the local market. In Ypres, for example, there was a line bleaching plant, a diamond cutting plant, a bicycle factory, a chocolate and gingerbread factory, some tanneries, soap and salt shops, and traders in metal and grains.<sup>3</sup> The industrial development for which Belgium was so well known at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had hardly penetrated the Westhoek (the westernmost corner of West Flanders province (*West-Vlaanderen*)). Because there was not enough work for the many (young) men – inside or just outside the city's ramparts – they were forced to look for work elsewhere. For example, men took up work as seasonal labourers in the North of France during the summer months, or in the coal mines in Wallonia during the winter months.<sup>4</sup> During this period, women still traditionally stayed at home to take care of the children. Although, many were involved in trades such as lace-making, sewing and stitching. Before the war, British, German and French travel guides on Belgium mentioned Ypres as a site of some interest thanks to its marvellous Cloth Hall and other remnants of its medieval heyday.<sup>5</sup> Aware of the importance of the city's heritage, the city council decided to set up an ambitious restoration program between 1895 and 1914, under the direction of the city's architect Jules Coomans.<sup>6</sup>

In order to study the demographic evolution of Ypres during and after the war, it is necessary to consider its pre-war population. The appropriate source for finding out about these people are the population registers. In Belgium, these registers were the result of ten-yearly censuses, which recorded all changes within a family. Unfortunately, the Ypres population registers from before 1914 – among several other archival sources – were destroyed during the shelling in the first weeks of the siege (between the end of October and the beginning of December 1914). An annual report of the Ypres city council that did survive the war mentioned 17,529 official inhabitants on 31 December 1911.<sup>7</sup> The only source still available to identify Ypres' pre-war citizens are the electoral lists of 1913–1915.<sup>8</sup> However, this source only allows for partial identification because the lists reflect the Belgian general multiple voting right introduced in 1893. This right gave every male Belgian citizen aged 25 or older at least one vote - and sometimes one or two additional votes depending on his social position. The electoral lists made it possible to identify 3,643 Ypres men: when and where they were born, what their profession was, where they lived, whether they were married, and, in some cases, their education. This means that only 20.8% of the pre-war Ypres population could be systematically identified.

### From refuge to front city

After the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914, one and a half million Belgians fled

3. HECTOR VERMEULEN-MEYNNIE, *Het vraagstuk Yper : ter lezing, overweging en bewaring* (s.l., s.n., 1945).

4. LIEVEN STUBBE, *Elf eeuwen Ieper : de negen levens van een stad* (Ieper, Stad Ieper, 2019), pp. 342-349.

5. See: DELPHINE LAUWERS, *Le Saillant d'Ypres entre reconstruction et construction d'un lieu de mémoire* (PhD Thesis, Florence, European University Institute, 2013), pp. 38-42; MARK CONNELLY; STEFAN GOEBEL, *Great Battles : Ypres* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 9-21.

6. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN; JAN DEWILDE, *The reconstruction of Ieper : a walk through history* (s.l., Openbaar kunstbezit in Vlaanderen, 1999), p. 7.

7. *Rapport sur l'administration et la situation des affaires de la Ville d'Ypres pendant l'année 1912* (City Archives of Ypres).

Of course, the figure on the eve of the First World War differed slightly from this, due to births, deaths and migration between 1912 and 1914.

8. Electoral rolls 1913-1915, Districts 1 and 2, originals and copies (*2<sup>e</sup> Canton. Liste des électeurs pour le Sénat, la Chambre des Représentants, la Province et la Commune. Du 1<sup>er</sup> mai 1913 au 30 avril 1914. 1<sup>er</sup> Canton. Liste des électeurs pour le Sénat, la Chambre des Représentants, la Province et la Commune. Du 1<sup>er</sup> mai 1914 au 30 avril 1915*), (City Archives of Ypres, GA13/IEPE\_01/box 14) Gratitude to IFFM-volunteer Dirk Vandekerckhove for having processed the lists.

within the first three months of the war.<sup>9</sup> The course of conflict brought the violence of war to the most remote villages. The German advance did not go entirely according to plan, which led to frustration and the harsh repression of Belgian citizens. In dozens of villages, executions, looting, and hostage-taking took place, and, in some cases, civilians were even used as human shields.<sup>10</sup> The death toll of the German atrocities rose to 5,600 Belgian citizens by October 1914. Reports of these atrocities caused great panic among the population, resulting in mass exodus as people fled from the German advance. After the fall of Antwerp (10 October 1914) the fighting shifted to the west. The chaos among the civilian population was complete. People had fled wherever they could – hundreds of thousands of civilians had crossed the Belgian-Dutch border to seek haven in the Netherlands, and tens of thousands more had fled to the western part of the country before crossing over to the United Kingdom or France.

Besides news and rumors about the fighting, refugees were usually the first ‘really tangible’ witnesses of the war. At the end of August 1914, the first small groups of refugees arrived in Ypres sporadically. On 3 September 1914, the first full trains reached the town with refugees from Mechelen and the surrounding area. That same day the first Ypres families left their town.<sup>11</sup> The first ‘refugee children’ were born in Ypres at the beginning of September, their parents came from the region of Charleroi, Ghent and Liège.<sup>12</sup> The Ypres people feverishly followed the events

in newspapers or via posters placarded on the city walls, but reality simply caught up with the news. On 7 October the German 3rd Cavalry Division passed through Ypres, and a week later the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division appeared on the Ypres Grand Place; the war was at Ypres’ doorstep. As with other regions in Belgium, civilians in West Flanders were suspected of obstructing the German advance as franc-tireurs. ‘Shy Monday’ became a heavily loaded concept in the collective West-Flemish memory. It marks the violent seizure of several villages on 19 (and 20) October, the acts of terror against the population that accompanied it in Roeselare, Ledegem, Staden, Beerst, Vladslo, Zarren, Handzame, Esen, etc., and the mass flight that followed.<sup>13</sup> Because the Germans had already reached the Belgian coast by that time and the last ships heading to Great Britain had left on 14 October, the only way out of the country was to reach France through the Westhoek.<sup>14</sup>

Caesar Gezelle, Ypres writer and assistant priest of St Martin’s parish, witnessed the arrival of the refugees in Ypres around 19 October 1914, stating:

“The day was one of unprecedented sadness. Throughout the preceding night and the long day refugees had arrived from Roeselare, Zonnebeke, Langemark, Passchendaele and all the north-eastern municipalities. One who has not seen such a procession of fear and despair, of tears and lamentation with his own eyes, remains unfamiliar with one of the most real disasters of war: the terrible banishment

9. For a comprehensive analysis, see (amongst others): MICHAËL AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil: les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale: France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas* (Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2008); MICHAËL AMARA; PIET CHIELENS; e.a. *Exodus: Belgen op de vlucht 1914-1918* (Gent, Tijdsbeeld, 2014); SIEGFRIED DEBAEKE, *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog: 1,5 miljoen Belgen op de vlucht 1914-1918* (Brugge, De Klaproos, 2004); MARC DE MEYER; MISJOE VERLEYEN, *Augustus 1914: België op de vlucht* (Antwerpen, Manteau, 2013).

10. See JOHN HORNE; ALAN KRAMER. *German atrocities 1914: a history of denial* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001).

11. War memories of GUSTAAF DELAHAYE, in: JOZEF GELDOF, *Oorlogsdagboeken over Ieper 1914-1915 – Eerste deel* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), p. 134.

12. City Archives of Ypres, Civil Status, Restored records of birth certificates of 1914-1915.

13. See (amongst others): ALFONS DENYS, *Geschiedkundige oorlogskroniek van Rousselaere en 't ommeland* (s.l., Atelier, 1989); JOZEF HUYGEBART, *Schuwe maandag, 19 oktober 1914: burgers van Roeselare en omgeving geterroriseerd en vermoord* (Brugge, De Klaproos, 2014); KEVIN BREYNE, *Staden 1914: het trauma van Schuwe Maandag* (Kortrijk, Kevin Breyne, 2014).

14. PIET CHIELENS; PIETER TROGH, *De Geschreven Oorlog: anthologie van teksten van het front in België 1914-1940* (Antwerpen, Manteau, 2016), pp. 32-36.



*Belgian refugees during the first months of the war. (Collection In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



*View of Boterstraat, taken from Tempelstraat: daily life in a city at the front. Ypres, 22/11/1914  
(Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*

from one's own home and lord of thousands of paltry innocent people."<sup>15</sup>

Entire villages were left almost empty. Some eye-witnesses spoke of 20.000 refugees in the city but these numbers could never be verified.<sup>16</sup> Chaos reigned in Ypres and no administration was registering the refugees. On 19 October, British soldiers tried to keep refugees out of the city: those who did not have a *laissez-passer* were barred entry. Gustave Delahaye, a blacksmith and firefighter, reported on the situation on 20 October:

"All night and all day long one hears the cannon roaring and the rattle of machine guns around Staden, Westrozebeke, Poelkapelle, Passchendaele, Moorslede, Beselare ... Thousands of people from those villages come to the city. There's no way of stopping them, the sentries are obliged to let them through. Some leave for Poperinge, but most of them stay in the city. Wagons and carts with household goods and children on them, yes, even many outsiders brought their animals with them. All the houses in town were full of refugees."<sup>17</sup>

The Battle of the Yser was in full swing when on 21 October 1914 the First Battle of Ypres erupted. For a month and a half, a bloody battle was fought around the town, resulting in the famous front formation of the 'Ypres Salient'. Ypres citizens and refugees were forced to live side by side in wretched conditions as thousands of soldiers marched through the town to the front.

In these chaotic circumstances the military medical services were short of personnel and equipment to cope with the constant stream of wounded sol-

diers. As a result, there was no time to take care of civilian casualties. The only civilian hospital in the city – the *Gasthuis Onze-Lieve-Vrouw*, that was located at the current Court of Justice on the Grand Place – only had three doctors and a handful of sisters to provide assistance to sick and wounded civilians. Most of the civilian doctors who had not fled had been admitted to the medical services of the Belgian army. By mid-November, the city council opted for safer accommodation by moving to Poperinge, leaving Ypres and its citizens behind. This move created some tensions with those who remained in the town. As a consequence, a handful of local residents set up a "Provisional Committee" (*Comité Provisoire*) to govern the city.<sup>18</sup> Their main challenge was to provide food, clean water and care for affected citizens. The diary of priest Camille Delaere, a crucial account to the history of the war in Ypres, bears witness to the daily shelling of the town and the civilian casualties. The priest walked through the ruins looking for victims, pulling them out from under the rubble, before trying to identify them and burying them. This was no easy task. As Camille Delaere explains: "the service of the gravediggers was completely disorganized. There were no more men to carry the bodies to the cemetery; we had to bury them in the gardens or in the courtyards of the churches. Every day more houses were demolished."<sup>19</sup>

The Provisional Committee, however, received help from an unexpected source. A British religious group of Quakers had set up the Friends Ambulance Service Unit (FAU) – a motorized ambulance column of professional doctors and nurses – which followed the British troops in order to assist those in need. Their help was usually provided to civilians.<sup>20</sup> Once it became too danger-

15. CAESAR GEZELLE, cited in: GABRIEL VERSAVEL, *Passendale 1914-1918* (Rumbeke, Drukkerij Arnold Herreman, 1968), pp. 22-23.

16. See ROBERT J. STOPFORD, *Ypres : then and now 1914-1965* (s.l., The Friends Ambulance Unit, s.d.).

17. GUSTAVE DELAHAYE, cited in: JOZEF GELDHOF, *Oorlogsdagboeken over Ieper 1914-1915 – deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), p. 146.

18. Collections In Flanders Fields Museum, Personal files, Folder 1617 – René Colaert.

19. CAMILLE DELAERE, cited in: JOZEF GELDHOF, *Oorlogsdagboeken over Ieper 1914-1915 – deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), pp. 41-57.

20. See (amongst others): PIET CHIELENS; PIETER TROGH, "Soldiers and ambulances", in: PIET CHIELENS; PATRICK ALLEGAERT; e.a., *War and Trauma* (Lichtervelde, Uitgeverij Hannibal, 2013), pp. 29-37; MAYBEARN TATHAM; JAMES E. MILES, *The friends' ambulance unit 1914-1919: a record* (London, The Swarthmore Press, s.d.), pp. 4-35.



ous to work in the civilian hospital on the Grand Place, a new hospital was set up on 2 December in the *Heilig Hartgesticht* (Sacred Heart Hospital) along the Poperingseweg, just outside the centre of Ypres. The buildings were to be shared with a French military ambulance but some rooms were reserved for civilian victims only.<sup>21</sup> The FAU and the Provisional Committee ran the hospital by all possible means. The administrative records of this activity is an important source for the identification of civilians in Ypres. The hospital register contained a comprehensive list of “sick - injured - refugees”, which in addition to the names also provides information about their origin (Ypres or elsewhere), their condition, and dates of admission, departure, transfer or death. The hospital operated from 2 December 1914 to 22 April 1915. This period between the First and Second Battle of Ypres was considered a relatively calm one, but the daily German shelling still took its toll. However, there was also another threat hanging over the city’s head.

### From front city to dead city

On 8 January 1915, Gustaaf Delahaye estimated that the city was inhabited “by about 8,000 civilians, about half of whom were refugees”.<sup>22</sup> Some citizens who had fled in October or November returned when they heard that a relative form of peace had been restored. “On 10 January 1915, Aunt Rachel and my brother Arthur attempted to reach Ypres without a *laissez-passer* and immedi-

ately assess whether the situation in Ypres was sustainable or not. It was so agreed that if they didn’t notify us somehow, the second group could follow”, wrote Karel Cornillie in his war memoirs.<sup>23</sup> The family of the then ten-year-old Cornillie had already fled to Vlamertinge on 30 October 1914. After two days his parents returned to Ypres with their six children and one of their grandmothers, only to flee two days later, on 3 November, to Roesbrugge-Haringe, near the border with France. On 20 January the whole family had moved back into their house in Ypres.

Despite everything, life went on in the city. Between the beginning of October 1914 and the end of May 1915 at least 151 children were born in Ypres.<sup>24</sup> One can wonder in what conditions exactly this happened – in damp cellars, while shells struck nearby. Albert Lemay was born on 24 November 1914 at 6am in the morning in one such a cellar of the Post Office building in the Rijsselstraat. Someone who attended the delivery carved an inscription on the cellar wall to remind us of this fact. The inscription survived the war, allowing Albert Lemay to return to the precise spot where he was born decades later.<sup>25</sup> The parents of 37 of the 151 children born in Ypres between the first and second battles, were refugees.

In that period, however, more deaths than births were counted in Ypres. Thanks to the Names List, we have a good idea of the civilian victims who fell in Ypres. Between 7 October 1914, the passage of the German cavalry, and 21 April 1915 – on the

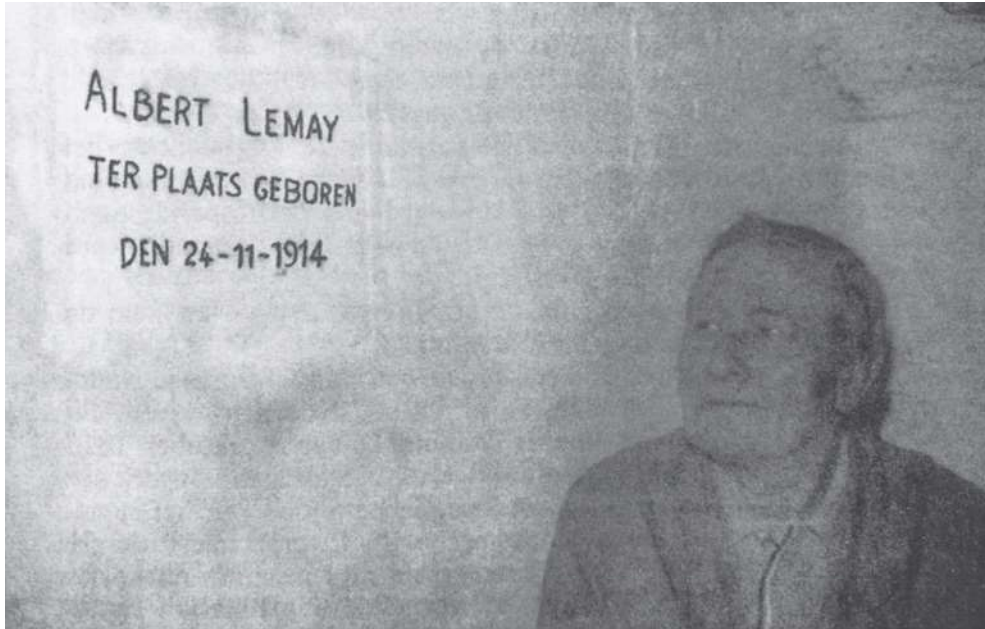
21. Collections In Flanders Fields Museum, unpublished report of GUSTAAF DELAHAYE, *Het Hospitaal te Yper: november 1914 - april 1915*. Also see: MAYBEARN TATHAM; JAMES E. MILES, *The friends' ambulance unit 1914-1919: a record* (London, The Swarthmore Press, s.d.), pp. 14-18.

22. GUSTAAF DELAHAYE, cited in: JOZEF GELDHOF, *Oorlogsdagboeken over Ieper 1914-1915 – deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), pp. 181-182. Meaburn Tatham of the *Friends Ambulance Unit* mentioned ‘more than 10.000’. MAYBEARN TATHAM; JAMES E. MILES, *The friends' ambulance unit 1914-1919: a record* (London, The Swarthmore Press, s.d.), p. 17.

23. Collections In Flanders Fields Museum, Personal files, Folder 3452 – KAREL CORNILLIE; unpublished war memoirs, pp. 27-28.

24. Civil Status, restored certificates 1919-1933 (City Archives Ypres). These particular registers of Ypres (1919-1933) were used to compensate for the registers of 1914 and 1915, which were lost during the war. They were drawn up only on request of an ‘administrative necessity’: in the context of a specific matter (f.e. regarding property issues). The registers with restored certificates contained a total of 841 certificates, covering the period from 1 January 1914 to the end of May 1915: 388 births (4 of which were recorded twice), 53 marriages and 400 deaths (7 of which were recorded twice). If one knows that about half of the Ypres refugees did not return to the city, one can already suspect that some certificates were never ‘repaired’ and that some cases are difficult or untraceable to date. The figures used here are therefore ‘a minimum’.

25. Collections In Flanders Fields Museum, *Iepers Kwartier*, 12<sup>e</sup> Jaargang, nr. 1; 1976.



*Decades after the war, Albert Lemay returned to the basement of the old Post Office to mark the site where he had been born. (Collection Stedelijke Musea, Ieper).*



*A search party posing in front of the Wooden House in Rijselstraat in Ypres (February/March 1915). Members of the party include Sister Margriet (far left) and the priest Camille Delaere (second from right) next to members of the Friends' Ambulance Unit. The man on the right is holding paint and a brush which were used to paint warning signs on the doors of habitations housing typhoid sufferers. (Collection Paul Handford, Birmingham).*

eve of the Second Battle of Ypres – there were at least 352 civilian deaths in Ypres itself (many others would die of illness or injury outside Ypres).<sup>26</sup> Some of those casualties occurred during the shelling of the town, but a significant proportion died from a typhoid epidemic which devastated the Westhoek in the winter of 1914-1915. By the end of 1914, the FAU had discovered the first cases. The circumstances at the time seemed favorable for the typhoid fever to thrive and develop into an epidemic: large numbers of people crammed into poorly ventilated cellars, clean drinking water was lacking, hygiene was poor and there was a high level of infection. The epidemic hit hardest between the end of December 1914 and March 1915, and affected almost the entire Westhoek. Separate rooms were set up in the Sacred Heart Hospital to quarantine typhoid victims. The FAU did everything in its power to control the disease, but it was not easy, as they faced “an enormous difficulty in inducing them (the civilians) to leave their homes for safer surroundings”. The FAU concluded:

“Hundreds of Belgian families preferred the security of a cellar to the dreaded possibility of having to cross the border line into France. This pathetic stubborn determination to stand by their homes, no matter what might happen, must have cost hundreds of lives, young and old, in that corner of Belgium alone”.<sup>27</sup>

Some had been ill for two to three weeks, an incubation period sufficient to be fatal. There were daily deaths from typhoid fever.<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of February, the FAU set up a large-scale vaccination campaign. With the help of the Provisional Committee, they tried to raise awareness among the population. Posters appeared in the city urging the Ypres people to get checked and vaccinated. Special search parties were formed to trace the sick by means of door-to-door visits and to evacuate them to hospitals equipped with quarantine rooms. This was done not only in Ypres, but in the whole region between Poperinge and Ypres. By means of a practical classification system they marked the houses to show the situation.<sup>29</sup> Between 5 February and 10 April 1915, 19,039 citizens were vaccinated against typhoid fever in the region of Ypres - Poperinge.<sup>30</sup> Thanks to the efforts of the FAU, the epidemic was eradicated by the summer of 1915. However, typhoid fever claimed the lives of at least 330 civilians in the Westhoek. In the Sacred Heart Hospital alone, 121 out of 162 deaths were due to typhus.<sup>31</sup> Out of a total of 884 patients treated in this hospital, 541 had contracted typhoid fever.<sup>32</sup>

Around mid-April 1915, just as the typhus epidemic was beginning to be brought under control, the Germans considerably increased the intensity of their shelling of Ypres. The shelling was the prelude to an offensive which the Germans launched on 22 April 1915 at dusk, as soon as the winds were favorable. It was the first large-scale gas attack in history. Along the front line between Steenstrate and Langemark, the valves of 6000 pre-buried gas canisters were opened: more than 150 tons of chlorine gas drifted towards Allied trenches.<sup>33</sup>

26. Figures based on the Names List. Also see: PIETER TROGH, *De Namenlijst - Een algemene inleiding: Naar een inclusieve geschiedenis en herdenking van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België* (leper, IFFM, 2019).

27. MAYBEARN TATHAM; JAMES E MILES, *The friends' ambulance unit 1914-1919: a record* (London, The Swarthmore Press, s.d.), p. 17.

28. JOZEF GELDHOF, *Oorlogsdagboeken over leper 1914-1915 - deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), p. 187.

29. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, “De Friends' Ambulance Unit. Medical Assistance Provided to the Civilian Population during the First World War”, in: PIET CHIELENS; PATRICK ALLEGAERT; e.a., *War and Trauma* (Lichtervelde, Uitgeverij Hannibal, 2013), pp. 68-69.

30. Maybearn Tatham; James E. Miles, *The friends' ambulance unit 1914-1919: a record* (London, The Swarthmore Press, s.d.), p. 209.

31. The State Archives in Brussels (SAB) keeps a fund with archives of civil hospitals behind the front (*Inventaire des archives des Hôpitaux civils du front, 1914-1918*/F. Plisnier; Acces nr. I-418). It contains sediments from the extensive administration of the activities of the Friends Ambulance Unit. The numerous individual cards allow us to get an idea of the deadly impact that the epidemic has had on the region. At least 330 victims could be identified, but the actual number is most likely even higher.

32. Jozef Geldhof, *Oorlogsdagboeken over leper 1914-1915 - deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), pp. 256-273.

33. See (a.o.): L.F. HABER, *The poisonous cloud: chemical warfare in the First World War* (Oxford, Clarendon, 2002);

KOEN KOCH, *Een kleine geschiedenis van de Grote Oorlog 1914-1918* (Antwerpen, Manteau, 2010); JEAN PASCAL ZANDERS, *Innocence Slaughtered. Gas and the transformation of warfare and society* (London, Unicorn Publishing Group, 2016).

The French defenders of the sector carried no protection and were completely surprised by the poisonous cloud of gas. Despite considerable territorial gains, the German tactics failed and the Allies closed the line again. The Second Battle of Ypres then erupted across the whole of the Salient, but ended in a stalemate after a month of heavy fighting. The Ypres Salient remained, but the front line had moved four kilometres closer to the town.

The shelling had caused great panic among the citizens of Ypres. Entire neighbourhoods were left in ruins and once again many civilians were killed. Ypres citizen Jules Breyne later noted in his diary:

"As we sat there praying, we heard bombs exploding continuously on the sides of the Kalfvaart, Brugseweg, Pennestraat, and more to the center of the city; we saw horses escaping and running wild. Suddenly a whole gang of people came out of the Paddevijverstraat, and we heard that the Germans had used suffocating gas and had broken through. (...) We hurried home among the explosions of shrapnel, but when we got home the façade of the place where we had left my sister Eugénie and her husband Alphonsus was smashed and they were no longer visible. Had they now fled or perished? We did not know and the bombardment was too heavy to investigate. We crawled through the debris, took our suitcases in all haste, and fled to Vlamertinge".<sup>34</sup>

A few days later, Jules Breyne discovered that his sister and brother-in-law had been found dead in the rubble.

Citizens sought shelter in the closest cellars they could find, but even there they were not safe. One of the greatest tragedies took place where the Menin Gate Memorial now stands. In the original

gateway, nestled in the city ramparts, there was a café called *In den Ouden Wachte* (In the Old Guardian). On 22 April 1915 some fifty citizens sought shelter in the cellars of the pub. By nightfall, two heavy shells wreaked havoc on the café: 25 civilians and 3 Belgian gendarmes were killed. The bodies were not found among the rubble until weeks later by a Belgian military unit in charge of clearing the wreckage in Ypres. An attentive adjutant of the unit took the trouble to identify the bodies as best as possible, so that today the identity of 21 of the 25 victims of the *In den Ouden Wachte* tragedy is known. At that time the bodies were buried on a perk on the city ramparts, but the graves were completely destroyed during the course of the war.<sup>35</sup>

The situation in Ypres became untenable. Those who had not yet fled were obliged by British military to leave the town at the beginning of May 1915. On 9 May 1915 the last civilians in Ypres were evacuated by the FAU to safer places behind the front. Priest Camille Delaere was among the very last to leave Ypres:

"Our poor ruins are abandoned to the soldiers' guard. (...) Everything has fallen prey to the flames; everything is now a ruin; it is even rare to see a section of wall still standing in the middle of these heaps of bricks: they are rare, the cellars that were not smashed, and the many unopened safes that are strewn among the debris. The houses that the fire has spared are all cracked open to the wind and to plunder ... It is the abomination of desolation".<sup>36</sup>

With the disappearance of the last civic activity in the city, the citizens declared their own city dead. Even during the war, this tragic moment was, with some sense of drama, referred to with 'the Death of Ypres', as if it heralded the end of the city's history.<sup>37</sup>

34. Collections In Flanders Fields Museum, digital copy of the unpublished diary of JULES BREYNE, pp. 34-35.

35. PIETER TROGH, "The hard road to recognition: the story of Ieper's civilian casualties", in: *Jaarboek In Flanders Fields Museum* (2018), pp. 44-73.

36. CAMIEL DELAERE, cited in: Jozef Geldhof, *Oorlogsdagboeken over Ieper 1914-1915 – deel 1* (Brugge, Genootschap voor Geschiedenis, 1974), pp. 120-121.

37. The concept was introduced by the Ypres priest-writer CAESAR GEZELLE. His book *De dood van Yper (The Dead of Ypres)* was published in 1916 by L.J. Veen in Amsterdam.





*Pillars of smoke rising from a burning Ypres on the eve of the Second Battle of Ypres, April 1915. The large field at the top right of the picture is the Minneplein, where the first large concentration of people who helped rebuild the city temporarily lived in wooden barracks after the war. (Collection In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



*Pre-war view of the Menin Gate, seen from just outside the city walls. Two buildings were nestled in the gate: the one on the left was café "In den Ouden Wachte". (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



Ruins of café "In den Ouden Wachte", after the shelling of 22 April 1915. Photo taken from the corner of Menenstraat and Kauwekijnstraat (current "Ypra Inn"). (Collection In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).

25 Cadavres trouvés sur le terrain à l'endroit  
 nord du café, au bout du chemin, et plusieurs  
 sur les ramparts à gauche en direction de la place.

1) Homme inconnuissable, tête d'un soldat, sans  
 pantalon, vêtements et gilet gris, portant bottines  
 anglaises. Trouvé avec élypsoïde et un rasoir.  
 inhumé le 29-6-1915. aucun papier d'identité.

2) Homme inconnuissable, tête d'un vétéran, sans  
 gilet et sans pantalons de couleur sombres.  
 Trouvé dans la poche d'un gilet d'homme d'artillerie.  
 inhumé le 20-6-1915. aucun papier d'identité.

3) Homme inconnuissable et défiguré, impossible  
 de préciser le supralongement. Trouvé en position  
 couchée, avec un élypsoïde, sans médaille religieuse  
 et "Mata batavia". inhumé le 20-6-1915. aucun papier d'identité.

4) Jeune homme paraissant âgé de 17 à 18 ans, tête  
 rasée blonde en toile, deux pantalons gris-bleu, sans  
 boutons, un porte-monnaie contenant 13 francs, bottes  
 militaires de forme allemande, une ceinture en cuir, sans  
 aucun papier d'identité. inhumé le 21-6-1915.

5) Vers 50 ans, tige d'acier, sans tête, le 31-12-1914.  
 Trouvé dans le fossé d'un fort, sans aucun papier d'identité.  
 de V. D. Bril, Belgique et Galicie, sans aucun papier d'identité.  
 inhumé le 21-6-1915.

List of the fatalities resulting from the artillery strike on the café "In de Oude Wachte", made by the Belgian military officer Ferdinand Baetmans. (Collection In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).



*Ypres citizens and refugees residing in Ypres left the city when the shelling intensified again. 18 April 1915, Tempelstraat, Ypres. (Q61561, Collection Imperial War Museum, London).*



## Ypres in exile

The exodus had taken place across several phases. Some Ypres citizens had already fled to France or Great Britain in September 1914. When the violence of war engulfed West Flanders in October 1914 a new wave of migration arose, which gained momentum during the First Battle of Ypres. Several Ypres civilians immediately sought refuge in France. From Calais, ships loaded with refugees left southwards via the Opal Coast, with stops along the major ports of the Normandy, Breton or Atlantic coasts.<sup>38</sup> From these ports, refugees were further ‘distributed’ to the French inland. Some who had fallen behind the German lines in October 1914 ended up in the Netherlands, or via the Netherlands in Great Britain. Another group of Ypres citizens had decided not to flee too far from home. They stayed in the allied hinterland, in the region around Poperinge. Once the front had stabilised, some returned to their homes in the city. During the Second Battle of Ypres life in the city became too dangerous for civilians. Consequently, the town was devoid of civilians by May 1915.

It is complicated – if not impossible – to provide an unambiguous and exhaustive overview of the whereabouts of the Ypres citizens in exile. There are several reasons for this, as far as the sources are concerned: they are fragmented, they are missing, or they do not allow for a (feasible) systematic search because the bulk of material is simply too extensive. As it was known that most of the Ypres refugees – due to the course of the war and the geographical location of the city – ended up in France, the focus of this part of the research was on that group. The State Archives of Belgium holds a number of archive fonds that are fundamental to

this research, in particular the archives of the official organisations that provided assistance to refugees in France, Great Britain and the Netherlands. The pioneering work of historians such as Pierre-Alain Tallier and Michaël Amara (and others in their wake) provides researchers with access to necessary source material to investigate the theme of Belgian war refugees.<sup>39</sup>

The most relevant source for the systematic identification of Ypres refugees in France is the archive of the *Comité officiel belge de Secours aux Réfugiés* (Official Belgian Committee for Aid to Refugees), the largest official organisation that worked from Le Havre to help Belgian refugees in various ways.<sup>40</sup> In the course of the war, for example, it undertook a large-scale registration of Belgians who were in exile in France.<sup>41</sup> Although these files only provide a snapshot in time, they are particularly valuable for identifying Belgian refugees. The hundreds of thousands of individual files created by the Official Belgian Committee for Aid to Refugees were registered and sorted in different ways at the time. It allows researchers to browse through them from different angles: alphabetically, by municipality of origin, by profession. For our research, the consultation via the access ‘residence in Belgium’ (domicile Ypres) was the most relevant.<sup>42</sup>

For the municipality of Ypres, the series contains 7,263 cards. In an ideal case, such a card contains the refugee’s surname and first name, their birth details, profession (before the war and in exile), always the domicile (Ypres), the place of refuge at that moment (department, municipality and sometimes street), possibly former places of refuge, the date of residence, and information about the family composition (marriage partner

38. PIETER TROGH, “Het dagboek van de Aalsterse vluchteling Jan Van de Meerssche”, in: *Jaarboek In Flanders Fields Museum* (2016), pp. 52-58.

39. In addition to their historical research, they composed several inventories for archives of various bodies - Belgian and foreign, public and private - that were involved in helping Belgian refugees residing abroad, mainly in France, Great Britain and the Netherlands.

40. MICHAËL AMARA, *Inventaire des archives du Comité officiel belge de Secours aux Réfugiés (Le Havre), 1914-1925* (ARA, Acces nr. I-611).

41. *Idem*, see inventory numbers 379-757.

42. In principle, the alphabetical register and the register by municipality of origin should more or less correspond to each other, but it is doubtful whether this is true in reality. For Ypres these are the inventory numbers 531-533.



Nom :	Profession habituelle :	Domicile en Belgique :	Résidence en France :
<b>Philip</b>	<b>tailleur</b>	<b>Ypres</b>	<b>ST. Gaultier</b>
Prénoms :			
<b>Arthur Joseph</b>			
Lieu et date de naissance :	Profession actuelle :	Province :	Département :
<b>26 ans</b>	<b>id.</b>	<b>FLORE</b>	<b>St. Indre</b>

COMPOSITION DE LA FAMILLE :		
<b>FEMME</b>		<b>ENFANTS</b>
Nom :	Sexe masculin :	Sexe féminin :
<b>Jacques</b>	Nombre : 1	Nombre :
Prénoms :	Age :	Age :
<b>Clementine Valentine</b>		
Profession :		
Lieu et date de naissance :		
<b>24 ans</b>		

Example of one of the hundreds of thousands of fiches of Belgian refugees in France (Inventory I-611, General State Archives, Brussels).

and their birth details and children, with or without name, date of birth or age). However, most of the sheets were only filled in fragmentarily. The name, domicile and place of refuge (municipality and department) are consistently recorded, but the 'quality' of the data can also vary considerably. This is most noticeable in the fields about the refugee's children: sometimes the name and date of birth are mentioned, but often only the gender (son/daughter), and sometimes an age. When processing the information, the main objective was to get an idea of the actual number of people mentioned on the total of 7,263 cards.<sup>43</sup> The analysis of the datasheets yielded 13,567 persons: Ypres citizens and children born in exile to parents from Ypres combined. They ended up in 79 different French departments. The largest concentrations of Ypres citizens were located in the Paris region (1,881 persons), in the Seine-Maritime (1,639 persons) and in the Pas-de-Calais (1,074 persons). In the latter department, the majority (603 people) had sought refuge in Le Touquet (Paris-Plage). The fact that the municipal administration of Ypres had settled there probably played a role. Moreover, the intense correspondence that passed between Ypres refugees as well as the city council in exile's own contact with its constituents (letters with questions concerning requests, certificates, etc.), might have encouraged some people – if they had the opportunity – to join their former fellow citizens.<sup>44</sup>

It is a lot more difficult to trace Ypres refugees in Great Britain, because no source allows for access based on the municipality of origin.<sup>45</sup> The most complete archive, the Central Register of War Refugees, contains individual sheets (or individual files containing several documents for one refugee) that are richer in content than the cards of the system used in France.<sup>46</sup> However, in order to find the Ypres citizens in these files (sorted alphabetically), one would have to dispose of a list of Ypres citizens who fled to the United Kingdom beforehand, and such list does not exist. This made it impossible to go through the tens of thousands of records looking for persons from Ypres within the scope of this case study. Nonetheless, something is known about their number through the efforts of Belgian-Polish statistician Thaddeus de Jastrzebski, who resided in England. In March 1916, commissioned by the British government, de Jastrzebski made an extensive study of the presence of Belgian refugees in Great Britain.<sup>47</sup> What matters is that at the end of November 1915, when some 200,000 Belgian refugees were recorded in the Central Register, de Jastrzebski established that 0.3% of that total number came from Ypres. This means that about 600 Ypres citizens were in exile in the United Kingdom then.<sup>48</sup> Of that group of Ypres in the United Kingdom, only a dozen are known by name for the time being, either through the Names List project or through the personal

43. Many thanks to IFFM volunteers Filip Jonckheere and René Declercq, who helped processing these cards (conversion to Excel sheet). The figures used are based on an analysis after verification (and removal) of redundancies and adjustments made to the sheet at the time.

44. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, "Karel Doubel en de Middenschool van Ieper in Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, 1915-1919", in: *'t Gruwzaam oorlogsland. Bronnen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de collectie van Liberaal Archief/Liberas*. Gent, Liberaal Archief/Liberas, 2018, pp. 58-61.

45. For an overview of the sources and possibilities to find Belgian WWI refugees in Great Britain, see: [http://www.belgianrefugees14-18.be/images/sampled/bronnenapparaat\\_CD\\_09.01.pdf](http://www.belgianrefugees14-18.be/images/sampled/bronnenapparaat_CD_09.01.pdf). Created by CHRISTOPHE DECLERCQ (and completed by MARTINE VERMANDERE en JULIEN DE VUYST).

46. B. SYMOENS, *Inventaris van het archief van "The Central Register of War Refugees. Central Register of Belgian Refugees", 1914-1919* (SAB, Access Nr. I-418). The British government created the War Refugees Committee in September 1914, a huge organisation responsible for coordinating the provision of assistance to war refugees in the United Kingdom. From the end of 1914, registration was compulsory for refugees, which resulted in a huge administrative burden. In spite of all the carelessness, this archive remains invaluable for research into World War I refugees.

47. THADDEUS DE JASTRZEBSKI, "The Register of Belgian Refugees", in: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (March 1916), pp. 133-158. With many thanks to Christophe Declercq (KULeuven).

48. In 1920 he published a more extensive version of his study, in which he mentioned '647' for 'Ypres'. Since he defined larger geographical entities under the denominator of the city itself, refugees from the surrounding municipalities were probably also included. See: THADDEUS DE JASTRZEBSKI, *Report on the work undertaken by the British Government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees* (London, 1920), p. 90.

stories that the In Flanders Fields Museum has collected over the years.

As for the Netherlands, searching for Belgian refugees based on their municipality of origin also proved impossible as there are no central archives or register that allow such a search.<sup>49</sup> Due to the evolution of war in Belgium, it was unlikely that people from Ypres would have decided to flee north. Nevertheless, some samples were taken for a number of refugee camps in the Netherlands, but these did not yield any results.<sup>50</sup> Systematically tracing Ypres citizens that ended up in Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States or elsewhere during the war is even more difficult. Therefore, these countries were left out of consideration for the time being. Finally, even more difficult to map out, is the group of Ypres citizens that had remained in the Westhoek itself. Most authorities and their administrations had fled the region, so there was no registration – let alone a central register – of refugees in the area. It is only thanks to the alertness of a few who sporadically compiled lists (priests, clerks who decided to stay, people who kept diaries), or thanks to interviews with witnesses decades later, that about a hundred names are known today.<sup>51</sup> We know for instance that 62 Ypres citizens stopped off in Westouter.<sup>52</sup> If we add up the known figures (fatalities, refugees in France and Great Britain) and compare them with the pre-war population, we arrive at a conservative estimate of a maximum of 2,650 Ypres citizens who stayed in the Westhoek (or elsewhere in Belgium).<sup>53</sup> At the end of April 1918, we know that some of these refugees nevertheless ended

up in France: as German troops regained ground south of Ypres during the Spring Offensive, which caused a new wave of migration. For example, after the names of the 62 refugees in Westouter mentioned above were checked against the files with Ypres refugees in France (cards of the State Archives of Belgium), it turned out that some of these refugees were also registered by the Official Belgian Committee in Le Havre.

### Resettlement in ruins : the first stage of repopulating Ypres

When the German Empire and the Allied Powers signed an Armistice on the 11th of November 1918, the weapons on the Western Front fell silent. While different stakeholders (for example, the city council, the Belgian Government and the British Government) were discussing a variety of scenarios for Ypres' post-war fate and reconstruction, the Ypres citizens did not wait to return home from exile. The sight of all the destruction led many residents to return to their places of refuge in a very disillusioned state of mind, assuming that the places they called home were gone for ever. Other 'pioneers' reluctantly decided to take up residence among the ruins, living in miserable conditions, in barracks villages consisting of wooden houses and corrugated Nissen huts.<sup>54</sup>

In the final section of this article, I focus on how the devastated city of Ypres was repopulated in the early post-war years (1919–1920), with special attention paid to those who originated from

49. J. VANNERUS; P.-A. TALLIER, *Inventaire des archives du Comité Officiel Belge pour les Pays-Bas. 1914-1919*/par J. VANNERUS (1924), revu, complété et introduit par P.A. TALLIER (SAB, Access number T-553/02).

50. Samples were taken for the places of refuge in Ede, Gouda, Uden and Zeeland. With thanks to the working group '100 Jaar Vluchttoord Uden' and the Zeeland Archives (<https://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl/>), who have done a fantastic job over the past few years.

51. For example through interviews bundled in publications such as *Van den Grooten Oorlog* (Malegijis, 1985), by the ELFNOVEMBER GROUP.

52. With many thanks to the Cercle d'Histoire of Comines-Warneton, who worked for years on a database of refugees from their region, including Ypres. Their database is based on research in municipal archives (in Belgium and France), in State Archives and in French departmental archives.

53. 17.529 (the last known pre-war population figure) minus 14.867 (at least 700 deaths + 13.567 refugees in France + an estimated 600 refugees in Great Britain) makes 2.662 'other Ypres refugees'.

54. DRIES CLAEYS; DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, *Feniks. Reconstructing Flanders Fields (guide to the temporary exhibition, 7 March to 15 November 2020)*, p. 6-8.



*View of the destroyed city of Ypres near the Rijselpoort (Lille Gate), 4 April 1919 (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*



Ypres (before the war). This time the most essential source was available: the city's population registers.<sup>55</sup> These registers are particularly interesting sources for the detailed mapping of the resettlement of people in Ypres. Contrary to the registers of the following period, 1921–1930, the books for 1919–1920, explicitly indicate a date of departure from the last residence before heading for Ypres, as well as mentioning the individual's pre-war residence. These details – interesting parameters for the analysis of resettlement – are omitted from the 1921–1930 population registers.<sup>56</sup>

In short, the population registers are a particularly rich source for historical research. Moreover, they enrich the knowledge about the life in exile of many Belgian refugees, both at an individual and collective level. The simple enumeration of a family situation can reveal a considerable amount of information about a family's war experience if you know how to interpret the combination of dates and places. For instance, the Versailles family, whose head was Georges Versailles, town clerk of Ypres, returned to their hometown on 1 July 1919 and was temporarily housed in the barracks on the Minneplein. Georges Versailles had three children who had been born before the war, but he also had three children born 'on the run': one in Poperinge (30 November 1914), where the family took refuge during the First Battle of Ypres, and two during his stay in exile in Berck-sur-Mer (Pas-de-Calais), in 1916 and in 1918. In other words, they had decided to flee to France, perhaps because Poperinge was no longer safe or because they had no longer a place to stay there. In the summer of 1920, his youngest son was born in Bruges, where his wife and other children were staying, pending the improvement of living conditions in Ypres.

The preparatory phase for researching the return of civilians to Ypres consisted of processing all the data contained in the registers: name, dates of birth, family situation, nationality, profession, address, date of return, last residence before return, any previous residence, any subsequent moves (within two years), any indication of pre-war residence. These data were then collated, cleaned up and turned into a workable dataset that lends itself to analysis. A total of 6,605 persons were identified, of whom 37 turned out to be registered twice, and 308 were registered as having resided in 1921 and are therefore not included in this analysis. This means that a total of 6,260 persons were taken into account in this study for the years 1919–1920.<sup>57</sup>

The dataset tells us a lot about the resettlement in Ypres during the first two years after the war. The first persons to return according to the population register were refugees who originated from Zonnebeke: Emile Pattyn and his wife Adeline Onraet. They were residing in Watou, close to the Belgian-French border, when they ventured into Ypres on 8 November 1918 and settled along the Meenseweg (Menin Road). As a profession Pattyn indicated *cabaretier et marchand*, which in practice meant that he kept a kind of small pub with an appended shop. On 15 December 1918 a third citizen followed, who also settled along the Meenseweg and had a similar business to make a living. These were the first three – officially recorded – citizens who settled in Ypres at the end of 1918 but were registered in 1919. From then on, the return of Ypres citizens began in earnest: in 1919 at least 2,088 people returned, in 1920 at least 3,964 more followed. The gradual resettlement of the town over these two years is depicted in the first chart.

55. Population registers of 1919-1920 (City Archives of Ypres).

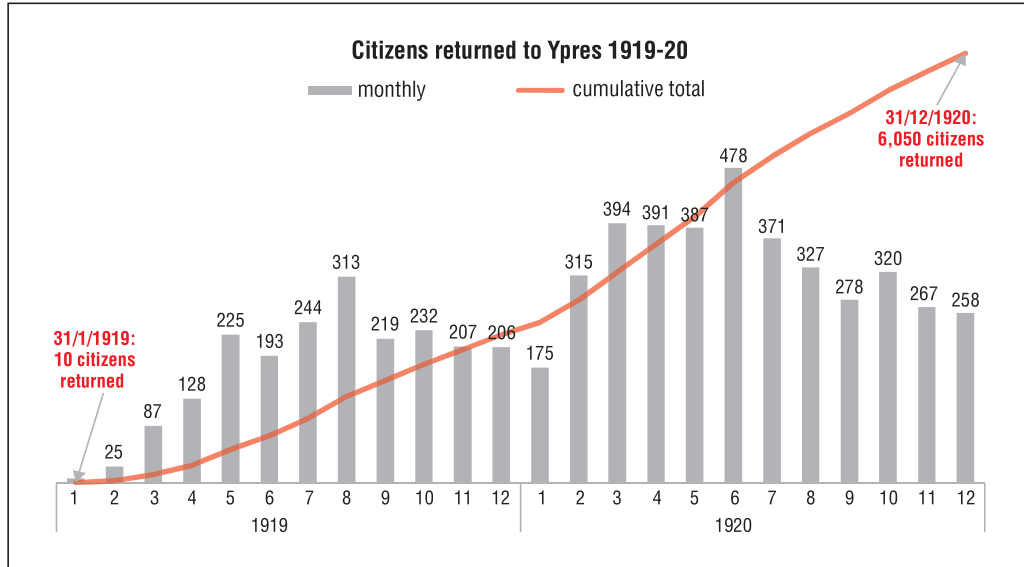
56. This is one of the reasons why I have limited myself to a study of the first two years of the repopulation of Ypres.

Another reason - within the scope of this article - was the excessive labour intensity to process a further 22 population registers.

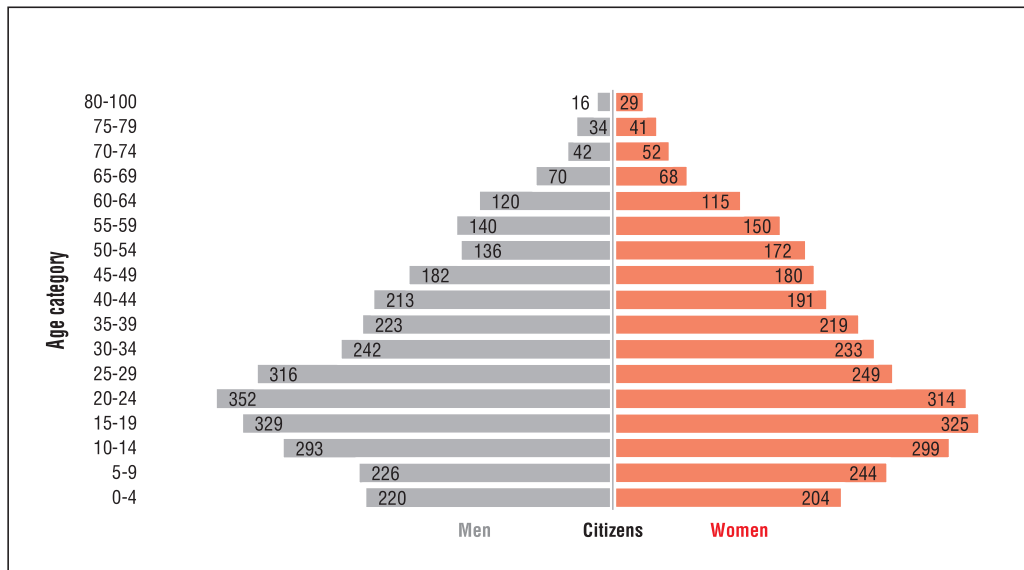
57. With many thanks to IFFM volunteer René Declercq for processing these data. Note to the total number: for 206 persons no place or date of return had been registered, and 444 left Ypres before 31 December 1920. Of that first group (206) some possibly returned in 1919 or 1920, but possibly also in 1921 or later. This group was not counted in the graph that shows the phased return per month. The group of people who left Ypres before the end of 1920 (444 persons) was included in the chart, because they belong to the total number of people who eventually returned in 1919-1920.

Ypres, Quartier de Bains										Rue, Quartier, Parc																
FAMILIERS COMPOSANT LE MENAGE										RENTRÉS																
N°	PRENOM	NOM	DATE DE NAISSANCE	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	N°	PRENOM	NOM	DATE DE NAISSANCE	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	N°	PRENOM	NOM	DATE DE NAISSANCE	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	PROFESSION	ÉTAT CIVIL	
1	Georges	Versailles	1870	...	Marié	...	Marié	...	Marié	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	7	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
4	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	8	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	9	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	11	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
6	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	12	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	13	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
7	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	14	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	15	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
8	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	16	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	17	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
9	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	18	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	19	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
10	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	19	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	20	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
11	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	20	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	21	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
12	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	21	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	22	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
13	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	22	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	23	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
14	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	23	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	24	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
15	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	24	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	25	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
16	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	25	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	26	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
17	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	26	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	27	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
18	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	27	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	28	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
19	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	28	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	29	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
20	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	29	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	30	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

Extract from the population registers of Ypres, 1919–1920: Georges Versailles' family. (Ypres City Archives).



Citizens returned to Ypres 1919–1920.



Age structure of citizens returned to Ypres 1919–1920.

If one looks at the places from which the people arriving in Ypres came, one finds that 3,639 of them were already in Belgium. Some stayed in the Westhoek, along the border with France, but others came from Bruges or Courtrai, or from deeper inside the country. A large group (2,308) came directly from abroad, if one considers the

last place of residence given: 2,254 from France, 36 from the United Kingdom, 11 from the Netherlands, 4 from Canada, 2 from Italy and 1 from Switzerland. One group did return from a very specific environment: 119 men came directly from the Belgian army. According to an arrangement of 'indefinite leave', first the older classes

and then the younger classes were allowed to leave the army and return to civil society in the course of 1919.<sup>58</sup>

The dataset can also be viewed from a different angle. A population diagram in the form of a back-to-back histogram for men and women provides a good visualisation of the composition of the Ypres population as it grew during the first two years after the armistice.

One clearly distinguishes the shape of a Christmas tree. As far as gender is concerned, the total population of 6,260 persons is approximately equally divided: 3,164 males and 3,096 females. What is striking is that 50 per cent of the population of this city under reconstruction was less than 27 years old, corresponding to the lowest layers of branches of the Christmas tree. Within this branch, the age category between 15 and 27 years (years of birth from 1905 to 1893) is very strongly represented with 1,668 persons. It was mainly this group of people who (physically) rebuilt Ypres. The group including babies, toddlers and young children (from 6 to 12 years old) was still relatively small, which shows that the city was also demographically recovering. A population diagram for the situation in 1930 would most likely take the form of a 'tower', with a stable base of young children and babies, which blends smoothly into a large segment of active workers. Among the group of toddlers and babies (born between October 1914 and December 1920) at least 368 of them were born on the run or in exile. Moreover, 11 children were born in Ypres in 1919, and 59 in 1920. From the 'Christmas tree motif' one could deduce that the older age groups of Belgians in exile were less inclined to return, at least in this first stage.

Of those first 6,260 pioneers in Ypres, 4,118 (or two-thirds) were of a marriageable age (+18 years). Out of these people, about one quarter were single

when they settled in Ypres (769 unmarried, 214 widowed or widower, 13 divorced), and half of that group had not lived in Ypres before the war. Consequently, one is left with the impression that the pioneers of Ypres consisted mainly of people who had little to lose or were at the beginning of living an autonomous life. Where some were deterred by the sight of desolate ruins, others may have seen opportunities for a new start.

As far as the different nationalities within that first group of citizens are concerned, the conclusions are obvious: 6,140 of the residents were Belgians. The small international community in Ypres (120 persons) consisted of 41 French, 8 Dutch, 4 Italians, 3 Luxembourgers, 2 Irish and 1 Swiss, while the other half (60) was British, mainly composed of workers in the transport sector (cars) or in horticulture (busy with the construction and maintenance of military cemeteries). This brings us to an inquiry by profession.<sup>59</sup> The first observation is that 'only' one third of the population can be included in this analysis. After all, 1,441 people did not have an occupation because they were too young (0 to 12 years old), or because they were registered as "unemployed" or as "retired". To this should be added 2,634 persons for whom no profession is mentioned in the population register: probably some of them were still pupils, probably several housewives or housekeepers (1,917 out of these 2,634 were registered as females), but some may simply not have indicated a profession. A profession was mentioned for 2,174 people, which means that at least more than a third of the population was active during the first two years of the reconstruction of Ypres.

Rebuilding a wrecked city is not limited to its material reconstruction, but extends to all areas of social and economic life. This is reflected in the diversity of occupations chosen by those who resettled among the ruins of Ypres. It goes without

58. The schemes of 'indefinite leave' were determined by the government via the Military Act. Thanks to Roger Verbeke and Rob Troubleyn for this information.

59. The classification into categories was partly based on the results in the dataset and was partly inspired by the classification made at the time by KOEN BAERT, "De terugkeer. Aspecten van de herbevolking van Ieper na 1918", in: *Div. Aut., Ieper: de herrezen stad* (Koksijde, De Klaproos, 1999), pp. 9-20.





*Café "In de Nieuwe Telefoon" ("The New Telephone"), situated on the Bascule, was one of the first barracks erected in Ypres after the First World War. Owner Henri Knockaert served wine, beer, stout and food. It was one of the many places in the city where people could gather and share stories and news about the war. (Collection Westhoek Verbeeldt).*

saying that the construction sector was strongly represented with 649 people (30%). More than 320 people were making Ypres accessible again or connecting it to the outside world: 151 people (6.9%) via Public Works (*Openbare Werken*; construction of roads) and at least 177 people (8%) in the transport sector (of which 95 on the railways - tram or train). At least 27 people (1%) - men only - were busy distributing mail. Agriculture employed 159 people (7.3%), of whom 145 were men. In public services 68 people (3.1%) were active and 72 people (3.2%) were employed to maintain public order. There are also 87 clergymen among the returnees (4%), 22 people worked in education (1%), 65 were active in the sector of horticulture and laying out of gardens (2.9%). A large group of people (417 people or 19.2%) tried to revitalize the middle class by opening small businesses as self-employed. 92 (or 4.2%) were active in the hotel and catering sector (café or hotel), a sector which was in fact even larger if one considers that a further 46 people (2.1%) combined their profession (as a butcher, baker, gardener, worker, farmer, trader, shopkeeper, bicycle repairer, etc.) with some sort of an improvised pub or hostel at their place of work. In the textile sector, 92 people (4.2%) were active, mainly women who made a living as lace workers. Among the other occupations we find liberal professions (1.2%), ironmongers and three representatives of the King Albert Fund.

In Ypres, these three representatives coordinated the activities of the special fund set up by King Albert, focusing mainly on building wooden barracks as temporary housing in devastated areas. These barracks were much needed to make the return to Ypres possible: they served as a base from which to exercise a profession or to rebuild a permanent home. Especially during the first few months after the conflict, there was a great shortage of emergency housing, due to, among other

things, a lack of wood, inadequate financing and transport problems.<sup>60</sup> Due to this shortcoming people sometimes lived together with different families in barracks. The largest concentration of wooden barracks stood on the Ypres Minneplein, which in the very beginning was the beating heart of the town's reconstruction: the city council was located there, as well as the gendarmerie, the post office, a hotel, schools, cafes, several churches, representatives of various organisations. A total of at least 821 people lived on the site in 1919-1920. The population registers reveal the growth of the temporary village on the Minneplein, but this is also true for the whole town: through the addresses and the date of return, one can follow how the space is reoccupied. Some fascinating photographic material completes this picture of the resumption of life in Ypres.

It would take us too far to make a comparison between the situation of the Ypres settlement in 1914 (albeit only on the basis of the group of male voters in 1914-1915) and that of the settlement in 1919-1920, or to analyze the growth pattern in detail. What is noticeable in general is that most people settled along the roads leading to Ypres: Dikkebusseweg (671), Meenseweg (651), Vlamertingseweg (293), Diksmuidseweg (133), Rijselseweg (130), Poperingseweg (106), and near the station (394). Although the city council tried to coordinate the process of resettlement, there were no clear rules and thus plenty of room for improvisation. The fact that the access roads were the first to be occupied was not in itself illogical: there was more space and less debris. While temporarily living in barracks outside the city, one could rebuild a house in the town centre. Within Ypres' ramparts, Rijselstraat was the busiest street, with 166 people living on it. 59 people settled on the iconic Ypres Grote Markt in 1919-1920, where a stump of the Belfry tower and some walls of the legend-

60. KOEN BAERT, "Wonen in de verwoesting. Omstandigheden en getuigen", in: *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914-2050: architectuur in de Westhoek* (Erfgoedcel CO7, 2009), pp. 20-28; RONNY GOBYN, "De woningnood en het probleem van de voorlopige huisvesting in België na de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in: MARCEL SMETS (red.); *Resurgam : de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914* (Brussel, Gemeentekrediet, 1985), pp. 161-188.



*A 'village' of wooden barracks at the Ypres' Minneplein, 1919-1920 (Collection Westhoek Verbeeldt).*

ary Cloth Hall still stood. The first 'British Tavern' was opened on 25 June 1919 and others followed on 1 August and 16 September of that same year. All the entrepreneurs were Belgians, with the exception of one young Frenchman, who opened a barbershop in one of the cafés. Apart from cafés, some car rental companies appeared, and between 28 May 1920 and 30 June 1920 the first 'real' post-war hotel was opened: Hotel Excelsior.<sup>61</sup> It is clear that the activity on and around the Grote Markt met the needs of the burgeoning front tourism.

Finally, it is worthwhile addressing the issue of how many original Ypres citizens were part of the first stage of the repopulation and rebuilding process of Ypres. As mentioned before, the loss of pre-war source material makes a comprehensive comparison between the pre-war and post-war situations difficult. Nevertheless, we can get an idea by examining the available material. Firstly, we can draw upon the partial identification of the city's population provided in the last pre-war election lists. Within the group of 3,643 constituents, apparently 741 (20.34%) returned to Ypres in 1919–1920. Secondly, if we consider the indication of pre-war residence in the population registers of 1919–1920, we come to the conclusion that out of a total of 6,260 people, 3,318 (53%) asserted that they had lived in Ypres before the war. At least 556 had certainly not and 2,386 had most probably not lived in the town before 1914 although this is not explicitly registered. A further analysis to map the trajectory of other original Ypres citizens who had not yet returned by the end of 1920 (and who had not been killed during the war) is necessary in order to eventually esti-

mate their total pre-war population share in the post-war repopulation. However, it turned out that several people took years to decide whether to return or not.<sup>62</sup> For example, an extensive consultation of the city's civil status records showed that 62 people who resettled in Ypres in the 1920s, were born in France between 1921 and 1926.<sup>63</sup> In his 1999 study, Koen Baert indicated that by 1930 the population had grown to 15,804, or about 90% of the pre-war population.<sup>64</sup> So the repopulation of Ypres took – at least – more than twelve years.

### A provisional conclusion

In this contribution an attempt has been made to measure, from a demographic perspective, the impact of the First World War on the Ypres population. This city was a very special case: Ypres successively went from being a refuge to a front and then a dead city, from which all citizens fled or were forced to evacuate. In other words, the entire population – more than 17,000 people – was detached from its hometown during the war for at least three and a half years. The impact of the alienation can hardly be underestimated, especially when returnees found their city razed to the ground. The detailed analysis of resettlement in Ypres during the immediate post-war years shows that only half (or even less, depending on the source) of the original inhabitants were eager enough to embark on the hard labours of reconstruction. This means that more than half of the pioneers of Ypres' reconstruction came from elsewhere. About a third of those 'outsiders' were between 15 and 27 years

61. In 1922 the complete rebuilding of the hotel was finished. <https://westhoekverbeeldt.be/ontdek/detail/f2fcafc2-bbc5-11e3-9a37-6b6883998fa8>.

62. This was already clear during the preparatory research phase for the IFFM's temporary exhibition 'Vluchten voor de oorlog' ('Fleeing from War'). In order to find and interview 'Ypres citizens born in exile and still alive' in 2003, the museum's researchers carried out an extensive consultation of the city's civil status records.

63. Research by Piet Chielens en Annick Vandenbilcke. Eventually about 150 people were interviewed.

64. Baert distinguishes three groups: '7,912 Ypres, 3,336 regionals and 4,556 foreigners'. However, it is unclear how he arrives at this classification, since the pre-war place of residence is no longer mentioned in the population registers of 1921–1930.

KOEN BAERT, "De terugkeer. Aspecten van de herbevolking van Ieper na 1918", in: Div. Aut., *Ieper: de herrezen stad* (Koksijde, De Klapproos, 1999), p. 18–19.





*Life returns to the city. View of the Excelsior Hotel with the Grand Place and the ruins of the Cloth Hall and St Martin's Church in the background (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*

old. They thus belonged to the largest age category that settled in Ypres in 1919-1920.

Identification was a major issue throughout this study. Notwithstanding the dispersion or limitations of sources, a large part of the Ypres population at that time was identified. Through the Names List project at least 700 civilian war dead were identified: many were killed by the shelling of the city, but there was also a vicious typhoid fever epidemic that caused many casualties. As for the Ypres citizens displaced due to the war circumstances, we discovered that – despite slight shifts from one country to another during the war – the majority (more than 13,500) of the people ended up as refugees in France, an estimated 600 civilians from Ypres sought refuge in the UK, and an estimated 2,600 people probably stayed in the Westhoek itself. Approximately 10,000 of the Ypres refugees (almost two-thirds) were identified. Especially as far as refugees in France are concerned, the method used for this study, revealed the nuances and diversity behind an administrative registration system for refugees (7,263 cards yielded 13,567 persons of which some 10,000 were identified). For several refugees, different places of refuge were discovered, showing that ‘staying in exile’ was anything but a static concept. An elaborate analysis of this subject fell outside the scope of this study, although the information we have on these people and their whereabouts invites further investigation.

The group that received most attention in this contribution were the approximately 6,200 pioneers who settled in Ypres during the first two post-war years. Revealing their identity and profiles (drawn from the population registers) allowed us to gain insight into the rhythm of the first phase of resettlement and reconstruction. Obviously, people who worked in the construction sector were strongly represented. Their presence brings to life photographs taken during the reconstruction of Ypres (example illustration 23): we don't know the exact identity of the 25 men who are working in the photograph, but we do

know who they *could* be, thanks to the extensive identification process of all the people who settled in Ypres in 1919-1920. Moreover, the total number of people employed in the construction business tells us a lot about this particular group, and the share it took in the early post-war community of Ypres.

Another element that stood out in the data was the presence of pubs. On the one hand, there were owners who ran their pub as a full-time profession. In addition to these people, there was a larger group who combined another profession with keeping a bar of sorts in their barracks. Maybe this was considered as a form of additional income (the possibility of serving the first tourists who came to observe the ravages of war or the military personnel who were still present in the city), but they may have also played a social role. A pub brings people – friends and foreigners – together in a cosy atmosphere, where stories and news could be shared. That must have been one of the things these post-war pioneers in Ypres were longing for. Every person or family had its own war experience, many had been separated for several years. There were lots of stories to be told and news to be shared.

More research is needed to further trace the evolution of the return to and repopulation of Ypres in the 1920s onwards, and to compare this process with witness accounts and personal experiences. The datasets that were created during this study may serve as a solid starting point to account for the recovery of the social and economic fabric of the city. They help to expose the complexity of an exodus and return, the diversity of a community, and they lay out the pioneer group that formed the backbone of Ypres' reconstruction. Furthermore, the Ypres case invites comparison with the impact of the war on other local populations, of places that were situated in the front zone for a long time (for instance, in the Westhoek or in northern France), for a short period (for example, in the provinces of Antwerp, Namur or Luxembourg in 1914), or places that were not in the front line at all, but where large parts of the population had



*Men working in the rubble of Boomgaardstraat in Ypres, with a view of the destroyed Cloth Hall in the background, 1 September 1920 (Collection Antony, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper).*

fled and, due to the course of events, spent the duration of the war abroad.<sup>65</sup>

Resettlement is inextricably linked to the theme of refugees. This study hopes to contribute to the history of refugees and resettlement caused by the First World War. For researchers coming to the

field of wartime refugees and their resettlement in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, a seemingly barren historiographical landscape awaits them. The source material is scattered and sometimes fragmented, but once one knows where to start digging, and which sources to combine, solid foundations can be laid for revealing insights.

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**65.** Researchers who are eager to elaborate on these themes might find a potential partner in the In Flanders Fields Museum. In the coming years the museum will set up a research project on Belgian refugees in preparation for a new temporary exhibition on that subject, which is planned for 2025. The approach of extensive individual identification will be used along with a planned broadening of the Names List to a database of historical persons linked to the First World War in Belgium.