

EDITORIAL

- **Bruno De Wever, Chantal Kesteloot & Nico Wouters** -

Chief-Editors

As Chief-Editors we are proud to present a volume which we believe to be a milestone in the field of modern and contemporary history in Belgium : the first English issue of the newly launched *Journal of Belgian History* (JBH).

This English issue has its origins in the merging of two of Belgium's leading scholarly journals of modern and contemporary history. It was decided in 2011 to merge these journals which at that time had an equally rich tradition : the former *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* (BTNG/RBHC) founded in 1969 and the *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis/Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent* (BEG/CHTP) founded in 1996 (but which was itself the continuation of the older *Bijdragen/Cahiers* focused on the study and research of the Second World War in Belgium). Both journals published articles primarily in French and Dutch, and occasionally in English, while the BEG/CHTP was mainly focused

on the twentieth century, and the history of the two world wars and colonial history in particular.

In a field characterized by specialization and the creation of specific journals for each sub-discipline, the decision to do the exact opposite was a conscious one.

First, Belgian modern and contemporary history is confronted with its own specific kind of fragmentation of an entirely different nature; the fragmentation caused by two distinctive language-based academic cultures – one Dutch and one Francophone – within the institutional frameworks of a federalized country. Today, the cleavage between both academic cultures within Belgium is a reality. From a purely scholarly viewpoint this is problematic. It is not uncommon nowadays for an early-career Belgian Francophone researcher to meet a Flemish colleague for the very first time during an international conference abroad, and to learn about mutual research or projects for the very first time in English.

The creation of a platform where both the Francophone and Flemish academic cultures can interact, inform each other about their respective research and intellectual developments, and exchange ideas and expertise, is therefore more than ever a necessity.

A second reason to believe in the validity of a *Journal of Belgian History* – and more specifically its English-language issue – is our conviction that Belgian historiography with all of its national specificity has great relevance when integrated in the international field. It also goes without saying that Belgian modern and contemporary scholarly historiography is in need of greater international visibility.

The JBH publishes four issues a year, one of which (the December issue) is entirely in English. The JBH presents political, socio-economic, and cultural history relating to Belgium in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The English issue does not necessarily contain articles that place Belgian history in an international comparative framework (although we would obviously hope to stimulate this as well). Rather, we publish articles on Belgian history which we feel are relevant for an international scholarly audience for a variety of reasons : because an article presents new insights that closely tie in with current international research or schools of thought, because an article shows new developments in Belgian historiography, or because an article offers innovative approaches or methodologies.

The five articles in this first issue perfectly exemplify our aim to achieve this variety. In Frank Gerits' article, the international

dimension is explicit. His contribution sheds new light on US-Belgian relations at the height of the Cold War. His critical assessment of the impact of the USA's implementation of a public diplomacy strategy in Belgium fills a gap in our knowledge of Belgian foreign (and internal) political and diplomatic policy, while at the same time suggesting relevant questions for other western European case studies.

In a more sociologically oriented article on geographic distribution of education, three authors apply recent research in the USA on the geographical divergences in education levels to Belgium as case-study for a European society. Their article has methodological importance, but it also offers insights that might be relevant for policy-makers today. The authors demonstrate how historically developed inequalities in the geographical distribution of highly-skilled workers endure. These structural inequalities seem to converge with current socio-economic problems and the authors suggest that this is exactly why these problems are so hard to resolve through policies that address only one aspect of the problem.

For her article on Rwanda, Petra Vervust uses her detailed research in colonial archives to offer a convincing counter-interpretation of the dominant discourse which takes ethnic distinctions or racial labels as the guiding framework to interpret the whole of Rwandan societal divisions, a discourse that has become dominant since 1994. Vervust re-introduces the element of class, analysing how deeply class distinctions in Rwanda are historically intertwined with ethnicity. In doing so, she questions the longer-term political impacts of

such ideological constructs as racial or ethnic labels.

Another article that strongly relies on innovative methodology is the article by Frederik T. Verleysen and Tim C.E. Engels who analyse the publication culture of Flemish historians. By doing so, they use Flanders as a case study for an internationally relevant assessment of the position and impact of bibliometrics within the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities.

To conclude, Nel de Mûelenaere's article gives some (much needed) attention to the nineteenth century. Through investigating the process by which a militaristic lobby between 1870 and 1914 influenced certain areas of civil society, the political authorities, and even the general public, she demonstrates the gradual normalization of certain militaristic values within broader Belgian society prior to the First World War.

In addition to these five articles, the JBH also publishes several features that taken together, will serve to give an international audience a window on current developments in Belgian modern and contemporary history. The *Current Issues in Belgian History* section deals with specific themes or issues. This can be a school of thought, a trend, a sub-discipline, a body of literature, or any kind of important topic that has received significant academic attention in recent years in Belgian historiography. A pair of Belgian historians specialized in the selected domain are invited to write a short overview of the current state of scholarly affairs: the new research and literature, the debates, the gaps which remain, and the new

perspectives. Sometimes this also involves connecting Belgian history with international developments. In this first issue, it seems only fair that two of the Editors-in-Chief take on this task. Bruno De Wever and Chantal Kesteloot have joined forces to write an overview piece on recent scholarly literature on the question of the Belgian nation state in relation to the specific regional language communities. Besides being a topic on which new historical literature continues to be published, this issue can indisputably be regarded as the hottest and most provocatively debated topic in contemporary Belgian politics today.

In the *Debate* section, we invite historians to write critical essays on an issue that has provoked not only scholarly debate but also public attention. For this issue the central topics are Belgium's conflicting commemoration policies on the First World War (1914-18) and recent debates with regard to the Holocaust or Shoah in Belgium. Regarding the first topic, three historians offer individual short essays on these conflicting commemorations in Belgium and the role historians could (or could not) play. Regarding the latter, Lieven Saerens, one of Belgium's leading experts on the Holocaust, uses a book recently published by German historian Insa Meinen to tackle issues about scholarly interpretation and analysis of the Holocaust. Meinen's book has not (yet) been published in English, but the public debates it provoked in Belgium are easily recognisable and transferable to an international audience.

Although we will highlight recently published literature in English on Belgian history in future issues, we opted for this issue simply to provide the list of reviews published in

our previous issue in French and Dutch and available online.

The section on PhD research offers a brief description of recently awarded PhD research in Belgium or abroad with regard to Belgian modern and contemporary history. A more detailed description of this research has been published (in French and Dutch) in our previous issue and it is also available online.

To conclude, we also provide the abstracts of all the articles published in this volume in three languages.

All the articles will have open-access availability one year after their date of publication. The different sections however (Literature Reviews, Debates, Current Issues, and PhD Research), as well as the article abstracts, are immediately available online. In order to access these texts readers should visit our website (www.journalbelgianhistory.be), where the archive of all previous issues, including those of both the JBH's predecessors, is also available.

We believe the newly launched JBH, and specifically this English issue, supports the stronger visibility of Belgian historiography and its integration into European and global levels of historical research. We sincerely hope you will enjoy reading it.