

New Research on First World War Belgium⁷²

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In 2015, the late, great Keith Jeffery's global history of the war year 1916 admirably demonstrated First World War scholarship's expansion in geographic range in the past two decades⁷³. That expansion shows no sign of flagging : ongoing research on once "forgotten" fronts, armies, and populations is sharpening readers' views of events and dynamics and allows for bolder and more precise transnational analyses⁷⁴. This is, as the war veterans Sellar and Yeatman would have phrased it, A Good Thing⁷⁵. An expanded geographic range makes for a deeper understanding of the war's wide variety of mobilizations, and of the many different strains that beset them, sometimes to breaking point.

This context forces us to problematize the national as a framework. But to problematize means to foreground its contingency, not to dismiss it. After all, the social contract in wartime was hammered out inside national contexts – or, depending on the case, it generated new national contexts. In much of Europe, at least, the conceit of the Fatherland stood for a "particular space of social reference points" which, over the course of the preceding half-century, ordinary people had started to master through a mass culture that held out the promise of distinction to all⁷⁶.

Where does this leave scholarship on Belgium in the First World War ? Does it concentrate unduly on a small national unit – or does it, on the contrary, possess a good vantage-point from which to grasp this war's conceits, endeavors, and tensions ? This brief essay will attempt to point out the intellectual benefits of researching Belgian First World War experiences.

To begin with, this was the most densely populated state on the planet at the time of the war – with a population the size of that of Australia, on territory only slightly larger than the Solomon Islands. Furthermore, as a state with two large linguistic groups, Belgium offers privileged terrain from which to observe how the national is refracted in languages.

Another point to be made is that Belgium was both central and marginal to the war. It was central because of its importance as a *casus belli*. The violation of a neutral state was a major breach of international law, which, as Isabel V. Hull has recently argued, was a central issue of the war⁷⁷. The influx of new research on Belgium and international law in the First World War era is therefore, to be applauded : Juliette Lafosse's exploration of Belgian juridical thinking on international law; Vincent Genin's soon to be defended thesis on networks of Belgian international lawyers; Thomas Graditzky's study of the Belgian contribution to the law of military occupations from the Franco-Prussian war

72. Please note : this is an attempt to synthesize recent research on Belgium and the First World War; it does not purport to offer a complete overview of recent and ongoing scholarship – with apologies to the authors not named here. 73. KEITH JEFFERY, *1916 : A Global History*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015. 74. One example : the interdisciplinary research network *Globalising and Localising the Great War*, Oxford University : <https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/globalising-and-localising-great-war>. 75. WALTER C. SELLAR & ROBERT J. YEATMAN, *1066 and all that*, London, Methuen, 1930. 76. CHRISTOPHE CHARLE, *La crise des sociétés impériales*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 201-203. 77. ISABEL V. HULL, *A Scrap of Paper : Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War*, Ithaca (New York), Cornell University Press, 2014.

through the aftermath of the Second World War. One can also approach the subject from below : Barbara Deruytter's work on popular patriotic songs promises to shed light on the vernacular sense of international justice. Scholars also explore the limits of the remit of international law. Jan De Volder has examined tensions between, on the one hand, Cardinal Mercier's insistence on the primordially of international law – hence, the restoration of Belgian independence – versus the conciliatory policy of Pope Benedict XV⁷⁸. Enika Ngongo studies the influence – or relative lack thereof – of international law on colonial experiences; she also explores the history of the colonial administration in Congo during the war, and asks how the war influenced colonial policies in the 1920s and beyond.

“Belgium” was shorthand for the moral issues of the war not just because of its invasion and attendant breach of international law, but also for the manner in which this invasion proceeded. The massacres of civilians by the invading armies – the “German Atrocities” – became a *Leitmotiv* in war culture on both sides⁷⁹. (Recent revisionism of the scholarly consensus is interesting mainly because of what it tells us about ongoing processes of re-nationalizing the war's memory even as scholarship takes an ever more transnational turn⁸⁰.)

But the very invasion that made Belgium a central issue of the war also made it into a

marginal belligerent. The majority of Belgians lived through the war in a liminal space outside of either front or home front : viz., under military mobilization. But precisely this marginality renders the Belgian case instructive in terms of mobilization for war. What forms of “national” mobilization obtain in circumstances of military occupation ? How to motivate an army that is separated from its home front ? How to mobilize hundreds of thousands of refugees ? All of these questions are broached by ongoing and recent research, as will be shown below.

Another point to be made is that Belgium experienced a war that might be seen as more invasive than that of most other belligerents, while at the same time remaining as it were in the lee of war : both a total and a rather-less-than-total war experience. Current research on life under military occupation delves deeply into its impact on civilian life. Emmanuel Debruyne's recent monograph maps out the transnational escape network in which the English nurse Edith Cavell played a central role⁸¹. Élise Rezsöhazy's work uncovers the profiles and motivations of civilians recruited by German counterespionage services. Mélanie Bost's thesis has mapped out the Belgian judiciary's agency and stance under an ever more repressive occupation regime, which from early 1918 onwards made any form of *modus vivendi* undefensible⁸². Lastly, Arnaud Charon's work on forced labor focuses on the deportees themselves,

78. JAN DE VOLDER, *Kardinaal Verzet. Mercier, de Kerk en de oorlog van '14-'18*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2014. 79. JOHN HORNE & ALAN KRAMER, *German Atrocities 1914 : A History of Denial*, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 2001. 80. GÜNTER SPRÄUL, *Der Frankfurterkrieg 1914. Untersuchungen zum Verfall einer Wissenschaft und zum Umgang mit nationalen Mythen*, Berlin, Frank und Timme, 2016. 81. EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, *Le réseau Cavell : des femmes et des hommes en résistance*, Brussels, Racine, 2016. 82. MÉLANIE BOST, *Traverser l'occupation 1914-1918. Du modus vivendi à la grève, la magistrature belge face aux occupants allemands*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Université catholique de Louvain, 2013.

allowing readers to gauge the impact of this particular aspect of the “Ludendorffian turn” on communities, families, and individual lives.

Occupied Belgium, then, was in a way hostage to total war; which was precisely what prompted the dispersed Belgian leadership – both civilian and military, and at all levels – to refrain from committing resources to the war effort beyond a point where they could no longer be replenished. To begin with, the international food relief effort that kept civilians in the occupied country afloat (if, by 1917, just barely) was a breach in the Entente’s blockade, and, therefore, a step away from full-on war. The Belgian government-in-exile, aided by U.S. efforts, pleaded against occasional British misgivings, urged on to a more demanding stance by King Albert, who warned his ministers of irreversible damage not just to national health, but to the credibility of the Belgian state. Indeed, inside occupied Belgium food became a political matter. Private diaries, certainly from 1916, obsessively discussed potatoes, butter, bread, and other foodstuffs, and they did so using a moral vocabulary⁸³. The issues surrounding food – relief, protests, crime – have proven to be a particularly inspiring field for Belgian historians. Giselle Nath’s granular view of the urban-rural divide delves deeply into the question of negotiating citizenship over access to food⁸⁴. Sophie Delhalle’s work-in-progress focuses on the plethora of wartime charity organizations. As an aside, one may note that

historians of food are not the only ones to draw attention to the corporeal dimension of the civilian occupation experience. Fashion historian Nele Bernheim is writing a dissertation on the first Belgian couture house, *Maison Norine*. This avant-garde venture opened its doors in Brussels in 1916, to surprising success – but maybe not all that surprising, given that the war economy generated pockets of affluence. The point to be made – and that goes for the whole of the corpus of scholarship discussed here – is that in-depth research even within a national context can make substantial transnational points.

Belgium’s less-than-total war was evident, too, on the front, where the military leadership, foremost King Albert, endeavored to keep it out of extreme harm’s way as much as possible. Tom Simoens’ recent dissertation about the build-up of the Belgian army during the stalemated war shows how this essential stance was maintained through a myriad choices on defensive tactics, equipment, and training⁸⁵. Rose Spijkerman’s study of emotions and their management – honor, shame – in the Belgian wartime army promises to shed light on the maintenance (or otherwise) of resilience in the absence of direct contact with the home front. Jan Vander Fraenen’s dissertation-in-progress on a sector of the Belgian front known as the “Trench of Death” will focus on the management of danger and death in the Yser Army – and on how this particular locus became, after the war, a site of memory. Benoît Amez, who has published on daily life

83. SOPHIE DE SCHAEFDRIJVER, “We who are so Cosmopolitan” : *The War Diary of Constance Graeffe, 1914-1915*, Brussels, State Archives of Belgium, 2008; ID. & TAMMY PROCTOR, *An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp*, New York, Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2017. **84.** GISELLE NATH, *Brood willen we hebben! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*, Antwerp, Manteau, 2013. **85.** TOM SIMOENS, *Wacht lopen aan de IJzer of een leger ‘in beweging’ ? De evolutie van de 1ste Legerdivisie in de loopgraven, 1914-1918*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ghent/Royal Military School Brussels, 2016.

in the Yser Army⁸⁶, writes a dissertation on Belgian military justice. Mario Draper's recent thesis on the conflicted relationship between the Belgian army and society from 1830 to 1918 argues that the Belgian army was not a "nation-building" tool because of society's reluctance to entrust its sons to military socialization⁸⁷. However, there were twists in this development : Nel De Muêlenaere's recent thesis on processes of "militarization" in 1890-1914 shows that Belgian society drew closer to the army and to military culture in that prewar decade⁸⁸.

But mobilization had its limits. When, in wartime, the Belgian state found itself obliged to mobilize among the hundreds of thousands of Belgian refugees in the United Kingdom and France, it did so reluctantly, and remained explicit about the necessity to preserve demographic resources, as Michaël Amara's seminal book has shown⁸⁹. Christophe Declercq's work on Belgian refugees in the United Kingdom documents their sometimes awkward situation. What of foreigners in wartime Belgium ? The war, as we know, exacerbated the suspicious slant of the Belgian Aliens' Police; Yasmina Zian at the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin studies the

war's impact on this body's attitude towards a particular group, Jewish foreigners.

One last point about the importance of Belgium as a vantage point concerns memory and legacy. For all belligerents, the exits from war were long-drawn-out and baffling; for some, the war shaded into other forms of violence – frontier conflicts, civil war. In Belgium, the polity had to be renegotiated after four years of separate existences – at the front, in exile, under occupation – which created issues of its own. Moreover, the occupation was an experience *sui generis* with a legacy of fierce, focused resentments and an equally fierce quest for heroes⁹⁰. These were refracted through the local, hence the importance of the work of Karla Vanraepenbusch on material memory traces in occupied cities. The war's literary memory is analyzed by Myrthel Van Etterbeeck; Belgium's war literature, and certainly the literature dealing with the occupation, is a sunken corpus indeed. Leen Engelen's pioneering work on the Belgian cinema has uncovered an entire dimension of cultural endeavor⁹¹. Philippa Read at the University of Leeds studies discourses of heroism in Belgium and France. One salient element

86. BENOÎT AMEZ, *Vie et Survie dans les tranchées belges. Témoignages inédits*, Brussels, Jourdan, 2013. 87. MARIO A. DRAPER, *The Belgian Army, Society and Military Cultures, 1830-1918*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kent, 2016. 88. NEL DE MUËLENAERE, *Belgen, zijt gij ten strijde gereed ? Militarising in een neutrale natie, 1890-1914*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2016. See also Id., "An Uphill Battle : Campaigning for the Militarization of Belgium, 1870-1914", in *Journal of Belgian History* XLII, 2012, 4, p. 144-179, and Id., "De creatie van de Belgische burger-soldaat. Educatie, discipline en emoties (1886-1909)", in *Journal of Belgian History*, XLVII, 2016, 2, p. 128-159 (Theme issue *Military History*, Nel de Muêlenaere and Josephine Hoegaerts eds.). 89. MICHAËL AMARA, *Les Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés belges de la Première Guerre mondiale en France, au Royaume-Uni et aux Pays-Bas*, Brussels, Éditions de l'Université Libre, 2008. 90. I elaborate this point in *Gabrielle Petit : The Death and Life of a Female Spy in the First World War*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 91. LEEN ENGELEN, *De verbeelding van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de Belgische speelfilm (1913-1939)*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Universiteit Leuven, 2005; Id., "Film/ Cinema (Belgium)", in *1914-1918 online : International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 2016, http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/filmcinema_belgium.

in postwar Belgium's memoryscape is, it hardly needs pointing out, Ypres; Dominiek Dendooven (who is finishing his thesis on the global presence of Entente troops in Flanders) has recently demonstrated the unquiet history of the British war graves there⁹². Fabian Van Wesemael's dissertation focuses on the life-course and the social activism of Belgium's veterans – a lesser presence in postwar society than were French or German ones because fewer Belgian men were mobilized, but a vocal and up until now insufficiently

studied group. And, lastly, Christine Van Everbroeck en Pieter Verstraete have studied the mutilated veterans of Belgium. In their bodies, as in that of mutilated veterans everywhere, the tension between the conceit of the Fatherland and the individual fate played out; more, possibly, than in the case of the dead, since death could be sacralized, but the ongoing reality of the damaged body could not. Much of the rest is therefore – to quote the title of their book – silence⁹³.

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92. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, "Bringing the Dead Home : Repatriation, Illegal Repatriation and Expatriation of British Bodies during and after the First World War", in PAUL CORNISH & NICHOLAS SAUNDERS (eds.), *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality, and Transformation*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 66-79. **93.** PIETER VERSTRAETE & CHRISTINE VAN EVERBROECK, *Le silence mutilé : Les invalides belges de la Grande Guerre*, Namur, Presses Universitaires, 2014.