

## On the public and academic impact of the '14-'18 commemorations : The Belgian centenary generation of doctoral researchers<sup>12</sup>

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### Introduction

Even before the official start of the '14-'18 commemorations in Belgium, serious concerns were expressed by various observers<sup>13</sup>. Especially in Flanders, criticisms were formulated against the political instrumentalisation of history by the Flemish Government, the fact that academic historians had not been consulted when the commemorative agenda was set, and the somewhat difficult underlying 'peace' discourse that shaped the agenda<sup>14</sup>. Ever since then, historians wrote numerous analyses, overviews and position papers that tried to give a more nuanced interpretation of the commemorative context in Belgium as a whole as well as in Flanders and in the French Community of Belgium<sup>15</sup>.

Most of these devoted a great deal of attention to the ambiguous and often invisible position of academic historians in the public sphere<sup>16</sup>.

If much has been written about the commemoration policies of the Great War centenary, less attention was given to the scholarly impact of the commemorations and the impressive collective research effort that historians were able to launch<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, this text aims to shift the attention towards these new research projects and focuses in particular on the large amount of new PhDs currently underway on Belgium during the First World War (FWW). Indeed, the number of doctoral researchers studying the FWW has never been as high as it is today. At least thirty-four PhD students are currently preparing or have recently defended a thesis on some aspect of the FWW related to Belgium. This is an unprecedented success in Belgian historiography. In comparison, only twenty-four theses dealt with the FWW in Belgium during the three decades preceding this four-year centenary period<sup>18</sup>.

12. We want to thank Nico Wouters, Bruno Benvindo, Sophie De Schaepdrijver, Chantal Kesteloot, Catherine Lanneau, Laurence Van Ypersele, Antoon Vrints, Koen Aerts and Barbara Deruyter for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. 13. For example : BRUNO DE WEVER, "Honderd jaar Eerste Wereldoorlog : de herdenking als hol vat", in *MO\* Magazine* (08/11/2013); "De geschiedenis is geen fictieserie. Interview met Sophie De Schaepdrijver", in *De Tijd*, 25.1.2013; CHANTAL KESTELOOT, "Commémorer 1914 herdenken", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2012, 2-3, p. 188. 14. WOUTER VAN DRIESSCHE, "De kleine oorlog om de Grote Oorlog", in *De Standaard*, 14 november 2011. 15. CHANTAL KESTELOOT & MÉLANIE BOST, "Les commémorations de la Première Guerre mondiale", in *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, no. 2235-2236, Brussels, 2014, p. 62; SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, "België 14-18 : een verhaal in het midden", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2012, 2, 3, p. 189-192 and LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, "Les préparatifs des commémorations de 14-18 par la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles et la Wallonie", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2012, 2, p. 193-197. 16. NICO WOUTERS, "‘Poor Little Belgium ?’ Flemish- and French-language politics of memory (2014-2018)", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2012, 2-3, p. 192-199 and "Le cavalier seul de la Flandre", in *La Revue nouvelle*, 2014/8 (dossier "Première Guerre mondiale, l'histoire au présent"), p. 42-46. 17. ID., "The Centenary Commemorations of the Great War in Belgium. History and the Politics of Memory", in *BMGN / Low Countries Historical Review*, 2016, 131-3, p. 81. 18. BRUNO BENVINDO, BENOÎT MAJERUS & ANTOON VRINTS, "La Grande Guerre des historiens belges, 1914-2014", in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2014, 44, 2-3, p. 191. They counted 24 theses completed between 1981 and 2013, of which 10 were written abroad. Note however that this number takes only PhD theses from History departments into account.

Our objective is twofold. Firstly we present and analyse the ongoing PhD research on any aspect of Belgium during the First World War. Particular attention has been paid to the research themes developed by this “14-18 generation” of PhD students. Thereby we focus on how these themes are rooted in previous national and current international historiographical debates. Secondly, we reflect on the public role of (young) historians against the background of the commemorations. This reflexion addresses two questions : it investigates the possible public impact of all this ongoing research and pleads for a deeper reflection on the issue of public dissemination.

### 1. New tendencies in '14-'18 research in Belgium

#### *The Centenary as a window of academic opportunities*

To understand the importance of the current research boom, one needs to remember that the First World War has only quite recently experienced a renewed academic interest, as

a result of the cultural turn in the 1990s. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the newly defined ‘short twentieth century’ – from 1914 to 1989 – instigated ‘Total War’ as a central concept. This led to a greater interest in its apparent starting point of 1914-1918, and for the fate of civilians in particular. Against this background, the First World War in Belgium appeared as a paradigmatic case study, combining all the experiences of total war simultaneously, i.e. those at the front, those of occupied civilians or of those in exile<sup>19</sup>. Within this context, Sophie de Schaepdrijver’s bestseller revitalised the academic field in Belgium, which became soon institutionalised<sup>20</sup>. Not only the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) around Laurence van Ypersele, but also the State Archives of Belgium (SAB) and the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Society (CegeSoma) played a key role in this regard<sup>21</sup>. Scholars interested in other conflicts shifted their focus to 1914-1918<sup>22</sup>, and it is only recently, from 2005 onwards, that a growing number of doctoral students chose to write their theses on the First World War<sup>23</sup>.

19. *Idem*, p. 187-191. 20. SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, *De Grootte Oorlog : Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Amsterdam, 1997. 21. B. BENVINDO (et al.), “La Grande Guerre des...”, p. 188-190 and A. Vrints, “Een verruimde blik. Het Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Maatschappij (CegeSoma) en de Eerste Wereldoorlog”, in PIERRE-ALAIN TALLIER & RICHARD BOYEN, *België en de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Bronnen-Stand van het onderzoek. Acta van het colloquium van 8 en 9 november 2001* (Legermuseum, zaal 1914-1918), 2002, p. 329-334. 22. EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE & L. VAN YPERSELE, *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre : l'espionnage en Belgique durant la guerre 1914-1918*, Brussels, 2004; E. DEBRUYNE & JEHANNE PATERNOSTRE, *La résistance au quotidien, 1914-1918 témoignages inédits*, Brussels, 2009; E. DEBRUYNE & L. VAN YPERSELE, “Je serai fusillé demain”, *les dernières lettres des patriotes belges et français fusillés par l'occupant, 1914-1918*, Brussels, 2011; AXEL TIXHON & BÉNÉDICTE ROCHET (Eds.), *La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre : une icône, des images*, Namur, 2012; A. TIXHON & MARC DEREZ (eds.), *Visé, Aerschot, Andennes, Tamines, Dinant, Louvain, Termonde : Villes martyres, Belgique août-septembre 1914*, Namur, 2014; XAVIER ROUSSEAU & L. VAN YPERSELE, *La patrie crie vengeance ! La répression des inciviques belges au sortir de la guerre 1914-1918*, Brussels, 2008; X. ROUSSEAU & GUILLAUME BACLIN, *En première ligne. La justice militaire face à l'incivisme au sortir de la Première Guerre mondiale*, Brussels, 2010. 23. BENOÎT MAJERUS, *Occupations et logiques policières : la police communale de Bruxelles pendant les Première et Deuxième Guerres mondiales (1914-1918 et 1940-1945)*, Brussels, ULB, 2005; STÉPHANIE CLAISSE, *Ils ont bien mérité de la patrie. Monuments aux soldats et aux civils belges de la Grande Guerre, mémoire(s) et reconnaissance (1918-1924)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL, 2006; MICHAËL AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil : les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale (France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays Bas) 1914-*

It is in this context of a renascent academic interest that the current research boom is taking place. The centenary provides a unique window of opportunities in this regard, essentially through the funding of individual as well as collective research projects, which is a specificity of this generation of '14-'18 research. Among the thirty-four surveyed PhDs, three collective projects, employing ten doctoral students, received direct funding from various levels of government. Two of these are financed by the Federal Public Planning Service Science Policy (Belspo) : *'Experiences and Memories of the Great War'* (Memex WW1) and *'The Great War from Below'* (GWB). The French-speaking community entity *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* funded the third project, *'Commémorer '14-'18: L'impact de la Première Guerre mondiale sur l'évolution du Droit international : les juristes belges'*. It is noteworthy that the Flemish Government did not promote any specific research project, even though they initially promised to do so<sup>24</sup>. Public funding is not the only scientific opportunity of the centenary commemorations. Many historical associations and academic journals dedicate anniversary-themed conferences or issues to the Great War, and this provides researchers with opportunities for conference presentations and publications. In addition, the amount of available digital sources has never

been so large. Many libraries and archives received funding for ambitious digitisation projects in the run-up to the centenary. Well-known examples are the Europeana 1914-1918 website, the digitisation of the Belgian War Press or the war reports of the Belgian dioceses<sup>25</sup>.

Sometimes, however, conducting research in the context of the centenary commemorations is also more challenging. First of all, while grant proposal deadlines are usually tight, this was even more the case against the background of the commemorations. As such, there was often not enough time to reflect upon the feasibility of the doctoral theses. Such hastily conceived grants might result in PhD projects that sound good enough on paper to get funding, but that are not altogether realistic to be completed. Some of the young researchers soon found out that there were not enough primary sources available to them to study the specific theme they were assigned and had to reorient their project in another direction. Also, some research questions, themes and sources of the thirty-four theses do overlap<sup>26</sup>. Secondly, the sources that scholars wish to examine might for example not be available for an extended period of time, because they are on display at an exhibition or because they are being digitised.

1918, Brussels, ULB, 2007; and M. BOST, *Traverser l'occupation 1914-1918; du modus vivendi à la grève, la magistrature belge face aux occupants allemands*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL, 2013.

**24.** Project Office The Great War Centenary (2014-18), *The Great War Centenary in Flanders. Government of Flanders*, 2011, p. 13; and N. WOUTERS, 'Poor Little Belgium ? ...', in *Journal of Belgian History*, 2012, 2-3, p. 192-199. **25.** The first was organised by the CegeSoma (<https://warpress.cegesoma.be/nl>). The second by the Belgian State Archives ([http://search.arch.be/nl/zoeken-naar-archieven/zoekresultaat/ead/index/zoekterm/oorlogsverslagen/eaid/BE-A0550\\_006912\\_006778\\_DUT](http://search.arch.be/nl/zoeken-naar-archieven/zoekresultaat/ead/index/zoekterm/oorlogsverslagen/eaid/BE-A0550_006912_006778_DUT)). The Europeana website (<http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu/nl>). **26.** For example, two doctoral students, working at different universities across the language border, discovered quite accidentally that they both did research on the theme of counter-espionage in occupied Belgium and France, using the same sources.

### **The “14-18 Centenary Generation” of Doctoral Researchers**

Let us begin with our definition and methodology. We include in what we call the “14-18 centenary generation” of doctoral researchers all those who are, during the four-year centenary, actively researching and/or writing a PhD thesis on any aspect of the First World War in Belgium. We asked all thirty-four surveyed doctoral researchers to fill out a form presenting their research project. Based on the answers we received<sup>27</sup>, we sorted their projects into three general and broad categories : military-political, social, and cultural approaches, hereby following the three configurations identified by Jay Winter and Antoine Prost<sup>28</sup>. Obviously, a strict distinction between these three categories is not only artificial, it also simplifies the complexity and broad scope of many research perspectives: at least one third of our PhD sample could be allocated to more than one category. Although these may be considered as arbitrary and fluid categories, we use them, as our findings build further on the recent overview by Bruno Benvindo, Benoît Majerus and Antoon Vrints. Applying the same three categories, they analyse the Belgian historiography of the Great War from 1914 up until 2014<sup>29</sup>, so that this current paper in a way extends their work. However, Benvindo, Majerus and Vrints studied historical postgraduate research, whereas we pay attention to doctoral researchers, i.e. not only historians, but also PhD students from other university departments.

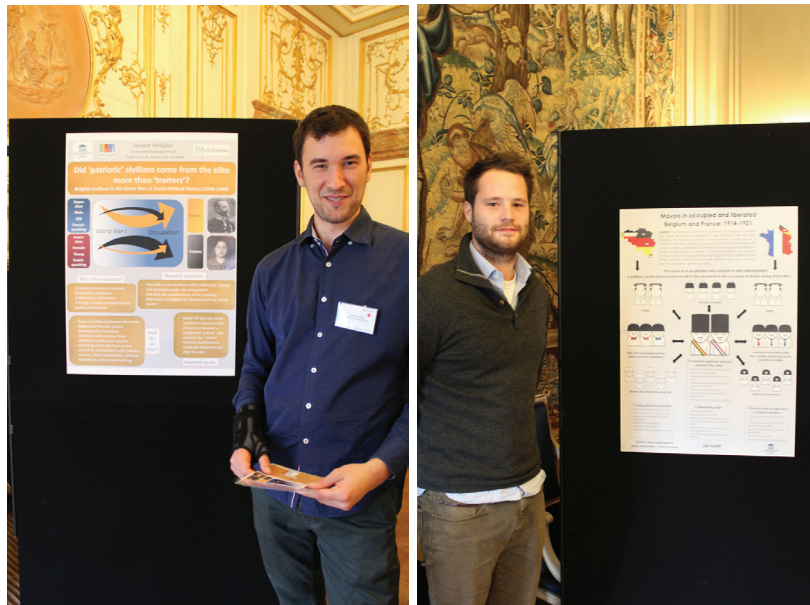
### **- Cultural Approaches in Decline ?**

The first school of Belgian FWW research emerged at the end of the 1990s at the UCL around Laurence van Ypersele, who successfully promoted a cultural history of the war focused on its representation, memory and cultural heritage<sup>30</sup>. The UCL school received international recognition after van Ypersele joined the steering committee of the research centre of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne, a key player in research on the First World War in European cultural history. Benvindo, Majerus and Vrints suggested that even though the cultural-historical approach had clearly revitalised Belgian FWW research, it is now less at the forefront of current research than social approaches focusing on war experiences<sup>31</sup>. This hypothesis might apply to historical FWW research in general, but has to be nuanced when taking a closer look at the interdisciplinary doctoral research projects.

More than one third of all PhD students of the “14-18 centenary generation” clearly privilege a cultural approach in their work, and they are scattered over different universities in Belgium and even abroad. The UCL can therefore no longer be considered as the base camp of the cultural approach. Van Ypersele, however, remains an important figure in Belgian FWW research. She coordinates, together with social psychologist Olivier Luminet, the aforementioned interdisciplinary research group Memex WW1<sup>32</sup>, which includes four PhD students and one post-doctoral researcher. Rose Spijkerman, who is much inspired by the his-

27. Note that we did not receive any answer from the doctoral researchers working in the UK, with the exception of Christophe Declercq. Since these researchers have good online visibility, we decided to include them. 28. JAY WINTER & ANTOINE PROST, *The Great War in History. Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present ?* Cambridge, 2005. 29. B. BENVINDO (et al.), “La Grande Guerre des...”, p. 170-196. 30. Well-known FWW scholars of the UCL school are Emmanuel Debruyne and Stéphanie Claisse. 31. B. BENVINDO (et al.), “La Grande Guerre des...”, p. 191.

32. See the research project website : <http://www.memex-ww1.be>



The three authors of this article. These pictures were taken during the poster session of the 'War and Fatherland' conference on 14-15 October 2015 in Brussels. The research of Karla Vanraepenbusch (upper picture on the right) concerns material memory traces of the First World War in Antwerp and Liège. Florent Verfaillie (left picture below) is writing a PhD on the social impact of the First World War in Belgium, focusing in particular on the trajectories of members of the resistance and collaborators. The research of Jan Naert concerns Belgian and French mayors under occupation and their legitimacy during WW I. (© CegeSoma)





tory of emotions and by gender history, investigates notions of honour and shame in the Belgian military. Karla Vanraepenbusch and Myrthel Van Etterbeeck both compare war memories in Wallonia and Flanders through time, but Vanraepenbusch focuses on material memory traces in occupied cities, while Van Etterbeeck examines works of literature. Pierre Bouchat also studies war memories, but as a social psychologist he is especially interested in these issues in contemporary Belgian society.

It is nevertheless true that relatively fewer young historians seem to be interested in this approach in comparison to the previous generation, but it remains dominant if we include non-historians. Cultural history has always been an interdisciplinary field, but now more than ever, doctoral researchers of different academic horizons are writing the cultural history of the First World War in Belgium. Only Rose Spijkerman, Karla Vanraepenbusch and Nicolas Mignon are historians. It seems, therefore, that the centenary commemorations awakened an interest among scholars of disciplines who, in Belgium at least, traditionally do not study historical events such as the First World War. Many of them are active in a translation or foreign language department, (Myrthel Van Etterbeeck, Christophe Declercq, Philippa Read and Cedric Van Dijck), while some of them are social psychologists (Pierre Bouchat and Aurélie

Van der Haegen). These young researchers of different scholarly backgrounds bring new concepts, new questions and new methodologies into the field, such as the question of the intergenerational transmission of memory, the concept of modernity, and discourse theory.

#### - Social History, a Newly Established Field

In comparison to the cultural approach and to historiographical developments in other countries, the social history of the First World War has been a much-neglected field in Belgium. Peter Scholliers stood out as the main exception in this regard with his extensive work on wages and material living conditions<sup>33</sup>, while gender historians made notable attempts to reconnect the Belgian case to broader social issues<sup>34</sup>. Michaël Amara was the first PhD student who tackled the FWW from a social-historical perspective, with his seminal study on Belgian refugees in France, the Netherlands and Great Britain<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, none of these individual endeavours spilled over into the Belgian historiography.

With the centenary of the Great War, the social-historical approach has become a major trend among Belgian doctoral studies. The CegeSoma notably coordinates the '*Great War from Below*' (GWB) project under the lead of Nico Wouters<sup>36</sup>. This project gathers three PhD students and one post-doctoral researcher, each PhD focussing on specific

33. PETER SCHOLLIERS & FRANK DAELEMANS, "Standards of Living and Standards of Health in Wartime Belgium", in RICHARD WALL & J. WINTER (dir.), *The Upheaval of War : Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, Cambridge/New York, 1988, p. 139-158; PETER SCHOLLIERS, "Koopkracht en indexkoppeling, de Brusselse levensstandaard tijdens en na de Eerste Wereldoorlog, 1914-1925", in *Revue belge d'Histoire contemporaine*, 1978, IX, n. 3-4, p. 333-385; ID., "België dreunt in zijn voegen. Sociale en politieke troebelen, 1914-1921", in FERNAND VANHEMELRYCK (e.a.) (dir.), *Mensen in oorlogstijd*, Brussels, 1988, p. 151-173. 34. DENISE DE WEERDT, *De vrouwen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Ghent, 1993; ELIANE GUBIN, "Bespiegelingen over sekse en oorlog in België, 1914", in *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis. Sekse en Oorlog*, 1995, 15, p. 33-48. 35. M. AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale. France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas*, Brussels, 2008. 36. See the research project website : <http://www.thegreatwarfrombelow.org/>.



war-created social groups. Arnaud Charon focuses on (un)deported forced workers while Fabian Van Wesemael examines veterans and their (un)organised social manifestations, and Florent Verfaillie analyses the social profiles of civilian ‘traitors’ and ‘patriots’ who were arrested and imprisoned. The three projects investigate both social movements born from the war and the trajectories of selected individuals whose experiences are characteristic. The broader impact of the war on the population is also scrutinised from a demographic perspective by Dr. Saskia Hin within this project.

This approach ‘from below’ is also central to other doctoral studies. Barbara Deruytter examines popular songs as a tool to research national identification among middle and lower classes during and after the war<sup>37</sup>. Gertjan Leenders focuses on socially differentiated denunciation conflicts among neighbours, while Jan Van der Fraenen inspects the experience of death among soldiers with a specific attention for hierarchical differences. Christophe Declercq and Jolien De Vuyst also analyse Belgian refugees’ experiences and testimonies in the UK. Remarkably, only two doctoral studies relate to more socio-economic topics: Sophie Delhalle studies the action of the public charities during the occupation in Liège, and Dries Claes inspects the landscape reconstruction after the War. Similarly, Yasmina Zian, examining the evolution of the attitude of the Belgian Investigation Bureau on Foreigners towards the Jews during and after the war, is the only PhD student dealing with ethnic minorities.

From an institutional perspective, Ghent University has largely become the FWW social history centre, especially around Antoon Vrints who is currently directing no less than six PhD projects, mostly with a social history perspective. This is even more striking seeing that Ghent University and Flanders in general were almost totally absent from the Great War research agenda a decade ago. Although we can see this as a happy union between the social historical tradition of Ghent University and the current renewed social trend in ‘14-’18 studies, one must emphasise the personal effect of Vrints rather than an institutional strategy in order to explain the appearance of this sudden new research epicentre. In the same vein as the role that van Ypersele has played regarding cultural approaches, it seems more than ever that historical ‘schools’ in Belgium still strongly depend on individual researchers, despite the intentional orientations adopted by institutions like CegeSoma or the State Archives. If the social history of the Great War has now reached an unprecedented level in Belgium, it is nevertheless the case that social history is not quantitatively dominant among doctoral projects.

#### - A Renewed Interest in Political and Military History

For a long time, Belgian political historians who studied the First World War were almost exclusively preoccupied with the ever-dominant national-political research questions on Flemish nationalist collaboration (Activism)<sup>38</sup>. With the international ‘rediscovery’ of the occupied territories, attention shifted to everyday political tensions and

37. Strictly speaking, Barbara Deruytter’s research project is not a PhD project. As she is a scientific collaborator who builds further on a PhD project that was initially started by Dominique De Groen at Ghent University in november 2012 : “Social Justice and national identification. A social history of war nationalism in Belgium, 1914-1925”, we decided to include her.

38. For a good synthesis, see : LODE WILS, *Onverfranst, onverduist ? Flamenpolitik, Activisme, Frontbeweging*, Kalmthout, 2014.





relations. Except from these often broad and synthetic considerations, we lack knowledge of political life under the German occupation. Three PhD researchers try to fill this gap, focusing on a micro-historical scale to answer broad questions on humanitarian aid, democratisation and processes of state disintegration. Sophie Delhalle emphasizes the political and lifesaving role of the local food and aid committees in the densely populated, laborious and industrial province of Liège. Karen Lauwers studies long-term interactions in Belgium and France between ordinary citizens and MPs and how the war changed their discourses and implied a possible process of democratisation. Jan Naert researches what happens at the local level when well-established states as Belgium and France partially disintegrate, due to a foreign invasion and occupation.

A second current in political history is diplomatic history, which is stimulated by a collaborative and interdisciplinary project that deals with the impact of World War One on international law (1870-1940) : *'Com-mémorer '14-'18 : L'impact de la Première Guerre mondiale sur l'évolution du Droit international : les juristes belges'*. This is investigated through the interconnection of various renowned Belgian juridical experts. Juliette Lafosse, philosopher, tries to study the content of different legal doctrines, their origins and the Great War's impact on them. Historian Vincent Genin analyses the international networks of these jurists. Focussing on transnational contacts, he investigates the discussions on the violations of international law that occurred during the war. The second historian involved is Enika Ngongo, who highlights the colonial

experiences and their impact on international law. Not a member of this large project, but also working on international law, is Thomas Graditzky. He researches the Belgian contribution to the evolution of the rule of law with regard to military occupations. One of his case studies is occupied Belgium in '14-'18.

Belgian academic historians have almost exclusively set their eyes on civilians, but following recent international trends, new military history projects have now also been launched in Belgium. These scholars often do not consider themselves military historians as they dismiss the traditional *"histoire bataille"* approach. Nevertheless, they may be considered as proponents of the "New Military History" as they do investigate the multiple connections that exist between war, the military and society. First of all, Tom Simoens describes how the Belgian army in 1918 differed from that in 1914 and the structural changes it underwent during the war. Similar approaches can be found in the work of Benoit Amez and Mario Draper. The first examines the functioning of military justice; the latter works on the discipline and morale of the Belgian army. The fourth exponent of this renewed military history interest is Dominiek Dendooven. He mingles military and colonial research perspectives by researching the war effort of different subaltern groups at the Western Front in relation with their post-war political careers. Though not military historian in the strict sense of the term, Rose Spijkerman uses soldiers as a case study for her cultural-emotional analysis of notions of honour and shame during the war (see above). Also in this vein is the work of Jan Van der Fraenen who explores the experience of death among soldiers (see above).





**- A Transnational Generation**

In his overview of historical writing on the First World War, Jay Winter states that the current generation of historians is especially preoccupied by transnational history. According to him, they study war from a global rather than a national or European perspective<sup>39</sup>. For the Belgian case Nico Wouters recently remarked that new research projects are mostly national in their orientation. This might be the case, according to Wouters, because “research funding opportunities within a strong national commemorative context will tend to favour national issues and disfavour too many transnational or international research subjects”<sup>40</sup>. It is true that two of the three new collective research projects make use of a strictly national framework. We believe this is not a deliberate choice, but partially due to the funding structures and their tight deadlines. As these two projects (Memex WW1 and the GWB) were funded by BELSPO and elaborated as Brain-be Projects<sup>41</sup>, there had to be a clear connection with Federal Scientific Institutions such as the State Archives or the CegeSoma and the (Belgian) sources they hold.

The “14-18 centenary generation” is, however, markedly more receptive to transnational approaches than previous generations. About one third of all doctoral researchers go beyond the nation by using a European or international comparative framework. Most of them (Leonard, Lauwers, Naert, Read, Rezsöhazy and Vanheule) focus on Belgium and France. The exceptions are Van Dijck, who

investigates British trench journals, Godfroid and Mignon, who study the occupation of the Ruhr territory, and Bouchat, who analyses European memory. It is also noteworthy that some British doctoral students, such as Draper, Fox-Godden, Matt and Read, study Belgium, but as a country where the British army fought and where their soldiers were buried, and less as an interesting case in itself.

Very few of the doctoral researchers privilege a truly global perspective. The exceptions are Dendooven and Ngongo. Dendooven, who co-authored *World War I : Five Continents in Flanders*, examines the war experiences of British colonials at the Western front, in particular the Indian Army Corps, the Chinese Labour Corps and the British West Indies Regiment, and how this experience influenced post-war politics at home. Ngongo is interested in a similar question, but related to the colonial past of Belgium. She examines the Belgian colonial administration in Congo during the war, and how the war influenced colonisation in the twenties and thirties.

Jay Winter points out that many scholars have become transnational themselves, “practising history far from their place of birth”<sup>42</sup>. Declercq, Dendooven, De Vuyst and Zian illustrate this point adequately. They all have Belgian nationality, but are pursuing a joint doctorate between a Belgian and a foreign university, Zian in Berlin, and Declercq, Dendooven and De Vuyst in the United Kingdom. Zian’s thesis subject illustrates, moreover, how

39. J. WINTER, “Historiography 1918-today”, in UTE DANIEL (eds.), *1914-1918 online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2014. 40. NICO WOUTERS, “The Centenary Commemorations...”, p. 82. 41. Belgian Research Action Through Interdisciplinary Networks (Brain-be) is the first phase (2012-2017) of a recurrent framework programme which allows, through the funding of research projects based on scientific excellence and European and international anchoring, to meet the needs for scientific knowledge of the Belgian federal departments and to support the scientific potential of the Federal Scientific Institutions. <http://www.belspo.be/brain-be/>. 42. J. WINTER, “Historiography...”.





transnational preoccupations can influence the analysis of a particular nation. Her research on Jewish migrants in Belgium is part of a larger research project<sup>43</sup> that examines how the First World War led to a radicalisation of anti-Semitism in Europe, in which several PhD students focus each on a different nation.

#### - Broadening Time Limits

Like broadening geographical scope, extending time limits can also serve as a comparative tool. Nevertheless, only three doctoral researchers privileged an explicitly diachronic comparative approach. Leenders and Van der Haegen are both conducting a study of the two World Wars, while Graditzky is the only PhD student making a diachronic comparison between the three wars of 1870-1871, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. All other PhD students concentrated on and around the 1914-1918 period.

Nevertheless, a little more than two thirds of the doctoral researchers surveyed adopted broader time periods than the strict time limits of the war. One third is expanding the time limit towards the post-war period, highlighting how the Great War is looked upon strongly as a historical starting point. This is obviously the case for those dealing with the memory of the Great War (Bouchat, Van Etterbeek, Van der Haegen and Vanraepenbusch), but also for those focusing on specific issues during the war and its direct aftermath (Dendooven, Deruytter, Naert and Ngongo). Mignon and Godefroid appear as a particular case, since the period that they study only begins at the end of the war, but then the Ruhr occupation can be considered as a direct consequence

and even continuation of the war. Strikingly, only one student stops in 1918 while starting earlier in the nineteenth century (Draper). Another third of the doctoral researchers is studying a broader time slot around the Great War which usually runs from 1900 to 1930 or 1940. This is the case for the members of the GWB project (Charon, Van Wesemael and Verfaillie) but also for Lauwers, Zian, Genin and Lafosse. All of them assess the Great War as a turning rather than as a starting point.

## 2. A Specific Social Responsibility for 'Centennial' Historians ?

While the exact historiographical outcome of these PhD projects remains unclear, the broader scientific impact of the commemorations seems to be assured. Therefore, being in the second half of the centenary commemorations, it is relevant to question the public impact of all these highly specialised FWW PhD projects as well. As part of an exceptional commemorative phenomenon, we probably feel more moral pressure than usual to return research results to the public. Therefore one can argue that it is regrettable that the chronology of many research projects and of the commemorations coincide. On the one hand, this implies that most research will, in all likelihood, have more difficulty in finding its way to a wider audience<sup>44</sup>. Public interest will probably diminish as commemoration fatigue will hit. On the other hand, we are constrained by and evaluated according to our innovative academic production, not its wider communication. Do we therefore need to consider that there is no specific role

43. See the project website : [https://www.tu-berlin.de/fakultaet\\_i/zentrum\\_fuer\\_antisemitismusforschung/menue/forschung/forschungskolleg\\_der\\_erste\\_weltkrieg\\_und\\_die\\_konflikte\\_der\\_europaeischen\\_nachkriegsordnung\\_1914-1923/](https://www.tu-berlin.de/fakultaet_i/zentrum_fuer_antisemitismusforschung/menue/forschung/forschungskolleg_der_erste_weltkrieg_und_die_konflikte_der_europaeischen_nachkriegsordnung_1914-1923/). 44. NICO WOUTERS, *The Centenary Commemorations...*, p. 82.

to be played by young researchers in this commemorative context other than purely academic? If on the contrary such role is to be played, how could this be done? Overall, how do we secure a public dissemination of the commemorations' scholarly impact? In the second part of this paper, we wish to contribute to an old and yet persistent debate about historians' engagement in society, and to the more recent one on the role and function of public history. We tackle these questions from our own specific situation, the context of the commemoration and through the perspective of young doctoral researchers.

#### **Public dissemination and Societal Impact**

Communication lies at the heart of the scientific process: no science can be made without a communication medium. Scientific media are almost exclusively made of academic articles and books. Even conferences are often translated into a written product, without which no scientific evaluation is possible. Yet, in the history discipline perhaps more than in others, scientific books can meet a larger public interest, even sometimes with great success<sup>45</sup>. Perhaps this is so because history, more than other fields, belongs to society as a whole? The interaction between historians and society has already been much debated in Belgium. After a short overview of this debate<sup>46</sup>, we develop our own insights

and explore some perspectives and potential evolutions based on concrete examples.

#### **- On the Social Role of Historians**

There is no consensus on whether historians should play an active role in society, and if so, how. Yet in Belgium, even the fiercest opponents to the public engagement of historians do not necessarily reject the idea entirely. Pieter Lagrou has been among those who have expressed the most clearly their criticisms towards historians' participation in public commemorations. As he advocates: "Historians are not executioners, but in fact snipers in the best case. They should not stand on the public square but behind the hedge. Let us choose rather than to suffer marginality, since only from the relative freedom of society's margin can we hope to regain the critical potential of our discipline"<sup>47</sup>. According to his words, his position is more than just the "monk's agoraphobia", as he argues: "Commemoration policy is in fact just politics, and the normal mechanisms of democratic control, stakeholders' mobilisation, vote soliciting and so on precisely make sure that conflicting claims on government subsidies and recognition remain manipulative (...). An essential question of political arbitration can only be settled in the political arena and the observation that our political institutions are always less able to achieve such arbitration gives us no single reason to

45. To mention only First World War examples: S. DE SCHAEFDRIJVER, *De Grootte Oorlog...*; CHRISTOPHER CLARK, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to war in 1914*, Penguin Books, 2013.

46. This debate overview is mainly based on ELS WITTE (ed.), *De maatschappelijke rol van de geschiedenis. Historici aan het woord*, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Brussels, 2010. 47. Original quote: "*Historici zijn dus geen scherprechters, maar in het beste geval scherpschutters, vrijeschutters, Heckenschützen. Niet op het plein dienen zij te staan, maar in de haag. Laten we dus kiezen voor marginaliteit, eerder dan ze te ondergaan, want enkel vanuit de relatieve vrijheid van de maatschappelijke marge kunnen we misschien het kritische potentieel van onze discipline herwinnen*". PIETER LAGROU, "De maatschappelijke rol van de historicus: de casus van de geschiedschrijving over de Tweede Wereldoorlog", in E. WITTE, *De maatschappelijke rol...*, p. 52.



*PhD researcher Arnaud Charon (Belgian State Archives) being interviewed by high school students. He participated in the school research project on Belgian forced labour deportees that was carried out by the Établissement des Soeurs Notre-Dame of Namur. (© Laurence Dejonckere)*





believe that historians, in name of the world, would be a better fit for this<sup>48</sup>. Defending intellectual independence, Lagrou even discourages giving academic legitimacy to initiatives doomed to be misused for political ends.

Jo Tollebeek is another critical voice in this debate. He points out that coupling research to its “impact” on society would foster commercialisation and turn research into a market-oriented product leading in turn to the weakening of academic independence. Furthermore, Tollebeek believes that historians are nowadays more humble regarding truth claims than in the past and tend to be more focused on the past for its own sake, regardless of contemporary concerns. Yet, they are not cut off from the outside world if they study historical – and more and more foreign – cultures, since this makes them natural critics of the culturally-centred moral identities of our societies. Like Lagrou, though focused on a purely intellectual rather than political dimension, Tollebeek concludes that “in order to formulate such criticisms, a distance, thinking about and even from other worlds is necessary (...). Just like other disciplines history does not have to serve the society, it

has on the contrary to be insubordinate. The historian must call society into question<sup>49</sup>.”

These important theoretical criticisms are challenged by historians such as Gita Deneckere. Although she clearly states that historians are not propagandists or cheerleaders who want history to be “useful” for the present, she also argues that “[historians] can however not keep staying superior on the side<sup>50</sup>”. She is critical towards neglecting the public and stresses along with Michel de Certeau that the self-exclusion of historians from society does not cause any harm to society’s *status quo* – which is indeed intended by promoters of a removed intellectual position. She points at successive major evolutions regarding the “memory boom”, the “heritage hype” and the growing use of official historical “truth” commissions as illustrations of the new “*régime d’historicité*” we would have entered, making use of François Hertog’s concept. Deneckere even uses the expression “post-history” to refer to the lost confidence in the future turned into an obsession for the conservation of the past and search for identities. The Ghent University professor concludes that the social relevance of history must “incite historians to find a new habitus which combines factual truth and

48. Original quote : “Herdenkingspolitiek is wel juist politiek, en de normale mechanismen van democratische controle, mobilisering van drukingsgroepen, stemmenronseling en dies meer staan er precies voor in dat conflictueuze aanspraken op overheidsgeld en overheidserkenning beheersbaar blijven (...). Een essentieel politieke arbitragekwestie kan enkel in de politieke arena beslecht worden en de vaststelling dat onze politieke instellingen steeds minder in staat zijn tot dergelijke arbitrage geeft ons geen enkele reden om te geloven dat historici, in 's werelds naam, daar beter voor gewapend zouden zijn”. P. LAGROU, “De maatschappelijke rol...”, p. 51-52. 49. Original quote : “Om die kritiek te kunnen geven is afstand nodig, een denken over en zelfs vanuit andere werelden (...). Net als de andere wetenschappen moet geschiedenis de maatschappij niet dienen, zij hoort haar integendeel dwars te zitten. De historicus moet de samenleving in opspraak brengen”. JO TOLLEBEEK, “De samenleving in opspraak. Opmerkingen over de maatschappelijke betrokkenheid van de historicus”, in E. WITTE, *De maatschappelijke rol...*, p. 38. 50. Original quote : “We kunnen echter niet superieur aan de kant blijven staan”. GITA DENECKERE, “De habitus van de hedendaagse historicus en de eigentijdse geschiedenis van ergoed, geheugen en historische commissies : wereldvreemd in eigen land ?”, in E. WITTE, *De maatschappelijke rol...*, p. 27.



interpretation, which restores contact with the public and also involves that public in societal debates on historical injustice, history and fairness<sup>51</sup>. If holding to their traditional habitus in the current evolving context, historians risk fostering their disconnection from the public and be put out of the game. As the society *does* have a relation to its past at any rate, Deneckere insists that historians should be part of that game.

**- Beyond the “Yes-or-No” Debate and Towards a “How” Question**

The various theoretical positions we just summarised highlight important points where historians disagree in this debate. Yet, it is also necessary to emphasise that they all seem to agree on one important point : historians do have a critical role to play in society. They only disagree on the degree of involvement, and more particularly on the way to be involved. Pieter Lagrou’s criticisms, for instance, target the direct political process of recognition, not the public role of the historian as such. When he advocates avoiding “overexposure” and the “public square”, it is to better shoot at it from the margin as a “sniper”. When Jo Tollebeek declares that history should not serve society but is meant on the contrary to be insubordinate and to question its culturally-centred values, it is still in order to address such criticisms to society and no one else. Both Lagrou and Tollebeek actually did participate as historical experts in the centenary commemorations, Lagrou as a member of the scientific committee of

the exhibition “14-18 *c’est notre histoire !*”, and Tollebeek in the scientific committee of the exhibition “*Ravage*”<sup>52</sup>. This demonstrates the complexity of these theoretical discussions and the fact that these points of view do not imply a categorical refusal of any form of public involvement.

This debate thus rather seems to be a “how” than a “yes-or-no” question. As Bruno De Wever notes, the notion of social engagement is complex and ambiguous<sup>53</sup>. In our opinion, this leads to a misunderstanding in this debate. “Anti-engagement” advocates in particular tend to overlook the difference between history and collective memory and the different roles of the historian in regard to each. Paradoxically, they tend to grant historians too much power or responsibility before fighting against such an inappropriate role. It is certainly not the essential role of historians to decide or shape what collective memory should be. The outcome of political compromise on memory is therefore not the matter (or responsibility) of the historian who, in his most strict and scholarly role, should limit himself to providing his expertise to society and leaving the final decision to it. That such a decision is political and manipulative is evident and not his problem (although it is worth intellectual interest), as long as it does not affect the field of historical research. If instrumentalised, historians remain free to publically express their criticisms, and then act as “snipers”. There is a false opposition between the two

51. Original quote : “*daagt historici uit om een nieuwe habitus te vinden die waarheid met betekenisverlening combineert, het contact met het publiek herstelt en dat publiek ook engageert in de maatschappelijke debatten over historisch onrecht, geschiedenis en gerechtigheid*”. GITA DENECKERE, “De habitus van de hedendaagse historicus...”, p. 29. 52. The Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History organised the exhibition “*14-18. It’s our History !*” (7.2.2014-15.11.2015) and in Louvain in the Museum M the exhibition “*Ravage*” was organised from 20.3.2014-1.9.2014. 53. BRUNO DE WEVER, “De maatschappelijke rol van de historicus : casus vlaamse beweging”, in E. WITTE, *De maatschappelijke rol...*, p. 40.





public roles of the historian as expert advisor and intellectual sniper.

Therefore, we believe it is now necessary to move on from this theoretical debate towards a more practical one. Such a debate should however neither escape nor neglect the critical stance towards the direct public engagement of historians, but rather include this viewpoint as one of the various degrees of possible (indirect) involvement. How can historians concretely, independently and academically best contribute to society's historical knowledge and intellectual reflection? This question has to be tackled beyond theoretical positions. Recently, in Belgium<sup>54</sup>, the growing field of public history offers promising prospects in this regard. Namely, it offers a professionalisation of historians' involvement in society within an institutionally independent framework, where academic research meets non-academic historians as well as various actors involved with the public. Yet, the notion of "public history" remains broad and rather evasive. While we do not aim at tackling this broader issue here, our purpose is to focus the reflection on one specific dimension of this field, the public dissemination of academic research. The specific case of the '14-'18 commemoration can appear as a mere pretext to deal with this broader reflection.

***Young Historians' Perspectives: Challenges and Opportunities of the FWW Centenary***

Debates on public dissemination happen to be of great importance in the context of the commemorations. Because, as Wouters noti-

ced, academic historians seem to have been quite unsuccessful during the centenary in bringing academic debates to the attention of a larger public, even though some historians played an active and visible role in the commemorative events<sup>55</sup>. Therefore we thought it appropriate to reflect on this rather practical question. We structure our remarks around three discussion points. First of all, we ask for sustainable forms of public engagement that will transcend the commemoration. Secondly, we want to emphasize that the specific academic context increases the risk of fragmentation of such public efforts. Third, we recommend a more thorough reflection on the structural anchoring of public dissemination in research projects.

**- Transience and Impermanence**

In 2016 a seminar was organised that brought together young scholars, teachers, heritage workers and local historians interested in the First World War<sup>56</sup>. The goal of this seminar was to encourage networking and collaboration, in the hope that this would result in participative commemorative projects for 2018 and afterwards. Several PhD students took an active role in organising the seminar, presenting their research during a poster session, and moderating or participating in a workshop. It is too early yet to see whether their efforts paid off, but the seminar itself was important as it was the first institutionalised event in Belgium that brought together scholars, teachers and heritage workers around the topic of the FWW. It also proved that some PhD students were eager to engage with

54. In 2007 the 'Interuniversity Institute for Public History' was established (*Interuniversitaire Instituut voor Publieksgeschiedenis*, IPG), followed by the CegeSoma which created its own Public History Department in 2011. 55. N. WOUTERS, "The Centenary Commemorations...", p. 81. 56. The seminar "De Eerste Wereldoorlog in 2018 en daarna ?!" was organised by FARO Flemish Interface Centre for Cultural Heritage, CegeSoma, 'Bijzonder Comité voor Herinneringseducatie' and 'Projectsecretariaat 100 jaar Grote Oorlog (2014-18)', and took place in Brussels on 26 April 2016.



*Some of the Belgian World War One PhD students after they presented their research posters during a 2016 seminar that brought together scholars, teachers, heritage workers and local historians working on the First World War.  
(© Stefaan Vergaerde)*



the public. But such institutionalised events are rare. Most young scholars who wish to engage in public dissemination activities are on their own. They write short articles in non-academic publications<sup>57</sup>, present their research results or provide historical context on radio and television<sup>58</sup>, create school projects<sup>59</sup>, co-operate in exhibitions<sup>60</sup>, and take part in the many local conferences<sup>61</sup> or heritage days<sup>62</sup>. They argue that it is better not to wait with public valorisation, and certainly not at times when the opportunities are so plentiful. Moreover, in some cases they also reap the fruits for their own research, since they meet local experts or can launch public appeals to collect as yet undiscovered sources.

Such small undertakings are valuable, but they result in volatile forms of public dissemination and a fleeting interest in the results of academic historical research. Therefore it is important that (young) researchers are aware of the sustainability and long-term impact of their efforts. Public dissemination and public history at large should also have the ambition to sustainably disseminate new historical knowledge and extensive scholarly findings to a wider audience. It is therefore essential to aim for a durable public dissemination of the ongoing doctoral

research that transcends the commemorative period. Different examples prove this is possible.

The renowned international online 1914-1918 Encyclopaedia is a classic illustration of how *Digital* and *Public History* can be brought together, in this case in the old-fashioned concept of an encyclopaedia<sup>63</sup>. The result is a specialised online platform supported by interuniversity and international cooperation. It fits in seamlessly with the applied approach and contextualisation of World War I as a global conflict. This also appears from the particularly broad thematic and geographical spectrum of the articles. In addition, because of the open-access policy the website is very user-friendly. Furthermore, all articles were written in the same language (English), there are easy clicks to other linked subjects and a short bibliography is provided. Moreover, the scholarly quality of the content is guaranteed by peer review. The project also demonstrates that digital media can help to bridge the gap between academic historians and the public. Building on this argument, we believe that historians should adapt themselves to the media environment. This does not mean adapting their discourses or analyses, but the channels and ways to communicate

57. For example : Karla Vanraepenbusch (UCL) wrote several articles for the *Journaux de guerre*. 58. For example : Vincent Genin (ULg) often provides talks on the radio and television on diverse historical subjects. 59. For example : Arnaud Charon assisted a school class who created a website on the forced deportations in the Namur region. <http://www.acmj.be/deportes/#Accueil>. 60. For example Enika Ngongo helped with the exhibition "Les Congolais dans la Grande Guerre : inconnus à cette adresse" (<http://www.crhidi.be/2016/09/02/exposition-les-congolais-dans-la-grande-guerre-inconnus-à-cette-adresse/>). 61. Enika Ngongo recently organised a conference for a wider audience on her PhD research that deals with the impact of the First World War on the Belgian Congo (13/09/2016). 62. Several young historians who are working at Ghent University collaborated on the Heritage day : "Eerste Hulp Bij Oorlogserfgoed", organised by FARO, Ghent University and the province of East Flanders (16 November 2014). 63. ALAN KRAMER, "1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Introduction", in UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ, HEATHER JONES, JENNIFER KEENE, A. KRAMER & BILL NASSON, *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 8 October 2014.

with the public<sup>64</sup>. In particular, digital media and especially social media are still largely absent from the reflection about scientific communication. More modest in design are two local-history books, one by a historical collective on Liège and the other by Sophie De Schaepdrijver on Bruges<sup>65</sup>. Both books show how local commemoration activities and a dialogue between local historians, heritage workers and academic historians can lead to a lasting public dissemination. Another book, *“Brood willen we hebben. Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog”*, by the Ghent historian Giselle Nath, is the commercial version of an award-winning master’s thesis on local food politics and social protest in occupied Belgium. Nath proves that individual academic work can also successfully find its way to a wider audience.

#### - Academic Context and Fragmentation

The academic context inhibits the desire to disseminate new research results to a wider audience in two ways. First and foremost, young researchers with an interest in the subject are in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand they certainly want to be read by the widest possible audience, beyond university libraries as well. On the other hand, we all pursue international relevance and no one

wants to disregard the all-important criteria of academic evaluations and assessments. This tension means that all efforts and time invested in public dissemination entails time lost for the research process and its scientific appraisal. Therefore it is an important conclusion that whoever was or is now successful in sustainably disseminating their scientific work, managed to do so only after finishing their doctoral research. In spite of the difficult academic context and fragmented research situation, we still find it important to pursue sustainable dissemination. This can be achieved through different media and in an individual as well as collective fashion. For example, individual researchers might strive to rework different doctoral theses after 2018 into a book for the general public. However, publishing a thesis is often accompanied by various problems. In the first place a publisher has to be found who is prepared to reflect on how an initially academic work can be adapted into a book for the general public. In Flanders, where the history book market is rather extensive and easily accessible, an adaptation of this kind would seem easier than in Wallonia for the time being<sup>66</sup>. In addition it also requires a great deal of time, money and, most importantly, as already stated, a prolonged stay at university<sup>67</sup>. Recently there

64. Recent trends and examples in Belgian academia are : <http://cultuurgeschiedenis.be> (KULeuven) and <http://www.ipg.ugent.be> (UGent), for a critical reflection on public- and digital history : FIEN DANNIAU, “Public history in a digital context : back to the future or back to basics?”, in *BMGN Low Countries Historical Review*, 2013, 128, 4, p. 118-144. 65. CHRISTINE MARÉCHAL & CLAUDINE SCHLOSS, *1914-1918. Vivre la guerre à Liège et en Wallonie*, Liège, 2014; S. DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, *Bastion : occupied Bruges in the First World War*, Bruges, 2014. 66. A. VINTS, “Van niemandsland tot de ‘grote klaprozenexplosie. Twee decennia onderzoek over België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog”, in *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 2016, 131, p. 58. 67. One can of course also rightfully emphasise that writing good public history books is not only difficult because of the academic context, as is argued here above. It also demands a specific manner of scholarly communication. Therefore, the readability of the manuscript and the kind of language that is used – as not every academic even writes in an as eloquent way as David Van Reybrouck - is the second most important characteristic of a good public history book. Another problem might be, for example, the link between transnational, comparative or interdisciplinary research and the translation to a wider audience that perhaps might be more interested in public history books that use a national or not explicitly interdisciplinary framework. (As argued by PIETER LAGROU, “De l’histoire du temps présent à l’histoire des autres.



have been various changes to accommodate some of these aspirations, though mainly in Flanders. They should stimulate professional academics, and therefore young researchers as well, to publicly disseminate research results in the form of a book, without being subjected to academic reprimand. Thus the creation of the VABB (Flemish Academic Bibliography for the Social Sciences and Humanities) list and the recent GPRC (Guaranteed Peer Review Content) label enable Flemish scientists to obtain academic credits for books aimed at the general public<sup>68</sup>. This procedure ensures that such books are first assessed through peer review. In this respect young historians are in fact not discouraged to think about a “popular” translation of a thesis after it has been concluded. This offers at least one incentive to reflect on how the work in progress can be structured and developed into a history book, better suited to the general public, at a later date<sup>69</sup>.

Secondly, the academic research context as such contributes to this fragmentation and dispersion. As has already been made clear, FWW researchers are not only scattered over virtually all universities on both sides of the language border, they are also part of different projects, study groups, research units and disciplines. This indicates the need for more interuniversity and interdisciplinary

co-operation on projects that specifically make historical research accessible to a large audience. It is highly unlikely that the many doctoral projects about the FWW will each individually reach a wide audience in a sustainable way. Therefore a collective effort should be generated, at least if the aim is to go beyond fragmented forms of public dissemination and to reflect on broader collective projects too. This might seem utopian, since there is no tradition at all in Belgian historical research of such large-scale public dissemination initiatives across the borders of universities and disciplines. It is nonetheless possible, as the collaboration between the two collective Belspo research projects (GWB and Memex WW1) shows, a collaboration that will, hopefully, result in the publication of a common public history book. But there also has to be an ambition to communicate and present all the FWW doctoral research projects beyond the collaboration of large research projects. In this case the core objective might consist, of bundling the many new analyses and insights which have emerged from extensive and often interdisciplinary research through co-operation across the universities and language borders. Just like 11 years ago, one possibility consists of a collective book publication, combining different specific conference contributions with the initial

Comment une discipline critique devint complaisante”, in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'Histoire*, 2013, 2, 118, p. 111-112). **68.** Guaranteed Peer Reviewed Content (GPRC) is a quality label attesting that a publication went through a process of peer review that conforms to international standards. However, criticsers might rightfully argue that the regional limitations of this label, only valid in Flanders, undermines structural change. This “regional” argument also goes for the peer reviewers that are appointed by publishing companies, as in Flanders specialists of a certain topic will often be colleagues or research partners. As such, the creation of the GPRC label can be seen as a good start. Pessimists will emphasize that the label is first and foremost a commercial trick of publishing houses who want to attract academics interested in publishing books for a wider audience. **69.** Things to consider might be for example: the language that is used, the word count, the way academic theory is presented, the sort of vocabulary that is used, etc. On the other hand, some recent examples have shown that members of doctoral juries can criticize these plans or ideas.



idea of presenting new research trends, perspectives and results<sup>70</sup>. Nevertheless, if the intention is to reach an as wide a audience as possible in a way that is as accessible, we consider it important to advocate a more public-friendly, bilingual and moreover sustainable initiative. Ideally this should be achieved by means of a digital, user-friendly and free dissemination of an e-book or website. An institution such as CegeSoma, which is not connected to one university in particular yet offers a meeting platform for war historians from both Flemish and French-speaking universities, could coordinate such an effort.

#### - Structural Anchoring of Public Dissemination

It is obvious that these questions are also rife in the collective Brain / Belspo FWW research projects in which they are already *de facto* institutionalised, since they require a public dissemination project to get funding. In contrast with the “*Commémorer 14-18*” project, *Memex WWI* and the *Great War from Below* both provided for a public translation of the collective research effort in their original project proposals. However, because of the secondary importance and simultaneously ambitious design of the ‘public dissemination’ section, it appears difficult to mobilise all partners. *The Great War from Below* initially aimed at publicly translating life course analyses on the basis of audio-visual fragments into a suitable exhibition or digital museum. This is a concept which appears to be difficult to achieve, in part because various research designs in the respective doctoral projects seem to be more divergent than was first anticipated. The *Memex WWI* project aimed at setting up a bilingual anthology of

Belgian war literature and at developing a tourist guide for Antwerp and Liège. Although there are still many ongoing debates in the two projects about the way in which all this can be achieved, it is certainly positive that there is unanimity to arrive at a common finished product for the public by the end of 2018, even if it might be less ambitious than first planned.

Both the Brain-be projects are examples of the fact that the question of public dissemination is already institutionalised. A growing number of publically funded research projects now require at least one public dissemination dimension from applicants. This is the case for European funds such as HERA and for the Belgian Science Policy (Belspo), while the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO) is following the same path. Should we see this as a threat for academic research independence? We do not think so. Research themes remain open for applicants, so do the included public dissemination projects. We believe on the contrary that this evolution is promising in that it cleverly combines research independence and public involvement. The non-compulsory achievement of such public dissemination project is crucial however, as to not jeopardise the research itself which remains the indisputable priority. This prioritisation is however the precise difficulty in effectively achieving the promised public dimension of most projects, as we personally observe in our own respective research projects. Hence, although requiring public dissemination from research funds seems a promising trend, more could be done: if such initiatives are necessary to receive grants, they should also

70. SERGE JAUMAIN, M. AMARA, B. MAJERUS & A. VRINTS, *Une guerre totale ? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Brussels, Belgian State Archives, 2005.





be appropriately evaluated. Not only public books, but also exhibitions or websites could be academically rewarded via ECTS credits, academic labels or awards. This would prevent original proposals from being too quickly scaled down after the project funding is granted. How to evaluate such diverse public projects should thus become an important reflexion and debate among both academic and public history professionals. Such mechanisms would prioritise the public dimension of research projects – especially in commemoration contexts – without turning it into an absolute constraint.

### Conclusion

If it is still too early to evaluate the full academic impact of the commemorations at this stage of the centenary, it has become clear that research on the First World War in Belgium is facing an unprecedented boom. Some trends can already be distinguished in this regard. A first striking characteristic of the “14-’18 centenary generation” of researchers lies in the fact that almost one third of all doctoral researchers use a social history point of view, which was almost completely absent a decade ago. Secondly, various military history approaches are re-emerging, which is also a new phenomenon. Thirdly, while social history largely proves to be historians’ private garden, the cultural perspective seems, on the contrary, to have been almost entirely overtaken by researchers from outside of history departments. FWW doctoral research in Belgium has therefore become more interdisciplinary than ever before. A last characteristic is that more researchers than ever before go “beyond the nation”, although few of them favour a truly global perspective.

These new trends do not, however, change the fact that some social groups, research themes and sources remain underexploited, such as for instance the social impact of the war on widows and orphans, the memory of Belgian army regiments or the rule of Flemish and Walloon governments under “administrative separation”<sup>71</sup>.

Yet, if the scholarly outcome of the centenary seems promising, the wider public impact of this research boom seems much more uncertain. We believe that the commemoration context offers a unique opportunity to re-think the interaction between research and public engagement, and in particular, how research results can be communicated sustainably to a larger audience. As we argued, the debate on historians’ public engagement and the relation with society in Belgium must evolve from a yes-or-no question towards a how discussion. On the one hand, we want to encourage young researchers to think about how to combine scientific rigor with public-friendly framing and style in the writing of their doctoral dissertations. On the other hand, we want to invite all professional historians, academics, non-academics and in particular public history professionals to reflect on structural possibilities to cleverly connect research and public dissemination. Among the various elements we discussed, the Flemish initiative to give academic credit for public books seems particularly interesting and could easily be applied in the French-speaking part of the country. More importantly, we believe that the scientific assessment of public history projects is an important issue for the future development of research, and that this question deserves

71. For many more suggestions see : A. Vrints, “Van niemandsland...”, p. 66-73.





a profound reflection. Finally, we also aim to urge concrete initiatives to coordinate the

various PhDs' results into an ambitious public dissemination project.

JAN NAERT (°1990) holds a Master's degree in History and is currently a PhD candidate at Ghent University, working on the project : "Mayors and legitimacy in WWI. The Mayor as a feeder, protector and representative in occupied and liberated Belgium and France (1914-1921)". This PhD project is being supervised by Antoon Vrints (Promotor - Ghent University) and Nico Wouters (co-promotor - CegeSoma/Ghent University). (Janw.naert@ugent.be)

KARLA VANRAEPENBUSCH (°1986) studied history at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and museum studies at the Université de Neuchâtel in Switzerland. She is currently preparing a PhD thesis at the Study Centre War and Society (CegeSoma) and at the Université catholique de Louvain, in the framework of the Brain project of Belpo Recognition and Resentment : Experiences and Memories of the Great War in Belgium (Memex WW1). Her research, under the supervision of Chantal Kesteloot and Laurence van Ypersele, concerns the material memory traces of the First World War in Antwerp and Liège.

FLORENT VERFAILLIE (°1987) holds a Master in History (UCL) and in Political Science (University of Kent). He started a PhD at CegeSoma and UGent in 2014 on a social history of resistance and collaboration in Belgium during the First World War. His PhD takes part in the larger research project "The Great War from Below. Multiple Mobility and Cultural Dynamics in Belgium (1900-1930)" (<http://www.thegreatwarfrombelow.org/>).

### List of the Thirty-Four Doctoral Researchers and Their Research Projects

BOUCHAT Pierre (ULB - Memex WW1)

*Les représentations sociales de la Grande Guerre en Europe*

Directors : Olivier Klein (ULB) and Valérie Rosoux (UCL)

CHARON Arnaud (AGR/ULB - GWB)

*Les travailleurs forcés, déportés ou non, de la Première Guerre mondiale et leur impact sur la société belge (1914-1930)*

Director : Serge Jaumain (ULB)

CLAEYS Dries (KUL ICAG)

*Wereldoorlog I en wederopbouw. De reconstructie van platteland en landschap in Vlaanderen*

Director : Yves Segers (KUL ICAG) and Gert Verstraeten (KUL)

DECLERCQ Christophe (UA/University College London)

*Belgian refugees in Britain during the First World War, a cross-cultural study of identity in exile.*

Director : Charmian Brinson (Imperial College London), Co-directors: Nick Bosanquet (Imperial College London) & Emily Mayhew (Imperial College London)





DELHALLE Sophie (ULG)

*Les œuvres de bienfaisance et l'assistance publique dans la province de Liège pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*

DENDOOVEN Dominiek (UA/IFFM)

*Subaltern War Experiences in the First World War. Non-European involvement in Belgium and Northern France, 1914-1920*

Director : Marnix Beyen (UA)

DERUYTTER Barbara (UGent)

*Singing in times of war : a social history of norms and identification among the lower and middle classes during the First World War*

Director : Antoon Vrints (UGent)

DEVUYST Jolien (UGent/University of Birmingham)

*Refugee relief during the First World War : Belgian refugees in Birmingham (1914-1919).*

Director: Dr. Angelo Van Gorp (UGent), Co-director: Prof. Dr. Kevin Myers (University of Birmingham)

DRAPER Mario (University of Kent)

*The Belgian Army, Society and Military Cultures, 1830-1918*

FOX-GODDEN Tim (University of Kent)

*A Greater Memorial – the architecture of the IWGC, memory and the old Western Front*

Directors : Dr Timothy Brittain-Catlin & Mark Connelly

GENIN Vincent (ULG - Commémorer 14-18)

*Les juristes belges de droit international (1870-1940). Réseaux, vécus et mémoires au contact de la Première Guerre mondiale*

Director : Philippe Raxhon (ULG)

GODFROID Anne (ULB/RMA/RMAF)

*L'occupation belge de la Rhur : rive gauche du Rhin*

Directors : Pieter Lagrou (ULB) & Jean-Michel Sterkendries (RMA)

GRADITZKY Thomas (ULB)

*La contribution belge au développement et à l'interprétation du droit de l'occupation militaire de 1870 à 1950*

Directors : Pieter Lagrou (ULB) & Olivier Corten (ULB)

LAFOSSE Juliette (ULB - Commémorer 14-18)

*Les positions doctrinales des juristes belges autour de la Première Guerre mondiale*

Director : Thomas Berns (ULB)



LAUWERS Karen (UA)

*Democratisering van onderuit ? De impact van de Eerste Wereldoorlog op de directe interacties tussen volksvertegenwoordigers en 'gewone burgers' in België en Frankrijk, 1910-1930*

Director : Marnix Beyen (UA)

LEENDERS Gertjan (UGent)

*Verklikking in België tijdens de beide wereldoorlogen. Praktijken en percepties in een comparatief perspectief*

Director : Antoon Vrints (UGent)

LEONARD Matt (University of Bristol)

*An Archaeological and Anthropological Exploration of the Subterranean Worlds of The Western Front During the First World War*

MIGNON Nicolas (UCL)

*L'occupation belge de la Rhur : rive droite du Rhin*

Director : Laurence van Ypersele (UCL)

NAERT Jan (UGent)

*Burgemeesters en legitimiteit tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. De burgemeester als voeder, hoeder en vertegenwoordiger in bezet en bevrijd België & Frankrijk (1914-1921)*

Director : Antoon Vrints. Co-director : Nico Wouters (Cegesoma)

NGONGO Erika (Université Saint Louis)

*Le Congo et la Grande Guerre. Enjeux et mutations pour la colonisation belge (1914-1931)*

Director : Nathalie Toussignant (Université Saint-Louis). Co-director : Patricia Van Schuylenbergh (UCL/RMCA)

READ Philippa (University of Leeds)

*Classical Influences on Discourses of Female Heroism in First World War France & Belgium*

REZSÖHAZY Elise (UCL)

*Pénétrer les sociétés occupées : le contre-espionnage allemand sur le front ouest durant la Première Guerre mondiale*

Directors : Laurence van Ypersele (UCL) & Emmanuel Debruyne (UCL)

SIMOENS Tom (UGent/RMA)

*De transformatie van het Belgische leger tijdens de loopgravenoorlog*

Directors : Luc De Vos (RMA), Bruno De Wever (UGent). Co-director : Antoon Vrints

SPIJKERMAN Rose (UGent - Memex WW1)

*Notions of honour and shame among Belgian military during the First World War*

Directors : Antoon Vrints (UGent) & Olivier Luminet (UCL)



VAN DER FRAENEN Jan (UGent/RMAF)

*De dood aan het front : doden en gedood worden en het Belgische leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*

Directors : Antoon Vrints (UGent) & Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Penn State University)

VAN DER HAEGEN Aurélie (UCL)

*Mémoire communicative et transmission intergénérationnelle des souvenirs d'événements historiques.*

*Etude des processus émotionnels et communicationnels*

Director : Olivier Luminet (UCL)

VAN DIJCK Cedric (UGent)

*Modernism at the Front : Modernist Temporality in British War Journals and Magazine*

Directors : Marysa Demoor (UGent) & Sarah Posman (UGent)

VAN ETTERBEECK Myrthel (KUL/Odisee - Memex WW1)

*De representaties van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in de Franstalige en Nederlandstalige literatuur*

Directors : Elke Brems (KUL/Odisee) & Reine Meylaerts (KUL)

VANHEULE Katrin (KUL)

*Spionnen in de Grote Oorlog. De repressie van spionage voor de Duitse bezetter in België en Frankrijk*

*tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog – een vergelijkende studie*

Directors : Stephan Dusil (KUL) & Jos Monballyu (KUL)

VANRAEPENBUSCH Karla (UCL/Cegesoma - Memex WW1)

*Les traces mémorielles de la Grande Guerre dans les villes d'Anvers et de Liège*

Directors : Laurence van Ypersele (UCL) & Chantal Kesteloot (CegeSoma)

VAN WESEMAEL Fabian (UGent/UNamur - GWB)

*De sociale impact van de Eerste Wereldoorlog : veteranen*

Directors : Antoon Vrints (UGent) & Axel Tixhon (UNamur)

VERFAILLIE Florent (UGent/Cegesoma - GWB)

*L'impact social de la Première Guerre mondiale : 'résistants' et 'collaborateurs'*

Directors : Nico Wouters (CegeSoma) & Bruno De Wever (UGent)

VERPLAETSE Stephanie (UGent)

*Non-Invasive Landscape Archaeology of the Great War*

ZIAN Yasmina (ULB/Technische Universität Berlin)

*Impact de la guerre sur le regard porté sur les étrangers d'origine juive en Belgique 1900-1930*

Directors : Ulrich Wyrwa (Technische Universität Berlin), Werner Bergmann (Technische Universität Berlin) & Jean-Philippe Schreiber (ULB)

