

d'avoir donné une place centrale à certains témoignages et reconnaît « un tropisme bruxellois ». Il est vrai sans doute que des ressources régionales et locales sont moins accessibles.

La lecture de la partie I en particulier paraît par moment assez ardue. Cela tient sans doute au type de sources utilisées, comme des rapports ou des directives, l'utilisation de beaucoup de sources brutes et la rareté d'analyses préexistantes, à l'existence d'informations un peu éclatées à la suite de l'instabilité des succès locaux, à l'évolution du parcours des militants, au manque d'anecdotes accrocheuses. Cela provient surtout, me semble-t-il, de la matière elle-même, au contenu touffu: combat idéologique lié à des contenus et des stratégies mouvantes, relations complexes régnant dans le mouvement ouvrier, parcours individuels, le tout compliqué par les contextes politiques national et international et les relations de la JC avec le parti et l'Internationale.

La partie consacrée aux étudiants est d'une lecture plus fluide. Cela tient de nouveau aux sources, comprenant beaucoup de journaux et des archives personnelles, ainsi qu'à l'existence de récits déjà construits. Cela signifie des informations plus concrètes, plus colorées. Cela tient aussi à la matière et aux circonstances. Les informations sont plus concentrées sur le plan du lieu, essentiellement l'ULB, et en second plan les Universités de Gand et Liège et donc le propos est plus cohérent et moins éclaté. Les grands combats de l'antifascisme et de l'aide à l'Espagne – sans être dépourvus de conflits – se déroulent dans un cadre général plus harmonieux alliant étudiants et enseignants autour du CVIA.

Ce très bon ouvrage remplit un vide dans la connaissance de la place de la jeunesse au sein du communisme belge dans l'Entre-deux-guerres. Les lacunes au niveau des archives laissent la place à un certain nombre d'hypothèses. L'accessibilité

de certaines sources (en Russie et archives de la police) pourraient permettre d'affiner et de confirmer certains éléments. En tous cas, ce livre trouve sa place dans les études réalisées sur l'histoire du parti communiste de Belgique; il en complète et éclaire certains aspects.

Micheline Zanatta

BERNARD WILKIN, BOB MOORE

Escaping Nazi Europe: Understanding the Experiences of Belgian Soldiers and Civilians in World War II

Abingdon, Routledge, 2024, 184 p.

Shortly before returning from wartime exile in London, the Belgian government introduced a medal called the Escapees' Cross which serves as a kind of motif in Bernard Wilkin and Bob Moore's new study. It was intended to recognise a distinct group of people usually referred to as 'war escapees' (*évadés de guerre/oorlogsontsnapten*) whose determination to continue fighting in exile or in the resistance motivated them to undertake an 'escape'. Although it proved surprisingly difficult to come up with a workable legal definition of the term, 4.927 people successfully applied for the medal over the following decade (p. 165-6). This small number may account for the relative lack of interest scholars or the general public in Belgium have shown in the escapees' experiences which the authors contrast with 'extensively chronicled' escapes by downed Allied airmen (p. 7). The more apt comparison is surely with the *Engelandvaarders* in the Netherlands and the vastly more numerous *évadés de France* both of whom, unlike their Belgian counterparts, have already been the subjects of detailed research.¹

Escaping Nazi Europe sets out to "[chronicle] a multiplicity of escapes and evasions attempted by Belgians, both military and civilian" (p. 2). The focus is on the experience of the journeys themselves and, "(w)herever possible, the authors have tried to use the words of the men themselves,

1. The former are even commemorated by a special museum in Noordwijk, South Holland. In Dutch and French literature, see, for example, A. DESSING, *Tulpen voor Wilhelmina: De geschiedenis van de Engelandvaarders*, Amsterdam, 2004 and R. BELOT, *Aux frontières de la liberté. S'évader de France sous l'occupation*, Paris, 1998.

either in direct quotations or paraphrased, to present their version of events as they understood and recounted them" (p. 7). They draw on a rich array of accounts in memoirs and archival sources including, notably, testimonies filed by applicants for the Escapees' Cross held by the National Archives of Belgium. Although highlighting some fascinating cases, the book's self-conscious focus on personal narratives means it remains largely descriptive in nature. Only limited space is devoted to scrutinising the individuals' motivations and in attempting to contextualise the wider themes which emerge.

Much of the book is structured around various circumstances and the kinds of journeys undertaken by war escapees. Although the authors do not seek to order them in this way, these fall generally into three groups. The first is the example of the soldiers who fled to the United Kingdom amid the disintegration of the Belgian military in May and June 1940. The second were their less fortunate compatriots who became prisoners of war and who sought to escape from camps and work *Kommandos* situated in Nazi Germany and the occupied territories in Eastern Europe. The authors point out that such escapes were surprisingly rare (p. 59) and most simply sought to return to their homes. Space is also devoted to the experiences of those who were re-captured and sent to the 'punishment camp' at Rawa-Ruska. A separate and particularly interesting chapter is devoted to the unusual case of the prisoner of war André Depienne who decided to head eastwards after his escape from a farm in eastern Germany in April 1941. He not only remarkably survived Soviet captivity but was eventually able to enlist in Belgium's army-in-exile in the United Kingdom.

The third category covers former soldiers and civilians in German-occupied Belgium who sought to reach the continent's remaining neutral states such as Switzerland, Sweden and, above all, Spain. The authors rightly emphasise the perils such journeys often involved including, most notably, a prolonged period in the internment camp at Miranda de Ebro in north-eastern Spain. A chapter is also devoted to those detained in Vichy France

who were forced to serve in the Foreign Legion in French North Africa and the authors rightly remind us that, whatever their circumstances, war escapees ran huge personal risks. The book's 'epilogue' describes the search for postwar recognition through the National Union of War Escapees (*Union nationale des évadés de guerre/Nationaal Verbond der Oorlogsontnaptten*).

Although *Escaping Nazi Europe* provides a glimpse into some captivating personal stories and is an important reminder of a neglected dimension of Belgium's wartime history, it ultimately struggles with the heterogenous nature of its subject matter. The difficulty in creating a workable legal definition of 'war escapee' in the postwar years reflected the fact that this category aimed to encompass individuals who escaped from very different situations, sought to reach different and occasionally opposite destinations, and were guided by diverse motivations and understandings of the meanings of their actions. The book never engages fully with this complexity and the questions it raises about how such disparate stories of illegal movement should be situated in the wider history of the wartime period. Perhaps what emerges most strongly is how little is still known about the war escapees in general. *Escaping Nazi Europe* is a welcome contribution but much remains to be said.

G.C.P. Bud

NICO WOUTERS

Bezet bedrijf. De oorlogsgeschiedenis van de NMBS. De deportaties en een spoorwegmaatschappij tussen collaboratie en verzet

Lannoo, Tielt 2024, 496 p.

De Holocaust en het spoor zijn onverbiddeijk met elkaar verbonden sinds miljoenen Europese Joden per trein in doorgangs- en vernietigingskampen arriveerden. Deze zwarte bladzijde uit de geschiedenis van de 'nationale' spoorwegbedrijven is in de afgelopen jaren opnieuw ter discussie gesteld, wat in Frankrijk en Nederland resulteerde in herstelbetalingen voor slachtoffers en nabestaanden.

In dit kader besloten de Belgische Senaat en de FOD Mobiliteit om het Studiecentrum Oorlog en