Much adored kittens and unwanted cats [1]

Belgian refugees in England during World War One

Martine Vermandere

'Memories trigger warm feelings, while historical events leave us unmoved'. This quote from Rik Torfs, the rector of the Catholic University of Louvain, accurately reflects the basic assumption underlying the various projects for the wider public that Amsab-Institute of Social History (Amsab-ISH) has run over the last fifteen years.2 No wonder that the current project, Employed on the other side of the Channel. Belgian refugees in the UK during World War One, has been conceived along the same lines, i.e. to chart the testimonies of people both in Belgium and England and collect as many documents and photographs as possible. The latter will feature in a virtual exhibition by spring 1917. Our project partners include, among others, the Imperial War Museum, University College London, the Women's Library of the London School of Economics, the Manchester-based People's History Museum, the Flanders Field Museum and Familie- en Heemkunde Vlaanderen. We issued a joint call for testimonies, documents and photographs. And we held a storytelling day, at the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp and the People's History Museum in Manchester. On both occasions we have learned that the descendants of the refugees, as well as the descendants of the people who welcomed them, still have strong feelings about what happened at that time.3

Fleeing out of fear

People are leaving everywhere, facing an uncertain fate 4

Young and old, rich and poor, city dwellers and villagers, they fled their homes in great numbers from the rapidly advancing German troops between early August and early October 1914. At first, however, on hearing the news of the German invasion (4 August 1914), few people were willing to do so, as nobody had the faintest idea about the ordeal they were about to go through. Inhabitants of Liège even went to visit the area – the heights around the city – where there was active fighting. The exodus would take place in the ensuing weeks and months, when the occupying German forces started to bombard cities, burn houses and execute people. Rumours spread about the ruthless way in which German troops had operated in Visé and Tongeren. On 19 August the latter invaded Aarschot, using excessive force and responding with harsh reprisals against the population as they assumed they were facing 'franc-tireurs': 173 man and boys were executed. They set fire to houses and tortured civilians. In nearby Louvain many people fled the city on 27 August. And so did almost all inhabitants of Mechelen (55 000 out of 60 000), after the city had been bombarded on 27 september 1914. Pictures of these bombardments appeared in the newspapers, refugees spoke of horrendous acts committed by the Germans and false rumours were circulating. This fuelled fears of a full-scale war and prompted enormous numbers of people to flee their homes. It is the most convincing explanation for the massive scale of the exodus.5 Many fled to Antwerp, as everybody assumed the fortified city could not be captured. But the city was captured on 10 October; and so was Ghent on 12 October and Bruges on 14 October. Winston Churchill, the then Minister of the Marine ('First Lord of the Admiralty'), argued that civilians had to stay in occupied territory, as 'useless mouths'to feed for the occupying forces.

In the meantime, many refugees had gathered in Ostend, where conditions were worsening by the day. Scores of them tried to force their way onto the ferries bound for England. Eventually, they jumped into dozens of small boats to escape. The Germans marched into Ostend on 15 October 1914. One and a half million people had successfully fled the country in two months time. Some of them to France and England, the majority to the Netherlands, from where many of them managed to cross the Channel.

The stream of refugees into the UK continued throughout the war. However, the numbers reaching the UK from France dropped sharply in the ensuing months, while those reaching the UK from the Netherlands did not show a significant fall. The number of refugees in the UK was estimated at about

250 000 by the end of 1915. The overwhelming majority of them (95%) were Belgian citizens. This figure was revised down to about 170 000 early in 1917, as many well-to-do families had chosen to return to Belgium, because they risked losing their home following the introduction of a tax on unoccupied homes. Men made up 33,5% of that figure, women 37,5% and children 29%. Probably, the UK hosted about 150 000 Belgian refugees by the end of the war.vi About three quarters of them came from Flanders, and over 40% from the Antwerp province. These Belgian 'aliens' – a common name for foreigners in the UK at the time – were mainly housed in South East England and the London region.

(they were) brought to a magnificent castle along the banks of the mighty river. Warships, Congo river boats, "Saint Anneke boat" and sailing ships were about to take them to England. Moeike and especially uncle Nare were delighted they could board so quickly, but Zjefke felt disappointed. He had hoped to board one of these super luxury boats of the Red Star Line company… Now they walked up a gangplank that was swaying dangerously, onto a cargo ship that was already packed with emigrants and where it was impossible to find a place to sit.'7 Boarding in Antwerp, 1914 (Iconographic Collection, Public Record Office, Brussels)

Some refugees are more equal than others

The first Belgian refugees arrived in England in mid-August 1914. They did not come in large numbers, so initially the authorities had no serious problems in dealing with them. A War Refugees Committee (WRC) was established by Queen Elisabeth in August 1914. Refugees were picked up at the port of Antwerp and brought to Tilbury six times a week, thanks to the British government. And London high society set up a project to welcome a few hundred Belgian refugees. Unlike France, where the authorities themselves hosted as many

people as possible, Victorian England had a long tradition of philanthropy and asked private charities for help, involving mainly female volunteers. Lord Victor Lytton collected funds from the entrepreneurs who had participated in the Brussels and Ghent world exhibitions. And Lady Flora Lugard, a British journalist, used the address list of the Ulster Unionist Council, which had been instrumental in hosting Irish women and children following the unrest in Ireland. The list would be most helpful for the War Refugees Committee as well. WRC would coordinate a wide network of voluntary relief work throughout the war, welcoming and hosting thousands of Belgian refugees, and securing work for them.

Although ferry ports and the reception centres in Folkestone and London were thronged with refugees in October 1914, the British population was well prepared to cope with the influx. Lots of people offered to house refugees in their homes, to such an extent even that supply exceeded demand. About 2500 reception committees were set up. The British also felt a responsibility to their community. People who could not take up arms against the Germans, thus managed to participate in the war effort. However, there was another reason why there was this massive response: many people were convinced that the war would be over by Christmas.

'A huge crowd had gathered to welcome us. It took the scouts a lot of effort to push people backwards, but with the help of their long sticks they managed to do so and cleared some space for us to pass.8 The reception of Belgian refugees in Rhyl (Wales) (Belgian refugees project Rhyl)

Although the British had initially responded in a very positive way to the influx of Belgians, solidarity sometimes failed to materialize. Those who had been more than willing to host protestant women and children from Ireland, were much more reluctant to do so when it came to housing large, catholic Belgian families in their home. Hospitality was a bit less generous by the end of 1914 and the authorities had to provide for accommodation via the Local Government Board (LGB). The London Metropolitan Asylum Board was given the task to convert public buildings into reception centres for refugees. Halls that were normally hosting major events, such as Alexandra Palace, and Earl's Court, were now used to receive refugees. Either they were turned into transit camps, or families took up permanent residence there. Large reception centres were also seen as a means of preventing friction with the local community. On the other hand, the British were absolutely astonished to see that cohabitation of Flemish and Walloon families caused great tension.

Moreover, members of the upper classes were separated from the other refugees right from the start, in Folkestone. Refugees that were socially well-off were given a rose card, which meant that they would be hosted in the best possible conditions. The others were given a blue card, which entitled them to free transport to London, where they would be transferred to large dormitories at Alexandra Palace.

Religious communities and professions were also organizing their own aid effort. The Jewish community of London welcomed 10 000 Jewish refugees, mainly Belgians, in Poland Street, in Soho. The reception of Jewish refugees was managed by Ernest and Otto Schiff, who would also take care of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Also, doctors, lawyers, architects and journalists pooled their efforts to help their colleagues from the continent.

At first, the English were quite amused and puzzled by Belgian habits. This is what The Times wrote on the occasion of Queen Mary's visit to Alexandra Palace: 'Women aren't wearing any hats, but a shawl to cover their head and hair when it rains or feels cold'.9 However, it did not take long before they felt irritation growing in them as refugees did not speak their language and had eccentric eating habits. While the Belgians complained about the food (it was tasteless), the omnipresent tea and the large amounts of mutton and porridge the English were consuming, the latter were a bit shocked that the Belgians ate horse meat and even gave beer to their children. Apart from cultural differences, social class mattered as well, especially when Flemish working-class and peasant families cohabited with middle- and upper class English families. As the former were not familiar with English customs , a real 'window war' broke out. English families used to make sure that their house was properly ventilated by keeping the windows open, while Belgian ones felt this had become an obsession. Consequently, the latter refused to open the windows for fear of catching a cold.10

Also, the English had to face rising food prices in the winter of 1914. They had to live on a smaller income and suffered a growing number of casualties. So, when some Belgian workers complained about the amount of money they had to pay for the provision of housing, clothing and maintenance, their hosts got irritated even more as the refugees seemed to be playing the victim card.

Fight or go?

There was another controversial issue, i.e. conscription. When the Belgian government, on 26 October 1914, decreed that all single men between 18 and 30 were to go to the recruitment offices of the Belgian army in the UK and enlist, the English responded positively. But when the English Military Service Bill was introduced in January 1916, providing for the conscription of single men aged 18-41, and the Bill was extended to married men in May 1916, the English branded it as unfair. To avoid a flare-up of animosity between Belgian en British citizens, the Belgian bill was amended along the lines of the British Bill on 21 July 1916.11

The Belgians were accused of relying too much on charity, but when they did work, they were scolded for being 'job snatchers'. Some Belgians had taken a (low-paid) job immediately upon arrival (hop reapers, domestic servants). Metal workers in Birmingham called a strike in autumn 1914, because they were not eager to welcome refugees at their workplace. Eventually, Belgians had to register at the Labour Exchange to get a job in order to make sure that hiring them did not prove detrimental to the employment of British workers. However, unemployment had fallen dramatically by 1915, to the extent that companies such as Rolls Royce and Vicker started hiring Belgian engineers and skilled workers, as their personnel had massively volunteered for service in the British army.

The great turning point, however, came with the 'Shell Crisis' , when the country was rocked by a scandal following the publication of an article in The Times (14 May1915) saying that British troops at the front were short of ammunition. The production of ammunition got an enormous boost from then on, as a Ministry of Munitions was established, headed by the future prime minister Lloyd George. Refugees were now massively employed at munitions factories, contributing to the war effort and the war economy, while becoming financially independent. Also, the English were actively trying to recruit from abroad and especially the Netherlands, provided workers had the appropriate skills. And 'hors-combats' (i.e. soldiers who had been declared unfit for service) were retrained as munitions workers. Conscription had been introduced, but in practice everybody who had a job could stay in England.

Belgian and British authorities also agreed to establish Belgian munitions factories, so that Belgian workers would not mix (too much) with British ones. The most well-known examples were the National Projectile Factory in Birtley, also known as Elisabethville, and Kryn & Lahy in Letchworth. Relatively large Belgian communities came into existence in the immediate vicinity of these factories. Elisabethville had nearly 7 000 inhabitants in 1918, i.e. two to three times as much as Birtley itself. There was a strong sense of community in Elisabethville, as people had their own shops, brass bands, sport clubs and theatre societies.

Belgian women too were employed in the war industries. 700 out of nearly 2 000 workers were women – the so-called 'munitionettes' – at the Belgian munitions factory at Richmond-Twickenham (owned by the French industrialist Charles Pelabon, who had run a factory at Ruisbroek, near Brussels, before the war). The Belgian Federation of Metal Workers(CMB), a socialist trade union, called for equal pay for women right from the start of its activities in England. However, its main aim was not to narrow the pay gap between men and women, but to maintain a high level of male employment and safeguard (better-paid) jobs. Together with the English Workers' Union, CMB was particularly helpful in providing advice about English laws and customs, and workers could rely on it for linguistic support or transferring money to Belgium. Of course, workers turned to the unions for the usual reasons, i.e. when they lost their job, suffered injuries from work-related accidents or got ill. Proper health care became indeed very important in 1917, when the Spanish flu pandemic swept the country that year.

The English trade unions promised to abandon strike action for the duration of the war as of February 1915. The Munitions of War Act forbade strikes and lockouts and established Munitions Tribunals, which included representatives of the employers and the unions and arbitrated in social disputes. Also, CMB attempted to address the sharp divide between the UK and Belgium concerning social legislation, as the former was about 10 to 20 years ahead of the latter. The Belgians, working long hours and earning less than their English fellow workers, did not always realize that they were endangering the achievements of the British unions. So, CMB was constantly taking legal action against Belgian employers for not observing British law. The Birtley workers' revolt on 21 December 1916 serves as an illustration of the sense of frustration felt by Belgian workers. Unlike their British counterparts, Belgian 'hors combats' continued to be subjected to military law (and military discipline) at all times; they were obliged to wear a uniform and not allowed to go to pubs. If they did not comply with the rules, they risked having to pay a fine or – worst case scenario – being sent to the front. Also, in autumn 1917, the Ministry of Munitions intervened with the Belgian authorities on behalf of the trade unions, trying to persuade them to intervene with the management of the Belgian plant in Birmingham to raise salaries. So, step by step, British and Belgian workers were treated more equally. And this proved to be a great help in overcoming stereotypes about Belgian workers.12

'Mother cooked and we went to work every day, willingly'. Clementine De Leender was a fifteen-year-old girl in 1916. She went to work in a London sewing room. Her inheritance included this picture (private collection Gaby Wittockx)

Thinking about the future

Three out of ten registered Belgian refugees were younger than sixteen in 1916. The majority of them went to Roman Catholic, as well as Anglican and Protestant primary schools. These children were likely to be profoundly affected by living in exile and this was giving the Belgian authorities serious cause for concern. They feared that they would fall behind children in Belgium and would no longer fit in at Belgian schools after the war. So, the Belgian government in Le Havre led the effort to preserve their mother tongue and to evoke warm patriotic feelings. As of 1915, it granted subsidies to set up Belgian schools. More than a 100 schools were established in this way. The large majority of them were led by priests, since many of them had also sought refuge in England. They addressed all sorts of problems, but above all they were concerned with keeping alive the Catholic faith and pledging loyalty to the Belgian king.8

'Monsignor De Wachter transformed himself into an apostle of Christ when it came to helping these Belgian children, who had been left behind and whose faith was under threat by attending non-Catholic schools'.

Book dedicated to Monsignor De Wachter, representative of Cardinal Mercier in the UK (Archive of the Archbishop of Mechelen)

Artists and writers also made an appeal to Belgians' patriotism. Emile Verhaeren, a Belgian poet, toured all over the UK , lecturing about the Belgian cause. A series of postcards were designed with excerpts from his poems. Verhaeren had the greatest admiration for King Albert and it showed in 1914, when *The Daily Telegraph* published *King Albert's Book*, in which statesmen, churchmen, authors, artists and composers paid tribute to the King of Belgium.15

Paul Lambotte, Director-General of the Department of Fine Arts at the Belgian Ministry of Sciences and Arts, was a key figure in promoting Belgian art and culture during the war. The Belgian government had taken up temporary residence at the Brown's Hotel in London, from where Lambotte organized several Exhibitions of Belgian Art in order to raise money for 'Poor little Belgium'. He also wrote a series of articles and books, including *Belgian Art in Exile* (1916). Famous artists, such as Emile Claus, Gustave Van de Woestyne, Valerius De Saedeleer and George Minne, stayed in the UK during World War One. Except for Claus, they all ended up in Aberystwyth (Wales), where they were hosted by Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, heirs to a Victorian industrialist. In an attempt to promote the arts in Wales, the latter hoped for artistic cross-pollination. However, their enthusiasm was short-lived, as the sisters decided to enlist as volunteers and leave for France.16 Some cultural exchange had nevertheless taken place, as the daughter of Valerius De Saedeleer,

Elisabeth, established a famous carpet factory upon her return to Belgium. While being in Aberystwyth, she had been able to perfect her weaving skills, as she had come under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, an aesthetic movement which had developed in the British Isles and stood for traditional craftsmanship. She became one of the first female lecturers at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels La Cambre. Also, exile offered an opportunity for some refugees to develop and evolve as artists, e.g. Constant Permeke, who became an expressionist painter. And even Emile Claus, who was well established as a painter, seemed rejuvenated by his stay in the UK.

With respect to the cultural discussion, there was also a shift of focus to the reconstruction effort in Belgium and the way to tackle the country's housing shortage. The International Garden Cities and Town Planning Association decided to organize a conference about it. It promoted the ideas of Ebenezer Howard, who saw the garden city as a means to solve the housing crisis. The Garden City Movement in Belgium had been only moderately successful before the war, in comparison to Germany, France, the USA and Russia. Nevertheless, the Belgian Minister for Agriculture and Public Works, Joris Helleputte, was presiding over the conference in February 1915. In addition, garden city tours were offered to Belgian architects; and they could attend lectures and training courses. Belgian architects also went to Letchworth, one of the two existing garden cities in Britain(many Belgians had temporarily settled to the west of the garden city). Raphaël Verwilghen, an engineer at the Ministry for Agriculture and Public Works, was appointed to improve prospects for garden city projects in Belgium. He championed the cause of the Garden City Movement and favoured cooperative ownership (i.e. by the workers) . After the war, several Belgian city garden projects drew on British experiences for inspiration.xvii

'Soon after the Belgians came, the Council started building houses for them to the west of the Garden City, without much regard to planning. Haste, of course, was the order of the day. We called this part of our city 'Belgian town'.(…)The town became dirty-looking and untied with bits of paper lying all over the place.' 17 Garden City Letchworth. The Belgian inhabitants worked at Kryn &Lahy Metal Works (private collection Nelly Roosen)

When the war ended, most refugees lost their job. The repatriation process, paid for by the British government, was expected to take several months, but it did not go smoothly, because of the Spanish flu and the very harsh winter. Also, many refugees did not relish the prospect of returning to a land now in ruins and facing serious shortages. The first groups of Belgians that were being repatriated, left mid-December 1918. For many of them, it was heart-breaking to leave everything behind. But not everybody returned to Belgium. According to a census that was taken in 1921, the number Belgians in the UK had risen by about 5 000 in comparison with the previous census in 1911. However, one can safely assume that many more Belgians had decided to stay in the UK.

Upon arriving in Belgium, refugees were not always treated kindly. They often found themselves branded cowards. Although they had contributed to the war effort as munitions workers, they did not feel tempted to share their experiences with soldiers who had barely left the trenches or people who had suffered during the German occupation. However, they valued the English language, continued to love a cup of tea and were committed Anglophiles for the rest of their lives. Moreover, they passed that on to their children. This is probably the logical explanation for the fact that one hundred years later so many descendants feel that many questions have remained unanswered. And that is also why our project includes detailed instructions for those who want to look for these answers, see: http://www.belgianrefugees14-18.be/index.php/sources.

1 Arthur MARWICK, *The Deluge* (Second Edition), London: The Bodley Head, 1965, p. 84: 'As the months wore on many an unfortunate Belgian found himself in the position of the much adored kitten which has grown into an unwanted cat.' Thanks are due to Christophe Declercq for initiating this project, reading my manuscript and providing source material.

2 Preface by Rik Torfs in: André VAN AERSCHOT, *Zjefke in de grote oorlog. Het leven van Haachtse, Rotselaarse en Wakkerzeelse vluchtelingen tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Engeland*, Brussel: Kaaitheater, KU Leuven, Trevor vzw, 2015. All royalties from this booklet go to Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen.

3 For more information about this project and the testimonies, see:

www.belgianrefugees14-18.be

4 Verse from Emile Verhaeren, *Les Ailes rouges de la guerre*, 1916.

5 The invaluable reference book on this issue is the doctoral dissertation by Michael AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas*, Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2014.

6 T. T. S. DE JASTRZEBSKI, The Register of Belgian Refugees. In: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 79(III/1916)2, pp. 133-158.

7 André VAN AERSCHOT, *Zjefke in de grote oorlog[…]*, p. 41.

8 Clementine DE LEENDER, *Oorlogsjaren van een dertienjarig meisje*, Poëzie Aarschot, 2014, p. 26.

9 *The Times*, 29/09/1914, quoted in: Dirk MUSSCHOOT, *Belgen maken bommen*, Tielt: Lannoo, 2016, p. 11.

10 Michael AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil […]*, pp. 172-173.

11 Michael AMARA, Piet CHIELENS, Kristin VAN DAMME, *Exodus: Belgen op de vlucht 1914-1918*, Gent: Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée, 2014, p. 28.

12 Michael AMARA, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil […]*, pp. 190-231.

13 Christophe DECLERCQ, Belgische vluchtelingen en onderwijs in het Verenigd Koninkrijk. Een uitheemse war effort op de Britse schoolbanken. In: Robert BARBRY e.a. (red.), *Naar school, zelfs in oorlogstijd. Belgische kinderen lopen school, 1914-1919*, Ieper: Onderwijsmuseum Ieper, 2015, pp. 25-43.

14 De oorlog is verklaard. De Eerste Wereldoorlog in de Kronieken van de Ursulinen van Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Waver, translated from French by Maurice Van de Putte and prefaced and annotated by Mario Baeck. In: *Mededelingen van het Jozef van Rompay-Davidsfonds-Genootschap vzw*, XXVI, O.-L.-V.-Waver, 2014.

15 Rik HEMMERIJCKX, Emile Verhaeren, een dichter in de Groote Oorlog. In: *Zacht Lawijd*, XIII(2014)3, pp. 169-189.

16 Caterina VERDICKT, Kroniek van de Vlaamse kunstenaars in Wales. In: Oliver FAIRCLOUGH e.a. (red.), *Kunst in ballingschap. Vlaanderen, Wales en de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Gent: Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 2002, pp. 53-78.

17Pieter UYTTENHOVE, Een nieuwe stedenbouw voor een modern België. Internationale relaties tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. In: Pieter UYTTENHOVE, *Stadland België. Hoofdstukken uit de geschiedenis van de stedenbouw*, A&S/Books, 2011, pp.73-145

18 Ethel A. HENDERSON, *The ideals of Letchworth the first garden city*, [1970], pp. 88, 90.