

## Belgian Refugees in Britain

1914-1919

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[ CHRISTOPHE DECLERCO ]

When Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914 and stories about atrocities by the German troops quickly spread, many Belgians fled their homes. Eventually, one out of five Belgians, some 1.5 million, sought refuge abroad. Initially more than a million went to the Netherlands, but by the end of the war barely 100,000 Belgian refugees were still in exile there. (1) About 325,000 refugees went to France, most of whom stayed there throughout the war, in part because the Belgian government in exile was located at Le Havre. Roughly a quarter of a million Belgians crossed the Channel during the war years. (2) Other destinations were Switzerland, Spain, Cuba, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Only a few academic studies have uncovered anything about this little-known mass migration. (3) However, with the Centenary of the First World War approaching, the topic is receiving increasing attention.

### From barbarism to safe haven

In the atmosphere of anti-German sentiment that followed the invasion of Belgium, most stories about German atrocities went to print uncorroborated in the British newspapers of the time. The alleged witness reports about German brutality sent shivers down the entire British society. On 16 September, Vera Brittain noted in her diary that 'the terrible stories of atrocities by Germans ... in Belgium' continued to come. (4) The atrocity stories were officialised in 1915 by the Committee on Alleged German Outrages in a report that is also known as the Bryce Report. This report concluded that during the invasion of Belgium, German forces had been guilty of widespread sadistic outrages. (5)

The first Belgians reached the southern ports of England in late August 1914. Initially in small numbers and mostly at their own expense, they moved inland and settled, usually in and around London. Jules Persyn, a Flemish literary critic of the time, and his family of eight headed for Ostend towards the end of August. Persyn had taken the family of Alfons Van de Perre, a Belgian MP, with him. On 30 August, they left for Folkestone at 11am and arrived in London at 7pm. (6) In the space of just a few weeks, the numbers of Belgians arriving



in England increased dramatically. On 15 October, the day Ostend fell, an estimated 26,000 Belgians arrived in Folkestone alone. The ports of the southeast acted as a transition area: from there most Belgians were sent to dispersal centres in London, such as Alexandra Palace and Earls Court, and were allocated to a local community anywhere in Britain that had volunteered to host them.

As no official registration system was in place until early December 1914, no exact figures exist. Numbers range from 211,000 to 265,000. One of the official reports of the time mentioned the number as 225,572. However, this did not include Belgian soldiers who convalesced in Britain. Also, because the spelling of Belgian names was often difficult for British administrators, many entries were in fact duplicates. Arguably the most detailed overview of the Belgians in Britain was produced by T.T.S. de Jastrzebski, a Belgian statistician. In January 1916, he published a paper for the British Royal Statistical Society (7), in which he stated that 91,000 of the Belgians were under 25 years old. 40% of the refugees had come from the province of Antwerp. A total of 67.2% spoke Dutch, 18.3% spoke French. The remaining 19% of refugees had come from the province of Brabant (Brussels and 'martyr cities' such as Louvain, Aarschot, etc.), assessing language use for that area was difficult to gauge.

October 1914: Belgians sought refuge wherever they could. They would arrive some place and soon move on somewhere else. Here the SS La Pallice arrives at La Rochelle (author's collection)

## Location, allocation and relocation

During the war, more than 2,500 local Belgian refugee committees were formed. The central organisation was an effort shared by the newly established War Refugees Committee and the existing Local Government Board. The Belgians did not rely on British charity alone, official bodies such as the Belgian Legation in London and the Comité Officiel Belge worked alongside the British organisations. Equally pivotal to the well-being of the significant Belgian community in Britain were the charity events organised jointly by the Belgians and British.

One such occasion was the Emile Verhaeren celebration, held on 3 March 1917 and organised by the British Royal Society of Literature. Distinguished British



Postcard of Belgian refugees 'Driven from a Belgian village'. Notice that the group concerns an entire family, including the men and boys (author's collection)

men of letters such as Robert Bridges, Edmund Gosse and Thomas Hardy sat alongside Belgian authors such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Henri Davignon and Emile Cammaerts. In the many cultural circles, especially those in London, the Flemish/Dutch – Walloon/French differentiation seemed much less of an issue than among the working class and peasants who had taken refuge in Britain. Using English as a relay language, possible friction was already negated beforehand by offering official information in three languages. Belgians also enjoyed a true exile press, in which *L'Indépendance Belge* served the francophone refugees and *De Stem Uit België* those refugees who spoke Flemish/Dutch.

Because of the reception and accommodation by the British, Belgian refugees in Britain were able to continue their lives pretty much as they would have done at home, which contrasted starkly with the refugees in the Netherlands, most of whom lived in camps. In addition, as the Belgian men were not conscripted for most of the duration of their exile, theirs was not a story of absent fathers or grandfathers either. However, the Belgian 'able-bodied men', those who could enlist and join the forces at the front, did pose a problem.

### **A British shell crisis leads to a Belgian solution**

With the war going on longer than anticipated, the initial wave of empathy for Gallant Little Belgium and the refugees waned. Friction arose within the host society. The different habits and customs of the Belgians caused many arguments. Women did not wear hats in public and alcohol consumption happened out in the open. However, that was nothing compared to the 'barbaric' habit of eating horse meat. This met with a wall of disapproval from the British. In Birtley, a Belgian labour colony just south of Gateshead, the Belgians of Elisabethville had at their disposal running water and electricity, whereas the local population did not. In the spring of 1915, pressure on local housing provision in Fulham even triggered a true anti-Belgian riot by local people.

One of the dormitories in Alexandra Palace, London, *The Times History of the War*, 1915, vol. IV, p.471



With nearly half of the entire group of Belgians in Britain under 25, the issue arose of able young men. Anywhere Belgians settled in Britain, the local people sent their men to the front, whereas Belgian families arrived and most of their able men remained on British soil. References to sentiments of discontent increased in number in the British press. Official organisations and cultural patrons continued to organise charity events, but across Britain many local communities became increasingly disgruntled.

Strangely enough, it was a British military crisis at the French front that saved the day for the Belgian exiles in Britain. In May 1915, a substantial lack of explosives was reported in *The Times*. This eventually led to the downfall of the Asquith Cabinet and the installation of a coalition government with the Liberal Lloyd George as Minister of Munitions. The solution to the problem of able Belgians was found in their employment in the war industry. The presence of existing factories such as Vickers or emerging munitions factories such as Armstrong-Whitworth in Birtley created labour opportunities for tens of thousands of Belgians. In fact, able men were brought from the Netherlands even. Large local Belgian communities, of several thousand refugees each, emerged in places like Dartford, Richmond, Letchworth, Barrow-in-Furness and Birtley, Gateshead.

## Education in exile

Another major issue that needed a well-structured solution was the education of the Belgian refugee children. With the sustained support of the Catholic clergy and financial backing by local authorities, the Belgians were able to develop a system of education in exile. There were various reasons for establishing Belgian schools for the refugee children and not having them join local British schools. Not only were differences in learning programmes between British and Belgian schools substantial, the language issue convoluted any possible incorporation of Belgian school education into the British one. Moreover, the

Catholic Church viewed proper Belgian education as a means of keeping their pupils away from the influence of the Anglican Church.

In August 1916, elementary education for Belgian refugee children was in place in 70 schools, in which 4,500 pupils were taught. The network of schools increased in size and one year later 7,000 pupils were being taught in 111 schools. (8) The 'Gesticht van het Heilig Hart', Tulse Hill, London, was a secondary school for Belgian boys, mirroring the bilingual situation in Belgium: 48 boys were taught in Dutch and 97 in French. St Mary's in Glasgow had 361 boys and girls attending by mid-1918, over 60% of whom came from the Antwerp-Mechelen-Lier area. Despite the reservations of the Catholic clergy, most Belgian refugee children were successfully incorporated into the British education system. The number of Belgian refugee children admitted to elementary British schools came to approximately 30,000.

The school year 1918-1919 did not end with the Armistice. In fact, the majority of Belgian children continued their education in exile well after 11 November 1918. With the return of most Belgian refugees organised for early spring 1919, most schools remained open until as late as Easter 1919. The Belgian schools that kept classes running into 1919 were no longer funded by the British and subsequently received subsidies from the Belgian government, which had returned to Brussels.

Belgian refugees and British institutions of higher education also added to the history of education in exile. Early in September 1914, William Osler, the renowned Canadian scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, had initiated the effort to have Belgian professors come to Oxford with their families. Among them was the well-known historian Leon Van der Essen. One of the Belgian students in Oxford was the author Jozef Muls. In Cambridge, an association of Belgian professors was formed. The group offered many lectures to both British and Belgian students. Other universities also helped Belgian refugee students and usually waived fees, as they did at Birkbeck College, London, for example.



André Cluysenaar,  
La Grande Bretagne  
Accueille Les Réfugiés  
Belges, plate from *A Book of  
Belgium's Gratitude*, London,  
John Lane, 1916, p.ii

## In the minds of the literati

The role and position of literature during the First World War has been the scope of numerous publications. With regard to the Belgian refugees, however, the difference could not be bigger. There has been no real output on the theme of Belgian exiles so far. And yet a whole pedigree of cross-cultural influences can be traced.

Emile Cammaerts, a Belgian who had come to Britain in the years before the war and who had married the Shakespearean actress Tita Brand, published several volumes of poetry, always translated by his wife, in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Observer*. Not only did Cammaerts befriend G.K. Chesterton, one of Cammaerts' other relations, Edward Elgar, set one of Cammaerts' poems, *Carillon*, to music.

Before Virginia and Leonard Woolf moved to Hogarth House in Richmond, Virginia rented rooms overlooking the Green in Richmond from a Mrs Le Grys. In her diaries Woolf wrote about the dietary habits and noises produced by refugees visiting the house. In his letters to Forrest Reid, E.M. Forster expressed his amazement on how much Jules Quilley, the Belgian refugee he had taken into his house, could eat. Maria Nys, another refugee, became a housemaid at Garsington Manor first and a marginal figure of the Bloomsbury group next. Immediately after the war she married Aldous Huxley. Lalla Vandervelde, the wife of the Belgian politician Emile Vandervelde, befriended W.B. Yeats, H.G. Wells and G.B. Shaw.

The names of authors and artists involved was virtually endless, not least because Charles Masterman, a close friend of Winston Churchill, had called for dozens of writers to contribute to the war effort by publishing pamphlets and

Advertisements on page 12 of De Stem Uit België, Friday 25 January 1918: The horse meat trade clearly set the Belgian butchers in exile apart from the British butchers (author's collection)

12 (1902) DE STEM UIT BELGIË. Registered at G.P.O. as a Newspaper. Vrijdag, 25 Januari, 1918.

Telephone: Oldbury 79. Telegrams: "Kraaken, Oldbury."

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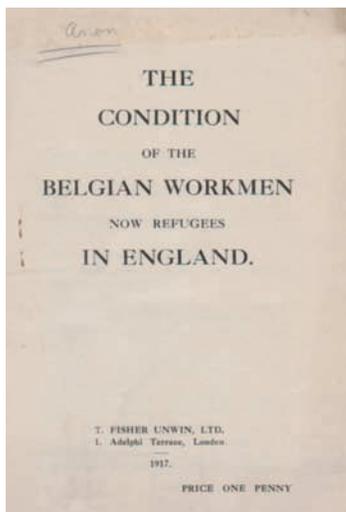
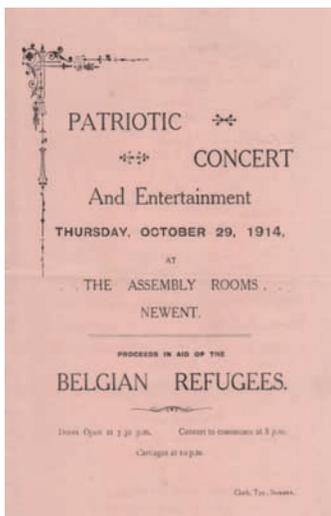
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including a pro-war tone in their publications. This War Propaganda Bureau is also known as Wellington House. Several of the Masterman authors contributed to the many gift books such as *King Albert's Book*, *Queen Mary's Gift Book* and *The Book of Belgium's Gratitude*. The proceeds of each of these publications went at least partly and often entirely to the distress relief of Belgian refugees in Britain.

One author who did not contribute was W.B. Yeats. After he was asked by Henry James to contribute to a gift book compiled by Edith Wharton, he first



Cover page of a booklet produced for a charity event in Newent, Wales, proceeds were in aid of the Belgian refugees (author's collection)

Throughout the war, the refugees formed part of a propaganda battle between Britain and Germany. This leaflet, *The Condition of the Belgian Workmen now Refugees in England*, was one of the many publications, providing proof that Belgians were treated well in Britain (author's collection)

declined with the cynical 'On being asked to write a war poem' and wrote 'Easter 1916' next. (10) On 23 March 1916, *The Times Literary Supplement* published a posthumous essay by Henry James, virtually the last thing he wrote, on the subject of Belgian refugees. James regularly visited convalescent Belgian soldiers at Crosby Hall, adjacent to his Chelsea residence.

Strangely enough, the most renowned literary merit and legacy of the Belgian refugees is a fictitious character by Agatha Christie. She had finalised her character of Inspector Poirot after becoming acquainted with Belgian refugees and treating wounded Belgian soldiers in Torquay Town Hall.

## Upon return

Even though the war dragged on for more than four years and despite strained resources, most Belgians had a source of income as a result of their work in the British war industry. When the war ended in November 1918, however, the Belgians were not immediately sent back. The British government was more concerned with bringing their own armed forces back first. In addition, the winter of 1918/1919 was a harsh one and Spanish influenza was a major issue too. The organised return of Belgians would last well into March 1919. The first to return were Belgians from the factories in Birtley. They were deemed skilled enough to help rebuild Belgium's destroyed infrastructure. Upon return, 'British Belgians' were often looked at with contempt, as if they had been traitors, leaving their fellow countrymen alone under German occupation. And yet, other than those Belgians who had been forced to work in Germany, it can be argued that those who went to Britain worked hardest during the war. The fact that they might not have suffered the most can be seen at the start of the Second World War, when the government no longer went into exile in Le Havre but headed straight for London. (11)



Pupils of the Belgian school in Letchworth, where a community of refugees resided around the Belgian Kryn and Lahy steel factory (Varlez 1917, author's collection (9))

The legacy of the Belgians in Britain during World War I is more than a pathway into World War II. Today many sites, memorials and gratitude plaques commemorate the Belgians in Britain. Lasting relations between host families and their guests continued for decades too. With over 5,000 Belgians staying in Britain officially, it can be argued that more unofficial Belgian ancestry can be traced as well. Anecdotal evidence of the 'long lost great-uncle in Glasgow', the illegitimate child from Cardiff that was adopted into a well-off family, all prove that there is still so much more to uncover. ■



Everyman's Special Belgian Relief Number, November 1914, London, Wyman&Sons  
The issue included contributions from authors such as H.A.L. Fisher, Maurice Maeterlinck, G.B. Shaw, Hilaire Belloc and Emile Cammaerts

By THOMAS HARDY  
SONNET ON THE BELGIAN EXPATRIATION

*I dreamt that people from the Land of Chimes  
Arrived one autumn morning with their bells,  
To hoist them on the towers and citadels  
Of my own country, that the musical rhymes*

*Rung by them into space at measured times  
Amid the market's daily stir and stress,  
And the night's empty starlit silentness,  
Might solace souls of this and kindred climes.*

*Then I awoke : and lo, before me stood  
The visioned ones, but pale and full of fear ;  
From Bruges they came, and Antwerp, and Ostend,*

*No carillons in their train. Vicissitude  
Had left these tinkling to the invaders' ear,  
And ravaged street, and smouldering gable-end.*

The chimes were mentioned in a poem by Thomas Hardy too, written especially for the publication of King Albert's Book, 1914, page 21 (author's collection).

## NOTES

- (1) For an analysis of the Belgians in the Netherlands during the First World War, see Evelyn de Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten. Vluchtelingen en krijgsgevangenen in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Zaltbommel, Europese Bibliotheek, 2000, 464p.
- (2) For a comprehensive appreciation of the British politics behind the British distress relief for Belgians in Britain, see Peter Cahalan, *Belgian refugee relief in England during the Great War*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1982, 552 p. The PhD thesis that lay at the basis of this book can be found through McMaster University's Digital Commons, <http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/opendissertations/717/>
- (3) For a comparative history of Belgians in these three main destinations, see Michaël Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale; France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-bas 1914-1918*, Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2008, 422p.
- (4) Vera Brittain. *Chronicle of Youth, Great War Diary 1913-1917*. London, PhoenixPress, 2002, p.103.
- (5) For an elaborate analysis of the German atrocities, see John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial*, Yale University Press, 2001, 608 p.
- (6) Jan Persyn. *Jules Persyn 1878-1933 Een slachtoffer van arbeidsdrift en politieke onwil Tevens bescheiden gezinskroniek*. Antwerpen, Stichting Marie-Elisabeth Belpaire. 2001. pp. 28-29.
- (7) T.T.S. de Jastrzebski, 'The Register of Belgian Refugees', in: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 79:2 (March 1916), pp.133-158, also available through JSTOR at [www.jstor.org/stable/2340812](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2340812).
- (8) In comparison, there were only 71 primary schools for about 13,000 Belgian children in the Netherlands, where refugees shared the Dutch language, (1917/1918 figures).
- (9) Armand Varlez. *Les Belges en Exil*. London/Brussels : Librairie Moderne. 1917. page H7.
- (10) For an appreciation of the setting in which this poem was written, see Marjorie Perloff, 'Easter 1916', from Tim Kendall (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2007. Chapter available from [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/Perloff\\_Yeats-Easter-1916.pdf](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/articles/Perloff_Yeats-Easter-1916.pdf)
- (11) Contrary to the history of Belgians in Britain during the First World War, the history of Belgians in Britain during the Second World War is much clearer, not least because there is comprehensive archive material. For an analysis of the latter, see Robert W. Allen, *Churchill's Guest: Britain and the Belgian refugees during World War II*, Wesport, Praeger Publishers, 2003, 212p.