

# Wartime German communities (Belgium)

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***This is the final draft sent to the editors. The final and full version is available from [http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/german\\_communities\\_and\\_their\\_expulsion\\_belgium](http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/german_communities_and_their_expulsion_belgium).***

## Summary:

At the start of the First World War, tens of thousands of Germans lived in Belgium, with noted communities in Antwerp and Brussels. How the Germans in Belgium experienced the war years, ranging from initial expulsion over partial return, to eventual expulsion at the end of the war, is a story that has been long overlooked.

## A new homeland

Until 1918, many Germans had settled in Belgium. In 1910, about 63,000 Belgian inhabitants were of German or Austro-Hungarian origin. Most of them were German. In the port city of Antwerp, about 20,000 of them (which corresponded with 6 per cent of the city's population) had established a thriving German community. With an estimated 15,000 Germans, the community in Brussels was about equal in size to the one in Antwerp, but the Germans wielded considerably more power and influence in the latter. For instance, the managers who ran the Red Star Line company in Antwerp, a passenger line that helped millions of Europeans emigrate to the United States, were German. Germans also settled in Liège or Verviers, but their numbers were much smaller and they were of a working class background, typically miners or metal workers, which stood in stark contrast to the more differentiated German colonies in Antwerp and Brussels and their dozens of different German schools, churches, cultural associations and various organisations.

In 1914, in addition to being the main harbour of colonial Belgium, the port city of Antwerp was a cosmopolitan hub with a modern kaleidoscopic population and a *hinterland* that reached into parts of Germany such as Rhineland. A lot of Germans had settled in Antwerp after the river Scheldt had become a toll-free river in 1863, they had come in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 or were attracted by the many trading business opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Over time, however, they faced a dilemma: were they to remain Belgian Germans, German natives with a sense of belonging that still appertained more to native Germany, or were they to become German Belgians, with a loyalty to the new homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Belgian King, Leopold (1790-1865), who hailed from Coburg, Bavaria, had already attributed a German element to Belgian public life.

## Outbreak of war, hostilities and occupation

When hostilities started in August 1914, many inhabitants in Belgium turned against their fellow citizens of German origin. No distinction was made between German Belgians or Belgian Germans, forcing many to leave their ransacked homes. On 6 August, for instance, all Germans were forced to leave their home cities, and in effect the country as well. The anti-German atmosphere was pervasive. The Catholic newspaper *La Métropole d'Anvers* publicly criticised the liberal tolerance towards German in the years leading up to the war and even claimed that the influences of the German community had paved the way for the real German invasion. German soldiers entered Brussels already on 20 August, calling civil unrest against Germans to a halt there, but Antwerp only fell on 9 October. Here too, many temporarily displaced German families who returned to their homes, not infrequently found their houses and shops ransacked.

Antwerp belonged to the *Occupationsgebiet*, which was under German administration. Restoring the German community to its pre-war situation was one of the priorities of the German occupying forces, who established a *Wohlfahrtsausschuss der deutschen Kolonie* in February 1915, which had representatives of the German schools and churches in Antwerp among its members. Although some German families protested and did not take part in this restricted social fabric, most of them did.

Social life in occupied Belgium had become essentially more German. The Reichsmark had been introduced on 3 October 1914 and as soon as the movement war came to a halt along the river Yser for the next four years, life in occupied Belgium entailed a renegotiated relationship between Germans and Belgians. Despite the attempts of the German occupying forces to instigate an active Flemish nationalism, their *Flamenpolitik* instigated the establishment of a Dutch-speaking University of Ghent and the pro-German Flemish Council, most Belgian Germans did not follow suit as they adhered more towards the francophone Belgian liberal bourgeoisie. Belgians themselves had to rethink their attitude towards the German occupying forces, the German Belgians and German culture.

While many endured the limitations that the occupation had forced upon their society, a fair portion of the Belgian civilians continued to enjoy their pre-war cultural cohabitation with Germans, although the focus shifted from interaction with the German communities to daily life as organised by the German occupation. One of the most noteworthy proponents of this overt orientation towards Germany, driven though it was by his Flemish nationalism, was the renowned Flemish poet Paul van Ostaïjen (1896-1928), who frequented German cafés and, because of his Flemish nationalism, had to flee to Berlin by the end of the war. On a governmental level, relations did not restore after the 1914 invasion: the Belgian government in exile took part in the second Allied economic conference in Paris, in June 1916, where it was decided that after the war trade links between Belgium and Germany would be diminished.

## Expulsion

The attitude of diminished involvement continued. On 10 November 1918, one day before the Armistice, the Belgian government installed a system of sequestration, whereby German possessions were disowned. Driven by anonymous letters that rattled out on fellow Belgians, but of German origin, and by a nationalist sense of revenge, no distinction was made between Belgian Germans who had actively taken part in the social life during the occupation, and German Belgians, often regardless of the latter's display of loyalty to Belgium during the war. Furthermore, by changing German names of public spaces to Belgian-sounding ones and because of the loss of German communities, especially in Antwerp – barely 300 people registered after the war – and Brussels, Belgian social fabric ultimately became more parochial. This was in spite of the East cantons Eupen-Malmédy, true German territory, that had been annexed to Belgium in 1920 by the Versailles Treaty. The cosmopolitan nature of the port city of Antwerp and the core city of Europe, Brussels, had suffered a significant blow, and moved from a culture of inclusion to one of exclusion.

**Keywords:** German community in Belgium, German colony in Antwerp, sense of belonging, sequestration

**Key Dates:** 4 August 1914, 20 August 1914, 3 October 1914, 9 October 1914, February 1915, June 1916, 10 November 1918

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