

## Belgian refugees in Britain, 1914-1919

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 escaped from the country. About 1.5 million people sought refuge abroad. Initially more than a million went to the Netherlands, but by the end of the war hardly 100,000 Belgian refugees were still in exile there<sup>i</sup>. About 325,000 refugees went to France and most stayed there throughout the war, in part also because the Belgian government in exile was located at Le Havre. During the war years, roughly a quarter of a million Belgians had crossed the Channel<sup>ii</sup>. Other destinations were Switzerland, Spain, Cuba, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Only a few academic studies have uncovered this little-known mass migration<sup>iii</sup>. However, with the Centenary of the First World War approaching, increasingly more attention is given to the topic.



October 1914: Belgians sought refuge anywhere they can. They arrived in one place and soon moved to another. Here the *SS La Pallice* arrived at La Rochelle. (author's collection)

### 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<sup>iv</sup>. 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<sup>v</sup>.



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)

The first Belgians reached the southern ports of England in the latter days of 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 in the latter days 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<sup>vi</sup>. Over the course of a few weeks only, 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 an area of transition, 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.



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

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 a number of 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<sup>vii</sup>, in which he stated that 91,000 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...), assessing language use for that area was difficult to gauge.

## Location, allocation and relocation

Throughout the war, more than 2500 local Belgian refugee committees 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 joint charity events organised by Belgians and British together.



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

One such occasion was the Emile Verhaeren celebration, held on 3 March 1917 and organised by the British Royal Society of Literature. Distinguished British 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. Also, Belgians were accommodated by a true exile press, in which *L'Indépendance Belge* served the francophone refugees and *De Stem Uit België* the refugees who only spoke Flemish/Dutch.

12 (1802) DE STEM UIT BELGIË. Registered at G.P.O. as a Newspaper. Vrijdag, 25 Januari, 1918.

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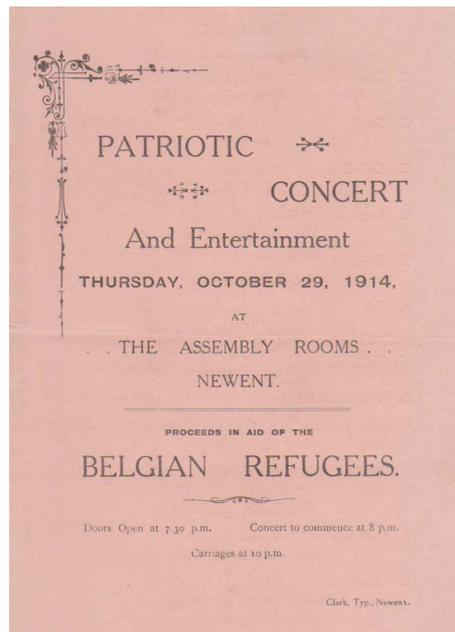
Advertisements on page 12 of *De Stem Uit België*, Friday 25 January 1918: The horse meat trade clearly set the Belgian butchers in exile apart from the British ones (author's collection)

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, where most of them lived in camps. Also, 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

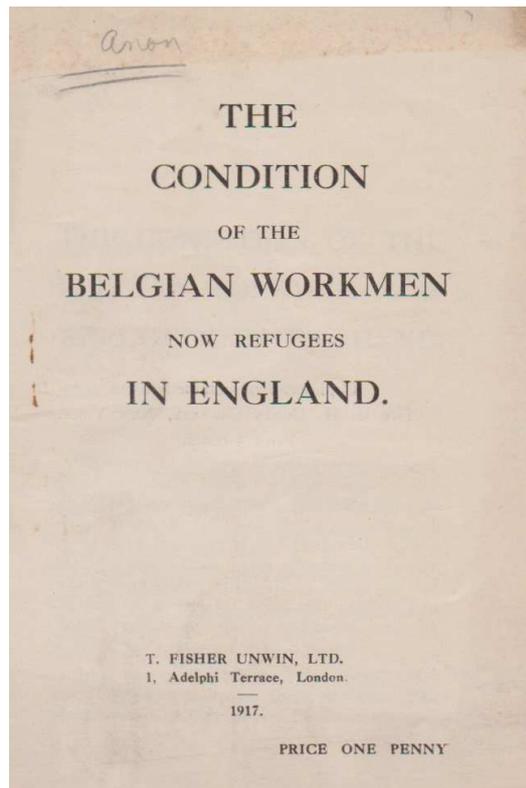
With the war going on longer than anticipated, the initial wave of empathy for Gallant Little Belgium and the refugees waned. Friction from within the host society arose. The different habits and customs of the Belgians caused many arguments. Women did not wear hats in public and alcohol consumption happened out in the open. However, nothing compared to the barbaric habit of eating horse meat. This was met by a wall of disapproval by 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.

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 able Belgians remained on British soil. References to sentiments of discontent increased in number in the British press. Official organisations and cultural patrons continued the charity events, but across Britain many local community became increasingly disgruntled.



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

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.



Throughout the war, the refugees formed part of a propaganda clash 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)

## Education in exile

Another major issue that needed a well-structured solution too 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 have them join local British schools. Not only were differences in learning programmes between British and Belgian schools substantial, the language issue convoluted many 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 of Belgian refugee children was in place for 70 schools, in which 4500 pupils were taught. The network of schools increased in size and one year later 7000 pupils were taught in 111 schools<sup>viii</sup>. 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 which came from the Antwerpen-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 was approximated to 30,000.



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 <sup>ix</sup>)

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 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 renowned historian Leon Van der Essen. One of the Belgian students in Oxford was the author Jozef Muls. In Cambridge, an entire association of Belgian professors formed. The group offered many lectures to both British and Belgian students. Other universities also helped Belgian refugee students and usually waived fees, like at Birckbeck.

### **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 regards to the Belgian refugees, however, the difference could not be bigger. No true output on the theme of Belgian exiles has formed 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 in translation by wife, in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Observer*. Not only did Cammaerts befriend G.K. Chesterton, one of Cammaerts' other relations, Edward Elgar, set a Cammaerts poem, *Carillon*, to music.

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.*

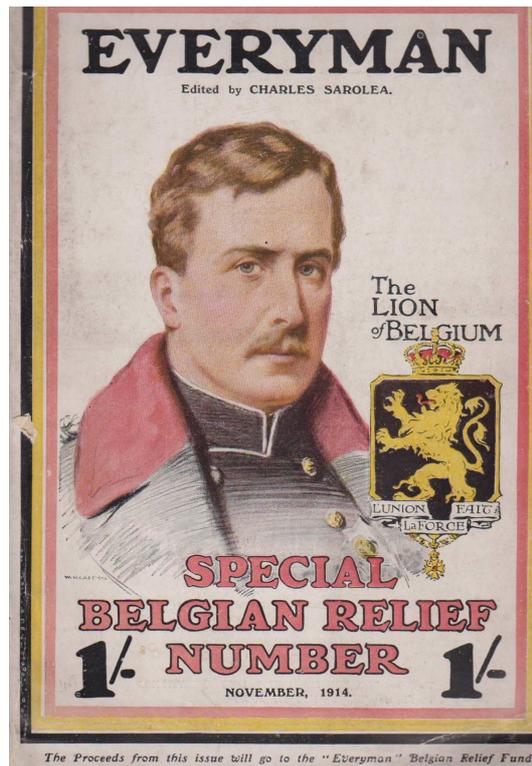
*Then I awoke : and lo, before me stood  
The visioned ones, but pale and full of fear ;  
From Bruges they came, and Antwerp, and Ostend,*

*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).

Before Virginia and Leonard Woolf moved to Hogarth House in Richmond, Virginia rented rooms from a Mrs Le Grys in Richmond, overseeing the Green. 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 to Winston Churchill, had called for dozens of writers to contribute to the war effort by publishing pamphlets and including a pro-war tone in publications of theirs. 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.



*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

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 declined with the cynical 'On being asked to write a war poem' and wrote 'Easter 1916' next<sup>x</sup>. 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 wound 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 were able to provide a means of income through 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. Also, 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 ones to return concerned Belgians from the factories in Birtley. They were deemed skilled enough to help out on rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure in Belgium. 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 in exile in Le Havre but headed straight for London<sup>xi</sup>.

The legacy of the Belgians in Britain during World War I is more than a pathway into World War II. Today many sites, memorial and gratitude plaques remember the Belgians in Britain. Also, lasting relations between host families and their guests continued for decades. With over 5,000 Belgians staying in Britain officially, it can be argued that more unofficial Belgian ancestry can be traced. 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.



On 12 October 1920, a memorial commemorating the Belgian refugees in Britain was unveiled at Victoria Embankment Gardens.

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<sup>i</sup> 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*. Zaltbomme, Europese Bibliotheek, 2000, 464p.

<sup>ii</sup> 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/>

<sup>iii</sup> For a comparative history of Belgians in those 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.

<sup>iv</sup> Vera Brittain. *Chronicle of Youth, Great War Diary 1913-1917*. London, Phoenix Press, 2002, p.103.

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v 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.

vi 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.

vii 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).

viii In comparison: the number of primary schools for Belgian children in the Netherland, where refugees shared the Dutch language – was only 71 and this for about 13,000 children (1917/1918 figures).

ix Armand Varlez. *Les Belges en Exil*. London/Brussels : Libraire Moderne. 1917. page H7

x 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)

xi 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 a much clearer one, not least because archive material is complete. For an analysis of the latter history, see Robert W. Allen, *Churchill's Guest: Britain and the Belgian refugees during World War II*, Wesport, Praeger Publishers, 2003, 212p.