

# The Odd Case of the Welcome Refugee in Wartime Britain: Uneasy Numbers, Disappearing Acts and Forgetfulness Regarding Belgian Refugees in the First World War

By Christophe Declercq

**Abstract:** With about 265,000 Belgian refugees staying in Britain at one time during the First World War, reflections on this transnational and cross-cultural story of welcome and accommodation at times of conflict merits continued attention. This article aims to provide an insight into several warfare-related features that characterised the human experience relating to the Belgians in Britain. A brief literature study confirms the issue of this history having been overlooked for so long. Reception at the time and early perception of the Belgian refugees is studied by means of two publications – the Bryce Report and *King Albert's Book*. These publications in part steered the very history into later silence and forgetfulness. The British host society faced the fatalities of warfare on a scale that history had not seen until then and within this context Belgians refugees were an equally unconventional presence. However, as Belgian men and women became employed in Britain – mainly in the war industry – and as Belgian children were incorporated into several education systems, this presence diminished to the extent Belgians effectively disappeared from view during the war already. Yet, the very nature of the Belgian refugee was a blurred one, as Belgian military sought refuge on British soil too, without seeking to join the forces again. Long-term convalescent Belgian soldiers in Britain often were managed by Belgian refugee committees as well. Upon return to their home nation, British Belgians found a fragmented country in tatters. They were among the prime workforce aiming to rebuild the nation and its infrastructure and yet in post-1918 Belgian history there simply was no place for the chapter of the Belgian refugees in Britain. In Britain as well, the sole representation became a detective with a moustache and mannerisms. All what was left of the history of Belgian refugees was flatlining forgetfulness.

**Keywords:** *Belgian refugees, refugees studies, memory studies, First World War civilians, diaspora studies, reception studies*

## Introduction

The global war that was the First World War began on 28 July 1914, when – after weeks of crisis triggered by the assassination of the Austrian-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a young Bosnian Serb nationalist, Gavrilo Princip – Serbia and Austria-Hungary were at war and through a series of alliances many more countries were dragged into the conflict. Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August in support of Austria-Hungary, and after Germany had invaded Belgium on 4 August, Britain declared war on Germany (De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*: 51-52, 68). The war cost “vast amounts of physical and human capital” (Eloranta and Harrison, *War and Disintegration*: 40)

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and about half of all the 20 million casualties was civilian (Mougel, *World War I Casualties*: 1). As it was the first global conflict to have unleashed transgressive violence against civilians, the First World War also saw the emergence of an unprecedented displacement of at least 10 million people (Gatrell, *Introduction*: 418). Among them were over 1.5 million Belgian refugees who had fled German atrocities and sought refuge in the Netherlands, France and Britain. Yet, when Britain declared war on Germany over the violation of Belgian neutrality, the support for Belgium was extended to its population and, subsequently, to well over 250,000 displaced Belgians who sought refuge in Britain at some point during the war. The main aim of the article is to analyse the experience of this early 20<sup>th</sup> century displacement from the perspective of cultural encounters and to articulate several intertwined themes in that history.

The mere fact that this history is still not well-known relates to a large extent to the disappearing from view already during the First World War as well as rapidly becoming excluded from public record and memory afterwards. In addition to that, the overall approach is that the story of the Belgian refugees in Britain is posited in a conceptual framework that does not abide by delineated designations. This is translated firstly into a brief review of work published on the Belgians in Britain during the First World War. This forgetfulness is accompanied by a description of the key experiences of Belgian refugee displacement that also contributed to a disappearance that was already in the process of taking place during the war itself. Secondly, this article acts as an extension of existing literature on the wave of empathy encountered by the Belgians through a further analysis of wartime charity and the role played by propaganda. Lastly, by conveying the difficult issue of numbers of Belgians who stayed in Britain at any one time, the article also reviews common perceptions of the concept of “a Belgian refugee”, as it is affected by unclear delineations and, as such, convolutes our understanding of the entire historical chapter of this temporary diaspora. By focussing on the extensive fringes of ‘the Belgian refugees’ this article counters the assumption applied to their story in Britain during the First World War that Belgians “encompassed none of the extremes of other alien communities” in Britain (Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*: 3).

Although this article does not aim to provide a comparative analysis between the displacement of Belgians then and the current mass displacements now, nor to provide lessons from history, it does include succinct comparisons with the current-day refugee crisis, or its absence. As Ian Hislop noted in a much praised BBC broadcast (Tanner, *Who Should We Let In?*), the analysis of the sojourn of a quarter of a million refugees in Britain is important and – often through

contrast – provides a context not only for our understandings of the contemporary refugee situation, but also Britain’s changed relationship with immigrants and refugees today.

### **Little-known history**

The Belgian exile community in Britain already during the war bore the signs of forgetfulness (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 328). This concept of forgetfulness was drawn from the English journalist Wickham Steed, a former editor of *The Times*, who in 1923 wrote about his own relation to the then recent conflict, more particularly about having forgotten about the German occupation of Belgium (Steed, *The Belgian Factor*: 18). This concept was then aligned with the history of the Belgians in Britain during that war and further developed over several conference papers and resulting publications, including those by researchers other than the author (Gill, *Brave Little Belgium*) and Ewence (2018) were later to explore aspects of historical forgetfulness in relation to the history of the Belgians in Britain.

In 2016, a special issue on those Belgian refugees, the introductory essay was very clear: “Soon gone, long forgotten” (Jenkinson, *Introduction*: 101). This point of view concurred with what was known in both popular history and academic study: Belgian refugees moved on the periphery of British history, and Belgian history as well for that matter. A.J.P. Taylor devoted only half a page to the Belgian presence in Britain during the war years (Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*: 19-20). Peter Cahalan’s more detailed analysis of the half a dozen reasons why the Belgians disappeared from view included the very simple fact that “no other modern European nation [...] had received so little attention from English historians as Belgium” and that, therefore, the Belgian refugees in Britain were no more than “little people from a little country” (Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*: 4). With his 1977 PhD, published in 1982, Cahalan provided the foundation study for the Belgians in Britain. His thesis primarily dealt with the British context and the politics behind the reception of the refugees. Cahalan also brought the philanthropical machinations to the fore. Although Cahalan’s work opened avenues, attention to the story remained marginal until the turn of the 20th/21st centuries. If Cahalan presented a full volume, Kushner was limited to the scope of a chapter only, in which he often used insular *petites histoires* (Kushner, *Local Heroes*: 1-28). Kushner’s approach was adopted later by several other researchers. Between 2001 and 2003, both Myers (*The Hidden History of Refugee Schooling in Britain*) and Storr (*Belgian Children’s Education in Britain in the Great War*) published several articles on the Belgians in Britain,

stressing the importance of women's contributions to the whole history and the relevance of that story today. Still, even in 2005 Proctor concluded that, unlike the Belgian landscape, which was regarded an important part of the Western front, Belgian civilians – among them refugees – were strangely absent from the social histories of the period (*Missing in Action*). Purseigle added to the approach taken by Kushner and Knox by publishing several papers. Focussing on neglected displacement and settlement issues in First World War histories, Purseigle called for the development of Cahalan's foundation study (Purseigle, *A Litmus Test of Wartime Social Mobilization*). Amara's PhD study followed and acts as a second watershed study (Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*). Amara followed nicely on from Cahalan and offered a comparative analysis and grand narrative for the reception and location of Belgian refugees in the three main receiving nations: Britain, France and the Netherlands (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 50-51).

The years leading up to the Centenary period of the First World War (2014-2018) increasingly provided an antidote to that forgetfulness. Increased academic attention, numerous local history projects and many larger remembrance events included an element connected with the Belgians in exile in Britain or focused on them entirely. The Centenary coincided with the humanitarian crisis that has seen vast streams of refugees attempting to reach the EU. The commemorations often stressed the warm welcome extended to the refugees, a welcome that stood in stark contrast to today's situation. At the same time, increasing academic output on the Belgians in Britain and a growing number of local research projects on the subject (Folkestone, Glasgow, Laugharne, Rhyl, Richmond/Twickenham and Royal Tunbridge Wells to name but a few) as well as projects with a broader scope (Wales for Peace, Amsab's online exhibition and Tracing the Belgian refugees) have proved that public perception and common knowledge about the Belgians in Britain as well as the sheer size of the community in exile, was still not well known. However, this article claims that a main factor why this history still does not sit well in social history, refugee studies or memory studies, is that the history of the Belgian refugees is thwarted by its own concept of "the Belgian refugee" as well as its own – past – reception.

### **Perception and empathy**

Initially, the British media coverage of Belgian refugees related to internally displaced persons fleeing the fierce fighting in and around Liège, in east Belgium, or to the relatively few Belgians who were in Germany when war

broke out. Soon, these Belgians on the run carried a far more important message. They contributed – or through press coverage were manipulated into contributing – to the greater good as the victimised civilians of *Gallant Little Belgium*, a nation that prepared to stand up against the German war machine, as well as the ultimate destitute from *Poor Little Belgium*, the nation that needed help: Britain's grand gesture of empathy emerged.<sup>1</sup> In the section "For the Belgian refugees" the *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald* noted that it "is impossible to estimate the debt that this country owes to gallant little Belgium" (14 November 1914: 6).

In order to use the Belgian refugee as a token representative of the reason why Britain had gone to war, a substantial shift in public perception had to take place. In fact, only a few years prior to the war, relations between Belgium and Britain had been rather tense. If in April 1900, anti-British sentiments in Belgium over the Boer wars forced a 15-year old Sipido to an assassination attempt on the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, who was passing through Brussels on his way to Copenhagen, then surely the indignation at colonial misconduct was soon reciprocated. Even though he was a first cousin to Queen Victoria, the excesses of Leopold II's rule over the Belgian colonies in central Africa, in particular in the Congo, scandalised the English nation. Leopold II made a fortune while the Congolese suffered atrocious hardships. The expansion of railway lines and the mass extraction of rubber triggered an exploitation of the native Congolese as a work force. Along with forced labour came human rights abuse, exploitation, enslavement and even mutilation – the cutting off limbs – as a punishment to keep the Congolese in tow, which resulted in the reported deaths of millions of Congolese. There are, however, no definitive figures on the number of Congolese who died because of exploitation and disease in the period between 1876 and 1908.<sup>2</sup> Whether the figures are closer to five or to ten million people, even fifteen, international consternation against Belgian rule in the Congo was justified (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 68-71).<sup>3</sup> It was only in 1908, when Leopold was forced to cede the Congo to the state of Belgium, that the inhumane regime was halted. At the outbreak of the First World War, however, a similar practice of mutilation was highlighted as constituting one of the major war atrocities committed by the Germans on Belgian civilians. The practice of cutting off limbs had therefore moved from the oppressor hardly a decade earlier to the oppressed (Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 1982). Mirroring this remarkable shift, several people who had spoken out firmly against Belgium and its activities in the Congo, at the outbreak of war, spoke in favour of the Belgians at the start of the First World War. The most striking example would be Herbert Samuel who had been a

leading critic of the Belgian regime in the Congo and who, as President to the Local Government Board, was in charge of Belgian refugees in Britain (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 68-71).

Most Belgians had not even left their homes when an early suggestion that hospitality should be offered to Belgian refugees was made in *The Times* on 15 August 1914 by Sir John Brunner, an industrialist and Liberal politician, who had himself arranged accommodation for the families of his friends from Brussels and who suggested others to do the same. Other relief initiatives emerged but none proved so elaborate and crucial in the reception of the Belgians as the War Refugees Committee (WRC). Established during the third weekend of August, the WRC had sprung from late-Victorian and Edwardian political elites and philanthropists. Fundamental to the association of the WRC was Lady Lugard, a former journalist – the only female journalist attending the 1889 Anti-Slavery conference in Brussels – and wife of Frederick Lugard, a former governor of Hong Kong and then governor-general of Nigeria. Lugard was assisted by Edith Lyttelton, the widow of the Liberal politician and former Secretary of the Colonies, Alfred Lyttelton. Edith Lyttelton had also been involved in establishing the Victoria League, a charitable organisation to promote collaboration and peace. The involvement with relief for refugees was well suited to her nature. Lugard and Lyttelton were joined by the Tory politician Lord Hugh Cecil, as chairman, and Lord Gladstone, son of the former Prime Minister, as treasurer. An entire office building in central London had been put at Lugard's disposal by General Accident, an insurance company that had developed an important maritime insurance base in Antwerp in the two decades before the war (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 110-111). On 24 August, the War Refugees Committee published a letter in the press, appealing for help and support. There were donations from existing charities, such as the Prince of Wales's National Relief Fund, and increasingly from private charity initiatives too. But more importantly, the general public responded too, and in huge numbers, most of them offering hospitality or donating money and clothing. From the very first appeal onwards and for months on end, offers of accommodation outstripped demand, a characteristic of the history of the Belgians in Britain that is difficult to imagine today.

With Antwerp – a safe haven for nearly one million citizens and internally displaced people – still standing firm in part-occupied Belgium, refugees were not yet arriving in large numbers, but Britain was increasing its framework for their reception and by 9 September 1914 arrangements had already been made for the organisation of local committees in dozens of towns and cities. On that day too, Herbert Samuel officially extended the nation's hospitality to Belgium

on behalf of the British government, after which the WRC was aligned with the Local Government Board in the reception and accommodation of the Belgians in Britain. British relief for Belgian refugees multiplied and diversified further. This included event-based proceeds over sustained financial support locally as well as nationally. Perhaps more strikingly, this also provided for Belgian relief organisations to gain ground in exile, an early sign and important prerequisite of the Belgian community in exile being allowed the space to develop their own activities.

Type of relief organisation	British <sup>4</sup>	Belgian (in Britain)
General organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• War Refugees Committee</li> <li>• Local Government Board</li> <li>• Metropolitan Asylum Board</li> <li>• Board of Education</li> <li>• Board of Trade</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comité Officiel Belge Pour L'Angleterre / Officieel Belgisch Comiteit voor Engeland</li> <li>• The Belgian Legation</li> <li>• Belgian Relief Fund</li> </ul>
Specific organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Prince of Wales) National Relief Fund</li> <li>• Hostels for Better Class Belgians</li> <li>• [etc.]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belgian News Fund</li> <li>• Het Volksbureel</li> <li>• The Belgian Red Cross in Britain</li> <li>• Cercle Esperanza, Dulwich</li> <li>• Belgian Metal Workers Union</li> <li>• Belgian News Fund</li> <li>• [etc.]</li> </ul>

Table 1. Overview of the main relief organisations for Belgians in Britain, differentiating between British and Belgian actions (based on Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 135)

Less crucial to the day-to-day wellbeing of Belgians in Britain, but a noted cultural example of the wave of empathy that swept across Britain, can be found in the publication of various charity books. The main charity book was *King Albert's Book* (KAB). The book – published in 1914 – was an anthology of prose and poetry written by mainly British, authors (such as Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling) and public figures (such as Herbert Asquith, Winston Churchill, Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst). KAB was widely

disseminated and sold for the benefit of *The Daily Telegraph* Belgian Fund.<sup>5</sup> *The Times* mentioned the publication of the book on 16 December 1914: this book was published “without parallel in the history of literature”. Fittingly enough, “for its subject is the greatest crime in history, met by a heroism which has thrilled the whole civilized world”. Together with another charity book – *Princess Mary’s Gift Book*, proceeds of which were also partially allocated to Belgian relief – KAB was one of the most profitable and popular books of the war (Potter, *Boys in Khaki*: 58). The widespread readership of *King Albert’s Book* cemented Britain’s commitment to Belgium as well as the support for Belgians in Britain.

The entire KAB event – not only its publication, but also its marketing in newspapers and impressive sales figures – featured within the context of Wellington House, home to the British War Propaganda Bureau (WPB) by Charles Masterman. Among the many contributors to KAB were several authors who had committed to the WPB from the very beginning such as Arnold Bennett, G.K. Chesterton and John Galsworthy. Moreover, the main publisher of KAB was Hodder & Stoughton, a publisher also typically aligned with Wellington House and one that established its own War Book department. The propaganda needed to obtain maximum popular support for the war, including playing the Belgian victimisation card, or the heroization of its King Albert. With the Armistice, however, no legacy of the entire King Albert’s Book event – and by extension the other charity books, which supported relief for Belgian refugees in Britain – remained in place, and no future reiteration was needed. The height of cultural empathy was effectively expressed through these charity books and, thereafter, the Belgian refugees in Britain were covered under a layer of historic dust at best, or more likely swept under the carpet of past propaganda.

### **Cementing empathy through propaganda**

Also part of the Masterman propaganda machine, but of an entirely different nature was the report published in 1915 by Lord Bryce on the alleged atrocities committed by the German troops. Across Britain, anti-German sentiment was already high on account of the invasion and subsequent fighting, but the stories of atrocities against civilians were as widespread as the reports of military action and most certainly sparked even more public support for the war effort. On 16 September, Vera Brittain wrote in her diary that the terrible stories of atrocities by Germans continued to come (*Chronicle of Youth*: 103). This was augmented by the numerous stories told by the many refugees who had come

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to Britain, stories newspapers were very eager to print. However, the veracity of the stories was never corroborated, nor could sources be traced. Authority for the witness reports was granted by the fact that the newspaper itself deemed them worthy of publication and/or by the fact that a noteworthy authority was appearing alongside the testimony. On 23 September 1914 *The Manchester Guardian* recorded that the stories of Belgian families, who had arrived in Manchester and were welcomed by the Lord Mayor at the Town Hall, “added to the record of the cruelty of which the German troops have been guilty” and that “the stories heard were more convincing proofs of the horrors”. No one actually doubted the authenticity of these stories, not least because the newspapers did not stop publishing them. Still, the British government wanted to officialise the stories and have a report produced. On 15 December 1914 a Committee on Alleged German Outrages (CAGO) was appointed. The committee consisted of lawyers and historians and was chaired by the respected diplomat-politician Lord Bryce.<sup>6</sup> Bryce, a former ambassador to the US, added a lot of weight and credibility to the report. Other members of CAGO were luminaries such as Frederick Pollock, Edward Clarke, Alfred Hopkinson, H.A.L. Fisher and Harold Cox.<sup>7</sup> When the Bryce Report was published on 12 May 1915, its contents and conclusions most certainly prolonged and even intensified the anti-German sentiment on either side of the Atlantic. Using hundreds of witness reports and depositions,<sup>8</sup> the Bryce report found German forces guilty of widespread outrage and of “deliberate and systematically organised massacres of the civil population, accompanied by many isolated murders and other outrages”, such as “women violated and children murdered” (*Bryce Report*: 60). The Bryce report indeed emphasised a systematic German policy of terrorisation of the Belgian population and recounted, in the words of its witnesses, hostage-taking, the use of human shields, collective executions, punitive arson and other similar acts. According to the Committee, no military necessity could be held accountable for any of the atrocities recounted.<sup>9</sup> The entire German operation became known – later on – as the Rape of Belgium, and yet it had the questionable veracity of witness reports at its core.

Already early on in the production process of the Bryce report, there was much scepticism about the origins of the depositions on which the Bryce report was based. Bryce himself never intended the validity of the depositions to be investigated (Wilson, *Lord Bryce's Investigation*: 373). Moreover, while writing up their report, there was fairly open disagreement between Harold Cox and the other members of the Committee. Cox found it difficult to put his name to a document, which was based on anonymous sources and wanted to interview

some of the refugees responsible for the witness reports, or at least to hear the translators who were supposedly present at the interviews.<sup>10</sup> The other CAGO members managed to convince Cox and, indeed, no member of the Bryce committee spoke to a single witness, nor were the accounts recorded under oath. Basically, any story was accepted at face value, leaving plenty of room for grotesque exaggerations to enter the witnesses' tales or, indeed, for fabrication. In 2001, Horne and Kramer published a colossal study of the German atrocities and the complex of myths that contributed the reception of the atrocity stories, often exaggerations by traumatised refugees who wanted to translate their emotions: "There is nothing absolute or immutable" about war crimes (Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*: 430). Nonetheless, the Bryce Report was very influential at the time in shaping attitudes and morale in virtually all the countries affected by the conflict (Cunliffe, *The Age of Expansion*: 301). This was in fact the purpose behind the dissemination of the report's findings. The clearest sign of the propagandist aspect of the Bryce Report is that it was published on 12 May 1915, five days after the British ocean liner *Lusitania* was sunk by a German U-boat, claiming nearly 1200 lives (Trommler, *The Lusitania Effect* : 246).

Peculiarly, when it comes to reasons why the Belgian refugees in Britain disappeared from view after the war the Bryce report aligns itself with the cultural representations that were the charity books such as *King Albert's Book*. The destitute Belgians had been used as a tool of warfare and when the war was finally over, those tools were hastily discarded, and all the stories that came with them suppressed. This discarding of perception of "the Belgian refugee" as a wartime concept is furthered by the unclear delineations of that concept.

### **Difficult numbers and the uneasy concept of "the Belgian refugee"**

One would expect the propaganda effort in support of Belgian relief in Britain still to be in full swing in 1915. True, British companies that were part of the war industry actively recruited Belgian refugees in the Netherlands in the spring and summer of 1915, but looking at the references to Belgian refugees in British newspapers, it would appear that the Belgians were no longer used as a public instrument to galvanise support for the war effort. They were still arriving in substantial numbers when they had already started to disappear from view in the press. While the newspapers focussed on stories of the destitute Belgians coming ashore in Britain, barely 18 months later this attention – measured by means of average number of references per war month – had decreased by a factor of 10.

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
occurrences	18,874	17,386	4,137	1,590	1,433	1,082
per war month (rounded)	3,775	1,449	345	133	119	90

Table 2. Search results in the database of British newspapers archive (online, figures 1 June 2019). For 1914, five war months were used.<sup>11</sup>

This disappearance from the British (local) press might have been less significant had the Belgian exile community in Britain dramatically decreased in size over the war period. But it did not.

Key to understanding any refugee movement or displacement and to the initiation and establishment of the relief apparatus is the size of the operation at hand. Although just a figure, the numbers behind it represent the scope of the trauma and relief effort at hand. Whereas current-day appreciations of displacement, relief, refugees and migration go hand in hand with figures that appear to be precise to the smallest unit, this was not the case for the Belgians in Britain during the First World War. The figures relating to the Belgians in Britain needs further clarification, if this is at all possible: although most references in the secondary literature adhere to the figure of 250,000, this was not the only number recorded. Nearly all existing secondary literature assumes that the numbers were lower, or – stressing that registration was fluid in the early stages of the war and that numbers were difficult to chart securely – limited themselves to more refined calculations of the presence of refugees by the end of the war (Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*: 448; De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*: 113).

*The Times*, arguably the most respected British newspaper of the time, started publishing weekly updates and reports on the war from 27 July 1914 onwards. The 273 weeklies were also collected and published in separate volumes, and appeared as *The Times History of the War* (TTHW). One chapter, published in the fourth volume (1915), concerned the Belgian refugees and was very likely the first serious attempt to try and map the number of Belgians in Britain. The assessment of figures was based on the detailed census by the department of the Registrar-General, then based at Somerset House, London. By early December 1914, the compulsory registration of all Belgians had been put in place. This registration took place alongside the police registers logging every time a Belgian moved location, in line with the 1905 Aliens Act and the 1914

Aliens Restriction Act which required all foreign nationals to register with the police. *The Times History of the War* estimated that the number of Belgians who had arrived in Britain from the very beginning until June 1915 was “approximately 265,000” (TTHW: 459). Just how difficult it was – at the time but also in hindsight – to evaluate the scale of the effort of receiving and accommodating so many Belgians can be drawn from the authoritative 1920 government publication *Report on the Work Undertaken by the British Government in the Reception and Care of Belgian Refugees* (RWU), which contained several consecutive sets of figures, ranging from “upwards of 200,000” over 225,572 to “a rough total of 260,000” (RWU: 4-5). The variation in the figures conceals some of the characteristics of the Belgian exile in Britain that do not always sit well in comparison with today’s humanitarian crisis: the modern-day response to the rough estimates of the number of Belgians in Britain is one of disbelief, either because of the lack of accurate statistics or because of the lack of a similar scope for reception today. Moreover, the Centenary of the First World War coincided with the humanitarian crisis that has seen vast streams of refugees attempting to reach the EU. The commemorations often stressed the warm welcome extended to the refugees, a welcome that stood in stark contrast to today’s situation.

*The Times History of the War* also included a reference to a second reason why the community of Belgians in Britain would not sit very comfortable with a current-day Western-European society: included in the figure of 265,000 were 40,000 wounded soldiers. The figure did not include the even larger number of Belgian soldiers who enjoyed leave in Britain. If the wounded soldiers already blurred the existing separation of civilians and soldiers during wartime, then the Belgian soldiers on leave in Britain most certainly provided an element that did not fit the war narrative: British fathers, husbands and sons fought at the Western front, when at the same time Belgian soldiers were visiting their families in Britain, among these the able-bodied men who were employed in the war industry in Britain. There was not much difference between a Belgian refugee who stayed in Britain and a disabled Belgian soldier who participated in workshops across Britain and who produced either garments or munitions for a prolonged period. Moreover, it was not uncommon for the convalescent soldiers to be cared for by the local Belgian refugee committee as well. The confines of the concept “refugee” were also tested by Belgian soldiers. Especially those who had fled to Britain in the early weeks of the war, and those who had come via the Netherlands after the movement war stranded in the trenches along the river Yser. Many among them did not re-enlist and could

even be considered deserters (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 231-232).<sup>12</sup>

Exercising control over Belgian military subjects in Britain was not easy. The Glasgow Register of Belgians contained more than 8,000 names, with details such as surname, first name, relationship, occupation, gender, age, marital status, Belgian address, arrival date, the address on arrival, the address to which they were moved next (Glasgow Family History). Of the 8,000 names, 735 Belgians were registered upon arrival as soldiers – more than nine per cent. However, hardly any of the earlier mentioned refugee-soldiers were sent to London. Typically, Belgian men who had not yet been a soldier enlisted among some of those who already had. In addition, a fair number of Belgians who joined the military services remained in Britain, working for the Legation and military authorities in London or for the military representatives and Belgian intelligence services at Folkestone. With 56 out of 137 Belgians aged 16-25 enlisting, the sample provided proof that Belgians did enlist in numbers.<sup>13</sup>

Two more factors convoluted the statistical representations of the Belgian exile community in Britain: those of incomplete data and those of non-Belgians who were included in the figures. TTHW calculated that about 10 per cent of the estimated 265,000 registration cards needed to be treated with care, if at all, because they represented the inevitable gaps in the register, i.e. incomplete, unclear or even unknown registrations. Most likely these concerned the Belgians who had arrived in Britain and left already before proper registration had taken place, or those who registered with false names during the initial weeks – when pressure on resources made accurate notations of personal data not always feasible – but later on registered truthfully. Along with that 10 per cent came another 10,000 Belgians, mainly men, who had returned to Belgium because of a tax that the German occupying authorities had levied on the houses owned by those Belgians who had fled (TTHW: 459-460).

The final characteristic of the Belgians in exile in Britain concerns the fact that larger groups formed part of the overall statistics but were in effect not actually Belgian. Around 15,000 were not Belgian subjects but “mainly Russian Jews engaged in the diamond-cutting industry of Antwerp” (TTHW: 459). Moreover, throughout the war, it was not unusual for a local Belgian refugee committee to take care of Serbian refugees, who had sought refuge in Britain in much smaller numbers. The flawed nationality aspect of the Belgian refugees concludes the string of characteristics of the Belgian exile community in Britain as well as the reasons why those British Belgians are not easily delineated and therefore physically framed. This has indeed contributed to the fact that the Belgian refugee has been relegated to a mere periphery of First World War civilian

history. This was also exacerbated by several forms of mobility the Belgian refugees were able to enjoy.

### **Mobility**

Throughout the First World War the Belgian community in exile was substantially driven by one form of mobility or another. This happened at three different levels: between the different receiving nations, across Britain and in social terms (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 318). The first level of mobility was an international one. If for the entire period of the First World War more than 265,000 Belgians had stayed in Britain at some point, with the peak being 172,300, this means that close to 100,000 Belgians arrived in Britain and left again. This transnational mobility was very likely to be happening towards France, or to a lesser extent the Netherlands, or even via that country back to occupied Belgium. Also, estimates concerning the number of Belgians in Britain by Christmas 1914 – by which time the war was expected to be over and when *King Albert's Book* was published – show that about 100,000 Belgians stayed in Britain then. This means another 165,000 at least had to relocate from somewhere to Britain. The main reasons to move from one host nation to another included reuniting with family (or being closer to the family in occupied Belgium) on the one hand and employment opportunities on the other hand, even making them an early example of economic transmigrants.

A second level of mobility among Belgian refugees was a national one, whereby the nation involved was the receiving society, here Britain. Other than an unsteady representation, the Belgians in Britain were allocated to seemingly random locations. Stories of warm welcomes at railway stations abound, but also of local people waiting in vain for Belgians to arrive. Gradually, Belgian communities began to emerge outside urban centres (Aldeburgh, Milford Haven among many others), but most Belgians remained in the larger conurbations, not least in the greater London area, where one in three settled. However, the mobility of the Belgians was striking. Registration cards kept from public view at the Belgian National Archives in Brussels prove that, on average, Belgians moved at least half a dozen times. This mobility transpires from data contained in the Central Register of Belgian Refugees, held at the Belgian National Archives in Brussels, as well as from a second register which is not yet publicly available.

This geographical mobility was nearly always due to employment. If, early on in the war, employing Belgians was haphazard, the presence of tens of thousands of able-bodied men became an issue in the seemingly everlasting

conflict and in a country that sent its own men to the front, whereas the Belgians in exile hardly joined the Belgian army. Friction that arose from this improper use of resources was silenced to a large extent by incorporating Belgian men into the war industry. This happened in several ways. Although most were employed in British factories others were as well but in Belgian factories on British soil. The three most important British employers provided jobs for roughly 9,000 Belgians: Armstrong and Whitworth in Glasgow and Newcastle employed 1335 Belgians, Jackson in Salisbury 1914 and all Vickers plants combined 5797. The three largest Belgian enterprises on British soil together employed well over 3,000 Belgians: General Stores and Munitions in London employed 950 Belgians, Kryn and Lahy in Letchworth 1469, Pelabon Works in Twickenham 1705 (Comité Officiel Belge Pour L'Angleterre, 96-112).

Working long hours on factory premises six days out of seven, Belgian men, as well as a fair number of Belgian women, disappeared from view. This disappearance also happened with education, when most of the tens of thousands of Belgian children were absorbed into the British educational system. A complete absorption and assimilation took place whereby no accommodation was organised for most Belgian children. They had to adapt to the new situation, adopted English albeit quickly and adapted to the education in wartime to such an extent that after they returned to Belgium their Anglicised exile created a wave of Anglophilia. Another layer of education also existed: nearly ten thousand Belgian children were educated in Belgian schools in Britain, or roughly one in six refugee children. In between those two outer ends of educational opportunities in exile sat a more hybrid form, whereby Belgian children were taught within a British context, but a limited Belgian presence in the curriculum and/or on the premises was allowed. Often this was a local priest passing by to teach matters related to religion in the native language (Declercq 2015). In Folkestone, for instance, the local Belgian Colony organised many of its own activities with the help of the Folkestone Belgian Committee. The Education Sub-Committee helped to establish a college for boys, employing Catholic clergy, so that pupils were able to continue their studies. Adult Belgians were given English classes there too, so that they "forgot the tedium of their exile in their efforts to master irregular verbs" (Carlile, *"Our Belgian Guests"*: 24) and an English-Belgian Literary Circle was formed. For those who had not mastered English, a newspaper in exile was published, the *Franco-Belge de Folkestone*. Above all, mobility of Belgians in Britain coincided with the opportunity of employment and its location first. Employment also created another form of mobility.

A third feature of mobility of the Belgians in Britain that does not sit well with its legacy is a sense of reverse social mobility. This social mobility in exile happened when those who could not fall back on resources were the first to look for employment, whereas those who relied on their own means for the duration of their anticipated short stay abroad eventually exhausted them and had to be employed much later than those who were considered lower class when they arrived (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 318). Moreover, some Belgians rose to the occasion and seized the opportunity not to reject their former selves, but to exercise some talent that had been in place, albeit modestly, prior to seeking refuge. Artists of little renown became part of charity relief events: when a concert was organised, the proceeds of which supported Belgian refugee relief, singers and musicians were billed as “famous” – in fact, their fame depended mainly on their performances while in exile. English cultural networks also absorbed Belgian cultured people and typically the latter were willingly invited. However, the fact that the cultural elite were not deprived of self-esteem because of their displacement was also valid for thousands of working class Belgians. No study has yet been undertaken into the intricacies that this brought upon their return to Belgium. Anecdotal evidence supports the thesis that the relative financial independence enjoyed by working Belgians upon return to their native land was a factor that added to the friction between those who had endured German occupation and those who had not. If, after Armistice, re-establishing the pre-war social construct was a prime concern of authorities in both Britain and Belgium – more in the latter than in the former for that matter – then returning refugees who had made some financial gains out of their hard work while in exile found themselves ostracised from their old neighbours and stamping grounds in that those who had remained in Belgium had endured years of hardship under German occupation. Typically, Belgian enterprises had also been stripped by the Germans, who re-used the hardware for their own war effort. Refugees who returned from Britain had built up some financial reserves that allowed them to rebuild their lives more comfortably than those who had lived through occupation.

In the years and decades after the war, histories of displaced civilians of the First World War did not essentially belong to the narrative of the single nation-victor at that time. That narrative was carried largely – especially in Belgium – by a focus on a renewed social contract through former authority and through celebrating the return of the soldiers. There simply was no place for a refugee chapter in post-war Belgium.

## Conclusion

This article has provided answers to the question why the history of more than a quarter of a million Belgian refugees in Britain had been confined to the margins of history for so long and had remained largely absent from public memory as well as academic research. This forgetfulness is the main characteristic of that history. This was driven by a multiple disappearance act during the war already as well as by a fraught belonging in post-war nationhood. The key characteristics of both the employment and education of the Belgians in Britain relate to the mutual interconnection between host society and the Belgian community in exile, on the one hand, and acting as the framework in which Belgians – men, women and children alike – disappeared from view on the other. Their presence on the streets diminished dramatically. Aligned with a substantially decreased focus in the British press, the foundation for later forgetfulness was already set during the exile itself. This contrasts starkly with current-day refugees who have to go through lengthy application procedures and settlement processes and in official questionnaires continue to have to tick their ethnicity, forced into reiterating their otherness.

Forgetfulness was also furthered by several features of the Belgian exile community that effectively make a clear understanding of what actually constitutes a Belgian refugee very difficult. These features relate to the exact figure of the Belgian community in Britain, the at times haphazard manner of registering Belgians, the presence of other nationalities and the difficult civilian entity that is the Belgian soldier, be it a convalescent one or one on leave in Britain. A second set of factors that affected the concept of “the Belgian refugee” concerns several modes of mobility, including a sense of reverse social mobility, features that are not usually allocated with refugees, most definitely not today. If after a century of trying to belong and striving to be included in the collective memory, the story of the displaced Belgians in Britain still does not resonate well, how can current societies be expected to respond to existing displacement crises?

Surely, popular as well as collective memory should be able to allocate more space to this chapter of displacement in the memory of the First World War than to its most renowned by-product, the fictitious character of Hercule Poirot?<sup>14</sup> His character became almost entirely assimilated, with connotations of its Belgian origins perhaps remaining in place to some extent but still lacking any connection with the refugee(s) that stood as a model for the inspector (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2015: 328).

Poirot as a representative of the entire chapter of Belgian refugees in Britain is perhaps missing the point of the entire history. In the end, the Belgian refugee-detective moves in upper class circles, mirroring – at best – the opportunities seized on by the Belgian happy few, but also moving as a one-dimensional character, stripped of his refugee status and allocated mannerisms only, a non-descript caricature nearly. Poirot is peculiar in that he singlehandedly stands among detectives that are otherwise Anglo-Saxon, but he has become so culturally appropriated that the latest BBC instalment of the inspector – portrayed by John Malkovich – is bereft of what made him a character. Without a moustache or accent, Poirot no longer stands out and, according to the producers, has become the ultimate symbol of integration. But now that the history of the Belgian refugees in Britain is increasingly gaining a voice across Britain, through the recent wave of Centenary commemorations paying attention to Belgian refugees as well as through increased academic output, Poirot falls squarely within the remit of where the chapter of the Belgians has remained for so long: flatlining forgetfulness.

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**Archive material – newspapers (\* through the British Library Newspaper Archive, online)**

*Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*, 7 August 1914\*

*The Belfast Telegraph*, 7 August 1914\*

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*The Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, 26 August 1916\*

*The Heywood Advertiser*, 7 August 1914\*

*The Manchester Guardian*, 23 September 1914

*The Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 7 August 1914\*

*Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 August 1914\*

*The Times*, 5 April 1900

*The Times*, 16 December 1914

*The Western Morning News*, 7 August 1914\*

*The Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 14 November 1914\*

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<sup>1</sup> “Gallant Little Belgium” first appeared as a full phrase in newspapers on Friday 7 August 1914, in both *The Belfast Telegraph* and *The Western Morning News*. The next day the image resonated in eight more local and regional newspapers. By the end of August 1914, the phrase had been used 59 times in dozens of newspapers. On 7 August as well, further epithets appeared in support of Belgium: “plucky” (*The Heywood Advertiser* and *The Newcastle Evening Chronicle*) as well as “heroic” (*Pall Mall Gazette*) and “brave” (*Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*). “Poor Little Belgium” first appeared on Saturday 15 August, in both *The Gloucester Journal* and *The Cheltenham Looker-On*. It was only after the War Refugees Committee was established on 24 August that the “poor” phrase and image appeared frequently, even though much less frequently than the “gallant” one. This conveys a noted shift from heroization to victimisation, not least because numerous British households had to be persuaded to take at least one Belgian into their homes, preferably even an entire family.

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- <sup>2</sup> A century later Adam Hochschild reignited historical and public interest in Belgian colonial rule (Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*).
  - <sup>3</sup> Along with the liberal and humanitarian Congo Reform Association, led by the journalist Edmund Dene Morel – who had worked for a shipping company that had a contract for the connection between Antwerp and Boma, Congo – and Roger Casement – a former British consul in the Congo. Other people who also spoke out against Belgian atrocities in the Congo included Mark Twain, Arthur Conan Doyle and Joseph Conrad. Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* is set in Congo Free State.
  - <sup>4</sup> These groups and associations might have a token Belgian on their books, especially the many local committees.
  - <sup>5</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* Belgian Fund was an addition to the already existing Daily Telegraph Fund, which had collected £28,000 for those affected by the Titanic disaster only a few years earlier.
  - <sup>6</sup> Bryce had worked with the Anglo-Irish diplomat Roger Casement to expose the exploitation of Indian peoples on the Amazon by a British rubber company.
  - <sup>7</sup> On 22 January 1915, the historian Kenelm Digby, a friend of Bryce's, was added to the Committee.
  - <sup>8</sup> No mention was made of the criteria for selecting these stories, but nevertheless any selection could have served the purpose, as the stories would not have been new to the public.
  - <sup>9</sup> For a more objective analysis of the events of the time, see John N. Horne and Alan Kramer.
  - <sup>10</sup> Moreover, given the trouble facing British administrators regarding the accurate notation of strange Belgian surnames and locations but their near flawless recounting of those, the presence of these note-takers is indeed questionable.
  - <sup>11</sup> Data from britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (last accessed on 1 June 2019). For similar findings in Welsh wartime newspapers, see Hughes, *Finding Belgian refugees in Cymru1914.org*, 2016.
  - <sup>12</sup> One such example was Seraphim Balcaem [sic], a Belgian soldier who had been discharged and lived in Weston with a girl to whom he was engaged, when he was killed in a car accident near Stevenage. His funeral was paid for by the Belgian Legation in London and the founders of the Kryn and Lahy factory in Letchworth (*Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, 26 August 1916: 3).
  - <sup>13</sup> The sample provided 56 for the first 1,000 Belgians listed on the register, i.e. between 400 and 450 for the entire list of 8,000.
  - <sup>14</sup> Poirot is the ultimate representation but ultimately in line with appearances in contemporary writing by Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf (Declercq, *Belgian Refugees in Britain*, 2014: 60-62), or in more recent tv shows such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1974); *Mr. Selfridge* (2014).