Refuge in a Moving World

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Making home in limbo: Belgian refugees in Britain during the First World War

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Introduction

Ahead of Refugee Week in June 2019, the Guardian published You, Me and Those Who Came Before, portraits by Jillian Edelstein of people with diverse backgrounds. The main argument behind the portrait exhibition – on display at Tate Exchange in London first, then at the V&A – was to celebrate unity in diversity: how refugees, represented by prominent figures, contribute to life in the UK. The geographical spread and the variety of reasons why people left their homes and found a future in the UK was as wide as the representations of refugee movements over time: among the many portraits were a virtuoso zither player from Damascus, an actor who at a very young age had escaped Rwanda with his family in 1994, a former Young Poet Laureate whose parents left Somalia in 1984, a British-Palestinian chef whose grandparents fled Palestine in 1948, a member of the House of Lords who was one of the 10,000 children rescued by the Kindertransport and a children’s author who fled Nazi Germany with her family in 1935 (Edelstein, 2019).

Their successful settlement elsewhere – in this case, in the UK – and the unique combination of diverse background and reception culture transpired in the timeline presented. Arguably, among many others, a member of the Windrush generation should have been included too. Experiences of the Windrush generation easily stand for earlier immigrant arrivals in Britain because of their position ‘both as British citizens and visible minorities’ (Quille, 2018: 2): under Home Secretary Theresa
May, a hostile environment was created at the Home Office from 2013 onwards (York, 2018) and new rules demanded enhanced evidence of people’s immigration status. However, those who had come to Britain – typically to address labour shortages – did not always have the right documentation to prove their British citizenship, and after decades of contributing to British society some found themselves with restricted access to employment and limited or even no health services. The Windrush case could also be extended to the settled status that EU citizens had to apply for when it remained uncertain whether Britain would leave the EU or not, or under what conditions (Sigona, 2018; O’Brien, 2019). You, Me and Those Who Came Before demonstrates that, by looking into the history of diversity – here, the condition of being a refugee – both differences and commonalities exist between various groups of people who have arrived seeking refuge in the UK.

However appealing it might be as a newspaper article fitting the narrative of 2019 Refugee Week, comparative refugee history – focusing on the experience of refugees over time – is only emerging as an academic field (Kushner, 2017; Stone, 2018). This chapter therefore aims to develop a comparative historical framework in which elements of the current-day refugee situation in Europe are considered against an existing history of refugees, more specifically that of Belgian refugees in Britain during the First World War. First, aspects of both historic and current media attention are contextualized. This is tied into narratives of commemorations. Next, an appreciation of figures – feeding the desire to quantify refugee streams and translating humanitarian aspects of the issue into dehumanized digits – is needed before a succinct overview of specific elements of the Belgian sojourn in Britain are highlighted, each of which contributed to the very history of their presence disappearing during the war and being omitted from public memory after the war.

The purpose of uncovering the history of Belgians in Britain during the First World War is not only to combat forgetfulness of the past and the ensuing lack of understanding about the present but also to reinstate past achievements in terms of refugee reception, accommodation and lasting inclusion into the receiving society – just as the portraits in the Guardian did. As such, a much-needed legacy in which the reception culture acted as a haven for refugees across time is reaffirmed (Townsend, 2014). A perfect validation of this contextualization through parallels and contrasts can be seen in the figures concerned: the number of Belgians in Britain for the period 1914–19 is estimated to be between 250,000 and 265,000. A similar number of asylum applications were made in the UK between 1991 to 2017: a total of 261,056. While these are very similar
numbers, this number of refugee arrivals happened over the course of 5 years in the 1910s, and over the course of 27 years more recently.

However, if – other than being omitted from public memory – one social legacy of the history of Belgian refugees in Britain is to be singled out, then it is the mere, but fundamental, fact that refugeedom is a complicated and constantly changing sphere that is, to a large extent, only facilitated when refugees themselves are allowed the space to develop their refugeedom. ‘Refugeedom’ here refers to Peter Gatrell’s matrix of administrative practices; legal norms; but, above all, to social relations and refugees’ experiences (Gatrell, 2017: 170) from the point of view that refugees themselves validate those contexts.

Given that the history of Belgian refugees in Britain during the First World War has been long overlooked, this chapter also answers the question of whether or not this historic refugeedom has indeed been excluded from public memory not only because it was a temporary one but also because it was successful.

A little-known history

In June 2014 – at the time of the emerging humanitarian crisis in the wider Mediterranean region and the advent of the First World War centenary – a poll was conducted by YouGov. When provided with seven options and asked which of the historic refugee groups settling in Britain had been the largest, forgetfulness about the right answer – Belgian refugees’ presence in Britain during the First World War – became clear: one in five people believed that the correct answer concerned Ugandan Asians fleeing persecution from Idi Amin. Seventeen per cent believed it to be Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria in the late 1930s. Only one person in over 2,000 people surveyed indicated rightly that the answer was Belgian refugees during the First World War (YouGov, 2014; Declercq, 2015: 33; Declercq, 2016: 94). Indeed – except for a few academics, archivists and local historians – the history of Belgian refugees during the First World War – characterized by voluntary action and government support through local bodies as well as by humanitarian organizations – is not a very well-known one. Yet, more than 1.5 million Belgians fled their country and the violence of the early weeks of the war there – the same number of people as all the sea and land arrivals in the EU for the years 2015, 2016 and 2017. By November 1918, about 600,000 Belgians still lived in France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Regardless of the duration of this exile, today that sudden story
of massive displacement would undoubtedly be labelled with the term ‘refugee crisis’ and press coverage would probably resonate with sentiments of ‘being overwhelmed’, along with metaphors invoking ‘invasion’ (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016: 18).

However, in order to fully gauge the difference in scope between then and now, the ultimate framing can be found in the respective press coverage (on media representations of displacement, see chapters by Snow and Davies in this volume). Online available digitized archives, such as the British Newspaper Archive and the archives of the Manchester Guardian and The Times, together hold well over 45,000 references for ‘Belgian refugees’ for the war years alone (1914–18), or more than 1,000 references per month of the war period. In turn, a phrase-based search in Google Advanced showed that the Guardian, the Independent, The Times and the Daily Telegraph combined printed nearly 13,000 references to ‘Syrian refugees’ between March 2011 and April 2019. This translates to roughly 135 references per month during this period. Clearly, the Belgians in Britain during the First World War received more press coverage than Syrian refugees a century later.

It is particularly notable that the vast coverage of Belgian refugees in the British press during the First World War did not leave a trace in public memory afterwards. In fact, one of the main characteristics of the history of the Belgians in Britain is that they had already been omitted from public narratives during the war itself: newspaper coverage dwindled so rapidly that the period August 1914 to December 1915 accounted for over 80 per cent of all mentions in British newspapers, whereas fewer than 20 per cent of all mentions arose in the remaining four years (Declercq, 2015; Hughes, 2016; Declercq and Baker, 2016). A clear disappearance from the British press took place during the course of the war, which anticipated a later forgetfulness: the central message of ‘soon gone, long forgotten’ (Jenkinson, 2016: 101) echoes Peter Cahalan’s conclusion that the Belgian refugees ‘disappeared as quickly as they had come’ (1982: 3).

However, during the commemorations for the First World War centenary (2014–18) the story of Belgians in exile received increasing attention from local-history groups and academics alike, as well as from Belgian and/or British commemoration initiatives such as those launched by or at Amsab-ISG, BBC’s World War One at Home, Birtley, Flanders House London, Folkestone, In Flanders Fields Museum, Laugharne, Leeds, Northwich, Rhyl, Richmond/Twickenham, Royal Tunbridge Wells, the Scottish Refugee Council, Tracing the Belgian Refugees, Vredescentrum Antwerpen and Wales for Peace. The commemoration of the centenary coincided largely with the ongoing humanitarian situation in the wider
Mediterranean region (as an area of departure as well as transit), but also with the increasingly antagonistic political atmosphere in several EU member states. Although many of the aforementioned commemorative initiatives promoted strong awareness, hardly any included today’s refugees, except for a project by the Scottish Refugee Council. This local and regional impact is unsurprising: the active inclusion of current-day refugees in the commemoration of a historical subject has proved to be mainly of local relevance.

In turn, national narratives in relation to Britain have been driven by a subtext in which a hostile environment is created for any migrant, old or new. This is consistent with the hostile attitude of the British state to individual rights generally, and the right to asylum specifically, that persisted for the remainder of the twentieth century (De Vuyst et al., 2019: 2) and continued to persist in the 2010s. The contrast of today’s situation with Britain’s generosity towards refugees during the First World War, most of whom were Belgian, could not be greater. In this respect, there is a palpable distance between our ability to learn from the past in order to understand the present better, and the disheartening hostility of the current attitude towards refugees.

**More than just numbers and figures**

By providing clear estimates of the numbers of people involved in forced displacement, one reduces a humanitarian situation to sheer numbers (also see Maqusi, this volume). Attempting to grasp the scale of a refugee movement in this way anonymizes the trauma of displacement and the significance of individual refugee stories. More importantly, it focuses on the host state through reference to the scope of and requirements for reception, accommodation and charity (see Astolfo and Boano, this volume). Or it might indicate the lack thereof, as was the case with British charity in the Balkans prior to the First World War and with those current-day refugees who are turned away from the borderlands of Europe and ‘returned’ to deplorable circumstances in detention centres in Libya. All narratives deemed authoritative aim for numbers but do not emphasize the experiences and priorities of refugees themselves, let alone create a space in which refugees themselves can develop their daily lives.

For the humanitarian disaster(s) of the 2010s, seemingly declining figures appear to provide a collective soothing sensation, as if the issue will gradually go away on its own when numbers eventually go down again (as is the implied anticipation). A headline from Euronews was very clear
on this point: ‘Illegal EU border crossings at six year low’ (Musaddique, 2019). This reduction, however, made sense, as several routes into the EU had become increasingly difficult; NGO support at sea was hampered (and, indeed, criminalized); and attempts were increasingly made to stop refugees well before they could even try and make it into the EU.

In 1914–15, the spirit was quite the opposite. Not only did the British Government support the massive accommodation operation initiated by the War Refugees Committee by aligning it with the Local Government Board, but it also committed to providing any resources that charity and philanthropy were unable to cover. These created a refined symbiosis between the official and voluntary levels: ‘It was considered expedient for the state to leave problems needing personal action to voluntary and philanthropic bodies’ (De Vuyst et al., 2019: 8). Moreover, when the largest influx of Belgians had dwindled and the winter of 1914–15 had passed, not only did the UK authorities resolve increasing friction about the presence of able-bodied Belgian men by incorporating all 60,000 into the war industry, they even fetched large parties of Belgians who were stranded in the Netherlands, where living conditions were not of the same standard as those in the UK. So, in the case of Belgians in Britain, figures provide much-needed grounds for making analogies with today, ideally adding awareness and scope to the current refugee situation or, in simple terms, highlighting what was possible then but no longer is today.

Public awareness of the start of the current humanitarian situation permeated the European public sphere in the first half of 2015 (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017), whereas the sheer drama of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing diverse conflicts in the Middle East, East Asia and Africa and many thousands losing their lives while attempting to cross the Mediterranean had been a major issue well before that. Between June and mid-September 2014, the UNHCR estimated the number of fatalities in the Mediterranean as being well over 2,200, with 130,000 people having arrived in Europe by mid-September 2014, mainly in Italy (UNHCR, 2017). The number of arrivals there in 2014 was more than twice the figure for the whole of 2013, but still only half the number of Belgians arriving in Britain a century earlier. And, most of the latter arrived over the course of only a few weeks (the second half of September to the third week of October 1914).

Although one can trace substantial numbers of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean all the way to the start of the twenty-first century, ranging from about 20,000 in 2000 to over 70,000 in 2011 (BBC News, 2014), there is indeed a break in the figures when it comes to comparing any pre-2015 arrivals with 2015 or later ones. According to the
International Organization for Migration (IOM), about 200,000 refugees arrived in Greece or Italy in 2014, whereas this was well over one million one year later (IOM, 2016). However, by repositioning the humanitarian crisis within a narrative of annual figures, histories of earlier tragedies and earlier modes of response are also eroded. The focus no longer lies with people, nor with the manifold issues that lie behind the situation. However, figures are useful for scoping humanitarian crises and allocating resources. Number estimations of just how many Belgians stayed in Britain during the First World War vary widely, adding to unclear delineations of this historical narrative.

When Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914, stories about atrocities committed by German troops in the first weeks of the conflict quickly spread; many Belgians fled their homes and eventually one out of five Belgians – some 1.5 million – sought refuge abroad (Declercq, 2014: 56). Just how many people were internally displaced but overtaken by the advancing troops is not clear: estimates range between half a million and 1.5 million. It can therefore be safely assumed that, at the start of the war, at least two million Belgians were dispossessed. Initially, more than a million sought refuge in the Netherlands, Belgium’s neighbouring country to the north, but by the end of the war, barely 100,000 Belgian refugees were still in exile there. About 325,000 refugees went to France, the neighbouring country in the south. Most Belgians residing in France stayed there throughout the war. Roughly a quarter of a million Belgians – the most frequently used estimations posit a final figure in the 250,000–265,000 range – crossed the Channel during the war years.

The most striking example of varying figures can be found in the seminal government publication Report on the Work Undertaken…, which provided several consecutive sets of figures, ranging from ‘upwards of 200,000’ through 225,572 to ‘a rough total of 260,000’ (Ministry of Health, 1920). The Times History of the War gave a figure of 265,000, allowing for erroneous records and convalescent soldiers (The Times, 1915). Still, a utopian mirroring of the number of Belgians in Britain with current-day Syrian refugees would mean that Britain could have accommodated nearly twenty times more Syrians: between 2015 and early 2019, Britain accommodated only 13,818 Syrian refugees. Admittedly, Belgians made up about 95 per cent of all refugees in Britain during the First World War, whereas the proportion of Syrians in the overall numbers of refugees in Britain in 2019 does not remotely equal that share.

Two eras can never be compared but juxtaposition appears significant, especially in relation to the current public perception of ‘being
overwhelmed’ (Staples, 2015: n.p.) and the way in which this unfounded fear is currently being used by extreme right-wing groups and parties. Of equal importance is how the three main host nations for Belgian refugees during the First World War currently relate to their historic capacity in terms of receiving refugees. In the table below (5.1), the respective population is measured by means of census details close to 1914 and this is then related to the population as near the time of writing (spring 2019) as possible. Next, the estimated number of Belgians in each of the countries – in the period August 1914 to April 1919 – is used to calculate how many Belgian refugees were hosted per one million inhabitants. That figure is then used to extrapolate today’s population, resulting in a specific share of today’s capacity for the period 2013 to 2017\(^\text{12}\) – which is of a similar duration to the First World War period – in comparison with the historical reception.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Census 1910s</th>
<th>Belgian refugees</th>
<th>Per million</th>
<th>Current population (2019)</th>
<th>Potential capacity</th>
<th>Actual reception</th>
<th>Share of historic reception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>43m</td>
<td>265,000</td>
<td>6,163</td>
<td>66m(^\text{13})</td>
<td>406,758</td>
<td>174,735</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NL</td>
<td>6.5m</td>
<td>105,000(^\text{14})</td>
<td>16,154</td>
<td>17m(^\text{15})</td>
<td>274,615</td>
<td>121,680</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR</td>
<td>39.6m</td>
<td>325,000</td>
<td>8,207</td>
<td>67m(^\text{16})</td>
<td>549,873</td>
<td>451,000</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Elaborated by the author.*

In terms of welcoming refugees, modern-day Britain is only hosting 43 per cent of the refugees and asylum seekers that it cared for during the First World War years. When looking at the other two main host nations for Belgian refugees, the Netherlands (NL) is very similar to the UK in that it is hosting only 44.3 per cent of its historic numbers. Although the situation for Belgians in Britain is in no way comparable with the rather sterile and at times minimal situation in the Netherlands, both countries currently resemble one another in terms of the proportion of what we might term ‘historic hospitality’\(^\text{17}\). The hypothetical calculation results in a different situation for France, however. At the time of writing, as a host nation, France maintains a proportional relation of 82 per cent compared with its historical capacity. Any conclusion in terms of different eras – no World War at the doorstep and the like – for the findings for the UK and the Netherlands is therefore thwarted by the result for France. Clearly, the former two countries have undergone a substantial shift in terms of hospitality towards refugees, whereas France has largely maintained it.
Any figure advocated by the distinctive British – Conservative – governments of the 2010s about the intended number of refugees welcomed in Britain is very different from what has been achieved in the past and what France is still achieving.

The possibilities of empathy

If one of today’s biggest concerns is the marginalization of millions of refugees, who face danger and humiliation on a daily basis (Gatrell, 2017), then the story of the Belgian refugees stands out as its counterpart. In 1914, the number of displaced people was on an unprecedented scale, and these included six million Russians, nearly two million French – most of them internally displaced – and half a million Serbs, but also Jewish, Italian, Croat and Slovene refugees, as well as Armenians (Gatrell, 2014) and over 1.5 million Belgians. Yet, despite the strain on resources, and by extension on society as a whole, no ‘crisis’ was perceived, most certainly not in Britain. In the war months of 1914 to mid-1915, the Belgians were met by a vast wave of British empathy: thousands of refugee committees were formed, overseen by the War Refugees Committee and the Local Government Board, and were ready to help and support the destitute Belgians. Numerous activities were organized nationally and locally, the proceeds of which were in aid of the Belgians. Official reports, media coverage and political actions were all aligned with the war effort, in which ‘Remember Belgium’ featured heavily – that iconic and omnipresent poster that used the imagery of atrocities committed by German troops on Belgian civilians to galvanize public support for the war effort and to bolster recruitment in Britain. The refugees from Poor Little Belgium epitomized the reason why Britain had gone to war in the first place (Kushner and Knox, 1999).

Popular perception about the necessity of hosting Belgians was such that a myth emerged: more offers of accommodation were in place than needed and everybody wanted a Belgian. Clearly, despite the scale of the Belgian exodus and subsequent exile, there was no feeling of ‘being overwhelmed’, a sentiment often voiced today (see above). In October and November 1914 especially, quite sizeable crowds regularly turned up at a local station when a first group of refugees was due to arrive – similar to what happened in Munich train station in Germany in 2015.

At the start of the First World War, Britain had grown accustomed to ‘immigration restrictions and the identification of foreigners as bearers of disease, criminal proclivities or dangerous ideas’ (Cesarani, 1992: 34).
and yet sentiments towards this massive influx of ‘friendly Aliens’ – in contrast to ‘enemy Aliens’ such as Germans – was very early on replaced by a strong feeling of compassion, further bolstering anti-German feelings across all levels of society. In stark contrast to today’s refugees, the Belgians in Britain were not marginalized. Moreover, by the time animosity had slowly begun to increase towards Belgian able-bodied men who had not initially carried out employment duties, let alone enlisted, the War Propaganda Bureau of Charles Masterman – also known as Wellington House – was in full swing, leaving virtually no space for friction. This was also helped by renowned D-notices, issued by the War Office Press Bureau as a means of censorship, which prevented press stories from being printed or at least controlled them. This form of control of the press also applied to stories about rogue Belgians or unsavoury stories involving Belgian civilians and soldiers alike, but also about refugees ‘flooding the countryside’ (Lovelace, 1982: 112).

If any organized manipulation of information dissemination, similar to what was in place a hundred years earlier, is being used today, then the common enemy has been translated into a common public enemy in the shape of any entity with a sufficient terrorist connotation, ranging from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to ISIS, Saddam Hussain and Bashar al-Assad. This added layer of diffuse public enemies convolutes a single cause for which public opinion can be galvanized. The fragmentation of ongoing regional turbulence and internal conflict, continuously shifting power vacuums that regional and global powers seek to fill (Cammack and Dunne 2018), is too complicated to sell to the public. Therefore, empathizing with the realities from which people flee is thwarted to such an extent that a common sense of understanding is lacking. Although the Masterman propaganda machine aimed to have the wider British society accept Belgian refugees locally as the ultimate representation of the reason why Britain went to war, the current situation is quite the opposite. A manifest narrative focuses on keeping multiple conflict-driven issues in the Middle East at bay: ‘According to the UN’s Arab Human Development Report 2016, the Middle East is home to only 5% of the world’s population but, in 2014, accounted for 45% of the world’s terrorist attacks, 68.5% of its battle-related deaths and 57.5% of its refugees’ (Select Committee on International Relations, 2017). This defensive narrative contrasts starkly with the widespread public support for Belgian refugees, in which there was no concern in relation to ethnicity or religion – let alone concerns about the unknown Other arriving on British shores in droves. Put differently, Belgian refugees were simply of the right religion and ethnicity.20
The wilful absence of organized empathy towards today’s refugees was also evidenced by a BBC online news article from 2018: only the graphs include the UK in relation to migration and the EU; the text itself does not. The analysis of the humanitarian situation in Europe and the way in which the migration issue is charted therefore wilfully aligns the linked chain of concepts in its readers’ minds: refugees and migration are EU, not UK. This $EU=migration$ premise permeated public debate in the years of the EU referendum and Brexit division: those in favour of leaving the EU used it as a defensive position in terms of migration (‘control of our own borders’), so that there is no longer a sense of being overwhelmed and there is confidence that migration can be halted: narratives in which refugeedom proper disappeared. Those in favour of remaining in the EU focused on the contributions of refugees and migrants to a diverse society, narratives in which refugeedom can thrive. At the time, Belgians who fled their country were given many labels: legally Aliens, they became ‘friendly Aliens’, and were called ‘refugees’ by media, political and institutional authorities alike. First World War refugees were never dubbed ‘migrants’, a term that in the 1910s was almost entirely reserved for people leaving Britain (for Australia for instance), returning to Britain, summer workers and migratory birds.²¹

However, several issues further complicate a clear appreciation of just how many Belgians stayed in Britain during the war. These include registration, transmigration and the flawed line between civilian refugees and soldiers (deserters and convalescents alike). Registration was not compulsory or well organized until early December 1914. Refugees who had somehow ‘remained under the radar’ prior to that point in time could have moved back to Belgium; or to France; the Netherlands; or, indeed, elsewhere. In their relatively secure transnational mobility, Belgians were transmigrants _avant la lettre_, but of a benign kind, clearly, given that the British Government actually actively sought to attract Belgians who had temporarily settled in the Netherlands in order to fill much-needed war industry employment. Belgians in Britain were not exactly hampered by the 1905 Aliens Act, which restricted immigration into Britain for the first time but which allowed it for refugees.²² Still, the Aliens Registration Act 1914 required any immigrant to register with the police, including Belgians – despite them being ‘friendly Aliens’. Although Belgians had to report their whereabouts to the local police, there was still a substantial degree of freedom of movement, which allowed for a high level of mobility for those Belgians who were seeking employment. It was common for people to relocate up to seven times in a four-year period, and relocating up to twelve times was far from exceptional (Declercq, 2015: 127).
Members of this Belgian transnational community in exile also enrolled in the Belgian Army. This complicated the very nature of the concept ‘Belgian refugee’: not only did thousands of refugees join the Belgian forces from their displaced location, but thousands of lower-ranking officers and soldiers – those who were not interned in prisoner-of-war camps in the Netherlands after they had sought refuge there in 1914 – moved to Britain and effectively were deserters but became members of the refugee community in exile, and valued resources for the British war industry. The line between a refugee and a soldier in exile simply did not exist, nor was this much of an issue for British public opinion – or at least, this does not emerge as an issue in the many newspaper articles published on the Belgians in Britain. Another dimension also stands in the way of the correct figures for Britain-based Belgians and, as such, the concept of a ‘Belgian refugee’: long-term convalescent Belgian soldiers were often overseen by local Belgian refugee committees.

Admittedly, the current conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, which is among the main causes for the ongoing humanitarian situation in and around the borderlands of Europe, stems from much more complicated fault lines than an easy First World War alignment of Central Powers – Allies – Neutral Countries. However, both the mobility and the military aspects of the Belgian refugees in exile in Britain support the understanding that Belgians in Britain were absorbed into the social fabric in a manner that hardly posed any problems then but would, in all likelihood, pose many today.

Disappearing from view, and forgetfulness

One year into the war, the powerful and much-used image of the Belgian refugee increasingly diminished in the British press. However, significantly decreased attention by the British press and controlled media output – by D-notices – only partially accounts for the Belgians disappearing from view. This had many reasons. First, support for the Belgians in Britain waned as the war dragged on. Second, the focus on charity and Belgium shifted towards supporting occupied Belgium. This was also driven by the large-scale organization of provisions for Belgians by the American Commission for the Relief of Belgium, managed by J. Edgar Hoover. Third, Belgians established their own intricate web of exile newspapers, journals and magazines, so there was no longer any reason for British newspapers to play the mindful carer and include sections for Belgians. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, by mid-1915 nearly all
Belgian men were employed, mostly in the British war industry, as were quite a large number of Belgian women. Lastly, with the integration of most Belgian children into the British education system – only one in six enjoyed Belgian education in exile\textsuperscript{23} – the presence of Belgian refugees on the streets became much less palpable.

Just how liberal this incorporation of Belgians into the British social fabric was can indeed be seen in the opportunity given to them to establish those own social spaces – not least of which was the establishment of over 100 Belgian schools as well as the foundation of Belgian factories, some of which constituted the most characteristic chapters in the history of the Belgians in Britain. Not only were privileges granted enabling able-bodied Belgian men to work in the war industry but Belgians also started businesses in Britain themselves. In Gateshead, for instance, an entire Belgian community grew out of the workforce of the British-run National Projectile Factory. Elsewhere, communities of Belgian exiles formed around factories such as the Kryn and Lahy factory in Letchworth and Pelabon in Richmond/Twickenham. The presence of over five hundred Belgian enterprises on British soil during the war clearly proves that the reception and care of Belgian refugees was not only a matter for the British but that the Belgians also took care of themselves, if not entirely then at least to a large extent. With Belgian unions also playing a role while in exile and Belgian curriculums at play, the Belgians themselves developed a new identity in exile – that of the British Belgians who actively inhabited the host nation’s space carved out for refugeeedom.

This set of refugee experiences was intensified through the advent of numerous Belgian shops, the most renowned of which were horsemeat butchers. These Belgian shops stocked exclusively Belgian produce and adhered to Belgian etiquette, and thus appealed mainly to Belgian shoppers. British customers struggled and wondered whether to find foreign customs just different or outright difficult.

However, the very fact that many Belgian shipping companies, mainly from Antwerp and often with existing routes into central Africa, relocated to the UK clearly shows that there was a substantial benefit to British trade and labour to be had from the Belgian community in exile. This is in sharp contrast with today’s situation in terms of Britain’s relation to the regions where most refugees come from. Using the top five countries of origin of UK asylum applicants in 2017 (Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bangladesh and Sudan)\textsuperscript{24} as an example, we can see that virtually no such benefit emerges other than supporting conflict locally through weapons’ exports, using cheap labour or harvesting natural resources at the very location from which the people are fleeing.
Forgetfulness

If Belgians quickly became more self-sufficient and less dependent on support because they were granted the necessary space, then logically a sense of segregation played out, as many Belgians were incorporated into Belgian structures of employment and education. Although relationships between the Belgians and British developed and there were cross-cultural transfers, when the Belgian refugees left, ‘there were relatively few inter-personal connections to keep memories alive’ (Declercq and Baker, 2016: 162). The Belgians not only became literally erased from living memory but also – often through discarded archive material – from the records (Storr, 2009): ‘of the estimated 2500 local Belgian relief organizations, the archive material of a little over 200 is kept in the Imperial War Museum archives’ (Declercq and Baker, 2016: 163).

There is, however, another factor to be taken into consideration – one that has not been supported by much research because it is no longer feasible, but one that can be seen mentioned time and again in letters, diaries and testimonies up to decades after the war: a common denominator in family-history research relating to the First World War is that those who returned from the front remained silent on any aspect of the war for the remainder of their lives. Likewise, if Belgians were the embodiment of why Britain had gone to war in the first place, it can be argued that family stories about accommodating and entertaining Belgian refugees disappeared into the same silence (Declercq and Baker, 2016: 163). This can be mirrored in today’s situation: the distance between the members of the host society and the very reasons why refugees seek a safe haven in Britain has been substantially widened by the focus on de-humanized figures, by the non-mediating nature of press coverage, through the distancing narrative in relation to yet another public enemy and through the perceived lack of benefits for the receiving society. Or, in short, the overarching framing narratives that surround current-day refugees have created the opposite of a wave of empathy.

The final reason behind this forgetfulness of a historic refugee chapter relates to post-war reconstruction. The organized repatriation of Belgian refugees took place in the period between the Armistice (11 November 1918) and the Treaty of Versailles (28 June 1919). Belgian refugees returned to a post-war society in which both their reintegration and the need for the reconstruction of the infrastructure of a broken nation were paramount (Declercq, 2015: 309). However, they also found themselves lost in a nation that was incredibly fragmented and
that, through new divisions, no longer coincided with the imagined community from the period in exile. Belgian refugees returned from different host nations and many prisoners returned from Germany, as did people who had been forced into labour there. Belgium had been mostly occupied and when refugees returned not all were readily accepted back into the renewed social construct.

That re-emerging fabric to some extent even harked back to pre-war social conditions, which collided with the more relaxed time enjoyed by many Belgian refugees, with the social mobility that quite a few Belgians enjoyed while in Britain and with the relative gender equality of exile, in that working women were much more common in Britain than in Belgium prior to the war, and immediately after. Moreover, for the entire duration of the German occupation, any house that had remained empty during the war because its inhabitants had fled, was ‘a vivid reminder to the local community that Belgians who were not enduring the hardship of occupation and the deprivations that came with it, had once lived on those premises’ (Declercq, 2015: 310). The empty houses, a focal point of increasing irritation during the occupation, led to friction when the occupants eventually returned. To date, little has been written about the return of Belgian refugees into their former native environment. This is particularly relevant, as those who returned often found themselves in situations in which trauma was revisited: destroyed and ransacked homes, fewer employment opportunities and internal displacement (which could be temporary but equally definitive). Despite partially destroyed infrastructure – entire areas were badly affected whereas most hardly suffered at all – there is no comparison, for instance, with the barren world that Syrian refugees might return to, if they do so at all. Understanding the feelings of returning Belgians would add to an awareness not only of their first experiences of displacement at the start of the war but also of the circumstances that current-day refugees find themselves in during resettlement and repatriation.

One more factor relating to repatriation and return convoluted the position of the Belgian refugees in both British and Belgian history: at Versailles, Paul Hymans – the key Belgian negotiator there, who from 1915 to 1917 had served as the Belgian minister to Great Britain – erroneously felt that he could play the card of the German atrocities again, hoping to revive international indignation about these and to resuscitate widespread support for Belgium. However, witness reports about these atrocities were already contested during the war (see Wilson, 1979; Horne and Kramer, 2001) and Belgian refugees, at least those in the UK, had served their (propaganda) purpose. The approach backfired and
many Belgian demands were not met. This buried the Belgian refugees under yet another layer of historical dust.

**Conclusion**

In the past few years, increasing academic output on the experiences of Belgian refugees in Britain and a growing number of local research projects on the subject have shown that public perception and common knowledge of Belgian refugees in Britain, as well as the sheer size of the community in exile, is still not great. Yet, as evidenced by Ian Hislop in *Who Should We Let In?*, a much-praised BBC broadcast (June 2017), analysing the sojourn of a quarter of a million refugees in Britain is important and – often through contrast – provides a context both for our understanding of the contemporary refugee situation, on the one hand, and Britain’s changed relationship to immigrants and refugees, on the other. The overall feeling remains in place that over a century ago, receiving nations were able to do more in terms of welcoming refugees than they are doing now.

Just before he passed away in the summer of 1996, the Ukrainian-British rabbi and Auschwitz survivor, Hugo Gryn, called the twentieth century ‘not only the century of two world wars, but also the century of the refugee. Almost nobody at the end of the century is where they were at the beginning of it’ (cited in Kushner and Knox, 1999: 1). With that refugee label applied to the past century, one wonders how to designate the current era in which even larger numbers of people are displaced and dispossessed around the world, both internationally and internally. The issue of labelling far transcends the terminological level and poses a quintessential question: To what extent, and how, can providing comparisons between historical displacement and contemporary refugee movement increase awareness? This phenomenon sits at the core of history: it is in overcoming a forgetfulness about a particular past – caused by renewed application – that historical parallels prove their existential value for understanding the present. Understanding historical cases of displacement helps to provide proof of the space that refugees themselves should be able to have in order to provide for their own sense of belonging, for their own refugeedom.

By uncovering a history of displacement and contrasting it with today’s situation, this chapter has aimed to bridge a gap between those two voids: a long-forgotten history, which at the time galvanized an entire nation, on the one hand, and the current humanitarian situation
on the other. That forgetfulness is no longer reiterated, and instead the proud legacy of welcoming refugees and of allowing refugees the space to reinvent themselves is reinforced, so that they themselves are able to translate the trauma of displacement into an experience of social relations within a new construct.

Notes

1. In relation to today’s humanitarian situation, this chapter deliberately avoids the term ‘refugee crisis’ wherever possible. On terminology such as ‘migration crisis’ and ‘migrant crisis’, and how its use by politicians and the media sets popular perception in support of far-right politics and the fear of ‘the other’, see Malik (2018) and Federici (2019).
2. For a useful companion piece to this chapter, see Vandervoort (in this volume) on the experiences of Syrian refugees who have sought refuge in Belgium since 2011.
4. This point of view is shared in secondary literature published before the centenary of the First World War, including Cahalan (1982); Declercq (2007, 2014); Amara (2008); Gatrell (2008); and Storr (2009).
7. Taking the Syrian Army clampdown on protests in March 2011 as a start of the period in which Syrians started to flee their country, the Syrian refugee crisis would – at the time of writing in March 2019 – last for eight years, or 96 months.
8. Such as the United Kingdom (UKIP, the anti-immigration stance of the Leave campaign and resulting Brexit approaches), the Netherlands (far-right parties run by Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet), Hungary (Viktor Orbán’s wall to keep refugees out) and Italy (Lega Nord’s election campaign was branded ‘racist’ and ‘xenophobic’ in the European Parliament; Gottardi, 2009).
9. In the project ‘Lest We Forget’, a group of refugees and Scots shared what they had learnt about the forgotten history of Belgian refugees in Scotland. The modern-day refugees related their experiences of rebuilding their lives in Scotland to a historical subject (Scottish Refugee Council, 2016).
10. The Netherlands was a neutral country, and the state’s perceived generosity towards Belgians could be interpreted by Germans as a violation of that neutrality.
11. Typically, wounded Belgian soldiers convalescing in locations across Britain were overseen and supported by local Belgian refugee committees.
13. Figure Office for National Statistics (ONS) UK: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates, 22 May 2019.
14. This is not taking into consideration the one million Belgians who had fled to the Netherlands by the end of September, early October 1914. Nearly 90% of those had already returned in a matter of weeks.
16. Sources include INSEE (French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies); ONS UK; and Statistisches Bundesamt, Germany, 22 May 2019.
17. For a fine example of hospitality across historical contexts, see Isayev (2018).
18. In Wales, the War Refugees Committee acted in conjunction with the Local Government Board too, but in Scotland all refugee matters were overseen by the Glasgow Corporation. In London, the War Refugees Committee operated alongside the Metropolitan Asylum Board.
19. With the Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, signed in February 2017, the EU – by means of its key Mediterranean member Italy – effectively externalized its borders with Libya, which clashed with the principle of non-refoulement, as refugees and/or asylum seekers...
should not be sent (back) to countries where they would be in danger (Plan C London, 2019; Caterino, 2019). This was never the case with the First World War refugees. Nor did any solidarity or charity at the time come to be criminalized.

20. Tim, Marshall Personal communication, 2016. For an appreciation of the role of religion in the reception of Belgians in Britain, see Taylor (2018).


22. Belgian refugees did not always obtain the contributions they were entitled (De Vuyst et al., 2019: 9). In this respect, there are indeed parallels with the Windrush generation.

23. On refugee children’s access to different forms of education in refugee camps in East Africa, see Amorós Elorduy in this volume.

24. Figures, the Migration Observatory, 22 May 2019.

References


