

The Great War from Below (GWB). Multiple Mobility and Cultural Dynamics in Belgium

www.thegreatwarfrombelow.org

Report of the Follow Up Committee Meeting - 4 March 2015 (State Archives Brussels)

Partners Present:

Michaël Amara (State Archives), Koenraad Matthys (KU Leuven), Antoon Vrints (UGent) & Nico Wouters (CegeSoma)

Partners Absent:

Axel Tixhon (UNamur)

Researchers Present:

Arnaud Charon, Saskia Caroline Hin, Florent Verfaillie & Fabian Van Wesemael

Committee Members Present:

Paul Breyne, (General Commissioner for the Commemoration of the WWI in Belgium)
 Gert De Prins (FOD Sociale Zekerheid, Directoraat-Generaal Oorlogsslachtoffers)
 John Horne (Trinity College, Dublin)
 Jan Kok (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)
 Michel Oris (Université de Genève)
 Geneviève Warland (UCL, Postdoctoral Researcher & Coordinator MEMEX-WWI)

Committee Members Absent:

Piet Chielens, (Director of the Museum In Flanders Fields, Yper)
 Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Penn State University)
 Bruno De Wever (UGent)
 Geert Van Goethem (Director of AMSAB-ISG)

REPORT (NICO WOUTERS)

Opening Remark:

The conference "*The Great War from Below: between individual life courses and collective experiences. New sources, new perspectives*" that took place on 3 March 2015 in the Belgian State Archives was the first large public initiative of the project and coincided with the launching of the project website. The conference is considered a success. The subscription-registration had to be stopped two weeks prior to the conference because the number of registrations exceeded the maximum capacity of the venue. The overall quality of the afternoon sessions by the project-researchers was very high and the comments were useful. We reached a large and diverse audience. The only negative point is the timing and delays. We will avoid this in the future with a lighter conference programme and stricter time management.

In a roundtable discussion, the following **General Remarks** are given by members of the Committee:

The **methodology of Life Course Analysis**, initially very prominent, seems to have moved to the background in all or some of the individual PhD projects. The project partners admit this, but point to 1) the importance of the work of the postdoctoral research by Saskia Hin to create a general reference context and 2) the divergences that unavoidably become visible at this stage because of the specific challenges created by the different social groups (different sources and information, different specific questions). However, where relevant the Life Course Analysis will certainly be maintained. In a very general and basic sense, **the central question of this research project remains** 1) how war experiences shaped collective identities of certain social groups and 2) how these experiences then impacted the way these groups used this newfound identity as a starting point for political, social, cultural action in the decades after the war.

In terms of **scope and feasibility**, the overall research is (too) large and ambitious. The remark is given that we should not try to do everything. We should focus, perhaps by selecting a relatively small number of ‘cases’. Another option is to choose between the two large chronological parts of the research. On the one hand, the research focusses on the war/occupation experiences themselves, on the other hand the second part tackles the post-war agency, preferably until 1940. Even one of those two ‘parts’ would be a legitimate research scope. For now, the partners prefer to keep both ‘parts’, combining war experiences with post-war agency (until 1940). But there is a strong awareness that realistic choices need to be made in terms of practical research implementation, on the level of method and case selection.

An interconnected (and essential) issue, is **the commonality** – the overlap and connection – among the individual researches. Besides the four separate individual research-outcomes, we need to strive for several overarching and collective results that bring the individual results together in one framework (preferably an international one). A necessary pre-condition for this, is a clear decision on the exact common point where the four researches overlap and meet each other. Such a point could be, for example, a selection of several concrete micro-cases that return in each of the researches. This is an open discussion. This discussion remains perhaps the most difficult one, as the commonality is potentially connected to all major research-choices of methodology, approach, case-selection etc.

There is a lot of attention to the **outcome** (deliverables) of this project. In general, the committee expresses that it’s impressed by the overall momentum that now seems to exist in Belgium in terms of ongoing fundamental historic research on WWI. All in all, ca. 30 (young) Belgian researchers carry out research directly or at the least indirectly tackling WWI-related history. That kind of investment is currently unique compared to the larger neighbouring countries and we should put that to good use. There is huge potential here. In that sense, both the GWB and the MEMEX project could form **the axis of a network**. As a post-meeting update to this report, it might be interesting to point out that the first network-moment has taken place at CegeSoma on Monday 23 March. Nine young WWI-researchers presented their ongoing research. Although public attendance was relatively low (20 people), it is clear that this is the first step in a process of network-building. First impressions can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/WW1Belgium>.

As far as the GWB-project is concerned, the following remarks are made:

- It would be a good idea to strive for an ambitious **edited volume** with a reputed academic publisher, integrating the four individual GWB-researches in an

international (European) framework. It might be a good idea to juxtapose or connect the Belgian social groups with the equivalent research on other (Eastern European ?) countries. Such a book would be relevant and meet the challenge set above, to create more international recognition of this Belgian research investment. Michäel Amara and Antoon Vrints are the most suitable GWB-editors of this volume.

- It would also be extremely interesting to be able to create a more public output or dissemination effort, for example in terms of an **exhibition** on our social groups, using perhaps individual life stories to reach the larger public. Again, there is huge potential here. However, such an exhibition would require a separate coordination and above all separate budget. There is no budget for a serious exhibition now. Nevertheless, everyone present agrees that public dissemination is important and we should keep it in mind.
- Last but not least, and bearing in mind the results of the morning session of the conference of 3 March on gathering, digitization & disclosure of (new) sources and collections, the proposition for some kind of **Research Notebook initiative** within this larger WWI-research community might be one outcome or result to strive for, and such a participatory digital research community in which researchers share/exchange notes and material found might also be the subject of a future GWB and/or MEMEX initiative. The GWB members are enthusiastic about this idea and will contact MEMEX to talk about a concrete outline for such an initiative.

To conclude: from now on, public communication about the project and related projects can be followed on the project website. The individual researchers might contact individual members with specific questions that were not discussed during the meeting because of the time limitations. We will keep all members of the committee informed about the next steps.
