

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

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Report of the Follow Up Committee Meeting – 21 April 2016

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:

Bruno De Wever (UGent)
Geert Van Goethem (Director of AMSAB-ISG)
Gert De Prins (FOD Sociale Zekerheid, Directoraat-Generaal Oorlogsslachtoffers)
Geneviève Warland (UCL, Postdoctoral Researcher & Coordinator MEMEX-WWI)

Committee Members Absent:

John Horne (Trinity College, Dublin)
Jan Kok (Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen)
Michel Oris (Université de Genève)
Paul Breyne, (General Commissioner for the Commemoration of the WWI in Belgium)
Piet Chielens, (Director of the Museum In Flanders Fields, Yper)
Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Penn State University)

The input received from some of the absent members was also integrated in the report.

1/ Individual Research Presentations

Each of the four individual researchers gives a ten-minute presentation of the current state of the research and the major questions and future perspectives (please find the four individual research notes in **ANNEX 1**). Jan Kok has sent his added comments to each of the individual researchers.

Some of the individual research comments from the committee discussed during the meeting:

A/ Saskia Hin:

- Bruno De Wever points to the 'Daily Life WW II' project where CegeSoma is a partner to integrate the demographic research in a broader historical framework. Koen Matthys remarks that broadening the demographic research to WW II is blocked by privacy legislation.
- Geneviève Warland asks questions on how certain trends can be explained, for example trends pertaining to the behaviour of women (the gender aspect): which methodology can be used to offer historical explanations for certain trends?
- Geert van Goethem points to the possibility to use international comparative research to balance the Belgian results. He also asks how the impact of the war can be measured as a 'factor' to explain certain trends, perhaps there are other factors that could explain certain trends. He also asks whether 'profession' is the only criterion to measure 'status' ?
- Gert De Prins points to the research by Gerlinda Swillen, who has researched birth rates in Brussels for WW II and has found a higher marriage rate related to WW II.

B/ Florent Verfaillie:

- Bruno De Wever points to the tension in the research between a focus on occupation behaviour tied to social position and a focus on post-war 'evaluation' and construction.
- Geneviève Warlande has questions on the exact selection criteria for the selected groups
- Bruno De Wever has questions on the role and place of the micro-research (on the individual level)
- Geert van Goethem points to the pitfalls of using 'class' in the research, and the need to conceptualize this more precisely when it's used in its current form in the research note. Perhaps it is better to avoid the term altogether.

C/ Fabian Van Wesemael:

- Geert van Goethem stresses the importance of the archives of the veterans' organisations (not only personal documents such as letters). Bruno De Wever points to an existing tension between the 'from below' ambitions of the project and the danger of writing a history of these veterans associations. To a question of Gert De Prins, Fabian confirms there are hardly veterans associations archives left, only the Flemish Veterans have left archives of the 1930s.
- Koen Matthys asks about the main central point, the connection between the three separate research components.

D/ Arnaud Charon:

- Arnaud Charon gave a short presentation in which he showed the map of Belgium with the overview of the amount of deportees per community
- In a short discussion, Geert Van Goethem asked a question on the province of Liège, that turns up as a 'blank' spot on the map (since there were no deportations from

that province). Arnaud Charon nevertheless confirmed the province will also be included in the research.

2/ Project Output

In a brief introduction, Nico Wouters outlines the academic output and public dissemination. In terms of academic output, each individual researcher will deliver one book publication (a published doctoral dissertation in the case of the three PhD researchers) and a series of academic articles (see annual report and individual research notes). We also foresee an edited academic volume in English, edited by project partners Antoon Vrints and Michaël Amara (see [ANNEX 2](#)).

The public dissemination output still remains open at this stage. The main problem remains the lack of time from researchers and partners. One idea was to use life-stories in documentary films (with partners). Another idea was to organize a final conference together with the BRAIN-MEMEX project (coordinated by Laurence Van Ypersele) as well as some form of common publication (the latter perhaps in the form of a magazine with a newspaper or similar publication, cf. earlier experiences with similar formats).

In a first reaction **Bruno De Wever** stresses that for any common output, commonalities in the research need to be found. Currently these are four separate research projects.

Geert van Goethem points to an existing international heritage project developed under the supervision of AMSAB-ISG (to be finished in 2017) that basically provides an open source tool to create virtual exhibitions/museums. The project in fact needs research projects to implement their content as a 'case', so GWB could be a perfect match for this. The GWB partners find this very interesting and we will follow this development.

Furthermore, Van Goethem also points to the existence of financing as Flemish 'heritage projects' (*'ontwikkelingsgerichte erfgoedprojecten'*). To the latter, Wouters answers that extra financing is currently not essential.

Gert de Prins points to the National Institute of Veterans as a potential partner: they might also seek cooperation for public dissemination output. He is sceptical about the film-documentary option, as the Flemish television at the least does not tend to invest in original historical documentaries.

Michel Oris stresses – in terms of outcome – the difference between an experienced post-doc like Saskia Hin and the PhD students. The latter must be certainly encouraged to publish not only in conference proceedings but also in peer-reviewed journals with a national or international echo, in particular also the Belgian Journal of Contemporary History.

Sophie De Schaepdrijver does not believe that a 'public history' book starting from GWB and Memex would be a wise investment of time and money : such a book needs to have a clear consistent narrative and vision and avoid being a patchwork of academic results. She does applaud the GWB-Memex partnership, for example in a joint final conference. Furthermore, she points to the importance and opportunities of education fields. Why not use our research results to propose concrete educational packages or –material ? Not only is there an obvious worth, she also believes there is a need from this sector. She refers to her own work done for the American Field Service (AFS) and she sees a lot of potential here.
