

The Great War from Below (GWB). Multiple Mobility and Cultural Dynamics in Belgium during and after the First World War (Contract - BR/121/A3/GWB)

Summary

1/ Description of the context, the objectives and the methodology of the research

This research project analyses the social impact of the First World War (WWI) in Belgium using four social groups, notably veterans (including Prisoners of War), pro-German collaborators and resistance fighters (in one research), and forced labourers: social groups all directly affected by WWI. The project focussed on wartime experiences (including the impact of social class and –relations) and the longer-term social trajectories of these groups (social mobility, collective changes, agency and social identification). The selected groups were members of the ordinary populaces whose lives were directly affected by the experiences of WWI. This research project is primarily based on the archival collections of federal institutes. This research project assumes that the impact of WWI has to be seen in more diverse or multiple ways, combining certain continuities with changes and with large social variations over a longer term.

The life-course analysis in a pure sociological-demographic way, was used in the post-doctoral research of dr. Saskia Hin (KU Leuven). Dr. Hin used quantitative demographic research methods to describe and analyse differences in the profiles of marrying couples before, during and after the war. Simple descriptive methods were used to describe trends, while multilevel regression methods were used to analyse patterns and differences between social groups. A total of 49,646 marriage records was studied for the project and the report contains the graphics of final results.

Drs. Arnaud Charon's research about forced labourers (conducted at the State Archives in Belgium) ultimately prioritized a broad and deeply historical approach. For this, he developed a database with the social profile of 1300 deportees for geographically representative parts of Belgium. The final report contains a.o. geographical maps on Belgium based on statistics created after the war.

The research about collaborators and resisters by Florent Verfaillie (CegeSoma, State Archives) correlated different categories of 'resistance' and 'collaboration' to social status and context and also adding a focus on gender studies. Drs. Verfaillie selected a total number of 648 so-called "political prisoners". Of these, 305 could be identified as so-called "collaborators" or "inciviques". 343 individual "patriots" were selected for the large sample. This selection was based on a geographical distribution : two larger cities (meaning : more than 100.000 inhabitants, notably Ghent and Schaerbeek), two middle-sized cities (meaning : between 40.000 and 20.000 inhabitants, notably Leuven and Verviers), 36

villages (meaning : less than 15.000 inhabitants) and finally the four first villages per province based on an alphabetical order.

The research about veterans by drs. Martin Schoups and prof. dr. Antoon Vrints (both Ghent University) focused more on the general history of the veterans (and veterans movement) related to social class in post-war Belgium (in strong direct dialogue with national and international literature). This included therefore a general history of 320,000 men that survived the war, and notably the 70% to 80% of them who were member of a veteran-organization. In terms of methodology, a careful archival research of published press was used to create an "event catalog". Such an "evenemential-based analysis" is a classic method in protest research. This was further "thickened" by a qualitative analysis of the veteran's self-published newspapers.

2/ Presentation of the results as well as the main conclusion and recommendation

Dr. Saskia Hin's research focussed on several complementary strands, in support of the overall research strategy, among others marriages (based on civil marriage records 1910-1930, Flemish Brabant and Brussels) and macro-demographic analysis. Dr. Saskia Hin finalized research into the development on first marriages in Belgium (see the book chapter for the edited volume *The Impact of WWI on marriages, divorces and gender relations*). Dr. Hin also produced a macro-demographic article joining demographic perspectives on marriage, mortality and fertility trends during the war. She also worked on a closely related theme: that of the impact of extreme conditions during childhood on marriage timing. For an exhaustive overview of published results we refer to the bibliographical list, but one highlight is the published edited volume co-edited by Saskia Hin *The impact of WWI on marriages, divorces and gender relations in Europe* (Routledge 2019).

Drs. Arnaud Charon's conclusions about forced labourers and deportees unearths explanations for regional deportation distribution. It also unearths the social dimensions and profiles of the labour population to partly explain the failure of German deportations; the social dimensions of the family of the deportee; the life conditions of deportees in the German camps; and the post-war, longer term consequences of the war on these deportee. For an exhaustive overview of published results we refer to the bibliographical list, but one highlight is the final report of Arnaud Charon's research attached to this report as Annex 1.

Florent Verfaillie's research about collaborators/traitors and patriots/resistance fighters (conducted at CegeSoma-State Archives in Belgium) focussed on wartime experiences rather than a focus on the post-war life courses and agency. The research indicated a.o. fact the convicted collaborators concern relative lower social profiles and younger profiles (under 35 years of age, but also including women). The 'ideal type' of the economic traitor is an older (45 year old in average), married man who is a small entrepreneur in charge of a

family. With regard to the resistance fighters, the vast majority were simply workers who attempted to flee from German work camps. For an exhaustive overview of published results we refer to the bibliographical list, but one highlight is the final report of Florent Verfaillie's research attached to this report as Annex 2.

In the research about the Belgian veterans, one of the major conclusions of the published book, is the vitality of the veterans' movement, described by the authors as perhaps the strongest social movement in interwar Belgium. This politicization of former soldiers was nowhere as visible as in Belgium. Membership of veterans' associations was the highest in Europe, with up to 70% of the 320.000 surviving soldiers being registered. 1412 street actions by war veterans for the interwar period have been detected. The veterans' associations formed a successful social movement, which was able to influence decision-making processes in different areas, ranging from material compensation for themselves to general political issues like the linguistic legislation or the defense policy. Its political style and actions were not violent or militaristic. Apparently, the Belgian veterans were not "brutalized" by the experience of total war. For an exhaustive overview of published results we refer to the bibliographical list, but one highlight is the monography book publication *De overlevenden. De Belgische oud-strijders tijdens het Interbellum* (Antwerpen 2018). This book was awarded by the prestigious three-yearly "Pil-Van Gastelprijs for history" in 2019.

In terms of recommendations :

(1) A strong and uniform interdisciplinary approach and methodology that depends on large serial archival collections can be a huge advantage but can also become a disadvantage once more in-depth knowledge of the sources shows that some of the original assumptions in the methodology are wrong and unobtainable.

(2) There was a certain tension between academic output and public dissemination activities, in terms of strategies, priorities and choices. This is probably a universal tension but was particularly acute in the Centenary commemorative context.

(3) An unambiguously positive lesson learned, is the strong international nature of this particular field of research. For all of the different researches, the dialogue with international scholars (in- and outside of the follow-up committee) and international literature was an integral part of research development. This confirmed the nature of First World Studies in Belgium as a strongly internationally embedded field (in contrast to, for example, Second World War Studies in Belgium).

3/ Keywords

The First World War , Political History, Social History, Social Demography