

Summary

IMMIBEL: Outcast or Embraced? Clusters of Foreign Immigrants in Belgium, c. 1840-1890

1) Context

Situated at the crossroads of migration history, maritime history, social policy and the history of science and technology, this project looked at foreign migration streams of specific groups (sailors, engineers and expellees) to Belgium between 1840-1914. This was an exceptional period in European history, that was characterized by rising mobility and increasing economic integration, but also witnessed the emergence of the 'modern' nation state. For the latter, the monitoring of foreigners gained importance as the distinction between 'foreigner' and 'national' became essential to attribute certain rights and welfare.

2) Objectives

The empirical objectives of the project were to map the scale, chronology and profiles of foreign migration to Belgium in the period 1840-1914, and to investigate the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of the interactions between various groups of migrants and different layers of Belgian society and the state. This project investigated socio-cultural encounters and confrontations that emanated from foreign migration to Belgium by cross- and interdisciplinary analysis and valorization of a series of exceptionally rich but underexploited archival series that are part of the federal historical heritage of the State Archives. It assessed to what extent Belgium embraced or marginalized foreigners by stressing that international *mobility* and *circulation* – rather than one-off *migration* characterized the movements of foreigners. With these dominant mobility patterns in mind the project looked at their influence on the economic, political, cultural and social history of 19th-century Belgium. The case study also provided major contributions to several international debates in migration history, including on the nature of a so-called 'mobility transition', the interactions between state policies and migration patterns, the role of migration 'chains' and networks, the international dimensions of the 'knowledge economy', and the long-term integration of international labour markets. Finally, by integrating the resulting databases in the search engine and website repository of the State Archives, the project aimed at greatly enhancing the accessibility of the 'individual foreigner's files' both for the interested public and for further academic research.

3) Methodology

In line with recent conceptual innovations in the fields of migration studies and migration history, the analytical framework adopted in this project integrated three scales of analysis, the so-called 'macro' (structural conditions), 'meso' (social networks and institutions) and 'micro' level (individual and household characteristics). Each level of analysis pertains to other research questions and required distinct research methods, ranging from quantitative aggregate statistics and life-course and social network analysis to qualitative analysis of individual biographies. While some of the more aggregate analyses were pursued for the totality of foreigners recorded in the sources, in-depth qualitative analysis at the meso and micro concentrated on three distinct subgroups, that are illustrative of the great social variation in foreign migration and in their interactions with Belgian society: (1) expelled foreigners, i.e. 'unwanted' migrants who interacted with repressive state policies; (2) sailors, working in one of the most internationalized labour market segments; and (3) engineers who as 'actors of knowledge' contributed to the diffusion of new ideas and technologies in the wake of Belgium's progression towards the second industrial revolution. This project processed information mainly from the more than 150,000 individual foreigners' files in the "first series" of the Sûreté Publique (1840-1890), 962 general files on the implementation of migration policies by the Sûreté Publique, the Mouvement de la Population, Population census, c. 40,000 entries to the seamen's registry and marriage certificates. Making optimal use of the possibilities of 'digital history' and record linkage combined with statistical, GIS, life course, social network and qualitative analysis, the great strength of the proposed methodology lied in its possibility to combine aggregate quantitative analysis with in-depth qualitative analysis, to combine cross-sectional with longitudinal analysis, and to combine diachronic with spatial comparisons.

4) Results

Two research vademecums disclosing sources on migration and the Belgian merchant fleet were composed to facilitate research on these topics. The integration of our databases of the foreigner's files index, Mouvement de la Population, Population census and the seaman's registry with the websites and search engines of the State Archives (www.arch.be) and LOKSTAT improves the accessibility of these sources and makes our data available to academics and the broader public. The materials were broadly used for university teaching purposes ranging from the supervision of master thesis students, guest lectures to full-fledged courses. The successful application for valorisation funds allowed developing primary source-based class materials to teach the topic in secondary schools. To spur the dissemination of research on migration history, IMMIBEL members organized the Day of Belgian Migration History in 2017, which due to its success became an annual event. The platform brings together people (academics, amateur historians, students, archivists, teachers, museum workers and education specialists) working on migration history to, from and within Belgium to increase the visibility of their work and promote collaboration. Besides this networking event all members of the project participated in conferences and workshops (68) and gave public lectures (7) to disseminate the results. The combined efforts led to a rich and diverse publication record some reaching out to a broader audience (9), yet most targeted academics via international journals (13), book chapters in scientific volumes (7), the completion of dissertations (2), an edited book and a monograph.

5) Main Conclusions

International mobility and circulation – rather than one-off migration – had a profound influence on the economic, political, cultural and social history of 19th-century Europe in general, and Belgium in particular. The subproject on sailors has revealed that the Belgian fleet relied heavily on foreign labour in the nineteenth century, particularly because the Belgian labour supply was insufficient to meet the increased demand. It highlights that the maritime labour market for seafarers in Antwerp altered significantly as a result of new propulsion modes, although there was also continuity. Increased numbers of especially unskilled and casual labourers in the Belgian fleet embodied changes in labour structures, wage distribution, migration trajectories and career development, which in turn resulted in a more pronounced segmentation of the maritime labour market with the advent of steam. At the same time, traditional seamanship did not immediately disappear, which suggests that the socioeconomic effects of the industrialization at sea on the maritime labour force followed the rhythm of the implementation of new technologies. The subproject on expellees highlights the centrality of expulsion in migration policies of modern nation states and shows that foreigners were stripped of any rights protecting them against expulsion independent of how well-established they were in Belgian society. Belgium embraced foreigners without criminal records who contributed to the economy and did not pose a threat to the public order, yet they could always become outcasts as soon as they fell without means or labelled as undesirables. Migration policies of modern nation states were and still are fundamentally discriminative as they inherently consider foreigners as disposable which turns them into second-class citizens and stigmatizes them as a threat. The subproject on engineers' migratory behavior is still in the process of completion, reaching three main dimensions: (a) the development of engineer's occupation in the private sector in Belgium; (b) the relationship of these foreigners with the Belgian state along the 19th century, and (c) judicial and administrative responses to breaches of the law committed by these foreign engineers in Belgium. Continued collaborative research by the different promoters in the IMMIBEL project has together further highlighted the high incidence and various patterns of turnover and circulation involved with various forms of international migration in 19th-century Belgium shedding new light on long-term genealogies of migration policies.

6) Recommendations

The work that has been done to disclose and analyse the "first series" of the individual foreigners' files of the Sûreté Publique (1840-1890) and the first series of the general files (1160) should be continued for the following series of individual files and the second series of general files (1417). Especially since the collection becomes much more complete in the subsequent series which not only allows to further develop the above-mentioned research framework over time, but to take it significant steps further permitting to formulate more detailed research questions and apply more in-depth research strategies on this unique source worldwide uncovering new insights on the developments in international migration and international mobility in general. The latter aspects have been greatly overlooked by scholars using individual files and general files of the Sûreté Publique only for migration and totally neglecting the potential they offer to assess how the booming tourist industry affected migration patterns and policies during the 19th and 20th century and vice versa. We warmly recommend any research and valorisation projects to be developed with such aims.

Keywords

Migration Studies, Migration History, Maritime & Transport History, History of Social Policy, History of Science and Technology