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The Great War from Below. Mobility and Cultural Dynamics in Belgium (1900-1930)

DURATION
1/10/2013 - 31/12/2017

BUDGET
872.454 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research project aims to analyze the long term societal impact of the First World War (WWI) in Belgium through a systematic bottom-up analysis of carefully selected social groups (in **three Work Packages**):

- 1° **Veterans (incl. Prisoners of War)**
- 2° **Pro-German Collaborators and Resistance Fighters**
- 3° **Forced labourers (deported and non-deported).**

These social groups were all directly affected by WWI and their particular war experiences initiated processes of group formation and identification to different degrees. Two types of questions are addressed in this research project.

- 1) How did specific wartime experiences (with a focal point of interest on the confrontation with 'the other') influence the **longer-term life course** of these different groups as a whole (social mobility, changes)?
- 2) What **agency** did these groups develop after the war to cope with their wartime experiences; what claims did they make?



How broad and fundamental were social changes in contrast with continuities; what types of changes can we detect; to what variables (social, geographical, cultural-religious, wartime experiences/confrontation with the other) can we connect the differences between the analyzed groups with specific war experiences; what caused these changes and how big was the window of opportunity for social change after 1918 (how open/closed did the societal context remain)? To what extent did a shared war past lead to collective claim making and group formation processes? Did these processes result in self-organisations as the creation of numerous associations of war widows, veterans or even former pro-German collaborators clearly indicates? What type of political and social claims did these organisations make, what strategies did they develop and to what extent was their claim making successful? Were some groups (for example veterans) more prone than others (for example forced labourers) to participate in such organisations of people with a shared war past, and if so, why was this the case? To what extent did the social profile of leaders and militants of these organisations coincide with the profile of the social group they presumed to represent?

The methodological interdisciplinarity lies in a combination of **historical prosopography**, **social demographic life course analysis** and **social-political analysis of collective/individual agency**. After the major scholarly shift during which cultural histories and memory studies gradually gained dominance in international WWI historiography during the 1990s, this research project wants to contribute to re-introducing social history at the centre stage of WWI historiography.

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Through what could be considered as a 'social history of WWI' we will critically assess the scholarly consensus that assumes that top-down reform related to the principles of mass-democracy instigated by the Great War (political and socio-economic reform) were broadly absorbed and interiorized by local societies and ordinary populaces after 1918.

The research project is carried out by three doctoral and one post-doctoral researcher. Florent Verfaillie (CEGESOMA) studies collaboration and resistance ; Fabian Van Wesemael (UGent and UNamur) studies war veterans ; Arnaud Charon (ARA) focuses on forced labourers and Dr. Saskia Caroline Hin (KULeuven) is in charge of the methodological coordination of the research projects. The project started in March 2014 and will run until February 2018.

Several public events will take place during these four years, notably a workshop on the use of Belgian sources for a social history of war and occupation and a methodological workshop on historical demography and prosopography. In the course of the project, several provisional reports will also be published in peer-reviewed journals.

The expected results of this project are first and foremost three doctoral theses (and their respective monographs). An international closing lecture is also foreseen, in which the final results of the research projects will be presented and placed in an international perspective. An English-language edited volume is also expected, combining both elements of social history and methodological aspects. Finally, the idea of a visual adaptation of a number of representative life-stories per social group has been contemplated in order to reach a larger audience



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