

OUTLAW

Outsiders and the Law. Uncovering Criminal Justice Trajectories in Nineteenth Century Belgium

Contract - B2/212/P2/OUTLAW

SUMMARY

OUTLAW pursued two intertwined ambitions. The first was archival and heritage-oriented: to unlock and promote the Belgian prison archives held by the State Archives, and in particular the so-called ‘registers of moral bookkeeping’. Introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, these registers document the family background, education, criminal record, behaviour and physical condition of roughly 120,000 men and women sentenced to at least three months' imprisonment in Belgium between 1855 and 1924. The State Archives digitised all 623 surviving registers and, through a citizen-science model involving 50 volunteers, built a searchable database of 27 fields. The project produced c. 120,000 freely accessible scans and a database of 122,225 convicts, available via the Agatha search engine and, as open data, through SODHA and CESSDA.

OUTLAW is, on the other hand, a historical-criminological research project that focuses on the social profiles and criminal justice trajectories of persons confronted with the law in nineteenth-century Belgium, in order to determine how different forms of social vulnerability (gender, age, class, migration background etc.) shape uses, practices and experiences of justice and to give voice to underrepresented groups of ‘outsiders’ in history. The empirical research confirms the project’s central hypothesis: individuals’ encounters with the criminal justice system differed fundamentally depending on their social profile and on the social capital they were able to mobilise. Across the successive arenas of the penal chain, people identified as social ‘outsiders’ were consistently treated differently, and generally more harshly, than those considered part of the ‘established’ population. Social vulnerability thus shaped the outcomes of contact with the law at nearly every stage of the judicial process. The research, however, also shows that even individuals occupying highly vulnerable positions within the social hierarchy were not without recourse.

Historical Criminology - Prison History – Prison Archives - Social Vulnerability – Citizen Science