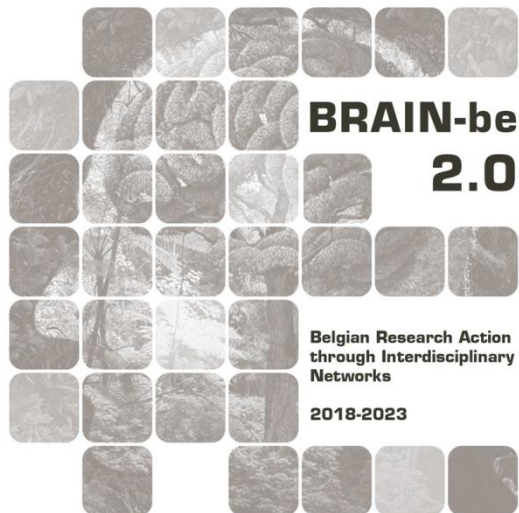


WOMENEXILE

**Gendering Political Exile: Women's Political Migrations to Belgium
(1918-1958)**

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Pillar 2: Heritage science



NETWORK PROJECT

WOMENEXILE

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(1918-1958)**

Contract - B2/202/P2/WOMENEXILE

FINAL REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Context

The history of politically active women in exile in Belgium remains largely unexplored so far, despite the rich material available in central government archives. Entirely missing is a general overview of the phenomenon, based on administrative serial sources, without prior choices for particular national groups. Indeed, unearthing these life stories in the kilometers of archival documents requires a coherent, systematic and time-consuming effort.

Objectives

The WomenExile project's core purpose is to overcome some methodological obstacles that stands in the way of developing a longitudinal history of female political migration in Belgium, through interdisciplinary teamwork. In order to do so, WomenExile aims to create several reliable databases of female exiles in Belgium between 1918 and 1958, enabling to navigate the rich material of central government archives and to find the traces that women have left there.

Conclusions

The first phase of the project produces two working tools for use by future researchers: a database of more than 60,000 names of people who obtained refugee status in Belgium between 1945 and 1958, and a list of 400 politically active women in Belgium, compiled from a variety of sources. The second phase of the project focuses on a case study: women expelled from Belgium for political reasons between 1919 and 1939. It produces a database of expulsions by Royal Decree for political reasons targeting men and women, and a database exclusively covering expelled women, enriched with qualitative biographical information from individual files. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of individual records reveals the multiple factors that influence expulsion decisions (surveillance methods, personal representations and assessments by agents, government directives, and administrative opportunities) as well as what happens after a royal decree of expulsion on political grounds is issued against a woman: how the sanction is applied, resisted, or negotiated, and its concrete consequences on the women's life trajectories. Finally, in both its first and second phases, WomenExile highlights the remarkable individual journeys of women activists and drawn attention of a wider audience to the twentieth-century history of female militant exiles in Belgium.

Keywords

History, Women, Migration, Exile, Activism, Police, Refugees

1. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this project was to uncover the lives and activities of migrant women who lived in political exile or were involved in political activities in Belgium in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and to interpret these life stories within wider historical contexts, domestic as well as international. We were threading on unknown territory: very little was known about their numbers, the countries of origins, the causes of their exiles, their migration trajectories, the reactions of the Belgian political and administrative systems, the expulsions some of them underwent, the way they integrated in their new country and developed militant activities, the support and resistance they encountered from civil society organizations and citizens.

The reasons why the history of women in exile in Belgium had remained largely unexplored so far are twofold: (i) for a long time, historians lacked a specific interest in the history of women in exile (as is explained below in the ‘State of the Art’); (ii) unearthing their life stories in the kilometers of archival documents required a coherent, systematic and time-consuming effort, which was all but impossible to realize within an individual research project (which will be explained in the Methodology-section). The WomenExile BRAIN-project has opened the door for future researchers by creating several tools enabling to navigate the rich material of central government archives and find the traces that women have left there, and by attracting the attention of a wider audience to the twentieth-century history of female militant exiles in Belgium. Reconstructing and recounting the life stories of these women in exile (in the period 1918-1958) would also enrich and feed contemporary debates on migration, diversity and today’s ‘refugee crises’, as well as on gender and the position of women within activism.



Identification picture of a woman with her children included in her husband’s Information bulletin, Eisden, 1926, Aliens Police individual record nr. 1437803, NAB.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

While it is certainly true that ‘women’s history’ and ‘migration studies’ were initially parallel developments, without much contact, in more recent decades both fields have interacted more intensely (Schrover, 2008; Guerry, 2009; Green, 2013). Illustrative in this respect is the publication of a special issue on ‘gender’ by the *International Migration Review* in 2006, and a growing number of special issues on ‘Femmes en migration’ by *Revue Européenne des Migrations internationales* in 2015, on ‘migration’ by *Gender & History* in 2019; on ‘Femmes et genres en migration’ by *Clio* in 2020; on ‘Femmes et genre en exil au XIXe siècle’ by *Diasporas* in 2021... Closer to home, *Sextant* published issues on the topic in 2004 and 2009, *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* in 2001, while *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* had a special issue on ‘gender, migration and government policy’ in 2008. Moreover, a number of edited volumes and monographs, published by leading social scientists and historians, have appeared, dealing with different regions, diverse time periods and several sub-topics (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000; George, 2005; Palmary, Burman et al., 2010; Schrover and Moloney, 2013; Timmerman, Fonseca et al., 2018). A number of topics figures prominently in this literature (Schrover and Moloney, 2013): the traffic of women and the relation to sex work (Keusch, 2017; Gould, 2010; Vijayarasa, 2015); female immigrants and domestic service (Momsen, 1999; Moya, 2007; Lutz, 2008); family reunion and ‘immigrant families’ (Grillo, 2008; Kraler, Kofman et al., 2011); and – more recently – debates about Muslim women in ‘western’ societies. These topics are historically relevant and important, but such studies tend to concentrate almost exclusively on the vulnerability and dependency of migrant women, representing these women as more or less passive actors, as doubly repressed, as part of the ‘migrant problem’ (Schrover, 2013; Schrover and Moloney, 2013). Migration of women is thus often connected to marriage, sex and care: in that sense women were often treated as following in the footsteps of men or migrating as a consequence of family decisions and as such without agency and without using their own networks or making their own destinies (Harzig, 2001). When refugee women (rather than economic migrants) are the object of the study, usually one national or ethnic group is singled out, the study focuses on a specific wave of refugees (such as those fleeing a genocide or war) or even on individuals, often writers or artists (Stanley and Zinn, 2007; Shayne, 2009), or the approach is juridical and policy-oriented (Spijkerboer, 2000; Walsum and Spijkerboer, 2007). If we limit the attention to Belgium, there have been for instance specific case studies on Jewish female refugees (Caestecker and Moore, 2011) and Ostarbeiterinnen after the Second World War (Venken, 2008). Entirely missing, however, is a more general overview of the phenomenon of women in exile in Belgium, based on administrative serial sources, without prior choices for particular national groups.

At first, WomenExile aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of women’s exile in Belgium between 1918 and 1958, who had been politically active in their country of origin or were at some point politically active in Belgium, based on official documents of the Belgian authorities held in the National Archives of Belgium. This is a particularly interesting period, starting with the refugee crisis after the First World War, the Armenian Genocide and the Russian Revolution; including the waves of refugees caused by fascist and authoritarian regimes during the 1930s; and ending with the crisis caused by the Second World War and the early Cold War, and the introduction of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). The survey would then be the basis for a more detailed reconstruction of the lives of a sample of women. Gradually, the emphasis of the project would move

towards more qualitative, life-history approaches, illustrating how these women experienced their Belgian exile, and how they engaged themselves in civil society organizations or political (trans)national activism. In doing so, the goal was to break with the heroic figure of the twentieth-century male political refugee, that has been dominant and has monopolized the imagination for decades. By creating new tools that makes it possible to search the central archives for politically active women, WomenExile had two objectives: (I) in short term, to bring the experiences of a group of mostly forgotten and hidden exiles under the attention of a specialized as well as lay audience; and (II) in the future, to enable ambitious and large scale new research on female migration to Belgium.

The spotlight on women's activism, has been a key focus of women's history since its inception (Thébaud and Richard, 1995), and has gradually shifted to a transnational perspective (Gabaccia and Iacovetta, 2002; Miranda, Ouali and Kergoat, 2011; Molony and Nelson, 2017; Sill, 2022; De Haan, 2023, etc.). By focusing on agency as a central issue – political agency and migratory agency – the WomenExile project is part of the new histories of exiled women activists in the 19th and 20th centuries (Maugendre, 2019; Lo Bido, 2013; André, 2016). Indeed, research has shown that women were not blindly subject to structural factors but played an active role in designing their migration project, deciding to migrate, organising their journey, and participating in networks and society in their destination country (Timmerman, 2015). However, attention to the active role of migrant women should not lead to neglecting their specific vulnerability (Nouvelles Questions Féministes, 2006). For this reason, agency will also often be interpreted in the sense of adaptation: how do women adapt to opportunities and constraints, how do they give meaning to their migration trajectory? The concept of agency is also useful for thinking about the collective commitments of immigrant women (Veith, 1999). Migrant women's involvement in associations can thus be analysed as a strategy for empowerment and resistance to precariousness (Lesselier, 2003), with migrant women portrayed as 'resilient, strategic and seeking autonomy' (Schmoll, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

From the outset, the project's core purpose was to overcome three major methodological obstacles that stood in the way of developing a longitudinal history of female political migration in Belgium, through interdisciplinary teamwork. These (well-known) obstacles were:

(i) The massive quantity of institutional archives of various kinds concerning migrants/activists held by the State archives. If we consider only the individual files of the Aliens Police, 1,760,000 were opened during the period 1918-1958, and 60,000 of them also had a file with the State Security Services due to subversive activities.

(ii) The difficulty of finding women in these institutional archives, as they were often treated as secondary and included in files concerning their husbands as 'heads of the family' (Gillen, 2004).

(iii) The polysemy of concepts such as political engagement or political activity, both as a category of analysis for contemporary researchers and as categories that were historically situated, subject to interpretation depending on the actors involved, and subject to change during the period under review. Indeed, the notion of "political exile" covers a variety of situations whose socio-historical evolution is strongly linked to the development of Belgian alien policy. The concepts of "political refugee" or "political asylum" are legal concepts that were progressively codified during the first half of the twentieth century, in response to national and international political issues (Caestecker, 2000). This legal evolution is intimately linked to the perception of the various forms of foreign political activism on Belgian soil by the country's elites. Until 1977, "political activities" remained prohibited for foreigners residing in Belgium and constituted grounds for expulsion from the territory (Morelli, 1991), but the extension of this prohibition has changed profoundly over time.

The project was therefore planned in two parts, the first of which was carried out by a historian-archivist and focused on the archives, with the aim of clearing and organising the many possible institutional collections, finding solutions for unearthing women activists, and developing tools that could be used for future research. The second part, carried out by a postdoctoral researcher, was to build on this work to conduct an in-depth analysis on more specific cases.

I. Part: Archives / Exploratory phase: Women's political migrations to Belgium

During the exploratory phase, numerous institutional funds were mobilised to uncover traces of politically active migrant women, including:

- Refugee files (National Archives of Belgium [NAB] – including random checks of individual files);
- Aliens police files (NAB – including random checks of individual files);
- General or thematic files from the Alien Police department of the Ministry of Justice (NAB);
- Naturalisation files (NAB);
- Gendarmerie (NAB – General Staff: Operations Directorate);
- Safe conduct passes (NAB – Nansen passports);
- Ministry of Defence: Files Armed resistance fighters (NAB);
- Minutes of the Council of Ministers (AGR);
- Archives of the public prosecutor's offices and the judicial police at the public prosecutor's office of Antwerp (State Archives Antwerp in Beveren);

- Archives of the public prosecutor's offices and the judicial police at the public prosecutor's office of Brussels (State Archives Brussels in Forest).

The mapping of all these resources and methods for finding women with a political agency in central government archives has been presented by Aline Thomas in different scientific events.

Given the variety of sources, administrative statuses, life situations and forms of political engagement, Aline Thomas has developed not one but several tools, which will also enable future research to be carried out.

1) Based on United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) archives, Aline Thomas has produced a comprehensive database listing more than 60,000 people who were granted refugee status in Belgium between 1945 and 1958.

After World War II, the Belgian authorities became increasingly bound to international commitments, and endorsed the charter of IRO, the international organization in charge of war displaced resettlement. In 1952, the refugee policy is firmly established, based on the international refugee regime in the Geneva Convention (1951). A new refugee definition is agreed upon: « a person with a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion ». Belgium became the first country to delegate its national competence for recognizing refugees on its territory to the representative of an international body (the Belgian delegate of the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR)) (Strubbe, 2020). This definition incorporated those grounds of prosecution that had been lacking in the 1930s, but the Belgian law still prohibits any political activity of aliens on its territory.

This inventory now offers the possibility of searching refugees by name to find their individual files held by the National Archives and provides easier access to UNHCR's files (Aline THOMAS, *Inventaris van het archief van de Delegatie in België van het Hoog Commissariaat der Verenigde Naties voor de Vluchtelingen (UNHCR). Individuele dossiers inzake asielaanvragers.*) As they make visible all individuals (men and women) who have been granted refugee status, with the possibility of qualitatively examining the reasons for their applications, these tools offer privileged access to constructing a gendered history of political migration authorised by the Belgian state (in contrast to political activities deemed “undesirable”, which we will discuss in Part II). These tools relating to refugees UNHCR are now available on AGATHA: the online search environment of the State Archives of Belgium [code F 1660].

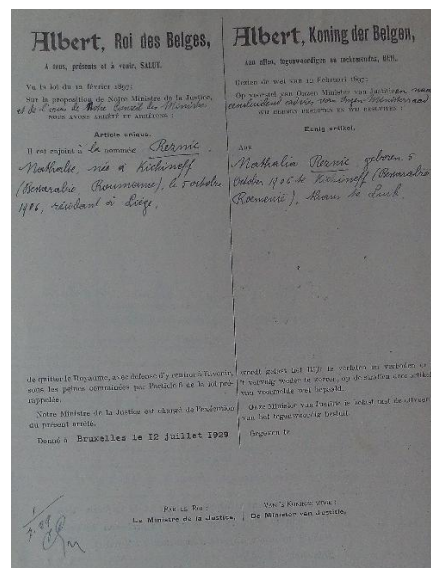
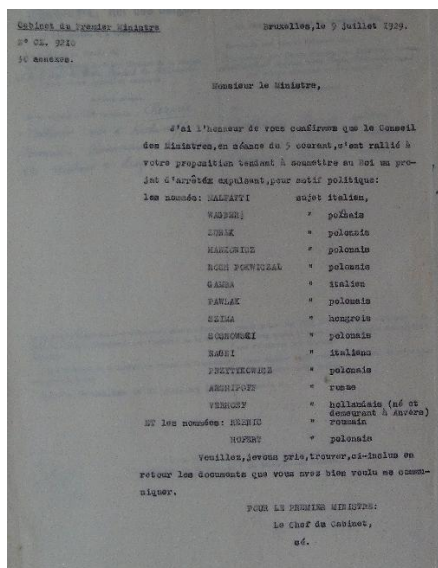
1918 and 1958, and the different ways in which they were treated by the Belgian authorities. This research in the archives serve both to highlight the variety and diversity of women's paths and to provide a more in-depth qualitative analysis of specific cases. Some of these remarkable cases have been the subject of various communications aimed at the general public throughout the project via the State Archives' social media channels.

II. Part : Research / Expulsions for political reasons

Drawing on the insights gained from the 'archives' part of the project, the decision was made to focus the in-depth research on the sub-group of women expelled from Belgium for 'political reasons' between 1919 and 1939. This choice made it possible to overcome the difficulty posed by the overabundance of sources and the difficulty in clearly defining the criteria for 'political engagement'.

Although the majority of expulsions of foreigners during the interwar period was carried out through administrative channels, which leave few traces, an examination of the limited number of Royal decrees specifically dedicated to the formal expulsion of foreigners who have broken the law or their duty of reserve with regard to political engagement offers a privileged insight into the limits that Belgian authorities drew between tolerated and "subversive" political activities. The meticulous compilation of a comprehensive corpus of men and women expelled for political reasons (two databases with 2,800 (M/F) and 250 (F) entries respectively) has made it possible to produce robust and representative quantitative data, providing a better understanding of police practices regarding the removal of foreigners on the basis of their political activities. Of a total of approximately 2,800 politically motivated deportations between 1919 and 1939, around 250 targeted women.

The first database (2,800 entries, male/female) was compiled by Nicolas Horvat and Juliette Masquelier based on the minutes of the meetings of the Council of Ministers, in which expulsions by royal decree on political grounds are mentioned, cross-referenced with the collection of Royal Decrees of Expulsion (NAB, Ministry of Justice, "Wetten en Besluiten" [Inv I 696]). The database includes surnames, first names, nationalities, gender, dates and places of birth, places of residence, dates of expulsion and individual file numbers. It offers the possibility of producing quantitative data (by age, nationality, gender, date of expulsion) and cartographic data (by place of birth and residence), and will enable future searches by name to directly access individual records, opening up the possibility for large-scale qualitative research.



List of expulsions on ‘political grounds’ approved by the Council of Ministers and corresponding Royal Decree of expulsion, 1929 (Aliens Police individual record n°1345287, NAB).

The second database (250 entries, only women) was compiled by Juliette Masquelier by cross-referencing the minutes of the Council of Ministers, compilations of royal decrees, and analysing each individual record of the women included in the list. The database includes names, first names, dates and places of birth, nationality, occupation, marital status, places of residence, date of expulsion, and qualitative information on alleged political activities and on the strategies adopted by women after receiving their expulsion orders (departure, appeal, clandestinity, marriage, forced removal, prison, etc.) and the rest of their journey, as it appears in their individual files. The relatively small number of expelled women allowed for an in-depth qualitative study of these cases, including an examination of police practices towards them, including potential gender bias. The comprehensiveness of this corpus also enabled quantitative assessments of the strategies employed by women to negotiate, resist or adapt to expulsion.

Ten remarkable stories have been selected to raise public awareness of the history of women expelled for political reasons, retrace the history of the surveillance of foreigners, and highlight the challenges of constructing historical knowledge, through two podcasts freely available on the platform ULB Podcasts (“Femmes engagées, regard policier : une enquête historique dans les archives de la Police des étrangers” - five episodes in French and two episodes in Dutch). The two databases will be soon available on the SODHA platform hosted by the State Archives. Both tools will enable other researchers to continue investigating this measure of removal, which has received little attention in the literature on the post-1918 period.

4. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Historiography considers the interwar period to be a particular moment in the deployment of policies of surveillance, control, and repression of migration within various European countries (Fahrmeir, Faron and Weil, 2003). These policies were based on new mechanisms for policing and administering national and foreign populations, which formed the backbone of modern nation states (Noiriel, 1997). Frank Caestecker has shown how political fears linked to the rise of communism contributed to increased state control of immigration (in terms of both legislation and enforcement), leading in particular to greater powers for the Security Service and increased repression of politically active migrants during the first half of the 1930s (Caestecker, 2000). However, the practical implementation of surveillance and repression of foreigners during the interwar period has only been studied in a fragmentary manner. It emerges sporadically from the history of migration and activism in exile – for example, of Italians (Morelli, 1984), Poles (Goddeeris, 2005) or Jews (Van Doorslaer, 1996) – for which the individual files of the Aliens Police are an essential source. A few case studies have also focused specifically on the administrative practices of the Aliens Police in order to offer a methodological reflection on the use of these archives (Lesogo, 2004; Morelli and Schreiber, 2004). More recently, Yasmina Zian has placed the anti-Semitic representations of the agents at the heart of her research (2022). Expulsions have yet to be explored in depth from this perspective, even though they constitute a pillar of Belgian migration policy (Feys, 2019).

The WomenExile project contributed to this field of research by examining the implementation of ‘political’ expulsions of women of all nationalities. The originality of its approach lied in working with an exhaustive corpus – the 245 women who were subject to a Royal Decree of deportation between 1919 and 1939 – allowing a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data contained in each of their individual files.

1) In a first article (submitted for peer review), Juliette Masquelier examined the decision to issue a Royal Decree of expulsion on political grounds against women during the interwar period.

The 1930s were a period of severe repression of political activities undertaken by foreigners in Belgium. The Aliens Police and the State Security Service carried out intense surveillance, targeting communists in particular, and orchestrated the expulsion of all foreigners they deemed politically undesirable (Caestecker, 2000). Of the more than 2,300 people expelled for political reasons during this period, 10% were women.

The decision to issue a Royal Decree of Expulsion on political grounds is influenced by multiple factors: surveillance methods, personal representations and assessments by agents, government directives, and administrative opportunities. By cross-referencing quantitative and qualitative data from the individual files of the 245 women who received expulsion orders for political reasons during the interwar period, certain patterns can be identified in the practices of officials and the profiles of the women targeted.

The three most common profiles of women in the cohort suggest that criteria such as nationality (Polish, Romanian, Russian), ethnicity (Jewish), and socioeconomic status (students and working class) strongly influenced the surveillance and political repression of both men and women. However, the

lower number of Italian women expelled, compared to the high level of criminalization of Italian men, suggests that other factors are also at play.

The criteria for classifying a political activity as “subversive” seem to be fairly well established (although their application varied in severity over the period): they relate to public expression (demonstrations and “active propaganda”) or the occupation of leadership positions within political organizations. These criteria correspond to militant roles traditionally performed by men, but it is not uncommon for the Aliens Police to recognize that these forms of action are also embodied by women. This logic renders invisible other forms of engagement that fall within traditional female gender roles—to the benefit of those female activists who escape repression. This is likely the case for some Italian anti-fascist women. A certain degree of political agency is recognized for single women, but also for many married women, whose expulsion is not necessarily linked to that of their husbands. On the other hand, practical considerations on the part of the immigration police seem to lead to the removal of many married women through the expulsion of their husbands, particularly women from working-class backgrounds.

While the criteria for political subversion apply to both men and women, gender bias nevertheless influences the treatment of female cases by the Aliens Police. The morality of foreign women is scrutinized, and any deviation from gender norms can be detrimental to them, causing immigration police officers to view them negatively. The Royal Decree of expulsion on political grounds can then be used as a means of pressure to force these deviant women to return to the gender norm. Thus, undesirability is not based solely on political factors, but also on more ambiguous criteria, such as transgression of gender roles and insubordination to authority. The study of political references in the individual records of people expelled for other reasons also suggests a high degree of overlap between political, economic, and moral undesirability, as well as the opportunistic use of the various legal tools available to officials to remove foreigners deemed undesirable.

Further large-scale research on the thousands of files of men and women deported for various reasons would help to substantiate and clarify these initial findings. A cross-sectional study of administrative practices would shed light on the processes involved in constructing profiles of undesirable individuals and their porosity. Comparing male and female cases, regardless of nationality and grounds for expulsion, would deepen our understanding of biases in police’s representations and assessments, and their interactions.

2) In a second article (submitted for peer review), Juliette Masquelier examines what happens after a Royal Decree of expulsion on political grounds is issued against a woman: how the sanction is applied, resisted, or negotiated, and its concrete consequences on the women's life trajectories.

The individual records contain numerous traces of the agency of women who were subject to expulsion orders on political grounds. Nearly three-quarters of them resisted or contested the orders, either directly or indirectly, with varying degrees of resources and external support, and one in five ultimately succeeded in obtaining a suspension of the measure. Expelled women faced structural insecurity caused by the frequent changes of opinion of the Aliens Police, the short deadlines for enforcing decisions, and the constant possibility of arrest—not to mention the precariousness of their situation once they left Belgium.

On the part of the Aliens Police, the application of expulsion measures follows a threefold logic—in line with its pre-war functioning: arbitrariness, pragmatic efficiency, and the protection of the gender order. The Aliens Police reserves all decisions for itself, never justifies its actions, offers no standard appeal procedure, and does not tolerate interference from local authorities. Its decisions are based on the State Security Service's guidelines regarding the political dangerousness of those being deported, but also on its assessment of various individual situations and the guarantees provided by potential supporters.

The Aliens Police adapts pragmatically in order to achieve its objectives: either the removal of “undesirable” foreigners, sometimes at the cost of a few illegalities, or sufficient proof of the harmlessness of the persons targeted and their submission to authority. With a systematic attitude of suspicion towards individuals targeted by an expulsion order, the Aliens Police readily resort to a proliferation of administrative acts (requests for surveillance and checks by local agents; accumulation of frequently renewed short deadlines) rather than risk leaving an “undesirable” person on the territory. Similarly, it multiplies the number of intermediaries at all stages of the procedure in order to ensure continuity in its surveillance: even if one of the intermediaries is less zealous than it is in enforcing the expulsion, another source will make it possible to cross-check useful information.

There is no doubt that the “good morals” of foreigners are scrutinized by the Aliens Police, as is their political behaviour. Gender influences the enforcement of decrees in several ways. After receiving an order, deviating from female gender expectations (such as living with a partner, being away from the marital home, not taking care of one's children) objectively penalizes women by making the Aliens Police hostile towards them. As their decision-making power is discretionary, the slightest reservation can weigh heavily on the outcome of an appeal against expulsion. Conversely, being a mother and accompanied by young children can provide some protection against detention and forced escort to the border, but these practices continue to be reported. Finally, the only way to permanently escape the sanctions imposed by the Aliens Police is exclusively female: marriage to a Belgian citizen.

Some women and their allies highlight their gender to plead political ignorance or to move the officers with the difficulties of their situation—with mixed results. The Aliens Police does not give any credence to women's claims of apoliticism once they have been granted a political decree. On the contrary, it sees this measure as a means of pressure, not only to preserve national security, but also to maintain the gender order. Suspensions are thus granted to individuals who reform politically, but also to women who agree to return to the gender norm by giving up economic activity, returning to the marital home, demonstrating submission to authority, or fulfilling their role as mother and wife.

Two observations seem useful in informing reflections on the contemporary society.

1) In the specific context of the interwar period, when the actions of the Security Service and the Aliens Police were entirely focused on combating the “communist threat,” the arbitrariness of their decisions, with no legal recourse possible and which could be suspended and reactivated at any time for any reason, created a climate of insecurity and instability for migrants, even if they had been legally settled in the country for a long time. Research shows that one of the consequences of this arbitrariness was the influence of officers’ personal views and assessments on their decisions and practices: increased surveillance of certain nationalities, ethnic groups, and social classes, and the use of threats of expulsions as a means of pressure to force women to conform to gender norms (by ceasing economic activities and returning to the marital home, for example). The decision that a person is undesirable on the territory doesn’t seem to be solely based on political factors, but also on more ambiguous criteria, such as transgression of gender roles and insubordination to authority. The study suggests a high degree of overlap between political, economic, and moral “undesirability”, as well as the opportunistic use of the various legal tools available to remove foreigners deemed undesirable.

2) The research demonstrates not only the political agency of many migrant women, but also their ability to act in the face of the threat of expulsion: by adapting to it, evading it, negotiating or resisting it in many possible ways, either alone or by finding allies. Faced with arbitrary decisions by the administration, however, their resources are highly unequal: not all of them could take the risk of living clandestinely or to find influential supports.

These observations and the main findings of the research are discussed in two podcasts (five episodes in French and two episodes in Dutch) aimed at a general audience. By following the narrative thread of the remarkable individual stories of several women who were deported for “political reasons,” the podcast highlights the importance of women in past migrations and political movements and puts into context the historical issues surrounding policies of surveillance and control of foreigners.

5. DISSEMINATION AND VALORISATION

For both parts of the project, four types of outputs were produced: (i) research tools, (ii) publications for the general public, (iii) publications for the academic community, and (iv) teaching activities contributing to the training of new generations of historians.

I. Part: Archives / Women's political migrations to Belgium

i. New research tools

- Database of 60.000 postwar refugees (1945-1956). Realisation: Aline Thomas. All refugees who arrived in Belgium during this period and were recognised by the UNHCR have been identified. This has enabled the creation of a catalogue of all refugee files held at the National Archives, which is accessible to Belgian and foreign researchers via the AGATHA online platform.
- List of 200 militant migrant women in Belgium (1918-1958). Realisation: Aline Thomas. Based on this list, around a hundred individual data sheets were compiled, bringing together all the available sources that shed light on the lives and journeys of these women. These tools have helped to speed up the identification of and access to the relevant sources used in the research.
- Digitisation of around 100 individual records of migrant militant women 1918-1958. Realisation: Aline Thomas. These scans will be available shortly on the AGATHA platform and added to the digital copies of the files that are already accessible online.

ii. Valorisation of the archives for the general public

Publication of biographical notes on remarkable activist migrant women who used to live in Belgium (in French and Dutch). Writing: Aline Thomas. Online publication: AGR.

- **Hélène Nowak**: an armed resistance fighter. **18.05.2022** – on the launch of the post-war refugee inventory. <https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=actualites&r=toutes-les-actualites&a=2022-05-18-projet-womexile-40.000-refugies-d-apres-guerre-repertoires>
- **Zofia Lechno-Wasiutynska**: a leading Polish scientist who took part in the Warsaw Uprising. **11.02.2023** – on the occasion of the International Day of Women and Girls in Science. <https://www.facebook.com/rijksarchief/posts/pfbid02Y1MQHeywtW3uBbqqtgrqZgv8cJDTMJKFJggQ4k3A3C5N5b4QRYxizpCuEbXmM8YI>
- **Vogelina Lobe**: activism and feminist struggle. **08.03.2023** – on the occasion of International Women's Day. <https://www.arch.be/index.php?l=nl&m=nieuws&r=alle-nieuwsberichten&a=2023-03-08-het-verhaal-van-vogelina-lobe-1912-1997-activisme-en-feministische-strijd>
- **Barbara Wrobel**: a Polish journalist in exile. **24.03.2023** – Following on from the PassaPorta Festival, which during that edition focused on the theme of “refuge”, in the sense of writers, artists and journalists in exile. <https://www.facebook.com/rijksarchief/posts/pfbid031Qvme3GeAdQ8PTGdmX6Mh5NHvBqkEPfZenhd1i3MB5fTxbSweS6yJEziJUCLnHHdl>
- **Gitel Wachspress**: a Jewish communist who migrated to Palestine in 1950. **11.11.2023** – on the occasion of Feminism Day. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=746343554184225&set=pcb.746343614184219>

Radio: Aline Thomas appears on the programme *d'Office* on regional radio station BRUZZ to present the WomenExile project, **December 2023**.

iii. Valorisation of the archives for the academic community

Presentations at scientific events:

- Aline THOMAS, “Les femmes en fuite (1918-1958). Les archives centrales dans la perspective du genre”, *Wetenschappelijke Lente*, National Archives of Belgium, **05.06.2023**.
- Juliette MASQUELIER and Aline THOMAS, “Women on the run (1918-1958): Central government archives from a gender perspective”, Women’s History Network Annual Conference, online, **1-2.09.2023**.
- Juliette MASQUELIER, “Lire l’engagement politique des femmes dans les archives de la Police des étrangers (1918-1958)”, annual conference of the Belgian Association for Contemporary History, BelVue, **13.05.2024**.
- Juliette MASQUELIER, “Women Activists in Exile: an introduction”, WomenExile conference *Activists in Exile*, National Archives of Belgium, **24.09.2024**.
- Aline THOMAS, “Vrouwen op de vlucht (1918-1958): centraal overheidsarchief vanuit genderperspectief. Balands van het WomenExile project”, Belgian Day for the History of Migration, National Archives of Belgium, **25.09.2024**.
- Juliette MASQUELIER, Organisation of the panel *Chercher les « subalternes » dans les sources du pouvoir. Éthique et méthodes*, annual day of Contemporary History, organised by the Belgian Association for Contemporary History (BVNG-ABHC), **15.05.2024**. In collaboration with Samuel Dal Zilio (UNamur), Aurore François (UCL), Mathilde Lucic (ULB), Margaux Roberti-Lintermans (UCL) and Anne Roekens (UNamur).
- Juliette MASQUELIER and Aline THOMAS, Organisation of the WomenExile conference “Activists in Exile. Gender, Political Commitment and Migration in the Twentieth Century”, National Archives of Belgium, **24.09.2024**.

The aim of the WomenExile final conference was to highlight recent developments in research on migrant activism, exploring the interactions between gender, political commitment and migration in the 20th century. Selected papers were focussing on women’s involvement as well as on gender relations in an exiled activist context. How does gender influence militancy in migration? And how do political commitment and migration influence gender relations and the construction of femininity and masculinity?

Introduction: Juliette Masquelier (Universiteit Antwerpen)

Panel 1: Activist Networks & Agency (1)

Juliette Louvegny (Université de Namur) - Revolution and student migration. Gendered experiences, relations and policing of Russian students in Belgium (1890-1914)

Ottavia Dal Maso (Università degli Studi di Genova) - Unveiling Networks of Anti-Fascist and Communist Women, 1933-1939

Cecilia Toninato (Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale & Université libre de Bruxelles)
- The political commitment of Italian women in occupied Belgium during WWII

Panel 2: Activist Networks & Agency (2)

Paul-Emmanuel Babin (Université de Lille) - Internationalist activists exiled in Belgium during the Algerian war. Between clandestinity and invisibility of the leaders

Caner Tekin (Ruhr University Bochum) - Exploring the Organisations of Turkish and Kurdish Refugee Women: Conflicts and Interactions in the 1980s

Panel 3: Normative Outlook & Repression

Yasmina Zian (Université libre de Bruxelles) - The Aliens Police, women's expulsions and strategies to resist

Juliette Masquelier (Universiteit Antwerpen) - Women expelled for “political reasons” in Belgium in the 1920s and 1930s

Panel 4: Memory, Traces & Individual Trajectories

Margot Elmer (European University Institute) - Angelica Balabanova in Brussels (1897-1899): the intellectual education of a socialist activist

Olivia Salmon Monviola (Université de Clermont-Ferrand) - Feminine libertarian activism. Spanish anarchist network in Toulouse

Panel 5: Gender & Community

Delphine Diaz (Université de Reims) - Belgian Women Refugees in France at War and their Invisible Commitments (1914-1919)

Sofiane Bouhdiba (Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales de Tunis) - The exile of Spanish Republican women in Tunisia in 1939: between indifference and solidarity

Neslihan Dogan (Erfgoedcel Gent) - Connecting home, family and community. Trajectories and roles of Turkish migrant women in Ghent between 1964 and 1979

Juliette MASQUELIER and Aline THOMAS, Organisation of the Belgian Day for the History of Migration on the theme “Women and Migrations”, National Archives of Belgium, **25.09.2024**.

iv. Teaching

Cécile VANDERPELEN and Juliette MASQUELIER, Seminar “Écriture de l’Histoire – époque contemporaine”, History bloc 2, ULB, **academic year 2023-2024**. 30 cases from the database “militant migrant women”. Students conduct personal research in order to write a biography and place it in its historical context. Supported at NAB by Filip STRUBBE and Aline THOMAS.

Juliette MASQUELIER, “WomenExile : Militantes exilées en Belgique (1918-1958)”, guest lecture in the course *Histoire du temps présent*, Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Bruxelles, **24.04.2024** (org. Hajar Oulad Ben Taib).

II. Part: Research / Expulsions for political reasons

i. Research tools

Database of 2800 expelled for political reasons 1919-1939 (M/F). Realisation: Nicolas HORVAT and Juliette MASQUELIER (with a Methodological note and visualisation of the data of political expulsions 1919-1939). On this basis, a second database was created: Qualitative Database of 250 women expelled for political reasons 1919-1939 (F). Realisation: Juliette Masquelier.

The two databases will be soon available on the SODHA platform hosted by the State Archives.

ii. Valorisation for the general public

Podcast *Femmes engagées. Regard policier*, 5 episodes in French. Direction: Juliette MASQUELIER and Chedia LEROIJ. Online publication: ULB, 09.01.2026 : <https://podcast.ausha.co/recherche-science-et-societe-a-l-ulb/playlist/femme-engagees-regard-policier>

This podcast takes us into the archives of the Aliens Police, following in the footsteps of six migrant women who were deported from Belgium for their political activities in the 1920s and 1930s. The stories of Nathalie, Nadejda, Eugénie, Marjem-Malka, Emilia, and Maria recount their militant commitments and their living conditions in Belgium, but also the administration of foreign nationals and the surveillance and repression organized by the authorities. Juliette Masquelier invites us to take a closer look at the sources to understand how police practices and perceptions are shaped and to reflect on the construction of historical knowledge.

Episode 1. “Nathalie and Nadejda Reznic: The extremist Jewish High Command.” In the archives, we follow in the footsteps of the Reznic sisters, two Romanian Jewish students, to understand how foreigners are monitored, especially when they are suspected of communism.

Episode 2. “Eugénie Ben: Her request was not granted.” Deported following the major strikes of 1932, French miner Eugénie Ben defends herself and tells her story in letters she sends to the authorities.

Episode 3. “Marjem-Malka Rosenberg: Trafficking in men.” This episode highlights the repression suffered by Jewish communists through the story of Polish seamstress Marjem-Malka Rosenberg, who was arrested during a major police raid in 1933.

Episode 4. “Emilia Napione: Anarchist and ‘not quite normal’” The Aliens Police hunt down Italian anti-fascist Emilia Napione, who is considered undesirable by the authorities both for her political activities and her supposed moral deviance.

Episode 5. “Maria Vrabic: Her husband cannot be held responsible.” The final episode focuses on Yugoslav canteen worker Maria Vrabic, who was deported for associating with Croatian nationalists.

Two episodes in Dutch have been produced. Direction: Geheugencollectief, in collaboration with Henk DE SMAELE and Juliette MASQUELIER. They will be made available shortly via the University of Antwerp.

iii. Valorisation for the academic community

Juliette MASQUELIER, “Women Expelled for ‘political reasons’ in Belgium in the 1920s and 1930s” presentation at the WomenExile conference *Activists in Exile*, National Archives of Belgium, **24.09.2024**.

Juliette MASQUELIER, “For she broke away from the discretion required of her as a foreigner’. Discussion of the results of the WomenExile project”, *Power in History* research seminar, University of Antwerp, **12.05.2025**.

The three scientific peer-reviewed publications based on Juliette Masquelier’s research are detailed in section 6. Publications.

iv. Teaching

Cécile VANDERPELEN and Juliette MASQUELIER, Seminar “Écriture de l’Histoire – époque contemporaine”, History bloc 2, ULB, **academic year 2024-2025**. 20 cases from the database “women expelled for political reasons”. Students conduct personal research in order to write a biography and place it in its historical context. Supported at the NAB by Filip STRUBBE and Aline THOMAS.

6. PUBLICATIONS

Peer-reviewed publications

Juliette MASQUELIER, “‘Ne se fait-elle pas remarquer du point de vue politique ?’ Les expulsions de femmes pour motif politique en Belgique (1919-1939)”, *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, submitted in 2025.

Juliette MASQUELIER, “‘Our administration deemed (im)possible to suspend her expulsion’. Repression and resistance of women expelled from Belgium for political reasons (1919–1939)”, *Sextant* special issue *Militantes en exil*, submitted in 2025.

Juliette MASQUELIER (ed.), *Militantes en exil. Genre, engagement politique et migrations*, *Sextant*, special issue 2026 (submitted).

For publications as research tools or aimed at the general public, see 5. Valorisation.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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