

# WOMENEXILE

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

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### Summary

#### Context

The history of politically active women in exile in Belgium remained largely unexplored until recently, despite the wealth of archives preserved on the subject. Indeed, there was no comprehensive overview of this phenomenon. Gaining a full understanding of its scale and unearthing these life stories from the vast archives available required extensive research, which was carried out as part of the project.

#### Objectives

The WomenExile project initially aimed to compile reliable data on women who went into exile in Belgium between 1918 and 1958. This is a particularly interesting period, beginning with the refugee crisis following the First World War, continuing through the waves of refugees caused by fascist and authoritarian regimes in the 1930s, and ending with the crisis triggered by the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, as well as the introduction of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). These databases then served as the basis for a more detailed reconstruction of the lives of a sample of women. Gradually, the project shifted towards more qualitative approaches, illustrating how these women experienced their exile in Belgium and how they became involved in civil society organisations or (trans)national political activism. In doing so, the aim was to break away from the heroic image of the male political refugee of the 20th century, which had dominated and monopolised the public imagination for decades. By bringing these women out of obscurity, WomenExile thus pursued two objectives: (I) to draw the attention of both specialist and lay audiences to the experiences of a group of exiles who have, for the most part, been forgotten and overlooked; and (II) to pave the way, in the future, for new, ambitious and large-scale research into female migration to Belgium.

#### Methodology

From the outset, the main objective of the WomenExile project was to overcome three major methodological obstacles that hindered the development of a cross-cutting history of women's political migration in Belgium. These (well-known) obstacles were as follows:

(i) The vast quantity of public archives of all kinds concerning migrants and activists held by the National Archives Of Belgium.

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

(iii) The polysemy of concepts such as political engagement or political activity. Indeed, the notion of ‘political exile’ encompasses a variety of situations whose socio-historical evolution is closely linked to the development of Belgian immigration policies (Caestecker, 2000).

The project was therefore organised into two parts, the first of which was carried out by a historian and archivist and focused on the archives with the aim of identifying female activists and developing tools that could be used for future research. The second part, carried out by a postdoctoral researcher, involved building on this work to conduct an in-depth analysis of more specific cases.

### **Results, conclusions, recommendations**

The first phase of the project resulted (among other outcomes) in the creation of tools designed to facilitate research: a database containing over 60,000 names of people who were granted refugee status in Belgium between 1945 and 1958; and a list of foreign women who were politically active in Belgium, compiled from various sources. These tools enable, for example, searches by name that link to various available sources, which will in future allow for qualitative analyses of specific cases involving different administrative statuses and life trajectories.

The second phase of the project focused on ‘undesirable’ political activities, specifically on women deported from Belgium for political reasons between 1919 and 1939. The choice of this specific case made it possible to overcome the challenge posed by the abundance of sources and the difficulty in clearly defining the criteria for ‘political engagement’. Two additional tools were developed: a database of expulsions for ‘political reasons’ covering both men and women, and a database covering exclusively expelled women, enriched with qualitative biographical information drawn from individual archive files. These two tools will enable future quantitative and qualitative research into political expulsions from Belgium, a subject that has been little explored for the period after 1918, despite being a cornerstone of Belgian migration policy (Feys, 2019).

Historiography regards the interwar period as a distinctive phase in the development of policies for the surveillance, control and repression of migration across various European countries (Fahrmeir, Faron and Weil, 2003). The WomenExile project contributes to this field of research by examining the implementation of ‘political’ expulsions of women of all nationalities. The originality of its approach lies in the use of an exhaustive corpus – the 245 women who were subject to an expulsion order ‘for political reasons’ between 1919 and 1939 – enabling a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data contained in each of their individual files. An analysis of the individual case files of women who have been deported reveals the multiple factors that influence deportation decisions (surveillance methods, officers’ personal perceptions and assessments, government guidelines and administrative discretion); how the sanction is enforced, challenged or negotiated; and its practical consequences on their life trajectories.

In the specific context of the interwar period, characterised by the authorities’ concern over the ‘communist threat’, the arbitrary nature of decisions—with no legal recourse available and subject to suspension or reinstatement at any time for any reason—created a climate of insecurity and instability for migrants, even if they had been legally resident in the country for a long time. Research shows that one of the consequences of this arbitrariness was the influence of officials’ personal opinions and assessments on their decisions and practices: increased surveillance of certain nationalities, ethnic groups and social classes, and the use of threats of deportation as a means of pressure to force women to conform to gender norms (by ceasing their economic activities and returning to the marital home, for example). Finally, the research demonstrates not only the political agency of many migrant women, but also their ability to take action in the face of the threat of deportation: by adapting to it, avoiding it, negotiating it or resisting it in a variety of ways, either on their own or by finding allies.

The findings of this research were presented at a conference held in Brussels, in various publications and in a series of podcasts.

**Keywords**

History, Women, Migration, Activism, Police