

WOMENEXILE

Gendering Political Exile: Women's political migrations to Belgium (1918-1958)

DURATION
15/12/2020- 15/03/2025

BUDGET
512 514 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

There is relatively little historical research available on women in political exile. Typically, the figure of the political exile-activist has been built on the model of masculinity, a tendency that also applies to Belgian historiography. In practice, however, thousands of women have also lived as political exiles in Belgium. Our research project is therefore at the crossroads between women's history and migration research. The National Archives of Belgium conserves thousands of files concerning these migrant women. These files produced by the Belgian services in charge of immigration (Aliens' Police (the predecessor of the current Immigration Office) and the UNHCR-representation for Belgium (the predecessor of the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees & Stateless Persons)) constitute a rich and under-exploited material for studying political migration to Belgium in the 20th century, and for investigating the political, social and cultural interactions between these immigrants and Belgian civil society.

Objectives and research questions

The main objective is to uncover the lives and activities of women who lived in political exile in Belgium in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and to interpret these life stories within wider historical contexts, domestic as well as international. First and foremost the project aims to create a reliable database of female exiles in Belgium, between 1918 and 1958, based on official documents of the Belgian authorities. It will be the basis for a more detailed reconstruction of the lives of a sample of women. By selecting the perspective of female refugees, new understandings of the (gendered) history of Belgium will emerge.

Methodology

The undeniable contribution of this research will be to propose a global view of the phenomenon of political exile experienced by women. In order to respond to the various lines of research, a combination of different data processing methods is required. The strength of the sources is both to allow the aggregation of quantitative data, due to their very large number and relative exhaustiveness, and to provide access to qualitative data for very detailed analyses. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are therefore combined to holistically understand political migration of women at the *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels. Finally, the wealth of individual files, coupled with the archives of political, women's or refugee organizations, will allow us to trace female migrants' networks. This in-depth enquiry will be possible only for a limited amount of cases (about 100), which will be selected for their representativeness or their exceptional nature in relation to the various models and regularities revealed by the study of the database.

Impact of the research

This project will be a crucial step to open up the exceptionally rich sources for future researchers and to contribute to the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of migration studies in Belgium and internationally. Reconstructing the life stories of these women in exile will enrich contemporary debates on migration, diversity and today's 'refugee crises', as well as on gender and the position of women within activism.



WOMENEXILE

The resulting database and the exposition of the life stories of women in exile will have important societal impacts. Firstly, the project will unveil the Belgian state's 'governmentality' of migration during the first half of the 20th century. This is obviously important within the scope of current migration challenges in Europe. Secondly, it will shift the focus to women as key actors in migratory movements and political organizing. This will challenge the conventional views on women as 'trailing spouses' less capable than men to initiate migration and political activism. It will also incite people to inquire about the present situation of women asylum seekers and refugees within Europe and beyond.

Valorization perspectives

The project counts 5 modules that aim at valorization. The first 3 are directed at the scientific community at large, the last 2 at a broader public. The project will also be present on social media.

(1) Online database

An entry into the files of refugees and exiles.

(2) Colloquium 'Women's political exiles in European civil society'

Closing conference focusing on the integration of women exiles in civil society.

(3) Two scientific publications

The proceedings of the colloquium will be published as well as the heart of the historical research.

(4) Book addressing a broader public

Illustrated volume that will include the results of the historical research, followed by 10 biographical portraits of female exiles.

(5) Pedagogical tool

Learning tool for secondary education.



NAB, Belgian Red Cross [Inv. I 661], n° 3794

CONTACT INFORMATION

Coordinator

Michaël Amara
National Archives of Belgium (NAB)
Contemporary Archives (Section 5)
michael.amara@arch.be

Partners

Henk de Smaele
University of Antwerp (UAntwerpen)
Department of History
henk.desmaele@uantwerpen.be

Cécile Vanderpelen
Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)
Département d'enseignement de Philosophie, Éthique et
Sciences des Religions et de la Laïcité (PHILO)
cecile.vanderpelen@ulb.be

LINKS

[http://arch.arch.be/index.php?l=nl&m=lopend-
onderzoek&r=onderzoeksprojecten&pr=womenexile-
gendering-political-exile-women-s-political-migrations-to-
belgium-1918-1958](http://arch.arch.be/index.php?l=nl&m=lopend-
onderzoek&r=onderzoeksprojecten&pr=womenexile-
gendering-political-exile-women-s-political-migrations-to-
belgium-1918-1958)