RECUPERATION, REVIVAL AND SURVIVAL

A Humanitarian Lace-Aid Programme in Occupied Belgium during the First World War[1]

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During the First World War, the renowned Belgian lace industry was threatened to disappear. Lace-aid programmes were set up by humanitarian organizations to save an imperilled European tradition and to provide wartime employment to the lacemakers. The most well-known and largest programme was developed by the Belgian philanthropic committee *Comité de la Dentelle* in collaboration with the American relief organization Commission for Relief in Belgium. Together they provided nearly 50,000 lace-makers with materials to produce lace destined for sale in the US and the Allied Countries. Using newly uncovered archival sources, this paper demonstrates each group's motivations for developing and participating in the lace-aid programme. What emerges is a more complex and multi-perspective history with an emphasis on the reciprocal set of relationships between the CRB, the *Comité de la Dentelle* and the lacemakers. At the same time, the continuity of historical ideas and practices is demonstrated, nuancing the assumption that the First World War was a turning point in the development of modern humanitarianism.

I. Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, humanitarian organizations have developed a growing number of handicraft programmes. Despite the long existence and abundance of these programmes, most existing studies of craft heritage and development aid are contemporary in focus and come from the fields of anthropology and development studies[2] - and more recently heritage studies, museology, and cultural studies[3] - but they do not consider genealogies of practice[4]. In addition, recent histories of humanitarianism, particularly American philanthropy, argue that the First World War was a turning point in the development of modern humanitarianism[5]. Yet, they are often limited to the analysis of food and medical assistance[6]. They do not usually engage with the idea of (gendered) labour, nor with the long tradition of craft-based philanthropy of women in orphanages and workhouses[7]. Nor, despite a current push to capture the experience of the aid beneficiary, do they fully acknowledge the relationship between donor and beneficiary[8]. This article contributes to filling this gap. Examining the historiographies of handicraft programmes in light of current research on the history of humanitarianism permits a revaluation of humanitarian beneficiaries as participants with agency rather than simply as persons receiving aid. It will also highlight the participation of women as cultural entrepreneurs and the role of gender in revivals of craft tradition. Additionally, it will help determine the role of tradition, history, and heritage in the humanitarian

1. This article developed from a paper I presented at the workshop *Humanitarian Handicrafts. Materiality, Development and Fair Trade. A Re-Evaluation* (United Kingdom, University of Huddersfield, 27-28 June 2019). It was largely written during my stay as an academic visitor at the Oxford Centre for European History at the University of Oxford during the academic year 2019-2020, a stay generously funded by a KU Leuven one-year postdoctoral mandate. It was finished during the start of my project *Re-making the World : Women, Humanitarian Agencies and Handicrafts Programmes* supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101032455. I thank Professor David Hopkin (University of Oxford, Hertford College) for his insightful comments on an early draft. In addition, I thank the participants of the Joint Mainz-Oxford Graduate Workshop (online, 28-30 April 2021) organized by Professor Lyndal Roper (University of Oxford, Oriel College) and Professor Johannes Paulmann (The Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG) in Mainz), for additional feedback. Dr Rebecca Gill (University of Huddersfield) provided some final comments. For image permissions, I wish to acknowledge the National Museum of American History (US, Washington DC), the Rijksmuseum (the Netherlands, Amsterdam), and the National Archives of Belgium (Belgium, Brussels). Lastly, I thank Anne Hodgkinson for editing the article.

2. Alyce Abdalla, "Employees or Beneficiaries ?" in *Review of Middle East Studies* no. 34, 2000 (2), p. 184-188 ; Ann Le Mare, "Show the World to Women and They Can Do It :' Southern Fair Trade Enterprises as Agents of Empowerment", in *Gender & Development* no. 20, 2012 (1), p. 95-109 ; Andrés Marroquin Gramajo, "Wayúu Crafts : A Dilemma of Culture and Development", in *Choice in Economic Contexts* (Research in Economic Anthropology 25), Bingley, 2006 ; Laurel Zwissler, "Markets of the Heart : Weighing Economic and Ethical Values at Ten Thousand Villages," in *Anthropological Considerations of Production, Exchange, Vending and Tourism*, Research in Economic Anthropology 37, Bingley, 2017, p. 115-135.

3. Routledge Series in Culture and Development : Sophia Labadi, *The Cultural Turn in International Aid : Impacts and Challenges for Heritage and the Creative Industries*, Abingdon, 2019 ; Polly Stupples and Katerina Teaiwa, *Contemporary Perspectives on Art and International Development,* Abingdon, 2019.

4. John Brewer and Frank Trentmann, eds., *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives : Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges,* Oxford, 2006, p. 2 ; Helen Gilbert and Chris Tiffin, *Burden or Benefit : Imperial Benevolence and its Legacies,* Bloomington, 2008.

5. Branden Little, "Humanitarianism in the Era of the First World War", Special Issue of *First World War Studies* 5, 2014 (1) ; Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918-1924,* Cambridge, 2014 ; Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones. The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism,* Berkeley, 2015 ; Tehila Sasson, "From Empire to Humanity : The Russian Famine and the Imperial Origins of International Humanitarianism", in *Journal of British Studies* 55, 2016 (3), p. 519-37.

6. Clotilde Druelle-Korn, *Food for democracy ? Le revitaillement de la France occupée (1914-1919) : Herbert Hoover, le Blocus, les Neutres et les Alliés,* Brussels, 2018 ; Mary E. Cox, *Hunger in War and Peace : Women and Children in Germany, 1914-1924,* Oxford, 2019.

7. Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion. Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870-1914,* Manchester, 2013 ; Melanie S. Tanielan. *The Charity of War : Famine, Humanitarian Aid and World War I in The Middle East,* Stanford, 2017.

8. Emily Baughan et al., "History and Humanitarianism : a conversation", in *Past and Present* no. 241, 1 (2018), p. e1-e38 ; Peter Gatrell et al., "Reckoning with Refugeedom : Refugee Voices in Modern History", in *Social History* no. 46, 1 (2021), p. 70-95.

imaginary and their relation to wartime projects for saving 'civilization'[9].

In particular, this article investigates why humanitarian organizations and their aid beneficiaries respectively developed and entered handicraft programmes in the past. As a case study, it examines a transnational lace-aid programme started during the First World War by the Belgian philanthropic committee *Comité de la Dentelle* in collaboration with the American relief organization Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). The programme pursued a dual goal : saving the Belgian handmade lace industry, which had been in existence since the sixteenth century but was in danger of disappearing due to a shortage of materials and clients ; and ensuring the continued employment of Belgian lacemakers, often women who supported themselves and their families through lacemaking. The women were provided with the necessary materials to produce lace destined for sale in the US and the Allied Countries. This lace came to be known as 'war lace' as the designs often referred directly to the war and depicted battlefield scenes, names of people, places, dates, coats of arms or national symbols of the US and Allied Countries, of the nine Belgian provinces, or of the Belgian martyr cities[10].

The literature states that the programme was successful, at least for the duration of the war, as it resulted in providing employment to circa 50,000 women and in bringing unprecedented publicity to the Belgian lace industry during the war years[11]. But the existing literature relies heavily on the communication strategies used by the CRB, who carefully controlled press coverage, posters, reports, and overviews. CRB's founder and chair Herbert C. Hoover (1874-1964) asked American writer and CRB member Charlotte Kellogg (1874-1960) to travel to German-occupied Belgium and to document the experiences of Belgian women living under the occupying regime. Her encounters resulted in the book *Women of Belgium. Turning Tragedy to Triumph* (published in 1917), in which she dedicated a chapter to the lace-aid programme, the *Comité de la Dentelle,* and the Belgian lacemakers[12]. Yet Kellogg could neither meet the lacemakers nor witness the results of the programme during the war, as the chief lace production centres were in the *Etappengebiet,* the area close to the front and under strict military surveillance. This was the reason why she travelled back to Belgium shortly after the armistice, visited many places renowned for lacemaking, and documented her experiences in *Bobbins of Belgium. A Book of Belgian lace, Lace-Workers, Lace-Schools and Lace-Villages,* which was published in 1920[13]. At first glance, both books seem to give an authentic picture of Belgian women and their war experiences, but Kellogg wrote from an American perspective and for an American audience, resulting in a eulogy of the CRB and of American benevolence with expectations of Belgian gratitude. Most later authors have uncritically based their writings on Kellogg's publications. They highlighted the benefits for the Belgian lacemakers and the lace industry without considering the perspective of

9. Tammy M. Proctor, "The Louvain Library and U.S. Ambition in Interwar Belgium", in *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, 2015 (2), p. 147-167.

10. War laces are preserved in museum and private collections across the globe. Core collections are at the Art & History Museum in Brussels, the National Museum of American History in Washington DC, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

11. Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit België van de zestiende eeuw tot heden. Een keuze van de Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis te Brussel,* Brussels, 1981, p. 119, cat. nrs. 85-88 ; Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* Brussels, 1990, p. 116-132, cat. nrs. 62-76, 77a, 79-82 ; Martine Bruggeman, *L'Europe de la dentelle. Un aperçu historique depuis les originaires de la dentelle jusqu'à l'entre-deux-guerres,* Bruges, 1997, p. 140-143 ; Marguerite Coppens, *Une industrie du raffinement. La dentelle aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles,* Brussels, 2004, p. 65-73 ; Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders. History and Contemporary Art,* Tielt, 2018, p. 22-23, 87-97 ; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire des femmes en Belgique, 19^e et 20^e siècle,* Paris, 2018, p. 577-579.

12. Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium. Turning Tragedy to Triumph,* 4th ed., New York/London, 1917, p. 158-166.

13. Charlotte Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium. A Book of Belgian Lace, Lace-Workers, Lace-Schools and Lace-Villages,* New York/London, 1920.

the lacemakers themselves. They also ignored anything that did not fit American propaganda nor did they question what drove the *Comité de la Dentelle* and the CRB to develop the programme[14].

To investigate this question of donor motivation, the Hoover archives were used to reconstruct organizational politics, the CRB's civic and cultural diplomacy, programme logistics, financial history, administrative practices, and fundraising and marketing techniques, which allowed their motivation(s) for collaborating in the lace-aid programme to be traced[15]. Alongside these American sources, the papers of the *Aide et protection aux dentellières* and the *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation,* both in the National Archives of Belgium, were studied in order to elucidate the conditions causing the Belgian lacemakers to need assistance, to trace the reasons for the *Comité de la Dentelle* to develop the lace-aid programme in collaboration with the CRB, and to reconstruct the internal organization of the programme. In particular, the newly uncovered papers of the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* allow for some nuance in the traditionally celebratory historiography of the CRB, often supported by the Hoover archives, constructed to preserve the legacy of the humanitarian organization and its founder[16]. This approach is in line with the recent work on the CRB, which is more attuned to the transnational nature and power relations as well as critical reading of the organization's publicity[17]. Yet, this article differs from most recent work by choosing to study a handicraft programme instead of the food aid. In addition, the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* papers allow for the experiences of the lacemakers to be captured, including the women's own opinions of and reactions to the lace-aid programme. Although these archives, constructed by humanitarian organizations, seldom record the experiences of aid beneficiaries, and although the lacemakers have left few written accounts of their own, local collaborators have documented the lacemakers' words, while the aid agencies involved have commented on them[18]. Analysing the dominant reading of these texts and engaging in alternative readings helps to capture the experiences of the lacemakers and to reconstruct their relationships with the different aid organizations.

From these archival records, it will become evident that the CRB, *Comité de la Dentelle,* and the lacemakers themselves had discrete motives for entering the lace-aid programme, demonstrating a much richer set of expectations and a fuller account of the workings of these aid relationships than was captured in the CRB publicity. First, the conditions leading the CRB to support the lace-aid programme are traced. Second, the transnational organization of the programme

14. Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit België …,* p. 119, cat. nrs. 85-88 ; Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 116-132, cat. nrs. 62-76, 77a, 79-82 ; Martine Bruggeman, *L'Europe de la dentelle…,* p. 140-143 ; Marguerite Coppens, *Une industrie du raffinement…,* p. 65-73 ; Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders…,* p. 22-23, 87-97 ; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire…,* p. 577-579.

15. In particular, the CRB & H. Hoover papers in the Hoover Institution Archives (Palo Alto, CA, US, HI) and the H. Hoover Pre-commerce papers and Lou Hoover papers in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (West Branch, IA, US, HHPL) have been consulted.

16. Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover,* 3 vols, New York, 1951-52 ; Herbert C. Hoover, *An American Epic.* vol. 1, *Introduction. The Relief of Belgium and Northern France 1914-1930,* Chicago, 1959 ; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover,* 3 vols., New York/London, 1983-96 ; Johan den Hartog, "The Commission for Relief in Belgium and the political diplomatic history of the First World War", in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 21, 2010 (4), p. 593-613 ; Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover. An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times,* New York, 2017.

17. Sébastien Farré, *Colis de guerre. Secours alimentaire et organisations humanitaires,* Rennes, 2014 ; Sébastien Farré, « Des États-Unis vers l'Europe : colis alimentaires et secours humanitaires durant la Première Guerre Mondiale et l'après-guerre (1914-1923), » in *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 38, 2017 (2), p. 161-177 ; Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover. An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times,* New York, 2017 ; Clotilde Druelle-Korn, *Food for Democrary ? ;* Elisabeth Piller, "Beyond Hoover. Rewriting the History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) through Female Involvement," in *The International History Review* 2022, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2022.2113553.

18. Emily Baughan et al., "History and Humanitarianism…, p. e19 ; David Hopkin, "Working, Singing, and Telling in the 19th-Century Flemish Pillow-Lace Industry", in *Textile. Cloth and Culture* 18, 2020 (1), p. 55.

is reconstructed to uncover the aims of *the Comité de la Dentelle*. Third and last, the lacemakers' opinions of and reactions to the programme are revealed to discover their reasons for participation. These findings help to demonstrate the continuity of historical practices and nostalgia for the pre-industrial, artisan 'way of life' in contemporary humanitarian reform. As such, they nuance the assumption made by recent histories of humanitarianism that the First World War was a turning point in the development of modern humanitarianism. In addition, the gendered history of humanitarian handicraft programmes and the focus on the experiences of the craft practitioner leads to a more complex and transnational narrative at the intersection of the histories of humanitarianism, craft, gender, and class.

II. Lace for food

At the outbreak of the First World War, Belgium was a densely populated country, characterized by industrialization and urbanization. The nation was an important economic power in Europe and relied heavily on the international trade of materials and finished products. On 4 August 1914, Belgium was violently invaded by German troops. In mid-October 1914, the advance of the German army was halted and trench warfare began in the west of the country, which would last for four years. During this time, most of Belgium, apart from a small strip of land behind the Yser River, was occupied by the German invaders, who installed a repressive occupation regime. Freedom of speech and movement were severely curtailed. Expressions of anti-German or pro-Belgian sentiment were strictly forbidden, while travelling became difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. The circa 7.5 million Belgians who had not fled abroad were subject to the laws of the occupying forces, were obliged to pay high war taxes, and suffered from pillages and requisitions[19].

The years of occupation meant material and immaterial deprivations for the Belgian civilians. The vast majority of the population suffered hunger, since food supply and distribution became a problem almost immediately. The invasion had destroyed a large portion of the 1914 harvest, while pillages and food requisitions by the German troops left the population without sufficient reserves. A ring of steel, applied by the frontline, the closure of the national borders, and the installation of the British blockade cut the Belgian inhabitants off from the international food market. This was disastrous : before the war, about three quarters of the country's food had been imported. Scarcity led to rapidly rising prices, which hit the working class especially hard. In particular, the situation deteriorated in the major cities and industrial areas, where workers were massively unemployed[20]. Early in September 1914, Brand Whitlock (1869-1934), the American minister to Brussels, noted : "Then we began to note a new phenomenon – new, at least, in Brussels – women begging in the street. Hunger, another of war's companions, had come to town"[21].

Local initiatives were taken to relieve hunger and to avoid starvation. The national committee *Comité National de Secours and d'Alimentation* (CNSA) united their efforts and coordinated the food aid. But these local and national actions proved to be insufficient without an international partner importing food from abroad. This partner was found in the American relief organization Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), specially founded for this purpose by the engineer, businessman, and later 31st US President Herbert C. Hoover (1874-1964),

19. Antoon Vrints, "All the Butter in the Country Belongs to Us, Belgians' : Well-Being and Lower-Class National Identification in Belgium during the First World War", in *Nationhood from Below. Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century,* Basingstoke, 2012, p. 234 ; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog,* 5th ed., Antwerp/Amsterdam, 2014, p. 13-125 ; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire…,* p. 266-273.
20. Antoon Vrints, "All the Butter…", p. 234-235 ; Giselle Nath, *Brood willen we hebben ! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België,* Antwerp, 2013, p. 45-63 ; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog…,* p. 114-116.
21. Brand Whitlock, *Belgium. A Personal Narrative,* vol. 1, New York, 1919, p. 239.

who became the CRB chairman. For more than fifty months, the CRB contributed to feeding nearly ten million people (first in occupied Belgium and later also in occupied Northern France) ; collecting one billion dollars ; and importing five million tons of food via the port of Rotterdam into the occupied areas, where the CNSA would distribute the food to the towns and municipalities[22]. In spite of these impressive numbers, the food supply and distribution would prove to be inadequate. This was especially the case during the second half of the war. After a visit to Brussels in September 1917, the Belgian Countess Henriette de Villermont (1855-1940) noted dryly in her diary : "All the fat people have disappeared"[23]. The countess' observation was an overstatement, as it was the working classes in the major cities and industrial areas who were predominantly hit by the food shortages, although individuals of the middle classes and in the countryside were not spared from experiencing the lack of food[24].

The collaboration with the CRB appears to be a success story, but the relief organization struggled to provide sufficient food supplies. This was caused by several factors. The war lasted four years instead of the originally conceived four months, resulting in an ever-growing portion of Belgians in need of assistance. From 1917 onwards, the Germans' unrestricted submarine warfare sank several CRB ships, causing tons of food to disappear into the sea. Additionally, the food requisitions by the occupiers continued to take place. But the most urgent and most persistent problem was the lasting shortage of money[25]. To resolve this problem, the CRB collaborated closely with the press, a characteristic of humanitarian aid since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century[26]. The constant press coverage in the US and Allied Countries resulted in a humanitarian mobilization in the US, predominated by women's networks organizing fundraising activities such as bazaars[27]. Even these generous and heartfelt contributions, however, were far from enough to cover the eventual total cost of the CRB's food relief programme. In *An American Epic,* Herbert Hoover described it as "[t]he support which we had already gleaned from that source [appeals to the charity of the neutral world] for Belgium was wholly insufficient for even its need"[28]. Already at the end of 1914, the CRB had to take measures in order to maintain their food aid : they avoided waste by working efficiently, which was characterized by rigorous bookkeeping ; they lobbied for ample and regular government support in addition to smaller and irregular individual donations ; and they wanted as many Belgian civilians as possible to be employed. The latter strategy was implemented because those with means or work purchased their food at slightly higher prices in the CRB-controlled shops, while those without means or work received free food rations[29].

22. Branden Little, "Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB)", in *1914-1918 online International Encyclopedia of the First World War,* issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2014 : 10.15463/ie1418.10071.

23. Belgium, private archives, diary of Countess Henriette de Villermont kept between 1884 and 1918 : « 4 septembre 1917, les grosses personnes ont disparu. »

24. Giselle Nath, *Brood willen we hebben !...,* p. 45-63 ; Antoon Vrints, "Beyond Victimization : Contentious Food Politics in Belgium during World War I", in *European History Quarterly* 45, 2015 (1), p. 83-107.

25. Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover...,* p. 148, 152, 156-157, 164.

26. Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism,* Ithaca/London, 2011, p. 29 ; Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion...,* p. 8-9. From the start of the food aid, the CRB sought to enhance publicity on the programme through press coverage, posters, reports and overviews, while several American CRB volunteers published about their experiences in occupied Belgium during and shortly after the war. The latter include Tracy B. Kittredge, *The History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, 1914-1917,* London, 1920 ; Vernon L. Kellogg, *Fighting Starvation in Belgium,* Garden City [NY], 1918 ; George I. Gay, *The Commission for Relief in Belgium. Statistical Review of Relief Operations,* Palo Alto [CA], 1925 ; Herbert Hoover, *An American Epic,* 3 vols., Chicago, 1959-1961.

27. Branden Little, "The Humanitarian Mobilization of American Cities for Belgian Relief, 1914-1918", in *Cahiers Bruxellois – Brusselse Cahiers* 46, 2014 (1), p. 121-138 ; Elisabeth Piller, "American War Relief, Cultural Mobilization, and the Myth of Impartial Humanitarianism, 1914-17", in *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17, 2018 (4), p. 619-635.

28. Herbert C. Hoover, *An American Epic...,* vol. 1, p. 81.

29. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "A Civilian War Effort...", p. 27-31 ; Sébastien Farré, *Colis de guerre...,* p. 39-54 ; Barry Riley, *The Political History of American Food Aid...,* p. 17-18.

Employment became an element of the CRB's relief strategy. The needs were high, as a large part of the Belgian population was hit by unemployment. Many industries had closed down since the start of the occupation, due to what Belgian historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver described as "the restrictions on imports of raw materials and exportation of goods, the impossibility of commuting, the ban on communication between citizens of different municipalities, the requisitioning of material, the war taxes and fines, the closure of factories and workshops unwilling to work for the occupants, and the dismantling of infrastructure, all paralysed honest activity"[30]. Despite these obstacles, local and regional authorities, philanthropists and charity organizations were all seeking ways to create job opportunities involving activities or industries that would not support the German war economy either directly or indirectly. Their efforts, much welcomed by the CRB, focused both on men and women. Local and regional authorities developed large public works, but these were only reserved for men, as were the few other available jobs. Philanthropists, mainly upper- and middle-class women, came into action and set up charitable programmes to provide job opportunities for wage-dependent women. These were particularly related to women's activities in the home and included childcare, cooking, sewing, and lacemaking[31].

Supporting lacemakers had several advantages : before the war the Belgian lace industry had provided work to thousands of women, who were now unemployed (or threatened with unemployment) due to a shortage of materials and clients. Ensuring the provision of materials would enable these women to continue working and to buy their own food instead of receiving it for free. In addition, it was envisioned that the sale of the finished lace in the US and the Allied Countries would make a profit, which the CRB could use to improve their financial situation and to continue their food aid programme. This motivation was also expressed in the article "Sale of Lace and Medals to Help Belgians" appearing in the *San Francisco. The Bulletin* on 25 February 1915 :

> "We are also supporting a Belgian lace movement. The well-to-do people in Belgium, who are doing so much to save their own situation, are taking up this cause of the lace workers. There are some 50,000 of them within touch, and if work could be supplied to them it would mean the ability of just that many more people to purchase their own food. So we are taking charge of a great quantity of this lace to be sold in the United States by the commission, or rather, through a commission appointed by them. Every penny of the proceeds will go to the workers, no percentage stopping by the way in the hands of the middleman. We think that there might be started a vogue for Belgian lace at the present moment"[32].

Lou Henry Hoover (1874-1944), Herbert Hoover's wife, expressed the same intention in a letter to an unidentified friend Mildred earlier that month : "There are 50,000 Belgian lace workers out of work. If any part of these women had work, their wages would buy just that much more food and make the charitable contributions of America and other countries go just so much farther"[33].

30. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "A Civilian War Effort…", p. 32.
31. Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium…*, p. 127, 137-157, 167-178 ; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "A Civilian War Effort…", p. 24, 32-35 ; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *Bastion. Occupied Bruges in the First World War,* Veurne, 2014 ; Éliane Gubin et al., "Women's Mobilization for War (Belgium)," in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War,* Berlin 2016 ; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire…*, p. 266-273 ; 577-579.
32. Anonymous, "Sale of Lace and Medals to Help Belgians" in *San Francisco. The Bulletin,* 25 February 1915 ; Letter from Lou Henry Hoover to Mildred (HHPL, *Lou Hoover Subject File : Articles-Addresses : Unidentified-Belgian Relief : Correspondence, 1914 :* 1st February 1915).
33. Letter from Lou Henry Hoover to Mildred, possibly Mrs Theodore Hoover (HHPL, *Lou Hoover Subject File : Articles-Addresses : Unidentified-Belgian Relief : Correspondence, 1914 :* 1st February 1915).

III. Saving the Belgian lace industry

Encouraging the Belgian lace industry and supporting its producers was an important way for the CRB to continue their food relief. A distinct advantage was that Belgian lace was already renowned across the globe. Lace towns like Bruges, Brussels, Mechelen (Malines), and many other places between the Belgian coast and the capital were household names for the production of the delicate white (sometimes black) material. For centuries, the handmade lace industry had brought employment and international fame to these places. After the independence of Belgium in 1830, the craft and its makers became part of the young nation's identity. But the invention of machine-made lace in the early nineteenth century threatened the handmade lace industry and its workers. Within just a few decades after its invention, machine-made lace had become just as attractive, and was considerably cheaper since it could be produced much faster. In order to compete, the already-low wages of handmade lacemakers were cut. Subsequently, many women left their bobbins to go working in the newly built factories. In half a century, the number of lacemakers diminished from 150,000 in 1850 to 50,000 in 1900, and probably to just around 25,000 in 1914[34]. Those who continued to make lace were compelled to produce more for the same price, which was detrimental to the quality[35].

The decline of the Belgian lace industry and the destitute state of the lacemakers called for action. Around the turn of the century, studies were conducted describing the problem and offering solutions, while novels were published comparing lacemaking to slavery[36]. Local and regional committees sprang up willing to implement these remedies. One of these was *Les Amies de la Dentelle* [The Female Friends of Lace], established around 1910[37]. *Les Amies de la Dentelle* aimed to revive the Belgian handmade lace industry and to improve the miserable fate of the lacemakers. Its members particularly concentrated on improving the technical quality of the lace, as well as the aesthetics of the designs. These goals were to be achieved by respectively improving the training in lace schools and by commissioning new designs, preferably drawn by artists. The members of the committee did not focus on the commercial aspects of the enterprise, such as demanding a higher and fairer price from the consumer, organizing trade unions, or negotiating with the dealers and factories. This demonstrates a paternalistic approach and their nostalgic vision of an imagined past. In their idealized view of the past, the production of handmade lace was economically viable and permitted working-class women to work from their homes while looking after their children, which was difficult since most women produced lace for ten to fourteen hours a day. In addition, *Les Amies de la Dentelle,* like many others concerned about the Belgian lace industry, saw the American market as the industry's salvation. The pre-war interest of American tourists buying lace in Belgium developed the idea of exporting Belgian lace to the US. But before any of the measures could be implemented, the war broke out[38].

The war brought the German occupation and the British blockade both preventing the import of thread and the export of lace for sale. The lacemakers risked running out of thread and becoming unemployed. Associations founded prior to the war followed up the situation, while new local initiatives to support the lacemakers were started. The *Union Patriotique des Femmes Belges,* created a few days after the German invasion by the Belgian feminists Jane Brigode (1870-1952)

34. David Hopkin, "Working, Singing, and Telling …", p. 55.
35. Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 11-15, 105-107.
36. Henry Van Holsbeek, *L'industrie dentellière en Belgique : étude sur la condition physique et morale des ouvrières en dentelles,* Brussels, 1863 ; Johanna Courtmans-Berchmans, *De hut van tante Klara,* Ghent, 1864, p. 5 ; Guillaume Degreef, *L'ouvrière dentellière en Belgique,* Brussels, 1886 ; Pierre Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge,* Brussels, 1912.
37. Charlotte Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium… ;* Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 109-116.
38. Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 11-18, 107-113 ; Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders…,* p. 68-69, 87.

and Louise Van den Plas (1877-1962), provided employment for women as seamstresses, toy makers, and lacemakers[39]. After a few months, several of the original members of *Les Amies de la Dentelle* founded the *Comité de la Dentelle* [Brussels Lace Committee], who took over the fate of handmade lace producers. The *Union Patriotique des Femmes Belges* continued to take care of women who made imitation lace. This division came after both organizations successfully applied to the CNSA for a grant to support lacemakers. The CNSA promptly established the *Aide et Protection des Dentellières,* an organization supervising the efficient use of resources and the allocation of tasks among both associations[40].

However, these initiatives would be inadequate without an international partner to import the thread and export the lace[41]. The American-born Viscountess de Beughem, née Irone Hare (1885-1979), one of the core members of the *Comité de la Dentelle,* brought the fate of the lacemakers in occupied Belgium to Herbert Hoover of the CRB[42]. Years later, she recalled in an interview how she had insisted on meeting Hoover during his visit to Brussels in January 1915. When she did meet him, "[h]e said, "It appears you have something to ask me." And I said, "Indeed I have, Mr. Hoover, and it's very important." The viscountess then explained to him the condition of the lacemakers. "So Mr. Hoover saw me through, and I thought – there was no reaction whatever. You know how he would sit without any expression. […] And he finally looked and said to me : "I will do what I can." And during the whole war he brought in the thread on the canals, on the boats that brought in the flour, and took out the lace"[43]. In order to do this, Hoover and the CRB negotiated with the British and German authorities to bring in the thread and to take out the lace destined for sale in the US and Allied Countries. The British were especially reluctant to open the blockade for the trade of Belgian lace. They feared the Germans, who had erected their own *Spitzen-Zentrale* [Lace headquarters], might use the imported thread for their own enterprise and even succeed in their efforts to control a revived Belgian lace industry[44].

From the start, the lace-aid scheme and food relief were closely linked. The CRB brought the thread to Rotterdam, from where the CNSA distributed it to all lace towns and villages across occupied Belgium. Both organizations also supported the scheme financially : they bought the materials and paid the lacemakers' wages. The catalogue of the *Exhibition of Belgian Lace* held in London in December 1917 stated that by that month, "the CRB and *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* already lent 13 million francs to the lace aid scheme"[45]. The CRB hoped to recuperate the money and make some profit after selling the lace. At the same time, the *Comité de la Dentelle* achieved their pre-war ambitions to revive the national lace industry : the training

39. Éliane Gubin, Catherine Jacques, Valérie Piette et al., *Dictionnaire des femmes belges. XIX^e et XX^e siècles,* Brussels, 2006, p. 79-81, 544-547 ; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire…,* Brussels, 2018, p. 270, 577-578.
40. *Rapport semestriel du Comité Exécutif au 30 Juin 1915,* p. 56-59. (NAB, *CNSA,* folder 12).
41. Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders…,* p. 88-89.
42. The Viscountess de Beughem was one of the core members of the *Comité de la Dentelle* alongside Countess Élisabeth d'Oultremont (1867-1971), lady-in-waiting to the Belgian Queen Elisabeth ; Mrs Josse Allard, née Marie-Antoinette Calley Saint-Paul de Sinçay (1881-1977), an amateur artist and wife of a banker ; and Mrs Louis Kefer-Mali, née Marie Mali (1855-1927), an expert on the history of lace, wife of a musician and sister of the Belgian Consul-General in New York. Mrs Brand Whitlock, née Ella Brainerd (1876-1942), who was married to the American minister to Belgium, was appointed as honorary chair. Brand Whitlock, *Belgium…,* vol. 1, p. 549-550 ; Evelyn McMillan, "War, Lace, and Survival in Belgium During World War I", in *PieceWork* Spring 2020, p. 2-3.
43. Oral history interview with Vicomtesse de Beughem by Raymond Henle, director (HPPL, 16 November 1966). This story has also been mentioned by Herbert Hoover in the first volume of his publication *An American Epic.* Herbert Hoover, *An American Epic,* Chicago, 1959, vol. 1, p. 410-411.
44. Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium…,* p. 160 ; Brand Whitlock, *Belgium…,* vol. 1, p. 419 ; Charlotte Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium…,* p. 120-123 ; Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 116-119.
45. Exhibition catalogue *Exhibition of Belgian Lace* (HHPL, *Lou Hoover Articles-Addresses : Unidentified – Belgian Relief : Correspondence, 1914,* Box 82, 11-12 December 1917 in London) ; Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 116.

in lace schools was improved, while more than two thousand new designs were drawn. Several were by renowned Belgian artists such as Isidore de Rudder (1855-1943), Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921), Juliette Wytsman-Trullemans (1866-1925), and Charles Michel (1874-1967), but most were by lace experts such as Lucie Paulis (1878-1952), by professional lace designers such as Mr Desnouck and Miss Brouhon, and by anonymous lace teachers and lace manufacturers[46].

The designs were approved by the *Comité de la Dentelle* and their choice resulted in a diverse iconography depicting flowers, animals, bucolic scenes, cherubs, fairy-tale figures and mythological creatures. These pieces without direct references to the conflict were originally not labelled as "war lace". Although this has changed over time, there is still little focus on them in curatorial practices and historiography, since the most renowned designs were the ones referring explicitly to the war. One example is a fan of fine-quality needle lace, designed by the Belgian painter Juliette Wytsman-Trullemans and manufactured by Maison Daimeries-Petitjean, whose names are both worked into the design. The fan shows a monogrammed A and E referring to the Belgian King Albert I and his wife Queen Elisabeth. The monogrammed letters are surmounted by the Belgian royal crowns and encircled by laurel as a symbol of victory. Between the letters, a Belgian lion holds a shield displaying the years 1914-1915. The animal is placed underneath the Belgian and American flags. Another example by an anonymous designer is a bobbin lace motif featuring the climbing lion of Belgium, holding a flagpole with the Belgian flag in vertical strips with the colours black, yellow and red. The lion stands on a pedestal, a yellow band with black border showing the date 1914-15 in red. The many designs with their different themes were executed in needle or bobbin lace and consequently worked into a wide variety of products ranging from lace sold by the yard to handkerchiefs, fans, umbrellas, cushions, tablecloths, and bedspreads[47].

The packages of finished Belgian lace were exported via the port of Rotterdam to London. From the British capital, the lace was distributed across Great Britain and to the US and other Allied Countries. After arrival in the US, Belgian lace was sold at bazaars, in department stores and specialized shops, and at lace exhibitions. Belgian lace was available at most Allied Bazaars and at CRB-connected events organized across the US, including those held in Palo Alto (California), Chicago, and Boston. Until recently, bazaars and charity events had been considered as the main selling sites, but that meant buyers had only temporary access to the products[48]. From the start, the CRB endeavoured to convince the renowned US department stores Altman's in New York, Wanamaker in Philadelphia, and Marshall Fields and Co. in Chicago to purchase the whole stock of lace, but it needed to

46. The catalogue *Dentelles* additionally mentions the surnames of the following artists : Ernest Blanc-Garin (1843-1916), the unidentified Bosché, Suzanne Cocq (1894-1979), Louis Charles Crespin (1892-1953), Georges Creten (1887-1966), Danse (It is uncertain if the surname refers to Auguste Danse (1829-1929) or one of his two daughters Marie (1866-1942) or Louise (1867-1948), who were both artists), Marnix d'Haveloose (1882-1973), the unidentified and probably aristocratic artist d'Hendecourt, Jacques de Lalaing (1858-1917), Baroness Lambert, née Zoé de Rothschild (1863-1916), Georges Lemmen (1865-1916), Amédée Lynen (1852-1938), Constant Montald (1862-1944) and Lucien Rion (1875-1939). Paul Musché, *Dentelles,* ed. the *Comité de la* Dentelle, Brussels, ca. 1915, n.p. ; Order Book of Mrs Josse Allard (Art & History Museum, ca. 1915-1920) ; Patricia Wardle, "War and Peace. Lace Designs by the Belgian Sculptor Isidore de Rudder (1855-1943) », in *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* no. 37, 1989 (2), p. 73-90 ; Marguerite Coppens, "Les commandes dentellières de l'Union patriotique des femmes belges et du Comité de la dentelle à Fernand Khnopff", in *Revue belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'art* no. 64, 1995, p. 71-84 ; Patricia Wardle, *75x Lace,* Zwolle, 2000, cat. nr. 75.

47. Order Book of Mrs Josse Allard (Art & History Museum, ca. 1915-1920) ; Exhibition catalogue *Exhibition of Belgian Lace* held 11-12 December 1917 in London (HHPL, *Lou Hoover Articles-Addresses : Unidentified – Belgian Relief : Correspondence,* 1914, Box 82) ; Paul Musché, *Dentelles.*

48. Artist and design historian Beverly Gordon traced the development of women's fundraising fairs in the US from the early 1800s to the late 1990s. See for more information about the US fairs during the First World War, Beverly Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies. The History of the American Fundraising Fair,* Knoxville, 1998, p. 156-159.

Juliette Wytsman (designer), Maison Daimeries-Petitjean (manufacturer and dealer), Monogrammed fan leaf with designer's name, 1915-1916. Point de Gaze needle lace, 12,7 cm x 43,18 cm. Washington DC, National Museum of American History, TE.E383969.

Anonymous, Motive of Belgian lion, ca. 1914-1915. Bobbin lace, 7,6 x 5,5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-NM-14367-73.

establish additional contacts with smaller specialized shops across the country[49]. Lastly, the organization also set up lace exhibitions, including a display at their New York office[50].

From the very start of the lace-aid programme, high-quality lace pieces were gifted to prominent figures with the hope that the additional publicity would lead to higher sales. This approach was not new. Traditionally, European queens and ladies of the higher nobility received lace at celebratory events such as weddings, state visits, and Joyous Entries. The precious gossamer luxury textile did come with certain conditions: the recipient was expected to support the local or national industry by wearing it in public, buying it, and giving it to others. These were gifts offered with an underlying strategy. Recipients of Belgian war lace included Miss Page, the daughter of Walter Hines Page, the American ambassador in London. She received a tablecloth as a wedding gift from Herbert Hoover and his wife. The unique tablecloth shows American eagles, wings spread, protecting the handcuffed Belgian lion, which is an artistic representation of the American support for the largely occupied country. The manufacture of the exquisite piece required three months of work by thirty women. This information, a picture of the special work, and the cost of $1000 (about €22,000 today) appeared in each exhibition catalogue. Other recipients were the American President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), the French President Raymond Poincaré (1860-1934), and the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina (1880-1962). These gifts were highlighted in articles, advertisements, and exhibition catalogues as a strategy to spark interest and sales[51].

Publicity campaigns were mounted by the CRB, the department stores, and the organizers of lace exhibitions. They did not focus on the renown of Belgian lace, but on the lacemakers themselves. Their reason for this redirection was to divert attention from lace as a luxury item. During times of war or hardship, the production of luxury goods is normally discouraged or even entirely abandoned. This was the opposite with Belgian lace, and thus the textile needed to be transformed into a humanitarian handicraft by concentrating on the lacemaker. An example of this strategy is the poster stating "Belgian Lace is not a Luxury" designed by the American illustrator Lawrence Sterne Stevens (1884-1960). The drawing above the caption immediately pointed the contemporary viewer to what really mattered: the destitute Belgian lacemaker who could only survive in her war-ravaged surroundings thanks to her craft and to her supporters elsewhere. She was a victim needing help from across national borders and even from across the ocean. This focus on the Belgian lacemaker fit in with Americans' understanding of the First World War as a disaster. In doing this, historian Julia F. Irwin argued, "Americans effectively disregarded questions of human culpability for the conflict and its consequences while simultaneously proclaiming their moral obligation to intervene on behalf of its innocent victims"[52].

IV. Surviving the war and its hardships

The Belgian lacemaker may have been the focus of the propaganda spotlight, but the representation of the solitary woman in the publications, advertisements, photographs, and posters reveals

49. Letter on the arrival and sales of lace in the US, written 7 May 1916 by Lindon W. Bates of the CRB office in New York to Herbert Hoover, chair of the CRB and staying in London (NAB, *APD,* folder 16).
50. Extract of undated letter from Gray to Richards of the CRB about exhibition of patriotic lace at entrance of offices (NAB, *APD,* folder 26).
51. These war laces are now preserved in respectively the President Woodrow Wilson House in Washington DC, the Art & History Museum in Brussels, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam on loan from the Koninklijke Verzamelingen in The Hague since 1966. Patricia Wardle, "War and Peace…", p. 73-90. Presenting lace to important persons like royalty had a long tradition. For earlier Belgian examples of lace gifts, see Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 32, 39, 64-67; Patricia Wardle, *75x Lace,* cat. nr. 75.
52. Julia F. Irwin, "The Disaster of War: American Understandings of Catastrophe, Conflict and Relief", in *First World War Studies* 5, 2014 (1), p. 18.

Lawrence Sterne Stevens, Belgian Lace is not a Luxury, ca. 1915-1918. Brussels, National Archives of Belgium, Iconographic Collection concerning WWI. Posters (inv. I 618), no. 886 : [...] Il serait à souhaiter que nous puissions disposer de subsides assez considérables pour nous permettre de donner à nos ouvrières au moins équivalent au secours attribue aux chômeurs. Ne serait-il pas en effet plus équitable de voir encourager le travail et de voir celui-ci plus rémunère que le sans-travail ! [...]

very little about the thousands of actual women, their lived experiences, or their motives for participating in the lace-aid programme.

According to the CRB and the *Comité de la Dentelle,* lacemakers were unemployed (or risked being unemployed) due to a shortage of materials and clients. Lace expert Martine Bruggeman even stated that the lack of clients was an even bigger problem than the depletion of the thread reserves[53]. However, she was ignoring the fact that lace was easily sold to the German troops, who sent the textile home as gifts[54]. Lacemakers in fact were becoming unemployed in the first place because the supplies of the necessary linen and cotton thread were running out. Those working with cotton were especially disadvantaged, as this material had to be imported from English spinneries, which was impossible due to the British blockade[55]. Therefore, it was predominantly the shortage of thread, and to a lesser extent the lack of clients, that made lace dealers, lace manufacturers, local dignitaries, and philanthropists turn to the *Comité de la Dentelle*. They all contacted the committee as they knew it could import thread from abroad thanks to its collaboration with the CRB. Lace dealers and manufacturers took this action as they were usually the ones who provided the lacemakers with the necessary materials, designs, and payment. Local dignitaries and philanthropists took action as they saw unemployment and poverty increasing in their towns and municipalities, while morale was declining. But in order to receive the badly needed thread, they needed to organize themselves into local committees headed by regional and provincial ones, after which they had to register their group of lacemakers. The latter needed to fulfil certain conditions as the *Comité de la Dentelle*'s aim was to entrust any lacemaker who had been working as a professional lacemaker before the war, who was over 16 years of age, who was without employment and in need, with the task of making lace, so to grant her a weekly salary of frs 3.00 net[56].

Within the first few months, the lace-aid programme became a success as circa 48,000 or nearly 50,000 women signed up. The majority produced handmade lace and were assisted by the *Comité de la Dentelle*. A minority made imitation lace and were supported by the *Union Patriotique des Femmes Belges*. The women assisted by these two organizations entered the programme for three main reasons: firstly, they needed a paid occupation to provide for themselves and their families. They were particularly drawn to the promised weekly salary of 3 frs in return for thirty hours of work. Before the war, most lacemakers worked ten to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, receiving on average 0,75 frs per day or 4,5 frs per week. This explains why in Brussels, a large number of lacemakers working for the lace manufacturer Keyser Frères et Soeurs quit their jobs in order to obtain the weekly benefit[57]. Yet, the fixed payment of 3 francs a week also caused problems. From the start, several subcommittees pointed out that unemployment support was often higher in their region than what the lacemakers would receive[58]. The subcommittee of Tielt, for example, wished "that we could have sufficiently large subsidies to enable us to give our women workers at least the same amount of relief as is given to the unemployed. Wouldn't it be fairer to encourage work and to see it paid more than the unemployed?"[59] Individual lacemakers also complained that they did not get enough to survive.

53. Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders...*, p. 88.
54. Letter from Mr Collart to Mr Flamine on 15th March 1915 about raw materials (NAB, *APD,* folder 24) : « Nous avons reçu aujourd'hui la visite du comte Henri de Limburg-Stirum, qui s'intéresse à l'industrie dentellière. Il nous a fait savoir que dans les Flandres cette industrie marche assez bien et que les Allemands l'encouragent en achetant des cadeaux pour les envoyer chez eux. »
55. Letter from the APD to the CRB on 28 April 1915 on the import of thread from England (NAB, *APD,* folder 1).
56. Règlement et organisation (NAB, *APD,* folder 1).
57. Subcommittee Brussels to Keyser Frères et Sœurs, 4 June 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 65).
58. Provincial Committee of Antwerp to APD, 12 June 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 47).
59. Report by subcommittee Tielt December 1916 (NAB, *APD,* folder 41).

In Brussels, Jeanne de Vare wrote that she lost her unemployment benefits as she was a lacemaker and desperately asked how she and her six-and-a-half-year-old child could survive on less than 0,50 francs a day[60]. Many lacemakers who at first had been satisfied with the level of wages grew dissatisfied in time. These included the craftswomen from Herzele who by mid-1918 were refusing to continue working for the low wages and enrolled in food-aid schemes that ran without the obligation to work. Although the subcommittee from Herzele regretted this turn of action, they understood their lacemakers:

> "The poor lacemakers who in 1915 or 1916 were happy to find a little work to earn a few francs, would no longer accept, at the moment, to work at these prices; in fact they are enrolled in the food aid scheme which they receive without having to do any work and which is much higher than the salaries of the Lace Committee of yesteryear, which we were able to pay them with difficulty, one week out of two, due to a lack of sufficient subsidies[61]."

These incidents show that lacemakers did not necessarily put up with the small and fixed allowance bestowed on them through the lace-aid programme. Instead, they resisted the expectations of gratitude, reclaimed their agency, and demonstrated their worth. They were often supported by their local committees, who witnessed first-hand the increasing destitution of the craftswomen. These incidents nuance Marguerite Coppens' declaration that "the allowance [during the war], then, was meagre; it was acceptable only given the wartime circumstances"[62].

A second reason why professional lacemakers participated in the lace-aid programme, was because they were excluded from unemployment benefits. A short note from the *Aide et protection aux dentellières* to the President of the Antwerp provincial committee on 15 June 1915 refers to this exclusion: "In reply to your letter P/P of the 12th of this month, we have the honour to inform you that the instructions relating to the Unemployment Fund formally stipulate that lacemakers cannot be included on the lists of the unemployed"[63]. The lace-aid programme was thus an unemployment scheme specifically for lacemakers, but the latter were obliged to work in order to receive support. Marguerite Coppens also observed this and wrote, "aid needed to reach the greatest number of the unemployed yet it would be unthinkable to grant aid without work performed in return"[64]. In her footnote she referred to the "allocation given to refugees [including Belgian refugees] by the French government without expectation of work in return as a novel and strongly criticized policy"[65]. The obligation to perform work in return for aid shows how the support for the Belgian lacemakers largely drew on earlier philanthropic ideas and practices. The deserving poor, whose behaviour was strictly controlled, were imagined as working hard to improve their living conditions, while keeping up the highest moral standards. The control of the skilful lacemakers reminds one of craft theorist Glenn Adamson, who wrote about the makers of the 2010 Jabulani football by Adidas: "like the

60. Letter from lacemaker Jeanne de Vare to APD, 8 December 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 65).
61. Report from the subcommittee Herzele (ca. July 1918) (NAB, *APD,* folder 27): « Les dentellières pauvres qui en 1915 ou 1916, étaient heureuses de trouver un peu de travail pour gagner n'importe comment quelques francs, n'accepteraient plus, en ce moment, de travailler à ces prix; en effet elles sont inscrites au secours alimentaire qu'elles reçoivent sans devoir fournir aucun travail et qui est bien supérieur aux salaires du Comité de la Dentelle de jadis, que nous arrivions péniblement à leur payer, une semaine sur deux, faute de subsides suffisants. »
62. Marguerite Coppens, 'The Lace Industry in France and Belgium during the First World War', in *Fashion, Society, and the First World War: International Perspectives,* London, 2021, p. 126.
63. Letter from the APD to the President of the Antwerp Provincial Committee on 15 June 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 47): « Répondant à votre lettre P/P du 12 courant, nous avons l'honneur de vous faire connaître que les instructions relatives au Fonds de Chômage stipulent formellement que les dentellières ne peuvent être portées sur les listes de chômeurs. »
64. Marguerite Coppens, "The Lace Industry…", p. 126.
65. Idem, footnote 17.

modern craftspeople for two centuries, the makers find themselves working at the intersection of two fields of manipulation : they masterfully shape their materials but are themselves controlled within a larger system of mastery"[66].

A third reason why lacemakers registered in the lace-aid programme was because lacemaking helped them to cope mentally with the daily worries about hunger, poverty, and the lack of news from their male family members at the front. An example is included in the letter written by the mayors of the villages Whingene, Ruysselede, Thielt, Oostcamp, and Beernem, who spoke on behalf of their lacemakers :

> "How many poor women have told us how much they would like to go back to work which would distract them from their sad thoughts and worries : how long and dreary are the hours spent doing nothing when one sees one's children lacking bread and shivering from the cold in front of the hearth which no flame lights up and when one thinks of the husband, of the son who is over there fighting for the honour of the Fatherland and about whom one has known nothing for months"[67] !

The ability of lacemaking and of crafts in general to distract from sad thoughts and worries is a quality originally noted by nineteenth-century reformers and by crafts preservationists – most notably by those associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, and it is still emphasized by craft enthusiasts. Yet, in the context of war in Belgium, that ability was combined with the fate of the soldier. Historian Antoon Vrints explained that "the notion of sacrifice, embodied by the soldier ready to give his life for the common good, occupies a central place, to the extent that the soldier at the front becomes the moral reference point for the population"[68].

The programme's success far exceeded the aid organizations' expectations (and budget) of supporting circa 20,000 women[69]. The male president of the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières,* the organization supervising the *Comité de la Dentelle* and the *Union Patriotique des Femmes Belges,* suspected that many were still apprentices, were not in need, or had been working in the industrial and agricultural sectors before the war[70]. He ignored the fact that lacemaking had provided an important additional income for farming families since the agricultural crises in the 1840s ; that the closure of many industries since the start of the war had forced women to take up their craft again to survive ; and that the rising living costs due to the ongoing war were resulting in increasing numbers of women and families in need[71]. Nevertheless, he urged a reduction in the number of registered women[72]. They all needed to meet the criteria for eligibility of the lace-aid programme as explained by its aim : to entrust any woman over 16 years of age who had been working as a professional lacemaker before the war and who was without employment and in need, with the task of making lace, so to grant her a weekly salary of 3.00 francs net[73]. In addition, only one member per household was admitted ;

66. Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft,* London, 2013, p. 40.
67. Report on the condition of lacemakers in Whingene, Ruysselede, Thielt, Oostcamp and Beernem by the local mayors to the CNSA. 20 January 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 24) : « Que de pauvres femmes nous ont dit combien elles souhaiteraient reprendre un travail qui les distrairait de leurs tristes pensées et de leurs inquiétudes : qu'elles sont longues et mornes les heures passées à ne rien faire lorsqu'on voit ses enfants manquer de pain et trembler de froid devant l'âtre qu'aucune flamme n'éclaire et qu'on songe au mari, au fils qui là-bas combat pour l'honneur de la Patrie et dont depuis des mois, on ne sait plus rien ! »
68. « La notion de sacrifice, incarnée par le soldat prêt à donner sa vie pour le bien commun, occupe une place centrale, au point que le soldat du front devient le point de référence moral de la population ». Antoon Vrints, « Les normes de conduite en Belgique occupée », in *En territoire ennemi 1914-1949. Expériences d'occupation, transferts, héritages,* Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2018, p. 88.
69. Procès-verbal de la séance du 4 mars 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 8).
70. Report 31 December 1916 (NAB, *APD,* folder 10).
71. Pierre Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge,* p. 31-32, 37-40, 189-190.
72. Procès-verbal de la séance, 11 June 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 8) ; report APD, 31 December 1916 (NAB, *APD,* folder 10).
73. Règlement et organisation (NAB, *APD,* folder 1).

family members could not benefit from any other replacement income; and in rural areas the possession of two cows – later one cow – excluded the applicant from further support[74]. These measures were taken, while local committees were exhorted to investigate the applicants, to verify that they fulfilled the aforementioned conditions. In Brussels, several lacemakers were found to be either too old or disabled to produce lace any longer, or did not know how. In the Ghent district, these controls led to the discovery of some inventive entries by the lacemakers:

> "Mr. Eeckhout reported that in the Ghent district in particular, some women workers were registered three times: under their maiden name, under that of a married woman and finally under a nickname of some kind. The Ghent sub-committee noted these abuses by means of in-depth investigations carried out by foreigners entrusted with this task. This work will yield surprising results"[75].

Despite the additional measures and checks, the number of women successfully obtaining assistance from the lace-aid programme never went below ca. 40,000. A rotation cycle, where each enlisted woman was given work for three weeks and unemployment benefits for one week, ensured the wartime employment of as many Belgian lacemakers as possible.

For the organizers of the lace-aid programme, providing suitable employment for working-class women took priority over making any profit. This conviction became even more evident once it was clear that the programme had not become a financial success. Shortly after the first shipment of Belgian lace was sent to the US in early April 1915, the CRB chairman Herbert Hoover wrote from London:

> "As to the lace business, we do not think you should take any further interest in it until we have had more experience of selling lace in America.
> It has been quite impossible for us to persuade the traders here to take any, except Selfridge who, out of friendship for us, agreed to take a small quantity and pay a small deposit, just to help us.
> We have sent the rest to New York, with the Belgian delegates, and if they do not manage to sell it quickly, I'm convinced we should drop the whole thing. It is a source of trouble and of little intrinsic value in our complicated situation[76]."

Nevertheless, the programme continued until after the war, although it altered over the years and was greatly cut back in 1917. Marguerite Coppens calculated that in the end an amount of lace worth only 1,200,000 frs was sold, while in contrast the production of lace had cost 10,187,373 frs.[77]. The disappointing financial results also help explain why Hoover only devoted a few lines towards the end of the first volume of *An American Epic* to the lace-aid programme[78].

74. Procès-verbal de la séance, 9 July 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 8); Reply from APD to *Comité de la dentelle* on 23 March 1916 to admit unemployed lacemakers from Liedekerke to the lace-aid programme (NAB, *APD,* folder 25).
75. Procès-verbal de la séance du 11 juin 1915 – 14h45 (NAB, *APD,* folder 6): « M. Eeckhout signale que dans la circonscription de Gand notamment, certaines ouvrières se sont faites inscrire trois fois : sous leur nom de jeune fille, sous celui de femme mariée et enfin sous un sobriquet quelconque. Le sous-comité de Gand a constaté ces abus par les enquêtes approfondies pratiquées par des personnes étrangères chargées de cette mission. Ce travail donnera des résultats surprenants. »
76. Translated letter from CRB chair Herbert Hoover to the CRB offices in Brussels, 6 April 1915 (NAB, *APD,* folder 16): « Pour ce qui concerne l'affaire des dentelles, nous ne croyons pas que vous devriez vous y intéresser davantage jusqu'à ce que nous ayons eu plus d'expérience au sujet de la vente de ces dentelles en Amérique. Il nous a été tout à fait impossible de persuader les négociants d'ici d'en prendre, excepté Selfridge qui, par amitié pour nous, a accepté de prendre une petite quantité et de payer un petit acompte, juste pour nous aider. Nous avons expédié le restant à New-York, avec les délégués belges, et s'ils ne parviennent pas à le vendre rapidement. Je suis convaincu que nous devrions abandonner complètement l'affaire. C'est une source d'ennuis et de peu de valeur intrinsèque dans notre situation compliquée. »
77. Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis,* p. 122.
78. Herbert Hoover, *An American Epic…,* vol. 1, p. 410-411.

After the armistice, Belgium awaited a long period of reconstruction. According to the Catholic trade union activist Maria Baers (1883-1959) there were still 80,646 lacemakers in Belgium in 1922, but it is unclear where she got this number from[79]. Yet, in the decades after the armistice as the war-damaged country was reconstructed, many women went to work in the rebuilt and re-opened factories, the newly established war-tourism sector, or in other jobs that paid better than lacemaking.

V. Conclusion

This paper elaborated the temporary alignment of humanitarian organizations, national philanthropic committees, and the recipients of their aid to respectively develop and participate in handicrafts programmes, using the lace-aid scheme as a case study. The CRB, the *Comité de la Dentelle* and the lacemakers all had their own reasons for entering the programme. The CRB, founded to offer food aid to the Belgian civilians, hoped to recuperate some of its financial losses in order to continue the food relief; the *Comité de la Dentelle* aimed to revive the Belgian handmade lace industry; while the professional and temporary lacemakers themselves wished to survive the war both physically and mentally by practising the textile craft. The outcomes of the programme were ambivalent: for the CRB and the *Comité de la Dentelle,* the scheme had not worked as intended, as it had apparently neither made any profits nor revived the lace industry, since the latter was to decline and ultimately disappear in the following decades. For the women participating in the scheme, the results had been mixed. On the one hand, participating in the programme in their moment of utter destitution had been a powerful way to ensure employment, to cope with their daily anxieties, and to help them survive the war. On the other hand, the lacemakers had to comply with the programme as they were excluded from unemployment benefits. In addition, their work was poorly renumerated, leading some individual and communities of lacemakers to protest and even abandon the programme. Yet, a better understanding of each parties' motives for entering the programme and their subsequent actions led to a fuller acknowledgement of the relationship between donor and beneficiary, while the examination of the handicraft programme permitted a revaluation of humanitarian beneficiaries as participants with agency rather than simply as persons receiving aid. What has emerged is a more complex and multi-perspective history with an emphasis on the reciprocal set of relationships between working-class women, Belgian elites, American relief organizations, and Anglo-American consumers, rather than a narrative of an external charitable endeavour.

In addition, these findings help to demonstrate the continuity of historical practices and nostalgia for the pre-industrial, artisan 'way of life' in contemporary humanitarian reform. As such, they nuance the assumption made by recent histories of humanitarianism that the First World War was a turning point in the development of modern humanitarianism. Engaging with the lace-aid scheme as an example of a handicraft programme revealed both its modern and traditional qualities. The programme was modern as it combined a large-scale operation employing ca. 50,000 lacemakers; a transnational field of action importing materials to produce lace destined for sale in the US and Allied Countries; and extensive strategic publicity campaigns developed by the CRB who used the aid beneficiaries to convince clients to contribute to the programme and buy the brand. The programme also contained traditional characteristics, as the fate of working-class women was put into the hands of the female philanthropists of the *Comité de la Dentelle*. The latter developed a lace-aid programme that is reminiscent of the long tradition of craft-based philanthropy for women in orphanages and

79. Colette Avrane cites Maria Baers in Colette Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile : le combat pour un salaire minimum sous la Troisième République,* Rennes, 2013, p. 153.

workhouses. Like these other programmes, this one combined ideas and action designed to preserve a traditional 'national' handicraft, as craft production was believed to lead to an improvement of the self and of the community. This example of humanitarian handicraft production brings into focus ideas about womanhood and class, that seem a large reproduction of the gendered and social order, even though women did find expression and solidarity and even empowerment in this handicraft programme. It also demonstrates the persistence of the concept of the 'deserving poor' in adjudications of who was entitled to receive aid. This focus in particular on the gendered history of humanitarian handicraft and implications of the manufacture of heritage tradition forces new appraisal of the ongoing use of arts and handicrafts in developmental aid programmes, while illuminating the conventions, restrictions, and opportunities associated with this form of gendered labour.

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Abbreviations

APD = Aide et protection aux dentellières
CNSA = Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation
CRB = Commission for Relief in Belgium
HHPL = Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa, U.S.
HI = Hoover Institution, Palo Alto, CA, U.S.
NAB = National Archives of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium