

V.P. SHELGUNOV AND THE SUPPLY OF AID TO RUSSIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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History usually focuses on major players and on nation-states, with 'minor' figures treated as mere pawns enhancing the status of King and Country. But what about 'transnational' operators, not seldom migrants, who do not fit in with the dichotomy of the chessboard and threaten to disrupt the simple opposition of Black and White, high and low, or them and us? In most cases they are ignored and forgotten, and the more tenacious ones are persecuted. This was the case with Vasilii Shelgunov, a Russian revolutionary who in 1909 came to Belgium under an assumed name, worked as a journalist, and at the outbreak of war set up a support network for Russian refugees and Prisoners of War, first in Belgium and later in the Netherlands. Because of his specific competences, he was (secretly) engaged by the Belgian authorities to broker a deal with the Bolsheviks regarding the exchange of Russian POWs and Belgian nationals stuck in Revolutionary Russia. Although this brokerage gained him the (tacit) support of politicians in high places and made him a Bolshevik spy in the eyes of anti-communists, Shelgunov's transnational, multilingual and transversal activities have escaped the attention of Belgian, Dutch and Russian historians alike.

I. Introduction

In June 1934, the Belgian Alien Police discovered that Vasilii Petrovich Shelgunov, a Russian émigré journalist, cinema proprietor and intermediary between Belgium and (Soviet) Russia, had been living in the country for 26 years under a false name.¹ Tax debts and Shelgunov's failure to renew his identity card had set the investigation in motion. As it turned out, Pavel Vasil'evich Balashov (1866-1943) was ten years older than his alter ego Shelgunov, and was not born in Moscow, but in Miasskii Zavod (now: Miass), a (gold) mining town in the Southern Urals. All of a sudden, a number of anomalies in his biography that had escaped the attention of the Belgian authorities now made sense: in May 1923, he had purchased under his real name and together with his 'son-in-law' Boris Balashov (Balachoff, 1896-?) two cinemas in the Brussels commune of Sint-Joost-ten-Noode. And his alleged mistress Anna Katsnel'son (Katsenelson, 1850-1936) and her three children Boris, Nina (1895-?) and Tatiana Balashov (1902-1973) turned out to be no other than his real family. Because of this false identity and the tax issues, on 6 October 1934 an eviction order was issued against Shelgunov-Balashov,² but the order was never executed: the socialist politician Emile Vandervelde (1866-1938) started to pull strings, there were issues over the precedence of creditors, and in March 1936 Balashov's wife Anna died. By September 1936, Balashov had managed to pay off his debts, making the eviction apparently obsolete. Balashov disap-

peared from the authorities' radar until his death in December 1943.

Why did Shelgunov-Balashov escape eviction at a time when the reigning mood and the legislation in Belgium were not particularly in favour of aliens?³ The reason therefore probably lays with the services Shelgunov had rendered to the Belgian State and especially to the then minister of Justice Emile Vandervelde in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. In 1920, Shelgunov had served as an unofficial intermediary between the Belgian authorities and the Bolshevik leadership to facilitate the return of Russian prisoners of war (POW) in Belgium to their home-country. By the end of the war, the number of Russian POWs in German and Austrian captivity had reached a staggering 2,8 million, over half of them in Germany and in the occupied territories at the Western front.⁴ Their repatriation was a diplomatic and logistic nightmare. Already during the war, they had been largely abandoned by the Russian authorities,⁵ but after their liberation at the armistice they were completely left to their own devices. The majority returned over land through Central Europe, but a considerable number of them hoped to be repatriated via France, Belgium, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom. As the diplomatic relations between these countries and Russia had been severed since the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917 and especially since the Brest-Litovsk treaty of 3 March 1918, the Russian POWs were stranded. To get rid of these unwanted aliens, the authorities turned to informal go-betweens to

1. State Archives of Belgium, Brussels (hereinafter SABB), Ministry of Justice, Administration for Public Safety, Alien Police (hereinafter AP), F1649, 871708 (Schelgounoff, W.).

2. SABB, AP, F1649, 871708 (Schelgounoff, W.).

3. FRANK CAESTECKER, *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840-1940. The Creation of Guest Workers, Refugees and Illegal aliens*, New York, 2000, 155-196.

4. REINHARD NACHTIGAL, "Zur Anzahl der Kriegsgefangenen im Ersten Weltkrieg", *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 67 (2008), 345-384; HEATHER JONES, "Prisoners of War", in UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ et al. (Eds), *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Berlin, 2014 (https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/prisoners_of_war). Cf also OKSANA NAGORNAJA, "United by Barbed Wire Russian POWs in Germany, National Stereotypes, and International Relations, 1914-22", *Kritika*, 10 (2009), 475-498; OKSANA NAGORNAJA, *'Drugoi voennyi opyt'. Rossiiskie voennoplennyye Pervoi mirovoi voiny v Germanii (1914-1922)*, Moskva, 2010; JOCHEN OLTMER (Ed.), *Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Paderborn-München-Wien-Zürich, 2006; VADIM O. TELITSYN, *Vozvrashchenie domoi. K istorii russkikh voennoplennyykh Pervoi mirovoi voiny*, Moskva, 2011.

5. NIKOLAI ZHDANOV, *Russkie voennoplennyye v mirovoi voine 1914-1918 gg.*, Moskva, 1920, 320-333.

strike a deal with the Bolsheviks. Belgium counted on Vasilii Shelgunov to smooth the way.⁶

Shelgunov had been a politico-cultural intermediary between Russia and the Low Countries since before the war, a transnational actor⁷ without formal position or official appointment who actively contributed to the circulation of knowledge between the two regions. As a unofficial agent, he had considerably more freedom of action than diplomats, envoys or arbitrators, but at the same time he was also more difficult to keep in check. If his involvement in undercover operations became public, his clients invoked plausible deniability, and his opponents subjected him to rumour and slander. As an alien without a secure status, Shelgunov was particularly susceptible to this kind of abuse. It was therefore in his own interest to remain 'discreet' and if possible 'invisible'.

Shelgunov's discretion and invisibility were certainly facilitated by the fact that he was a migrant who operated transnationally, defying the national, linguistic, political, cultural and judicial boundaries and referential framework imposed by the war and the post-war system of European nation-states.⁸ As a *migrant intermediary*, Shelgunov fits into the concept of *Migrant knowledge*, a new paradigm on the crossroads of migrant studies and the history of knowledge that focuses on the role of migrants in the circulation of knowledge.⁹ As a *migrant journalist* he could relay news from Belgium and the Netherlands to his home country; as a *migrant Russian* in the Low Countries, he had obtained the necessary knowledge, skills and connections to operate on behalf of the Russian

POWs; as a *migrant revolutionary* he could connect to the Bolshevik leadership and mediate on behalf of the Belgian authorities; as a *migrant cultural entrepreneur* he became a point of reference for Soviet culture in the interwar period. Because of his multiple roles in different settings and his migrant status, his *knowledge* was perceived as both a threat (he was presented as a Bolshevik) and an asset (he served as go-between with Soviet Russia), depending on the situation and who was doing the talking.

Shelgunov's discretion and invisibility also translate into a multiplicity of various and fragmented sources in many different places, the coherence of which only emerges when making targeted queries in (online) archives and (digitized) newspapers. Moreover, the available sources themselves often need critical scrutiny. Soviet sources on his revolutionary credentials, for instance, are ideologically biased and need to be read with caution. And sometimes sources contain answers that the their compilers failed to comprehend at the time: in the 1920s, for example; the Belgian Alien Police made cross-references between the personal files of Vasilii Shelgunov and Boris Balashov, but failed to see that they were father and son.¹⁰

By looking at Shelgunov's involvement in the repatriation of the Russian POWs from Belgium, establishing his credentials as a migrant intermediary, and identifying his transnational network, we not only want to rescue a 'forgotten' individual from oblivion, but also want to catch a glimpse of the predicament the Russian POWs in Belgium found themselves in. Investigating the Shelgunov

6. WIM COUDENYS, *Leven voor de tsaar. Russische ballingen, samenzweerders en collaborateurs in België*, Leuven, 2004, 34, 46, 87, 93, 163; WIM COUDENYS, *Voor Vorst, voor Vrijheid en voor Recht. Kolonel Andrej Prezjbano, een Rus aan het IJzerfront*, Antwerpen, 2017, 266-267, 279-283; WIM COUDENYS & PATRICK RAPOYE, *Fallen Far from the Fatherland. Russian Victims of World War I in Belgium*, Leper, 2021, 14, 96-98.

7. ANTIJE DIETZE & KATJA NAUMANN (2018), "Revisiting transnational actors from a spatial perspective", *European Review of History*, 25 (2018), 415-430; ANTIJE DIETZE, "Cultural brokers and mediators", in MATTHIAS MIDDELL (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, London, 2018, 494-502.

8. Cf. JOHN TORPEY, "The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Passport System", in JANE CAPLAN and JOHN TORPEY, *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, Princeton, 2001, 256-270.

9. ANDREA WESTERMANN & ERDUR ONUR, "Migrant Knowledge: Studying the Epistemic Dynamics That Govern the Thinking in and around Migration, Exile, and Displacement", in Id. (Eds.), *Histories of Migrant Knowledge. Transatlantic and Global Perspectives*, Washington, 2020, 5-18.

10. SABB, AP, F1649, 907744 (Balachoff B).



*Vasilii Shelgunov, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1649, 71708.*



*Boris Balashov, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1649, 907744.*

case not only provides an opportunity to catch a glimpse of these 'forgotten' victims of the war,¹¹ but also to evocate a forgotten, transnational Russian-Belgian-Dutch world that straddled the First World War and that by the mid-1920s had largely been eclipsed by the newly arrived 'White' Russian emigration.¹² To fully understand Shelgunov's involvement in the aid to Russian POWs, first in the Netherlands (§ IV) and then in Belgium (§ V), we also need to look at his previous engagements as a revolutionary in Russia (§ II) and his activities as a Russian journalist in Belgium and the Netherlands (§ III). And his engagement on behalf of the Russian POWs is also key to understanding why, after 1920, Shelgunov was essentially left in peace by the Belgian authorities and escaped persecution after his unmasking in 1934 (§ VI).

II. A Russian revolutionary

In 1913, the influential progressive daily *Russkie vedomosti* published a collective volume on its 50th anniversary. The volume not only contained materials about its history, famous collaborators such as L.N. Tolstoi and A.P. Chekhov, and its constant battles with the tsarist authorities, but also autobiographies of its contributors. 47-year old Pavel Balashov summarized his life as follows:

Born in 1866 into a family of a small provincial official. He was brought up in a gymnasium in the backwater town of Troitsk, Orenburg province. After the gymnasium he was a village teacher. In 1887 he was arrested in Kazan' based on the regulations on security and was administratively (by agreement of the Ministers of the Interior and Justice) sentenced to two years' imprisonment, which he served in the St. Petersburg solitary prison (Kresty).

After serving this imprisonment he served on the railways first in Samara and Chelyabinsk, then in Moscow (from the beginning of 1898 to the end of 1900) and finally in St. Petersburg. In 1905 he was arrested for a second time as a member of the Executive Committee of the [St. Petersburg] Soviet of Workers' Deputies. After the first trial in the summer of 1906 he was released on bail and then tried separately in the spring of 1908, but before the verdict he went abroad, where he has been living up to the present day.¹³

The larger part of his reminiscences was devoted to the importance of *Russkie vedomosti* for his personal development: how it alleviated the dullness of his provincial existence, instilled democratic ideas and once and for all freed him of religious thoughts. Corroboration for Balashov's revolutionary antecedents is provided by Soviet sources: in 1927, Trotskii named him as a member of the Executive Committee of the 1905 St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies who allegedly opposed the idea of an immediate general strike without proper preparations and who was prosecuted together with Trotskii, Plekhanov and many others.¹⁴ The biographical dictionary *Deiateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii* (1931) labelled him as a Social-Democrat, gave additional details about his first arrest and sentence (Kazan' – Saint-Petersburg, 1887-1892), his involvement in organizing the 'Ural Workers' Union' in Chelyabinsk in 1896-1898, and in the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies in 1905.¹⁵ The information in the dictionary was almost exclusively derived from Soviet sources and built on the assumption that all revolutionaries "who declared themselves clear adherents of Marx' teachings in the mid and late 1880s" were by definition social-democrats, even "if they were not yet social-democrats."¹⁶

11. ANNETTE BECKER, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre 1914-1918. Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre*, Paris, 1998.

12. WIM COUDENYS, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 85-88, 161-164.

13. *Russkie vedomosti. 1863-1913. Sbornik statei*, Moskva, 1913, Part 2, 18.

14. LEV TROTSKII, *Nasha pervaiia revoliutsiia. Ch. 2*, Moskva-Leningrad, 1927, 299, 304, 311, 313, 316, 318, 335, 339.

15. *Deiateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii. Bio-bibliograficheskii slovar'. Ot predshestvennikov dekabristov do padeniia tsarisma. T. 5. Sotsial-demokraty 1880-1904*, Moskva, 1931, 208-209.

16. VLADIMIR NEVSKII, "Predislovie", in *Deiateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii. T. 5*, x.

These Soviet sources, however, were uncertain about Balashov's political views: they called him "a former *narodovolets* (populist)," ¹⁷ "a *narodovolets-retsdivist*," ¹⁸ and an "undoubtedly politically compromised" ¹⁹ person; the latter inferred that Balashov was under police surveillance. ²⁰ Many decades later, in the 1970s and 1980s, Chelyabinsk historians dismissed any doubt about Balashov's views and actively established (questionable) links between the local revolutionary Balashov and the national leadership of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), including Lenin. ²¹ Balashov, it seems, was a harmless figure, mainly involved in reading circles in the Russian provinces and the distribution of critical (i.e. revolutionary) literature. Having left Russia well before 1917 and having disappeared from view ever since, he had remained unaffected by the grindings of Soviet politics.

III. A Russian journalist in Belgium

On 17 July 1908, Louis Gonne (1860-1934), the head of the Belgian *Administration de Sûreté Publique* (Administration for Public Safety), requested his Russian colleague in St. Petersburg information about Vasilii Petrovich Shelgunov, a 42-year old Muscovite who had arrived in Brussels ten days earlier. The exchange of information between the Belgian and Russian security services was common practice in the prewar years and undoubt-

edly inspired Balashov to assume a false name, ironically enough borrowed from the famous revolutionary publicist and literary critic Nikolai Vasil'evich Shelgunov (1824-1891). The Petersburg *Departament politzii* (Police Department) fell for the ruse and replied that they did not possess any information on this man. ²² The Brussels police and gendarmerie nevertheless kept an eye on Shelgunov, who reportedly was looking for a job as an accountant, learned French by reading newspapers in the café of the Brussels *Maison du Peuple* and making translations; he also received some money from Russia, and did not mix with others. By 1911, he was living "with his family," i.e. Anna Katsnel'son and her children who had arrived in Belgium in August 1908, and claimed to be a "journalist." ²³ Apparently, the Belgian security services were unaware that Shelgunov had become the Brussels correspondent of *Russkie vedomosti*. His first article, on 21 May 1909, dealt with the way King Leopold was trying to sell his art collection so as not to leave it to his estranged family. ²⁴ In general, Shelgunov sympathized with the underdogs of society (labourers, strikers, women) and was critical of the powers-that-be: he reported on (the wealth of) the Belgian royal family, the might of the Catholic Party, the abuses of capitalism, Belgian politics and major public events; personally, he enjoyed the political liberties and luxuries of life in Belgium, notably its extensive railway network, which he contrasted with the lack thereof in Russia. ²⁵ And he was par-

17. VLADIMIR NEVSKII, *Ocherki po istorii rossiiskoi kommunisticheskoi partii. T. 1*, Leningrad, 1925, 494.

18. IOSIF GODLEVSKII, "Iz vospominanii o pervom 'Ural'skom rabochem soiuze'", *Katorga i ssylka*, 1928 (8-9), 56.

19. LEONID MEL'SHCHIKOV, *Okhrana i revoliutsiia. K istorii tainykh politicheskikh organizatsii, sushchestvovavshikh vo vremena samoderzhavii. Chast' II. Vypusk I. 1898-1903 gg.*, Moskva, 1928, 51.

20. LEONID MEL'SHCHIKOV, *Okhrana i revoliutsiia*, 86, 88, 89.

21. A.S. RYZHKOV, "Balashov Pavel Vasil'evich", in *Plamennye serdtsa. Biograficheskie ocherki. Vyp. 1*, Cheliabinsk, 1972, 34-43; V. MOROZOV, "Pavel Balashov, revoliutsioner", *Miasskii rabochii*, 1/5/1972, 3; M. FONOTOV, "Okna istorii. Iz al'boma khudozhnika", *Cheliabinskii rabochii*, 16/4/1983, 3. Cf. also ZINAIDA. N. ANOKHINA, "Balashov Pavel Vasil'evich", *Cheliabinskaiia oblast'. Entsiklopediia. T. 1.*, Cheliabinsk, 2008 (http://chel-portal.ru/enc/Balashov_Pavel_Vasilevich).

22. L. Gonne to St. Petersburg Police Department, 17/7/1908; St. Petersburg Police Department to L. Gonne, 16(29)/7/1908 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

23. SABB, AP, F1649, 871708.

24. V.SH., "Koronovannyi trgovets (Pis'mo iz Briusselia)", *Russkie vedomosti*, 21/5/1909, 4-5.

25. V.SH., "Iskusstvo ostat'sia u vlasti", *Russkie vedomosti*, 2/7/1909, 3; Id., "Iubileinyi katolicheskii congress", 23/9/1909, 3; Id., "Mezhdutsarstvie", 11/12/1909, 4; Id., "Tsivil'nyi list koroia Al'berta I", 24/12/1909, 4-5; Id., "Nakanune vseмирnoi vystavki", 10/4/1910, 4-5; Id., "Mirovoi zheleznyi sindikat", 30/6/1911, 3; Id., "Pobeda moriakov", 12/7/1911, 4; Id., "Bab'ia revoliutsiia", 30/8/1911, 5; Id., "Iz skitanii po Bel'gii", 19/8/1912, 5. Cf. also V.SH., "Krizis bel'giiskogo liberalizma", *Russkoe bogatstvo*, no. 10 (1912), 258-274.

ticularly critical of the collaboration between the Belgian *Sûreté Publique* and the Russian *Departament politzii*: he denounced the extradition of Russian subjects from Belgium and gleefully wrote about the scandal surrounding Arkadii Garting (1861-1927), the disgraced head of the Paris office of the *Okhrana* (the political section of the *Departament politzii*) who had taken refuge in Belgium.²⁶ In 1913, Shelgunov started to take an interest in the Netherlands, devoting articles to national politics (socialists and liberals vs 'clericals'), the peace movement (the 20th International Peace Congress, the Peace Palace) and other forms of international collaboration on Dutch soil (e.g. the 18th Interparliamentary Congress in The Hague).²⁷ Whereas he signed with "V.Sh." when reporting from Belgium, he used V. Shelgunov when writing from and about the Netherlands.

When war broke out in August 1914, *Russkie vedomosti* used its extended network of correspondents to cover the fighting on the Western front, and write about the fate of Russians caught up by the events.²⁸ Mikhail Osorgin (1878-1942) reported from Italy, Vladimir Zhabotinskii (1880-1940) followed the retreating Belgian, French and British armies in Belgium and Northern France, and Vasilii Shelgunov dispatched letters from occupied Brussels. On 25 August he wrote about the sorry fate of the penniless Russian refugees in Brussels, who depended on the support from two committees, one founded by political émigrés, the other created by the Russian embassy. The let-

ter also contained the (fake) story about 600 Russian students arrested in Liège for participating in the defence of the city, and claimed that the Belgians counted on the Russian army to liberate them.²⁹ In the next letter, dating from 28 August, Shelgunov wrote about the thunder of the cannonade on Antwerp that could be heard from Brussels (he called it his "baptism of fire"); furthermore he explained that the help to Russian refugees was now channelled through the *Russkii komitet pomoshchi* (Russian Help Committee), which he himself had co-founded. The committee provided lodgings to some 35 people and had opened a soup kitchen for c 80. The local émigré community continued to run its own cooperative kitchen.³⁰ Shelgunov also compiled a list of Russians stuck in Brussels; the first names on them were of Anna Balashova and her children.³¹ The next letter of 24 September, about Shelgunov's flight from Brussels, was already sent from The Hague.³²

IV. Providing aid to Russian POWs in the Netherlands

Shelgunov's dispatches from The Hague were initially concerned with the fate of (Russians in) Belgium. He dedicated several of his 'letters' to the Russians in Liège, the largest community in the country; some had helped with the defense of the city in August 1914 and were now held prisoner in the notorious prison of 'La Chartreuse' (Liège) or the POW-camp of Munsterlager (Lower

26. V.Sh., "Delo anarkhista Gartenshteina v gentskom sude", *Russkie vedomosti*, 12/6/1909, 3; Id. "Garting v Briussele", 1/7/1909, 2 & 5/7/1909, 3; Id. "Zapros o Gartinge v bel'giiskoi palate deputatov", 15/7/1909, 2. On Garting and Belgium, cf. KENNETH L. LASOEN, *Geheim België. De geschiedenis van de inlichtingendiensten 1830-2020*, Tielt, 2020, 112-118.

27. VASILII SHELGUNOV, "Nakanune vyborov v Gollandii", *Russkie vedomosti*, 4/6/1913, 3-4; Id. "Razgrom klerikalov v Gollandii", 20/6/1913, 4; Id. "Gollandskie sotsialisty ob uchastii v liberal'nom ministerstve", 8/8/1913, 4; Id., "Sredi pasifistov", 15/8/1913, 3; Id., "XX mezhdunarodnyi kongress mira", 17/8/1913, 4 & 20/8/1913, 4; Id., "Torzhestvennoe otkrytie Dvortsa Mira", 21/8/1913, 4; Id., "Dvoret's mira v Gaage", 22/8/1913, 4; Id., "Istoriia mezhduparlamentskogo soiuza", 24/8/1913, 4.

28. DAVID BALMUTH, *The Russian Bulletin, 1863-1917. A Liberal Voice in Tsarist Russia*, New York, 2000, 337-358.

29. V.Sh., "V Briussele", *Russkie vedomosti*, 17/9/1914, 5. On the Russian reactions to the German invasion of Belgium in 1914, see WIM COUDENYS, "A Country of Heroes? Belgium in Russian Propaganda during WWI... and after", *Studia Historica Gedanensia*, 9 (2018), 170-182 & WIM COUDENYS, *Voor Vorst*, 51-81.

30. V. SHELGUNOV, "Pod zvuki kanonady", *Russkie vedomosti*, 25/9/1914, 5.

31. "Russkie, ostavshiesia v Briussele", *Russkie vedomosti*, 24/9/1914, 3-4.

32. V. SHELGUNOV, "Begstvo iz Briusselia", *Russkie vedomosti*, 10/10/1914, 5.

Saxony); others had volunteered in the Belgian army.³³ On 5 November, he announced that he had created a *Russkii komitet v Gollandii* (Russian Committee in the Netherlands) to liaise between Russian refugees, notably from Belgium, and their relatives in Russia, and speak on their behalf before the Dutch, Belgian, German and Russian authorities. To this goal, he claimed to have rented housing for Russian refugees in The Hague, and was hoping to open other refuges along the Dutch border and in Rotterdam. Doubting that the Dutch would be willing to support such a venture, he hoped to receive funding from individuals in Russia, and, possibly, the Russian embassy and consulate. The leadership of the *Russkii komitet* completely consisted of Russians who had fled from Belgium: Shelgunov (chairman), the anarcho-communist mathematician Veniamin Aleinikov (1877-?) (secretary), and the engineer Schlioum (Solomon) Fel'dmann (1887-?) (treasurer), both former students of the University of Liège.³⁴ In the following weeks and months, Shelgunov's articles alternated between the situation in occupied Belgium,³⁵ the threat of war to the Netherlands,³⁶ and (escaped) Russian POWs. The latter were primarily meant to inform the readers of *Russkie vedomosti* about the fate of their beloved ones in German camps, and foremost, to request them to make gifts to the Russian Committee in the Netherlands through the *Moskovskoe gorodskoe upravlenie* (Moscow City administration) and the

Russian Red Cross. There was mainly need for tobacco and reading materials.³⁷

Judging by the contents of his letters on POWs, Shelgunov actively liaised with Russian officials in the Netherlands. After the morning service in the Russian-Orthodox church of The Hague on 13 January 1915 (Russian New Year), for instance, Ivan Peterson (1861-1940), the Russian Consul-General in Rotterdam, introduced Shelgunov to *iefreitor* (Corporal) Maksimov, who had fled from a German camp and had turned up the day before at the Consulate in Rotterdam in full uniform and without any knowledge of foreign languages.³⁸ On 23 May Shelgunov lamented that Russian POWs hardly received any help: "The reason thereof lays in our inability, and partly, perhaps, in our unwillingness to use all means." He compared this Russian lameness with the organized way in which the Belgians, French and British were lobbying for their POWs. "Only the Russians stand aside of everything, remain seated with arms crossed and philosophically behold their surroundings."³⁹

An opportunity to improve the aid to Russian POWs presented itself in May 1915, when Shelgunov came in contact with the Belgian Section of the *Oeuvre internationale pour blessés et prisonniers de guerre* in The Hague. The *Oeuvre* had been created in February 1915 in Maastricht to come to the

33. V. SHELGUNOV, "Russkie v L'ezhe", *Russkie vedomosti*, 15/11/1914, 4-5; "Spisok (nepolnyi) russkikh studentov, arestovannykh nemtsami v L'ezhe i otpravlennykh v Miunsterlager", 15/11/1914, 6 & 16/11/1916, 7; V. SHELGUNOV, "Vesti iz nemetskogo plena", 18/11/1914, 3; "Spisok (nepolnyi) russkikh poddannykh, zhivushchikh v L'ezhe k 23-omu oktiabria (5-mu noiabria) 1914 g.", 18/11/1914, 6. Cf. also "Russkie dobrovol'tsy v bel'giiskoi armii", *Russkie vedomosti*, 8/8/1914, 5 & M. LUR'E, "Russkie studenty v plenu", *Russkie vedomosti*, 12/12/1914, 6. On the fate of the Russian volunteers in the Belgian army, see WIM COUDENYS & PATRICK RAPOYE, *Fallen Far from the Fatherland*, 11-21.

34. V.SH., "Russkii komitet v Gollandii", *Russkie vedomosti*, 20/11/1914, 5. Cf. SABB, AP, F1649, 676692 (Aleinikov V.); F1650, 1021502 (Fel'dmann S.).

35. V. SHELGUNOV, "Bel'giiskie bezhentsy", *Russkie vedomosti*, 23/11/1914, 2-3; V.SH., "Istoricheskii dokument", 29/11/1914, 6; Id., "Poslednie chasy Antverpena", 30/11/1914, 2; Id., "Bel'giia bez gazet", 12/12/1914, 5; V. SHELGUNOV, "Chto oni gotoviat Bel'gii", 16/12/1914, 6-7; Id., "Poslanie Kardinala Mers'e", 14/1/1915, 2; V.SH., "Nemetskii proizvol v Bel'gii", 7/2/1915, 5; V. SHELGUNOV, "Snabzhenie Bel'gii", 27/11/1915, 5; "V Bel'gii", 29/7/1916, 5 & 4/1/1917, 3.

36. V. SHELGUNOV, "Dykhanie voiny", *Russkie vedomosti*, 5/3/1915, 5-6; Id., "Germaniia i Gollandiia", 13/3/1915, 7; Id., "Morskoe razboiniki", 28/4/1915, 3; Id., "Zhenskii kongress v Gaage", 15/5/1915, 5; SH., "Polozhenie v Gollandii", 24/3/1916, 4; V. SHELGUNOV, "Morskoi razboi", 2/4/1916, 4-5; "V Gollandii", 5/2/1917, 4.

37. V. SHELGUNOV, "Zhizn' v germanskom plenu", *Russkie vedomosti*, 24/5/1915, 3; Id., "Dukhovnye nuzhdy voennoplennykh", 4/6/1915, 5; Id., "Vzaimopomoshch' sredi russkikh voennoplennykh", 30/6/1915, 5.

38. V. SHELGUNOV, "Russkii beglets iz germanskogo plena", *Russkie vedomosti*, 21/1/1915, 2.

39. V. SHELGUNOV, "Bezprizornye", *Russkie vedomosti*, 11/6/1915, 5.

aid of Belgian POWs, but soon reached out to all POWs, Allied as well of the Central Powers, so as not to jeopardize Dutch neutrality. Because of its remarkable efficiency Shelgunov suggested to the Moscow City Administration to send help to Russian POWs via the *Oeuvre*. In September 1915, a separate *Russkaia sektsiia* (Russian Section) of the *Oeuvre* was created, with Shelgunov as its president.⁴⁰ As of late 1915, Shelgunov's dispatches in *Russkie vedomosti* became few and far between, suggesting that his engagement in the Russian Section drew all his energy. In May 1916, for instance, he boasted the success of his enterprise, with thousands of packages delivered to Russian POWs and the creation of cooperative canteens within the POW camps.⁴¹ In the same vein, he told the story of an 'unlucky' POW who had been shot by a German border patrol on Dutch soil and taken to a hospital in Aachen; under Dutch pressure, he was extradited to the Netherlands, where the man immediately proceeded to Rotterdam, from where he wanted to rejoin the Russian army.⁴² From these 'letters from The Hague,' it transpires that Shelgunov had taken up a patriotic stance and closely collaborated with the *Russkii komitet po delam bezhavshikh iz plena voinskikh chinov* (*Comité russe des prisonniers de guerre évadés*) in Rotterdam, which essentially prepared escaped Russian POWs for a return to the front; it fell under the authority of Colonel Liudvig Maier (Mayer, 1878-1936), the military agent to the Netherlands, but was run by Father Aleksei Rozanov (1872-1936), the priest of the Russian Orthodox parish in The Hague.⁴³ This military *Comité* operated parallel to Peterson's *Ofitsial'naia komissiia po okazaniu pomoshchi russkim bezhentsam* (*Commission officielle à l'as-*

sistance des réfugiés russes), which catered for civilian refugees.⁴⁴

Shelgunov's letters from The Hague, however, did not mention the problems he was encountering. As it happens, the success of Shelgunov's enterprise, the trust he enjoyed of the *Oeuvre's* president, countess Blanche de Geloës (b. de Lannoy, 1859-1936), and especially the large funds he had at his disposal, became a source of envy. Already in November 1915, there was some bickering over collaboration with the Dutch Red Cross: if Shelgunov wanted to be eligible for tax refunding (on sugar and sweets), he had to ship his parcels through the Dutch Red Cross. That organization seems to have distrusted Shelgunov and suspected him of contraband. However, it never presented hard proof thereof, and once the tax refunding granted, Shelgunov had his parcels again delivered through the central office of the *Oeuvre* in Maastricht, rather than through the Dutch Red Cross.⁴⁵ But worse was to come.

In March 1916, a certain baron Béla Kőrösi presented himself to Mrs. Emilie Seydlitz (b. van der Maesen de Sombreff, 1864-1951), the treasurer of the *Oeuvre* in Maastricht. Through her, the (alleged) former officer of the Austro-Hungarian army managed to coax countess de Geloës into making him a representative of the *Oeuvre* in The Hague. Soon enough, he started to blacken Shelgunov's reputation and accused him of embezzlement. Apparently, he wanted to get control over Shelgunov's funds. On 14 June 1916, the *Oeuvre* suspended Shelgunov, and instated a committee of inquiry to look into the accusations.

40. V. SHELGUNOV, "Russkaia sektsiia pomoshchi voennoplennym", *Russkie vedomosti*, 31/10/1915, 4-5. Cf. also HANS VAN LITH, *Twee miljoen pakketten ... Het 'Internationaal Liefdewerk voor Gewonden en Krijgsgevangenen' te Maastricht 1915-1919. Een indrukwekkend initiatief*, Soesterberg, 2011; SABB, 1433: WO 1. Internationaal Liefdewerk voor Gewonden en Krijgsgevangenen in Maastricht; ELIK E. ABDRAKHITOV, "Deiatel'nost' obshchestvennykh i mezhdunarodnykh organizatsii v dele okazaniia pomoshchi rossiiskim voennoplennym v Germanii i Avstro-Vengrii", *Nauchnye vedomosti Belgorodskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya Istoriia. Politologiya. Ekonomika. Informatika*, 8, no. 26 (2013), 125-30.

41. V. SHELGUNOV, "Neponiatnaia repressiia", *Russkie vedomosti*, 7/5/1916, 5.

42. V. SHELGUNOV, "'Ne pofartilo'", *Russkie vedomosti*, 19/7/1916, 5.

43. "Mestnaia khronika. [...] Godovshchina Russkogo Komiteta po Delam Bezhavshikh iz Plena Voinskikh Chinov v Rotterdame", *Golos rodiny*, 10/12/1918, 2.

44. Cf. EVELYN DE ROODT, *Oorlogsgasten. Vluchtelingen en krijgsgevangenen in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Zaltbommel, 256-261.

45. HANS VAN LITH, *Twee miljoen pakketten*, 35-38.

The committee ruled that the accusations were malicious and ungrounded, and in August, Shelgunov was exonerated and reinstated.⁴⁶ Shelgunov, it transpires, had friends in high places: Aleksandr Svechin (1859-1939), the Russian envoy to the Netherlands, had informed the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs John Loudon (1866-1955) of the situation.⁴⁷ And Shelgunov also had allies within the *Oeuvre* itself. The most vociferous of them was Louis Lamberts-Hurrelbrinck (1856-1941), a lawyer and a literary author, who exposed Kőrösi as an imposter and a crook.⁴⁸ Emilie Seydlitz had to resign as treasurer of the *Oeuvre*, but she and her husband, the influential banker Herman Seydlitz (1860-1938), would continue to insist that she had been right all along.⁴⁹ Notwithstanding Shelgunov's exoneration, the accusations would haunt the man for years to come. The Dutch Red Cross, for instance, wanted to use the affair as a leverage to effectively put the *Oeuvre*, including the Russian Section, under its control.⁵⁰

On 24 March 1917, Russians in the Netherlands gathered at the Pulchri Studio in The Hague to welcome the Russian Revolution. They were addressed by the leadership of the *Russkii komitet v Gollandii*: Shelgunov, Aleinikov, Fel'dmann and Lev Berlin (1854-1935), a Russian lawyer who had settled in Brussels in 1900 and had fled to the Netherlands in 1914.⁵¹ A week later, on 31 March, a similar meeting at the Olympia Theatre in The

Hague drew even more people. Shelgunov shared his experiences in the 1905 Petersburg Soviet with the audience, while Berlin talked enthusiastically about the rights and liberties the Russian people were now going to enjoy; Leon Chasanowich (Katriel Shub, 1882-1925), a Galician representative of the *Poalei Zion* (Zionist Workers Movement), addressed the crowd in Jiddish.⁵² Shelgunov's sympathy for the new regime in Russia did not affect his activities or his standing in The Hague. On 1 September 1917, also at the Pulchri Studio, he organized a party for the second anniversary of the Russian Section; all the diplomatic representatives of the Allied powers attended, as well as the full staff of the Russian legation: Envoy Svechin, First Secretary Genrikh Bakh (de Bach, 1863-1935), commercial attaché Aleksei Zeime (Seume, 1875-1949), and military agent Colonel Maier. The Dutch authorities were represented, among others, by Lidiia Heemskerk (b. Zarembo, 1869-1955), the (Russian) wife of the former Dutch Premier Theo Heemskerk (1852-1932), a socialite and the chairperson of the Dutch Committee of the Russian Red Cross. In 1915-16, she had collected (Dutch) funding for a field hospital in Russia and had personally delivered it to Petrograd.⁵³

She praised Shelgunov for his "restless diligence and energy with which he fulfilled his humanitarian task" and gave him a silver box with an

46. *Verslag, uitgebracht door de Commissie tot onderzoek en regeling van de moeilijkheden, gerezen tusschen het Oeuvre internationale pour blessés et prisonniers de guerre te Maastricht en den heer B. Chelgounoff, voorzitter der Russische afdeling van het Oeuvre te 's-Gravenhage, s.l., [1916].*

47. L.H.J. LAMBERTS-HURRELBRINCK, *Het Internationaal Liefdewerk voor Gewonden en Krijgsgevangenen te Maastricht*, Maastricht, 1919, 40.

48. L.H.J. LAMBERTS-HURRELBRINCK, *Het Internationaal Liefdewerk*, 38-42. Cf. ANTOINE KESSEN, "Louis Herman Jean Lamberts Hurrelbrinck", *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 1943, 51-60.

49. *Lettre à Madame la Comtesse de Geloës née Comtesse Blanche de Lannoy au Château d'Eysden de H.J. Seydlitz*, s.l., [1916]. Cf. HANS VAN LITH, *Twee miljoen pakketten*, 70-75.

50. HANS VAN LITH, *Twee miljoen pakketten*, 84-87, 90; PAUL VAN DER STEEN, *Schampschot. Een klein Nederlands dorp aan de rand van de Grote Oorlog*, Amsterdam, 2014, 96-102.

51. "De Russen in Nederland", *Delftsche Courant*, 26/3/1917, 2; "Binnenland", *Twentsch Dagblad Tubantia*, 26/3/1917, 1; "Russen in Nederland", *De Soldatencourant. Orgaan voor Leger en Vloot*, 28/3/1917, 3.

52. "Een vergadering van Russen", *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 31/3/1917, Derde Blad, 1.

53. "Een ambulance voor Rusland", *De Telegraaf*, 12/10/19125, Avondblad, Tweede Blad, 6; "Voor het Russ. Roode Kruis", *Het Vaderland*, 12/10/1915, Ochtendblad, 2; "De Ned.-Russ. ambulance", *Het Vaderland*, 6/3/1916, Ochtendblad, 1; "Uit het Rijk van den Tsaar", *De Sumatra Post*, 21/11/1916, 2 & 22/11/1916, 2. Cf. JANINE JAGER, *Hoe komen we heelhuids uit deze hel. Nederlanders in revolutionair Rusland*, Amsterdam-Antwerpen, 2017, 41-42; FREDERIK HEEMSKERK, *Van vader op zoon. Opkomst en teloorgang van het premiersgeslacht Heemskerk*, Amsterdam, 2020, 115-117.



L. Zaremba's Red Cross Mission to Petrograd, 1916, picture taken from the Th. Heemskerk Archives. VU Amsterdam Library, Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism, Th. Heemskerk Archives A18. With thanks to Mrs. Sandra A.M. van Beek.

engraving made by Consul-General Peterson. The meeting concluded with Lev Berlin giving a detailed overview of the activities of the *Oeuvre* and its Russian Section, and on its close collaboration with the Dutch and Russian authorities.⁵⁴ A week after the anniversary party, newspapers announced that both Lidia Heemskerk and Vasilii Shelgunov had become involved in a committee that was preparing an exhibition of Russian art and craft.⁵⁵ And later, in May 1918, they would both attend the Russian theater in Rotterdam, where Shelgunov's son Boris was performing.⁵⁶ However, the newspaper coverage of these events may have been too rosy. On 14 September 1917, for example, Colonel Maier sent a dispatch to the General Staff in Petrograd in which he called Heemskerk a pacifist (true) and a Germanophile (unsubstantiated) who had been in Russia with the Red Cross in 1915-1916 (false) and had given money to (the suspected spy) Aleinikov (unsubstantiated).⁵⁷

After the Bolshevik takeover in November 1917 (October in Russia) and, following that, the summary dismissal of the Tsarist diplomats abroad by Trotskii, tensions in the Russian colony in the Netherlands started to emerge. On 6 December 1917, the (military) Committee was reorganized and put under the command of Colonel Khristof Auè (1884-195?); it would provide help to Russian POWs who after the October Revolution

could not return to Russia.⁵⁸ On 8 December 1917, the Russian military in the Netherlands, led by Maier and Auè, distanced themselves from the ceasefire on the Eastern front and confirmed their allegiance to the Allied cause.⁵⁹ At the same time, the (civilian) Commission in Rotterdam launched a Russian-language weekly *Bezhenets* ('Refugee', as of 26 January 1918: *Nasha Gazeta*, 'Our gazette') to counter the German anti-Allied propaganda among Russians and Poles in the Netherlands.⁶⁰ The editors paid particular attention to the ongoing peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, and rejected the treaty itself (3 March 1918) as a treacherous surrender to the German conditions. They duly reported on the formal protest of the Russian Mission in The Hague against the treaty (7 March)⁶¹ and especially the protest meeting of (Shelgunov's) *Russkii komitet v Gollandii* (9 March). The manifestation provoked mixed feelings: the military (and other hardliners) welcomed Berlin's firm rejection of the treaty as 'true patriotism,' but rejected Shelgunov's suggestion that democratization, rather than military discipline would increase the combat readiness of the anti-Bolshevik forces;⁶² Polish readers of *Nasha gazeta* were upset about the transfer of the Kholm region to Ukraine,⁶³ whereas others did not understand the protest against the treaty at all: was Russia not at the end of its tether and in dire need of an armistice, if only to save the revolution?⁶⁴ It was

54. "Oorlogsliefdewerk. Ten bate van gewonden en gevangenen", *Maandagochtendblad*, 3/9/1917, 1 & *De Telegraaf*, 3/9/1917, Avondblad, Tweede Blad, 6; "En Hollande. [...] La section russe de l'œuvre de secours aux prisonniers", *L'Echo belge*, 4/9/1917, 2.

55. "Russische kunst", *De Nederlander*, 10/9/1917, 3.

56. "Teatr", *Nasha gazeta*, 18/5/1918, 3-4.

57. BARON LAUZKII, "Shpiony-279. Bez pasporta sekretneishim obrazom", <https://dzen.ru/media/id/5f79d18e5acac00a14f19b5c/shpiony279-bez-pasporta-sekretneishim-obrazom-6198f5de629637115b81731f>. During the war, Heemskerk did indeed make attempts to broker a peace treaty. See FREDERIK HEEMSKERK, *Van vader op zoon*, 117-119.

58. "Godovshchina Russkogo Komiteta po Delam Bezhavshikh iz Plena Voinskikh Chinov v Rotterdame", *Golos rodiny*, 10/12/1918, 2.

59. "Verklaring van Russische officieren", *Het Vaderland*, 8/12/1917, avondblad B, 1.

60. REDAKTSIIA, "Chitateliam", *Bezhenets*, 1/12/1917, 1; RUSSKII BEZHENETS, "Vstupitel'noe slovo", *Bezhenets*, 1/12/1917, 1; "Uit 't Moederland. De Russen in Holland en de Maximalisten", *Sumatra Post*, 6/3/1918, 12; "Mestnaia khronika", *Golos rodiny*, 3/12/1918, 2.

61. "Protest Russkoi missii v Gaage", *Nasha gazeta*, 7/3/1918, 1-2.

62. "Protest Russkogo komiteta protiv germanskogo mira", *Nasha gazeta*, 7/3/1918, 2; M.M., "Miting protesta v Gaage", *Nasha gazeta*, 12/3/1918, 1-2; "Russkii miting protesta", *Nasha gazeta*, 14/3/1918, 1; "Binnenland", *Twentsch Dagblad Tubantia*, 26/3/1917, 1; "Aan den Coolsingel", *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 31/3/1917, derde blad, 1; "Een Russisch Protest", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 10/3/1918, ochtend, tweede blad, 1 & *Leeuwarder Courant*, 11/3/1918, 1.

63. "Protest poliakov v Gollandii protiv prisoedineniia Kholma k Ukraine", *Nasha gazeta*, 9/3/1918, 4.

64. A. IURGENSON, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu", *Nasha gazeta*, 16/3/1918, 3-4.

the beginning of a heated debate among Russians in the Netherlands, not seldom with an antisemitic undertone.⁶⁵ By mid-April, however, the military at the Committee had enough of the discussions and took over the reins of *Nasha gazeta*. Henceforward, there was no more room for debate about Russia's role in the war or the goals of the (February) revolution.⁶⁶ At the end of May, *Nasha gazeta* was replaced by *Golos rodiny* ('Voice of the Motherland'), which would voice the patriotic and anti-Bolshevik feelings of the Russian Mission in The Hague. That Mission was completely in turmoil: Envoy Svechin had resigned from his post and *chargé d'affaires* Genrikh Bakh had assumed responsibility; together with his friend, Second Secretary Pavel Pustoshkin (1886-1958, Poustochkine), he would run a ship that no longer had an owner, was sailing without charge or means to keep it afloat, and relied on directions provided by the Russian military in the Netherlands.⁶⁷ It had to count on the goodwill and especially advances of the Dutch government, and almost exclusively engaged in anti-Bolshevik PR and the fate of the Russian refugees and escaped POWs.

The October revolution, and especially the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, also created unrest among the refugees and especially the POWs: at last, the time had come to escape military service and return home. To suppress the unrest, the (military) Committee and the (civilian) Commission

in Rotterdam closely collaborated with the local police, who customary sent troublemakers to the POW-camp of Bergen.⁶⁸ This policy, together with the precarious situation of the (former) Russian Mission, made the Committee and Commission easy targets for the leftish press.⁶⁹ The Mission, in collusion with the Dutch (right-wing) press,⁷⁰ tried to present the unrest as a Bolshevik conspiracy.⁷¹ Key to the Mission's policy was the denial of tensions between the Committee and the Commission, of collusion with the right-wing Dutch press, and the targeting of 'dissident' voices. This led to a wave of unproved allegations and ungrounded accusations left, right and center. On 14 August 1918, for instance, Lev Berlin announced in *Golos rodiny* that he had come across certain 'facts' in the management of the Russian Section that made further collaboration impossible.⁷² A week later, Shelgunov confirmed the rift, but laid the blame with Berlin's (unacceptable) journalistic activities, in particular an article in *Maandagochtendblad* (the Monday-morning issue of *De Telegraaf*) of 5 August in which he ridiculed the anti-Bolshevik ravings of an émigré journal in Stockholm, arguing that the Bolsheviks had no majority in Russia.⁷³ The dispute drew the attention of the Russian Mission. On 20 August 1918, Pustoshkin noted in his diary that Shelgunov had decided to help refugees and POWs excluded from the Russian organizations in Rotterdam, and in so doing had become a Bolshe-

65. STARYI RESPUBLIKANETS, "Otvét na pis'mo g-na Iurgensona", *Nasha gazeta*, 19/3/1918, 1-2; PETR I. PETERSON, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu", 19/3/1918, 2; I. DYMISHKEVICH, "Pochtovyi iashchik", 26/3/1918, 2; STARYI RESPUBLIKANETS, "Otvét Petru Petersonu", 28/3/1918, 2-3; PETR I. PETERSON, "Pochtovyi iashchik", 28/3/1918, 3-4.

66. "Ot Redaktsii", *Nasha gazeta*, 23/5/1918, 1.

67. Cf. ANGELA DEKKER, *Diplomaat van de tsaar. De ballingen van de Russische Revolutie*, Amsterdam-Antwerpen, 2014; PAUL PUSTOSCHKINE, *Lotgevallen. Een Russische familiechroniek*, s.l., 2023.

68. EVELYN DE ROODT, *Oorlogsgasten*, 261-271.

69. "Van en voor onze Russische gasten", *Het Volk*, 20/5/1918, 5; 30/5/1918, 5-6; 1/6/1918, 5; 8/6/1918, 9; "Rotterdam. Protestmeeting inzake de vervolging van De Visser. De actie der Russen", *De Tribune*, 3/6/1918, 4; H.R.H., "Daden van willekeur en onrecht", *De Tribune*, 29/7/1918, 1; Id., "Een Komplot tegen de Russische Vluchtelingen in Nederland", *De Tribune*, 15/8/1918, 1.

70. ANGELA DEKKER, *Diplomaat van de tsaar*, 51-54.

71. "Een echo der Russische revolutie. Bolsjewisme te Rotterdam", *De Telegraaf*, 2/6/1918, 5; "Ot Rossiiskoi Missii v Gaage", *Golos rodiny*, 4/6/1918, 1-2; "Bolshevists in Holland", *La Gazette de Hollande*, 19/6/1918, 2; "Het einde van het Rotterdamsche bolsjewisme. De valsche beschuldigingen", *De Telegraaf*, 28/6/1918, 5 & *De Courant*, 28/6/1918, 2; "Po povodu dvizheniia sredi russkikh bezhentssev v Rotterdame", *Golos rodiny*, 30/6/1918, 3-4; V[ALERII] B[RODSKI], "Dolg russkogo grazhdanina", *Golos rodiny*, 11/8/1918, 1.

72. L. BERLIN, "Pis'mo v Redaktsiiu", *Golos rodiny*, 14/8/1918, 2.

73. V. SHELGUNOV, "Pis'mo v Redaktsiiu", *Golos rodiny*, 22/8/1918, 4; LEO BERLIN, "De vernielende kracht in Rusland", *Maandagochtendblad*, 5/8/1918 & *De Telegraaf*, 5/8/1918, avondblad, 3.

vik representative.⁷⁴ On 26 August, Lidiia Heemskerk informed the Mission about another “worrying” article by Berlin in *Maandagochtendblad*. In “Ruslands toekomst” (Russia’s future), the lawyer described the Russians as totally lacking in respect for both themselves and others, which explained their fascination with crime (as demonstrated by numerous Russian writers); this, essentially, was the result of centuries of suppression; one could only hope that Great Britain and France would bring civilization to Russia.⁷⁵ Two days later, Pustoshkin travelled to Amsterdam to question the editors of *De Telegraaf* about Berlin’s article, and at the same time to request the return of the advance, made by the Mission in 1917, to publish a Russian supplement to *De Telegraaf* (only one issue had appeared).⁷⁶ This not only confirmed the (constantly denied) collusion with the Dutch press, but above all testified to the dire financial situation the Mission was in.

The financial woes of the Mission only increased after the armistice on 11 November 1918, when bands of released Russian POWs crossed the German-Dutch border and started to roam the country.⁷⁷ From the Dutch point of view, Russian POWs entering the country were considered (illegal) aliens and were imprisoned in camps in the northern province of Frisia; by the end of November, the

border was closed for Russian POWs. The Dutch wanted to repatriate them as quickly as possible via Danzig or Königsberg, in collaboration with the Allied High Commandment.⁷⁸ Russians already in the country were encouraged to keep a low profile and not to shame the Dutch hospitality.⁷⁹ Internally, the Russian representatives deplored the ‘discrimination’ of Russian POWs (French, British Belgian and US POWs kept their right of way) and alluded at engaging these POWs in the fight against the Bolsheviks.⁸⁰ The new situation primarily affected the (military) Committee in Rotterdam, which throughout 1918 had seen an explosive growth of its personnel (from 20 to 50, mainly Russian officers) to cater for some 3000 stranded POWs. As it relied on the Dutch authorities for financing, it was in no position to criticize the Dutch policy: it could not use its funding on POWs or oppose the dissolution of the Committee on 5 January 1919.⁸¹ If the Russian representatives in the Netherlands wanted to retain control over the POWs so as to engage them against the Bolsheviks (something that was repeatedly denied), they had to find another source of income.

Initially, they put their hope on the promise by Admiral Kolchak’s Provisional Siberian Government in Omsk to cover all debts incurred by (anti-Bolshevik) representatives abroad.⁸² However,

74. Notes Pustoshkin 4 (17), 7(20) & 8(21)/8/1918. Poustochkine Family Archives, Wassenaar. With thanks to Paul Poustochkine for making these notes available.

75. Notes Pustoshkin 13 (26)/8/1918; L. BERLIN, “Ruslands toekomst”, *Maandagochtendblad*, 26/8/1918 & *De Telegraaf*, 27/8/1918, avondblad, 1-2.

76. Notes Pustoshkin 15 (28)/8/1918. Peterson wrote a reply to Berlin’s article for *Maandagochtendblad*, but we have not been able to find it, as no copies of *Maandagochtendblad* have been preserved (cf Notes Pustoshkin 19/8 (1/9)/1918). Another reply by the editor of *Golos rodiny* appeared in October: V. BRODSKY, “Terra incognita”, *De Telegraaf*, 8/10/1918, avondblad, 2.

77. “De repatriëring der krijgsgevangenen”, *De Telegraaf*, 26/11/1918, ochtendblad, 2; “Repatriëring der krijgsgevangenen. [...] Russische krijgsgevangenen”, *De Telegraaf*, 27/11/1918, ochtendblad, 2; “De Russen in Gaasterland”, *De Tribune*, 28/11/1918, 2; “Geen gezantschap der Sowjet-republiek”, *De Tribune*, 28/11/1918, 4; “Oproer in een kamp van Russische gevangenen”, *De Telegraaf*, 30/11/1918, avondblad, 6; “Russische krijgsgevangenen”, *De Telegraaf*, 20/12/1918, ochtendblad, 2.

78. “Russkie voenno-plennye v Gollandii”, *Golos rodiny*, 8/12/1918, 2, 12/12/1918, 2 & 13/12/1918, 2; “Gollandskie pravila o dopushchenii v stranu novykh voennoplennykh”, 21/11/1918, 2; “K vozvrashcheniiu voennoplennykh”, 24/11/1918, 2; “Russkie plennye v Gollandii”, 22/12/1918, 1-2 & 25/12/1918, 2; “Mestnaia khronika”, 22/12/1918, 2; “Polozhenie russkikh plennykh v Gollandii”, 24/12/1918, 2; AUE, “Prikaz Zaveduiushchego Voennym Komitetom v Rotterdame”, 24/12/1918, 2.

79. MORGOLI, “Prizyv soldat k sokhraneniui poriadka”, *Golos rodiny*, 17/11/1918, 2.

80. AUE, “Obrashchenie k russkim soldatam Zaveduiushchego Voennym Komitetom v Rotterdame”, *Golos rodiny*, 17/11/1918, 2; V[ALERII] B[RODSKI], “Doma”, 20/11/1918, 1.

81. “Godovshchina Russkogo Komiteta po Delam Bezhavshikh iz Plena Voinskikh Chinov v Rotterdame”, *Golos rodiny*, 10/12/1918, 2 & 12/12/1918, 2; AUE, “Prikaz Zaveduiushchego Voennym Komitetom v Rotterdame”, 24/12/1918, 2; Id., “Ob”iavlenie ot Russkogo Voennogo Komiteta v Rotterdame”, 1/1/1919, 1.

82. “Ot Rossiiskoi Missii v Gaage”, *Golos rodiny*, 3/12/1918, 1; V[ALERII] B[RODSKI], “Dva pravitel’sva”, 3/12/1918, 1.



Russian Committee Rotterdam, 1918, picture taken from Russkii Komitet po delam bezhavrshikh iz plena voinskiikh chinov v Rotterdame 1918-1919 g.g. Source: Museum van Loon, Amsterdam. Archives de Bach-van Loon, 1973-5.

this did not imply that the Russian representatives could freely use the advances from the Dutch government. On 7 January 1919 – the repatriation of POWs was already in full swing⁸³ – *Golos rodiny* launched a frontal attack on Shelgunov and his Russian Section. It claimed that he was sitting on a pile of money and hardly spent anything to alleviate the sorry fate of the Russian POWs.⁸⁴ The next day, the newspaper claimed that Shelgunov was deliberately sabotaging the repatriation by distributing money and passports to those unwilling to embark to Danzig. It was further insinuated that he was in league with the Dutch communist David Wijnkoop (1876-1941), who was also distributing money, received from Moscow, to POWs.⁸⁵ Two days later, Lev Berlin, in a letter to the editor, distanced himself from the allegations against the Russian Section made by *Golos rodiny*, but he also found that Shelgunov should make his funds available to aid Russian POWs.⁸⁶

When in late January 1919 unrest effectively broke out under the POWs still in the country,⁸⁷ a collaborator of *Golos rodiny*, Sevast'ian Fulidi (1893-?), published in *La Gazette de Hollande* a sensationalist article about Shelgunov and Wijnkoop spreading Bolshevism in the Netherlands.⁸⁸ It coincided with similar allegations in the French press and the short arrest of Vasilii Shelgunov and Boris Balashov during a disturbance with Russian refugees in Rotterdam.⁸⁹ Again, friends in high places stepped in. On 6 February, the conservative newspaper *Het Vaderland* published a

letter of defense by Henri Marchant (1869-1956), a progressive liberal MP and fierce polemicist. According to Marchant, Shelgunov's only 'sin' was that he used the huge funds of the Russian Section to assist (individual) POWs to return home, without asking for their political convictions or forcing them to embark on one of the vessels chartered by the Dutch authorities. Marchant accused the Russian representatives in the Netherlands and their Dutch allies of organizing a witch hunt against Shelgunov, who, because of his 'revolutionary' past and imprisonment in tsarist Russia *had to be* a Bolshevik.⁹⁰ It was the beginning of the 'Zaak Chelgounoff' (Shelgunov affair) which led to questions in Parliament⁹¹ and held the Dutch press in thrall for the next few weeks. Marchant's accusations were formally refuted by the Russian Mission: it had nothing to do with Shelgunov's arrest; it did not organize an anti-Bolshevik witch hunt; it just wanted to make sure that Russian money (i.e. the funds of the Russian Section) did not end up in the hands of the Bolsheviks.⁹² Marchant promptly reacted: the Russian Mission had not answered his allegations and there was ample proof of its orchestrating anti-Bolshevik propaganda (through Fulidi); moreover, he questioned the Mission's legal and diplomatic status (who did it represent?) and disputed its claims to the funds of the Russian Section as they had been provided by private persons, and not by the Russian state.⁹³ Fulidi himself denied any involvement with the Russian Mission, claimed that he was not targeting the Russian Section but only Shelgunov, and that

83. "Russkie skital'tsy", *Golos rodiny*, 2/1/1919, 2; "K otpravke russkikh voenno-plennykh", 5/1/1919, 2 & 9/1/1919, 2.

84. "Russkie plennye v Gollandii", *Golos rodiny*, 7/1/1919, 1.

85. "Otpravka", *Golos rodiny*, 8/1/1919, 1.

86. L. BERLIN, „Pis'mo v Redaktsiiu", *Golos rodiny*, 10/1/1919, 2.

87. "Inostrantsy v Gollandii", *Golos rodiny*, 19/1/1919, 2; "Aresty inostrantsev v Rotterdam", 21/1/1919, 2.

88. FOULIDI, "Les bolcheviks en Hollande", *La Gazette de Hollande*, 1/2/1919, 1-2.

89. "La lutte contre les bolcheviks", *Journal des Débats*, 1/2/1919, 4; "La Hollande arrête des agitateurs", *La Croix*, 1/2/1919, 9.

90. H.P. MARCHANT, "De zaak Chelgounoff", *Het Vaderland*, 6/2/1919, avondblad, 5.

91. "Ongewenste vreemdelingen en revolutionaire woelingen", *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, 11/2/1919, ochttenblad, B, 1; "Schriftelijke vragen", *Provinciale Drentsche en Asser Courant*, 11/2/1919, 2; "Tegen de revolutie", *Het Vaderland*, 11/2/1919, ochttenblad, 2.

92. "De Rus Chelgounoff. De lezing van het Russische gezantschap", *De Telegraaf*, 9/2/1919, 5.

93. "De zaak-Chelgounoff", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, ochttenblad, 6.

he had 'proof' of his Bolshevik activities.⁹⁴ And he was furious about Marchant questioning the legal status of the Mission and its claim to the funds of the Russian Section: how dare a non-Russian interfere in purely Russian affairs?⁹⁵ Fulidi's slander was met with derision by the extreme-leftist newspaper *De Vrije Socialist* (The Free Socialist), which accused the Russian Mission of corruption and antisemitism, with Fulidi as its mouthpiece.⁹⁶ On 16 February 1918, Shelgunov broke silence and reacted. Unlike Fulidi, he wrote, Marchant did not trifle with the truth. Shelgunov did not deny that he had been in contact with the Germans and with the Bolshevik representatives in Berlin to discuss the repatriation of POWs through Germany – but if this was a crime, why had he never been charged with it? And was it a crime to suggest to POWs to return home over land, rather than over sea? According to international law, the POWs were free citizens; dispatching them to the German border to make enquiries about border passage did not constitute a crime. And how can encouraging POWs to return home be conceived as Bolshevik propaganda? The so-called 'Bolshevik brochure' he had read to the POWs was nothing else than an excerpt from a report of the *Bureau für russische Kriegsgefangenen* in Berlin, which the Mission itself also spread under the POWs, and which had been approved by the Dutch authorities. He furthermore wondered about the reliability of the figures provided by Fulidi, pointed out that the Minister of Justice did not take his so-called 'proof' seriously, and said that he was targeted, whereas he was only pursuing the interests of the Russian Section.⁹⁷ And with this, the Shelgunov affair came to an end. Even more: Shelgunov completely disappeared from the Dutch-Russian scene, as if, with the

departure of the (first contingent of) POWs, his part had been played.

V. Shelgunov as an intermediary between Belgium and Soviet Russia

On 17 and 18 January 1919, the Belgian Alien Police noted in Shelgunov's file that he wanted to return to Belgium, and that there were no objections: he had not caused any problems in the Netherlands (sic), had been collaborating with Belgian organizations providing aid to POWs, and his former neighbors in Brussels vouched for him as well.⁹⁸ However, as Military Intelligence was dragging its feet to give an advice, formal permission to return remained forthcoming. In August 1919, Shelgunov asked the socialists Emile Vandervelde and Camille Huysmans (1871-1968) to intervene on his behalf; moreover, he offered to spend the remaining funds of the Russian Section on the Russian POWs in Belgium.⁹⁹ However, the latter was never mentioned again and there is no indication whatsoever that these resources were effectively spent on Russian POWs in Belgium. These POWs were initially kept in a military camp at the wartime frontline in the west of the country, under the control of the Belgian Ministry of War and Lieutenant-Colonel Andrei Prezhbiano (1885-1963), the Russian military agent to Belgium. Officially they were waiting for their repatriation to Russia; in reality, however, Prezhbiano, in collusion with the Belgian military, wanted to engage the POWs in the Russian White Armies. Unfortunately for him, only a handful of the POWs was willing to take up arms again. The blame for this failure was laid on the Belgian commander of the camp, Captain-commandant Armand Fran-

94. S. FOULIDI, "L'affaire Chelgounoff", *La Gazette de Hollande*, 10/2/1919, 2; "De zaak Chelgounoff", *De Telegraaf*, 10/2/1919, avondblad, 6; S. FOULIDI, "Ingezonden stukken. De zaak Chelgounoff", *De Nieuwe Courant*, 11/2/1919, ochtendblad, 3 & *Het Vaderland*, 12/2/1919, avondblad, 2; "De zaak-Chelgounoff", *De Nieuwe Courant*, 12/2/1919, avondblad, 1 & *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's Gravenhage*, 12/2/1919, avondblad, 1.

95. [S. FULDINI], "L'affaire Chelgounoff", *La Gazette de Hollande*, 13/2/1919, 1.

96. "Sociaal Politiek Overzicht", *De Vrije Socialist*, 15/2/1919, 1.

97. V. CHELGOUNOFF, "Ingezonden stukken. De zaak-Chelgounoff", *Het Vaderland*, 16/2/1919, ochtendblad, B, 1.

98. Notes 17 & 18/1/1920 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

99. Shelgunov to Vandervelde (s.d.) & Huysmans, 30/8/1919 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

cot (1880-1947), who, according to Prezhibiano, did not enough to counter 'Bolshevik propaganda,' distributed by... Shelgunov.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in early November 1919 Shelgunov, then still in The Hague, had sent the Russian POWs in Belgium a letter offering them help in finding (temporary) jobs while waiting for their return home; at the same time, he asked them to keep him informed of what was going on in the camp.¹⁰¹ Given Shelgunov's previous history in the Netherlands – and Maier made sure Prezhibiano was informed of all his (alleged) misdemeanors – he was an easy scapegoat.¹⁰² The Belgian civil authorities, i.e. the Alien Police, however, did not (completely) buy into Prezhibiano's allegations, and in late 1919 or early 1920 delivered a visa to Shelgunov. According to them, there was no hard proof of Shelgunov's Bolshevik sympathies; moreover, his name had already been cleared by the Dutch authorities.¹⁰³ Notwithstanding this, Military Intelligence kept an eye on him – his letters were customary read and copies of 'interesting' ones sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and occasionally to the Alien Police (Ministry of Justice). Translations of these (Russian) letters were provided through... Prezhibiano.¹⁰⁴ Shelgunov complained to Huysmans that he was the victim of a conspiracy of former Russian diplomats who were increasingly desperate to win the Belgians for the contra-revolutionary cause.¹⁰⁵

Shelgunov's arrival in Belgium coincided with a major shift in the Belgian policy regarding the

Russian POWs. In December 1919, the POWs had been transferred from the military barracks in the west of the country to the 'Kolonie' (Colony), a huge asylum for vagrants in Merksplas and Wortel, north of Antwerp and close to the Dutch border. This implied that they were no longer under the control of the Ministry of War (as of December 1919: Ministry of Defense), but of the Ministry of Justice, which was headed by the socialist Emile Vandervelde. As a result, Prezhibiano no longer had access to the POWs. Moreover, Vandervelde was willing to risk a cabinet crisis over the collusion between the Ministry of Defense and Prezhibiano; eventually, the Government put a stop to the attempts to recruit Russian and Belgian volunteers for the Russian front. Needless to say that in Prezhibiano's eyes, Vandervelde was a Bolshevik himself, and he would do everything to 'prove' it (without much success, though).¹⁰⁶ Apart from that, the Belgian government was set on getting rid of the Russian POWs as soon as possible, if only to cut down on expenses.¹⁰⁷ Unlike the Dutch, who themselves had chartered ships to repatriate POWs as early as 1919, the Belgians counted on the French and the British to take charge of the Russians in Belgium. When the French refused to oblige, the Belgian hope was entirely on the British, who were negotiating the exchange of Russian POWs and British citizens stuck (held hostage) in Soviet Russia. The negotiations were held in Copenhagen between the British socialist MP and Trade Union Leader James O'Grady (1866-1934) and the Soviet representative Maksim Litvinov

100. Francot to F. Masson (minister of War), 11/11/1919 & 25/11/1919; Prezhibiano to Masson, 19/11/1919; Ministry of War (hereinafter MinW) to Ministries of Justice (hereinafter MinJust), Foreign Affairs (hereinafter MinFA) and the Interior (hereinafter MinI), 10/11/1919 & 26/11/1919; Cpt. N. Adlerberg to Gen. Merchie (MinW), 25/11/1919 (Royal Military Museum Brussels (hereinafter RMM), Moscow Archives (hereinafter MA), 4304).

101. Shelgunov to Soldiers' Council, Houtem Barracks, 30/10/1919; Francot to Commandement des Centres de l'Arrière (hereinafter CCA), 4/11/1919; CCA to Masson, 6/11/1919 (RMM, MA, 4304).

102. Shelgunov to Soldiers' Council, Houtem Barracks, 7/11/1919; Francot to MinW, 11/11/1919; MinW to Francot, 11/11/1919 & ?/11/1919; Masson to Vandervelde, 19/11/1919 (RMM, MA, 4304). Prezhibiano to Maier, 19/1/1920; Maier to Prezhibiano, 21/1/1919 (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter AMFA), B38).

103. SABB, AP, F1649, 871708.

104. Shelgunov to Litvinov, 24/1/1920 (intercepted and translated letter) (AMFA, B38).

105. Shelgunov to Huysmans, 7/4/1920 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

106. Note Gen. P. Kusonskii, 10/1920 (Hoover Institution Archives (hereinafter HIA), P.A. Kusonskii Collection, 10/42k); N[IKOLAI] POZNANSKII, "Bol'shevistskoe dvizhenie v Bel'gii", 10/4/1921 (HIA, E. Miller Papers, 20/26); A[NDREI] PREZHBIANO, "Mirazh vozrozhdeniia", *Vozrozhdenie*, 13/5/1936, 2; "Le 'Complot Bolcheviste' du 'XX^{me} Siècle'", *Le Peuple*, 25/4/1920, 1.

107. Ministry of Finances to Ministry of Defense (hereinafter MinDef), 14/1/1920; MinDef to MinFA, 4/2/1920; MinFA to MinDef, 16/2/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

(1876-1951) and did not go smoothly, as both parties were accusing each other of ill faith.¹⁰⁸ In early December O'Grady agreed to bring up the issue of the Belgian contingent (some 1100 people); the Bolsheviks did not object to this.¹⁰⁹

From the very moment the Belgian contingent was on the table in Copenhagen, Shelgunov got himself involved. He was convinced, for instance, that he knew far better than O'Grady and Litvinov how the POWs in Western Europe were treated. On 2 December 1919, for example, he wrote a letter to O'Grady, claiming that Russian POWs in the UK were deprived of their liberties and would not be allowed to return to Russia. An indignant O'Grady categorically refuted these allegations.¹¹⁰ On 24 January 1920, Shelgunov addressed Litvinov, saying that the POWs were better off in the 'Kolonie' then under the control of Prezhibiano, but that nevertheless they were still (locked up) in a camp. And he asked Litvinov to calm down O'Grady and convince him that he was not a (Bolshevik) propagandist.¹¹¹ Shelgunov's demands to gain access to the 'Kolonie' (via Huysmans), his providing employ to Russians outside the 'Kolonie' (effectively setting them free), his (intercepted) letters to Litvinov and O'Grady, and his formal demand, on behalf of Litvinov, to receive the list of names of the Russians subject to repatriation, raised the alarm of the Belgian authorities.¹¹²

Shelgunov seemed undeterred by (or unaware of) this threat. On 28 February 1920, he shared a letter he had received from Litvinov with the POWs in Wortel. The letter confirmed that an agreement had been signed about the repatriation of Russian POWs and civilians from the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland; furthermore, Litvinov wanted Shelgunov to urge the Belgian and Dutch governments to ratify the agreement and threatened that failure to do so would result in the Soviets retaining Belgian and Dutch citizens still in Russia. Moreover, POWs refusing to be repatriated now would forego their right of return; civilians were discouraged to apply, as the Soviet government could (or would) not guarantee their safe passage because of the ongoing (civil) war; and only *Russians*, or those willing to take *Soviet* citizenship would be allowed into the country – Soviet Russia would not take responsibility for 'foreigners,' i.e. those who wanted to go to the now independent Baltic States and Poland. Returnees, he promised, would not be enrolled in the Red Army.¹¹³

The letter was intercepted and explained, according to Francot, why the Russians under his command were becoming unruly.¹¹⁴ An increasingly desperate Francot repeatedly begged the ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense to let the Russians go as soon as possible; he even wanted to resign

108. RICHARD H. ULLMAN, *Britain and the Russian Civil War*, Princeton, 1968, II, 287-289, 317ff. & 340ff; NINA E. BYSTROVA, 'Russkii vopros' v 1917-nachale 1920 g., *Sovetskaia Rossiia i velikie derzhavy*, Moskva-Sankt-Peterburg, 2016, 333-342; EVGENII IU. SERGEEV, *Bol'sheviki i anglichane. Sovetsko-britanskii otnosheniia, 1918-1924. Ot interventsii k priznaniu*, Sankt-Peterburg, 2019, 242-245; Id., *The Bolsheviks and Britain during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, 1917-1924*, London, 2022, 85-86. Cf also: Belgian Legation Copenhagen to MinFA, 5/12/1919 (AMFA, B38).

109. Allart (Copenhagen) to MinFA, 9/12/1919 (AMFA, B38); MinFA to MinDef, 16/2/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

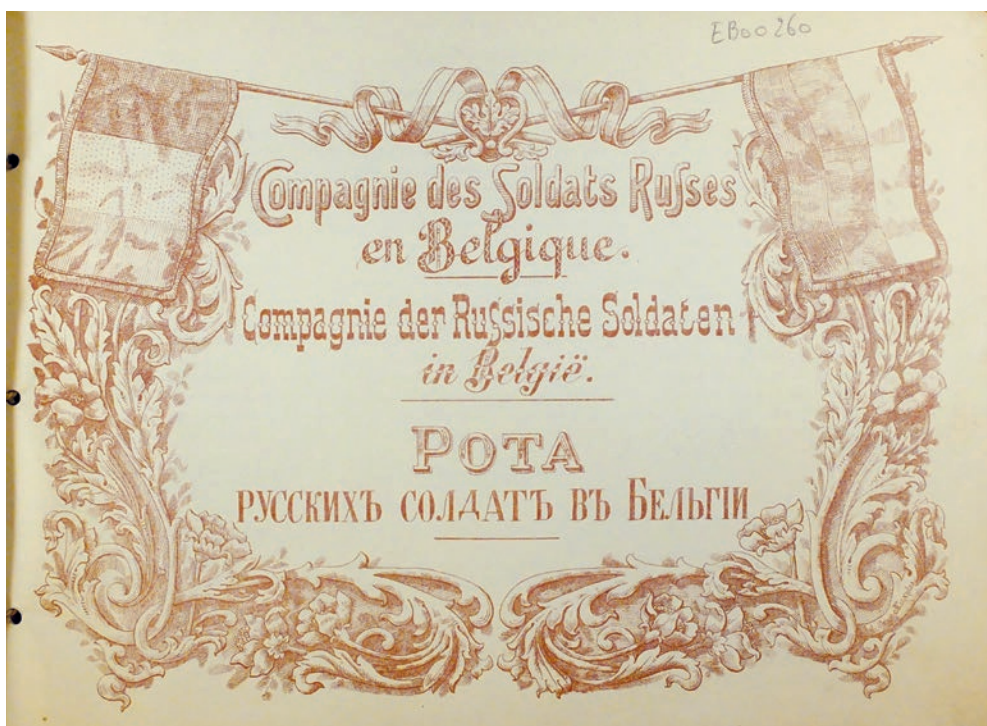
110. O'Grady to Shelgunov, 6/12/1919 (AMFA, B38).

111. Shelgunov to Litvinov, 24/1/1920 (AMFA, B38).

112. Shelgunov to Huysmans, 22/1/1920; Francot to Administration for Public Safety (Hereinafter APS), 24/1/1920; APS to MinJust, 6/2/1920; note APS, 4/3/1920 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708); Shelgunov to P. Hymans (minister of Foreign Affairs), 9/3/1920; MinDef to MinFA, 10/3/1920 (AMFA, B38); Shelgunov to Francot, 9/2/1920; H. Dom to Francot, 23/2/1920; Dom to Vandervelde, 2/1920; (SAB Beveren, Rijksweldadigheidskolonies Hoogstraten / Wortel, 3218); Dom to Francot, 4/3/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304); Shelgunov to Huysmans, 22/1/1920 & 7/4/1920; Note for Vandervelde, 6/2/1920 & 5/3/1920; Report Gendarmerie Nationale, 22/3/1920 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

113. Litvinov to Shelgunov & Shelgunov to the Russian POWs in Belgium, 28/2/1920 (AMFA, B38 & RMM, MA, 4304). Cf MinFA to MinDef, 3/3/1920; Dom to Francot, 4/3/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

114. Francot to MinFA, 31/3/1920 (AMFA, B38 & RMM, MA, 4304).



Compagnie des Soldats Russes en Belgique, 1920, picture taken from Compagnie des Soldats Russes en Belgique. [Turnhout, Brepols, 1920]. Source : University of Leuven Libraries Special Collections.

from his post.¹¹⁵ The ministers themselves insisted on the imminent departure of the POWs; there was no question of delaying tactics, as Shelgunov had implied.¹¹⁶

However, the departure was constantly postponed, to the dismay of the (former) Russian soldiers in the 'Kolonie'. On 24 and 25 March, at the request of the minister of Justice, Shelgunov came to explain to his compatriots that the search for a suitable ship was not going smoothly and that the Belgian government was not to blame. Francot had to give Shelgunov credit for calming the situation and effectively persuading the majority of the POWs to register for repatriation.¹¹⁷ Further problems were created by the Polish government, who wanted to repatriate their compatriots themselves.¹¹⁸ And when the POWs in mid-April learned that a charter was to leave from Rotterdam for Russia, about 70 of them set off; they were intercepted in Baarle-Nassau by the Dutch police and sent back to the 'Kolonie'. There were also plans to demonstrate in Brussels. At a certain moment, Francot even wondered whether Belgium had effectively signed an agreement with Litvinov.¹¹⁹ The question was legitimate: the British had agreed with Litvinov to repatriate the Russians from Belgium, but Belgium itself had not signed anything yet. This did not happen until 20 April, when the French consul in Copenhagen, Charles Duchesne (1874-?), signed an agreement on behalf of Belgium.¹²⁰ The Belgian government now had a formal agreement with Litvinov, but organizationally it was at the mercy of the British.¹²¹

Considering the many organizational problems and the negative association thereof with Shel-

gunov, one can wonder why the Ministry of Justice, and its subsidiary, the Alien Police, did not follow Military Intelligence in denouncing Shelgunov. The reason therefore does not (solely) lay with Vandervelde's personal or political sympathy for Shelgunov, but with pragmatic considerations related to national interest. Litvinov's letter that Shelgunov had shared with the Russian POWs was representative of the Bolshevik attitude in international relations: Since the October revolution, the Western Allies wanted to get their citizens out of Russia, but at the same time supported the White Armies against the Bolsheviks; a deal seemed logical, but as time went by, the readiness of the Allies to financially and militarily intervene in the Russian Civil War started to wane, and eventually dried up. This left the British, French, Dutch, Belgian... nationals in Russia at the mercy of the Bolsheviks, who did not shy away from blackmail. From the archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, it transpires that the Belgian authorities had huge difficulty to receive reliable information about the whereabouts and fate of their citizens and their (Russian) relatives. And the Bolsheviks were not forthcoming either: they claimed that they did not possess that information themselves (very likely, given the ongoing civil war), or – as many believed – were systematically lying and effectively using foreigners as hostages.¹²²

The Belgian-Soviet agreement of 20 April 1920 related to the voluntary repatriation of Russian military and civilians from Belgium (c 1000), and Belgian military and citizens from Russia (c 200). The contingents would be exchanged simultaneously on the Estonian-Russian border, in collab-

115. Francot to Dom, 3/3/1920; Francot to MinDef, 3/3/1920; Dom to Francot, 4/4/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304). Cf also Francot to MinDef, 20/1/1920 (RMM, Officer's File 10207 (Francot A.)).

116. MinDef to MinFA, 5/3/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

117. AMAND FRANCOT, *Compagnie des soldats russes en Belgique, Wortel. Rapport concernant la période du 1^{er} au 31-3-1920*, 2/4/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

118. Col. A. Starzeński (Polish military agent in Brussels) to Lt.-Col. Giron (MinDef), 23/3/1920; Giron to Starzeński, 27/3/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304). Similar policies were pursued by other newly independent states in Central-Eastern Europe.

119. Francot to MinDef, 20/4/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304). Cf "De Russen te Wortel", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 6/5/1920, 2.

120. Accord entre le Gouvernement belge, d'une part, et le Conseil des Commissaires du peuple de Russie et celui d'Ukraine d'autre part, 20/4/1920 (AMFA, B38).

121. MinFA to MinDef, 3/5/1920; MinDef to Francot, 5/5/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

122. E.g. Allart to MinFA, 20/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

oration with the British and Estonian authorities. Judicial or administrative procedures against persons involved, both in Belgium and Soviet Russia, would come to a stop, and the Soviet side promised “to provide preferential treatment to all Belgians in prison or kept in Russian camps.”¹²³ The agreement was signed on the condition – laid down in a separate document – that Belgium would refrain from “interference in internal Russian affairs and not participate in any aggressive policy against the Soviet republic.”¹²⁴

The agreement, however, did not imply that all the problems that had occurred during the previous months were solved overnight: as before, there was bickering over who could and would provide shipping capacity, and there was also discussion about who should or could (not) be on the lists of repatriates. On top of that, Francot was doubtful about the success of the repatriation. He was convinced that by the time the Russian contingent would have reached a Baltic port, half of them would have absconded. In such case, would the Soviets be willing to keep their part of the deal?¹²⁵

In the given circumstances, the Belgian authorities could do with one or more effective intermediaries. On 17 May 1920, Louis Gonne (*Administration de Sûreté Publique*), as instructed by Vandervelde, sent an extensive report on the role of Shelgunov in the repatriation of Russian POWs from the Netherlands and Switzerland to Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul Hymans (1865-1941). From the report, it transpired that only thanks to the mediation of “le père Chelgounoff,” whom the Russian POWs implicitly trusted, 218 (remaining) Russian POWs from the Netherlands had set sail from Amsterdam on 21 April; on 4 May,

Shelgunov and his associate Ivan Fridmann (Friedmann, 1884-1950) had overseen the embarkment, in Rotterdam, of 310 Russians from Switzerland and another 13 Russians in the Netherlands on the British *Dongola*. On its return from Terijoki (now: Zelenogorsk, Russia), the *Dongola* had brought back some 300 Western hostages. Armed with letters of recommendation from the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, Shelgunov and Fridmann now proposed to organize the repatriation from Belgium as well.¹²⁶ On 26 May, Fridmann was received by Jacques de Lalaing (1889-1969) at the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²⁷ The engineer and entrepreneur Fridmann had been a student in Liège before the war; in 1914 he had fled to the Netherlands, where he had been involved in providing help to Russian POWs, had built good relationships with the Russian Mission (notably its commercial attaché Aleksei Zeime), and had befriended Shelgunov. Fridmann was also the brother-in-law of Veniamin Aleinikov, the secretary of Shelgunov’s Russian Committee in the Netherlands and the driving force behind the *Russko-gollandskoe biuro* (*Bureau Russo-Hollandais*), a company created in May 1917 to facilitate trade between revolutionary Russia and the neutral Netherlands. The *Russko-Gollandskoe biuro* had a Dutch front (the trader A.J. Godron, 1880-1931), but was effectively run by Russian refugees from Belgium, i.e. Aleinikov, Fel’dmann, and the (Liège) engineer Schlioma (Solomon, Sally) Orfinger (1883-1970).¹²⁸ Notwithstanding Fridmann’s contradictory credentials – he was depicted as a Russian patriot, a Bolshevik agent, and everything in between,¹²⁹ – the Ministry of Justice had granted him a visa in November 1919. Thanks to his Dutch-Russian-Belgian network, Fridmann had managed to overrule the appre-

123. Accord entre le Gouvernement belge, 20/4/1920 (AMFA, B38).

124. Déclaration préalable à l'accord de la même date sur le rapatriement, 20/4/1920 (AMFA, B38).

125. Francot to Dom, 1/5/1920 (AMFA, B38).

126. Gonne to Hymans, 17/5/1920 (AMFA, B38).

127. Note by de Lalaing, 20/5/1920 & 26/5/1920 (AMFA, B38).

128. Military Intelligence to APS, 12/2/1919 (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697 (Friedmann J.)); National Archives The Hague, 2.9.46: Ministry of Justice, Public Limited Companies dissolved before 1983, 19573: “Russko-gollandskoe buro” Bureau russo-hollandais [sic].

129. SABB, AP, F1649, 720697. Cf. also MinJust to MinFA, 17/5/1920 on the activities of Fridmann, Shelgunov and Aleinikov in Rotterdam and Amsterdam during the embarkment of Russian POWs in April (AMFA, B38).

hensions of the Alien Police: they received letters of recommendation from Orfinger's brother in law, the Liège lawyer (and future Jewish leader) Max Gottschalk (1889-1976), the liberal senator Charles Magnette (1863-1937), the Liège socialist politician Jules Seeliger (1871-1928), the liberal MP Edouard Pecher (1885-1926), Ernest Solvay's private secretary Charles Lefébure (1862-1943), the liberal mayor of the Brussels commune of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek Louis Mettwie (1855-1942, a business partner of both Fel'dmann and Fridmann), and the socialist minister of Labour Joseph Wauters (1875-1929).¹³⁰

From that first meeting onwards, things started to move. Two days later, on 28 May 1920, Fridmann introduced Shelgunov to de Lalaing,¹³¹ and the following day, Shelgunov had a meeting with Vandervelde, Henry Dom (Director-General at the Ministry of Justice, responsible for charities, including the 'Kolonie'), de Lalaing and his colleague Charles Papeians de Morchoven (1878-1966), where it was agreed that Shelgunov would liaise with Litvinov in Copenhagen.¹³² What followed was a hectic exchange of communications between all the parties involved. Fridmann was sent to Copenhagen to placate Litvinov and to feed him information whenever that became available.¹³³ Meanwhile Foreign Affairs tried to get its hand on a vessel, but it took until the end

of June to charter the *Czar*, a former ocean liner of the Russian American Line which had served as a American troopship during the war; given its Russian antecedents, the vessel could not land on Soviet Russian soil and would therefore disembark its cargo in Libau (now: Liepāja, Latvia).¹³⁴ Part of the delay was also caused by discussions over funding: would the League of Nations be willing to contribute?¹³⁵ At the same time, Foreign Affairs and Justice started to compile a list of Russian repatriates for Litvinov.¹³⁶ The compilation of a list of Belgians to be repatriated from Russia proved less straightforward: Foreign Affairs received numerous individual requests from Belgians whose relatives were missing in Russia, while the *Association Belgo-Russe* was providing its own lists; some names had to be removed from that list, or were rejected by the Soviets for political reasons (e.g. Russian relatives of Belgian citizens; Belgians arrested on political grounds).¹³⁷ As a result, several lists were sent to Litvinov, who acknowledged receipt, but made no promises.¹³⁸ The preparations were further delayed by the request of the Dutch government, initially through Shelgunov, to add another 20 Russians from the Netherlands to the Belgian contingent.¹³⁹ And the closer the date of departure approached, the more the (former) Russian military agent Prezhbiano tried to interfere in the ongoing preparations.¹⁴⁰ The Ministry of Justice, however, postponed its

130. Seeliger to Gonne, 20/9/1919 & 14/11/1919; Gottschalk to APS, 10/10/1919; note APS, 21/10/1919; MinFA to MinJust, 23/10/1919; Letter of recommendation J. Wauters, [25/10/1919]; Ch. Magnette to APS, 29/10/1919 & 13/11/1919 (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697).

131. Note by de Lalaing, 28/5/1920 (AMFA, B38).

132. Meeting at the MinJust, 29/5/1920 (AMFA, B38).

133. Note de Lalaing, 1/6/1920; Allart to MinFA, 3/6/1920 & 4/6/1920; Shelgunov to MinJust, 3/6/1920; Fridmann to MinFA, 3/6/1920 & 4/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

134. Vandervelde to Ch. Maskens (Belgian Embassy London), 29/5/1920; L. Moncheur (Belgian Ambassador London) to MinFA, 31/5/1920 & 4/6/1920; MinFA to Belgian Embassy Copenhagen, 14/6/1920; de Lalaing to Moncheur, 18/6/1920; MinJust to MinFA, 26/6/1920; F.H. Villiers (British Ambassador Brussels) to MinFA, 26/6/1920; Belgian Embassy London to MinFA, 28/6/1920 29/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

135. Moncheur to MinFA, 15/6/1920 & 16/6/1920; MinFA to L. Delacroix (Premier Minister), 18/6/1920; MinFA to Moncheur, 18/6/1920; Moncheur to Hymans, 22/6/1920; MinFA to Delacroix, 23/6/1920; Delacroix to Hymans, 24/6/1920; MinFA to Delacroix, 28/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

136. Confirmation of receipt by Litvinov, 3/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

137. Cf Allart to MinFA, 1/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

138. J. Naze (Belgian Consul Moscow) to de Lalaing, 1/6/1920; MinFA to Allart, 2/6/1920 & 18/6/1920; Ch. Winand to MinFA, 5/6/1920; Allart to Hymans, 12/6/1920, 21/6/1920 & 6/7/1920; Association Belgo-Russe to de Lalaing, 14/6/1920, 17/6/1920 & 19/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

139. Note MinFA, 28/6/1920; MinFA to C. Van Vredenburg (Dutch minister Brussels), 29/6/1920 (AMFA, B38).

140. Prezhbiano to P.E. Janson (minister of Defense), 26/6/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).



*Veniamin Aleinikov, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1649, 676692.*



*Schlioum Fel'dmann, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1650, 1021502.*



*Ivan Fridman, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1649, 720697.*



*Schliouma Orfinger, picture taken from his Alien Police file.
Source: SABB, AP, F1649, 765602.*

answer to Prezhibiano until the *Czar* had set sail. By then, the Russian POWs were no longer a Belgian problem.¹⁴¹

Fridmann and Shelgunov accompanied the Russian POWs on their return home to help solve problems underway. Their presence aboard was counterbalanced by a military detachment under the command of Francot: interpreter Marius (Maurice) Van Vinckenroye (1900-?) and Major Dr. Valère Brassine (1884-?), who had both served in the Belgian expeditionary force in Russia during WWI, 5 nurses and some 50 privates.¹⁴² In total, 1301 Belgian Russians were on board, and 31 Russians from the UK.¹⁴³ When the *Czar* sailed from Antwerp on 11 July 1920, there was a minor incident: on the way out to sea, some red flags were raised on the ship; Francot took them down, Shelgunov wanted to put them back up.¹⁴⁴ Another 'incident' occurred, when it transpired that one of the women aboard, a former 'secretary' of Shelgunov's, was actually a French citizen, accompanying her Russian lover; Brussels, however, overruled Francot's apprehensions and let her continue her journey.¹⁴⁵ During a stop in Copenhagen on 14 July, another twelve Danish Russians embarked; as Francot was in a meeting with the Belgian representative Georges Allart (1864-1933), Shelgunov took the liberty to receive them, together with a representative of Litvinov's. When Litvinov learned that there were some 200 repatriates less than anticipated (because they did not want to return to Russia, as Shelgunov explained), he threatened to release only half

of the Belgian hostages; Shelgunov and Fridmann met with Litvinov and, so it seems, managed to placate him.¹⁴⁶ Notwithstanding these incidents, Francot, Shelgunov and Fridmann understood that they were literally in the same boat and had to make the best of it. On 17 July, the *Czar* dropped anchor off the coast of Reval (now: Tallinn, Estonia); the British captain did not want to sail on to Narva, the agreed point of exchange on the border between Estonia and Soviet Russia, because this would put his ship within shooting range of Bolshevik artillery. Therefore, the last part of the journey would be made by train. The Soviets hesitated, but keeping the Russians on board any longer was out of the question as supplies were dwindling rapidly. On 21 July, 800 former POWs left for Narva; four days later, Francot followed with the remaining 541. It turned out that only 107 out of the 151 promised Belgians were waiting for them in Narva (in total some 182 had registered with the Russian authorities, or so the Bolsheviks claimed).¹⁴⁷ After some negotiations, Francot released 441 of his 'hostages': he simply did not have the means to maintain them. The Belgian returnees were immediately sent to Reval, while Francot and his staff stayed in Narva to wait for the rest of the Belgian contingent. In vain. Francot had "the impression that someone in Russia, for reasons unknown, is obstructing the repatriation of some of the Belgians. According to many of the returnees, one cannot expect any loyalty from the Bolsheviks."¹⁴⁸ And since the *Czar* could not stay at anchor forever, Francot agreed with the chairman of the Estonian Red Cross that, if the Belgian

141. Dom to MinDef, 15/7/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

142. MinFA to Belgian Embassy London, 12/7/1920 (AMFA, B38). On the history of the Belgian expeditionary force in Russia, cf AUGUST THIRY & DIRK VAN CLEEMPUT, *King Albert's Heroes. Hoe 400 jonge Belgen vochten in Rusland en de VS veroverden*, Antwerpen-Utrecht, 2015.

143. Shelgunov to Francot, 15/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

144. Rapport du capitaine en 2d Francot chargé du rapatriement des Soldats russes en Belgique et des citoyens belges vivant en Russie, 4/8/1920. Annexe A. Incident du drapeau des Soviets au départ d'Anvers (AMFA, B38 & RMM, MA, 4304).

145. Allart to MinFA, 16/7/1920; Rapport du capitaine en 2d Francot... Annexe B. Affaire Mme Eug. Guittard, née Ronger, Française; Litvinov to F. Puech (French Embassy in Copenhagen), 14/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

146. Litvinov to Puech, 14/7/1920; Allart to MinFA, 15, 16 & 17/7/1920; Shelgunov to Francot, 15/7/1920 & Francot to Shelgunov, 16/7/1920, in: Rapport du capitaine en 2d Francot... Annexe C. Incident Buchholz à Copenhague; N. Zhdanov (President mixed Russian-Estonian Commission on the Exchange of POWs) to Shelgunov, 31/7/1920 (AMFA, B38). Cf. "Pour rapatrier les Belges qui sont en Russie", *Libre Belgique*, 14/7/1920; 2.

147. Allart to MinFA, 23/7/1920; de Lalaing to Hymans, 23/7/1920; Rapport du Capitaine en 2nd Francot... Annexe I. Liste des Belges rapatriés de Russie (AMBZ B38).

148. Rapport du capitaine en 2d Francot... (RMM, MA, 4303).

hostages turned up at some point, they would be escorted home by the Estonians. On 30 July, he released the remaining Russian hostages and returned to Reval, from where the *Czar* was to set sail on 1 August. Francot's, Shelgunov's and Fridmann's mission was over.¹⁴⁹

VI. A Belgian Aftermath

The failure to repatriate more Belgian citizens from Soviet Russia had many causes. Francot was convinced that the Bolsheviks were of ill faith; the Bolshevik refusal to release Russian relatives of Belgian citizens, or those accused of political activities, only strengthened this belief. However, there are indications that Litvinov did urge Moscow to release more Belgians, and Nikolai Zhdanov (1875-1935), the Bolshevik representative in Estonia responsible for the return of POWs, promised to continue to repatriate Belgian citizens, even after the departure of the *Czar*.¹⁵⁰ Telegrams between the Bolshevik representatives in Reval and the Soviet authorities in Moscow corroborate this.¹⁵¹ The Belgians, on the other hand, overestimated the capacity of the Bolsheviks to identify, register and repatriate Belgian citizens (many had already left the country of their own accord), and the failure to do so only corroborated the negative image the Belgians already had of the Bolsheviks. And there is no doubt that the Belgian authorities were also partly to blame: their bickering over who was going to cover the costs of the repatriation, and hence the many delays and the speedy return of the *Czar*, seriously jeopardized the successful outcome of the operation. The anti-Bolshevik press suggested that the non-interference clause of the Belgo-Soviet agreement of 20 April made Belgium susceptible to Bolshevik black-

mail: could Belgium, in the given circumstances, provide support to Poland in its war against Soviet Russia (1918-1921)?¹⁵² In the weeks following the departure of the *Czar* from Reval, Shelgunov made enquiries about additional transports, but these were turned down by the Belgian authorities.¹⁵³ Instead, they focused on the fate of Belgians stuck in Russia and continued to accuse the Bolsheviks of ill faith.¹⁵⁴ Serious breakthroughs, however, did not occur: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs either treated every case separately, or passed them on to the International Red Cross and/or the offices of Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), who as of April 1920 organized the repatriation of Russian POWs and European citizens to and from Soviet Russia on behalf of the League of Nations.¹⁵⁵

So who would get the blame? Shelgunov, the main intermediary between Belgium and Soviet Russia was an obvious target: after all, he was an alien migrant with numerous (unsubstantiated) accusations against his name: if he was not harbouring Bolshevik sympathies, then at least he was involved in murky (financial) businesses. Moreover, Shelgunov's righteousness and obstinacy had already more than once annoyed the authorities and other powers-that-be, be it in Russia, the Netherlands or Belgium. Georges Allart, for instance, raised the alarm over what he called the 'Affaire Chelgounoff': how he had allowed, in Francot's absence, Litvinov's representative aboard the *Czar* ("like a wolf in the sheepfold") and how he insisted on meeting with Litvinov in person: "It is clear that Shelgunov, under the guise of receiving [additional] prisoners, has gone to take instructions from Litvinov on how to set up a future propaganda campaign in our country." Allart also claimed that Shelgunov had caused a lot of trouble to Francot, and "the mitigating influence

149. Rapport du Capitaine en 2^e Francot... (RMM, MA, 4303).

150. Allart to Hymans, 20/7/1920; Zhdanov to Shelgunov, 31/7/1920; Zhdanov to Francot, 31/7/1920; Allart to MinFA, 2/8/1920; Shelgunov to Francot, 6/8/1920; Litvinov to Puech, 11/8/1920 (AMFA, B38).

151. RMM, MA, 4304.

152. E.g. "La France, la Belgique et les soviets", *Nation Belge*, 11/7/1920, 3; "Un engagement signé avec les Soviets interdirait à la France et à la Belgique de secourir la Pologne", *Nation Belge*, 12/7/1920, 1.

153. Shelgunov to Dom, 14/8/1920; Shelgunov to MinFA, 19/8/1920; MinFA to MinJust, 27/8/1920 (AMFA, B38).

154. Allart to MinFA, 2/9/1920; de Lalaing to Ch. Maskens, 17/9/1920 (AMFA, B38).

155. Cf. International Red Cross to MinFA, 12/10/1920 (AMFA, B38).

of M. Fridmann hardly compensates the nefarious influence of this sectarian [Shelgunov] on his compatriots.”¹⁵⁶ Brussels immediately put a stop to Allart’s complaints: Shelgunov had declared in writing that the Belgian government had met all the conditions of the agreement of 20 April and he had also persuaded the Russians in Belgium to return to Russia.¹⁵⁷ Allart replied that notwithstanding Shelgunov’s and Fridmann’s efforts on behalf of the Belgian hostages, the Bolsheviks remained unreliable.¹⁵⁸ Back in Belgium, interpreter Van Vinckenroye claimed that Shelgunov had delivered more than 300 false passports, and that he had brought back from Russia 16.000 guilders¹⁵⁹ – allegations that very much resembled the ones previously made in the Netherlands. In a separate report on the repatriation for the Ministry of Defense, written on 16 September 1920, Francot did not hide his dislike of minister of Justice Vandervelde (who had promised to “personally repatriate” the Russians), the Russian POWs themselves (“Big children, primitive and uncultured, whom they wanted to cultivate notwithstanding themselves, [...] incapable of moral discipline of their own free will.”), and Shelgunov, “officially the Brussels representative of the Moscow Section of the International Red Cross, but in reality the representative of Litvinov and, hence, of the People’s Commissars in Moscow.” And he made some recommendations for future transports: the surveillance of the POWs and medical care had to be much better; a malicious type such as Shelgunov should not be allowed to accompany the returnees (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had overruled Francot’s apprehensions); not only the Ministry of Defense, but all the ministries involved should financially contribute to the repatriation (Francot himself was still waiting for the reimbursement of expenses); Belgium itself should organize future

transports and not rely on third parties whose interests did not coincide with the Belgian ones; and last but not least: the head of the operation (i.e. Francot) should be given more authority, support and recognition.¹⁶⁰

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was happy to give Shelgunov credit for the successful repatriation of the Russian POWs. However, a letter from the Russian prisoners thanking the Belgian authorities, Francot and the medical staff on board of the *Czar* never appeared in a Belgian newspaper, as the prisoners had asked. The reference therein to Russia’s future greatness and prosperity may have been a bridge too far for the Belgian government.¹⁶¹ And although the Alien Police continued to have doubts about the political allegiances of Shelgunov and his son Boris Balashov, their presence in Belgium was not fundamentally questioned. They were allowed to purchase two cinemas the Brussels commune of Sint-Joost-ten-Noode (*Le Casino* and *Le Carrefour*). In a report about the purchase of the second cinema (on Place Madou), on behalf of his son Boris, Shelgunov is said to have paid an advance of 30,000 francs in cash, and had promised to pay the outstanding balance (55.000 francs) a week later, because he had to collect the money from his account in the Netherlands.¹⁶² Was this the money of the *Russkaia Sektsiia* that he, depending on the source, had received or stolen during the war? Or was it the money, if Allart is to be believed, that had been given by Litvinov in 1920? Between 1925 and 1934, there were reports of minor infractions at the cinemas, such as an expired permission, illegal publicity, underage visitors and breaches of building regulations, but these remained without consequence. Shelgunov’s attendance at a controversial Soviet exhibition in January 1928 – together with many other (leftist) journalists, writers, artists

156. Allart to MinFA, 17/7/1920; cf also Allart to MinFA, 15 & 16/7/1920 & Litvinov to Puech, 17/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

157. MinFA to Allart, 17/7/1920; cf. declaration Shelgunov, 11/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

158. Allart to MinFA, 20/7/1920 (AMFA, B38).

159. Note on declarations by Van Vinckenroye, 9/8/1920 (AMFA, B38).

160. Francot, Rapport concernant l’activité de la compagnie [des Soldats Russes], 16/9/1920 (RMM, MA, 4304).

161. Russian POWs to the editor of the..., 26/7/1920, in Francot, Rapport concernant... annex E (AMFA, B38).

162. Report Gendarmerie Nationale, 18/8/1925 (SABB, AP, F1649, 871708).

and teachers – was passed over in silence,¹⁶³ and the same applied to his dealings with (leftist) cinematographers and promoters of early Soviet cinema.¹⁶⁴ And when his position really became precarious in 1934, the socialist Emile Vandervelde stepped in. Was this intervention a belated ‘thank you’ for services rendered to Belgium? Shelgunov never applied for Belgian citizenship. His descendants, going under the name Balashov (Balachoff), continued Shelgunov’s cinematographic endeavours: his daughter Tatiana became a French actress, director and drama teacher (Tania Balachova); his son Boris turned their cinema complex in a thriving business and offered a venue to the ‘Club de l’Ecran’ (1931), which in turn laid the foundations of the ‘Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique’ (1962) and the ‘Cinematek’ (2009). Boris’ son Dmitrii (1925–2005) became a well-known cinema programmer and film critic in francophone Belgium.

The authorities’ attitude to Shelgunov’s wartime associates was mixed. Fridmann was regularly accused of Bolshevik sympathies (he was meeting with Boris Balashov and other suspects in the Brussels *Maison du Peuple*) and more than once the Alien Police suggested to have him evicted from the country. However, a letter of acknowledgement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for services rendered during the repatriation of the Russian POWs in 1920 served as a safeguard.¹⁶⁵ Fridmann engaged in shady businesses – among them the sale of French army stocks to the Soviet Union¹⁶⁶ – but friends in high places, notably mayor Louis Mettewie and the (aristocratic) proprietors of the *Compagnie Hanséatique Belge*, regularly spoke in his favour.¹⁶⁷ In 1926, he was granted Belgian citi-

zenship, notwithstanding the apprehensions of the Alien Police (“On le suspecte d’être un bolchéviste militant”).¹⁶⁸ And even after his naturalization, the Alien Police kept tabs on him.

Fridmann’s brother-in-law Aleinikov was never allowed to return to Belgium; his ‘functions’ under the new regime – he was either presented as a vice-commissar for public education, a professor at the university of Moscow or a commercial attaché in The Hague – made him an ‘undesired alien’; letters of recommendation by Fridmann and Gotschalck did not mollify the authorities. His wife and daughter, who needed medical treatment, lived in Belgium between 1927 and 1934, but then disappeared. It is unclear, whether they rejoined their husband and father in the Soviet Union. We have no idea about their fate, but given Aleinikov’s anarchist antecedents, chances of their survival in Stalinist Russia are dim.

Schlioum Fel’dmann, the erstwhile secretary of Shelgunov’s *Russkii komitet* also returned to Belgium. He did not identify himself as a Russian émigré, but as a Pole (he was born in Białystok), engaged in ‘commercial activities’, and apparently steered clear of his former associates. In 1938, he received Belgian citizenship.¹⁶⁹ Likewise, Schlioma Orfinger, Max Gottschalk’s brother-in-law and Fridmann’s former associate in the *Rusko-gollandskoe biuro*, returned to Liège, kept his nose clean and received Belgian citizenship in 1928. In his petition, he claimed that he had been involved in providing aid to Russian POWs in the Netherlands.¹⁷⁰ Notwithstanding his being Belgian, on the eve of the Second World

163. *Annales Parlementaires, Chambre des Représentants*, Séance du 24 janvier 1928, 316; on the exhibition and its context, cf WIM COUDENYS, “Een wegbereider van de Belgo-Sovjetrelaties: de Cercle des Relations Intellectuelles Belgo-Russes (1921-1926-1931-1939)”, in EMMANUEL WAEGEMANS (Ed.), *België en Rusland 1900-2000. 100 jaar liefde en haat*, Antwerpen, 2000, 101-118.

164. MAARTEN VANHEE, *Links-België en de erfenis van Eisenstein. De ambivalente perceptie van de Sovjetfilm bij de Belgische communisten en socialisten (1917-1945)*, MA thesis, KU Leuven, 2004, 27; VINCENT GEENS, “Le temps des utopies. L’ambition cinématographique d’Henri Storck, de 1907 à 1940”, *Cahiers d’histoire du temps présent*, 7 (2000), 223.

165. MinFA to British Consul, 22/8/1920 (AMFA, B38); Fridmann to Alien Police, 14/4/1921; Alien Police to MinJust, 14/4/1921; Letter of thanks to Fridmann by MinFA, 22/9/1920 (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697).

166. Note Alien Police, 13/12/1923 (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697).

167. Note Alien Police 30/3/1920; L. Moreau (Compagnie Hanséatique Belge) to MinFA, 12/12/1922 (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697).

168. Note Alien Police, 23/6/1926 & note Gonne, [23/6/1926] (SABB, AP, F1649, 720697).

169. SABB, AP, F1650, 1021502 (Feldmann_S.).

170. Pro Justitia, Liège Police, 20/2/1924 (SABB, AP, F1649, 765602 (Orfinger S.)).

War, the Alien Police still listed him as a ‘foreigner’. His (communist) son Lucien (1913-1944) joined the Resistance and died in the concentration camp of Breendonck.

The oldest of Shelgunov’s associates, the Jewish lawyer and freemason Lev Berlin, also returned to Belgium, where he would devote himself to the fate of (anti-Bolshevik) refugees from revolutionary Russia. For that reason, the Alien Police clearly identified him as a “Russe Blanc,” untainted by the doubtful credentials of his (former?) friends.¹⁷¹ He was the only one of Shelgunov’s network who engaged with the new wave of Russian migrants. The others, like most of their generation, kept their distance from the anti-Bolshevik and often anti-Semitic émigrés after 1917. As such, a 1939 declaration by representatives of that prewar generation very well applies to the Shelgunov circle:

We belong to the generation of Russian revolutionary intelligentsia from the beginning of the century. Between 1904 and 1909 we were members of the RSDLP (Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party), as was the entire student youth at the time. We left this party in 1909, long before the Communist Party was founded. We came to Belgium after the revolution of 1905-1907, which means that we had nothing to do with the Civil War or the White Movement. When the Ivans Ivanoviches [i.e. the post-1917 émigrés, WC] learned of these suspicious facts, they felt it their duty to inform the government of them, without, of course, saying that we had long since left the Social Democratic Party.¹⁷²

VII. Conclusions

The present article focusses on Vasilii Shelgunov, a hitherto unknown key-player in the relationship between the Low Countries and Russia around the

First World War, and in particular on his involvement in providing aid to Russian POWs in the Netherlands and Belgium. As it is almost impossible to gain insights in the fate of these POWs themselves, either individually or collectively, the reconstruction of the life and deeds of Shelgunov provides an alternative route into the matter by establishing facts and their circumstances, and mapping the networks related to these ‘forgotten’ victims of the war.

As an alien migrant and transnational intermediary, Shelgunov defies the ramifications of Belgian, Dutch and Russian national contexts as well as the sources related to them, making him all but invisible. The actor-centred approach of the present article fits into the concepts of ‘transnational mediator’ and ‘migrant knowledge’. Indeed, Shelgunov meets all the criteria of both paradigms: as a migrant journalist he shared information about his host country with his fellow-countrymen in Russia; he accumulated specific, host-country knowledge which allowed him to build a new life, tap into local resources and networks, and, in times of crisis, share this knowledge with the Russian community in the Low Countries. In Shelgunov’s case, this knowledge also amounted to providing active assistance to POWs. His unofficial status, either as a migrant or an intermediary, forced him to keep a low profile and avoid embarrassment to his clients and patrons; in exchange, he enjoyed the discreet protection of people in high places.

The case of Shelgunov not only sheds light on a forgotten episode of Belgian, Russian and Dutch history around the First World War and a key-person therein, but also draws attention to a chapter of migrant history in the Low Countries that has remained largely unstudied: the history of Russian, not seldom Jewish refugees of political persecution after the 1905 revolution, who massively settled in Liège, making the city the largest centre of the Russian (student) emigration in the

171. SABB, AP, F1649, 673625 (Berline L.). Cf Wim COUDENYS, *Leven voor de tsaar*, 86-93.

172. KONSTANTIN N. PLATUNOV, P.V. BAENOV, A.D. SIBIRIAKOV, “Deklaratsiia”, *Tropa k tainomu*, aug. 1939, 191-194a.

Low Countries before the war.¹⁷³ Their networks were not only visible in the organization of the aid to Russian POWs in the Netherlands during the war, but also after their return to Belgium after the war. Because of their ‘revolutionary’ origins, when they were increasingly perceived and presented as leftist opponents of the post-1917 White Russian emigration, and, by consequence, sympathizers of the Bolshevik cause. The aforementioned scandal surrounding the 1928 Soviet exhibition in Brussels testifies to the fact that under changed circumstances – the World War, the Russian Revolution, anti-Bolshevism, White Russian emigration and state-nationalism – a previously very visible and present world can disappear. These prewar émi-

grés operated far more transnational than their post-revolutionary successors, and in the interwar period occupied (leading) positions in Belgian and Dutch society, with many becoming Belgian or Dutch citizens.¹⁷⁴ It took a second World War and the integration of the post-revolutionary émi-grés in Belgian society (very few settled in the Netherlands) to almost completely erase their names from memory. Shelgunov was partly spared such a fate, because his descendants upheld his cinematographic legacy, albeit (discreetly) under the name of Balachov. The purpose of this article was to bring also the journalistic, humanitarian and political legacy of this *migrant intermediary* to the surface.

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173. WIM COUDENYS & PATRICK RAPOYE, *Fallen Far from the Fatherland*, passim; PIETER DHONDT, “Les étudiants étrangers en Belgique aux 19^e et 20^e siècles. Une bibliographie annotée”, in FRANÇOISE HIRAU & FRANÇOISE MIRGUET, *Finances, mobilités et projets d’éducation universitaires. Le regard des historiens*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2012, 203, 210.

174. Cf LARA BONGARD, *The Girl Who Crossed the River with a Tablecloth*, Ghent, 2023.