Missing in Action: Belgian Civilians and the First World War

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In a recently published English-language bibliographic guide to sources on the Great War, *Researching World War I: A Handbook*, the authors sought to bring together in synthetic essays and comprehensive source lists the major scholarly works on the '14-18 conflict (Higham, 2003). Billing itself as more comprehensive than its predecessors, the volume incorporates chapters on lesser known participants such as Japan, Romania, and Greece, along with coverage of the major belligerents. Despite its centrality to the war on the western front, Belgium is absent from this guide, its presence only indicated in the topical chapters on the outbreak of the war. In fact, in the index, Belgium is only mentioned on seven pages of the 450-page book, under the headings of such topics as "exploitation of", "invasion of", and "as colonial power" (*Ibid*., 457). Likewise, Antoine Prost and Jay Winter's historiographical essay on the state of the field published in French in 2004 also largely overlooks Belgium in its survey of important work in the field (Prost & Winter, 2004). Despite its inclusion in other recent reference works in German and French (Hirschfeld, Krumeich & Renz, 2003; Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2004), Belgium's comparative obscurity in major bibliographies and historical overviews of the First World War (particularly in the English-language world) is symptomatic of its treatment by many historians outside of Belgium.

While featuring prominently as a *landscape* of war and as a symbol of wartime propaganda, Belgium and its people are strangely absent from the military and social histories of this period in European history. Occasionally Belgium is mentioned in conjunction with occupied northern France, with little differentiation between these experiences made, or it appears as the setting for British, German, or French military histories. As Sophie de Schaepdrijver has so astutely noted, Belgium's role in the war is that of bystander to its own history (de Schaepdrijver, 2002a, 96). Caught between images of soldiers in the mud of Passchendaele and propaganda about the atrocities of the German invasion, Belgium's wartime experiences have been overshadowed.

The absence of the Belgian case in many general histories of the war is particularly problematic for those studying the civilian experience in 1914-

1918 and the social and cultural history of the period. Belgium lies at the intersection of several major developments during the First World War, and the testimonies of its citizens can provide insight into broader problems such as the nature of occupations, resistance and collaboration movements, humanitarian aid, and postwar recovery. Part of the reason for Belgium's invisibility in the larger literature of war is the organization of that material into essentially two areas – home front and battle front. Belgium, with its army perched precariously on a small stretch of coast in its own country and a civilian population on the front lines of battle and occupation, can never fit into the home/battle model that is so popular in British, American, and German historiography. Even France, which had occupation zones in the north, has remained for the most part firmly in the battle/home, soldier/civilian framework. Excellent studies have emerged from this theoretical framework, particularly focusing on the experiences of civilians "at home" (Williams, 1972; Fridenson, 1992; Winter, 1986; Becker, 1985; Davis, 2000; Healy, 2004). However, Belgium's war has created blurry lines between soldier and civilian, home and battle, resistor and collaborator, making historical work on "the people" quite difficult. What is needed is a concerted effort to publicize Belgian archives and the work of scholars within Belgium as a necessary corrective to historiographical trends that have marginalized this nation from the larger European narrative of western front experiences.

The rehabilitation of Belgium's First World War has begun, especially in Belgium itself, with impressive work coming out of the Center for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (CEGES/SOMA in Brussels), In Flanders Field museum (Ieper) and the Université Catholique de Louvain, in particular. Outside of Belgium, the contributions of the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne (France) have provided a glimpse of the importance of social and cultural histories of the occupied zones during the war, and younger scholars in Germany have also begun to interest themselves in the occupation of Belgium and Imperial German policies toward its war/occupation zones. In the English-language world, the careful study by John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial*, stands as an example of how central to the war's history and ideology Belgium was (Horne & Kramer, 2001), while Larry Zuckerman's *The Rape of Belgium* re-examines the German occupation of Belgium (Zuckerman, 2004).

The country's peculiar situation during the First World War – as a neutral-turned-combatant, mostly occupied by German forces but fed largely with Allied assistance – contributes to the complexities of the Belgian war experience and perhaps helps explain its invisibility in the broader war scholarship.

Belgium fits neatly in neither Allied nor German historiography of the western front, and in fact occupies a sort of historical No Man's Land between the dominant national histories. This short essay aims to examine the emerging voices in Belgian First World War scholarship in the context of more established works. By surveying the major literature of the field and suggesting gaps, this article will expose Belgium's continued marginalization and its undeniable importance to studies of the wartime world, before suggesting areas of needed future research.

1. THE STATE OF THE FIELD

Even before the war was over, histories of it were being produced. For Belgium, in particular, the large number of studies that emerged between 1915 and 1917 sought to explain questions of international law in relationship to the invasion of 1914. Belgium was a *cause célèbre*, and many public intellectuals sought to address its woes in writing. Of these studies, the best known is Fernand van Langenhove's examination of the *franc-tireur* question in relationship to the "atrocities" of 1914. His theory about the 1914 atrocities was that German soldiers were laboring under a mass delusion, built on stories of 1870 and anti-Catholic propaganda. As he notes,

> "De psychologische oorsprong van legenden is in de laatste jaren vooral in Duitschland het voorwerp geweest van veelvuldig onderzoek. Met allerlei proefnemingen werd in het bijzonder een studie gemaakt van de misvattingen die zich voordoen in de voorstelling van een geobserveerd feit" (Van Langenhove, 1916, 95).

This important study, which in some ways set the terms of discussion for the next half-century, did not end the debate. Historians on either sides of the issue re-fought the war in the interwar period and after, often confining their discussions of Belgium's war to August and September 1914. This focus was entirely understandable given the centrality of the issue of war crimes to the war culture as it emerged, with its rhetoric on war as battle against barbarism.

Following this trend, much of the early work on Belgium's role in the First World War focused on its victimization and its role in atrocity propaganda. There was a lively debate regarding the "franc-tireur" and the question of international laws of war, which is ably summarized and analyzed in *German Atrocities 1914* (Horne & Kramer, 2001, 89-139). One of the most important works examining this issue was published in *Current History* in 1928, at a time when reparations, bitterness over the Paris peace treaty, and wartime

damages were still fresh in the minds of Belgians (Mayence & Meurer, 1928). This special issue of the journal on war blame for the sack of Louvain re-ignited the controversy over alleged atrocities and civilian "snipers" just in time for the official opening of the new university library in that town the same year (De Soete, 1929). The two debaters in the journal, German Christian Meurer and Belgian Fernand Mayence, took opposite sides, with Meurer claiming that civilians fired on German troops, and Mayence maintaining that Germans may have "thought" they were under civilian attack, but it was not true. Mayence even published his piece on Louvain as a small book, in order to bring more scholarly attention to the theme (Mayence, 1928). Mayence, along with other historians in Belgium and elsewhere, spent much time trying to create an international commission to deal with the *franc-tireur* and atrocity issues in order to arrive at some sort of historical accommodation. It was not until the less charged atmosphere of the 1950s that the issue was dealt with in some detail by Peter Schöller's *Der Fall Löwen*, but even then, hostile reactions persisted (Horne & Kramer, 2001, 392-398, 412-414; Schöller, 1958; Wieland, 1984).

With the issue of war crimes and guilt still a vital one up through the 1950s, it is not surprising that much historical literature of the interwar period is preoccupied with issues of Belgian's victimization during the war and with notions of betrayal at Versailles. At the Paris Peace negotiations, Belgium had little voice in the final decisions regarding territory and reparations, and many felt particularly bitter about the rejection of Belgian claims to Luxembourg, Antwerp's sea access via the Schelde River, and parts of Limburg and Flanders (Depoortere, 1997). In addition, the reparations never seemed to make up for the loss of livelihoods, lives, and infrastructure during the war, especially after the deliberate destruction of equipment, industry and agriculture by the departing German troops (Marks, 1981, 90, 199, 255). As historian Sally Marks noted in her diplomatic history of Belgium's role in the treaty negotiations, the nation was treated as with the Allies, "but never of them" (*Ibid*., 5). Its mythic "soldier-king", Albert I, had no power in the European political maneuvering that followed the war (Van Ypersele, 1995; Thielemans, 1995). Albert's ministers had to depend on diplomatic champions in the United States to get their claims a hearing at Versailles (Marks, 1981, 180-182). Belgium emerged as a country that was perceived to have made fewer sacrifices and suffered less damage than other nations such as France, a position which was bolstered by John Maynard Keynes in his denunciation of the peace treaty, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919). Somehow Belgium's prewar neutrality compromised its role as a combatant nation, with its soldiers in the field bringing to the fore its lack of

neutrality and its unique status among combatant nations. In fact, occupied Belgium

> "lived through two wars simultaneously: that of those directly involved in the conflict, like all the soldiers, and that of a civilian population... of course, on the front lines" (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, 2002, 54).

This ambivalent and complicated war experience makes writing its history a difficult task. Undoubtedly the most influential general study of the war in Belgium is Henri Pirenne's, *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale* (Pirenne, 1928). Pirenne, arguably Belgium's most well-known historian, wrote his 1928 volume as an official history of the Belgian people during 1914-1918. His own experiences during the war, first with the enlistment of three of his sons and the death of one of them, and then with his own imprisonment along with colleague Paul Fredericq in Germany from 1916-1918 certainly contributed to his history of the war (Fris, 1919; Nyrop, 1917; Lyon & Lyon, 1976; Bittlestone, 1983; Coppens, 1990). Also important is the personal betrayal that Pirenne felt at the hands of German historians whom he felt embraced the militarist myth in 1914 and thereby alienated the scholarly community; this deeply affected his vision of history as a unifying endeavour. Pirenne, one of the historians seeking to create a cross-national scholarly community in Europe largely abandoned this project, concentrating instead on his shaping of Belgian history. As his biographer noted of the events of 1914,

> "At one stroke was shattered what Pirenne had believed in, what he had worked for – German-French intellectual rapport and the Europeanization of scholarship" (Lyon, 1974, 205).

Although penned a decade after the conflict and written with his customary professionalism, Pirenne's work emerges as part of a wave of war memories, both scholarly and autobiographical, and its tone reflects in some ways the author's painful remembrances and his determination to document Belgium's tribulations. At points in his account, he reminds readers of the suffering of Belgian people and tries to chronicle the years of occupation, noting early in the book:

> "L'arrêt de l'industrie, le chômage, la disette des vivres, la pénurie du combustible et du luminaire lui imposaient des souffrances qui allèrent croissant d'année en année" (Pirenne, 1928, 81).

His focus on the suffering of civilians and the oppressive policies of the occupying government speak to his own experiences and ring with the authority of the witness. This book remained the standard history of Belgium's First

World War for more than a half-century, and it continues to be an important source for anyone studying the period. Yet, in some ways, the very authority that Pirenne wielded as a war participant and as a historian of world renown, made it difficult to challenge or revise his account. Perhaps that accounts for the lag in general texts exploring Belgium's First World War for almost seventy years and the focus instead on limited and quite specific aspects of the war years (de Vos, 1996; de Schaepdrijver, 1997). However, it is also true that Belgian scholarship in the recent past has not encouraged broad synthetic works, instead much scholarship has emphasized detailed monographs of specific historic events, themes, or periods (de Schaepdrijver, 2002b).

The most significant event in the marginalization of Belgium in the historical literature regarding the First World War, however, was the Second World War. During the second global conflict, Belgium's occupation was much different. Its political situation especially regarding *Flamenpolitik*, the pro-Flemish policies of the Germans, had changed, and generally, the scope of the 1940-1945 war overshadowed the First World War. The bitter Nazi occupation of the Second World War became the iconic period in Belgian public memory, and indeed in continental European historical memory, so the experiences of civilians and soldiers alike in the First World War lapsed into relative obscurity. As an example, at the excellent Musée de la Résistance in Brussels, a small corner with memorabilia on Edith Cavell and Gabrielle Petit constitutes the World War I exhibit, while the rest of the museum is filled with materials on the Belgian resistance during the Second World War and beyond. Professional historians and the public have both used the 1940-1945 period as a lens for examining earlier events, often seeking explanation and context for the vicious attacks on civilians in the Second World War (Lagrou, 2003, 129-141). Likewise, it is only in the past few years that CEGES/SOMA has extended its mission from a strictly Second World War study centre to include the earlier war and twentieth-century colonialism. In a special issue of the CEGES/SOMA journal on the First World War, Rudi Van Doorslaer recognizes this problem in his editorial introduction, summing it up nicely:

> "La Seconde Guerre mondiale fut bien plus que la Première une guerre totale (c'est en tout cas souvent ainsi que les choses sont perçues); elle a (pour cette raison?) pendant des décennies, et certainement tout au long de ces trente dernières années, été l'objet d'une attention sans commune mesure avec celle accordée aux autres événements du siècle... En attendant, la mémoire historique de la Grande Guerre en Belgique a été (et reste toujours) reléguée à l'arrière plan (sauf peut-être dans le Westhoek), même s'il semble qu'un timide changement s'opère aujourd'hui à ce propos (principalement en Belgique francophone?)" (Van Doorslaer, 2000, 7).

While Van Doorslaer is undoubtedly correct in his claim that the Second World War has overshadowed the First in Belgian scholarship, he fails to note that the resurgence in First World War interest in Belgium is not confined to the francophone community, or indeed, even to Belgium.

In the last ten years and in forthcoming studies, many young historians and more established scholars have embraced the challenge of trying to interpret the First World War without seeing it through the lens of the Second. While this is a difficult challenge for all historians of the twentieth century, in Belgium, linguistic barriers and politically-charged debates regarding nationalism have complicated the task. Perhaps younger scholars and those from outside of Belgium are less troubled by the painful memories, and the debates among the European Union generation of historians can transcend the linguistic and historical divides of the past. Certainly some have begun to look at Belgium as a model state and a center of "Europeanness" rather than dwelling on past and present divisions (Van de Craen, 2002, 26). One example is Geert Van Istendael's work, which serves as a starting point for the possibility of a broader Belgian national history (van Istendael, 1989).

Sophie de Schaepdrijver, part of this later generation, has certainly contributed to this project of embracing Belgium's diverse communities in writing histories of the 14-18 conflict. Her 1997 history of the Great War is a standard in the field and a bestseller in Belgium, and the book's recent translation into French gives it even wider resonance and audience (de Schaepdrijver, 1997; 2004). Her articles in English-language journals and edited collections have also raised the specter of Belgian war experience for scholars in Great Britain and the United States. Perhaps de Schaepdrijver's most important contribution to the field has been her ability to write about the war while also commenting consciously on the created memory of the war and its concomitant shaping of both public commemoration and professional history in Belgium. She directly confronts the issues of Belgian linguistic and political divides in her work. De Schaepdrijver's assertion in a recent article sums up this more critical stance on the 14-18 years:

> "Although the center held – language and federalist reforms, democratically arrived at, continued apace – it had been drained, so to speak, of much of its content, becoming more narrowly pragmatic than it had been. The language struggle was henceforth loaded with grand notions and accusations – betrayal, martyrdom, historical choices, Wilsonian self-determination – it was never designed to withstand. Language had been a problem in Belgium; now it was *the* problem *of* Belgium. In this sense, August 1914, the finest hour of the idea of Belgium, was also the beginning of its end" (de Schaepdrijver, 1999, 294).

2. SOURCES ON BELGIUM'S WAR

Part of the difficulty for foreign scholars hoping to access Belgian studies of the war is the inaccessibility of many Belgian publications outside of the country. Dutch-language volumes and recent publications in French and Dutch from more locally-based publishers such as Lannoo and de Klaproos are particularly difficult to find in libraries. For example, Lode Wils' classic study of Flemish activism in the First World War is only available in four libraries in the United States (Wils, 1974). Other works are poorly publicized outside of Belgium, and so external scholars are not always abreast of new developments in the field.

Despite this difficulty, international conferences linking scholars from the First World War and the accessibility of the World Wide Web have made the community of historians working in the field much smaller. Successive conferences in 2001 and 2003 in Brussels on the First World War have brought the various constituencies working in this period together, from graduate students to archivists to public historians to university professors. The 2001 conference, "België en de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Bronnen – Stand van het Onderzoek", highlighted the rich archival resources of Belgian's national and regional depositories, but also pointed to the difficulties facing researchers hoping to access these holdings. Many of the materials are spread throughout communes and provinces, necessitating frequent travel, but also, some lack specific finding aids in printed or computerized formats. The second conference, "14-18, A Total War?" in 2003 demonstrated that many scholars have embraced the challenge of working with these diverse archives, developing a multi-faceted approach to study of the First World War.

Personal and official records from the years 1914-1920s abound in Belgian archives, particularly in Brussels at the Archives Générales du Royaume, Royal Army and Military History Museum, and various national offices such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Less popular among scholars, but extremely useful, communal and regional libraries often hold a wealth of details concerning wartime policies. In the city archives and special collections of towns such as Leuven, Liège, Mechelen, Ieper, Poperinge, Mons, Tournai, and Pepinster to name just a few, historians find correspondence with German authorities, copies of local newspapers and regulations, and records of arrest, collaboration, and resistance. The regional archives often hold private collections of papers, such as Princess Marie de Croÿ's papers at the Archives Générales branch in Mons. Specialty museums and institutions also sometimes contain helpful documents on aspects of the Belgian situation during

the war. Examples include KADOC (Katholiek Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving) in Leuven, the Musée de Folklore in Tournai, and In Flanders Fields documentation center in Ieper. University libraries and special collections are especially good sources. For instance, Ghent University holds the original diaries of historian Paul Fredericq (who was interned with Henri Pirenne), the Loveling family, and other Ghent notables, while the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven has materials on the controversy regarding the burning and rebuilding of its library. Finally, the war memorials, sites, and monuments themselves, spread across the Belgian countryside, are potent sources as well for the story of the war's impact (Chielens & Putkowski, 2000; Casterman, 1996). Many of the available materials are catalogued in a useful guide published by the Archives Générales du Royaume (Tallier & Boijen, 2002).

In terms of primary sources on the war that do not require archival trips, there exist some moving and detailed memoirs from Belgian civilians about life in the occupied regions, Étappen (staging areas), and army zones, which provide interesting glimpses into the militarization of ordinary people's lives. Some of the best deal with the day-to-day grind of food shortages, requisitioning, interactions with soldiers, and endless posted warnings and advisories from the German authorities. Particularly detailed published accounts include the work by Siegfried Debaeke and the diaries of authors Virginia Loveling and Stijn Streuvels and pastor A. Van Walleghem in Flemish (Debaeke, 1999; Streuvels, 1979; Loveling, 1999; Van Walleghem, 1964), and in French, memoirs by Henri Pirenne, Cecila Wullepit and Sister Emma Boncquet (Pirenne, 1920; Wullepit, 1949; Boncquet, 1918). Boncquet's book has recently been translated into Dutch as well (Gysel, 2002). In English, works by Brand Whitlock and Hugh Gibson provide particularly telling accounts of the diplomatic maneuvering and political intrigue of the war (Whitlock, 1919; Gibson, 1917).

Other rich archival sources that have remained largely untapped by historians of the First World War are the records of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University (USA). These records of Americans in Belgium from 1914 to 1917 provide a different view of the complexities of the civilian experience. As outsiders in a privileged position in Belgium as protected neutrals, the young men of the CRB provide frank accounts of the forced deportations they witness, the life of Belgian high society they experience, and the desperate conditions of unemployed families in certain areas of the country. In official records and private papers, CRB representatives document life as they see it in all parts of Belgium and northern France. Much of this material has gone unpublished

except in the official histories of the organization published soon after the war and in the biographies and memoirs of Herbert Hoover, the organization's director, and Emile Francqui, the Belgian director of the relief effort (de Lannoy, 1922; Gay, 1925; Henry, 1924; Nash, 1988; Hoover, 1959; Ranieri, 1980, 1985).

The CRB itself and its Belgian counterpart, the Comité National, also have been strangely absent from most larger accounts of the war, yet this logistical miracle plays a vital role in the structure of German occupation and the German strategy in the west. Even quite comprehensive economic and social investigations of the war have left the CRB out (Strachan, 2001; Ferguson, 1999). This is particularly disappointing given that in terms of diplomacy, the CRB also points to one of the most seemingly illogical agreements of the war. This international "neutral" organization supplied occupied Belgium and northern France during the war using mostly British ships with British safe passages through the British blockade of Germany. Was it not odd for Allied populations to be helping to feed civilian populations occupied by German armies? Opponents of the humanitarian effort certainly saw the difficulty. Winston Churchill opposed bringing lots of civilians to Britain and wrote on 7 October 1914,

> "There is a military reason for relieving the fortress of Antwerp of [*bouches inutiles*] and we ought to help them in every way as part of our policy for the sustained defence of Antwerp. But we ought not to concern ourselves with merely helping Belgians from the unpleasant consequences of residing in Ghent & Bruges under German occupation. They ought to stay there & eat up continental food, & occupy German policy attention. There is no reason why the civil population of Belgium, not concerned in the defence of Antwerp should come & live in England. The point is important. Everything must be done to help Belgium's military resistance – but this is no time for charity" (Cahalan, 1982, 69).

Hoover, director of the relief organization, countered with the argument that the violation of Belgium's neutrality necessitated humane aid from the Allied populations, thereby establishing a precedent for large-scale humanitarian organizations in time of war. The CRB was precursor to post-World War I food and health organizations in war-torn areas, to the Berlin Airlift, and to United Nations feeding schemes. In fact the whole question of feeding the occupied population became a major issue for European leaders during and after the war (Haag, 1990). In this sense, Belgium is at the heart of philosophical and diplomatic debates about the feeding of civilian populations and the responsibilities of occupying armies in the past century, and therefore has resonance for a whole host of twentieth-century historical questions deserving of more scholarly attention.

3. AREAS OF CURRENT AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In terms of new secondary research emerging from Belgium, the possibilities are enormous for changing some of the major paradigms of the war literature. Belgium sits at the center of many of the defining issues in the social history of the war, and as a case study, could provide insight into the larger cultural shifts that emerged in the 1920s from the war. Much work has been done by Belgian scholars, but these studies have not found their way into the mainstream "big" histories of the war.

One area of particular interest that has not been incorporated into many of the general war histories and which has not been explored systematically in Belgium itself is that of the forced labor and deportation of Belgian civilians during the First World War (Passelecq, 1928; Claisse, 2000). There are obvious parallels to be drawn here between the two world wars, but also between German labour policies in Belgium and in occupied France, Poland and Lithuania. The timing of forced deportation and the creation of large-scale labour battalions in all German occupied territories (mid- to late-1916) provides important information about the tensions emerging in the German war effort and its need for supplies (Liulevicius, 2000; Linde, 1965; Conze, 1958). Some scholars have examined aspects of the deportation experience and effects in Belgium, but beyond new research coming out of Germany, few historians of the war outside of Belgium have engaged with this important issue (Roolf, 2000; Rawe, 2005; Thiel, 2005). In addition to the issue of deportation, the impact of the war on individual households and their budgets, the unemployment crisis of the later war years and immediate postwar years, and the emotional stress on family life all remain areas to be studied.

Other aspects of the civilian experience deserve increased attention, including the plight of refugees. The war created refugees across Europe, but Belgium saw large numbers of its population fleeing or being pushed out of their homes. Hundreds of thousands of Belgians (and perhaps as many as a million) spent all or part of the war in France, Netherlands, and Great Britain, relying on charity, government relief, and scant employment prospects. This issue of displacement, both for Belgium's subsequent history, and for surrounding countries, is an important one, but study of refugees also provides insight into issues of nationalism, the development of national and ethnic stereotypes, and war trauma. Work on this topic has garnered more interest of late especially when an exhibition at the In Flanders Field museum and its

accompanying catalogue drew eyes to the topic (Amara et al., 2004), but it remains a marginal area of First World War scholarship deserving increased inclusion in synthetic studies of the war years (Amara et al., 2004; Becker, 1998; Cahalan, 1982). In addition, several works by Dutch, French, English and Belgian scholars have emerged in recent years to provide more information on the movement of Belgians during and after the war (Becker, 1998; Cahalan, 1982; de Roodt, 2000; Purseigle, 2005). Again, in light of subsequent refugee crises in the twentieth century, the Belgian experience could be an enlightening one. As one scholar has noted,

> "Fleeing war is a universal, contemporary phenomenon. In this respect, the history of these thousands of Belgians forced into exile is especially useful for a better understanding of some of the central issues of the time in which we live" (Amara et al., 2004, 36).

These themes of deportation, forced labour and refugees all are difficult for historians to study because they are delicate subjects even today, but they are almost easy in comparison to the more painful notion of collaboration. Although much more politically charged in connection with the Second World War, all sorts of collaboration, whether political, economic or sexual, remain hard topics to discuss. Yet the treatment of collaborators, the rise of pro-German movements, and individual resistance/collaboration are important to the larger history of the war and to the post-war climate in Belgium and Europe. Some historians have examined the issue of Flemish collaboration, particularly the Council of Flanders, and the role of the war in fueling the rise of new forms of Flemish activism (Wils, 1974, 1985; de Schaepdrijver, 1997; Vrints, 2002). Others have placed the war period within the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century nationalism more generally (Deprez & Vos, 1998). Comparisons between nationalist and separatist movements in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe and the world have been few, and this area in the study of the 1914-1918 years could constitute an important realm for future research (Hossay, 2002).

Despite work on the larger issues of nationalist movements and the notion of collaboration in the war context, however, scholars have mostly ignored the local collaboration that often emerged out of economic necessity, coercion, or desperation, and few have comprehensively studied the issue of sexual collaboration that has been a part of French and German work on the war (Harris, 1993; Audoin-Rouzeau, 1995; Daniel, 1997; Majerus, 2003). This is a trickier subject in many ways that relies heavily on research in local archives and which may stir up unhappy memories of past disputes. Nonetheless, some recent scholarship has emerged that focuses on Belgium's attempts

to come to terms with "incivisme" in the immediate postwar period, both in real terms of condemnations and amnesties, but also in terms of representations of the 'good' and 'bad' Belgians of the war period (Rousseaux & Van Ypersele, 2003; 2005). The difficulties of this kind of scholarly inquiry are aptly conjured in Michael Verhoeven's 1990 film about a research project that exposes a town's secrets regarding World War II collaboration, *Das schreckliche Mädchen*. Undoubtedly issues of guilt, secrecy, and individual responsibility are sensitive ones, but also they provide great insight into the war's history and subsequent developments within Europe, including people's responses to the Second World War.

As is already evident in this essay, the social and cultural history of Belgium during the war and its aftermath has been the focus of particular scholarly interest in recent years. One piece of Belgian history that could help historians of other nations contextualize the issue of religion, is the role of Catholic leaders in explaining, justifying, and resisting the war and the German occupation. In recent years, the general subject of war and religion has been somewhat neglected in the larger scholarly community, so an emphasis on the role religion played in war-torn Belgium might help ignite a larger discussion of the issue. The central figure in much of the scholarship on Belgium is, of course, Cardinal Mercier, but university rectors, nuns, and parish priests also figure in some of the publications. The works on Mercier are many and varied, but some of the most interesting include studies by Belgian and external scholars as well as his own writings from the war period (Aubert, 1998; Boudens, 1975; Meseberg-Haubold, 1982; Mercier, 1917).

In keeping with a broader movement in twentieth-century history, gender and families have also become areas of study. Although much of this research agenda is still in need of examination in the Belgian context, a few works have been published on children's lives during the war in Belgium (Delbecke, 2000; Frédéric, 2002), while scholars have depicted women in roles as diverse as workers, volunteers, symbols, spies, resisters and collaborators, embracing patriotism and protection of family during the war (De Weerdt, 1993; Gubin, 1998; Proctor, 2003; Van Ypersele, Debruyne & Claisse, 2004). Historians have looked in some detail at women's participation in war and its effects on their lives in France (including in the occupied zones), but similar work on Belgium still needs to be undertaken (Becker, 1999; Darrow, 2000; Le Naour, 2005; McPhail, 2001, Thébaud, 1986). While these books have begun the gendering of Belgium's war experience, much more work is still to be done in this field, particularly in the area of masculinity studies. Pioneering research in Germany, Britain and France point the way to theoretical perspectives and a host of important themes that deserve further investigation in

the Belgian context: gender and nationalism, war and masculinity, and the gendering of war trauma (Mosse, 1985, 1990; Audoin-Rouzeau, 1986; Bourke, 1996; Dudink, Hagemann & Tosh, 2004).

Another useful area for future research that has been neglected since the war itself is comparative studies of German occupation zones. In particular, how did Belgium measure up to other occupied territories such as Poland and Lithuania? Scholars have begun to ask such comparative questions, but more often than not these studies compare France, Britain and/or Germany and exclude Belgium (Pyta, 1983; Winter & Robert, 1997; Grayzel, 1999; Purseigle, 2004; Showalter, 2005; Müller, 2002). However, occupation and resistance remain subjects that are covered thoroughly in Second World War literature and largely overlooked in comparative work on the first conflict. Work on occupied France often makes mention of Belgium, but sustained comparative studies of the year 1914-1918 even in border zones are rare (McPhail, 2001; Farcy, 1995; Becker, 1998). Comparison with the neutral Netherlands or studies of the border have also been virtually non-existent, but new histories re-examining the Dutch role in the war do provide insights for Belgian and European history (Frey, 1998; van Tuyll van Serooskerken, 2001; Vanneste, 2000). Likewise, few studies deal with the complexities of Luxembourg's occupation as compared with Belgium's in the First World War, although such work has been published on the Second World War (Nestler, Böhme & Barnand, 1990). Difficulties in language acquisition, and until the 1990s, in archival access have prevented many western to eastern European comparisons of occupation zones, but it is a much-needed field for research. Perhaps the recent study of German occupation on the eastern front will provide some impetus for a larger comparative study of German occupations during 1914-1918 (Liulevicius, 2000).

Despite one historian's recent claim that "Occupied Belgium was a forerunner of Nazi Europe", few studies have directly tried to understand the connections between World Wars I and II in relationship to the Belgian occupation (Zuckerman, 2004, 2). The circumstances were quite different between 1914 and 1940, but the first Belgian occupation may have lessons to offer for those studying Nazi Europe's policies as well as civilian responses to the Nazi invasion. Work by Benoit Majerus on police, Emmanuel Debruyne on intelligence and other scholars associated with CEGES/SOMA have begun to fill this gap by looking thematically at Belgium in both wars (Majerus, 2004; Debruyne, 2001, 2005).

Another area in which Belgium could contribute much to our understanding is in its centrality to the multicultural war experience. Belgium's problematic history with its colony in the Congo, and in particular, the role of

Belgium in the war in the African theatres has not been studied in any depth. Particularly neglected are studies of African civilians, in this case, mostly carriers or porters hired to work for the Belgium army. As one historian has noted the death rate for carriers was "similar to that of an army on a so-called major front" and porters in Belgian service suffered five times the casualties of "native" soldiers (Strachan, 2001, 500). Although not alone among national histories of the First World War (it is true for all major combatants), Belgian's colonial war has been pushed to the side by scholars.

However, in the European theater, colonialism also played an important role. Flanders served as one of the major zones for interactions between European populations and colonial soldiers and laborers on the British and French fronts. Not only did mostly-Flemish speaking peasants and townsfolk interact daily with Canadian, British, Australian, American, French and German soldiers, but they also met (many for the first time) Indians, Senegalese, Algerians, Maori, and Chinese troops and laborers, just to name a few. Their vivid descriptions of these encounters in oral histories and memoirs have been very sparsely used by historians in past years. Little has been published on the multicultural war in Flanders, and much of what is available is only in Dutch. One of the only scholarly studies of the Chinese interaction with the Flemish population is an M.A. thesis from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Hagen, 1996). Johan Meire's book on remembrance of the war in the region of Ieper discusses the memory of the war for Sikhs, among others stationed in Flanders (Meire, 2003). Luckily, a forthcoming article by Dominiek Dendooven will highlight the issue of the multinational war interactions (Dendooven, 2005), and In Flanders Field Museum is planning a major exhibition on the multicultural war in the next couple of years.

In addition to the contributions of professional historians to the development of war historiography, it is important to note the role of public historians, antiquarians, and scholars from other fields. In terms of public memory, the Belgian museums have developed a sort of amnesia regarding the years 1914-1918, with many local museums ending their displays around 1900. Their focus on daily life (how people dressed, what they ate, how they worked) places the exhibits in the realm of folklore, making the invasion of 1914 seem an uneasy fit. Even in Leuven, where the university library and much of the town burned, the local Museum Vander Kelen-Mertens includes no mention of the First World War, and in Mechelen, the same is true of its multiple local history museums. In fact, when queried, staff at the Museum Hof van Busleyden recommended a visit to Breendonk, which is a Second World War site. Perhaps the upcoming centenary of the war in 2014 will spur

local and regional museums to reinvestigate the 1914-1918 years in their displays.

Following the lead of Jay Winter, scholars studying memory have examined the issues of public commemoration and its national character in Britain and other countries (Winter, 1995; Sherman, 1999; King, 1998; Goebel, 2004; Gillis, 1996). Certainly the Belgian landscape is densely populated with all sorts of concrete reminders of the war, from individual monuments in cemeteries to communal memorials to huge parks preserving and commemorating battles and war dead. Tours of battlefields and cemeteries are big business, and draw in a large number of tourists each year. In Belgium, local and regional studies of memorialization and memory have been popular in recent years (Ceunen & Veldeman, 2004; Meire, 2003; Claisse, 2002; Derom, 2000; Tixhon & Van Ypersele, 2000). However, these need to be complemented with work that explores the nature of Belgian war tourism and that examines the presence or absence of some sort of national cult of remembrance.

Scholars in fields other than history have embraced the issue of the cultural production and memory of the First World War, most notably in literary studies (Buelens, 2001; de Schaepdrijver 2002). Again, these studies tend to be regional or national or to focus on only one genre (poetry or novels), but they have not emerged as comparative studies with literature from the United Kingdom, France, Germany or the Netherlands as in books by such scholars as Elizabeth Marsland or Modris Eksteins (Marsland, 1990; Eksteins, 1989). In fact, Sophie de Schaepdrijver argues persuasively that not only has Belgian war literature not become part of the larger World War I canon, but that Belgian post-war literature has relied heavily on the experiences of non-Belgians for its story lines (de Schaepdrijver, 2002a, 112-113). In film and media departments, beyond an article or two on Belgian films of the war years, only recently have major studies of the Belgian film and war emerged (Convents, 1995; Engelen, 2005).

4. CONCLUSION

Clearly this essay has documented much energy in the study of Belgium's First World War and issues of civilians, but what seems to be lacking is a broader European context for much of the work. Certainly comparative histories are hard work and can sometimes obscure the specific experiences of a nation or region, but they are also necessary to the creation of synthetic works about this world war. As two recent historians have written, compara-

tive history of World War I is "first and foremost, the history of a process of adaptation to industrial warfare" that can only enrich our understanding of the twentieth century (Macleod & Purseigle, 2004, 12). If the historical work on England, France and Germany continue to dominate scholarship on the conflict, then a full picture of the war's impact on Europe, and indeed on the twentieth century world cannot emerge. What is needed is a better accessibility for Belgian historical works, both in French and Dutch, outside of Belgium. Many of the presses do not distribute well in the United States, Germany, or Great Britain, and books in Dutch can be especially difficult to obtain and read for foreign scholars. Journal articles and licentiates are hard to order from outside the country, and the Belgian banking system makes it difficult for outsiders to obtain new journals without the ability to easily make electronic funds transfers. These are perhaps mundane points to raise in an historiographical essay, but they speak to the need for better communication across boundaries among those working in this field. Belgium's experience in the First World War, both military and civilian, has resonance for larger histories of the war and for studies seeking to examine the two world wars in comparative context. Working to link Belgian historians with French, German, British, Irish, American, Dutch, and scholars of other nationalities could lead to a richer conversation about the impact of the war, particularly as we rapidly approach the centennial of the war's inception.

ABBREVIATIONS

CEGES/SOMA	Centre d'Études et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/ Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij
CRB	Commission for Relief in Belgium
KADOC	Katholiek Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving

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Vermist tijdens het gevecht: Belgische burgers en de Eerste Wereldoorlog

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SAMENVATTING

Hoewel België zowel geografisch als symbolisch een belangrijke rol speelde in de Eerste Wereldoorlog, blijft het land opvallend afwezig in de militaire en sociale geschiedschrijving van deze periode. In de bestaande historiografie wordt België vaak op een lijn geplaatst met het eveneens bezette Noord-Frankrijk, zonder dat de cruciale verschillen tussen de oorlogservaring van beide landen in acht genomen worden. Tevens verschijnt België in de geschiedschrijving als plaats waar Britse, Duitse of Franse militaire geschiedenissen zich afspelen. De genoegzaam bekende beelden van soldaten in de modder van Passchendaele en de propaganda over de wreedheden die het Duitse leger tijdens de invasie op het grondgebied beging, overschaduwen de grote diversiteit van de Belgische oorlogservaring. Het ontbreken van de Belgische casus in vele algemene geschiedenissen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog is bijzonder problematisch voor o.a. de studie van de 'burgerlijke ervaring' in 1914-1918 en de sociale en culturele geschiedenis van die periode. België situeert zich tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog immers op het kruispunt van verscheidene belangrijke ontwikkelingen en de getuigenissen van zijn burgers kunnen inzicht verschaffen in bredere problemen zoals de bezettingservaringen, verzets- en 'collaboratiebewegingen', humanitaire hulp, en naoorlogs herstel. Een van de redenen voor de afwezigheid van België in de wetenschappelijke literatuur over de oorlog is gelegen in het onderscheid tussen het thuisfront en het slagveld dat steeds gemaakt wordt met betrekking tot deze materie. Omwille van de uitzonderlijke dualiteit van de Belgische oorlogservaring – de frontlijn die dwars door het grondgebied loopt en het land verdeelt in een (klein) vrij en een (groot) bezet gedeelte – past België niet in het thuisfront/slagveld model dat in de Britse, Amerikaanse, en Duitse geschiedschrijving goede dienst bewijst. Zelfs Frankrijk, dat in het Noorden bezet gebied was, blijft stevig in het thuisfront/slagveld, militair/burgerlijk kader verankerd. Uitmuntende studies, in het bijzonder diegene die het thuisfront als voorwerp hebben, illustreren het belang van dit theoretische kader. In België heeft de oorlog echter tot onscherpe lijnen tussen militairen en bur-

gers, thuisfront en slagveld, weerstand en 'collaboratie' geleid, wat de geschiedschrijving over de ervaring van het thuisfront erg complex maakt. Er is grote nood aan een gezamenlijke inspanning om de collecties van Belgische archieven en het werk van Belgische wetenschappers dienaangaande een grotere bekendheid te geven. Alleen op die manier kan de bestaande geschiedschrijving over de Eerste Wereldoorlog, waarin de Belgische oorlogservaring tot nog toe vaker dan niet gemarginaliseerd werd, geamendeerd en gecorrigeerd worden.

Disparus lors du combat: les citoyens belges et la première guerre mondiale

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RÉSUMÉ

Bien qu'évidente comme théâtre de guerre et symbole de la propagande, la Belgique et ses citoyens sont étrangement absents des histoires militaires et sociales de la première guerre mondiale. De temps en temps la Belgique est mentionnée en même temps que la France du Nord occupée, avec peu de différenciation entre ces expériences faites, ou bien elle apparaît en tant qu'arrière-plan pour les histoires militaires britanniques, allemandes, ou françaises. Dû à la fixation entre les images de soldats dans la boue de Passchendaele et la propagande au sujet des atrocités de l'invasion allemande, les expériences du temps de guerre en Belgique ont été éclipsées. L'absence du cas belge dans beaucoup d'histoires générales de la guerre est particulièrement problématique pour ceux qui étudient l'expérience civile en 1914-1918 et l'histoire sociale et culturelle de l'époque. La Belgique se trouve à l'intersection de plusieurs développements principaux pendant la première guerre mondiale, et les témoignages de ses citoyens peuvent faciliter la compréhension des problèmes plus larges comme la nature des occupations, les mouvements de résistance et de 'collaboration', l'aide humanitaire, et le rétablissement d'après-guerre. Une des raisons pour laquelle la Belgique n'apparaît pas dans la littérature historique concernant la guerre est due essentiellement à l'organisation

de ces études dans deux secteurs: celui des arrières et celui du champ de bataille. La Belgique, avec son armée perchée sur une petite partie du territoire à la côte belge et sa population civile entre les lignes de front et le pays occupé, ne peut jamais s'adapter au modèle arrières/champ de bataille qui est si populaire dans historiographie britannique, américaine, et allemande. Même la France, dont le nord fut occupé, a conservé en gros les structures d'arrières/champ de bataille et de soldat/citoyen. Des études excellentes ont émergé de ce cadre théorique, se concentrant en particulier sur les expériences des civils. Cependant, en Belgique la guerre a créé des lignes vagues entre militaires et civils, entre arrières et champ de bataille, entre résistant et 'collaborateur', rendant le travail historique concernant les citoyens belges assez difficile. Ce dont nous avons besoin est un effort concerté pour divulguer les archives belges et le travail des historiens belges en tant que correctif nécessaire aux tendances historiographiques qui ont souvent marginalisé cette nation par rapport au grand récit européen des expériences du front de l'ouest.