

FILM DISTRIBUTION AND EXHIBITION IN THE LIGHT OF GERMAN CULTURAL POLICY IN OCCUPIED BELGIUM (1914-1918)

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During the First World War, the occupation of Belgium was characterized by destroyed towns and villages, plunder, and an impoverished population consumed by a hatred towards the German invader. Many Belgian families feared the fate of “their boys” on the Yser front. In these difficult times, one of the few bright spots in the daily life of the mainly urban population was found in cinema-halls and film screenings. The German occupying government both supported and encouraged cinema screenings and surprisingly, screenings of pre-war films from countries that Germany was at war with, such as France, were allowed. In parallel, the German General-Governor ruling Belgium did his utmost to supply the film market with new (German and Danish) films. It was a clear attempt to construct a degree of goodwill with Belgians in their own occupied country, cautiously introducing only a limited number of films that could be seen as pure propaganda. This article highlights an unknown but fascinating aspect of German cultural policy during their occupation of Belgium.

I. Introduction

In November 1895, Belgium was the first country outside of France where the Lumière brothers demonstrated their cinematograph. As one of the most industrialized and richest countries in the world, Belgium embraced new inventions quickly and cinema was no exception. In less than twenty years, approximately seven hundred cinema halls opened and began screening films. At this point, there was one cinema for about every 10,000 inhabitants, which made Belgium one of the countries in the world with the largest per capita film consumption¹. This rapidly emerging cultural sector then began organizing itself. In 1913 the Syndical Chamber of Cinematography (*Chambre Syndicale de la cinématographie*) was established and became a member of the Chamber of Commerce (*Chambre de Commerce*) of Brussels, where most film distributors were also located. In the early twentieth century, French language and culture dominated the film industry, in both the official and public sphere. At the eve of the First World War, short films were the primary element in most cinema programs. Longer films (which would eventually be labeled feature-length films) had not yet become the industry standard but, starting in 1913, were ever increasingly present in cinema programs. The films were silent, with live musical accompaniment. Story developments were explained with intertitles which, in Flanders, due to the pressure of Flemish nationalists were initially bi-lingual: French and Dutch. One French film periodical which did not wish to emphasize political aspects argued that this would help Flemish cinemagoers to improve their French language skills².

The Belgian film market was initially largely dominated by French productions, but from 1909 on imports from the United States, Italy, and Denmark increased progressively. German films initially had a limited presence: an estimated three percent of the films distributed were of German origin³. Henny Porten and Asta Nielsen (who was originally from Denmark but had moved to Germany) were among the first German actresses who became famous in Belgium⁴. From 1909 to August 1914, Danish films from the *Nordisk Co.* outnumbered German films on Belgian screens. In 1913, many cinemas including *Le Phare* and *Cinema Royal* in Liège had a Nordisk film in their program almost every week. Danish actors such as Valdemar Psilander and actresses such as Betty Nansen and Lilli Beck became well-known names.

The German invasion and occupation of Belgium did not stop cinema exhibition and distribution. From the end of 1914 on, cinema was again offering an important form of entertainment. To cite some examples: During the war, in March 1915, there were already 20 cinemas active in Ghent and one year later the number had increased to 30. In February 1916 128,000 cinema tickets were sold⁵. In the province of Brabant (including the cities of Leuven and Brussels) 872,308 inhabitants went to the cinema in April-May 1916. In the period from June 1916 to June 1917 roughly 50 million tickets to entertainment venues were sold in occupied Belgium. On the eve of war, there were 7,684,490 citizens in Belgium. Shortly thereafter, due to war events, the number of inhabitants had decreased. These statistics clearly show that cinema-going was very popular and that it was

1. GUIDO CONVENTS & KAREL DIBBETS, „Verschiedene Welten. Kinokultur in Brüssel und Amsterdam 1905-1930“, pp. 148-154, in CORINNA MÜLLER und HARO SEGEBERG (Hg.), *Kinoöffentlichkeit 1895-1920: Entstehung, Etablierung, Differenzierung*, Marburg, 2008.

2. *Ciné-Journal*, Paris, 18 July 1914.

3. GUIDO CONVENTS, „Ontstaan en vroege ontwikkeling van het Vlaams bioscoopwezen (1905/1908-1914)“, pp. 23-43, in DANIEL BILTEREYST & PHILIPPE MEERS (Red.), *De Verlichte Stad. Een geschiedenis van bioscopen, filmvertoningen en filmcultuur in Vlaanderen*, Leuven, 2007. *L'Indépendance belge*, Brussels, 9 March 1913.

4. In May 1911, the Danish film star Asta Nielsen made her appearance on the Belgian screens with Urban Gad's Danish film *Abgründen* and *Den sorte drøm* (1911) and his German production *Heisses Blut*. Soon the Belgian public called her the queen of the cinema. In 1913, German actress Henny Porten became famous in Belgium with *Eva*, *Der Wankende Glaube*, *Das Opfer*, and above all *Der Feind im Land*, all Messter productions.

5. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels, 7 April 1916. WILLIAM DRESEL, „Kinematographisches aus Gent“, *Der Kinematograph* (429), Düsseldorf, 17 March 1915.



Asta Nielsen in *Das Mädchen ohne Vaterland* (1912) The drama in 3 acts by Urban Gad was presented in the Antwerp Scala and Alhambra with the title *De Boheemster* between February and July 1912. It was one of the dozen films with Asta Nielsen programmed before the war. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.



German actress Henny Porten was one of the first film stars in Belgium. Some cinemas announced only her name on the program at that time and not the title of the film. In Belgium, her pre-war distributed films such as *Eva* (1913) re-appeared during the war in Belgian cinemas. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.

Danish Nordisk actor Valdemar Psilander was one of first male-film stars in pre-war Belgium. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.



At the eve of the war, a film starring Danish actor Valdemar Psilander, produced by Nordisk Co, was already screening in Belgium. Source : *La Meuse*, Liège 27 January 1914.

both an interesting business and an active market in wartime.

The importance of this has not escaped historians researching film culture in early twentieth century Belgium. A pioneering micro study on film exhibition in the city of Louvain was already published in the late 1970s⁶, making it clear that film programming and presentation had become part of German warfare and occupation policy⁷. But many questions remained: How can one explain film programming in this time period? Which kind of films arrived on screens, how were they presented, and in what context? Did German occupiers intervene directly in film programming and if so, how? Or was this simply due to the war and the restrictions it brought with it? Was film part of the general occupation policy or was it ad hoc? In other words, how did the occupation, the occupier, and film policy in Germany influence the screening of films in an occupied territory? One could suppose that German film would take over the Belgian film market, thereby limiting the availability of new French, Italian, and

in 1917 American films. Did this happen? If this was not the case, why not? In the more recent past, many other studies have shed light on the era and have gradually started to answer some of these questions⁸.

II. A Cultural War: the German Film Industry at Home (1914-1918)

Almost immediately after the outbreak of war, Germany launched a campaign against foreign films in their domestic market. On 4 August 1914, cinemas from the region *Gross Berlin-Brandenburg* decided “to ban from German cinemas all films from French companies, especially those of Pathé Frères and Gaumont”⁹. Before the war, 85 % of the films in German cinemas came from abroad, meaning only fifteen percent were produced in Germany¹⁰. The German Film Association (*Deutscher Filmbund*), representing German film producers and distributors, called for German cinema theater owners to stop screening French, English, and Japanese films¹¹. Through these actions,

6. GUIDO CONVENTS, “Duitse Bezettingsstrategie en bioscopen in Leuven”, 1914-1918, in *De Brabantse Folklore* (227-228), Brussel, September-October 1980, p. 364-373; GUIDO CONVENTS, “De komst en de vestiging van de film te Leuven (1895-1918)”, in GUIDO CONVENTS & VAN ZUTPHEN, *Fiets en Film rond 1900. Moderne uitvindingen in de Leuvense samenleving*, Leuven, 1982, p. 257-422.

7. This is outside the scope of this article focussing on film distribution and exhibition, but film production also became part of the German occupation strategy. The film *the German Occupation of Historic Louvain* was one of the first remarkable examples of one used for worldwide German propaganda. It was made end September 1914 a month after Louvain’s destruction and under German occupation and it was not the result of carefully planning of the German High Command. See: GUIDO CONVENTS, “Filmbeelden van het vernietigde Leuven (Augustus-September 1914)”, in MARIKA CEUNEN en PIET VELDEMAN (Eds.), *Aan onze helden en martelaren... beelden van de brand van Leuven (augustus 1914)*, Leuven, 2005, p. 95-110.

8. GUIDO CONVENTS: “Cinéma and German Politics in Occupied Belgium”, in KAREL DIBBETS & BERT HOGENKAMP (Eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, 1995, p.171-178; GUIDO CONVENTS, “Le cinéma et la Première Guerre Mondiale en Belgique. Quelques aspects inconnus”, in *Revue Belge du Cinéma* (38/39), Brussels, March 1995, p. 29-36; GUIDO CONVENTS, “Film en de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België”, in WILLY MAGIELS en ROBBE DE HERT, *Magie van de Cinema*, Antwerp, 2004, p. 20-21; GUIDO CONVENTS, “Film en de Duitse inval en bezetting in België 1914-1918. Of op welke wijze de overheid film als machtsinstrument ontwikkelde”, in SERGE JAUMAIN, MICHAEL AMARA, BENOÎT MAJERUS & ANTOON VRIJNTS (Eds.), *Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la première guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Brussels, 2005, p. 315-328; LEEN ENGELEN, MICHAEL HAMMOND & LESLIE MIDKIFF DEBAUCHE, “‘Snapshots’: Local Cinema Cultures in the Great War”, in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 35(4), 2015, p. 631-655; LEEN ENGELEN, “België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)”, in *Journal for media history/Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*. Amsterdam, 2016, p. 5-21; LEEN ENGELEN en ROEL VANDE WINKEL, *Hoe film de Antwerpse dierentuin heeft gered*, Antwerp, 2018; LEEN ENGELEN & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, “A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the zoological garden in occupied Antwerp, 1915-1918”, in *First World War Studies*, 7 (3), 2016, p. 243-264; ULRIKE OPPELT, *Film und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg. Propaganda als Medienrealität im Aktualitäten- und Dokumentarfilm*, Stuttgart, 2002; LIEZE ROMBAUTS, *Cinema Zoologie. Historiek en programmering tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, MA Thesis, KU Leuven, 2014-2015.

9. „Keine französischen Films in den Berliner Kinos“, in *Berliner Börsenzeitung* (361), 5 August, 1914: “alle Films französischer Gesellschaften, insbesondere der Firmen Pathé Frères und Gaumont, sind aus den deutschen Kineothekern zu verbannen”.

10. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels, 4 April 1917.

11. FRANK KESSLER and SABINE LENK, “The French Connection: Franco-German Film Relations before World War I”, in THOMAS ELSAESSER (Ed.), *A Second Life. German Cinema’s First Decades*, Amsterdam, 1996. p. 69.

cinema had become an instrument of patriotic warfare¹². This reaction was a response to nationalists who had already become critical of the influx of foreign films before the war. Films from enemy states were now looked upon as trash and a poison for the German public. The war recontextualized the German identity, morality, and independence which the enemy wanted to destroy¹³. The General Government in German-occupied Brussels supported the idea that films could contribute to foster Germanness (*das Deutschtum*) and promote German culture as a 'Leading Culture' (*Leitkultur*)¹⁴.

With the outbreak of war, branches of film producers and distributors which were then looked upon as the enemy in Germany were closed and their film stock was seized. This happened to, for instance, German subsidiaries of the French production companies Pathé, Gaumont, and Éclair. To be clear: their films were neither destroyed nor forbidden to be screened¹⁵. In fact, after censoring them again, the German government sold the films at discount prices to the *Produktions AG Union* (PAGU) Berlin¹⁶. Germany forbade the import of films from all countries it, or its allies were at war with. (For instance, in May 1915, Germany banned new imports of Italian films, because it was evident that Italy would declare war on Germany's ally,

the Austrian-Hungarian empire.) Films that had already been purchased and (re-) censored, however, could remain in circulation, which was also the case in occupied Belgium.

It took German authorities and military high command a remarkably long time to accept that the production of propagandistic films might be an important tool of warfare which would require state-controlled coordination. It was felt that German efforts in visual propaganda were "inadequate and largely clueless" compared with French and British efforts¹⁷. Between the outbreak of the war and the beginning of 1917, military and governmental entities repeatedly collaborated with private film companies to streamline the international distribution of films. None of these attempts were successful. (This will be demonstrated, in this article, by the examples of the *Export film Gesellschaft* and the *Umbina Film Gesellschaft*.)

From January 1917 on, the German supreme Army Command, with the help of the German film industry, tried to revise and improve its audiovisual policy by establishing the *Bild und Filmamt* (BuFa), an agency for film and photography¹⁸. This was, however, a failure. In 1918, the *Universum Film AG* (Ufa) company was created to replace BuFa. Its main shareholders were the

12. BRIGITTE BRAUN, „Patriotisches Kino im Krieg. Beobachtungen in der Garnisonsstadt Trier“, in *Kintop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films* (12), Frankfurt am Main/Basel 2003, p. 100-143.

13. THOMAS MANN, „Gedanken im Kriege“, in *Die Neue Rundschau*. Band 25, Berlin, November 1914, p. 1471-1484.

WALTER FRITZ, „Kino-Protokoll eines Kulturkampfes (1910-1924)“, in *Maske und Kothurn. Internationale Beiträge zur Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft* (25/3-4), 1979, p. 202-210.

14. Cfr. studies such as: HANS BARKHAUSEN, *Filmpropaganda für Deutschland*, Hildesheim 1982. WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Ufa-Gründung. Der deutsche Film im 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin 2004, or DAVID WELCH, Germany, *Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918: The Sins of Omission*, New Brunswick/New Jersey, 2000.

15. SABINE LENK & HERBERT BIRETT, „Die Behandlung ausländischer Filmgesellschaften während des Ersten Weltkriegs“, in MICHAEL SCHAUDIG (Ed.), *Positionen deutscher Filmgeschichte. 100 Jahre Kinematographie: Strukturen, Diskurse, Kontexte*, München, 1996, p. 61-74.

16. GERTRAUDE BUB, *Der deutsche Film im Weltkrieg und sein publizistischer Einsatz*, Berlin, 1938, p. 38.

17. RAINER ROTHER, „Learning from the Enemy: German Film Propaganda in World War I“, in THOMAS ELSAESSER (Ed.) *A second Life. German Cinema's First Decades*, Amsterdam, 1996, p. 184.

18. HANS TRAUB, *Die UFA. Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des deutschen Filmschaffens*, Berlin, 1943, p. 185.

In 1916 General Erich Luddendorf organized a military film and photo office (the *Militärische Film- und Photostelle*) which was renamed end January 1917 as the *Bild und Filmamt* (BuFa). It coordinated the German film propaganda (production and distribution). It opted for another way of film propaganda. The country and the soldiers had become tired of the war and a new strategy had to be outlined. Films did not have to show anymore the horror of war with death soldiers. They should not clarify and convey the atrocities of the war to the Germans but should take the horror of the carnage away. Presenting dying soldiers on the screen had to be avoided. It sent films mainly to the military in Occupied Belgium, but via the *Pantheon Cinema* established in Brussels, these were also seen about a dozen commercial cinemas for Belgians.



The Italian film, Julius Caesar (1914), a Cines production, was purchased by German distributor Lichtbilderei GmbH by the end of 1914. The film screened a year later in Belgian cinemas, such as in De Vooruit in Ghent end of October 1915. Source : Der Kinematograph (466), Düsseldorf, 1 December 1915.

Deutsche Bank, the War Ministry, and important film companies such as *Messter-Film*¹⁹. Its main task was to produce high quality films for both the military and civilians that would be competitive on the international market, partially in preparation for post-war time. Ufa did not have an impact on the film sector in Belgium in 1914-1918 but later became the largest German film company in the interwar years and had a great impact on the Belgian film industry in World War Two²⁰.

III. Film Distribution and Exhibition in the First Fifteen Months of the Occupation

On 4 August 1914, Germany invaded Belgium. In the first weeks their military campaign was characterized by terror, destruction of villages and towns, and violence against civilians, which initiated a deep resentment towards Germany within the Belgian population²¹. In early September, German occupying forces ordered that daily life had to resume. Shops, restaurants, cafés, theatres, cinemas, and other places of entertainment had to be reopened²². This was easier said than done. Cinemas had been closed during the mobilization and invasion. Some buildings had been destroyed or repurposed as, for instance, hospitals. Owners and staff members had been mobilized or had temporarily fled their homes. The situation was chaotic. Nevertheless, difficulties had to be overcome. Theoretically, it seemed possible to re-open cinemas. The international film market had been turned upside down by the war, but there were enough pre-war films available that the Belgian sector was in no urgent need for new imports²³, providing that these films were accepted by the censors that had been installed by the German authorities. This raised several practical and eth-

ical questions. Were film distributors prepared to subject their films to German censors? Were Belgian cinema owners prepared to re-open their doors? Would Belgian audiences return to the cinema? From a (Belgian) patriotic viewpoint, was it considered acceptable to go to the cinema and be entertained, while knowing that behind the *Yser-front*, Belgian troops were still fighting alongside their allies? These questions were difficult to answer, and many Belgian film professionals initially hesitated to restart business.

On 13 October 1914, the occupier increased the pressure by ordering that all films that were not presented to their censors, would be confiscated²⁴. Three days later, the Syndical Chamber convened. After a long discussion, of which an extensive report would be published after the liberation, it was decided to allow members free to decide whether or not to resume their activities²⁵. Unsurprisingly, most of them did. The cinemas were relatively new, most of them had opened after 1908. The owners had debts to pay and families to support. Film distributors had bought films for the new cinema season which should have started in autumn 1914. Last but not least: membership of the Syndical Chamber was voluntary. Film exhibitors and distributors who were not members would not have been affected by a syndicate-imposed boycott. The film sector slowly started up again and from late December 1914 on, film distributors could use repaired railways to dispatch their films over most parts of the occupied country.

Before a film could be distributed, however, it had to be approved by German censors. In March 1915, German authorities reaffirmed that all the films in Belgium had to be registered and censored, or they could no longer be screened. Importing new films was no longer allowed unless those films

19. WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur UFA-Gründung. Der deutsche Film im 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin, 2004, p. 292.

20. Cf. the article of Fortemps and Vande Winkel elsewhere in this issue.

21. KLAUS-JÜRGEN BREMM, *Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Darmstadt, 2013, p. 36-54.

22. *Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt für die okkupierten Gebiete Belgiens*, Brussels, 5 September 1914.

23. «En Belgique», *Cine-Journal*, Paris, 1 March 1915.

24. *Gesetz- und Verordnungsblatt für die okkupierten Gebiete Belgiens*, Brussels, 15 October 1914.

25. «Assemblée Générale extraordinaire des cinématographistes tenue le 16 octobre 1914 à la suite de l'Arrêté allemand concernant la censure (Etablissements Gits)», in *Revue Belge du Cinéma*, Brussels, 26 January 1919, p. 4-12.

came from or through Germany. In principle, this made it impossible to keep importing films from the neutral Netherlands, where Dutch film distributor Jean Desmet had set up strong business connections with cinemas in Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent. The result was that, from mid-May 1915 onwards, Germans had taken control over both available film stock and new imports. Some films somehow slipped through, such as the Dutch film *Fatum* by Theo Frenkel, produced in 1915²⁶.

Initially, censors carefully tried to eliminate everything that either could harm the image of Germany or might conflict with German morality²⁷. According to Albert Fovenyesy, a member of the Syndical Chamber who fled to France in 1915, the Syndical Chamber eventually convinced the German authorities that such intense censorship made it impossible for them to work. The censorship became more lenient, but references to military affairs and 'immoralities' such as adultery remained forbidden²⁸. Most of the films that had to be censored were those that had already been on the market before the German invasion.

Whether or when Belgian cinemas would re-open was not only decided by exhibitors and distributors, but also in part by local authorities: including Belgian mayors and local German commanders. Local Belgian authorities were rather reluctant to have cinemas reopened in late 1914 and early 1915. They believed that it was not the right time

for entertainment, since so many people were mourning those who had been wounded, killed, or lost. Another consideration was that numerous people were living on welfare and should have other pecuniary priorities than entertainment. These objections of local authorities often held reopening back temporarily, but in the end could not prevent it. In Leuven, for instance, municipal authorities found it inopportune to re-open cinemas for an impoverished population living in a town in ruins. The occupier then, however, enforced the re-opening²⁹.

In mid-December 1914, a journalist visiting Brussels already noticed that shops, cafés, and cinemas were open again³⁰. In March 1915, Flemish writer Virginie Loveling, living in Ghent, wrote in her diary that almost all pleasant things had been suspended: no festive meals, no or few parties with friends. She then noted that this was gradually changing with people coming together to play cards or to go to the cinema, although parties were not organized, and music was seldom heard: "In fact, in the cold and wet spring, most people, including the workers, go to the cinemas where they pay almost nothing to forget their misery, and save light and fire"³¹. Also, in March 1915, the municipal administration in St-Jans-Molenbeek in Brussels decided to discontinue financial aid to people who seemed able to visit cinemas³². In January 1916, the city of Mechelen organized an inspection of people queuing in front of the

26. IVO BLOM, «L'artère Nord-Sud. Jean Desmet, distributeur hollando-belge, et la Belgique», in *La Revue Belge du Cinéma* (38/39), March 1995, p. 28; IVO BLOM, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade*, Amsterdam, 2003, p. 255; LEEN ENGELÉN, "België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)" in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 19 (1) 2016, p. 8-11. Programme Cinema Zoologie, 22 April 1917.

27. This was exactly the way Albert Hellwig described in his article how the German occupier would exercise his censorship in Belgium: "Lichtspielprüfung in den besetzten Teilen Belgiens", published end 1914 in the *Das Preussisches Verwaltungsblatt*, Berlin 1914, p. 13-31. He supposed that the *Kommandantur* in Brussels would certainly cut those scenes which could upset the population. One of the reasons why in the first years no films about the war were seen in the Belgian cinemas, was not only that these images could lead to riots and upset the audience, but also to avoid that the images were openly commented in a non favouring way for Germany.

28. «En Belgique», *Cine-Journal*, Paris, 1 March 1915.

29. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Cinema and German Politics in Occupied Belgium", in KAREL DIBBETS, BERT HOGENKAMP (Eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 173.

30. *Het Volk. Christen Werkmansblad*, Ghent, 19 December 1914.

31. VIRGINIE LOVELING, *Oorlogsdagboeken. Een vrouw vertelt over haar Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Antwerpen, 2013, p. 175/177: "Het is zelfs zo dat de meeste mensen, ook de arbeiders, in het koude en natte voorjaar naar de cinemas trekken waar ze een "kleinigheid" betalen, hun miserie vergeten en licht en vuur sparen."

32. *Het Volk. Christen werkmanblad*, Ghent, 4 March 1915.

cinema, and those who were receiving financial or other governmental help were then excluded from its aid. Similar actions were taken in Antwerp and elsewhere³³. These incidents indicated that people were eager to visit the cinemas that had reopened.

In 1915, the General Government in Brussels had installed the *Bildungszentrale*: an 'educational centre' which aimed to bring cultivated entertainment (theatre, film, lantern-illustrated lectures, conferences, books) to both German soldiers and to Belgians who were *deutschfreundlich* ('German-friendly'). The *Bildungszentrale* was active in various cultural areas including cinema. In 1916, it even produced a film, with the German *Eiko Film GmbH.*, *Belgien unter deutscher Verwaltung; sein Handel und seine Industrie* (Belgium under German Administration; its Trade and Industry). This propaganda documentary premiered in January 1917 and was distributed in Belgium, Germany, and in other German-occupied territories³⁴. Films were also produced about Flemish nationalist themes³⁵. Nevertheless, film production never became a priority of the occupying regime. The *Bildungszentrale* was more focused on organizing film screenings. To that end, it received film projectors and a large number of films from the German *Gesellschaft für Volksbildung*³⁶. This allowed it to set up cinemas that specifically targeted German audiences (mostly soldiers) and therefore screened films with German intertitles. Nevertheless, some of these cinemas were also frequented by Belgians.

In 1914-1916, Belgian film distributors mainly supplied Belgian cinemas with films they had 'in stock': titles they had bought in the spring of

1914, and in previous years. After being subjected to German censorship, they were released. These pre-war imports were mostly of French, Italian, British, or American origin. The audience, however, eventually preferred to see new films, which were difficult to come by. As mentioned above, by mid-1915, German authorities had arranged that new films could only be imported from or through Germany. Given the political and military situation (the ongoing war and the blockade of Germany) American, British, and French films were no longer imported. Having created this opportunity, it may seem strange that Germany did not flood the Belgian market with its own productions. But Germany needed its own films to meet the 'patriotic' demand of cinemas domestically, especially when fewer foreign films were allowed. Moreover, it was not producing enough films to meet the demand of both its domestic market and that of the occupied territories. Raw materials for producing celluloid – the same ingredients required for making explosives – were scarce, making it difficult to produce new films and release a sufficient number of prints of new titles. Even in November 1915, Belgian company *Filmco*, which was established in the Bd. Barthelemy 34 in Brussels, was selling 50,000 meters of good quality Pathé films – films of the enemy – to German film distributors³⁷! The German market apparently needed films at all cost. All of this paved the way for Denmark, which remained neutral during the First World War and which (unlike other neutral countries at Germany's borders, such as the Netherlands) had a thriving film production industry that yielded high quality films. In 1916, the *Nordisk Films Kompagni*, based near Copenhagen but with a branch in Berlin (*Nordische Film Co*) was allowed

33. "Uit Mechelen. Cinemabezoeken", *Het Volk. Christen werkmansblad*, Ghent, 18 January 1916.

34. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Film en de Duitse inval en bezetting in België 1914-1918. Of op welke wijze de overheid film als machtsinstrument ontwikkelde", in SERGE JAUMAIN, MICHAEL AMARA, BENOÎT MAJERUS & ANTOON VRIJTS (Eds.), *Une guerre totale ? La Belgique dans la première guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, Brussel, 2005, p. 315-328.

35. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Film", in *De Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Vol. 1. Tiel, 1998, p. 1141-1152; Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en aktivisme. Vlaanderen tegenover België in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Leuven, 1974.

36. *Der Film* (48), Berlin, 23 December 1916.

37. KRISTIN THOMPSON, *Exporting entertainment. America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*, London, 1985, p. 65.

« Celluloïd en tous genres des meilleures provenances. Nouveau Celluloïd ne brûlant pas. Achat de déchets. 37 rue royale Ste-Marie, Schaerbeek », *Le Progrès*, Brussels, 14 August 1915, p. 4. « Cuivre, mercure, étain, ivoire, celluloïd. Payons très cher. 183, rue des Tanneurs », *Le Quotidien*, Brussels, 15 September, 1915. *Der Kinematograph*, Düsseldorf, 3 November 1915.

to export 500,000 meters of film to Germany. Between 1914 and the end of 1916 the Danish company produced 375 feature films³⁸, including films from other Scandinavian producers, such as the *Svenska Filmkompaniet*³⁹.

A year, or rather two years later, a good number of these films found their way to Belgium, not only through German distributors but also through Belgian ones such as Mathieu Hackin Fils⁴⁰. Before 1917, most films were those from the pre-war stocks. The cinema *Union Theatre Belge* in Brussels referred to the good reputation Danish films had in their publicity in 1915: "The public has long known the reputation of the films of the "Nordisk" brand, of which the *Roman des Deux Vies* is a recent production. Apart from superb views and settings this film unfolds one of the most moving and eventful actions that keeps the audience spellbound through the four acts of equal value"⁴¹. This positive review was of course not unlikely since a Danish company owned that cinema⁴². On March 26, 1916, *Le Bien Public* mentioned that the *Cinema Oud Gend* was screening the 1913 Nordisk film *Atlantis* by director August Blom, a film that had already screened in Belgian cinemas two years earlier. Brand new Danish films came to the Belgian cinema early in 1916 with Robert Dinesen's film *For Lykke og*

Aere (1915) presented in the *Ciné-Zoologie*. Some of the latest German films came very quickly to Belgian screens such as *Das Schicksal rächt sich*, an *Eiko Film* production directed by Harry Piel. The film came out in 1917 and in February of that year it was already in Belgium. The same can be said of the *Richard-Oswald-Produktion, Fiat Lux – Es Werde Licht* – a film about venereal diseases which arrived in April of that year, thanks to the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* which had the exclusivity for the film in occupied Belgium⁴³.

At the end of March 1915, local film producers and distributors founded the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* in Düsseldorf with the intent to facilitate the export of their films to occupied Belgium and Northern France⁴⁴. The managing directors were journalist and writer Alfred Rosenthal (1888-1942) from Düsseldorf, and film journalist Lorenz Pieper (1875-1951), a Catholic priest. Rosenthal had as co-founder and president of the *Provincial Association of Rhineland-Westphalia of the Association for the Safeguarding of Common Interests of Cinematography and Related Industries in Berlin eV*. the necessary contacts in both the local and in the national German film industry. This also explains why he and Pieper were able to have discussions with the General Government in Brussels and receive its support since it wanted more Ger-

38. MARGUERITE ENGBERG, "Nordisk in Denmark", in KAREL DIBBETS & BERT HOGENKAMP (Eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 43.

39. „Die Ausnahmewilligung der ‚Nordisk Films Co‘, von Filmeinfuhrverbote – verlängert und erneuert!“, in *Der Film* (38), Berlin 14 October 1916. „Die Verlängerte und die erneuerte Einfuhrbewilligung der ‚Nordisk Films Co‘“, in *Der Film* (39), Berlin 1916. Films from Sweden were also imported see: PATRICK VONDERAU, *Bilder vom Norden. Schwedisch-deutsche Filmbeziehungen, 1914-1939*, Marburg, 2007, p. 125.

40. LEEN ENGELN, "België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)", p. 14.

41. *Le Bruxellois*, 11 September 1915: « Le public connaît de longue date la réputation des films de la marque « Nordisk » dont le *Roman des deux Vies* est une récente production. En dehors de vues et de décors superbes ce film déroule une action des plus émouvante et des plus mouvementées qui tient le public en haleine le long de quatre actes d'égale valeur ». The full title was: *Le remords qui tue ou Roman des deux Vies*. It could not be yet identified. Most films which the *Union Théâtre belge* presented in 1915 were on the Belgian market early 1914.

42. *Le Bruxellois*, Brussels, 18 September 1915.

43. *De Nieuwe Gazet*, Antwerp, 25 April 1914. *Programme Cinéma Zoo* Antwerp. See also *Le Télégraphe*, Liège 31 August 1917, program of the cinema *Kursaal* in Liège. Among the many new Nordisk films produced after 1914 and distributed and screened in the Occupied Belgium was i.e. *Fa-Djala* (or *De Evige Flamme* by Alexander Christian or Dinesen's *Maharadjahens Yndlingshustru* as *De lievelingsvrouw van de Maharadja* with another well-known actor Gunnar Tolnaes. LIEZE ROMBAUTS, *Cinema Zoologie. Historiek en programmering tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p. 55. *Programme Cinema Zoologie*, Antwerp, 11 February, 8 April 1917. *Der Kinematograph* (528), Düsseldorf, 7 February 1917.

44. One of the local branches of the German Nordisk Co, the *Nordische Film GmbH*, was situated at the Graf-Adolfstrasse 12 in Düsseldorf. Distributor Max Loeser established in Hamburg and Düsseldorf bought the rights of several films for the Belgian market. *Lichtbild-Bühne* (36), Berlin, September 1916.



For Lykke og Ære – The Call for a Child (1915) was apparently the first new Nordisk production imported on the Belgian screens since the outbreak of the war. Source : Det Danske Filminstitut.



Fiat Lux – Es Werde Licht (1917-1918), a film about venereal diseases. Programme Cinema Zoologie, Antwerp 6-8 April 1917. Source : www.expocinezooologie.be/nl/year/1917.html.



Fiat Lux – Es Werde Licht (1917-1918) was distributed in Belgium by the Film - Export Gesellschaft. Source : Der Kine-matograph (529), Düsseldorf 14 February 1917.

man films in occupied Belgium⁴⁵. The *Film-Export Gesellschaft* was not a commercial company as such, although it also bought films to distribute. Its mission was to bring morally and patriotically “healthy” German films to occupied Belgium⁴⁶. It established a branch in Brussels in the confiscated buildings of the *Pathé Frères Cie*. In order to start its business on May 1⁴⁷, it also had to present all of the films it wanted to import to a censor affiliated with the *Kommandantur* in Brussels⁴⁸.

Considering the sensitivities of the Belgian market, all films were provided with Dutch and French intertitles, as was ordered by the Governor-General as part of the *Flamenpolitik*. This condition was no problem for the company: “For the Flemish it must be a pleasant feeling to discover that the practical equality of their language, which existed only on paper, has now been implemented in the cinema and in all announcements related to cinema by the German administration”⁴⁹. Despite these efforts, Belgian film exhibitors could not be forced to rent German films. Many cinemas still had contracts for renting films with their pre-war Belgian distributors. Therefore, the Brussels *Film-Export* office had

a rough start. In October 1915, a German soldier noted: “As far as I know, it was loudly announced that (film) companies in Germany, namely in Düsseldorf, have joined forces in order to get German film art into Belgium. Where do you see this film art? In Ghent, Antwerp, and Bruges, and in Ostend too, I have looked for it in vain”⁵⁰. He felt also frustrated that most films had only Flemish and French intertitles, and no German ones. In 1915, the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* suffered a big loss and new capital had to be injected. It was also said that it sold old films which had been circulated in Germany as new films in Belgium⁵¹. From 1916 onwards, its situation improved as it began sending films to military cinemas for German soldiers who were situated behind the frontlines or in occupied cities⁵².

IV. Developments in Film Distribution and Exhibition (1916-1918)

As more and more cinemas (re-)opened, the demand for films increased and the pre-war stock became insufficient: The more the available films

45. *Der Kinematograph* (459), Düsseldorf, 13 Oktober 1916. ALFRED ROSENTHAL, „Brüsseler Eindrücke. Ein Stimmungsbild aus meinem Kriegstagebuch“, in *Der Kinematograph* (551), Düsseldorf, 18 July 1917. Rosenthal had negotiated this “distribution deal” with the *Kaiserliche Konsul Legationsrat Kaempff* (also written as Kempf) in the Parkhotel in Brussels early 1915.

46. The exact denomination in German of this organisation was: *Bureau zur Verbreitung von deutschen Nachrichten im Auslande und des Provinzialverbandes Rheinland und Westfalen des Verbandes zur Wahrung gemeinsamer Interessen der Kinematographie und verwandter Branchen zu Berlin e.V.*

47. In April 1915 the Germans had confiscated the possessions of Pathé Frères in Belgium. *Berliner Börsenzeitung* (187), Berlin, 22 April, 1915.

48. WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur UFA-Gründung. Der deutsche Film im 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin, 2004, p. 97-98.

49. “Düsseldorf. Die Film-Export-Gesellschaft m.b.H.”, *Der Kinematograph* (459), Düsseldorf, 13 Oktober 1915:

„Für die Flamen muss es ein angenehmes Bewusstsein sein, dass die praktische Gleichberechtigung ihrer Sprache, die sonst nur auf dem Papier stand, nun im Film und in allen auf das Kino bezüglichen Ankündigungen durch die deutsche Verwaltung zur Durchführung gelangt ist“.

50. „Brief aus Belgien. von einem Feldgrauen Fachkollegen“, *Lichtbild-Bühne* (44), Berlin, November 1915, p. 49: „Mit Großen Ankündigungen haben sich da meines Wissens in Deutschland, und zwar in Düsseldorf, Gesellschaften zusammengetan, um deutscher Filmkunst in Belgien Eingang zu verschaffen. Wo sieht man denn diese Filmkunst? In Gent, Antwerpen und Brügge, auch in Ostende habe ich vergeblich danach gesucht. Und warum haben alle Bilder nur flamsche (sic) und französische Zwischentitel? In September 1915 Rosenthal leaves the company (temporarily?) and is replaced by Dietrich Krell.

51. „Bilanz der Film-Export-Gesellschaft“, in *Lichtbild-Bühne* (11), Berlin, 17 and 24 March 1917. See also *Lichtbild-Bühne*, Berlin, 3 July 1915.

52. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels, 20 October 1916 (A). For the about a million soldiers of the German army in Belgium cinema entertainment was important. It was not evident that German soldiers visited the Belgian commercial cinemas because the films had Flemish and/or French titles, it was forbidden to smoke and there was a relatively high entrance fee. As most Belgian cinema theatres had films from the “enemy” (France, Italy, UK and after April 1917 USA) in their program, the military was not in favour of the idea that the soldiers would be ‘infected’ by the culture of these films. This created the necessity to build structures to develop cinema venues, the so called *Feldkinos* and *Soldatenkinos*. The target audience for the films was different from the point of view of the German propaganda. It was not Belgians, but German civilians and soldiers.

circulated, the quicker prints lost their quality and became worn out. New films were needed. The *Kommandantur* became dissatisfied with the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* after discovering that its partnerships were mostly limited to film production companies in Rhineland and Westphalia and it proved not able to deliver enough new films on time. "New films" didn't necessarily mean the most recently produced. It looks like older German films from before the war were being sold in Belgium as "new" films. At the beginning of 1916, the General Governorate of Belgium approached German production company *Eiko-Film Gesellschaft*, to directly deliver films as well as to produce some titles⁵³. Eiko accepted but it took some time to supply the films that were needed.

Meanwhile, Governor-General Freiherr Moritz von Bissing (1844-1917) remained dissatisfied with the activities of the *Film-Export Gesellschaft*. Nevertheless, the company stated that, for the year 1916, the annual turnover had tripled. It also claimed to have sent more than one thousand titles (representing about 500,000 meters of film) to Brussels. In the German trade press, the company explained that it was now able to bring German films more easily to Belgian cinemas because the aversion Belgians had previously had towards Germany had almost been eliminated. The company declared that it had contributed to delivering German culture and soul to Belgium and the occupied parts of Northern France. The *Film-Export Gesellschaft* underlined the fact

that it had been praised by all authorities with which it worked⁵⁴. This promo talk did not help much. German authorities in Brussels established contacts with another organization. Perhaps they hoped that competition between two companies (or three, if *Eiko* is considered) under its supervision, could further accelerate the import of German films to Belgian cinemas.

On 19 June 1916, the political division of the General Governorate invited representatives of the Berlin-based *Association for the Protection of Mutual Interests of the Cinematography and Related Branches in Berlin* to Brussels, to discuss cinema matters in an occupied Belgium⁵⁵. The situation of the Belgian film market was discussed, and it remained problematic to provide Belgian cinemas with new films. The *Film-Export Gesellschaft* was supposed to solve such problems but failed. Apparently, several important German producers did not trust this company. A possible explanation is that they were not willing to submit their films to the censorship office in Düsseldorf (given the influence of the reform movement and above all the Catholic moral views of its directors). The Governor-General believed that good new German films, even those that had been banned in Germany because of the sharp censorship, would probably find good sales in Belgium⁵⁶. Importing German films which had been banned by the German censor in Germany to Belgium was not such a bad idea since these films were available and their export would not harm the films' exhibition in Germany.

53. In 1912 the *Eiko-Film GmbH* was founded in Berlin. Between 1913 and 1922 it produced 139 films and was one of the most important producers in this time period in Germany. One of its founders was Franz Vogel who had been a producer of film material in Düren near the Belgian border. In 1916 this company produced a film about occupied Belgium to present to the world the daily life and how it "really" was to show how well the Belgians were doing under German occupation (cfr infra footnote 32). These images were in the first place aimed to be presented in neutral countries. *Der Film* (28), Berlin, 5 August 1916. In Belgium, it was probably only screened in German friendly cinemas because the depicted situations could upset most Belgians.

54. „Düsseldorf“, *Der Kinematograph* (533), Düsseldorf, 14 March 1917. (*Verband zur Wahrung gemeinsamer Interessen der Kinematographie und verwandter Branchen zu Berlin E.V.*)

55. *Der Film* (15), Berlin, 6 May 1916. This association was founded in 1914 and was the first one in Germany to bring the professional film world together. One of the co-founders was Alfred Rosenthal who also became its president. Among the members there were Paul Davidson of the *Projektions-Aktiengesellschaft "Union"* (PAGU), and Julius Grünbaum of the *Vitascope GmbH*. ОЛГА ВУКОВА, „Ein Pionier der Deutschen Filmkritik“, Archiv Schöneberg Museum. It was *Legationsrat* Kaempff and Officer Deputy Schick who received the representatives from the Berlin film industry at the *Kommandantur* in Brussels.

56. „Verbandsnachrichten. Deutsche Filme nach Belgien“, *Der Film* (22), Berlin, 23 June 1916.



Pigen fra Pals – The Girl from Whitley (1918). During the war German censors in Brussels had forbidden this film, which appeared two weeks after armistice on Belgian screens. Source : Det Danske filminstitut.



Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz, head of the Political Department (Politische Abteilung) of the General Governorate in Belgium. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.



Advertisement in the Belgischer Kurier, Brussels 21 April 1917 announcing the establishment of the Film - Export Gesellschaft in Brussels. Source : Belgischer Kurier, Brussels 21 April 1917.

Could the Berlin association help? The Governor-General proposed that the representatives from Berlin would ask their association, in the interest of the German film industry, to export more films to Belgium, preferably in collaboration with the *Film-Export Gesellschaft*. If this could be done through the mediation of the association, the strict pre-censorship in Germany could be avoided. Only censorship by the *Kommandantur* in Brussels would be necessary. That censorship office would consider the Belgian conditions and would make decisions “according to much freer principles than those withheld by the German censorship”⁵⁷. In some cases it allowed previously forbidden films as it had done with the Nordisk film *The Girl from Whitley* of 1916 directed by Eduard Schnedler-Sørensen with Karen Sandberg: “For the first time in Belgium, an art film by *Nordisk Co*, *The Girl from Whitley* will be screened this week (in the *Wintergarten* and *Ciné-Zoologie* November 1918, note of the author). It is a drama in five parts with a grand and delicious setting. This film had been forbidden in Belgium by the German censors. This will make it even more attractive”⁵⁸. During the war the *Wintergarten* and the *Ciné-Zoologie* in Antwerp had the privilege of screening the Belgian première of Nordisk films.

In June 1916, Wilhelm Lohöfer (1878-1965), the vice-president of the Berlin association organized a special conference in Berlin. Invitations were sent out to fifty German film producers. The message to the German film industry was clear:

the *Kommandantur* in Brussels needed new German films and would take away all obstacles such as import and export administration, censorship, translations, and so on. Then there were the rumours that the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* was going to merge with the new founded *Deutsche Lichtbild Gesellschaft* (DLG or Deulig) in Berlin, an initiative of Alfred Hugenberg (1865-1951), to promote better German films abroad. The *Film-Export Gesellschaft* denied this and said that it had already proven that its efforts to bring German films to Occupied Belgium were successful⁵⁹. It was, however, unable to convince the *Kommandantur*. In the beginning of 1917, under the impetus of the Governor-General in Brussels, a new, Berlin-based firm, the *Umbina-Film Gesellschaft*, which collaborated with several large German film producers was created. It was supposedly independent but received only films that been approved by BuFa. Their offices were located in the same building, which is not without importance. The *Kinematograph* published in July 1917 this small note: “For all films to be exported to Belgium the Kgl. *Film-und Filmamt*, Zimmerstrasse 72/74, exercises pre-censorship. Applications for an export permit for films to Belgium will only be granted if the prior censorship of the Kgl. *Bild-und Filmamt* has been exercised with success”⁶⁰. The *Umbina-Film Gesellschaft* was headed by Victor Altmann and his deputy Hanns Lippmann (1890-1929)⁶¹. Altmann was one of the five shareholders of the *Messters Projection AG*⁶². He had strong links with the *Auswärtiges Amt* (Foreign

57. „Verbandsnachrichten. Deutsche Filme nach Belgien“, *Der Film* (22), Berlin, 23 June 1916: „nach viel freieren Grundsätzen als die deutsche Zensur“.

58. *Het Tooneel*, Antwerp 23 November 1918: “Voor de 1^{ste} maal in België gaat deze week een kunstfilm der Nordisk Cie *De Roode Nacht*, een drama in 5 deelen met grootsche en overheerlijke tooneelschikking. Deze film mogt (sic) niet opgevoerd worden door de Duitsche censuur. Hij zal dus eene aantrekkelijkheid te meer daarmstellen”. *Het Tooneel*, 19 May 1917. The Danish title was *Pigen fra Pals*.

59. CARLOS BUSTAMANTE, „AGFA, Kullmann, Singer & Co. and early cine-film stock“, in *Film History*, Vol 20/1, 2008, p. 72. President was Leo Mandl of *Pax Film GmbH*. Like Victor Altmann, Mandl had shares (6.5 %) of the Messter's Company. Lohöfer was the managing director of the *Aktien-Gesellschaft für Anilin-Fabrikation* (AGFA) producer of celluloid film. *Der Kinematograph* (540), Düsseldorf 2 May 1917.

60. LEEN ENGELN, “België verdeeld. Filmdistributie in bezet België (1914-1918)”, p. 10-11. *Der Kinematograph* (552), Düsseldorf, 25 Juli 1917: „Für alle nach Belgien auszuführen Filme übt das Kgl. *Bild und Filmamt*, Zimmerstrasse 72/74, die Vorzensur aus. Anträge auf ausfuhr Erlaubnis von Filmen nach Belgien wird nur noch stattgegeben werden, wenn an diesen Filmen die Vorzensur des Kgl. *Bild-und Filmamtes* mit Erfolg ausgeübt ist“.

61. *Adressbuch Berlin 1918*, Berlin, 1918, p. 928.

62. *Der Film* (52), Berlin, 30 Dezember 1916.

Office), the war ministry and the highest military command. It was now, along the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* and the *Eiko-Film Gesellschaft*, one of the main three main channels to import German films into Belgium.

In January 1918, Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz, head of the Political Department (*Politische Abteilung*) of the General Governorate, wrote a rather self-congratulatory report about German film import to Belgium⁶³. His first findings were that the cinemas were flourishing, which was the case⁶⁴. His second finding was that the programming differed substantially from programming before the war: at that time most of the cinemas were showing French films, which had now been replaced by German productions⁶⁵. This had to be seen as his interpretation of the facts, to explain that it was the result of years of commitment from the *Deutsche Presse Zentrale* in Brussels. This was certainly partly the case, but it was also a fact that an increasing number of film copies of the existing stock of French productions had become worn out and were of insufficient quality for further screen-

ing⁶⁶. Von der Lancken estimated that the Belgian market needed 300,000 meters of new films per year. In 1917, 260,000 meters of new films had been imported from Germany alone. Probably to impress his superiors, he claimed that these new imports had to be added to the films which had already been imported but had not yet been censored. He remarked that more German films would later arrive but were still in production⁶⁷. Von der Lancken concluded: "In addition to the economic benefits for the German film industry, the penetration of German films into Belgium is also of political importance to create for the future a counterweight against French films, which were previously dominant, and which were known to be largely at the service of French political propaganda. The German film is very popular among the public. While the Belgian cinema owners initially tried to hide the German origin of the films by removing the company brands from film and advertising material, the German brand was now being shown in many cinemas and was even required by the audience. The photos of German 'film stars' e.g., Maria Carmi, Henny Porten, were

63. OSCAR VON DER LANCKEN, *Tätigkeitsbericht der politischen Abteilung bei dem Generalgouverneur in Belgien von Anfang August 1917 bis Ende Januar 1918*, Berlin, 1918, p. 33.

64. In October 1917, the Belgian cinema exhibitor Jean Coppin of the Varia Cinéma Casino in Jumez confirmed Von der Lancken's observation that the Belgian cinemas did good business with full houses. They still were bringing films acquired before the war and only few German films when needed. «Nouvelles de Hollande», *Cine-Journal*, Paris, 27 October 1917.

65. Before the war, the French cinema was prominent present on the German market. According to a first estimation based on valued empirical research on 1912 there were on the 5412 film titles which could be detected about 1280 French titles. The highest number found till today. Due to anti-French feelings, fewer French films reached the German film market in 1913, but as said, it was also a matter of quality which allowed a few titles to be screened more than others. So, it is not easy to explain the "domination" of the German film market before the war: cfr. FRANK KESSLER and SABINE LENK, "The French Connection: Franco-German Film Relations before World War I", in THOMAS ELSAESSER (Ed.), *A Second Life. German Cinema's First Decades*, Amsterdam 1996, p. 63.

66. The state of these films was not excellent as one could learn from a letter published by the French film magazine *Le Courrier Cinématographique* about cinema-going in occupied Brussels. The writer said that the same films were shown again and again often under different titles. According to him the audience did not reject this strategy, and seemed to always be satisfied watching these old, often worn, flickering pictures. *Le Courrier Cinématographique*, Paris, 8 July 1917.

67. In the war, German film trade magazines published advertisements for German film distributors in which their involvement in the export of films to occupied Belgium was mentioned, e.g., the *Bayerische Film-Vertriebsgesellschaft*, and *Unger & Neubeck* (Boch) for the Mia May Series 1916-1917. The production of the *Astra-Film Co* from Copenhagen and especially the Olaf Fönss Serie 1918/1918 and the Martha Novelly Serie were sold in January 1918 to the *Bioscop Filmverleih* in Cologne for the occupied territories. The *Berlin Mintus-Filme* distributor obtained the monopoly for the occupied territories of the film *Dein Leben war meine Liebe und mein Tod* from the *Hungaria Film Fabrik* of Budapest. The Company Adrien Henin from Berlin acquired the Declafilm *Der Weg, der zur Verdammnis führt* (about women trade) for Belgium as well as the *Deutsche Mutoskop-und Biograph Produktion* the film *Das Tor der Sühne*, and so on.

prominent at the entrances of the larger cinemas in Brussels”⁶⁸.

On the one hand, it was not difficult for Von der Lancken to say that Belgian cinemagoers from 1917 onwards increasingly ‘liked’ German films, as they were the newest product on the market and at that time there was, apart from some new Danish films, no competition. On the other hand, no-one was forcing people to go the cinema. And the popularity of German stars was, for instance, demonstrated by the poem about Asta Nielsen by *deutschfreundlicher* Flemish poet Paul van Ostaïjen⁶⁹.

In the last days of June 1918, Altmann dissolved the *Umbina Film Gesellschaft*⁷⁰. In September 1918, the German War Ministry proclaimed that film export to Belgium was ‘again set free’. That BuFa would change its pre-censorship regulations; censorship would now only be based on artistic and aesthetic criteria⁷¹. None of this had a strong impact on the film sector in Belgium because soon afterwards the war ended with the German capitulation of 11 November.

V. The Audience for Films Coming from Germany: German or Belgian?

We have repeatedly referred to cinemas and their audiences on the previous pages. Nevertheless, this article has so far mainly focused on an appraisal of

(German attempts to reorganize) film import and film distribution, with the intent to change film exhibition in Belgium. But what do we know about the ‘result’ of these measures? To what extent were Belgian cinema owners willing to screen German films? To what extent did Belgians watch these films? How did they react to them?

As often is the case when it comes to monitoring historical audiences, resources are scarce. The report of the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* on the second financial year 1916 noted that some important (but unnamed) Belgian cinema owners who had previously refused to screen German films, were now adding an increasing number of German productions to their program. But was this a significant change? The company had made a small profit of 767.18 Mark for the year 1916, which was not a sign of overwhelming success⁷². In the summer of 1917, it was supplying cinemas for the military with new films and was working with the *Bildungszentrale*. In early April 1917, Brussels-based German journal newspaper *Belgischer Kurier* proudly wrote that by that time, over one million-meters of German films had been screened at the front and in the occupied territories of Belgium. “The war had an extremely fruitful impact on the German film industry and paved new paths for it. Before the war, only fifteen percent of German and 85 % of foreign films were shown in Germany. That has now changed. Foreign films hardly come in anymore, in Germany

68. OSCAR VON DER LANCKEN, *Tätigkeitsbericht der politischen Abteilung bei dem Generalgouverneur in Belgien von Anfang August 1917 bis Ende Januar 1918*, Berlin, 1918, p. 33 : „Abgesehen von den wirtschaftlichen Vorteilen für die deutsche Filmindustrie ist das Eindringen der deutschen Films in Belgien auch von politischer Bedeutung, da hierdurch auch für die spätere Zeit dem früher herrschenden gewesenen französischen Film, der bekanntlich in hohem Masse im Dienste der französischen politischen Propaganda stand, ein Gegengewicht geschaffen wird; Der Deutschen Film wird vom Großen Publikum gern gesehen. Während anfänglich die belgischen Kinobesitzer die deutsche Herkunft der Films durch Entfernen der Firmenmarken aus Film- und Reklamematerial zu verheimlichen suchten, wird jetzt in vielen Lichtspielhallen die deutsche Marke gezeigt und sogar vom Publikum verlangt, die Bilder deutschen „Filmsterne“ z.b. Maria Carmi, Henny Porten, prangen an den Eingängen der größeren Brüsseler Kinotheater“.

69. PAUL VAN OSTAÏJEN, *Music Hall*, Amsterdam, 1982, p. 112-118; JEF BOGMAN, “Poetry as a Filmic and Historical Document: Occupied City”, in KAREL DIBBETS & BERT HOGENKAMP (Eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, 1995, p. 179-187. *Bezette Stad* (Occupied city) is a poem of 132 pages on the occupation of Antwerp in which films he had watched played a significant role. He witnessed how the city and the entertainment business such as cinemas revived. He devoted eight pages to the Danish film star Asta Nielsen. See also the contribution of Erik Spinoy to this volume.

70. *Berliner Börsen Zeitung* (302), Berlin, 1 July 1918.

71. *Der Kinematograph* (610), Düsseldorf, 11 September 1918.

72. WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Ufa-Gründung. Der deutsche Film im 1. Weltkrieg*, p. 97.



Maria Carmi was a famous Catholic Italian actress, of Swiss origin. Before the war she was already working in Germany and her films were well known in pre-war Belgium. During the war, several of her films were screened in Belgium, for instance titles such as *Homunculus* (1916) or *Der Letzte eines alten Geschlechts* (1916). Source: private collection Guido Convents.



Nordisk Film *Die Lieblingsfrau des Maharadscha* was first presented in the Wintergarten in Antwerp. It was also programmed in other cities. Source: *L'Indicateur/De Aanwijzer*, Antwerp, 24 June 1917.



The film series *Mia May and Joe Deeb*, produced by the May Film GmbH Berlin, was distributed by Bayerische Filmvertriebs GmbH in occupied Belgium. Source: *Der Kinematograph* (523), Düsseldorf 3 January 1917.



One of the more successful films in occupied Belgium was Nordisk film *Die Lieblingsfrau des Maharadscha* (*The Maharaja's Favourite Wife*, 1917) with well-known actor Gunnar Tolnaes. Source: *Der Kinematograph* (523), Düsseldorf, 3 January 1917.

[and the occupied territories, note of the author] we are now dependent on the brands of our own film industry (...)"⁷³.

In general, films for the Belgian civil market were somewhat different from those which were delivered to the German soldiers. For them patriotic films and films exalting the *Heimat* were important, and these would not fit easy into Belgian cinema theatres which served mainly a non-*deutschfreundliches* audience. It is significant that special companies, such as the *Film-Export Gesellschaft* and later the *Umbina-Film Gesellschaft* had to facilitate the films of the German distributors who had bought the rights of films for the occupied territories, to distribute them in the military circuit and in the Belgian civil cinema theaters if possible. It seems, however, that it was not really a success. Sources indicate that the commercial Belgian cinemas which were screening German films were for the most part those owned by Germans, Belgians of German descent, Belgians who were *deutschfreundlich*, or companies that were entirely or partially German-owned. In every major city there were several cinemas which could be classified as such. A large German community had been established in the city of Antwerp since the end of the 19th century. It is thus not surprising that several *deutschfreundliche* theatres were established such as the *Anvers-Palace*, *Folies Bergière*, *De Belgische Kinema*, *Eden* and *Wintergarten*. Under pressure of the occupier, the latter had to change the letter d into a t, to transform the prewar name *Wintergarten* into *Wintergarten*⁷⁴. The former Pathé cinema, for example, had been confiscated and was managed by a certain Gustave Lange. The cinema was denominated into *De Belgische Kinema*⁷⁵!

German cinema entrepreneurs were also active in Liège and Namur. Heinrich Dux opened a cinema in Namur, in the rue Gailott, and in Liège. He ran them under the name, *Deutsches Lichtspielhaus*, mainly or exclusively targeting a German public. His business was supported by the local *Kommandantur*. His managing director, A. Boosfeld, was from Germany. Dux initially purchased his films from the Düsseldorf-based distributor *Verleihhaus Ludwig Gottschalk*. Later in 1915, other suppliers from Düsseldorf were added. He also worked with the *Prometheus-Film Gesellschaft* and the *Welt-Film Gesellschaft*⁷⁶. These theatres presented mainly or even exclusively German films and German newsreels which were not in the program at the "normal" Belgian cinemas⁷⁷. Sometimes they were confronted with the problem that new German films were not arriving in time, sometimes even days late. In that case the cinema closed its doors⁷⁸. Dux also leased the *Cinema Scala* in Liège, situated in the rue Sauvenière, in the center of the city. Scala programmed German and Danish films (from the *Nordisk Co*, such as the ones with Maria Carmi) as well as *Eiko* and *Messter* newsreels, most likely for a mixed German-Belgian audience⁷⁹.

A mixed audience could also be found in the *Scala theatre* (1,800 seats) in the Iseghemlaan in Ostend. This venue was confiscated by the German Navy in 1915 and set up as the Navy cinema or *Lichtspieltheater des Marinekorps*. It was managed by a Feldwebel, two projectionists and five soldiers. It was open for the military and for inhabitants of Ostend, but they were not permitted to view the films in the same screenings. The civilians had access to the cinema in the

73. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels, 4 April 1917. „Der Krieg hat auf die deutsche Filmindustrie äußerst befruchtend gewirkt und ihn neue Wege gebahnt. Vor dem Kriege waren vor allen in Deutschland von den vorgeführten Filmen nur 15 % deutscher und 85 % ausländischer Herkunft. Das ist jetzt anders geworden. Ausländische Filme kommen kaum noch herein, wir sind in Deutschland (und im besetzten Belgiens, GC) jetzt auf die Fabrikate unserer eigenen Filmindustrie angewiesen (...)"

74. These venues are cited in the German censored magazine *Het Tooneel* (16 February and 23 October 1918).

75. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels 19 January 1918 (A). It is probably the same Gustave Lange who had directed in the Nieuwstraat in Brussels a German canteen for soldiers during the occupation. *Tijdschrift voor Numismatiek* (nr. 2), Brussels 1977, p. 44-45.

76. *Der Kinematograph* (448), Düsseldorf, 28 July 1915.

77. *Der Kinematograph* (455), Düsseldorf, 15 September 1915.

78. *Der Kinematograph* (456), Düsseldorf, 22 September 1915.

79. JEAN-LOUIS LEJAXHE, *Histoire des cinémas à Liège*, Liège, 1999, p. 38-39.



Henny Porten in Die Faust des Riesen (The Giant's Fist, 1917), produced by Oscar Messter in two parts, directed by Rudolf Bierbrach. The film was screened in Ghent in the Cinema De Vooruit in late September 1918. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.



The Scala in Ostend, a cinema for the local civilians in the afternoon and for the German military in the evening. Source : OCD/private collection Guido Convents.

afternoon from 15:00 to 17:00 and the soldiers in the evening⁸⁰. Apparently, to avoid competition in Ostend, the Germans closed down a nearby commercial cinema⁸¹. The *Scala* primarily screened German films and newsreels, mainly from *Messter* which worked closely together with the official institutions of German propaganda⁸². In a German newspaper in Ostend, a journalist wrote down his impressions after a visit to this cinema. He referred to the cinema *Scala* as the *Marine-Lichtspiele* (theatre). He said: "Cinema in the field! First a film about the fairy tale of German barbarism. Then the "barcarolle" from *Hoffmann's Erzählungen* (The Tales of Hoffmann) sounds muffled to our ears. Inside, the men sit head-to-head in field grey uniforms. The film reflects a comedy on the screen. Pictures from home that is so far away. Images of the theatre of war, the size and tragedy which every spectator felt. As the film is on the screen inside the theatre, the cannons' thunder from the West (nearby front) can be heard. A cinema fifteen kilometers behind the front. The German barbarians are so emotional and nostalgic"⁸³.

Oskar Messter served in the first war year as an officer in the film and photo department of the Foreign Office and from May 1915 on was the first German businessman to organize *Messters Kriegskinos* film screenings in existing Belgian cinemas such as in Ostend, Bruges, and Comines⁸⁴. By 1917, the *Feldkinos* and *Soldatenkinos* were a widespread phenomenon in all major cities as

well as in the front and *Etappen zone*, for example in Zarren⁸⁵. In Bruges, the main cinema *Pathé* was closed during the war and the Germans installed a *Soldatenkino* in the "Zwart Huis" in the Kuipersstraat. Civilians were also allowed to go there, but they rarely seemed to have done this⁸⁶. In Ghent, which was part of the *Etappengebiet*, almost 10,000 German military were stationed. For them cinema was important and facilities for them were created. The *Wintergarten* at the Kuiperskaai was transformed into a *Lichtspielhaus* and screened only German films. Starting in 1917, the former Socialist cinema *De Vooruit* continued to function as a cinema under German control and as a *Soldatenheim*⁸⁷. At that time, parallel to these German cinemas about thirty other commercial cinemas were active in Ghent. Brussels had two *Soldatenkinos*. These were, however, not the ideal way to bring German culture to the population, especially not those referring to the *Deutsche Kultur* and *Deutschtum*.

In his report from end of January 1918 – already cited above – Von der Lancken stressed that the Belgian audience could be informed about the occupants' (political) views by showing the official BuFa-films and the *Eiko* and *Messter* war newsreels. He had to admit that these official films could only be programmed in those cinemas in which the audience was more German-friendly, to ensure that the screenings would not degenerate into anti-German riots. For this purpose, some

80. „Frontkinos an Flanderns Küste“, *Der Film* (19), Berlin, 3 June 1916.

81. *De Zeewacht*, Ostend, 6 April 1919.

82. R. KARSCH, „Filmgeschäfte. Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Messter-Firmen“, in *100 Jahre Kino. Oskar Messter. Filmpionier der Kaiserzeit. Katalog der Ausstellung. Kintop Schriften 2*, Basel/Frankfurt am Main, 1994, p. 160-164. FRIEDRICH VON ZGLINICKI, *Der Weg des Films*, Berlin, 1956, p. 392.

83. E. SPAETHE, „Ostende von Heute“, *An Flanderns Küste. Kriegszeitung für das Marinekorps*, Ostend, 1 June 1916. Richard Oswald's *Hoffmann's Erzählungen* or the *Tales of Hoffmann*, with Werner Krauss and Lupu Pick, the film had been released in Berlin end of February 1916.

84. WOLFGANG MÜHL-BENNINGHAUS, „Oskar Messters Beitrag zum Ersten Weltkrieg“, in *Kintop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films nr.3*, Stroemfeld, 1994, p. 103-106.

85. ALFRED ROSENTHAL, „Das Deutsche Feldkino. Ein Kapital aus der Kulturgeschichte des Weltkrieges“, *Der Kinematograph* (532), Düsseldorf, 7 March, 1917. This issue of the magazine contained several articles about the phenomenon of the military cinema at the front (the 'Feldkinos').

86. SOPHIE ANSEEUW, KATELIJNE VERTONGEN, CHRIS FERKET (Red.), *Brugse verhalen uit de Groot Oorlog. Inspiratiebundel voor leerkrachten*, Bruges, 2014, p. 51.

87. LIES VAN DE VIJVER, *Gent Kinemastad. Een multi-methodisch onderzoek naar de ontwikkeling van de filmexploitatie, filmprogrammering en filmbeleving in de stad Gent en randgemeenten (1896-2010) als case binnen New Cinema History-onderzoek*, PhD Dissertation, Universiteit Gent, 2012, p. 86.

cinemas had been carefully chosen and designated without much difficulty in consultation with the local *Kommandantur* of several cities. In this sense, two large cinemas in Brussels, five in Antwerp, and one each in Liège, Charleroi, Tongeren, Mechelen, and Leuven were selected for screening German official films. He proudly reported that the Belgian public was very interested in these screenings. This was the experience in the *Pantheon cinema* situated at the Noordlaan 152 in Brussels. One has to say that this cinema was strongly related to the German occupier. It was a commercial cinema theatre where most of the BuFA films were screened. Though, as Von der Lancken had indicated, it was part of a plan to bring German films into other cinemas than those which were *deutschfreundlich*. In October 1917, *Graf Dohna und seine 'Möwe'* was presented. This documentary was a pur sang propaganda film about how a militarized merchant ship sank a number of French ships. A few months earlier it had been on the program of the *Soldatenkinos* in occupied Belgium. The *Belgischer Kurier* published extensive articles on the film on 30 June 1917. In this way, these films became visible within both public and civil spaces. In January 1918, there were short films such as *Kämpfe bei Lens und Oppy* (containing images of an out of action posed British tank with captured, and wounded British soldiers and German soldiers), *Die Fesselbalons Lille im 3ten Kriegs Jahr*, and *Nach der Grossen Schlacht im Westen*⁸⁸. Films which were not very exciting for those who knew the front as soldiers. In the course of 1917-1918, these war films were also screened in a few cinemas outside of Brussels where they were considerably less successful⁸⁹. In mid-November 1917, a series of German war films arrived in Leuven, a town which had suffered enormously during the war. It was rather a daring action to bring German propaganda films into the *Louvain Palace*, one of the most prestigious and newest – built in 1916 – cinema theatres of the town. In fact, it was the *Cinema Pantheon* from

Brussels which had rented the cinema to screen German films every week on Saturday evening, outside of the regular program. The first film which was presented was Richard Oswald's *Seeschlacht* (Seabattle (1917). It was a fiction film with Werner Kraus, Emil Jannings, and Conradt Veit, glorifying the German marines. Other films followed such as *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme*. These were produced by the BuFa. The initiative was met with suspicion by the citizens of Leuven.

VI. Epilogue

The research presented in this article demonstrates that analyzing film distribution and exhibition in German-occupied Belgium (1914-1918) is rather complex. It must be contextualized as part of German policies that were changed and adapted throughout the war in the occupied territories. Film export to Belgium had to conquer a new market, was expected to imbue cinemagoers with German culture, and create the illusion for the occupied that life in the occupied territories was “quiet” and normal. Nevertheless, unlike in the Second World War, Germany did not have a steady production of state-sponsored propaganda films. It did not produce enough films (political or otherwise) to replace those that were already available in the stocks of the Belgian distributors. By consequence, even though Germany was at war with France and Italy, and even though new imports from those countries were no longer allowed, cinemas could still show pre-war productions from these countries. These films were screened with French/Dutch intertitles, but not with German in an effort to discourage German soldiers from watching them.

This study also highlights the central role played by both the General Government and the *Kommandantur* in Brussels who tried to help – or to convince – German producers and distributors

88. *Belgischer Kurier*, Brussels, 1 February 1918 (B), 9 February 1918 (B) and 9 March 1918 (B)

89. GUIDO CONVENTS, “De komst en de vestiging van de film te Leuven (1895-1918)”, in GUIDO CONVENTS & N. VAN ZUTPHEN, *Fiets en Film rond 1900. Moderne uitvindingen in de Leuvense samenleving*, Leuven, 1982, p. 257-422.

to bring their films to occupied Belgium. It was important to them to assure that there were enough films for both Belgians and for German military cinemas. The *Kommandantur* expressed openly its conflicting opinion about the severe censorship in Germany, which it believed could not be applied in *stricto sensu* to the Belgian market. This meant that during the war German films which censors had banned in Germany were screened in Belgium. Thereby they were not lost for the producer and could still make money.

Besides the work of the “facilitating” companies which one can call the *Film-Export Gesellschaft*, *Eiko Film Gesellschaft*, and the *Umbino-Film Gesellschaft*, some films, probably, also came into Belgium in more natural ways. Among large German film distributing companies that bought the rights for films for different territories including the occupied ones, several were certainly able to have their films on Belgian screens without the interference of general government-initiated companies, and most Belgian film distributors were still active. Apparently, the number of films coming to the occupied territories was too few, which

explained the initiative of the General Government in occupied Belgium. To be certain of this, more research in this field is needed.

One can say that a part of the Belgian public saw films imported from Germany, which included a large number from the *Nordisk Co.* These films indirectly propagated German culture, but they initially served German business interests. This study wanted to find an answer how most films from Germany came to the Belgian screens and who saw them. We are well aware that several other aspects of the cinema in occupied Belgium are still to be explored. What is certain is that film-going in occupied territories was serious business not only for the Belgian cinema owners, distributors, and producers but also for the German film industry and for the local German authorities, the *Kommandantur* in Brussels, the General Staff in Berlin – with the BuFa, and above all the German industrial world, with Alfred Hugenberg. The result was that at the end of the war the Ufa was created to serve not only the economy but also German culture in the coming post-war years.

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