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Retrieving Sources on Experiencing Everyday Life in Belgium in the Second World War

Dirk LUYTEN¹

Introduction²

In June 2012, the source edition project ‘Societies under German Occupation – Experiences and Everyday Life in World War II’ held its kick-off meeting in Berlin. This project is initiated and coordinated by professor Tatjana Tönsmeier (University of Wuppertal) and professor Peter Haslinger (Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe – University of Gießen), who created a group of researchers from 15 countries to retrieve and comment sources on everyday life in different countries occupied by Nazi Germany. As a result, Nazi-occupied Europe will be covered from South to North (Greece, Norway, ...) and from East to West (the former Soviet Union, Belgium, Luxemburg, ...).³ The published sources will offer a transnational picture of the impact of Nazi occupation on the lives of 200 million people between 1939 and 1945.

CegeSoma – the Study Centre War and Society – operational directorate IV of the State Archives is the Belgian partner in this source edition project. The project is still a work in progress and in this article we will only focus on the source collection which is directly related to archives. This article explains the methodology to find the adequate sources for Belgium, especially archival sources. We will focus on some unexpected sources, discuss methodological issues for some types of sources and point to national peculiarities in the availability of sources which is linked to the national archival systems and culture. To start, we will explain in more detail the objectives, methodology and approach of the project.

The project

The objective of the project is to collect and publish sources that give an insight of the impact of Nazi occupation on daily lives of different categories of the population all over occupied Europe. ‘Daily life’ is an extensive field

¹ Ph.D. Dirk Luyten, Archives of Belgium, CEGESOMA.

² I would like to thank my colleague Lut Vandaele for proofreading the text.

³ More information on the project website: <http://www.societies-under-german-occupation.com> (seen December 3, 2017).

covering different aspects of existence ranging from food supply to work and repression.

The project has started with one specific theme: ‘supply and shortage’. Shortage of all kind (food most obviously, but also clothes, pharmaceutical products, building materials, ...) was a feature of Nazi occupation forcing the population to look for individual or collective coping strategies and to deal with new phenomena structuring daily life such as the black market which flourished with different intensity in the countries under occupation, and with new regulations, bureaucratic structures, control services and repression as a means to enforce the rules.

The sources from different countries will be published in a book. Each source will be annotated. The volume starts with an introduction on the topic of supply and shortage and its historiography. The source publication aims at an international audience: all sources are translated from the original languages into English.

Collecting sources

The source collection is the work of a specialized researcher, who is acquainted with the sources and the national historiography. The researcher is mostly based in the country under research. He/she is responsible for the organisation of the retrieval of the sources and the annotation. For source collection in the archives, the researcher is often assisted by a collaborator. For Belgium this is Laurence Petrone.

The sources to be collected are written sources, published as well as not published. In some countries, source editions are already available, but they do not deal with daily life as a general rule, so the sources will be published for the first time. In order to have a balanced coverage of the different countries, the researchers are guided by a common ‘framework’ elaborated by the coordinators in consultation with the researchers, indicating on which topics and on what social group sources should be looked for and which questions should be answered. One of the points in the framework are for instance sources on specific groups as children and elderly people.

The sources should offer a bottom-up perspective on daily life: how people *experienced* the impact of the occupation on their everyday life is the central question guiding the source collection. The second question is to know *how people dealt with* these shortages and the new institutional context and which *strategies and ways* people found to obtain alternative sources of supply. The context is to be taken into account as well. Therefore, sources on, for instance,

the rationing system are integrated. Rationing systems were one of the essential new frameworks for daily life established by the occupation. Even if these systems existed in many countries, they functioned in different ways, with different outcomes and effects on the population.

Sources should be written during occupation or shortly after in order to privilege a historical over a memorial approach.

Ego documents and personal archives⁴

A first type of source that informs directly on the bottom-up experiences of daily life are ego documents: diaries, chronicles, exchange of letters between relatives and friends and even a simple record book. One document selected for Belgium are the record books of a middle-class woman, covering the whole occupation period. In this record book, the woman wrote her daily expenses for basic products bought at the official as well as at the black market. Sometimes she made a comment on the long-term unavailability of certain products.⁵ This source makes the sharp rise in prices we know from statistics very concrete: prices are recorded only for basic products, often per item (one egg, ...) and for the whole period of occupation. When a product had been unavailable for a long period, the woman added short comments expressing her joy or amazement or sometimes she explained the unusual way she had followed to obtain a certain product.

The second type of source which offers a direct bottom-up perspective on the impact of occupation on daily life are personal archives of people who are not part of the political or social elites. These archives often contain letters and other types of documents, illustrating in a concrete way how mechanisms of supply worked. An example are the ‘so-called potato contracts’, which are known from literature.⁶ These contracts were introduced in 1942 as an alternative, decentralised system for the centralized distribution of potatoes, one of the basic foodstuffs. Consumers could contract directly with a farmer for a certain amount of potatoes. These ‘potato contracts’ were often organised at the level of a small group, for instance for inhabitants of an apartment block or a group of colleagues at work, with one person acting as the organiser. A personal archive contained a filled out form of a potato contract as well as the instructions of the organizer, pointing to specific issues, such as shortages of materials to pack the potatoes, leading to a set of

⁴ We used primarily the archival collection of CegeSoma for the ego documents.

⁵ Institut d’Histoire ouvrière Economique et Sociale, Seraing.

⁶ HENAU A, VAN DEN WIJNGAERT M., *België op de bon. Rantsoenering en voedselvoorziening onder Duitse bezetting 1940-1944*, Leuven, 1986, p. 85.

instructions and specificities for the packing material: obtaining proper packing material appeared to be a real problem to organize the distribution of potatoes. These sources, even if they have at first sight an administrative character, make the effects of shortages more tangible by focusing on what appears as administrative details (packing material), but showing that people had to deal with different shortages at once.

Next to letters to relatives, personal archives may contain more formal letters (or letters of complaint) exchanged with the authorities. This type of letters makes clear how people dealt with the authorities and which aspects of the food rationing system frustrated them in particular. Another source that can be found in personal archives are alternative kitchen recepies. These recepies explain how food can be prepared with products that are in normal circumstances not used for that purpose. Such recepies were often published in newspapers and magazines, but the recepies in personal archives, or even series of recepies handwritten in small booklets, describe less used methods of alternative cooking or give an idea of the personal taste of the people concerned.

These sources not only offer a direct insight in how shortages were experienced and coped with, but also give information on regional differences in one country, when for instance relatives lived in city and countryside, where different products and items were lacking and personal exchange could be a solution. Journals and letters make clear how people reflected on how shortage affected their own social position and how this led to a change of the position versus other social groups or at least how these changes were perceived and felt.

Ego documents and personal archives are a first rate source to document the experience of shortage and document coping strategies, but there are some limitations. The first is a social bias: writing and keeping paperwork is more common with the (intellectual) middle class (for instance teachers). National traditions may impact on writing habits: in Belgium for instance, it was only after World War I that obligatory schooling (until the age of 14) was introduced, it may be assumed that many people were not accustomed to write down their personal experiences or to exchange letters. The context of occupation by an authoritarian regime and the fear for repression may have led people to refrain from keeping a journal, from writing things down, to remain silent on certain aspects (for instance the role of the occupier) to impose self-censorship or referring only indirectly to certain issues. Therefore, these sources should be interpreted with some care.

Another limitation is the extent to which these sources have been collected in a systematic way. At this point the national archival systems have an impact. Even if there are exceptions, national archives typically focus on institutions or personal archives produced by the elite, for instance national political leaders. In some countries, specialized institutions started shortly after the war with the collection of personal archives and documents with the population. In the Netherlands, already in 1945 the *Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (State Institute for War Documentation) started the collection of diaries. In other countries, these specialized institutions were created later and systematic collection only started years after the occupation: the Belgian Navorsings- en Studiecentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog (now CegeSoma, part of the State Archives) started its activities only in 1969, leaving a time lag of 25 years with the end of the occupation.

Other countries have so-called thematic documentation or memorial institutions, linked with for instance the labour movement or the Resistance. These institutions collect personal archives directly with the rank and file or with their militants, which may cover the period of the Second World War. For instance in the archives of the organizations of the labour movement which are systematically collected by these institutions, letters and other personal documents may be found as well: these organisations serve as intermediaries for document collection. Some local archives may have specific collections of personal archives or may have collected documents concerning the occupation.

Bureaucracies

Bureaucratisation was a feature of Nazi occupation. Bureaucratisation was an article of faith of National Socialism and bureaucracies were part of the regulation of social and economic life as an alternative for the market mechanism. New institutions, based on the principles of the New Order and often headed and staffed by members of the collaborationist parties such as the National Corporation for Agriculture and Food were established after the invasion. The occupation brought a parallel German bureaucracy, aiming at the control and supervision of the domestic administration. Administrations issued new rules and regulations: for food supply there was a regularly updated special 'Rationing codex' (7 volumes in 1942) with which consumers and producers had to comply.⁷ An extensive body of control and policing services was to enforce the many rules, some of which were communicated

⁷ CORPORATION NATIONALE DE L'AGRICULTURE ET DE L'ALIMENTATION, *Code du ravitaillement: réglementation des produits agricoles et alimentaires*. (Brussels), 1942, 7 vol.

directly to the population with posters or via the press under censorship, which are of course relevant sources also for finding concrete details on the rationing system and its organisation and to understand how the regulations were semantically imposed on the population.

Public opinion was systematically surveyed in '*Stimmungsberichte*', often using informants. Internal administrative instructions and reports of these bureaucracies and circular letters indicate what went wrong, identified sore points and reveal how the population opposed and circumvented the rules, and reveals mechanisms of fraud.

These sources often have a normative character and are relevant to understand the context, while others give an outsider perspective on the way the population dealt with shortages. When using these sources, it is necessary to take into account that the institutions producing them had specific purposes: controlling and imposing sanctions, and make the population comply with the rules (and the new regime) were central concerns.

A particular type of source, produced by control and policing services are case files, of which there are plenty since the many rules were frequently broken.⁸ In contrast to internal administrative documents or normative sources meant to persuade the population, these case files give a floor to the people who are subjected to the rules. In the reports of an interrogation, we have the voice of the perpetrator and/or victim (in case of fraud for instance). In these interrogations, not only the context is explained, but often these sources reveal a 'moral economy' component. When for instance farmers had not complied with the fixed prices, it might be that there was a sort of accepted margin in a local context, which was not seen by that community as a breaking of the rules. In these sources is a bias too, since we only have the voice of those who have broken the rules or those who made the effort or had the skills to complain.

Next to New Order bureaucracies, domestic administrations continued their activities. To the extent that competences of these administrations had a link with daily life, as for instance the administration supervising coal production, they produce sources that can be used for researching supply and shortage. In contrast to the New Order bureaucracies, these administrations were more trusted by the population. They had moreover often local branches, serving as interfaces with the population. People complained or petitioned with these

⁸ For instance: CEGESOMA Brussels, *Controledienst Kortrijk*, AA 78.

administrations and asked for their intervention to settle personal conflicts with institutions, authorities or fellow citizens.

Enterprises

Supply and shortage was for many people closely linked with work: a job was not only a source of monetary income, employers often provided extra food or other scarce products. Chronic shortages had an impact at the workplace and on the production: labour productivity was undermined by undernourishment and the search for extra food by the workers interrupted the production process.

Enterprises produce relevant sources for the project, documenting the effect of shortages (especially food) on the workforce. These sources are varied as far as the perspective is concerned and the aspects covered, depending on the economic position of the company. In 1940, 40% of Belgian industry was controlled by one holding company, the *Société Générale*, of which the archives are kept at the Belgian State Archives.⁹ This financial group had a macro-economic perspective on the consequences of the occupation and produced in that context a retail price index in December 1940, which is a precious document for following the price evolution of basic products. Wages had been linked to the retail price index in Belgium in the interwar period, with the retail price index fixed by an official commission.¹⁰ The German occupier blocked prices and wages and as a consequence, the index-linked wage system was suspended and the retail price index was no longer calculated. The *Société Générale* filled up this void by calculating an alternative index. This index did not take into account the products that were no longer available, integrated black market prices as well and as far as the regulated market was concerned, listed real prices and not the official price laid down in the regulations. This index not only shows the rapid decline of purchase power, it reflects the situation as it was for the consumer, since the index was based on real prices and reflected changing consumer patterns, focusing only on the (few) products still available.¹¹

Since the official rationing system was insufficient to provide for basic nutrition, employers provided extra food for their workers. These efforts are documented in sources that can be found in the archives of (big) enterprises. Reports explain the organization of this system of additional food supply,

⁹ Algemeen Rijksarchief2 Brussel (Depot Cuvelier).

¹⁰ Peter Scholliers, *Loonindexering en sociale vrede: koopkracht en klassenstrijd in België tijdens het interbellum*, Brussels, 1985.

¹¹ Société Générale, Vierde storting; Algemeen Rijksarchief2 Brussel (Depot Cuvelier).

detail which food was provided, evaluate the success and the failures of the system and the reactions of the workers. These sources, generated at macro level by holdings or at micro level in production companies provide direct information on the decrease of purchase power and the rise of prices and the alternatives for food provision for the workers.

Sources produced by retail companies give indirect information on shortages with which the individual consumer was confronted. The *Institut d'Histoire Ouvrière Economique et Sociale*, a centre specialized in the history of labour and social movements keeps the archives of a consumer cooperative, part of the socialist labour movement. The archive contains the weekly statistics of the entries in the central depot for different products. There is a systematic comparison with the week of the previous year, e.g. the number of pigs processed by the butchers cooperative in the first week of October 1940 was 58 against 241 in the same week in 1939.¹² This gives a concrete idea of the dramatic drop in supply at the central level of the cooperative. Even closer to the individual consumer are the statistics on the availability of items at shelf level in the local shops (the organisation of the shelves in the different shops was standardized). These statistics make clear that the shops had run out of stock for items of daily necessity for several weeks... The cooperative was not only an economic organization, but also a social movement. The women-clients of the local cooperatives were formally organized in a consumer league. The reports of the meeting inform on changing consumer habits and coping strategies (cooking, clothing, ...) and on distributional conflicts with non-members of the cooperative who tried to obtain products that were not available at their local shop keeper with the cooperative.

Minutes of the management bodies of enterprises may give information on the effects of shortages indirectly via problems in the realm of personnel management. The board of directors of the socialist cooperative had direct disciplinary power over the workforce and ultimately settled individual social conflicts. In 1942, the board had to decide on conflicts on theft and embezzlement of food by the employees of the cooperative who had access to products of prime necessity or means of transportation (a lorry) that could be used to move products or for trafficking. The board discussed individual cases and took the decision on the sanction. The argumentation, which refers to the difficulties to obtain food and other necessities often reveals individual strategies to cope with shortages, for which the network of the cooperative

¹² Institut d'Histoire Ouvrière Economique et Sociale. Seraing. Union coopérative. Coopérative ouvrière Liège.

movement was used. The evolution in the sanctions is an indication for the deterioration of shortages.

Surveying

Social surveying was at the eve of World War II an established practice in social sciences. The sociological research institute *Institut Solvay*, linked with the Brussels University had a longstanding practice in the field. In the 1930s Guillaume Jacquemyns researched the living conditions of miners and unemployed using social surveying methods. In 1941 he was asked by the governor of the *Société Générale* to survey the standard of living and the living conditions of the workers under occupation. The result of his work was published shortly after the war and has served until today as a key source for much of the research on the social history of the Second World War in Belgium. Jacquemyns focused on the miners and the workers in the heavy industry in Wallonia and the *Kempen* (a recently exploited coal mine basin) using the survey methodology of his time¹³.

These social surveying methods were also used by some prospective social workers in their thesis. A complete collection of the theses of all social schools in Belgium are kept in the library of the Belgian state archives.¹⁴ The small-scale research for the thesis was often linked with the internship of the student, enabling him or her to integrate interviews with the people they worked for in their research. The focus is on a specific small community such as young factory workers, children, pregnant women, the inhabitants of the poorest quarter in a big city or artists in need (*'pauvres honteux'*), for which groups it is often difficult to find other sources. The thesis gives an insight on the impact of shortages and the way these communities dealt with them. Often they include micro-budgets based on observation by the social work student or reflections of the people under study on their personal situation.

Organizations

Sources produced by formal as well as informal organizations provide information on daily life, also from a bottom-up perspective. The clandestine press, the mouthpiece of resistance organizations, is particularly relevant to document social protest against shortages and the politicization process of shortages. The clandestine press publishes articles with complaints on shortages and articles where social and political protest against shortages is

¹³ JACQUEMYNS G, *La société belge sous l'occupation allemande, 1940-1944*, Brussels, 1950.

¹⁴ Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel (Ruisbroekstraat). Library

documented (for instance hunger marches). Other, more ideological articles politicize shortages by blaming a specific group, mostly the occupier but also collaborationist parties or the employer, for the shortages with the population. Demands on food supply were often used in the clandestine press to mobilize the population against the occupier and the collaborationist movements and to undermine the legitimacy of the new powers. Some clandestine newspapers specifically addressed women and can therefore be used as a starting point for a gendered approach.¹⁵

New clandestine radical trade unions, part of the Resistance movement, dealt most directly with shortages and used them as the starting point for their actions to improve the purchase power of the workers. These unions were organised at factory level and often edited a clandestine newspaper which reflected their actions and demands.¹⁶ Some kept minutes of their meetings, revealing their strategy towards the employer or the occupier to cope with shortages of food.¹⁷ Sources produced by trade unions are especially relevant to study strikes, often rooted in shortages of food and were a way to voice workers discontent with the situation created by the occupation.¹⁸

The sources from New Order organizations, established as an alternative for the prewar organizations such as the official trade union *Union des Travailleurs Manuels et Intellectuels* shed also a light on the way these organizations tried to respond to the discontent of their rank and file. These sources are most relevant for the *political* impact of shortage and supply issues: how could these problems be politicised, not to oppose the occupier, but to support the new regime.

Another aspect that may be revealed in these more politically oriented sources are *moral economy* aspects of shortages: who was held responsible for which shortages? Which expectations did people have of the occupier, the domestic administration or the employer to solve their supply problems?

To the extent that the prewar institutions and organizations no longer could play their role in defending the material position of the populations, charity

¹⁵ The Belgian clandestine press published in World War II is digitized and available on: www.warpress.cegesoma.be.

¹⁶ Just one example: De Hamer: Orgaan der Brusselsche Federatie van de SSK der Metaalbewerkeren ("The Hammer", Journal of the Federation of Communist Trade Union in metalworking in the Brussels region).

¹⁷ HEMMERIJCKX R., *Pour une histoire ouvrière de l'occupation. Le cahier des procès-verbaux de l'association des ouvriers métallurgistes du centre (1941-1942)*, in: *Cahiers/Bijdragen*, 1994, n° 16, p. 117-161.

¹⁸ LUYTEN D., *Stakingen in België en Nederland, 1940-1941*, in: *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, 2005, 15, p. 149-176.

organisations could fill the gaps. Churches, humanitarian organisations (e.g. the Red Cross), hospitals and the semi-official charity organisation, *Winterhulp/Secours d'Hiver* played a role in this field and aided as a general rule the poorest layers of the population. Sources produced by the organisations documenting their activities and the concrete actions are relevant, as well as the reports on the people that were helped, or documents expressing directly the needs of the people aided (e.g. letters, petitions). The perspective offered by these organizations will often be paternalist and the reader should bear in mind that these organisations also defended their organizational interests and possibly framed the demands of the needy to privilege what they wanted or offered.



Concluding remarks

Sources that give an insight in bottom-up experiences and coping strategies with shortages in different social groups can be found in different types of archives kept in different types of archival institutions. Diaries and other egodocuments are a first-rate source, but are sociologically biased. We completed the corpus with other types of sources of which the archives of enterprises and the theses of prospective social workers often offered startling perspectives. Another conclusion is that archives of institutions and organisations remain relevant to study social phenomena, also from an individual perspective.



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