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“Everyone leaves traces”: individuals in Belgian archives during both world wars

Filip STRUBBE¹

Over the last years, the staff of the National Archives of Belgium has experienced a steadfast increase in the number of research questions or genealogical enquiries on the fate of individuals during both world wars. This development cannot simply be contributed to special circumstances, like for instance the centennial of World War I. Moreover, much of the archives produced during or in the aftermath of both world wars are connected in such a way that a researcher often doesn't only consult one file/document. In practice, what may look like a simple search at first sight may turn into an exploration of a “dense web” of archival sources.

This contribution aims to shed some light on the bulk of the available source material (mainly produced by central government administrations) by showing how archives that document the fate of persons during and immediately after the First and the Second World War are interconnected. Whenever necessary, the overview will also take into account the impact of both world wars on people's ownings or their material lifeworld. For each of the two following chapters, the reader can fall back on a schematic of the main sources in order to situate them in the research process.

1. Sources with regard to the First World War

On August 4, 1914 German forces invaded Belgium. In spite of the resistance of the Belgian army (consisting of around 140,000 men) and the support of its French-British Allies, most of the Belgian territory was rapidly conquered. After the evacuation of Antwerp 30,000 Belgian soldiers crossed the border of the neutral Netherlands where they were immediately interned. Another 35,000 soldiers were taken prisoner during the military campaign and would end up in hastily organized POW-camps in Germany. The remaining Belgian soldiers retreated to a small strip of non-occupied land behind the *Yser* and *Ieperlee* rivers. By then, the western front had stabilized and the Belgian positions in West-Flanders would hardly move until the spring of 1918. Behind the *Yser* front, the Belgian army would steadily rebuilt up to around 180,000 men. From the beginning of the invasion German troops acted brutally against the civilian population. As a result, more than one million

¹ Filip Strubbe, National Archives Brussels, Sect.05: Temporary Archives.

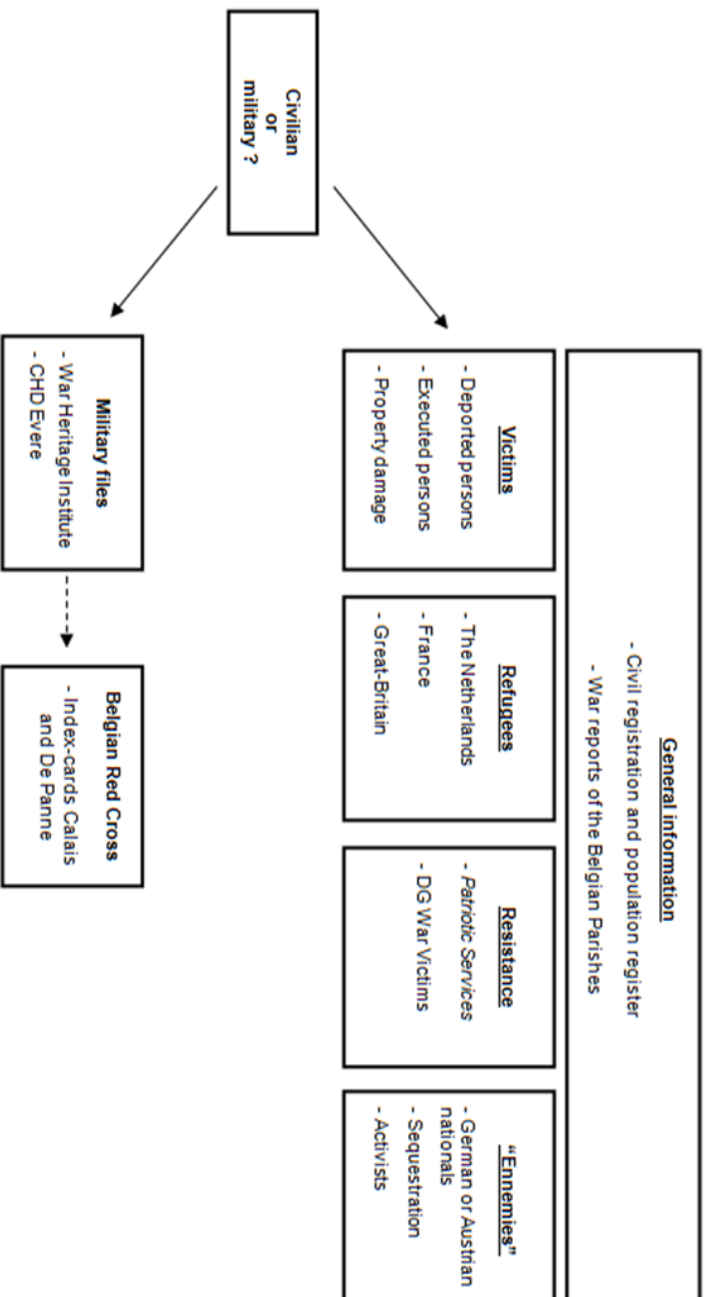
Belgians decided to flee their home. Many of them would stay in the Netherlands, France or Great-Britain for the rest of the war. Meanwhile, the population in the occupied part of the country was facing four harsh years. Massive German confiscations and the British continental blockade crippled the industrial and agricultural production, causing food shortages. Unemployment rates skyrocketed, but the occupant incentives to encourage Belgian unemployed for voluntary labor in Germany did not meet with much success. As a result, the occupant began deporting over 100,000 laborers to Germany or the front-zone in France between October 1916 and 1918.

When one wants to find information on an individual during this period, one obviously needs to “translate” all these events into archives. The schematic overview on the following page distinguishes between different categories of subjects, according to their role and/or fate. The most important distinction to make in terms of archival sources, depends on whether research is being performed on a military or a civilian. In case of a soldier or military officer, the most comprehensive information can be found in the military file of that person. The birth date determines where (and whether) a file is conserved. The archive service of the War Heritage Institute in Brussels currently conserves the personal military files of soldiers born before January 1, 1889 and of officers born before January 1, 1900. The files of military personnel born after these dates are conserved by the Belgian Armed Forces Documentation Centre in Evere. The archives service of the War Heritage Museum has created an online database in which one can easily look up persons by name, place of birth or even by unit.² It must be noted however that this file series isn’t complete since part of the military files of the soldiers born before 1889 have not been conserved. In such cases, the archives of the Belgian Red Cross may allow to recover some information on a soldier’s fate if he was injured and subsequently treated in the red-cross hospitals in De Panne (*ambulance L’Océan*) or in Calais. The Belgian Red Cross established a card-index on all patients treated in both hospitals, with each card mentioning a person’s name, date of birth, military rank, domicile, place of hospitalization and a summary of his condition/hospitalization. Interestingly, the card-index was established by family name as well as by domicile. Although the information in both series is practically the same, their different structure offers more research possibilities. As such, the index-cards sorted by domicile will be of particular interest to local historians who want to document the fate and number of (injured) soldiers from a specific municipality.³

² The database can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.klm-mra.be/D7t/en/content/archives>.

³ CORNEL B., *Inventaris van het Belgische Rode Kruis (Eerste Wereldoorlog) (1914-1922)*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 629), 2017.

MAIN ARCHIVE SOURCES ON INDIVIDUALS – WW I



When it comes to civilians, the source material is more diverse but at the same time more dispersed because of the different categories of civilians whose lives were affected by the war. One can, of course, always find basic information on every person in the civil registry and population register of the municipality where he or she lived. Also, parish reports were established after the war as a result of a questionnaire sent to every pastor by a commission convened by cardinal Mercier. Based on this questionnaire, the pastors wrote an account of the events that had taken place in their parish during the occupation, while underlining the helping role of the church in the struggle of people's daily life. Although the original parish reports are conserved in various religious institutes, the complete collection was digitized by the State Archives in 2014 and is accessible online.⁴

Besides these general sources, several archives document the consequences of the German invasion and occupation for specific groups within the Belgian population. One such category are the 5,500 civilians who were executed by the German army in August and September 1914: a copy of the death certificates of all individuals that suffered this fate can be found in the archives of the "Central Belgian Office for the Prisoners of War" (*Office central belge pour les Prisonniers de Guerre*),⁵ where the documents are ordered alphabetically by name of each municipality. A more detailed account on the impact of the war on each Belgian municipality can be found in the reports of the "Commission for the inquiry of the violation of the rules on people's rights". This commission was given the task to document all the violations and war crimes committed by the German forces during the occupation, in which deportations and confiscations or property destruction played a major role. As a result, the files sorted by municipality contain lists with names of individuals who had been deported, mistreated or executed.⁶ After the war, the government passed a law that allowed deported persons to claim a (rather modest) financial compensation for the hardships they had endured. Because these allowances were considered to be far too unsatisfactory at the time, public protest led to the creation of a "Central Commission for the Deported, Requisitioned and Civil Prisoners" that was to reexamine the claims in view of more suitable allowances. Although the

⁴ It suffices to introduce the key-word "oorlogsverslagen" in the search engine: <https://search.arch.be/>.

⁵ VANDEN BOSCH H., *Inventaris van het archief van de Belgische Middendienst voor de Krijgsgevangenen (Office central belge pour les prisonniers de guerre) 1914-1925*, Brussels (Inventories National Archives, 436), 2009.

⁶ VANNÉRUS J., TALLIER P.-A., *Inventaire des archives de la Commission d'enquête sur la violation des règles du droit des gens, des lois et des coutumes de la guerre (1914-1926)*, Brussels (Inventories National Archives, 298), 2001.

Central Commission depended on the work of provincial bureaus. These bureaus didn't all keep their records after they had ceased their activities. Still, the archives of the commission contain over 30,000 forms of individual claimants, sorted alphabetically by municipality within each province.⁷ Many former deportees who were still unsatisfied with the additional compensations decided to take legal recourse and called in the help of lawyer Jacques Pirenne. Although this initiative didn't amount to any practical results, Pirenne's archives contain many thousands of individual information forms that fill some gaps in the series of the Central Commission.

The German invasion triggered a previously unseen outflow of refugees to Belgium's neighboring countries: initially, more than one fifth of the Belgian population fled to the Netherlands, France or Great-Britain where they were registered and repatriated after the war. The National Archives conserve several archives that document the fate of the refugees in each of these neighboring countries:

- By early 1915, around 100,000 Belgians were living in the Netherlands as refugees. When they finally returned to their home country in early 1919, more than 20,000 of them carried a safe-conduct (*laisser-passer*) with which they could cross the border. These documents, which can be found in the archives of the "Official Belgian Committee for the Netherlands", contain photographs of the concerned persons and also document their former residence in the Netherlands, their domicile in Belgium as well as their profession.⁸
- In France, the "Official Belgian Committee for the Assistance of Refugees" created an intelligence bureau that oversaw and coordinated the efforts of the various organizations supporting Belgian refugees. Its archives contain tens of thousands of file cards with basic information on each person or family. Interestingly, the same information is copied several times in the file-card series, but always appears within a subseries that allows a search from a "different angle": by name, place(s) of residence in France, domicile abroad or profession of the former refugees.⁹
- Over 200,000 refugees from Belgium fled across the channel to Great-Britain, where registration was only made mandatory when the Aliens'

⁷ AMARA M., *Inventaris van het archief van de Hoofdcommissie van Weggevoerde, Opgeëiste en burgerlijke Gevangenen 1919-1925 = Inventaire des archives de la Commission centrale des Déportés, Réquisitionnés et Prisonniers civils 1919-1925*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 563), 2014.

⁸ TALLIER P.-A., *Comité officiel belge pour les Pays-Bas, 1914-1919*, Brussels (*National Archives, Instruments in Limited Edition*, 553), 2002.

⁹ AMARA M., *Inventaire des archives du Comité officiel belge de Secours aux Réfugiés (Le Havre) (1914-1925)*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 611), 2016.

Restriction Order was issued in December 1914. As a result, a Central Register of War Refugees was created that would compile a dataset on all foreigners that would enter Britain until January 1919. The name 'Central Register' is somewhat misleading, since the archives actually consist of five series of forms in alphabetical order, with forms on the same person or family being tied to a "file" whenever a change of address occurred.¹⁰

Any study on resistance activities in occupied Belgium during the First World War will find that the archives of the "Commission for the Annals of the Patriotic Services established in Occupied Territory in the Western Front" are of utmost importance. This commission had originated from former resistance members of the group "*Dame Blanche*" who were tasked by the British Military Intelligence Commission to document and write the history of their organization. It wasn't before long that the persons involved saw the value of their work and extended its scope to all other resistance groups. The commission that resulted from this reorientation operated from June 1919 until 1926, launched a call to the press and broader public for testimonies and collected numerous documents. The archives that were thus gathered allow for research that focusses on a specific resistance group or resistance activities in a particular region, as well as (genealogical) enquiries into the fate of individuals by means of two (digitized) alphabetical file-card indexes.¹¹ Anyone who wants to find even more detailed information on a former resistance member will be likely to find an individual file in the World War I archives of the Directorate-General for War Victims, which were transferred to the National Archives in late 2017.

After the war, Belgian authorities took a number of juridical measures against activists and "enemy nationals", the latter being mostly German and Austrian subjects living in Belgium. Activists were a group within the Flemish Movement that tried to solve a number of Flemish grievances by collaborating with the German occupant and to that effect, established a "*Raad van Vlaanderen*" in 1917 that acted like an unofficial Flemish parliament.¹² Compared to the few hundreds of activists that were prosecuted after the war,

¹⁰ SYMOENS B., *Inventaris van het archief van "The Central Register of War Refugees - Central Register of Belgian Refugees" 1914-1919*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 420), 2008.

¹¹ LANNOYE A., *Inventaire des archives de la Commission des Archives des Services patriotiques établis en Territoire occupé au Front de l'Ouest (1914-1930)*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 581), 2015.

¹² VANDEWEYER L., *Inventaris van het conglomeraatsarchief van de Raad van Vlaanderen, het Propagandabureau, Nationaal Verweer, de Nationalen Bond voor de Belgische Eenheid, Jacques Pirenne en Henri Pirenne 1908-1939*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 530), 2012.

the German and Austrian nationals that resided in Belgium before and after the war constituted a large group of several thousands of persons. It included persons of Austro-German origin who had been naturalized before the war, but whose Belgian citizenship was annulled after the liberation as part of a more selective and restrictive naturalization policy. Together with the other German and Austrian foreigners these former Belgians were subject of an individual file produced by the former Aliens' Police, the predecessor of the current Belgian Immigration Service. Ever since the 1830s, Belgian authorities started to register and survey the residence and circulation of non-Belgian subjects on Belgian territory in order to safeguard public order. The files that were thus established also provide a detailed account of Germans and Austrians in Belgium before or after the war, documenting their mobility within Belgium, civil registry status, professional activities and possible prosecutions or convictions, amongst others. In order to look up a person's file, one needs to know his or her name and preferably also a place or date of birth.¹³

After the liberation, thousands of persons of German origin faced the sequestration of their properties: in practice, this measure entailed the impoundment of a person's belongings (house, company, etc.) without however annulling their ownership. Rather, the sequestration implied that an administrator was appointed to manage this property so that the original owner could no longer freely dispose of it. In a number of cases, the impoundment was lifted after some time, whereas on other occasions it led to an acquittal by auction or a transfer to the Belgian government in order to replenish the Treasury and obtain compensations for the inflicted war damage. As such, the inventoried file series of the former Sequestration Service (WW I) under the Land Registration and Estates Department within the Ministry of Finance constitutes a unique source for the socio-economic, financial and industrial history, especially with regard to German migrants in Belgium.¹⁴ Moreover, the file series is complemented by a collection of private archives from several dozens of German firms and companies, seized by Belgian authorities after the liberation.

¹³ More background information can be found in the following research vademecum: CAESTECKER F., STRUBBE F., TALLIER P.-A., *Individual files on foreigners opened by the Sûreté publique (Police des étrangers) (1835-1943)*, Brussels (*Research Vademecums National Archives*, 24), 2011.

¹⁴ VANDEWEYER L., *Archief van de Dienst van het Sekwester van de Administratie der Domeinen - Archives du Service du Séquestre de l'Administration des Domaines 1919-1996*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 484), 2010.

The fighting during the First World War had put large parts of Belgium in ruins. Besides the front region several villages and the town centers of Dendermonde, Louvain, Namur and Dinant were heavily struck. In total, around one fifth of the historic buildings that existed in 1914 were damaged or destroyed. A legal framework for the award of damages would only be established by late 1918. Around 242 municipalities suffered from war damage to such a degree that they could not organize the reconstruction by their own means and had to call upon the “Service for the devastated Regions” to coordinate the reconstruction works.¹⁵ Meanwhile, individual claims for allowances were treated by special courts for war damage (*Tribunaux de dommages de guerre*), administrative courts that remained active until 1935. The archives of these courts, conserved by the repositories of the State Archives in the Provinces, no longer contain any individual files on processed claims, but are limited to the judgments that were passed (sometimes with indexes). However, more detailed documents on individual requests can be found in the above-mentioned files of the Directorate-General for War Victims.

2. Sources with regard to the Second World War

In May 1940, Belgium was again invaded and this time completely occupied by German forces. Together with Northern France (departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais), the country was placed under a Military Administration (*Militärverwaltung in Belgien und Nordfrankreich*), an interim occupation authority. In October 1942, measures of forced labor in Germany were introduced, resulting in the deportation of over 190,000 Belgians (mostly men) to support the German industry. Shortly before, the summer of 1942 had seen the beginning of the Shoah in Belgium with the departure of train convoys carrying Jewish persons from the Dossin Casern in Mechelen to concentration and elimination camps in Poland (mainly Auschwitz). In total, over 25,000 persons of Jewish origin would be deported in 28 train convoys, of whom merely 1,244 would survive the war. Besides the Dossin Casern, the fortress of Breendonk served as a transit camp for over 3.500 political prisoners in anticipation of their transport to various concentration camps in Germany, Poland and Austria. Just like during the previous occupation, the German administration met with passive resistance from the majority of the Belgian population but active resistance during World War II took a different form. Besides clandestine press, economic and military espionage and setting up escape routes for soldiers and laborers, it also included armed resistance

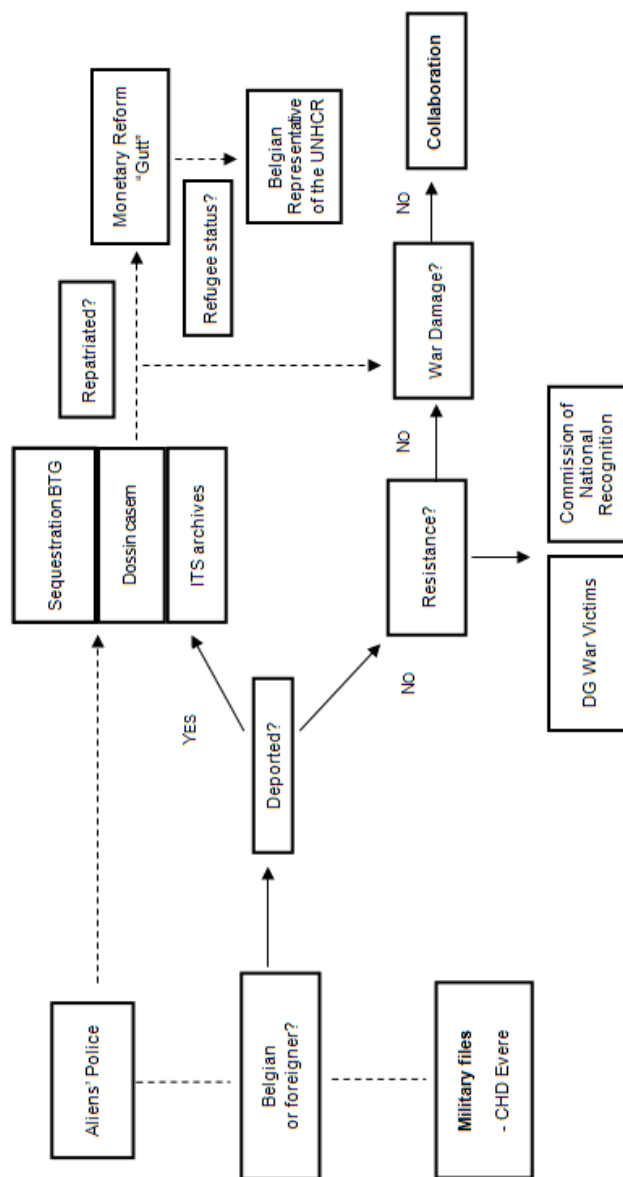
¹⁵ NOTEBAERT A, NEUMANN C., VANDEN EYNDE W., *Inventaris van het archief van de Dienst der Verwoeste Gewesten. Inventaire des archives du Service des Régions dévastées*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 264-270), 1995.

which had not occurred during the previous war. The violence and reprisal resulting from these actions would submerge Belgium in a climate of slumbering civil war by late 1943. However, the rapid liberation of most of the Belgian territory in early September 1944 and the disarmament of the resistance by late 1944 would put the fuse out of this potential powder keg. In the wake of the liberation Belgian authorities also faced the difficult task of punishing those who had collaborated with the occupant: contrary to the period of occupation during World War I, collaboration had been a widespread phenomenon in 1940-1944.

All of these events “resonate” through a large number of archives, but depending on the fate of an individual, different clusters of source material will be relevant. For the period of the Second World War, we can present the most important sources in the schematic on the following page. Since the Second World War caused more victims among the civilian population than the first world conflict due to the nature of the war violence (notably aerial bombardments), terror, hunger and deportation, the focus in this chapter will be on civilians. Any research on individuals in the military will start with the personal military files conserved by the Belgian Armed Forces Documentation Centre in Evere. For any civilian basic data can obviously be retrieved from the civil registry and population register of the municipality where he or she lived, but this is just the tip of the iceberg...

Before starting any research, it is important to know whether one is looking for a Belgian civilian or a foreigner. Already by the beginning of the 20th century, Belgium had become an immigration country but this evolution truly manifests itself between both world wars, when the Aliens’ Police opened nearly one million files on immigrants and their families. During the 1930s, a decade of political turmoil, Belgian authorities saw the arrival of around 40,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Unsurprisingly, a rather large percentage of the civilian victims of the German invasion and occupation of Belgium were foreigners. The most persecuted group were of course people of Jewish origin and gypsies, most of whom were deported via the Dossin casern if they got arrested. The archive and documentation center of the current “Kazerne Dossin” conserves a detailed overview of all the deportation convoys, basic name lists that have become the back-bone of digitization projects of related archival sources on the deported persons, like for instance their foreigners’ files and the Central Register of Jews in Belgium.

MAIN ARCHIVE SOURCES ON INDIVIDUALS – WW II



Just like in all occupied countries, the Nazi regime tried to “purge” the Belgian economy of all Jewish influences: the seizure of Jewish property facilitated the identification and isolation of the Jewish community, while its profits could benefit the economy of the Third Reich. The same policy applied to assets of “enemies”, subjects of countries that were at war with Germany or any person who had fled to these countries. In October 1940, the Military Administration decided to install a central organism to spearhead the spoliation process. Thus, the *Brüsseler Treuhandgesellschaft* was created: a Belgian company, it was in practice led and controlled by high-ranking officials of the Military Administration. The *Treuhandgesellschaft* aimed at the identification and centralization of individual bank-accounts, shares, deposits and the content of safes belonging to Jewish persons or enemies. As a result, its archives contain several file series concerning the transfer of financial property of “enemies” and Jewish persons or companies to central bank accounts of the *Treuhandgesellschaft*. The file covers in each series carry a different color, reflecting the different categories of enemy nationals. When Belgium was liberated, the government at its turn ensured that enemy possessions were taken in protective custody. Among the sequestered enemy belongings were the assets of the *Treuhandgesellschaft*, which mainly consisted of the plundered financial property of the Nazi regime’s victims. The restitution and/or acquittal of these individual assets is also documented through various post-war file series in the archives of the sequestered *Treuhandgesellschaft*.¹⁶

During the occupation, the process of financial spoliation ran parallel with the incarceration and deportation of the persecuted persons. Quite often, the fate of these individuals is meticulously documented in the (digitized) archives of the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen (Germany), which consist of millions of documents from dozens of organisms (acquired over several decades) and may be considered as the central memory of the victims of the Nazi regime. The digitized archives contain over 80 million digital images concerning work, concentration and extermination camps, forced labor and the fate of displaced persons after the war. Together with metadata that were added in the digital copy, a Central Name Index allows to look up individuals in this huge volume of documents. In practice however, retrieving information on one individual or a family is a complex matter that requires a good amount of expertise. Since 2011, the National Archives conserve a copy of the ITS-archives, which allows researchers to combine its contents with

¹⁶ STRUBBE F., FRANSSSEN J., *Inventaire des archives du Séquestre de la Brüsseler Treuhandgesellschaft et du Groupe 12 y compris les archives du 'Service Belgique' de l'Office de Politique coloniale du NSDAP (1899-1988 (principalement 1940-1963))*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives* 2, 25), 2014.

that of archives mentioned in the previous paragraphs. Especially with regard to deported foreigners, the ITS-archives “fill up the blanks” in foreigners’ files that contain relatively little information on these individuals during the occupation period.¹⁷

If deported persons survived their ordeal, their repatriation at the end of the war is well documented in the archives of the National Bank on the post-war financial reorganization that took place in Belgium. This restructuring was dubbed the “Gutt-Operation” after the former Minister of Finance (Camille Gutt) who introduced a number of measures to curb the risk of inflation. In this respect, the Belgian government saw to an obligatory declaration and deposit of bank notes as well as a blocking of bank deposits, so as to draw a substantial amount of money out of the reel economy. At the same time, new bank notes and coins were introduced. These measures also applied to over 300,000 persons (Belgians or foreigners) that were repatriated, most of whom carried (the equivalent of) less than 2,000 Belgian francs with them. They are subject of a file in a special series that is accessible through an alphabetical file-card index. In general, these files contain information on a person’s profession, his/her residence in Belgium, the date of deportation and a very brief summary of his/her whereabouts and fate during the war.¹⁸

In the aftermath of World War II allied authorities in Western Europe faced hundreds of thousands of Displaced Persons that did not want to return to the other side of the Iron Curtain. The United Nations tried to assure their permanent care through individual recognition processes, first by the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and from 1952 by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Belgium regulated its refugee policy based on the international refugee regime enshrined in the Geneva Convention of 1951. From now on, a refugee was defined as a person with a well-founded fear of persecution in his or her country of origin for reasons of race, nationality, membership of a social group, religion or political affiliation. Those who complied with these conditions could enjoy protection. The Belgian section of the IRO, later on the Belgian representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, produced tens of thousands of files with requests for recognition of the refugee-status. These files mainly hold one or more application forms with

¹⁷ More information can be found in the following research vademecum: STRUBBE F., TALLIER P.-A., *Digital copy of the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, accessible at the National Archives*, Brussels (*Research Vademecums National Archives*, 37), 2012.

¹⁸ LELOUP G., *Inventaris van het archief van de Nationale Bank van België met betrekking tot de na de Tweede Wereldoorlog doorgevoerde muntsanering*, Brussels (*Inventories National Archives*, 422), 2008.

identification of candidate refugees. As of the 1950s, those forms mention the persons training, working life and the trajectory of the person throughout Europe. In many cases a researcher will have a good view on the fate of the refugees before, during and after the Second World War. Especially with regard to persons who never resided in Belgium before the war, the refugee files contain plenty of interesting information on someone's education, professional activities and whereabouts before his/her immigration.

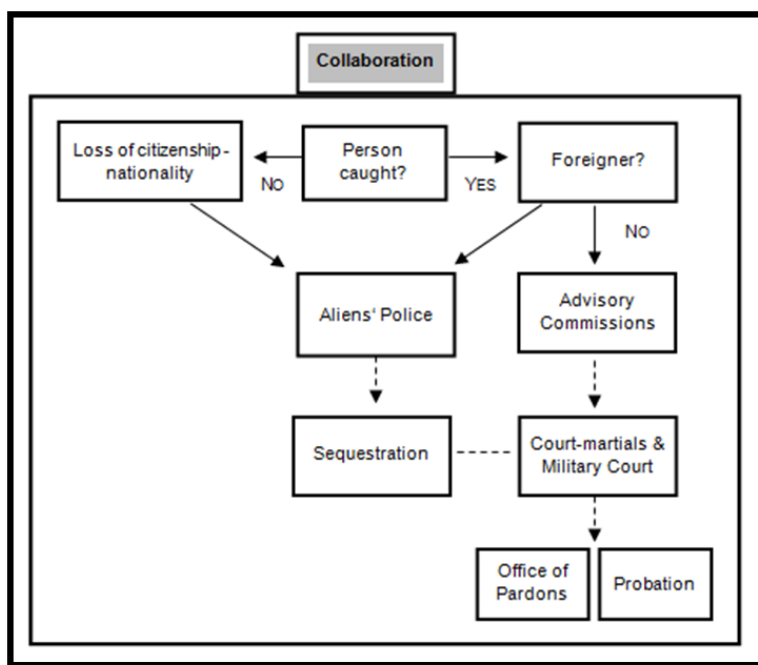
When it comes to the fate and activities of resistance members, political prisoners, objectors to forced labor, hidden and deported persons in occupied Belgium, the most detailed information is conserved by the Directorate-General for War Victims, that will merge with the National Archives in early 2018. Its archives comprise over 13 kilometers for the period of the Second World War alone. In turn, the National Archives conserve a number of complementary sources, like the archives of the Commission of National Recognition, created in 1946 to evaluate any proof and facts invoked when an honorary distinction was proposed for a civilian who had shown exceptional bravery or patriotic valor during the period of hostilities. The archives consist of more than 25,000 individual files that have been inventoried.

Just like during the previous war, hostilities during and immediately after the occupation caused a lot of damage to both public and private property. However, administrative authorities could benefit from the experience gained after the First World War for coordinating repairs. In 1945, a Ministry of War Damage was installed, which would be part of the Ministry for Reconstruction from 1946 onwards. In October 1947, an important law was passed that regulated the payment of allowances for war damage to private property in Belgium, giving rise to a huge amount of claims from individuals concerning damaged buildings, movable goods, industrial or commercial equipment, raw materials, cattle and ships, among others. It is estimated that around one Belgian out of four issued a request for allowances. The files that resulted from the processing of these claims contain detailed information on the damaged properties (sometimes including pictures) and their estimated value. The National Archives in Brussels (Cuvelier repository) conserve a file series that covers nearly all claims treated by the central administration. Although a single file-card series allows a name-based search, the files themselves are sorted by province which is indicated by the file-number and the place of residence (from which the request for allowances was expedited) on the file-card.¹⁹ Obviously, indemnities could only be attributed to persons

¹⁹ More detailed information on the production and content of the file series can be found in the following catalogue: TALLIER P.-A. (ed.), « *Une brique dans le ventre et l'autre en banque* » *L'indemnisation des dommages aux biens privés causés par les opérations de guerre et*

who could submit a proof of civic allegiance, which leads us to an important last category of persons: those who were accused of having collaborated with the German occupant.

After the First World War, the punishment of incivism was mainly targeted against (Austro-German) foreigners (some of whom had already acquired the Belgian nationality before the war), with the exception of a few hundreds of activists. By contrast, collaboration during the occupation in the 1940s was a widespread phenomenon that could not simply be attributed to foreigners on Belgian territory. Because the “unpatriotic behavior” largely came “from within the ranks of the native Belgians”, the penalization of collaboration after World War II, known in Belgium as the repression, had a predominately political-moral rather than ethnic-nationalistic dimension. Since the repression was in fact a multi-faceted phenomenon, we only intend to focus on the judicial process,²⁰ the main principles of which are represented in the following schematic:



assimilées: Sources pour une histoire plurielle du 20e siècle, Brussels (*Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia*, 136), 2012.

²⁰ The following publication offers a much more detailed and exhaustive overview of the persecution of collaborators: AERTS K., LUYTEN D., WILLEMS B., DROSSENS P., LAGROU P., *Papy était-il un nazi ? Sur les traces d'un passé de guerre*, Tielt, 2017.

The first question one should ask is whether a collaborator was actually apprehended by the Belgian authorities. If not, the legislation at the time made it possible to strip the nationality of Belgian collaborators who were convicted in absentia for a felony or primary sentence. This measure especially concerned serious cases, where the perpetrator wanted to avoid being apprehended. A separate decree-law applied to political collaborators in Eupen-Malmédy, who could lose their Belgian nationality even without being convicted. Within the Ministry of Justice, the Citizenship service (*Service d'Indigénat*) kept a file-card index on over 4.000 persons that were denationalized. This file-card series is nowadays conserved at the National Archives in Brussels.

If a perpetrator did get caught, he or she may have first been interned in prison or in provisional internment centers together with tens of thousands of other suspects. In order to facilitate the course of justice, the Minister of Justice decided to create one or more "Advisory Commissions" (*Commissions consultatives*) in each juridical district. These organs, consisting of two advocates presided by a magistrate, had to decide on who could be liberated (whether on probation or not) and who would be placed under an arrest warrant. Their rapid identification of alleged and petty collaboration greatly facilitated the work of the military prosecution and alleviated the overcrowded prisons. When the exceptional internment regime was no longer applied in April 1946, the Advisory Commissions also ceased their activities. Tens of thousands of individual files are nowadays conserved at the National Archives of Belgium (Central Direction of the Advisory Commissions) as well as in several State Archives in the Provinces (Advisory Commissions by district). A distinct regulation applied to foreign suspects that were interned: these persons could plead their case before a special Advisory Commission consisting of officials from the Public Safety Office. Its proceedings and advice, on which the Minister of Justice based his decision, are well documented in each individual foreigners' file.

The cases of persons that were deemed to have collaborated or committed war crimes were transferred to the military courts. Between September 1944 and December 1950 nearly 350,000 judicial files were opened against these suspects, who were mostly charged with political, economic or military collaboration as well as denunciation or several of these charges. Court-martials pronounced a sentence against which one could appeal before the military court. It is important to note that most judicial files (nearly 300,000 cases) concern suspects who did not appear before the courts-martial or who ended up being acquitted because of insufficient elements for prosecution. Justice was rendered in around 58,000 cases, 53,000 of which resulted in a condemnation whereas 5,000 ended in acquittals. Although the archives of the

military courts are already conserved by the National Archives (Cuvelier repository) and the repositories of the State Archives in the Provinces, they are only accessible after 100 years which means that access to files on the post-war repression is subject to the written authorization of the College of Attorneys-General.

By late 1946, government authorities realized that the long-term incarceration of convicted collaborators was undesirable and counter-productive. Prisons were overcrowded and the penalty for the same crime could sometimes vary according to the place and time of the sentence. The right to pardon an offender allowed to balance the penalization. A pardon means that a penalty can be annulled, reduced or changed: as such, it modifies the execution of a penalty but does not affect someone's guilt. Although a pardon is attributed by royal decree, the Minister of Justice carries the political responsibility of the decision, which results from consultations with judicial authorities. All requests for pardon are expedited to the Service for Pardons within the Ministry of Justice. The files from this service contain the basic information from the original sentence, as well the plea(s) for pardon and the decision process to either grant or dismiss a pardon. The National Archives currently conserve two series of files related to convicted collaborators: the main series contains nearly 45,000 files accessible via an alphabetical file-card series,²¹ whereas the cases concerning the 242 persons that were convicted to a death sentence and executed constitute a small, separate series.

Besides the right of pardon, the possibility of parole or probation offered another means to balance the penalization of collaboration. Probation is a favor, not a right that can be taken for granted. The measure may be motivated by humanitarian considerations like illness, a funeral or the family needs of the imprisoned person. Initially, former collaborators were denied parole, but a few years after the liberation they could also benefit from this measure: first collaborators could be released on probation after having served half of their prison sentence, later on after one third of their detention time. The Service for Conditional Release under the Ministry of Justice is in charge of the administrative follow-up of each case. The National Archives in Brussels conserve around 30,000 files on former collaborators that were released on probation. These files contain detailed information on the criminal offense, the punitive measures, the inmate's behavior as well as a rehabilitation plan with an analysis of the prisoner's job opportunities and personal letters from family members, advocates and acquaintances. The file series is made

²¹ DEPOORTERE R., SAOUDI N., WILLE I., *Inventaire des archives du ministère de la Justice. Direction générale des établissements pénitentiaires. Service des grâces. Versement 2001*, Brussels (National Archives, *Instruments in Limited Edition*, 552), 2001.

accessible by an alphabetical name index and runs up until the first half of the 1950s: by that time, almost all of the former collaborators had been released.

A similar evolution in which sanctions decreed shortly after the liberation were mitigated, can be seen in the financial prosecution of enemy nationals and suspects. In August 1944, a Decree-law was issued that allowed enemy property to be sequestered in order to create a collateral for damages caused by enemy subjects to the State's patrimony. However, for Jewish persons of Austrian or German nationality who had fled their home country in the 1930s, the sequestration measure had a perverse effect: the abolition of the Nazi racial laws after the war implied that these persons regained their original nationality, which meant that they were considered enemy subjects after the liberation. It wasn't until January 1947 that the Belgian legislator foresaw the possibility of lifting a sequestration for enemy nationals who had actually supported the allied cause. From January 1945 on, sequestration measures could also apply to (Belgian) persons suspected of having compromised the external security of the Belgian State which sharply increased the number of files that were opened by the Sequestration Office. By the end of 1948 however, it was decided that the administration would only actively treat 12,399 files, in which the Belgian State sued collaborators by presenting itself as the injured party in order to obtain compensations from the accused. The files of the former Sequestration Office are conserved by the National Archives (Cuvelier repository) and are accessible via an alphabetical file-card series.²² In practice, names will have to be looked up by an archivist.

Epilogue

When contemplating the main body of archival sources with information on individuals during both world wars, it's hard to draw any general conclusions except for the inevitable commonplace that war (and its aftermath) is actually a catalyst of archive production rather than a synonym for archive destruction. Some general distinctions between both periods can be made, but they will hardly come as a surprise. Compared to the First World War, archive production in the World War II-era is more voluminous: on the one hand, it reflects a global evolution of increasing administrative control or regulation in an ever more complex society, but it also shows that the German occupation during World War II had permeated the Belgian society more thoroughly, which is shown by the phenomenon of collaboration with the occupant. At the same time, a number of archives dating from the First World War allow for

²² MARÉCHAL G., "Vijanden en verdachten. Het archief van het Sekwester na de Tweede Wereldoorlog", in: ART J., FRANCOIS L., *Docendo discimus. Liber amicorum Romain van Eeno*, Gent, 1999.

more search possibilities than a simple name search, which often remains the only way to “navigate” through World War II-archives. This increased accessibility is sometimes due to the archive production itself, but also to the fact that virtually all archives dating from the First World War have nowadays been inventoried or disclosed in such a way that more search options become possible. This is of course where the archivist comes into play by making archives accessible so that anyone can consult them without needing his or her help. Yet, if the ultimate (and paradoxical) aim is to become superfluous, it seems very unlikely that any archivist will ever succeed in achieving this goal, given the complex nature of archives and their intricate connections that require a lot of explaining. But then again, there’s a French saying that goes: *point n’est besoin de réussir pour persévérer...*



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