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“Guests of the nation”
or “guest workers”?
Belgian refugees in
Great Britain, 1914–1918

The First World War sundered a Europe that had already been heaving under the tensions between its monarchies before. Once Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia, Russia, France and Germany joined the hostilities in quick succession. On August 4th, 1914, German troops marched into Belgium (see Lloyd 2002, 51ff.) – a decision that was to trigger a population movement of unimagined dimensions. The acts of war, sieges and bombardments already drove the people from their home towns to the coast before the month was out. Tens of thousands were stranded in Antwerp without fixed abodes or supplies. In view of the hopeless situation, Great Britain – Belgium’s ally who had entered the war after the German invasion there – agreed to evacuate some of the refugees to its realm. A ship connection set up in September had already conveyed 10,000 people to Great Britain in its very first month. The taking of Antwerp in October finally triggered a true exodus, with nearly one million people seeking refuge in the Netherlands. As the space on the British ships was no longer anywhere near enough to transport all those eager to emigrate, additional connections had to be established (see Holmes 1988, 87; Amara 2004, 6ff.). Between September 20th and October 24th, alone, over 35,000 Belgians arrived in Great Britain by way of Folkestone. The number of refugees then grew to 210,000 in the course of 1915 (see Amara 2004, 15).¹ The evacuation of these people was without precedent in the history of Europe.²

In Great Britain, the Belgian refugees were classed as “alien friends” (as opposed to “alien enemies”) by the 1914 Aliens Restrictions Act (see Holmes 1988, 94).³ Besides proving that one was not a citizen of an enemy nation, one first of all needed to have lost one’s home because of the war, secondly needed to be “of good character”⁴, and thirdly had to pass a medical check-up, i.e. not pose a health risk for the British population.⁵ If all three criteria were met, one would be accepted on the island as a “Belgian refugee”.

On the station platforms in London these refugees, arriving from the coastal towns in overcrowded trains, were enthusiastically welcomed by relief organizations and throngs of people in the summer and autumn of 1914. They came to symbolize the brutality and ruthlessness of the enemy, Germany. Reports about the refugees were full of sympathy, but also not without a slight shudder – encountering, as one did, the reality of a war that had not yet reached Great Britain herself. “...one saw people who had been days under fire and in cellars, others having had no food for days, one woman having exchanged her wedding ring for a crust of bread for her children.”⁶ These stories, told and heard directly on the platform, became part of the war propaganda which, after 1914, quickly integrated the case for the alliance as well as the flow of refugees in its narration of the relationships between European states. Great Britain therein stylized herself as Belgium’s “historical protectress”⁷, casting the refugees both as heroes and victims of the Great War. Constantly recurring elements of this heroic tale were the “gallant opposition” by those Belgians who had staged a resistance to the German invasion, the terror spread amongst the civilian population by the German

troops, and the escape of the resistance fighters, “driven from every refuge by the fear inspired by the enemy’s method of warfare”⁸.

The solidarity with these refugees and the government’s and people’s willingness to help were closely linked with the role of the Belgian resistance against the German army. The refugees became a symbol for the suffering of “little Belgium”, who had sacrificed herself to keep the German army from marching through. “Bravo Belgium!” ran a *Punch* headline in August 1914, celebrating the heroic but hardly promising struggle of the Belgian troops as a triumph of culture over German savagery.⁹ The “gallant opposition”¹⁰ mounted by Belgium became a heroic yet doomed attempt to stop the German army in the name of Western Civilization, and established Great Britain’s moral obligation to accept the refugees. As early as September 1914, the *Times* almost routinely wrote about “German atrocities”, and the Belgians as “victims of German barbarity”.¹¹ In the context of these reports, everyone was now able to come up with their very own contribution to the war effort on the “Home Front”, for example by engagement in aid organizations, but first and foremost by welcoming Belgian refugees in one’s own home. Whoever helped in this manner could simultaneously distance him- or herself from the “barbarity” of Germany.¹² The refugees were declared “guests of the nation” who had a rightful claim to the hospitality of the British populace.¹³ To look after them became “(the) country’s obligation of honour”¹⁴ in the summer of 1914.

One of those who packed their lives in as little luggage as possible and set out for Great Britain in the winter of 1914/15 was the remarkable Laure Vanderstichele. Born 1871 in Terwagne in the Province of Liège,¹⁵ she was one of the first Belgian women to have visited a university.¹⁶ When the war broke out she lived in Brussels, freshly divorced from her husband,¹⁷ with her elder daughters Paule and Madeleine enrolled at university in Ghent.¹⁸ News were spread secretly on paper shopping bags in German-occupied Brussels. This is where Laure found the information that Bedford College for Women at the University of London offered free study courses for refugees. Unable to tell if this was actually the case—a letter smuggled to London had remained unanswered—she took the future of her daughters into her own hands so that neither the war nor the Germans would determine it. She told the German occupation authorities that she urgently needed to join her husband in Amsterdam, who was supposedly dying, was issued with a travel permit under the proviso to return, and set out with her daughters and minimal luggage – some clothing, but also needle, thread, scissors and leftover bits of fabric. ▶ Fig. 1

In a letter to her parents, Laure described the view of her war-torn country, which she initially crossed by boat on the way to Antwerp, of the great number of wooden crosses marking hastily dug graves, of destroyed palaces and estates, blown-up bridges and bombed-out cities. In the also destroyed Antwerp, she was forced to discover that there was no longer a direct boat to the interim stop of Flushing,¹⁹ but found one that took her to Hansweert, halfway there. From here, Laure, Paule and Madeleine reached the seaport by train, hoping to cross to Great



Fig. 1 The devastation of war in Mechelen after the German army's invasion, September 1914

| Royal Museum of the Army and of Military History, Brussels; Nr Inv KLM-MRA: B-1-282-9

Britain. Despite dwindling funds, Laure booked first class cabins wherever possible because, as she wrote to her parents, one had not quite sacrificed one's standards yet.²⁰ She cheerfully told them about the good company the journey proceeded in, but also did not omit the thorough searches she and her daughters were apparently subjected to by German soldiers repeatedly – and writes of the deadly silence that came over everyone as they realized that their small boat was navigating between floating mines.

In Flushing she managed to jump queues of several hundred would-be emigrants before the Belgian and British consulates and book cabins for herself and her daughters in time. The conditions on the sea journey in a very small ship with strong winds, sub-zero temperatures and the risk of armed mines made her heart race in fear. But for her daughters she hid her worry behind a laugh – or at least until seasickness also took a hold of her. ▶ Fig. 2

They reached Great Britain via Folkestone, where the obligatory medical check-up had to be passed,²¹ and then took a train to London.²² Volunteer committees welcomed the small group of travellers at the station along with other arrivals from Belgium for further “distribution”. Here, where the tension of the voyage could be shed, initial euphoria was followed by disillusionment: In London they were no more than three amongst tens of thousands looking for accommodation – and their money was also gone, apart from a reserve for emergencies. London



Fig. 2 Jostling for places on a boat from Ostend to Great Britain, October 1914 | Royal Museum of the Army and of Military History, Brussels; Nr Inv KLM-MRA: 201271754

appeared dark and forbidding. Their first abode was a community hall, packed with provisional beds, almost all of them occupied by women and children. Conversations with earlier arrivals, who reported about the helplessness of aid organizations that were only able to do very little for the refugees as private accommodation had become scarce, strengthened Laure's resolve to find a livelihood for herself as quickly as possible. But she continued to nurture the hope that her stay would only be brief.²³ So she once more set out for London with her daughters, with references and the remaining thirty shillings and five Belgian francs in her pocket: to the Bedford College for Women, from which she had expected so much for her children. In vain, as it initially appeared – because the rumours about free university places had indeed only been rumours.²⁴ She still found pragmatic and unbureaucratic help: The director and her team assisted the family, organized accommodation for Laure with a wealthy spinster in Hampstead, while Paule and Madeleine found shelter with a doctor in Devonshire Place. The daughters actually managed to learn English in the space of six months – a prerequisite for enrolling at the college after all.²⁵ ▶ Fig. 3

As Laure Vanderstichele's story already suggests, the initial enthusiasm, the spirited private help for the "guests of the nation" (tens of thousands of Belgians had been taken in by families and singles) began to wane as the war dragged on, also in view of own losses and needs. That the heroes of the resistance against "German barbarity" turned out to be quite ordinary people, who in no way lived up

to the heroic images conveyed by war propaganda, disappointed the helpers. One expected the Belgians also to express gratefulness for their accommodation by adjusting to the cultural givens.²⁶ Instead, the hosts complained about the inadequate adaptability of their guests, for example an alleged lack of hygiene: The Belgian refugees were said to entertain other sanitary concepts than the British, and not uncommonly be quite unclean.²⁷ An excerpt from a diary summarizes the growing reservations about the “guests of the nation”: “... the Belgians were not grateful. They won’t do a stroke of work, and grumble at everything, and their morals ... ! It may be true enough that Belgium saved Europe, but ... save us from the Belgians! As far as I am concerned, Belgianitis has quite abated.”²⁸

The private offers of help and accommodation, still received in vast numbers in the beginning of the war, already started to ebb away drastically by late autumn of 1914. Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, who had hesitated to involve the state in the assistance for the “absolutely destitute refugees” and passed that responsibility on to the War Refugees Committee²⁹ (WRC),³⁰ now had to admit that the latter had reached its limits as a private philanthropic organization, despite the selfless labours of its many unpaid helpers.³¹ The Local Government Board (LGB) took over the entire complex of admitting and registering the refugees.³² It was responsible for their initial reception and provided immediate support for the particularly needy. The LGB ensured their supply with food and clothing in large reception camps.³³ It was most of all to keep these reception camps working that the government felt compelled to invest ever greater funds in refugee



Fig. 3 Laure Vanderstichele’s registration card where the picture has been obviously inserted later. All relocations had to be reported to the police and / or Aliens Registration Office and were noted in the card.

| Imperial War Museum, London

relief by way of the LGB. Especially because more and more refugees returned to these camps, instead of leaving them, as the war progressed and private offers of help diminished in number.³⁴

The government hence resolved as early as October 1914 to rely on refugees for covering the demand for labour that was becoming increasingly tangible by then. The Belgians were to be provided with opportunities to work without putting them in competition with native workers. This was most easily achieved in the understaffed arms industry.³⁵ Belgians willing to take a job were only to be hired, however, as long as no British worker could be found for it.³⁶ The arms industry started employing Belgian refugees in ammunition factories on this basis from the beginning of 1915. Faced with the dogged trench warfare at the western front and great consumption of ammunition and grenades, the search for additional armaments workers became a matter of the “gravest urgency”³⁷. The potentials provided by the recruitment of refugees who were already in the country were quickly exhausted. The reason was that many Belgian men who were fit to bear arms were called back to the front by the Belgian government at the same time. The Home Office and Board of Trade therefore tried to fight the labour shortage by recruiting additional Belgian workers on the continent. The transport of Belgian refugees from the Netherlands to Great Britain started at the end of 1914. Notions of charity and humanitarian refugee work gave way to the view that the Belgians’ employment was an economic necessity in the war economy. The refugees were still written and spoken of as “guests of the nation”, to be sure. But their role in the wartime economy had long since changed: They had been invested with an economic usefulness and turned into an important factor for the war. By July 1917, hardly any Belgian workers were left unemployed in Great Britain, and only wounded soldiers, and old men and women were out of work.³⁸ Over half of the 57,000 Belgians registered as “employed” in England in 1918 were working in the arms industry.³⁹ The guests of the nation had turned into guest workers.

The problems weren’t long in coming. The integration of the refugees in their new work environment proved difficult, given the large number of recruitments. Many employers feared that the alleged bad habits of the Belgians could catch on in England, for example their cigarette breaks, which were considered particularly unproductive. Unionists in turn accused the Belgians of working too fast, which was seen to jeopardize the achievements of their unions. The course of the war ultimately helped to solve such problems: As the great demand rendered even the opening of new factories profitable, it was only consistent in view of the integration problems to concentrate the Belgians in groups and staff entire plants with Belgian personnel. They were a symbol of Belgian self-help in times of war, demonstrated productive involvement in it, and enabled the problem of integrating a large number of “foreign” workers to be solved.⁴⁰

The “guests of the nation”-rhetoric did also not keep the government from starting to plan the return of Belgian refugees from as early as 1916. A committee for preparing this repatriation was set up in 1917. The objective resided in sending the



Fig. 4 Laure Vanderstichele's 1940 passport, issued by the South African Union | Imperial War Museum, London

refugees back immediately after the liberation of Belgium, even if the hostilities in Europe should not have come to an end by then. The government feared that refugees could turn into “undesirable aliens” after the war, who would only be a financial burden for the state.⁴¹ The repatriation of approximately 170,000 Belgians was never seen as problematic. The work of the government and charities was thought to enable them to establish new livelihoods in their accustomed homelands with the savings accumulated in Great Britain.⁴² Between December 1918 and May 1919, British authorities financed the repatriation of over 65,000 “guests of the nation”, while others had returned at their own expense. Two months later, almost all Belgians had left the island, according to the Home Office.⁴³ ▶ Fig. 4

And Laure Vanderstichele? She remained in London after the war and had her youngest daughter Luce join her there in 1919. She managed to establish herself in the clothing industry—the needles, thread and fabrics she had salvaged in her travel luggage from Belgium to England became the cornerstones of her career: Many major London stores bought her designs, and she employed twelve seamstresses in the workshop studio in Clapham she rented in addition to her apartment. In 1939 she fled from the war again, this time to another continent, and lived in the South African Union with her daughter Paule for almost 20 years, where she started to paint, had successful exhibitions and where she sold her works. It was not until the mid-50s, as the tensions in South Africa continued to grow, that Laure had to set out once again for another country that promised greater safety and more of a future, due to her links with Nelson Mandela and the political developments in connection with the 1956 Treason Trial (her daughter Paule had lost her professorship at the university):⁴⁴ She returned to Great Britain, where she passed away in London in 1967, presumably aged 95.⁴⁵

I Biographical fates

- 1 The Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10882/344019, Reparation Committee Interim Report dated 04/07/1917 counted 172,298 Belgian refugees in Great Britain. Remigration and onward migration to France then caused their numbers to fall to 170,000 in the subsequent years of the war.
- 2 Over 1.5 million Belgians left their country in the summer of 1914, seeking asylum in the Netherlands, France and Great Britain. More than 600,000 of them would remain in their countries of refuge for the entire war (see Amara 2004, 7).
- 3 As long as they actually were Belgians and not possibly German “spies” with an interest in state secrets. See Hansard, HC Deb. vol. 65, 05/08/1914, col. 1986, col.1989.
- 4 Meaning that they were meant to be able to provide proof of their integrity.
- 5 First Report of the Departmental Committee ..., Cd. 7750, 1914, p. 4.
- 6 IWM 86/48/1, diary Alice Essington-Nelson. Essington-Nelson, born 1877, helped to “distribute” the new arrivals from the station to the reception centres and camps in London as a member of the Catholic Women’s League (CWL).
- 7 See Powell 1920, 9. This always also served to underscore the necessity of Great Britain’s entry into the war.
- 8 First Report of the Departmental Committee ..., Cd. 7750, 1914, p. 4.
- 9 See The Punch, 12/08/1914 and The Punch, 26/08/1914.
- 10 See amongst others in the First Report of the Departmental Committee, Cd. 7750, 1914, p.4.
- 11 The talk of “German atrocities” and “victims of German barbarity” became a much-quoted topos of the war reporting (see The Times, 07/09/1914). These charges were denied on the German side (see Horne/Kramer 2001).
- 12 In December 1914, the Asquith government established a committee to investigate German war crimes under Lord Bryce (see Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages, Cd. 7894 of Session 1914-1915, 1915, p. 60f.).
- 13 See Herbert Samuel’s speech on 09/09/1914: Herbert Samuel, Hansard, HC Deb. vol. 66, 09/09/1914 col. 558.
- 14 The Times, 14/09/1914.
- 15 Date of birth as in the documents at the Imperial War Museum. Laure Vanderstichele’s granddaughter Shirley Hinkly says her grandmother was born in 1869.
- 16 She was enrolled in natural science, but no proof of her graduation could be found (see Simon-Van der Mersch, 1982).
- 17 These and other personal details about Laure are taken from a report written by her granddaughter Shirley Hinkly in 1995. Shirley was the daughter of Laure’s youngest daughter Luce, who was also brought to Great Britain after the war (IWM, documents 06/1181, Shirley Hinkly, Freedom for a Family).
- 18 Another daughter, described as “Baby Luce” in Laure’s letter to her parents, must have been around 7 years old at the time of the escape, according to Shirley Hinkly (IWM, documents 06/1181, letter by Laure van der Stichele to her parents, 14/02/1915).
- 19 A small harbour town at the mouth of the Westerschelde river, point of departure for boats to Great Britain.
- 20 IWM, documents 06/1181, letter by Laure van der Stichele to her parents, 14/02/1915.
- 21 The medical check-up was one of the requirements of the 1914 Aliens Act, as was the registration of every refugee with the police authorities, who also needed to be informed if refugees moved to another town or flat (see Holmes 1988; Torpey 2001, 258f.).
- 22 In a compartment that was allegedly locked for their own safety, with the shutters closed as a safeguard against possible attacks by German zeppelins (IWM, documents 06/1181, letter by Laure van der Stichele to her parents, 14/02/1915).
- 23 “So here we are, in England – but for how long. They seem certain here that it will all be over by the spring.” IWM, documents 06/1181, letter by Laure van der Stichele to her parents, 14/02/1915.
- 24 A corresponding letter sent to the college by Laure has been lost in the turmoil of war in Belgium.
- 25 Madeleine graduated in 1918 while her sister Paule took her Bachelor of Science in 1917, but stayed at the university for her Master in 1922. University of London, Graduates List, Graduates until December 1926 (<http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk/our-collections/special-collections/archives-manuscripts/university-of-london-students-1836-1934> - accessed on 27/05/2016).
- 26 First Report of the Departmental Committee appointed by the President of the Local Government Board to consider and report on questions arising in connection with the reception and employment of the Belgian refugees in this country. Cd. 7750, 1914, p. 43: “How Belgians should acknowledge British hospitality”.
- 27 46046 Viscount Gladstone Papers, vol. 62, Correspondence of Lord Gladstone with other Members of his Family, 1875–1927, Helen Gladstone to Gladstone, 13 October 1914. Initial exalted romanticism quickly gave way to xenophobic anti-

- Belgian tendencies. The claims were largely from the same hostile stock-in-trade as the charges against other “aliens”: concerns of a hygienic nature, loose sexual morals, laziness, dishonesty and politically questionable attitudes that were all explained with underlying cultural, national or racist assumptions.
- 28 IWM, 97/25/1, diary Miss Mary Coules.
- 29 The WRC established in August 1914 was the largest private charity to look after these “absolutely destitute refugees” from Belgium and elsewhere, and pooled the assistance offered by local committees (see Cahalan 1982, 20; Purseigle 2007, 437).
- 30 “We all have the greatest sympathy with these destitute refugees from Belgium for which we feel as much as we do at this moment, but there is a certain number of funds which are being raised by private actions for the purpose, and I would rather wait and see how that works out ...”, H. H. Asquith, Hansard, HC Deb. vol. 66, 31/08/1914, H. H. col. 367.
- 31 See Herbert Samuel, Hansard, HC Deb. Vol. 66, 09/09/1914, col. 558.
- 32 The Local Government Board established in 1871 was an administrative body that took over the previous tasks of the Home Office and Privy Council in healthcare and local government, as well as all the functions of the Poor Law Board, which was abolished at the same time (see Harris 2004, 47ff.).
- 33 IWM, BEL 12/4, WRC: Notes on arrangement between LGB and Refugees Committee, 09/09/1914.
- 34 The largest of these camps were at Alexandra Palace (see Harris 2005) and Earl’s Court (see Powell 1920). The building and grounds of Alexandra Palace, built in 1873 as a public leisure and entertainment centre in North London, were used to accommodate and feed refugees. The building complex of the former Earl’s Court Exhibition Center similarly offered many Belgians their first accommodation as “Earl’s Court Camp”. The LB also rented entire hotels, and all larger vacant buildings were reviewed to determine their suitability for accommodating refugees. Unused ice rinks and similar premises were rented to ensure their initial reception.
- 35 Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10738/261921/698, Memorandum: Belgian Refugees: General Arrangements in the United Kingdom, July 1917.
- 36 And not even at worse conditions or lower wages than generally customary (First Report of the Departmental..., Cd. 7750, 1914, p. 9: Conditions for the Employment of Refugees).
- 37 Dt. Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10738/261921/394, Local Government Board and Under Secretary of State, Home Office, 11/03/1915.
- 38 Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10738/261921/698, Memorandum: Belgian Refugees: General Arrangements in the United Kingdom, July 1917, p. 4.
- 39 PRO, HO 45/10809/311425/81, S. Clarke (M.I.5), Lists of aliens approved for munitions work up to 31 January 1918 and during January 1918; IWM BEL 7/1, Files on employment of Belgian refugees supplied by Ministry of Labour, 12/04/1918.
- 40 There were several of these Belgian factories on British soil, most of them established by Belgian entrepreneurs, for example the “Pelabon Works” in Twickenham or the “Kryn and Lahy Factories” in Letchworth. In the view of the unions, the resulting segregation of British and Belgian workers also helped to eliminate social tensions in the production process, without which the individual groups were thought to be able to work much more productively and efficiently (see Cahalan 1982, 267).
- 41 Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10882/344019/7, Report of Repatriation Committee, November 1918.
- 42 Public Record Office (PRO), HO 45/10882/344019, Repatriation Committee, Interim Report, 04/07/1917. Remigration was nowhere near as easy as the British government thought, however. Large parts of Belgium, for example in the region of Flanders, had been devastated by the war and left uninhabitable. In the winter of 1919/20, the region around Ypres, Diksmuide, Nieuport and Dinant only featured as few as 25,000 habitable buildings for 45,000 returning families. The former “Belgian refugees” partly lived in the trenches and built provisional accommodations from the debris left behind by the armies (see Smets 1985, 169ff.).
- 43 As opposed to France, were many former exiles settled permanently after the war because of the heavy war losses and the underpopulation resulting from the lower population growth (see Amara 2004, 32).
- 44 IWM, documents 06/1181, Shirley Hinkly, Freedom for a Family.
- 45 Excerpt from the City of London’s Register of Deaths, accessible at <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>, (accessed on 27/05/2016). According to her granddaughter she would have even been 97 years old.

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