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# Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Belgium)

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**This article discusses the war experiences of Belgian soldiers: how did they endure four years of war and how did the Army Command keep up morale and maintain discipline? Insights into the morale of soldiers during the war can be found in the military authorities' morale reports, which were composed by reading soldiers' correspondences. The attitudes and behaviour of soldiers can also be analysed through the judicial records of the military court.**

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## Introduction

The existence of universal [war enthusiasm](#) upon the outbreak of the First World War has been

debated and nuanced for some time. However, in 1914 the belligerent countries were of course not aware of the disastrous four years that would follow. Therefore, an initial combativeness was indeed present among many soldiers and civilians. The same can be said for Belgium, where the indignation about the German violation of [neutrality](#) and the German invasion of 4 August resulted in a patriotic fervour never felt before. [Belgian soldiers](#) found themselves in a different situation than in other belligerent countries: Belgium was almost completely [occupied](#) and liberation was thus the main reason for fighting. This article will address the experiences, perseverance, morale, and disobedience of Belgian soldiers over the course of four war years.

## Gallant Little Belgium

In the days prior to the declaration of war, conscripted soldiers had already been called up and sent off at train stations by family and other spectators, singing the national anthem, *La Brabançonne*, and popular nationalistic songs such as *De Vlaamse Leeuw* (The Flemish Lion). When the reservists arrived in Brussels, singing and waving their hats and handkerchiefs, the gathered crowd broke out into loud applause.<sup>[1]</sup> Many men soon voluntarily joined the Belgian army. Most volunteers came from cities, because the threat of war already influenced employment and due to the prominence of patriotism in urban areas. Nevertheless, men of all ages and social classes enlisted: collectives of brothers, friends, neighbours and colleagues, the “Belgium-minded”, Walloon and Flemish men, even socialists who were generally critical of elevated patriotic rhetoric.<sup>[2]</sup> Of the estimated 200,000 men that went to war in August, 18,000 were volunteers.<sup>[3]</sup>

When [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) addressed the Parliament in Brussels on the day Belgium entered the war, hailed by a jubilant crowd both outside and inside Parliament, he stated that [Germany](#) would meet “a stubborn resistance” and concluded with the following: “I have faith in our destiny. A country that defends itself requires respect for all. This country does not perish. God will be with us in this just cause. Long live independent Belgium.”<sup>[4]</sup> During the first months, Belgian soldiers did the best they could defending the fortresses of Liège, Namur, and Antwerp, earning the nickname “Gallant Little Belgium”. Nevertheless, the army was too ill-prepared in terms of equipment, strategy, and trained soldiers. In October/November the army had to withdraw with high [infantry losses](#) behind the River Yser in West Flanders, where they remained until 1918. Morale rapidly began to fade.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Maintaining Morale

### Soldiers’ Endurance

The Belgian situation differed from that of the other belligerent countries. Apart from the marshy plain behind the Yser that was the Belgian front, the country was occupied. As mentioned above, the Belgian’s main reason for fighting was liberation. Although the army was certainly involved in several

battles and raids during the war, from November 1914 to April 1918 Belgians mainly secured their position. The fighting during the invasion and the liberation of the country was the deadliest. The conditions at the [front](#), in the flooded areas around the Yser, proved to be one of the main causes of disease, injury, and death during the war. Because of the occupation, it was impossible for Belgian soldiers to return home when on leave, therefore the majority did not see their families for four years. Financial restrictions also limited travel: in the early years of the war soldiers' pay was very low. Other means of contact with the home front were difficult. [Letters](#) had to be sent by detour, for example via [Holland](#) and [Great Britain](#), and were subjected to military [censorship](#). Trench [newspapers](#) provided some news from soldiers' hometown villages, but, because of the occupation, this was not very reassuring. These physical and psychological deprivations clearly influenced the morale of Belgian soldiers, who had a difficult task to endure.

Despite the hardship, many soldiers continued fighting. As said, fear and concern for family and towns in occupied Belgium were the primary motivations. A related motivation was hatred of the German occupier, intensified by stories of German [atrocities](#) in Belgium. Feelings of vengeance sustained Belgian soldiers. The decision of Albert I, who took personal command of the army, and [Elisabeth, Queen, consort of Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1876-1965\)](#), to stay near the front also provided support for the soldiers. The king's concern for his troops contributed to his nearly mythical status. Religiosity was also an aid, and faith was often present in soldiers' diaries and letters. Naturally, not all soldiers were or behaved that religiously, as can be seen in trench newspapers which urged soldiers to turn to God. Another important factor in soldiers' endurance was friendship. Although there were certainly frictions between different groups within the army, comradeship predominated. Soldiers faced the same experiences, comforted each other when they felt homesick, relieved the tension with jokes and, very importantly, depended on each other in critical situations.

Besides these factors, there was also a continuation of cultural practices and social norms that existed before the war. [Masculinity](#), courageous behaviour, duty, and honour also contributed to soldiers' determination.<sup>[6]</sup> Because of these notions, soldiers were willing to undergo deprivations, but also needed to feel that their efforts were meaningful. They expected that their endeavours would be remunerated with respect, acknowledgement, and justification from both Army Command and the home front. Apart from these reasons, soldiers were of course also forced to continue. Many obeyed, but others refused throughout the war, as will be addressed below.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Measuring Morale

The factors addressed above contributed to soldiers' perseverance but, as briefly mentioned, as soon as the army established itself behind the Yser, it became more challenging for soldiers to uphold their optimism. The first months of fighting had been very hard, but the long days without much action that followed were difficult as well. Discipline and morale thus became important points of concern for the military authorities. When examining the diaries and letters of soldiers, their feelings and reactions were often alike, but it is difficult to perceive a simultaneous attitude or

disposition at specific moments throughout the war. Every soldier was different and personal factors often played an important role; their mood frequently changed from day-to-day. However, sometimes they did describe the morale within the army in a general way. However, the number of available diaries and letters is limited. Reports on the morale of soldiers from the military authorities – dispatched monthly during the last years of the war – offer some additional overarching insights into soldiers' attitudes. Correspondence was read to monitor soldiers' moods and activities. However, soldiers knew that their letters were checked, and therefore probably did not write everything that was on their mind. Soldiers often complained about these measures, to the extent that commandants were sent to visit *la Censure*, so they could inform their soldiers about the high security and trustworthiness of the service.<sup>[8]</sup>

The reports showed a fluctuating morale. The first report that can be found dated from June 1915, which stated that the troops showed feelings of discouragement and lassitude, which manifested itself for some time. The first winter had been harsh, there was a shortage of almost everything, and soldiers were disappointed that the predicted spring offensive had not occurred. Confidence that their country would soon be liberated diminished, and the thought of another winter in the trenches was feared.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1916 a report ensured that the morale of the troops was excellent, although there was again disappointment that an announced offensive was not carried out; the same had happened in October the year before. The report warned that if the soldiers' expectations were disappointed again, their morale would be seriously affected. The slightest progress in Belgium would give them an incomparable boost: "In summary, a depression is looming, but is still superficial."<sup>[10]</sup> In the winter of 1917 several reports mentioned that the morale of the men was severely low, caused by their own physical deprivations, as well as the concerns for their parents given recent bombardments. Officers were urged to act against the depression.<sup>[11]</sup> The reports of 1918 showed an improvement of morale, mainly because of allied offensives and achievements, but also the prospect of action of their own. However, a report also recounted a letter of a soldier who wrote about his comrades, who were talking of deserting to the enemy. He also mentioned that in one night 58 men from his division deserted.<sup>[12]</sup>

Apart from these general fluctuations, every report discussed several matters that soldiers consistently complained about, and which also affected their morale. A report of 1917 demonstrates that after three years of war many problems that were present in earlier reports had still not been resolved. In almost every report, the main complaint concerned the lack of proper nourishment. For example, the scarcity of potatoes and the dislike of rice and red beans is addressed, as well as the preparation of the **food**. Proper clothing was another complaint; soldiers stated that their clothes were still not sufficient, especially during the freezing winter. The trenches did little to provide shelter or warmth during low temperatures and the winter and spring of 1917 were the coldest in 30 years. Soldiers suffered from frostbite, and their food and water froze. The snow and clear nights made them more visible to the enemy, and therefore the fear of being shot intensified. Wet conditions in the trenches had gradually been improved due to better drainage and more waterproof footwear, but the

weather still made life very difficult for soldiers. In the report of 1917 there are still remarks about the poor construction of the barracks. Soldiers criticized hygiene within the camps – dirt and vermin were omnipresent – as well as the medical care and the harshness of the medical staff.<sup>[13]</sup>

More and more reports mentioned grievances from Flemish soldiers concerning the dominance of the French language within the army, although the army consisted of 64.3 percent of soldiers whose first language was Dutch or who did not speak French at all. Without knowledge of the French language, it was difficult to obtain certain posts within [artillery](#), communication, and aviation. Many Flemish soldiers thus remained in the lower ranks, particularly the infantry, and were more exposed to danger.<sup>[14]</sup> Although not always carried out, measures were taken to make the army bilingual.<sup>[15]</sup> Walloon combatants, who thought the *Flamingants* received too much attention and did not find it useful to learn Dutch, at times protested in return. The culmination of the Flemish movement came in March 1918 with a series of demonstrations, often attended by groups of 100 to 400 men displaying Flemish slogans. Though the language issue caused discontent, the majority of Flemings still believed themselves to be Belgian and were willing to fight for their country.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Improving Morale: From Food to Self-Consciousness

The Army Command tried to rectify these complaints. Besides the most urgent measures mentioned above, soldiers also longed for intellectual and recreational distractions to fight boredom. With the support of Queen Elisabeth, around 250,000 books were sent from neutral countries to the libraries at the front. There were also efforts made to develop the army's institutionalised regimental schooling for illiterates. Many young men felt that because of the war their secondary, higher, or professional education was interrupted and demanded continuation of their schooling during their service. The supply of sporting equipment such as footballs and boots also improved morale and Albert I contributed to the purchase of the equipment. Football matches were organized, which he and Elisabeth frequently attended. Apart from these diversions, "luxury goods" also became easier to obtain. Food shortage and quality remained a problem, but from 1915 onwards, military shops were established to provide men with products so they did not have to buy these from independent vendors who charged exorbitant prices.<sup>[17]</sup> Luxuries were provided on holidays, as one soldier wrote: "For Christmas, we received chocolate, 25 cigarettes and jam, plums, apples and pears (...). Attached to the chocolate is a little note, which says: Soldiers of the Yser, your Fatherland is proud of you."<sup>[18]</sup>

The Army Command took steps to strengthen soldiers' self-consciousness and permeate them with military values, as a measure to maintain the inviolability of the front. Commanders had to reinforce the morale of the troops by giving them confidence, and at the same time discipline them by imposing military norms. They aimed to cultivate an awareness of earlier honourable actions, military valour, duty, patriotism, collaboration with allies, and the spirit of sacrifice.<sup>[19]</sup> This was undertaken, for example, by the bestowing of military decorations, which were granted after brave actions on the

battlefield. Not only was the soldier's self-confidence intensified, but this also gave meaning and value to actions, which inspired and motivated soldiers. Courageous behaviour and military virtues were rewarded and sanctified, publicly acknowledged in front of other soldiers and in official documents of the Army Command. The public affirmation of desirable conduct suggests both its collective normative function and the validation of the self-consciousness of the individual combatant. When examining the writings of soldiers, they mainly did perceive the bestowal of decorations as impressive, and were indeed proud of their receipt.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Refusal and Obedience

The attitudes and morale of soldiers can also be analysed through judicial records of the military court. The most common crimes tried by the court martial were insubordination (sometimes together with insults or violence against superiors) and desertion. Of the estimated 6,200 arrests which were actually prosecuted between 1914 and 1919, 84.4 percent concerned insubordination and desertion, of which 40.2 percent insubordination and 35.8 percent desertion, and 8.4 percent the combination of the two. This was followed by violence, insults and revolt, constituting 8.3 percent of the cases. The most extreme measures were mainly taken in the first two years of the war. 12 soldiers were sentenced to death, 7 in September and October 1914 during the war of movement, 3 in May and July 1915 and 2 in 1918. The executed soldiers were charged with insubordination, abandonment of post, desertion, and murder.<sup>[21]</sup> It is possible that the executions in the first two years were partly to create a deterrent. This is indicated in the documented words of General [De Ceuninck \(1858-1935\)](#) in 1915:

We are approaching the bad season, and life in the trenches will be difficult; already certain transgressions of the mind are manifesting themselves; it is imperative to curb this evil through a severe example. From this point of view, the results obtained in May have been very satisfying.<sup>[22]</sup>

Regardless of the severity of the penalty, the punishment of soldiers was a public affair, probably intended to set an example. In several orders of the day, descriptions of the deed and according punishment were given, during three roll calls a day the penalty was announced, and some of the executions were attended by the soldier's regiment.<sup>[23]</sup> Apart from the most extreme cases, discipline during the First World War was perhaps even less strict than during peacetime. Military courts sentenced approximately 2.24 percent of Belgian soldiers each year, which was substantially lower than the 3.6 percent average witnessed between 1900 and 1913.<sup>[24]</sup>

Both desertion and insubordination (in front of the enemy) became more frequent from 1916/1917 onwards. War-weariness, boredom, and homesickness were the most important factors. Soldiers longed for peace, often expressed in diaries during festivities or special occasions. A soldier wrote on 31 December 1917, "Let us hope that this new year brings us the peace we so fervently wish."<sup>[25]</sup> Already during the first weeks of fighting, many soldiers deserted and went to the neutral Netherlands

where they stayed until the end of the war. Over the years, the number of desertions would only increase. Desertion was particularly frequent in the winter, especially in 1917, when desertions increased from 435 in November to 1,007 in December.<sup>[26]</sup> The liberation offensive in 1918 also resulted in many desertions: soldiers went missing, only to turn up when the hostilities were over. Desertions were often of limited duration, as soldiers left their unit for a couple of days to meet friends or family in other units, or did not return in time from leave. When soldiers explained their absence, it is noticeable that in the last years they more often mentioned being frightened. For example, one soldier admitted that his brother had recently been killed next to him, after which he was so afraid that he did not have the courage to go into battle and therefore deserted.<sup>[27]</sup> Perhaps it was thought of as a better excuse for their conduct, but it is also possible that fear was no longer regarded as shameful or a sign of weak character, and therefore soldiers felt they could express these feelings.

Desertion to the enemy increased substantially from 1917 onwards, and was a serious problem within the army. The military court was quite intolerant in the evaluation of these soldiers. Reduction of penalty, even when there were extenuating circumstances, was granted far less often than it was for other offences.<sup>[28]</sup> More than 90 percent of these deserters were Flemish soldiers. As mentioned before, the discrimination they experienced as a result of the language issue, and the idea of a new Flanders made possible by Germany, as was propagated by both *Flamingants* and Germans, were reasons to desert. However, this kind of desertion was not very common, as soldiers risked being killed by their own army.<sup>[29]</sup>

Insubordination covered many actions, for example when soldiers had to go to the front lines and did not attend when they were called, or when they refused orders. These two often went together. When one company had to replace another company in the front lines, soldiers often did not turn up. This offence was not included within the military penal code, therefore officers often gave soldiers an order to assemble at a certain time on a certain day, with their equipment. Because this was an order, soldiers who did not turn up could be prosecuted. This resulted in very harsh penalties, such as the executions of 1914/1915, undertaken after soldiers were absent when their company left to the front lines. Insubordination in front of the enemy was even more punished, as it could jeopardize the operation and safety of fellow soldiers. Sentences differed from capital punishments (in most cases not carried out), detentions of 5, 10, 15 years, to life imprisonment.<sup>[30]</sup> Less severe, but nevertheless punished, was the soldier's refusal to do chores, disrespecting military discipline, or undermining the authority of their superior. Soldiers often indicated that they were the ones who did the fighting and therefore were more courageous, as in the example of a soldier who refused to salute his superior. According to the account of the officer: "He looked at me with an evil look, to provoke me", I asked again "Why don't you salute me", on which he answered insolently and arrogantly "Because I don't have to salute you. Because you are a coward and you punished me before with 8 days of prison."<sup>[31]</sup>

remission letters, soldiers used an elevated terminology of military virtues such as courage, duty, comradeship, and fatherland. They emphasised respect and esteem for superiors, a return to hierarchical order and discipline. One soldier received 20 years of detention for insubordination in front of the enemy and several other offences committed between 1915 and 1917. From prison, he wrote a letter to his major, asking if he could return to the battlefield to fulfil, alongside his brothers, his duty to his fatherland. He felt remorse about his lamentable behaviour, wanted to undo his misdeed, to gain the esteem of his superiors again, and submit himself to them. He ended his account with the remark that “he would rather die a thousand times at the river Yser than to stay in prison to the shame and dishonour of everybody,” and signed with “your very humble and very obedient servant”.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Conclusion

Stationed in the only non-occupied part of their country, primarily defending their position, the main challenge of Belgian soldiers was to endure the four years of war. An important reason for the perseverance of many soldiers was fear and concern for their families and towns in occupied Belgium. Other factors contributed as well, for example the commitment of King Albert I and Queen Elisabeth to the soldiers, comradeship, and feeling valued. However, soon after the army retreated behind the Yser, optimism became more difficult to maintain. Reports on the morale of soldiers fluctuated from “excellent” to “feelings of discouragement and lassitude”. Various complaints affected morale, such as the lack of action, the circumstances in the trenches, and inadequate food and clothing. The Army Command tried to improve the most urgent complaints, provide intellectual and recreational distractions, and bestow military decorations. Judicial records show that the most common crimes tried by court martial were insubordination (sometimes together with insults or violence against superiors) and desertion, both of which lead to severe punishment. Regardless of the severity of the penalty, the punishment of soldiers was a public affair, probably to set an example for other soldiers. Both desertion and insubordination (in front of the enemy) became more frequent from 1916/1917 onwards. Soldiers were unwilling to participate in dangerous missions or refused to conform to military discipline. However, as is also visible in these records, some prosecuted or convicted soldiers again conformed to the principles and expectations of Army Command, whether they were sincere or just trying to reduce their sentences.

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## Notes



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