

Historiography 1918-Today (Belgium)

By Nico Wouters

After a promising start, academic historiography of the First World War in Belgium fell silent after 1928. There was nothing that resembled an academic field of World War I studies in Belgium for decades. Two reasons might be the strength of Flemish national historiography and the enduring dominance of the Second World War. A remarkable shift occurred in the late 1990s, leading up to the frantic mobilization in 2014. This shift was not a generational occurrence, but a convergence of separate decisions. This article hypothesizes that the underlying context was the end of the "golden era" of Belgian World War II historiography after the commemorative year 1995. This created the space for an academic field of World War I historiography.

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The First Wave (1918-1928)

As in most belligerent countries, the first Belgian attempts to write histories of the First World War originated in the administrations of wartime propaganda.^[1] In 1915, the [Belgian government](#) created the *Bureau Documentaire Belge* (BDB) in Havre led by lawyer and journalist [Fernand Passelecq](#) (1876-1951). This bureau worked in relative autonomy next to the *Office de la Propagande Belge* (OPB) and the *Service des Relations avec la Presse* (SRP). The essential underlying theme of their work was Belgian victimhood and German [atrocities](#). It is no coincidence that the two most important works published during the war dealt with the German invasion in [Belgium](#): the influential work (translated into four languages) published in 1916 by Belgian sociologist [Fernand Vanlangenhove](#) (1889-1982) about the legend of the *franc-tireurs* and German violence against Belgian civilians during the invasion^[2] and the book by historian [Léon van der Essen](#) (1883-1963), professor at the University of Leuven and head of the political cabinet of the Belgian prime minister during the war.^[3] Both men were high-standing academics, but also heavily embedded in political administration. Some works were written during the war but only published in its immediate wake. Noteworthy publications are: the book by [Alfons Fierens](#) (1881-1921), in which he developed a historical argumentation to counter anti-Belgian Flemish [nationalism](#) and the book by the Liège historian [Herman Vander Linden](#) (1868-1956), in which he used a historical argumentation to support Belgium's post-war territorial claims.^[4]

The bulk of the early works on World War I (WWI) was produced by non-historians: journalists and writers, politicians or scholars from other disciplines such as legal scholars and sociologists. In the first years, this also included published personal accounts of wartime experiences. An important initiative was the *Revue Belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre*

(RBLDA) established in 1924. This journal compiled references and brief critical summaries of relevant published material, both Belgian and foreign.

Contemporary history as an organized academic discipline did not exist in Belgium in 1918. Most historians dealt with earlier time periods. The urgency of WWI pushed some major Belgian historians to temporarily shift their focus to the discipline of contemporary history. Simultaneously, the Belgian state tried to organize the writing of this history to support Belgian diplomatic claims and incorporate the recent experience of the war and occupation in its national history.

In 1919, the Belgian government created the *Commission des Archives de la Guerre* (CAG). Henri Pirenne (1862-1935), arguably Belgium's most important pre-war "national" historian, became president of the CAG. As such, Pirenne spearheaded a large effort to collect sources and archival material. Pirenne also became a member of the official Investigative Commission (under the Ministry of Justice) tackling the topic of German atrocities in 1914 (while the abovementioned Van der Essen served as official Belgian expert advisor during the [Versailles negotiations](#)).

However, for Pirenne and most of his peers, the academic agenda prevailed. Pirenne in particular defended an academic vision that would enable international comparison and transnational histories. He found initial support in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for which he served as the Belgian president. Thanks to the Carnegie funding, seven books about Belgium in WWI were published between 1924 and 1928. Pirenne authored the concluding and most important volume himself.^[5] These were high quality works mostly focussing on the [occupation](#).^[6] However, besides Henri Pirenne - and his son Jacques Pirenne (1891-1972), also a historian, - these seven key works were authored by five legal experts, one sociologist and one engineer.^[7] This was a clear sign that a true school of contemporary history had failed to launch. This failure was also shown in the fact that military history detached itself from further developments in the discipline of contemporary history. About half of the Belgian books about WWI produced before 1985 were on military history and members of the military wrote most of these works themselves.^[8] There is only one other key work for this early stage worth mentioning, published in 1926 under the editorship of the Liège law professor Ernest Mahaim (1865-1938). This important book mostly focused on socio-economic topics.^[9]

The concluding volume of Pirenne marked the end of this first wave of academic history about WWI. After 1928, historic research within established Belgian academia on WWI halted. First, political support waned and the CAG was abolished in 1928. The collections were transferred to the Belgian National Archives, where they were largely forgotten for over half a century. Second, there was also lack of broader academic support. After 1924, most Belgian academic historians gradually returned to their older subjects and themes. The intellectual and societal weight of one man – even as influential as Pirenne – was not enough to create a durable effect. Thirdly, an alternative Flemish historiography became more dominant after 1928.

Flemish nationalist [collaboration](#) during the occupation ([activism](#)) and the German *Flamenpolitik* already formed an important issue in 1918. Between 1918 and 1928, this mainly led to source publications of archives meant to reveal Flemish activist "betrayal".^[10] While canonized academic Belgian production within governmental or scientific institutions virtually stopped after 1928, a Flemish nationalist production increased. The latter contained popularized history (through press, novels and propaganda) using arguments such as the high mortality rate of Flemish soldiers caused by a Francophone class of officers, the martyrdom of convicted Flemish collaborators (the "activists") and the lack of post-war legislation doing justice to Flemish demands. However, an academic sub-culture of history writing by a new Flemish intellectual elite also emerged. The Flemish historian Hendrik Elias (1902-1973), who himself perceived that his academic career was being hampered by a Francophone academic culture, called for a systematic study of the Flemish movement in 1926. It is also important to note that Flemish historians maintained closer contact with German historical schools during the 1930s. They certainly monitored German discussions about the *Flamenpolitik* in Belgium, such as the works by Ernst Wilhelm Bredt (1869-1938) and archivist Robert-Paul Oszwald (1883-1945). This Flemish academic sub-culture produced fundamental reflection and historical works after 1928, amongst others the *Philosophie der Vlaamsche Beweging en der overige sociale stroomingen in België* ("The Philosophy of the Flemish movement") by historian Max Lamberty (1893-1975) in 1933 and a history of the Flemish movement in 1937 by Leo Picard (1888-1981), who was a former pupil of Pirenne.^[11] Both Lamberty and Picard had been part of the Flemish activist movement during WWI. They exemplify a strong strand of Flemish nationalist historic writing that after 1928 took over from Belgian national history writing of the Great War.

WWI: History in the Margins (1928-1997)

An institutionalized academic field of contemporary history in Belgium only emerged after 1945. The Second World War presented academia with roughly the same challenges as the First World War had after 1918. However, after 1918, political and academic attention had only lasted for the immediate post-war years. In stark contrast to this, the historiography of World War II (WWII) only began in earnest twenty years after the actual event. Academic historians initially left it alone, as it was considered too close. However, after two decades it was impossible to further ignore that the legacy of WWII had created fundamental cleavages that needed to be academically addressed. The creation of the national Centre of Historical Research and Study of the Second World War in 1969 marked the beginning of a Belgian academic school of research about WWII. Fluctuations aside, this school would never really lose momentum.

The Second World War became one of the major formative events for Belgian contemporary history as an academic discipline. The contrast with WWI could not be greater. Of the 431 articles published in the *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* (BTNG/RBHC, founded in 1969) between 1969 and 1999, only seven dealt with WWI.^[12] The editors of a bibliographical overview of WWI in Belgium noted in 1987 that Belgian academic historiography about WWI was close to “non-existent”.^[13]

This last statement is probably exaggerated. First, there remained large public interest in WWI history, as the activities around the fifty-year anniversary of the Great War in 1964-1968 proved.^[14] Second, more popularized forms of WWI historiography remained influential, in particular a Flemish nationalist one. Third, prolific and accredited historians were pursuing some high quality academic work. However, the latter never turned into something that could be labelled a coherent “field” of Belgian WWI studies. Some historians specifically tackled certain national myths. The best examples are the book from Leuven historian Lode Wils about the Flemish activists (1974),^[15] the research about the ‘King-soldier’ Albert I, King of the Belgians (1875-1934) during and after the 1970s,^[16] and the debunking of the myth of Flemish soldiers not understanding the orders of their Francophone officers.^[17] In these cases, the history of WWI was not really at stake. It only mattered in so far as it tied into discussions about the increasing problems of the unified Belgian state. Another group of research came from scholars that applied their main academic interest on the period of WWI.^[18] Examples are historian Peter Scholliers with his work on [food supply](#) and material living conditions, and the work by Eliane Gubin and Denise De Weerdts about [women](#).^[19] Overall, historical work on WWI remained few and far between. These books remained the result of individual efforts and as such, they hardly communicated with each other as one body of WWI studies.

This is not easy to explain in a country whose war experience was so fundamental. First, the academic field of contemporary history in Belgium remained very small for decades. When for a variety of reasons a handful of key individuals chose not to tackle one particular field or theme, this in itself was already enough to cause a “historiographical gap”. Another important reason is the shadow of the Second World War. The academic culture strongly favoured WWII history. It probably pushed historians who were potentially interested in WWI in another direction. The emblematic example here is the historian José Gotovitch. In the early 1960s, he seemed to start a research career as Belgium’s first important WWI historian since Pirenne. However, he made a drastic choice when he shifted towards WWII. He would then become arguably the leading figure in that field for decades after 1969. A third factor is the lack of international influence. In very general terms, Belgian contemporary history seemed to have difficulties detaching itself from the immediate political questions engendered by the pressure on the Belgian national community. The challenge posed by a pseudo-scientific strand of the Flemish movement should not be underestimated. A new Flemish intellectual elite proved particularly efficient in using historic arguments (in particular WWI and WWII) to legitimize their political programme. Academically formed historians working in a Belgian context and interested in WWI could not escape this challenge. In this context, (international) innovation did not really fall on fertile ground.

The Re-discovery of the Great War (1997-2014)

The emblematic turning point was signalled by the publication of *De Grootte Oorlog: het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* [The Great War. The Kingdom of Belgium during the First World War] by [Sophie De Schaepdrijver](#) in 1997.^[20] Although the Flemish issue remained a focal point, the book was the first real synthesis of the Great War in Belgium since Pirenne’s work was published in 1928. The book was also a commercial success. In this particular case, the widespread attention further strengthened its long-lasting academic impact.

De Schaepdrijver’s book came at a timely moment when several institutional trends converged. At the Université Catholique de

Louvain (UCL), [Laurence Van Ypersele](#) defended her PhD in 1994 (about the myth of the King-Soldier Albert I).^[21] In part under the influence of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne (founded in 1992), Van Ypersele's research preconfigured what would become the first Belgian school of WWI research. It focussed on a cultural history of WWI, connecting it to memory and heritage studies, yet also tackling topics such as the resistance or the German atrocities during the invasion. Van Ypersele would later be appointed as a member of the board of directors of the *Historial*. This symbolized the definitive end to the Belgian disconnection with international WWI research.

A different and separate change was the decision of the abovementioned Belgian Study Centre for the Second World War to enlarge its mission statement in 1997 (it transformed into The Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society, or CegeSoma). One of the underlying goals was to broaden the chronological scope and interpretative prism. Part of this programme was to connect WWI to WWII.^[22] One concrete result was the PhD research by [Benoît Majerus](#) about the police in [Brussels](#) during both world wars.^[23] Another important result was the conference (2004) and publication (2005) about the state of the art as well as future perspectives of WWI historiography in Belgium.^[24] The latter publication, published by the National Archives, was a real landmark publication. It brought something together for the first time, which could be considered a "field" of WWI history in Belgian contemporary history. However, at the same time it showed that besides the abovementioned cultural school at UCL, there existed a field that was mainly characterized by heterogeneity.

Another simultaneous parallel trend came from the National Archives (AGR). After decades of inactivity with regard to some larger WWI collections, the National Archives made a huge effort to publicly disclose these essential collections. Starting around 1995, over 200 WWI-related inventories would be published in the succeeding fifteen years.^[25] In 2001, the National Archives created a publication series specifically devoted to WWI, mainly offering a publication outlet for new MA-level theses.^[26]

How to explain this sudden and fundamental shift? The three institutional shifts (UCL-CegeSoma-AGR) happened separately; they were not connected to each other. Nevertheless, the fact that they followed roughly the same timetable is no coincidence. It is not correct to explain this convergence in 1997 as a generational shift. The major actors who were collectively responsible were far too varied in age and academic background to represent one single generation, quite on the contrary. Apparently, autonomously from each other, different institutions and individual actors sensed that the time was right to put WWI on the academic agenda.

Part of the explanation is certainly located on an international level. The influence of the Péronne school on the WWI school at UCL has already been mentioned. In that same period, other (young) Belgian scholars were also influenced by a surge of new international WWI publications. However, the main explanation lies perhaps within Belgium, and more specifically with the year 1995 and how it created a first real "pause" in WWII history. First, most essential topics in WWII history had been given their first standard reference works by 1995. Second, the fifty-year commemoration in 1995 created new societal challenges pertaining to the public use of WWII history to which Belgian WWII historians did not have an immediate answer. In 1995, WWII studies seemed like a saturated field without clear direction. WWI was now suddenly discovered as the exact opposite: an exciting uncharted domain where most of the innovation still needed to be done. In that sense, the importance of the commercial success of De Schaepdrijver's book should not be downplayed. Between 1974 and 1992, several emblematic works about WWII had consistently generated strong public attention, always serving as an attraction pole for other works. De Schaepdrijver's book was the first WWI equivalent for this. Her 1997 book sent a clear message that it was academically acceptable and publicly relevant to write ambitious books about WWI. This happened at a time when the number of academically trained young historians was exploding and there was a real need for new research subjects. WWI was a hot research topic almost overnight. Although this is too simple as a single explanation and the change did not happen overnight (or in one year), WWI seemed to gradually fill a gap that a lull in WWII historiography had created after 1995.

After 1997, the proverbial dam was broken. From all sides, historians now made up for the decades of delay. All manner of subjects and approaches were now launched: histories of the occupation, the Belgian front experiences, cultural histories of [memories and commemoration](#), the resistance under WWI, histories of violence, judicial history during and after the war, food history, microhistories and urban histories, and many others. Young historians who would take important positions in 2014 commemorative event, conferences and publications had built their careers on WWI research between 2000 and 2008. Three different examples are: [Antoon Vrints](#) (who published his PhD at [Ghent University](#) about an anthropological study of micro-violence and was appointed as full professor at the Ghent University in 2013), [Michaël Amara](#) (who wrote his PhD at ULB about Belgian [refugees](#) during WWI in 2008 and became a key figure within the National State Archives for further disclosure of WWI

archives), and [Emmanuel Debruyne](#) (who published his PhD about Belgian [espionage](#) at UCL and became full professor at UCL in 2015).^[27] Important international historians now discovered Belgium and dealt with outspoken “national” subjects. Just two examples are the work done by [John Horne](#) and [Alan Kramer](#) about the atrocities against Belgian civilians during the German invasion and the research done by German historian [Jens Thiel](#) about [forced labour](#).^[28] Indeed, one-third of all doctoral dissertations about WWI in Belgium during the past thirty years were written by non-Belgians, an exceptional situation when compared to other Belgian topics.^[29]

Epilogue: 2014 and Beyond

When preparing a conference on the history of WWII in May 2015 (seventy years after the liberation) in The Hague, the Belgian co-organizers could hardly find Belgian historians who were still doing fundamental work on WWII. Slightly exaggerated, one can say the situation of 1995 had been radically reversed. The context of the centenary in Belgium has created a frantic production of WWI-related research and publications. Obviously, it is difficult to evaluate an ongoing process. Here are some observations.

First, there is an impressive body of PhD research underway. As of 2015, roughly twenty-five PhD researchers are conducting WWI-related research about Belgium. Two examples illustrate the diversity: the research project “The Great War from Below” has four researchers doing research on social history while the research network “Recognition and Resentment: Experiences and Memories of the Great War in Belgium” (MEMEX) WWI has five researchers implementing specific variations of cultural memory studies.

Second, the centenary has created a context in which well-known senior academics published new books, both about old and new subjects. Many of these books are explicitly meant to reach large audiences. Several senior Belgian WWI experts are highly present in public history projects such as exhibitions, in commemorative policy and in the media.

Third, the large amount of research and books outside of academia has become the dominant force. Some observations about this popular history writing are: the focal point on personal experiences of ordinary people during war (local histories, diary publications), the absence of the classic theme of Flemish activism (or traditional political history in general), and the enduring dominance of a national angle rather than an international dimension. After 2018, a more indepth analysis of the post-commerative state of research can be conducted.

Conclusion

It is not easy to explain the peculiar lack of academic WWI historiography in Belgium between roughly 1928 and 1997. There was clearly an enduring lack of institutional academic backing. This was in part tied to individual choices: the field of Belgian contemporary history remained a narrow field of a small number of key individuals for decades. Several autonomous pseudo-academic schools of research (Flemish nationalist historiography and military history most notably) made the creation of a strong unified Belgian school of WWI difficult. WWI could not be detached from the disintegration of the Belgian state. This national focus blocked international scholarly input. WWI was also pushed to the margins by the academic attention to WWII after 1968.

It is tempting to interpret the sudden shift around 1997 as a generational change. In reality however, the causes that interconnected with each other were separate and autonomous. Strategic decisions within different academic institutions merged with the individual agency of different younger researchers and senior academics. The question is why these autonomous choices occurred at the same time? This article hypothesizes that the important commemorative year of 1995 was a key moment in ending the “golden era” of Belgian WWII historiography. A general pause in WWII historiography created the general context in which a dynamic and embedded academic field of WWI history could be launched.

One final remark: this article deals exclusively with academic historiography. There is a lot that remains invisible: fiction (novels, for example), cultural remembrance activities, local histories, etc. The current state of research does not allow an integrated analysis of how these different currents of history-construction interacted with each other.

Notes

1. ↑ I am indebted to Bruno Benvindo (CegeSoma) for giving his remarks, as well as: Benvindo, Bruno/Majerus, Benoît/Vrints, Antoon: *La Grande Guerre des historiens belges, 1914-2014*, in: *Journal of Belgian History* 44/2-3 (2014), pp. 170-196.
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6. ↑ For example: Pirenne, Jacques/Vauthier, Maurice: *La législation et l'administration allemandes en Belgique*, Paris et al. 1926.
7. ↑ Benvindo/Majerus/Vrints, *La Grande Guerre* 2014, p. 178.
8. ↑ Lefevre, P./Lorette, J. (eds.): *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale. Bibliographie/België en de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Bibliografie*, Brussels 1987.
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12. ↑ Benvindo/Majerus/Vrints, *La Grande Guerre* 2014, p. 182.
13. ↑ Lefevre/Lorette, *La Belgique* 1987, p. 6.
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25. ↑ Tallier/Boijen, *La Belgique* 2002.
26. ↑ The series is called: *Études sur la Première Guerre Mondiale – Studies over de Eerste Wereldoorlog* [Studies about the First World War]. It has published nineteen works between 2001 and 2011, online: <http://www.arch.be/index.php?l=fr&m=ressources-en-ligne&r=premiere-guerre-mondiale&sr=publications-sur-la-premiere-guerre-mondiale#1> (retrieved 1 September 2015).

27. ↑ Amongst others: Vrints, Antoon: Sociaal protest in een bezet land. Voedseloproer in België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog [Social protest in an occupied country. Food riots in Belgium during the First World War], in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 124 (2011), pp. 30-47; Debruyne, Emmanuel: La guerre secrète des espions belges, 1940-1944, Brussels 2008; Amara, Michaël: Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale. France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas, 1914-1918, Brussels 2008.
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29. ↑ Benvindo/Majerus/Vrints, La Grande Guerre 2014, p. 191.

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