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Exile and Migration (The Netherlands)

By [Marlou Schrover](#)

About a million Belgian civilians fled to the Netherlands at the beginning of the First World War. Approximately 900,000 of them returned within a few weeks, while 100,000 stayed for the duration of the war. The Netherlands also accommodated about 100,000 refugees from other countries. Initially there was an enormous willingness to help the Belgian refugees. However, costs were too high for private organisations to bear and, when support dwindled, the Dutch state took it upon itself to house and feed some of the refugees.

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Introduction

This article describes the [migration](#) of refugees to [the Netherlands](#) during the First World War. The Netherlands, which at that time had a population of 6.3 million, received an estimated one million [Belgian refugees](#) in the first weeks of the war. Large numbers returned to [Belgium](#) within a few

weeks. In November 1914, there were still 323,000 Belgian refugees in the Netherlands; by the end of December the number had fallen to 200,000, and in May 1915 only 105,000 remained. This last group stayed in the Netherlands for the duration of the war. In total, there were about 140,000 [refugees](#) – Belgian as well as German, [Russian](#) and French refugees – in the beginning of 1915. This number increased to 210,000 in 1918 mainly due to the arrival of non-Belgian refugees.^[1] A 300 kilometre [electric high-voltage fence](#) along the Dutch-Belgian [border](#), constructed by the Germans in May 1915, made it near impossible for Belgians to cross into the Netherlands, although 3,000 people died trying.^[2]

The article first describes the reception of Belgian civilian refugees, followed by sections on soldiers and other groups of civilians. The centenary in 2014 led to a large number of local [commemorative](#) initiatives, resulting in websites and exhibitions, which repeated or added to information in earlier publications.^[3] In recent years, plaques have been placed to [commemorate](#) Belgian camp sites. The Zeeland archive constructed a large database on Belgian refugees, as did archives in other places such as Harderwijk. A nationwide database is under construction.^[4]

Belgians

After Belgium resisted German demands regarding the passage of German troops en route to [France](#), [Germany](#) invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914. From the border of the southern Dutch province Limburg, people could see Belgian villages burning.^[5] Civil society responded immediately. Already on 7 August, a Dutch national committee was created to coordinate the numerous activities of private Dutch organisations, which wanted to help the Belgians.^[6] On 21 September, Dutch authorities followed suit, and created a government committee – which included members of the private committee – to provide and coordinate support.^[7]

Belgians started to flee to the Netherlands in large numbers particularly after the siege of Antwerp – from 28 September to 10 October – and following the city council's advice to leave.^[8] Between 9 and 15 October, about one million Belgians crossed the border into the Netherlands (500,000 Belgians fled via the province Noord-Brabant, 400,000 via Zeeland, and 100,000 via Limburg).^[9] From Ostend, 250,000 Belgians fled to [England](#), while 325,000 fled to France.^[10] Overall, more than 1.5 million people left Belgium (which had a population of 7.3 million at the time).^[11]

Refugees came to the Netherlands on foot, on carts, by bicycle, and by car; they rowed across the river Scheldt, or used the ferry between Antwerp and Flushing.^[12] Belgian train drivers brought eleven locomotives and 500 to 600 railway carriages across the Dutch border, which were thereupon used to transport refugees further inland.^[13] The Dutch responded with sympathy, and in the first days donated 300,000 guilders, potatoes, clothes, and blankets.^[14] The [Red Cross](#) and the Dutch army, which was stationed at the Belgian border, provided emergency relief.

Near the border the situation was chaotic.^[15] The towns Roosendaal and Bergen op Zoom, with populations of 16,700 and 15,500 respectively, each sought to accommodate 50,000 refugees. Dutch authorities tried to move the refugees away from border areas as quickly as possible. Throughout the Netherlands, hundreds of people – driven by voyeuristic curiosity and empathy – came to watch the refugees arrive.^[16] Rich refugees stayed in hotels and guesthouses, or rented rooms from private citizens, while poor refugees were housed in churches, army barracks, factories, monasteries, railway stations, and tents. On 10 October 1914, the Catholic national newspaper *De Tijd* printed about thirty short articles, summing up heroic deeds and voicing support. Dutch people had, for instance, driven their carriages to the border to meet refugees – who had fallen by the wayside because of fatigue – and collected women and children. In Roosendaal, there was no more food by the end of the first day. Local authorities wired for help, whereupon the military provided bread. A committee left from Rotterdam for Antwerp by ship planning to collect 500 abandoned children. When the ship arrived, the quay was full of desperate refugees, but the children were not to be found. The ship evacuated 300 refugees under heavy bombardment, the paper wrote, emphasising Dutch altruism.^[17] Even Protestants had come to collect some refugees, *De Tijd* reported in surprise.^[18] The economist Emile Verviers (1886-1968) wrote extensively about children among the refugees in the Catholic weekly *Katholiek Sociaal Weekblad*, articles which were copied by numerous other papers. In response, a committee (*Nederlands RK Huisvestingscomité voor kinderen in kampen*) was created to care specifically for refugee children.

Immediately after the fall of Antwerp, Dutch authorities started to encourage refugees to return. The Antwerp city council called on its people to come back, and the Germans declared the situation was safe. Many refugees did return because they had left behind possessions, houses, shops, livestock, pets, and family members. Antwerp authorities also threatened that butchers, bakers, and coal traders would lose their business if they did not return.^[19] The call to return led to endless debates in the numerous Belgian camp journals that were published in the Netherlands: were returnees traitors or not?^[20] In Belgium, newspapers reported on visits by Belgian authorities to Dutch camps: the consensus was that the Dutch did their best, but that conditions in the camps were bad, and the refugees were better off if they returned.^[21] The Dutch call to return was repeated a few days later.^[22]

Newspaper articles changed tone rapidly after this call.^[23] *De Tijd* first reported that the whole city of Antwerp was on fire; one day later it said that the stories of massive destruction sprang from the imagination of the refugees, and that the damage was not as bad as the refugees claimed.^[24] Other papers published similar articles: shops were open in Antwerp, and brown bread, vegetables, and potatoes were for sale.^[25] In other words, it was safe to return. Dutch authorities discussed return but they did not agree on the issue: the minister of war wanted all refugees to return, while the minister of internal affairs argued that only soft pressure should be applied: the upkeep of poor refugees was a financial burden, but nobody should be forced to leave.^[26]

Local authorities implemented the instruction to apply soft pressure in different ways. In Harderwijk, for instance, refugees were forced onto trains, and those who refused were brought to a holding camp.^[27] In Amsterdam, 4,000 refugees were sent to a shed on the IJkade, if they did not want to return. The decision was criticised by the press and led to the so-called “shed-affair”. According to the large national socialist paper *Het Volk*, the shed was not suitable for housing people.^[28] There were insufficient fire exits, human faeces flooded the floors, and the refugees were fed pig food.^[29] Landlords increasingly complained that their guests were too loud and too demanding, and refused to house them any longer.^[30] Newspapers were increasingly negative about the refugees and wrote that some of the refugees only came because they were unemployed.^[31] Support for refugees rapidly decreased.^[32] If the refugees did not work, newspapers accused them of sponging off the Dutch; if they did work they were accused of stealing jobs.^[33]

The refugees who did not return to the Netherlands and could not pay for their own upkeep were placed in camps.^[34] In 1915, about 20,000 Belgian civilians were housed in camps in Nunspeet, which could hold 13,000 people, but never held more than 7,050, in Ede (10,000 potential and 5,400 actual capacity), Uden (10,000 potential and 7,020 actual capacity) and Gouda. The Gouda camp was a private initiative, where refugees were housed in green houses. Later, mobile homes and barracks were added, and it was recognised as a camp by Dutch authorities.^[35] In 1915, Gouda housed 1,962 people, and in the two last years of the war 1,150. In Nunspeet a section of the camp – called “the Congo” after the Belgian colony which was considered to be an unattractive place to live – was surrounded with 3 metre high barbed wire fences and held criminals.^[36] “Unruly” refugees were sent to the isolated penal complex Veenhuizen, which was commonly used to re-educate the Dutch poor. About 5,000 refugees lived on a large number of smaller locations in the Netherlands, while 75,000 Belgian refugees stayed for the duration of the war in houses they bought or rented, or in hotels and guest houses. The Belgian refugees had some influence on Dutch society: they created theatre companies, orchestras and singing societies, whose performances were also attended by the Dutch public.^[37] Thus, the response a few months into the war was mixed: authorities pressed for return and public support for poor refugees dwindled, while the input of the refugee elite was appreciated by the public.

Camps received large [gifts from abroad](#). A Danish newspaper, for instance, collected donations and paid for workshops in Gouda, Ede, and Uden, where demountable homes had been constructed (153 houses in Ede, 154 in Uden, 27 in Amsterdam, and 38 in Ziekrikzee).^[38] Via the American envoy in the Hague, a large number of gifts from the [United States](#) was received: in 1915, for instance, the U.S.-based Belgian Refugee Fund gave 35,000 guilders.^[39] The American Rockefeller foundation gave money to build halls and provided sewing machines, while the Quakers gave to several camps a library building with books as well as tools and machinery for woodwork and a foundry. Refugees in the camps made brooms, baskets, mats, lace work and toys, which could be exchanged for food, shoes, clogs, and clothes in the camp shop.^[40] The camps also had canteens,

churches, a post office, hospital, shops, and schools.^[41] While Dutch societal support fell, support from abroad made the Belgian camp populations more self-supporting and inward-oriented.

Soldiers

Neutral states were (according to The Hague Convention V, articles 11-15) obliged to intern foreign troops for duration of the war.^[42] When Antwerp fell, 40,000 Belgian soldiers fled to the Netherlands. Of these 7,000 escaped to England. The rest were interned in camps in the Netherlands (in Gaasterland, Oldebroek, Zeist, and Harderwijk).^[43] These camps housed 10,000 to 15,000 soldiers and, like the civilian camps, had their own shops, schools, churches, and canteens.^[44] After a while, soldiers' family members were allowed to live near the camps. Officers were largely housed outside the camps. There were also British (1,751 men), and German (1,461) troops interned in the Netherlands.^[45] Germans were partly housed in Bergen (in the Dutch province Noord-Holland) and the British in the town Groningen.^[46]

Barbed wire fences surrounded all these camps and they were guarded by Dutch soldiers. Three Belgians tried to escape in civilian clothes from the camp in Zeist, but they were caught and put into a holding cell. In response, riots erupted and the Dutch guards opened fire killing eight soldiers, and wounding eighteen. This led to a lot of debate in the press. Newspapers reported that the Dutch military was unable to maintain order. The Dutch government responded to the criticism by expanding possibilities for education and recreation, and allowing soldiers to spend a few hours per day outside the camp. The British soldiers played football and organised matches with local teams, while the Belgians focused on cycling, building the largest cycling rink in the Netherlands.^[47] Both of these sports were rather new to the Netherlands, and the initiatives led to favourable responses from the locals.

Some interned soldiers were allowed to work outside the camps. Because there was a mining shortage in 1917, soldiers were transferred to the mining town Heerlen and put to work.^[48] The Dutch miners' union called for a strike from 22 June until 2 July 1917, demanding an eight-hour working day and a wage raise of 20 percent. The union wanted the Belgians to show their solidarity, but the interned soldiers risked being sent back to the camp if they went on strike. Furthermore, they were not members of the union, and were thus without financial support.^[49] The Belgians joined the Dutch strike anyhow and the gesture was appreciated by their Dutch co-workers.^[50] Soldiers were repatriated after the war. In addition, British, French, and German soldiers, who had been POWs outside the Netherlands, were repatriated via the Netherlands. For months after the war, large numbers of foreign soldiers moved by train, on foot, or by boat through the Netherlands.

Russians

During the war, some Russians got stuck in the Netherlands because their ships could not leave. The majority of these Russians were not sailors but rather civilians and POWs who had fled from Germany. In Rotterdam, the Russians lived concentrated in one area: a widow bought up several houses and accommodated 700 to 1,000 Russians.^[51] People complained that the Russians drank too much, got into fights, urinated in public, swam naked in the river, courted Dutch women, and played loud music. Initially, refugees and former POWs were repatriated to Russia via England or [Sweden](#), until their numbers increased and ships could no longer leave because of ongoing [submarine warfare](#). Housing prices increased thereafter. The Russian consulate responded to complaints and gave a subsidy of 10,000 guilders to build three large hotels in Schiedam. In May 1917, there were 5,000 Russians in Rotterdam and Schiedam.^[52]

The [Russian Revolution](#) made the Russians in the Netherlands more assertive. In May 1917, forty “unruly” Russians were interned on a ship in the Rotterdam harbour.^[53] Dutch authorities sent all new Russian refugees to Rotterdam, where they received financial support from the *Comité russe des prisonniers de guerre évadés* which was led by Leon Berliin, an attorney from Petrograd, Colonel d'Aoué, and Captain Sawitsky (the latter two had served in the Tsarist army).^[54] The Dutch communist paper *De Tribune* wrote that about 1,500 Russian refugees had been arrested in Rotterdam and brought to Bergen.^[55] From there they were to be transported to Murmansk to fight against the Bolsheviks. *De Tribune* called on the Dutch railway workers to strike to stop the transports to Bergen. In May 1918, ten Russians in Rotterdam formed the Russian Soviet in Holland, but they were arrested and imprisoned. Meanwhile, the Soviet Committee for Russians in the Netherlands (created by the Dutch Communist Party to support the Russian refugees) helped thousands of sympathisers to cross the eastern border into Germany. Those Russians who did not sympathise – about 3,553 – were repatriated by ship by the Dutch authorities to Danzig.^[56]

Germans

Anti-German riots in Antwerp, preceding the siege, drove 60,000 to 80,000 [Germans living in Belgium](#) across Dutch borders.^[57] According to Dutch newspapers, every evening thousands of Germans took this route, protected by the American Consul General and aided by the Dutch.^[58] In Asia, Germans who fled from the French and British colonies to the Dutch East Indies, were also helped by the Dutch.^[59] Dutch hospitality, both in the Netherlands itself and in its colony, were mentioned repeatedly and in positive terms in [German newspapers](#), according to the Dutch press.^[60] The Dutch however feared that support for the German refugees would be seen as support for Germany.^[61] Newspapers praised the tactical manoeuvring of a Dutch mayor, who did evict a group of German strike breakers, but without angering too many people, and thus maintaining a neutral stance.^[62] German strike breakers made an appearance in the Netherlands with some regularity. A few days after the beginning of the war, 300 German strike breakers were allowed to

stay in Rotterdam.^[63] Authorities walked a tightrope, trying to emphasise neutrality.

The number of German refugees increased in 1915 after the passenger ship *Lusitania* was sunk by a German torpedo just off the coast of Britain killing 1,198 passengers.^[64] The sinking led to anti-German riots in England and within one month (May-June 1915) 3,449 new German refugees from England arrived in the Netherlands.^[65] The number of Germans in the Netherlands further increased after 1917 when 10,000 German deserters fled to the Netherlands. Dutch socialists came out in their support.^[66] The German deserters had their own newspapers *Der Kampf* and *Michel im Sumpf* – printed on the presses of the Dutch communist paper *De Tribune*.^[67] Overall, there was some public support and sympathy for the German refugees, though support fluctuated during the war and depended on the type of refugee.

French

The number of [French refugees](#) in the Netherlands was small. Only towards the end of the war did their numbers increase when French refugees fled the fighting in northern France. The Germans switched off the electric current on the fence between Belgium and the Netherlands to let them pass. About 40,000 French refugees were registered within a few days, mainly in Limburg. At the end of October 1918 thousands of French refugees crossed the Dutch border per day. The Dutch were better prepared than in October 1914. After the war, the French refugees returned by ship via Rotterdam.^[68]

Aftermath

After the First World War, the Aliens Law of 1849 was implemented more strictly. All foreigners had to register, and ledgers and personal files were created. These changes were not only the outcome of wartime refugee migration, but also – and perhaps more importantly – of the authorities' fears regarding the arrival of revolutionaries and stateless migrants who could not be returned (mainly Russians). Two new laws were introduced after the war: one on monitoring foreigners (1918) and another on border control (1920). Both laws were in line with attempts by other countries to control and restrict migration.^[69] Dutch authorities bore the cost of housing the civilians (34 million guilders) but asked Belgium to pay for the costs of housing the soldiers (51 million). It took until 1939 to settle this issue.

Conclusion

The number of refugees that came to the Netherlands in October 1914 was unprecedented and has not been repeated since. About 900,000 of the one million Belgian refugees that came, however, returned within a few weeks. In addition to the Belgians there were about 100,000 other refugees in the Netherlands during the war. The Dutch pride themselves on the support that was provided – with

some justification – and seem to have forgotten the complaints, protests, and the soft pressure that was applied to push most of the refugees out after a few weeks only. Authorities worried about neutrality and costs, and encouraged return, while the public – as far as their ideas were voiced via newspapers – was supportive in the beginning but increasingly less so.

Marlou Schrover, Universiteit Leiden

Section Editors: [Samuël Kruizinga](#); [Wim Klinkert](#)

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