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# Literature (Belgium)

By [Sophie De Schaepdrijver](#)

**Belgium's war literature, in both Dutch (Flemish) and in French, covers different war experiences: not just that of the front but also that of military occupation. Although none of it became canonical, it was a concerted effort to make sense of the war – or express bafflement. Front literature, like European combatant writings generally, moved from the heroic to the disillusioned mode. Postwar occupation literature, in contrast to 1920s historiography of the occupation, was steeped in cultural pessimism. Both genres, then, moved away from the tropes of glory of 1914-1915; but Belgian literature lacked the confidence, the coherence, and the audience to impose an alternative metanarrative.**

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## Introduction

Belgium's war experience was of a more "civilian" bent than that of other belligerents, because the country was invaded and **occupied** early on, and only one out of five military-age men served at the front. As a result, Belgian war literature encompasses both literature on the military front and literature on the military occupation.<sup>[1]</sup> The corpus spans two languages because of Belgium's bilingual status. In 1914-1918, French was still the dominant (but not the majority) language, the medium in which all elites communicated. At the same time, the war was a moment – if a complex one – of acceleration of the Flemish quest for equal linguistic status. This article attempts to analyze Belgian war literature in both languages and for both front and occupation. Analyzing it as a whole makes sense: for all its heterogeneity, it forms a corpus of works dealing with a war experience – **neutral** status, invasion, Yser front, occupation – that was specific to **Belgium** and was felt to be so, even if many writers expressed bewilderment over what it had all *meant*, and some withdrew or redrew their national identification.

## Brave Little Belgium

The **Belgian government's** rejection of the German ultimatum demanding unimpeded passage through Belgium for the imperial troops en route to attack **France** was internationally hailed as a principled stance on behalf of the rule of law. When, as a result, the country suffered a brutal invasion, the government's decision was transvalued into a choice made by all of Belgium – a duly anthropomorphized entity – to sacrifice itself on the altar of what was right. Contemporaries promptly sought confirmation of this exalted status in Belgium's literature.<sup>[2]</sup> In Moscow, the young **Konstantin Paustovsky (1892-1968)** partook of the general admiration for a country over which hung "a halo of martyrdom," and turned to its authors – the world famous poet **Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916)**, the Nobel Prize-winning playwright **Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949)**, and the rarefied Symbolist **Georges Rodenbach (1855-1898)** – to find "an explanation of [Belgium's] bravery." To no avail:

I could not find it in the complicated poems of Verhaeren, describing the old world as a great evil, nor in the lifeless novels of Rodenbach, as brittle as flowers under the ice, nor in Maeterlinck's plays, which seemed to me as if they had been written in his sleep.<sup>[3]</sup>

Still, these authors were figure-heads of the Belgian cultural war effort. Verhaeren, genuinely shocked by an invasion that destroyed his hopes for universal brotherhood, turned to bitter denunciations: "Germany! Germany! You bringer of dusk!"<sup>[4]</sup> He went on lecture tours to support the Belgian cause, dying in a 1916 accident as a result. His *confrère* and fellow francophone Fleming Maurice Maeterlinck, abroad like Verhaeren – the task of representing Belgium's tragic apotheosis fell to Belgians abroad, since such discourse was forbidden under the occupation - likewise supported the Belgian cause in lectures and in writing. In 1917, to revive flagging international indignation, Maeterlinck brought out a play titled *Le bourgmestre de Stilmonde (The Burgomaster of Stilmonde)*, a drama of the invasion with Burghers of Calais overtones, staging a heroic mayor of a little Flemish town who volunteers to be executed in order to save his charges. Flemish literature struck similar sacrificial tones. In Holland, the Flemish poet **René de Clercq (1877-1932)** pushed the

theme of Belgium's sacrifice to its soteristic limits in his early 1915 poem "Als de Heiland" ("Like the Savior"): "Young and fair / You have let Yourself be nailed on the Cross/ To Save the World (...) O Belgium, God's dearest son!"<sup>[5]</sup>

## The Joyful Crusade

The Belgian army's 1914 campaign inspired heroic narratives. The war volunteer Maurice Gauchez (1884-1957), a native Walloon who had grown up in Antwerp, in early 1915 enjoyed a fleeting moment of international glory as the author of the very first published battle narrative.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1917, Gauchez published a novel titled *La glorieuse retraite* (*The Glorious Retreat*), a swashbuckling tale of Liège-to-Yser exploits.<sup>[7]</sup> A 1916 memoir by the Antwerp journalist and war volunteer Fritz Francken (1893-1969), entitled *De Blijde Kruisvaart* (*The Joyful Crusade*), described the war as an adventure, undertaken in a spirit of chivalrous indignation bolstered by a kind of irrepressible gaiety which Francken presented as essentially Belgian.<sup>[8]</sup> This vision of the war as glorious and worthwhile endured after the war. One 1922 memoir, *Mes cloîtres dans la tempête* (*My Sanctuaries In The Storm*), was by far the greatest publishing success ever achieved by a Belgian war book; indeed it was the twenties' most popular French-language war memoir across Europe.<sup>[9]</sup> Within Belgium, it was one of only a few war books in French to be translated into Dutch. This popularity may be due to the book's mix of mysticism and bellicosity: the author, Martial Lekeux (1884-1962), was an [artillery](#) officer turned Franciscan monk turned officer again at the outbreak of the war.<sup>[10]</sup> But Belgium's heroic front narratives avoided dealing with the immobility of the [Western Front](#) following 1914. *My Sanctuaries* largely ends after the first eight months of war. Likewise, Francken's *Joyful Crusade* does not encompass the trenches, and Gauchez' 1917 book ends on a note of bafflement over the stalemated front.

## The Disenchantment Paradigm and Belgian Front Literature

The stalemate, by contrast, was central in works written in a more disillusioned vein, such as the 1921 *Aux lueurs du brasier* (*By the Light of the Embers*) by Lucien Christophe (1891-1975), a former war volunteer and infantry officer,<sup>[11]</sup> and the 1922 *La Boue des Flandres* (*The Mud of Flanders*) by the [Brussels](#) physician Max Deauville, pseudonym of Maurice Duwez (1881-1966), who had served as an army doctor.<sup>[12]</sup> These, at first, garnered little interest, but were brought back into print after the paradigm shift heralded by [Erich Maria Remarque's](#) (1898-1970) *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the ensuing war boom of disenchanting narratives. Although the books' tone differs – Christophe's is lofty, Deauville's, ironic – both find themselves at a loss to define the purpose of the suffering at the front. But both also end on a note reminiscent of [Henri Barbusse|Henri Barbusse's (1873-1935)] take on the front experience: they paint a disenchanting but steady sense of obligation among the suffering – and they paint them as a community.<sup>[13]</sup> Similar notes were struck in Flemish front literature.<sup>[14]</sup> This Barbussian trope could have made for a confident "reading" of the Yser Front – the

community of the disenchanted offers meaning, even if the war itself has none. As Modris Eksteins has pointed out, the hecatomb broke the confident liberal narrative of Progress and as a result left the historical imagination “sorely challenged.” But literature rendered the catastrophe legible again by proffering the forceful metanarrative of the sacrificed front generation.<sup>[15]</sup>

However, Belgian literature was never credited with offering a canonical vision of the front on a par with the English war poets, with Henri Barbusse and [Roland Dorgelès \(1885-1973\)](#), or with Remarque, or, for that matter, [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#).<sup>[16]</sup> There are three reasons for this. The first is the lack of prestige of Belgian literature, even in the eyes of Belgian audiences: for instance, Max Deauville’s memoir *Jusqu’à l’Yser*, though praised by the 1920’s most formidable critic of war literature, [Jean-Norton Cru \(1879-1949\)](#), as a masterpiece far superior to the war narratives of Barbusse et al., sold no more than a dozen copies between 1917 and 1937.<sup>[17]</sup> (As to Belgium’s most prestigious belle époque writers, Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, their war production was soon dismissed as embarrassing propaganda.)

Second, Belgian writers exhibited a certain lack of confidence in imposing *their* vision of the front. Lucien Christophe’s *Lueurs du Brasier* had made a case for a specific Belgian variant of valor: he emphasized, for instance, how Belgian soldiers had become “vagabonds of their sacrifice,” fighting their war in exile with no homefront. But eventually Christophe turned to another trope of wartime valor: the French poet [Charles Péguy \(1873–1914\)](#), a war volunteer killed in 1914 along with multitudes of Frenchmen – a cataclysmic loss that overshadowed the Belgian war toll.

The third reason for Belgian front literature’s lack of canonical status is that linguistic differences precluded the imagining of the Belgian front generation as a community of fate. It is true that the actual front experiences of Flemish and francophone soldiers had overlapped. Soldiers had interpreted their experience along similar lines, between tenacity and despair; the existence of two language groups inflected Belgian army culture as a whole; and Flemish and francophone intellectuals had read similar works, such as the religious verse of the French poet [Francis Jammes \(1868–1938\)](#). But next to these similarities stood the vexations of language at the Belgian front – and these, after the war, echoed through the Flemish accounts and remained absent from the francophone ones. No account or translation ever bridged this gap in perspective. Through the interwar years, a radical Flemish counter-memory of the war emerged, which portrayed the Flemings on the Yser as a front generation sacrificed by the Belgian state. But this counter-memory did not take an influential literary form: “We have no war literature,” lamented the Flemish [nationalist](#) veteran [Filip De Pillecyn \(1891-1962\)](#) in the post-Armistice year, and the interwar period, including the 1928-1930 war boom, gave him little reason to change this assessment.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Making Sense of the Occupation

If post-war historiography was at a loss as to how to make sense of the hecatomb at the front, the German occupation of Belgium, by contrast, could be confidently interpreted as an ideological

confrontation between an authoritarian empire and a flawed but valiant parliamentary democracy. The clash ended in a triumph of the latter and therefore confirmed faith in progress. Belgian literature on the occupation experience, however, was another matter.<sup>[19]</sup> By and large, the works in this sizeable and variegated (if largely obscure) corpus did not see the occupation as a communal experience, nor was it seen as a setting in which meaningful action was possible. The general tone was one of pessimism. Three themes stand out in occupation literature: the occupation as a hiatus; the occupation as a degrading and divisive experience; and the hero as a foil to – instead of an emanation of – the occupied community.

## Lost time

Whereas national historiography defined the occupation as a national test, and one that was by and large well sustained, literature defined it as a hiatus in individual lives. One novel by a lawyer from Brussels, tellingly entitled *Dans les ténèbres* (*In Darkness*), centers on a beautiful young officer's wife named Julienne Restier, whose husband is at the front. Lonely and depressed in occupied Brussels, she finds no solace in novels because, as she muses,

the plots were too ingeniously constructed and always ended well, whereas her story had no shape at all, and no ending either, and was oppressed by an excessively long ordeal...<sup>[20]</sup>

Men, too, are condemned to passivity in this body of literature. One example is the schoolteacher Jean Clarambaux, protagonist of *La Rafale* (*The Squall*), a voluminous 1933 novel by Jean Tousseul, pseudonym of Olivier Degée (1890-1944), the drama critic for a Socialist daily. Clarambaux' fiancée has fled to the unoccupied corner of Belgium behind the front – where she betrays him with a soldier. His war years are a time of mere existence, in which “the days go by, desperately empty,” and he finds himself occasionally startled to find that entire months have gone. The entire village feels this way. “One drifted. Would one still be alive in six months' time? In two months' time?” The village lies in the zone of the great civilian massacres of the *namurois* region of August 1914. This trauma has prematurely aged most of the adults. Although daily life still offers routine consolations, the village seems to have slid outside of time, drifting like an island. In September 1918, after four years, the school-teacher muses: “Had we really lived since [1914]? No. We had let ourselves be shunted about by events.”<sup>[21]</sup> In one Flemish novel, *Het Duistere Bloed* (*Dark Blood*), occupation *ennui* is presented as so all-pervasive that the protagonist, an Antwerp dockworker, yearns to be deported to Germany as a forced laborer: “it answered my most secret desire: to go away from here – to go anywhere – it did not matter where, as long as I could be active”.<sup>[22]</sup> The West Flemish drama *Polder* offers another example of hopeless waiting: the protagonist, Elza, misses her husband and rues the passing of time. “God only knew how many summers and winters she would still have to wait for her husband.” Alone, struggling, and yearning for a man, she ends up, like Julienne Restier, by taking a German lover. Somber drama ensues.<sup>[23]</sup> A young boy in *Het Wrede Spel* (*The Cruel Game*), also set in occupied West Flanders, endeavors

to keep his mother from sleeping with men while his father is away. As he tries to “approach Father’s heroism through sacrifices,” he commits “irreparable cruelties” towards his mother.<sup>[24]</sup> Under the occupation, all action, even the best-intentioned, is problematic.

## A Cutthroat Universe

Throughout the corpus, with rare exceptions, the occupied do not form a real community. It is a dog-eat-dog universe, where compassion and solidarity are rare, and all manner of social pathologies – cheating, lying, grabbing, stealing, denouncing – flourish. Here, too, literature and historiography were at odds. While economic and social histories of the occupation did not conceal the problem of war profiteering, they emphasized the crushing weight of the occupation regime: the taxes and fines on individuals and communities, the dismantling of industries and stocks, the pillaging and destruction. In literature, by contrast, these matters were defined as, so to speak, *par for the course*; the real dynamics were those of greed among Belgians. The novelist Pierre Broodcoorens (1885–1924) wrote that “the abject rabble of traffic and profit” exploiting fellow Belgians ought to be the occupation novel’s real subject; dwelling on the occupiers would smack of a patriotism that did not behoove the novelist.<sup>[25]</sup> As a result, throughout the corpus, Belgian **profiteers** and the compatriots they victimize are described with a wealth of detail. The Germans, by contrast, remain sketchily-drawn archetypes: the boorish, sausage-chewing soldier, the supercilious monocled Prussian officer, the Goethe-quoting, war-deploring Good German. The war profiteer as a key figure of scorn allowed novelists to join a fundamental pessimism towards the market - a staple of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel - to the wartime execration of those who had (or were believed to have had) distorted the moral economy, an execration that erupted into widespread violence within hours of the Armistice.<sup>[26]</sup> War profiteering and patriotism were portrayed as indissoluble. One example is a 1923 novella by one of the most popular Flemish writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ernest Claes (1885–1968). *De vulgaire geschiedenis van Charelke Dop* (*The Unedifying Tale of Charley Dop*) tells the story of a canny war profiteer who does business with all. After the war, Dop escapes punishment and even taxation, indeed is covered in honor. In tune with his new gentlemanly status, he now disdains lowly Flemish.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Heroes As Foils

A few characters, in the corpus, escape the endemic moral corrosion of the occupation. But these heroes do not form a sort of vanguard of the occupied community; they do not belong to it, but stand alone, and their virtues throw an unflattering light upon society. In actuality, resistance endeavors in occupied Belgium were most often conducted in networks. But in occupation literature, idealistic self-sacrifice stands as a foil to the common corruption. Pasquier’s *Darkness* portrays a young resister named René, who, in one scene, as he walks through Brussels, realizes that he is followed by the German police. As the thought of his imminent end sinks in, René passes brightly lit cafés.<sup>[28]</sup> The contrast between lonely heroism and callous gratification deepens in the next chapter. Somewhere

downtown, a variety show has just ended and the audience floods out of the theatre, faced suddenly with the sight of a German poster in red - the color that announces executions. The poster proclaims that René was shot that morning. The passers-by give it barely a glance. “Another execution! It was becoming routine.” And they babble on about the show: “I almost died laughing.”<sup>[29]</sup> The contrast between sacrifice for the community and that same community’s indifference emerges in many different places in the corpus. It is a trope of social pessimism; it questions the possibility of meaningful action on behalf of the collective. Even the highly political novels that heroize “activism” (viz., the choice made by some Flemish nationalists to align themselves with the occupying regime) paint the contours of the Flemish community and cause in very hazy terms: sacrifice had to be its own justification, since the collective was ultimately unworthy of it.<sup>[30]</sup> The possibility, then, of meaningful action on behalf of the community meets with a skeptical reception in much of the corpus, whether Flemish or francophone. In this, Belgian occupation literature stood hardly alone. As Modris Eksteins has pointed out, 1914-1918 represented a massive crisis in the very concept of heroism. A hero’s action on behalf of a community vanished before his conquest of the a-social realm of air and speed; in Eksteins’ analysis, the Charles Lindbergh (1902-1974) cult exemplifies this shift.<sup>[31]</sup> Comparable tropes surface in Belgian occupation literature. The poet Georges Linze’s (1900–1993) childhood memoir *Shelled Children*, published in 1936, stated that the war had put an end to beliefs, with technology filling the void:

“We were such sweet children. (...) They have wrecked us. All that we were ready to believe was spoiled, all that talked, was lying, all that sustained, betrayed, and all of our victories were soiled (...). Hence our sadness – and then our joy upon discovering the beauty of matter, the perfection of the wheel, the helix’ pathos.”<sup>[32]</sup>

## Conclusion

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the fervor that coalesced around Belgium in 1914, Belgian war literature never joined the European canon. As the urgent issues of wartime paled next to the hecatomb, Belgian literature, like all of the literature of the First World War, moved into the disillusioned mode. Belgian occupation literature struck particularly disenchanting notes, refusing to look back on the occupation as a meaningful collective experience. But this vision never added up to an alternative metanarrative. The answer to the question why this was so, requires more knowledge of interwar Belgian readerships and of critical and popular responses to war works in interwar Belgium than is presently available. But it seems fair to assume that the failure of Belgian occupation literature to proffer a forceful vision of what had been the dominant Belgian war experience was due to this literature’s lack of confidence, lack of coherence, and also - possibly because of its unremittingly grating tone - its lack of an audience.

Sophie De Schaepdrijver, The Pennsylvania State University

## Notes

1. † In addition, there is a small body of literature on the experience of exile: 600,000 Belgian [refugees](#) spent the war in France, Britain, and the Netherlands. For reasons of space, I will not dwell on this.
2. † The 1911 compendium *Contemporary Belgian Literature* by [Jethro Bithell \(1878-1962\)](#), the head of the German Department at Birkbeck College, London, went through three reprints in 1915 and another one in 1916; his pre-war works on Maurice Maeterlinck and Émile Verhaeren found unexpectedly wide readerships.
3. † Paustovsky, Konstantin: *The Story of A Life* (translated by Joseph Barnes), New York 1967, Part 2: *Restless Youth*, p. 264.
4. † Verhaeren, Emile: "L'Allemagne, exterminatrice de races", in: *Les ailes rouges de la guerre*, Paris 1915, pp. 197-201.
5. † de Clercq, René: *De Zware Kroon* [The Heavy Crown], Bussum 1915, p. 28. On De Clercq's subsequent conversion to anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism, see de Schaepdrijver, Sophie: "Occupation, Propaganda, and the Idea of Belgium," in: Roshwald, Aviel/Stites, Richard (eds.): *European Culture in the Great War: the Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 267-294.
6. † Gauchez, Maurice (pseudonym of Maurice Gilles): *De la Meuse à l'Yser, ce que j'ai vu*, Paris 1915.
7. † Gauchez, Maurice: *La glorieuse retraite*, London 1917.
8. † Francken, Fritz (pseudonym of Frederik Clijmans): *De blijde kruisvaart* [The Joyful Crusade], Antwerp 1919.
9. † Cru, Jean-Norton: *Témoins. Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en français de 1915 à 1928*, Paris 1929 and Nancy 1993, p. 349. Cru detested the book's mystical tone.
10. † Lekeux, Martial: *Mes cloîtres dans la tempête*, Paris 1922. The book went through eighty-five reprints in that same year, and reached its 141<sup>st</sup> reprint in 1930.
11. † Christophe, Lucien: *Aux lueurs du brasier*. 1917-1920, Brussels 1921 and Paris et al. 1930.
12. † Deauville, Max (pseudonym of Maurice Duwez): *La Boue des Flandres*, Brussels 1922 and Paris 1930.
13. † An insightful interpretation of the ending of Christophe's narrative in Schoentjes, Pierre: "'C'est donc cela, la guerre.' La représentation de la mort dans quelques oeuvres de la Grande Guerre," in Hubert and Schoentjes, 14-18: *une mémoire littéraire*, pp. 13-32.
14. † Striking examples are the subtle novella *Longinus* by the former war volunteer Franz De Backer, who taught English literature at the [University of Ghent](#) (Arnhem, 1934) and the extremely bitter *De Miskenden* [The Unsung Ones], Kortrijk, 1938, a narrative of life as a stretcher-bearer on the Yser front by Jan Gommaar Gheuens, a manager of a boxing club.
15. † Eksteins, Modris: *Rites of spring: the Great War and the birth of the modern age*, London at al. 1989, p. 291.



16. † Whose closest avatar in Belgian front literature is the short story *De Rit* [The Ride on Horseback] by the Flemish nationalist author [Filip De Pillecyn \(1891-1962\)](#), although that has more aristocratic and preindustrial echoes in the manner of the Grenfells. It appeared in an eponymous collection of short stories by De Pillecyn, De Rit, Borgerhout 1927.
17. † Cru, Témoins 1929, pp. 117, 427, 570; Deauville, Max: Dernières Fumées, Brussels 1937, p. 274.
18. † De Pillecyn, Filip: "Wij hebben geen oorlogsliteratuur," in: Vlaamsche Arbeid 10/3 (1919-1920), pp. 87-94.
19. † For reasons of space, I concentrate on narrative prose fiction, excluding local chronicles and published war [diaries](#), even if written by recognized literary authors, as well as drama and poetry.
20. † Pasquier, Alex: Dans les ténèbres, Paris n.d. [1920 or 1921], p. 191. The book was published under the rather transparent pseudonym Alix Pasquier.
21. † Tousseul, Jean (pseudonym of Olivier Degée): La Rafale, Brussels 1933, quotations on pp. 106-107, 108, 171, 185, 228-229 (This is the fourth volume in Tousseul's novel cyclus *Jean Clarambaux*.)
22. † Zielens, Lode: Het Duistere Bloed [Dark Blood], Amsterdam 1930, p. 67.
23. † Fonteyne, Norbert-Edgard: Polder, Antwerp 1937, p. 42.
24. † Duribreux, Gaston: Het Wrede Spel [The Cruel Game], Leuven 1960, p. 187.
25. † Broodcoorens, Pierre: "Avant-propos," *Boule-Carcasse*, Brussels, 1928, volume I, quotations pp. IV, II.
26. † Rousseaux, Xavier/Van Ypersele, Laurence: "Leaving the war: popular violence and judicial repression of "unpatriotic" behaviour in Belgium (1918-1921)," in: European Review of History, 12/1 (2005), pp. 3-22.
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28. † Pasquier, Dans les ténèbres n.d. [1920 or 1921], p. 177.
29. † Pasquier, Dans les ténèbres n.d. [1920 or 1921], p. 193.
30. † Meert, Leo: De Nood van 't Land [The Fatherland's Distress], Amsterdam 1924; Broekaert, Arthur: Roomdale's jongelieden in de Verzoeking en in de Beproeving [The Youth of Roomdale [a Flemish village] in Temptation and Tribulation], Bruges n.d. [1930], 2 vols.; Thiry, Antoon: De Hoorn Schalt [The Bell Tolls], Amsterdam 1932.
31. † Eksteins, Rites of Spring 1989, op. cit.
32. † Georges Linze: Les enfants bombardés [1936], Brussels 2002, p. 132.

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