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Making Sense of the War (Belgium)

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Belgium's war experience was *sui generis*. The vast majority of Belgians experienced the war neither at the front nor on the home front, but under German occupation. The article analyzes the range of ways in which the occupied population made sense of the war. It examines the emergence, at the start of 1915, of the idea that life under occupation constituted a war effort in itself. It then examines how this conceit fared over the next four years. It does so through private diaries, which offer a nuanced view of the range of responses to the occupation.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Life Under Occupation As A War Effort In Its Own Right](#)
- [3 Endurance and Expectation](#)
- [4 Seeing It Through](#)
- [5 Patriotism and Endurance](#)
- [6 Conclusion: Making Sense of the Occupation](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

When at eight in the morning of 4 August 1914, the German invasion forces crossed the Belgian border, Belgium entered a war unlike that of the other belligerents on the [Western Front](#). By November 1914, Belgian society had fallen apart into different segments. The government was in exile in Normandy. The army took a stand on the Yser front. Behind the Belgian and British sectors of what was now the Western Front, the westernmost corner of the country remained uninvaded; it

was there that the royal family resided. Hundreds of thousands of [refugees](#) were abroad. The largest segment of Belgium-at-war was the occupied country. Belgium, in 1914 the most densely populated country in the world, was largely overrun: of its 2,636 communes, 2,598 were occupied. In other words, most Belgians lived the war under [occupation](#). This included military-age men, of whom no more than 20 percent were mobilized, in contrast to the far greater numbers elsewhere. (Even in occupied [Serbia](#), the vast majority of military-age men were in the army.) Belgium's war experience, then, was of a much more "civilian" bent than that of all the other belligerents.

Occupied Belgium offers a particularly instructive field of investigation to First World War scholars interested in processes of societal mobilization, self-mobilization, [demobilization](#), and what one could call "countermobilization," by which I mean the rallying of forces *against* the national war project. Occupied Belgium is an instructive case of societal mobilization because the state was in no position to mobilize society: the government was in exile and the occupation regime silenced public culture. Belgians, therefore, were left to their own devices when it came to making sense of what was happening. To scholars of societal mobilization, the case of Belgium is all the more instructive because the country had remained, through the early 20th century, a somewhat loose nation-state by western European standards, sporting an array of unassailable local priorities and political-confessional particularisms, with linguistic differences constituting only one axis of centrifugality among several. As a result, the state could only exact so much: conscription was not generalized until 1912, and even then allowed for wide exemptions. But the idea of national defense did turn out to sway the citizenry during the crisis of the summer of 1914 to largely accepted the government's decision to reject the German ultimatum and defend Belgium's [neutral](#) status. The ensuing invasion, and echoes of worldwide sympathies for the country's plight, galvanized a sense of common purpose as Belgian society entered the occupation with little national leadership but a great deal of national fervor.

The scholarship of Belgium's First World War occupation has enjoyed a renewal over the past two decades, with particular breakthroughs in the study of [espionage](#),^[1] policing,^[2] material circumstances and their impact on the political imagination,^[3] and the contours of Flemish countermobilization.^[4] Scholars have moved beyond the rigid application of national and class categories to a more constructivist approach that acknowledges contingencies. In line with this approach, I will, in what follows, trace the question of how Belgians made sense of the occupation through the lens of one particular source: private [diaries](#). The reason for this choice is twofold. First, military occupation, the dominant experience for Belgians of the war generation was a baffling experience in need of interpretation. Second, diaries, both in what they say and in what they do not say, permit the historian to closely chart the generation of meaning, to study the way in which raw happenings are constructed into *experiences* – reflected through each diarist's idiosyncratic (but also socially and culturally inflected) lens. It is true that diaries are not socially representative; only literate men and women with some leisure took stock of their days in writing. The social range of the diary is not exactly narrow: in the case of occupied Belgium in 1914-1918, it includes both children's governesses and aristocrats. But the source does exclude the large part of the citizenry that lacked

time, resources – and education (at war's outbreak, 25 percent of Belgian adults were illiterate). A more complete view of the occupied population's perspectives on the war requires more scholarship than is presently available, though breakthroughs have been made regarding popular media such as [cartoons](#) and street-songs, as well as clandestine [papers](#) and post-war novels about the occupation (the latter two sources, admittedly, have an equally strong class bias). More research is needed on practical responses to the occupation regarding issues of work, [food](#), [censorship](#), policing, and the like.

This article, then, does not pretend to offer a complete view, but it does hope to contribute a few insights into how individuals made sense of military occupation through time; how they defined this particular experience of war that belonged neither to the front experience nor to that of the home front as it existed in other belligerent societies, and yet was suffused by the war.

Life Under Occupation As A War Effort In Its Own Right

As occupied Belgium entered the year 1915, the invasion-era extreme violence against civilians had receded, the occupation authorities had ensconced themselves in conquered terrain, and the occupied citizenry was cut off from its army and government. Against this backdrop was issued a text that proffered an interpretation of the occupied Belgians' circumstances. This was "Patriotism and Endurance," the pastoral letter for the New Year by Cardinal [Désiré-Joseph Mercier \(1851-1926\)](#), the head of the Catholic [church](#) in Belgium. Its importance reaches beyond Belgium: it was the war's first – and would remain its only – public statement on behalf of occupied populations. Mercier declared all military occupations unacceptable, including those of the Entente: "occupied provinces are not conquered provinces; Belgium is no more a German province than Galicia is a Russian one."^[5]

The pastoral letter caused a sensation, because it openly mentioned the [massacres](#) of the invasion, a forbidden subject. Here, I mainly want to highlight how it defined the duties of the occupied. Mercier enjoined his audience – he was addressing the bourgeoisie specifically – to share its shrinking resources with those in need, and to show stoicism so as to be worthy of the soldiers on the Yser ("Let us not complain. Let us be deserving of our liberation"). His notion of "endurance" infused volition and a sense of collective virtue into the predicament of the occupied. As to their attitude towards the occupying powers: the occupied had to "submit to the *de facto* situation" so as not to endanger fellow citizens. But the key term here was *de facto*. The regime had no legitimacy and would not last. "This power is not a legitimate authority. In your innermost souls you owe it neither esteem, nor attachment, nor obedience. The only legitimate power in Belgium is that which belongs to our king, his government, and the representatives of the nation." Unarmed civilians, forced to cohabit with a superior military force, should refrain from armed resistance, but they *could* deny this military force all legitimacy.

Endurance and Expectation

Mercier's pastoral letter transvalued life under occupation from passive misery to a war effort: enduring hardship and maintaining faith in eventual liberation became collective endeavors. Some had formulated a similar notion even earlier, amidst the trauma of the invasion. At that time, civilian endeavor seemed almost hopeless in the face of crushing military superiority; yet the fact that many civilians, each in their own sphere, mustered their feeble resources to limit the remit of military authority was cause for hope in itself, regardless of efficiency. "Let us admire! Let us admire without reserve!" wrote a Socialist provincial councilman in October 1914; Brussels, by then, had been taken and Antwerp was about to fall. He was describing efforts to keep administrations afloat against all odds through secret payments to public servants and clandestine correspondence. "Think of the sheer number of actions undertaken – trifling in appearance, but ennobled by the goal! How they testify to the valour of this country that is determined not to die, that mobilizes all of its resources and bravely resists the boot that wants to crush it!"^[6]

Such endeavors gained their full significance in the aggregate ("the sheer number of actions undertaken") and over time. "Endurance" only meant something over the longer run. By the time Mercier launched his pastoral letter, there was a need for a "horizon of expectation" – to use Reinhard Koselleck's term – that befit the stalemated war.^[7] For, by early 1915, the *moment* of invasion and mobile warfare had already shifted to the *stretch* of longer-term warfare (even if few people as yet expected a lengthy war of attrition: that shift would not occur until after the great offensives of 1916). The occupation regime, as could be expected, banned calls to "endurance" that defined life under occupation as a war effort. Instead, it went out of its way to foster an acceptance of the new state of affairs as normal. The German ban on open expression gave rise to a thriving clandestine press; among occupied regions in First World War Europe, Belgium was the only one with a vast corpus of underground periodicals. These publications, launched mainly by middle-class, Catholic patriots, aimed to present the "*de facto* situation" as temporary and illegitimate.^[8] While of great value in helping us understand how a particular segment of the population defined the occupation for the benefit of their compatriots, clandestine periodicals only present one strand of opinion. Diaries, by contrast, present a range of civic choices. What is more, in contrast to the more discontinuous discourse of the clandestine press, diaries are of particular value in charting the "war effort" of life under occupation – or, to be more precise, the effort to define life under occupation as a war effort – over time. For diaries are all about time and they are all about continuous effort. Diarists do not just *mention* endurance, they actually *construct* it in the very act of keeping their diary.^[9] Keeping a diary, in the early modern and modern West, is a conceit: it is a way to take stock and prevent time from passing by uselessly.^[10] Making sure that time does not get squandered becomes a particularly urgent undertaking in occupation times, when the sphere of bona fide activity shrivels. Keeping a diary remains an ever-available exercise, a form of discipline, repeated daily or at least regularly, a way or in any case an attempt to keep entropy at bay.

Seeing It Through

The conceit of endurance over time, then, is particularly well expressed in occupation diaries, not only in what they say (or do not say), but also in how they are kept. One example is the hefty diary kept by the retired Brussels magistrate Edmond Picard (1836-1924) all through the war. Six months in, Picard wrote that he failed to make sense of the war any longer; all he could see was a “hiatus” in people’s lives.^[11] He soon gave up trying to define the occupation as a meaningful collective experience; revealingly, he only ever wrote the term between quotation marks. The very form of his diary expresses how his effort to make sense of it all came undone. The first part of his diary (August 1914-July 1915) consists of 712 pages’ worth of observations in two tidy notebooks entitled *The European-German War*; but after that, the diary collapsed into a pile of 1,082 unpaginated loose sheets in various formats.^[12] But he did write until the Armistice; one could say that he saw it through, even if he no longer saw through it. Other diarists, by contrast, found meaning in the very repetitiveness of events: in Ghent, the novelist Virginie Loveling (1836-1923) commented that “noting one’s daily impressions like this, one finds oneself writing the same thing all the time, always the same aspects of military occupation, monotonously. And yet one only has to read over one’s notes to realize that in the very repetition lies the essence of a great city in war-time.”^[13] Yet even Loveling’s diary tailed off a little in the last two years of the war: the entries became shorter, entire weeks remained unexamined. In other cases, diarists who had enthusiastically started out documenting the war’s daily events, concluded after a while that shifts and changes at the fronts altered little. An energetic dermatologist from Brussels named Adrien Bayet (1863-1935) started writing on 1 August 1914; by the Armistice, his journal ran to 6,352 pages over twenty-five notebooks. There was a shift in content, however: the first notebooks bulge with clippings about the events on the fronts, cut from the German-censored papers and fiercely annotated. But by December 1915, Bayet decided no longer to pay attention to the ticker-tape of military news. Neither, he noted, did his fellow citizens. “The public mood has decidedly changed. (...) At the start of the war, one still harbored the illusion that a single event could turn the course of the war. (...) A year ago, people took apart every single item of front news; they discussed the taking or the loss of a stretch of trench, and rejoiced or worried.” He congratulated himself and his compatriots on having reached a view of “the inexorable march of fate” that was independent of “specific events” and on no longer giving in to “bouts of exaggerated pessimism or optimism.”^[14] This was Bayet’s roundabout way of saying that he was not going to let despondency over German successes in the East get the better of his trust in eventual liberation. “I am firmly convinced that we will return to our lives, if not this year, then the next,” he wrote on the first day of 1916.^[15]

The intimate nature of private diaries offers a close sense of time passing – including the time of the human body. Loveling, a keen and humane observer, was particularly good in picking up on this. One example is a vignette from early 1915: she had seen a one-legged veteran of the summer’s fighting hop onto the tram. “Only twenty, radiating good health, and not yet disheartened by his mutilation! He proudly looks about him. Knowing that he has done his patriotic duty has consoled him

so far. But after that first flush of pride?"^[16] In Brussels, the middle-aged novelist Georges Eekhoud (1854-1927), as he gradually retreated into himself after a first flush of patriotic fervor, started describing meals he had enjoyed; there are 25 descriptions of dinners between Easter 1916 and the Armistice, none before that time.^[17] In the countryside near Antwerp, the writer Marie Gevers (1883-1975) commented with unusual candor – unusual for the times, not for her – on her yearnings for her husband; she wrote her diary in the form of letters to him. On one occasion, intertwining erotic desire and patriotic references, she described a dream of hers in which they were interrupted by an intruder as they made love. "I managed to chase him away by singing the Marseillaise... but I woke up before time, unfortunately."^[18]

Patriotism and Endurance

Diarists varied widely in the extent to which they emphasized the national. Some dwelt at length and with vehemence on the notion of the fatherland at war. Eekhoud, Bayet and Picard are examples. Gevers had struck patriotic notes in the diary she had kept in [the Netherlands](#), but the tone of her diary grew more matter-of-fact after her return to occupied Belgium in August 1916.^[19] In yet other diaries, the imagined community (to use Benedict Anderson's classic term) is implied amidst the seemingly mundane.^[20] This is the case in the diary of Henriette Bovy (1858-1945), a middle-class Catholic mother of six from the Brussels borough of Molenbeek, whose two youngest sons were at the front. Although the family was active in clandestine-press networks, her diary does not dwell on the idea of the fatherland much. Neither did it dwell on the death of both her sons at the front in 1917, respectively 1918. (In both cases, the news only reached her months later, proof of how much the occupied country was cut off from the front. Several diarists mentioned how extremely disheartening it was not to be able to communicate with loved ones in the army.) Madame Bovy retained her tone of elliptic stoicism in her notes on post-Armistice Brussels: "The trams are full to bursting point. Ladies' purses and gentlemen's wallets get stolen. (...) Everywhere one sees soldiers reunited with their families. Aline [her daughter] and I walk part of the way home; we cry together in the dark street. (...) I gather bits of cloth and sew 10 flags (...); the Greek one is a lot of work."^[21]

By contrast, another bourgeois materfamilias, whose sons were not yet at the front but would reach military age in 1916 and 1918, wrote her diary explicitly to comment on national allegiances in wartime. But then the story of *her* family was one of transnational loyalties: Constance Graeffe (1874-1950) née Ellis, a Belgian-English-French mother of five, married into a Belgian-German family of prosperous sugar refiners in Brussels. The extended family, faced with a choice of national adherence, defined themselves as Belgian patriots. But Constance's husband Otto chose to align himself with the German side. She subscribed to his choice, but it is revealing that she felt the need to start a diary as a running commentary. Her observations are ostensibly addressed to a Scottish childhood friend now living in [Australia](#), as if to appeal to a kind of court of international opinion. They mix family tension, seemingly mundane matters and vehement editorializing on the moral issues of the war – such as the civilian massacres of 1914, the execution of the English nurse Edith Cavell

(1865-1915) in occupied Brussels, and [war profiteering](#).^[22]

In several cases, an all-too-fervent espousal of patriotic allegiances at the start of the war led to disappointment with fellow citizens, for they were bound to fall short of the exalted image of a nation soldered together against the invader. This disappointment led to a wholesale refusal to make any sense at all of the occupation. This is particularly the case with Edmond Picard and Georges Eekhoud. Both men had belonged to choice literary and artistic circles for decades and were much beholden to Belgium's national prestige. Both were, at the outset of the war, extremely invested in an exalted vision of the nation-at-war. Picard had, years earlier, coined the term "Belgian soul," and fancied that he saw it manifest itself in the summer of 1914. Eekhoud waxed lyrical over the "sublime Belgians."^[23] Such exalted imaginings were bound to be disappointed by a necessarily more flawed reality. In reaction to this disappointment, both men came to vehemently deny that the occupied Belgians formed a citizenry with common interests. By mid-1918, both Picard and Eekhoud had publicly served the occupation regime's self-legitimizing effort. Picard had launched an ostensibly pacifist campaign that encouraged Belgians to accept the status quo of military occupation, so the war could end. Eekhoud had defended writers' right to publish their work under censorship, although, among Belgian literati and journalists, it was widely considered unpatriotic to do so.

Conversely, diarists less steeped in [war culture](#) – in other words, less given to the sacralization of the war's miseries – and more given to ironic observation were, perhaps paradoxically, better able to make sense of the occupation. The West Flemish novelist [Stijn Streuvels \(1871-1969\)](#) - pseudonym of François Lateur - had run afoul of patriotic opinion at the start of the war because of his mocking vignettes of villagers fleeing in panic before the invading troops. It did not stop him, once the occupation regime was installed, from training an observant eye on the emergence of patriotic imagining even among illiterate rural laborers: "I thought that these fellows had feelings only for the land they work and that they had no notion of a fatherland that belongs to them at all. But the sight of a German traveling along the highway like a lord stirs in them feelings of indignation such that they open up to the idea of patriotism." He concluded that "one should not judge the common people too hastily."^[24] Likewise, Virginie Loveling, the Ghent novelist, refused to subscribe to chauvinism: she made a point of talking to German occupation personnel and she never idealized the occupied citizenry. But this sense of proportion, precisely, seems to have enabled her to think through the occupation, as it did her cousin, the Ghent historian [Paul Fredericq \(1850-1920\)](#). Fredericq kept an amused distance vis-à-vis patriotic exaltation. Yet he also refused on principle to do anything that might legitimize the occupation regime, and he took this refusal to some lengths: in 1916, Fredericq was deported to a German prison for his rejection of the new Flemish [university of Ghent](#), which was a creation of the occupation authorities. Other Flemings by contrast did applaud the new university without pausing to consider that it was created by a coercive regime (in the week the university opened, the first groups of forced laborers were deported from Ghent). Not coincidentally, a closer examination of the rhetoric of the Flemish university's champions reveals a surfeit of patriotic exaltation: some of them had started out fervently embracing the idea of Belgium, before rejecting it and embracing the idea of Flanders with equal fervor.^[25]

Conclusion: Making Sense of the Occupation

It is well known that the invasion and the occupation of Belgium generated a great deal of Entente war fervor. Much has been written about the rhetorical excesses surrounding the trope of *Gallant Little Belgium*, followed by *Poor Little Belgium*. But one may ask whether these excesses really swayed opinion – both international and Belgian opinion – all that much. For the blunt fact of military conquest and the questions it raised needed no elaboration; the unacceptability of occupation was a concrete and finite credo (even if the human cost of rolling back the occupations was so staggering as to dwarf the original issue). That is why, within occupied Belgium, a nuanced and complex view of occupier and occupied – and a keen sense of the pity of war - did not preclude a principled stance on the occupation itself. It is no coincidence that, among diarists, the ones that were least in thrall to the war culture and its praise of “sacrifice” were, in the end, the ones best able to make sense of the occupation.

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Notes

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7. † Koselleck, Reinhart: "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont' - zwei historische Kategorien," in id., *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt 1989, pp. 349-375.
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9. † I sincerely thank [Nicolas Beaupré](#) for pointing this out to me.
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11. † Brussels, Archives et Musée de la Littérature (AML), Edmond Picard, *La Guerre Européo-allemande*, M.L. 2229/1 and 2 ; entry of 3 February 1915.
12. † Brussels, Royal Library, Manuscript Division, Edmond Picard, *Journal*, 1915-1918, Mss III 224, folders 1-4.
13. † Van Raemdonck, Bert (ed.): *In Oorlogsnood. Virginie Lovelings dagboek 1914-1918. Tekstkritische editie. [Amidst War's Anguish. Virginie Loveling's Diary 1914-1918. Text-critical edition.]* online: http://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/BIB-G-025872_2005_0001_AC.pdf (retrieved: 21 April 2016). Entry of 26 June 1916.
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15. † Bayet, notebook 7, f. 1575, 1 January 1 1916.
16. † Loveling, entry of 25 January 1915.
17. † Brussels, AML, Georges Eekhoud, *Journal*, M.L. 2954/11 through 19.
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