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# Women's Mobilization for War (Belgium)

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**Belgium experienced the war in an exceptional position: it never issued a declaration of war, but was drawn into it by the brutal invasion of its territory. Both men and women were subject to a harsh occupation regime. The focus of their mobilization for war was on surviving. This article explores how Belgian women responded to the outbreak of war and how gender relations were affected, during the war and after.**

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## INTRODUCTION: THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

In Belgium, the war came as a surprise: until the end of July 1914 the population felt little concerned by a possible conflict.<sup>[1]</sup> There was faith in the country's [neutral status](#), which was guaranteed by the Great Powers and had been proven to be effective since 1839. The mobilization of the army was carried out calmly and without great concern, as a purely preventative measure. The invasion of the country on 4 August 1914 came as a great shock, and incited patriotic fervor and a collective adherence to a defensive war. The sentiment of national unity was intensified by the [massacres](#), [rapes](#), and destruction by the German troops. Within a few weeks, the country experienced a massive exodus of 1,500,000 [refugees](#), and when the fronts stabilized, Belgium was divided into three: a small piece of free territory behind the Yser; the zone under [German occupation](#); and the Belgian population in exile in [Britain](#), [The Netherlands](#), [France](#) and, in small numbers, in Switzerland. The government was established near the French city of Le Havre. It was in this atmosphere that women were drawn into the war. There were emotions of fear and sadness, but we also observe pride in resisting an invading force, a sentiment that was further fed by the discourses of public and religious authorities. Many women saw this resistance as a national duty from which they could not escape.

As elsewhere, the first weeks of war were appalling. The military health services were quickly overwhelmed and everywhere the response was the same: women were called in. Numerous women of all ages and from all walks of life, with or without medical competence, rushed to the aid stations and ambulances that were hastily set up in schools, museums, monasteries and castles. [Nursing](#) appeared to be the preferred way for women to be involved in the conflict, especially since, being potential mothers, they were considered to possess useful "natural" qualities for this task. On the Belgian front, one female figure stands out: [Marie Curie \(1867-1934\)](#). With her daughter [Irène Joliot-Curie \(1897-1956\)](#) she quickly established a mobile radiography service.

From the outbreak of war, the main feminist associations ceased their disputes and aligned themselves in the name of patriotism. As early as 8 August 1914, they created a Patriotic Union of Belgian Women to channel all female resources. Everywhere local female support groups appeared whose main task was to take care of the refugees and the wounded. In this context, one hardly finds a voice in favor of peace. Self-defense was legitimate, even for those who considered themselves [pacifists](#) before 1914. Many women's groups had argued for the settlement of disputes by arbitration, but without advocating full disarmament. Violation of the country's neutrality - and thus of international commitments - and violation of human rights, such as massacres and rape by the invader led them to support a defensive war.

## Women's Contribution to the War Effort

The fronts stabilized in November 1914 and the war became a long-term matter. The war experience of women in Belgium was very different to that of women in other countries, as the distortion of the sex ratio was much less marked in Belgian society than in countries with a high mobilization rate.

(Belgium was neutral and had only a very small army when the conflict started; mobilization during the conflict was hardly possible because of the occupation.) Even when the occupier started forced deportations of male workers from 1916, women never systematically replaced men, as they did in the neighboring countries.

Nutritional survival mobilized the majority of Belgian women. Many enlisted in charities. Others engaged in civil resistance. Women in the unoccupied zone as well as those in exile were requested to fulfill the needs of the army, to care for the wounded and to assist the refugees.

## Behind the Yser Front

Behind the Yser, life followed the rhythm of the army, which remained the only source of income for the population. The momentum of volunteering had passed, with the reorganization of health services and the arrival of professional nurses. They were sent by their national [Red Cross](#) or by private organizations such as the Women's Emergency Corps, and worked alongside Belgian registered nurses, who were very few in numbers. Far from the romantic image of the white angel, modeled after the consoling mother figure, nurses delivered hard labor in hospitals and convalescent facilities. They executed their physically exhausting, badly paid, and morally demanding work under the authority of doctors and in permanent contact with suffering and death.<sup>[2]</sup>

The army also recruited large numbers of women in auxiliary services: laundry, cleaning, disinfection, and cooking. Sewing workshops were installed in large villas in De Panne, to produce and repair military clothing; small factories employed women to make [gas masks](#) and [camouflage](#) netting. Women were asked to look after the children behind the Yser, often left all by themselves in a region devastated by the fighting, and to evacuate them to France or Switzerland. Although considerable effort was made to provide jobs for women, income insecurity was growing, and with it, a clandestine prostitution developed near the trenches.

## Belgians in Exile

Over 600,000 Belgians spent the war in exile, living in difficult conditions, even though the Belgian government made big efforts to employ women in its garment workshops or arms factories. The army was in great need of this labor and the necessitous women got a wage in return. However, their mobilization remained low in comparison with the 450,000 French *munitionnettes* and the British women munition workers, numbering nearly 1 million. In 1917, there were just over 1,300 women refugees involved in the manufacture of shells and cartridges for the Belgian army, in factories that were set up in France by the Belgian government and in England by engineers and entrepreneurs.<sup>[3]</sup>

Female mobilization largely focused on care, the protection of [children](#), and charity, according to a division of labor reflecting social class. But women also enrolled in the office work of charities, or in the services that delivered [letters](#) and parcels to soldiers and prisoners. Finally, some women, often wives of politicians, such as Lalla Vandervelde, or of important personalities including Julie Horta and

[Marie Depage \(1872-1915\)](#), engaged in patriotic [propaganda](#) services and undertook extensive tours abroad, either to raise funds for “Poor little Belgium” or to counteract the [propaganda](#) spread by [Germany](#) in neutral countries.

## Occupied Belgium

In occupied Belgium, women were subject to insecurity and had to ensure the survival of their families. The country - an atypical home front since it was located behind enemy lines - quickly sank into misery. Unlike other belligerent countries, whose economies were supported by the war, the Belgian industry collapsed under the weight of destruction, requisitions, and the continental [blockade](#). Unemployment exploded and affected women, representing 30 percent of the workforce in 1914. Food shortages occurred quickly, despite the organization of a National Relief and Food Committee ([Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation](#), or CNSA), responsible for food distribution with the help of neutral countries.

Instead of being called in as replacement workers and gaining some independence, women were driven back to the most traditional crafts, such as lace making, sewing and cooking. The remaining jobs and professional training were reserved primarily for men. The division of labor followed a strict gender segregation. The Patriotic Union of Belgian Women (integrated within the CNSA) coordinated women's work in three areas: domestic services, production of clothing, and lace making. Many workshops opened in public buildings. A special service dealt with the lace workers, who were particularly numerous and miserable. Canteens, soup kitchens, and economic restaurants emerged, providing a full-time job for thousands of women. The founding of a toy-making charity (*l'Œuvre du jouet*) in 1915 created new work opportunities for women. Women also invested in the protection of children and pregnant women, in schools and in consultations for infants.<sup>[4]</sup> Throughout the war, Belgian society could only survive because of the infinite network of aid organizations and the massive integration of women in a vast philanthropic network, all based on patriotism. Women of disorderly conduct (which also included concubines) were excluded from any assistance.

Women had to manage the unmanageable: ensure the survival of their families. This became a daunting task due to supply shortages, particularly in the [cities](#).<sup>[5]</sup> Gradually, men also became involved in the search for [food](#). From 1917, famine threatened the population; but they had to keep going, make the linen last, mend, and sew. Women took on great responsibility managing this precarious existence, but it was in no way emancipatory. As the war continued, differences between social classes and between the sexes blurred, because everyone faced the same difficulties. Food became a nagging problem: feminists spread wartime recipes; Christian women's organizations set up home economy courses; farmers associations organized Food Weeks. These meetings also helped to keep a moral control on women and influence them with patriotic speech.

Misery and unemployment unavoidably pushed a number of women into [prostitution](#), especially in [Brussels](#), a transit stage for German troops, and other large cities. By September 1914, the occupying forces took drastic measures to monitor and control the prostitutes. Military authorities

considered prostitution a necessary evil, and especially feared the spread of [venereal diseases](#). Infected women, illegal prostitutes and women of suspicious conduct were locked in "hospitals" and subjected to a regime of hard labor, to regular medical examinations, and to numerous humiliations. At the time of the liberation, these women would be considered double traitors (towards the country and morale). They were subject to public violence and stigmatized by having their hair shaved.

## Women in the Resistance

A small number of women radically broke with traditional gender roles by engaging in the civil resistance movement that started in November 1914. In order to directly support the Allied armies, this resistance was structured according to three types of action: gathering information, organizing escape routes and the underground [press](#). Throughout the war, many networks crisscrossed the country in favor of the Belgian, French, and British Intelligence Services. The women involved saw this [resistance](#) as a substitute for military service, from which they were excluded. About 30 percent of resistance members were female, but their exact number is difficult to establish because they operated in a proper way, relying more on informal solidarity networks, including the timely assistance of neighbors, friends and relatives, who were never recognized as official agents. [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#) for example could count on the assistance of students at her nursing school. Some networks were dominated by women (the direction of [Dame Blanche](#), the most famous one, consisted of 41 percent women). Some were exclusively female, such as the networks of [Louise de Bettignies \(1880-1918\)](#) and Madeleine Doutreligne; others entirely male. Social diversity in these networks was high, even if the nobility was particularly well represented - because of their relations in political and diplomatic circles, their knowledge of the German language, which had been common before 1914, and their financial resources necessary to operate the network.

However, none of the tasks was reserved for one or the other sex. The most dangerous actions were those concerning the escape routes to Holland, as a [high-voltage electric fence](#) was built along the Belgian-Dutch border in December 1914. Often these tasks were entrusted to women. [Rosalie Cortvrindt \(1893-1917\)](#) was electrocuted aged twenty-four, when helping six men to escape on 19 July 1917. These women experienced danger and fear and displayed real bravery, as was recognized by numerous decorations. They took risks and like men, they were sometimes arrested, imprisoned, and transferred to prisons in Belgium or Germany (Siegburg, Delitz, Holzminden). Some died during deportation. Women were not spared because of their sex, age, or social status. Several nuns were imprisoned for [espionage](#); women of the nobility were sentenced to [forced labor](#), alongside more humble women. Of the 358 women arrested and tried, thirty-seven were sentenced to death and thirteen were executed.<sup>[6]</sup> The executions caused a scandal in the national and international [press](#) and were suspended after that of [Gabrielle Petit \(1893-1916\)](#) on 1 April 1916, but resumed from 1917. Subject to the same moral and physical misery, the women forged a solidarity beyond traditional social structures, which resulted after the war in a fellowship of former prisoners of Siegburg.

## Divergent voices

In both occupied Belgium and exile, hatred of the enemy was at such levels that there was little room for pacifist calls. When feminists of neutral countries agreed to hold an international peace congress in The Hague in April 1915, the Belgian delegation, consisting of only five women, said at the outset that peace was impossible as long as their country was occupied.

In this patriotic unanimity, only a very small group of women engaged in the *Flamenpolitik* and collaborated with the occupier. Among them were some feminists, such as [Roza de Guchtenaere \(1875-1942\)](#) and [Anna Mortelmans \(1893-1951\)](#). The former ran a school in Ghent that was founded by the Germans and established for the independence of Flanders; the latter took part in Flemish nationalist meetings and launched appeals which were considered defeatist. Both women were sentenced after the war.

## Gender and war

The special situation in Belgium shows the complexity of the analysis when it comes to gender relations. We must distinguish between the upheavals that originated in the war, and the longer-term effects on the status of women. And these are not unambiguous.

### A conservative war?

The war clearly separated the sexes (men must fight, women take care of the home) but also represented a moment of blurring of gender norms. In many countries, the state of emergency forced the call on women to replace men when all other possibilities had been exhausted. Women then entered new, mixed spaces. They were indispensable to the war effort and, as what they did, they did well, they raised fears of masculinization and role reversal.

The relative autonomy acquired during the conflict would have favored women's emancipation. This thesis, at first widely accredited in Western historiography, has been questioned since the 1990s, given the persistence of inequalities and the limited advances for women after the war. There is in fact evidence of a backlash, with discourses consolidating male supremacy. Governments tried to re-impose traditional roles, seeing men as heads of the family, protectors and providers, and assigning women to their domestic role. According to this view, the war was an interlude that was quickly ended.

Where do we locate the Belgian case in this debate? During the war, nothing was liberating for the women in occupied Belgium and their status continued to deteriorate. When peace returned, society seemed eager to forget this particularly painful episode by returning to the traditional values that made sense for many. Temporarily obscured by the conditions that characterized the lives of both women and men during the conflict, gender stereotypes were reborn. Only a small group of feminists - an absolute minority - called for more political and civil rights based on women's patriotic war



effort.<sup>[7]</sup>

As in all countries, the Belgian government gave top priority to the reintegration of men in civilian life; political equality was established in 1919, but solely for men. Women only got suffrage in local elections, as a result of political bargaining, and excluding prostitutes from the vote. Reconstruction also involved repopulation: new laws were passed, which were restrictive in matters of [sexuality](#), incentive in terms of fertility, and distributive in allowances (for housewives and family allowances). Wage labor for women was strongly condemned. Women's mass organizations supported this patriarchal model: the Christian associations according to the doctrine of [the Church](#), the socialist, according to Marxist doctrine, denouncing the enslavement of workers by the capital.

## Progress for Women

One would be tempted to support the thesis of the war as conservative. But this interpretation does not account for the many advances in women's lives between 1918 and 1940. The negative effects of the war interacted with other aspects, and resulted in long-term progress for women. From this perspective, the analysis must take into account social changes at national and international level after 1918. The Constitution of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which was integrated in all [Parisian Peace Treaties](#), stipulated equal pay for men and women in case of work of equal value. Under the umbrella of the [League of Nations](#), international women's organizations were able to push for nationality rights of married women - a question reactivated by war-linked cases - and investigations on women's status in general. On a national level, attitudes varied significantly across generations - women's aspirations were not homogeneous according to their age, any more than they were according to marital status, social and spatial conditions.

If we take as an example two particularly recessive elements during the war - the increasing impoverishment of women and their massive enrollment in philanthropy - we observe that they could eventually generate favorable effects for women. The impoverishment of the middle classes forced girls to earn a living. Despite pro-family messages, marriage no longer appeared as their only destiny: it had become less obvious a choice by the absence of dowry and had shown its limits in times of crisis. Combined with compulsory education (1914) and with a diversification in professional training, this pushed a greater number of young women to (re)enter the labor market in better conditions. They moved into decently paid and regulated professions, away from the jobs they were offered in wartime, which were badly paid and already in decline: domestic work, sewing and heavy industrial work. Certainly, the feminine occupations were still considered inferior to male activities and wage inequality persisted, but progress was made. In addition, many women who wished to maintain a certain economic autonomy kept on working after marriage. They gradually acquired a professional identity separate from their connection with the home, and even a career perspective. This represented a totally new element in gender relations, social integration through professional activity being once a purely male characteristic.

Turning to the field of philanthropy, we observe that this had taken new dimensions during the war,

both in scope and organization: because it had been extended to the entire population, it left the area of private charity and came to be seen as general humanitarian assistance. Philanthropy became structured under the leadership of men, who found in it a substitute for those powers they had lost in public life. The change of scale was significant: charity work now involved a social duty, working for the general interest, connected to political, diplomatic, and economic matters. After the war, women used this broader conception in their favor, further investing in the public sphere and theorizing on social citizenship, in the name of which they claimed rights and a voice in the socio-political organization of society. Women's mass associations applied this as a means to get recognition in the emerging welfare state. Negative effects of the war could thus have paradoxical implications.

## War Widows

The **war widows** made up a special group of women in post-war society. Not only the wives of deceased soldiers, or civilians shot for resistance during the war, belonged to this category, but also the wives of invalid veterans who died before 1929, even if their marriages ended after 1918. Their number is estimated at about 40,000, but there is only limited information about them. They were recognized and praised at the time of the liberation as symbols of the suffering, and got the right to vote in 1919. But it was only in the name of the dead they could speak: they lost the vote if they remarried. When a single man died, this right could be transferred to his mother, if she herself was a widow.

War widows benefited from a state pension under certain conditions defined by law in 1919, and they retained this pension even if they remarried - unless they married a citizen of an enemy country (clearly targeting Germany). However, they could lose it in the event of misconduct or a criminal conviction. From 1924 on, these women were united in a Union of mothers and widows of war.

Apart from institutional matters, the lives of war widows have been little studied, probably because of the heterogeneity of their situations. Many were also responsible for a family and received a supplementary pension for their orphaned children up to the age of twenty-one. A significant number of them seem to have remarried, judging by the constant decrease in women voters in this specific category during the interwar period.

## Conclusion

As this article has shown, from the perspective of women's position in society, the interwar period was a time of paradoxes. One thing however is clear: women lived different lives in 1940 from in 1914. The war marked a rupture, followed by a transition in which gender relations were readjusted between traditions and new ideas, as a pendulum that never fully returns to its starting point.

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## Notes

1. ↑ This article is based on the exhibition *Gender@war 1914-1918, men and women to war* (AVG-Carhif, BELvue museum Brussels 2015) and Gubin, Eliane/Smaele, Henk de: *Femmes et hommes en guerre, 1914-1918*, Brussels 2015.
2. ↑ de Launoy, Jane: *Infirmières de guerre en service commandé (Front de 14 à 18)*, Brussels 1937.
3. ↑ Amara, Michael: *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale. France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas*, Brussels 2014, pp. 140-144.
4. ↑ Marissal, Claudine: *Protéger le jeune enfant. Enjeux sociaux, politiques et sexués. Belgique 1890-1940*, Brussels 2014, pp. 109-127.
5. ↑ Nath, Giselle: *Brood willen we hebben! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*, Antwerp 2013, pp. 45-46.
6. ↑ De Weerd, Denise: *De vrouwen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Ghent 1993, pp. 263-294.
7. ↑ *Pour le suffrage des femmes. Lettre ouverte adressée aux membres du Gouvernement par la Fédération belge pour le suffrage des femmes, December 1918*, printed in: *Le Féminisme chrétien de Belgique*, April-May 1919, pp. 7-17.

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