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Refugees and the emergence of a transnational home front.

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In October 1914, a small but revealing ceremony took place at Tikitiki, in the district of Waipu in New Zealand. There, almost twelve thousands of miles away from the battlefields of Europe where war had been raging for weeks, Maori gathered together around a flagstaff whose erection had been funded by subscription for one singular purpose: hoisting the Belgian flag under the New Zealand ensign as a tribute to the Belgian nation who had bravely arisen against the German invasion. In the words of one of the chiefs invited to speak during the event,

the Maori here [...] had met to honour the flag of the Belgians, “a people who had raised (sic) on the hurdles over which the enemy would have to jump before New Zealand could be reached.”¹

Notwithstanding the implausibility of a direct German assault on New Zealand, this speech revealed the role played by the invasion of Belgium in the cultural mobilisation for war across the British Empire. It was indeed rather typical of the discourses and representations that framed the initial responses to the conflict. When, in November 1914, the pupils of Roseneath School in Wellington “spontaneously decided to forego their picnic and prizes and donate the whole of the net proceeds [of their annual garden fête] to the Belgian Relief Fund”, they did so in recognition of the plight of Belgians, as many communities did across the British world.² Historians of wartime propaganda have regularly paid attention to the construction and significance of “Gallant Little Belgium” across the Allied societies.³ As the German army invaded the country and laid a number of cities to waste, including of course Louvain and its world-famous university library, it initiated an unprecedented forced migration. Over a million Belgian men, women, and children fled the advancing enemy and sought refuge in France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

Despite the quantitative and cultural significance of their exile, historians long neglected the

¹ *The Press*, 7 October 1914, “*The Maori and the Belgians. Honouring the Belgian flag. Gisborne, October 6*”

² Letter from the Roseneath School Headmaster to the Belgian Consul in Wellington, New Zealand, 25 November 1914, Archives Générales du Royaume, Bruxelles (hereafter AGR), T.533, 9-16

³ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie, “‘A Less-Than-Total Total War’: Neutrality, Invasion, and the Stakes of War, 1914–1918”, in Felicity Rash and Christophe Declercq, eds., *The Great War in Belgium and the Netherlands: Beyond Flanders Fields*, Cham, 2018, pp. 13–34.

experience of Belgian refugees. This critical dimension of the history of Belgium at war was in fact rapidly consigned to the margins of both the historiography and the collective memory of the First World War. It was not before the tail end of the twentieth century and the publication of seminal works by Peter Gatrell, Tony Kushner, and Katharine Knox, that scholars of the Great War gave due consideration to this specific type of civilian victimisation.⁴ Peter Cahalan's book had hitherto stood out as the lone study of the reception of Belgian refugees in the United Kingdom.⁵ In the last twenty years however, the study of wartime refugeedom was reinvigorated, in part as a result of the comparative and transnational turn in the study of the First World War. Michael Amara thus produced an excellent comparative monograph on the reception of Belgian refugees in France, Britain, and the Netherlands.⁶ It is in this comparative context that the experience of refugees was first positioned within the wider social history of Britain during the war.⁷ This was one of the ways in which historians of the First World War contributed to the growing number of historical studies of population displacement in the wake of twentieth-century conflicts.⁸ Most recently, the intense commemorative sequence opened by the centennial commemorations of the war coincided with the re-emergence of migration as a key issue in international and domestic politics to rekindle scholarly and public interest in Belgian refugees.⁹

⁴ Gatrell, Peter, *A whole empire walking. Refugees in Russia during World War I*, Bloomington, 2011; Kushner, Tony and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an age of genocide. Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century*, London - Portland (OR), 1999. In the meantime, however, historians of education had produced interesting work on the experience of refugee children. Myers, Kevin, 'The hidden history of refugee schooling in Britain: the case of the Belgians, 1914–18', *History of Education*, 30 (March 2001), pp. 153–162. For the contribution of women's historians, see Storr, Katherine, *Excluded from the record: women, refugees, and relief, 1914-1929*, New York, 2009.

⁵ Cahalan, Peter, *Belgian refugee relief in England during the Great War*, New York, 1982.

⁶ Amara, Michaël, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil : les réfugiés de la première guerre mondiale : France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas 1914-1918*, Bruxelles, 2008. See also the catalogue of the exhibition organised in 2004 by *In Flanders Field* museum in Ypres, Amara, Michaël and Piet Chielens, eds., *Strangers in a strange land: Belgian refugees, 1914-1918*, Leuven, 2004.

⁷ Purseigle, Pierre, '"A wave onto our shores." Exile and resettlement of Western Front refugees, 1914-1918', *Contemporary European History*, 16 (2007), pp. 427–444.

⁸ Essential readings in this field include: Baron, Nick and Peter Gatrell, eds., *Homelands : war, population and statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918-1924*, London, 2004; Gatrell, Peter and Nick Baron, eds., *Warlands : population resettlement and state reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50*, Basingstoke, 2009; Reinisch, Jessica and Elizabeth White, *The disentanglement of populations: migration, expulsion and displacement in post-war Europe, 1944-9*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, 2011; Gatrell, Peter and Liubov Zhvanko, eds., *Europe on the move: refugees in the era of the Great War*, Manchester, UK, 2017. Frank, Matthew and Jessica Reinisch, eds., *Refugees in Europe, 1919-1959: A Forty Years' Crisis?*, London, September 2017.

⁹ Winterman, Denise, 'World War One: How 250,000 Belgian refugees didn't leave a trace', *BBC News Magazine* (September 2014). Fowler, Simon and Keith Gregson, 'Bloody Belgians. "Ancestors", 43-49 (2005).', *Ancestors* (May 2005), pp. 43–49. Declercq, Christophe, 'Belgian Refugees in Britain 1914–1919. A cross-

In the history and memory of a conflict defined by of industrial warfare, an unprecedented number of casualties, and the experience of mass grief and mourning, the experience of Belgian refugees may seem marginal. It did however illustrate the fundamental transformation of warfare evidenced by the First World War. Along with the war's other civilian victims, refugees testified to the dissolution of the boundary between the military and civilian experiences of the conflict. Indeed, the very phrase "home front" was coined to reflect this gradual and incomplete collapse of the distinction between the experience of soldiers and that of civilians.¹⁰ The reception of refugees also revealed the social and cultural dynamic underpinning the extensive mobilisation of British society for war. But Belgian refugees in Britain also participated in the social mobilisation of the Kingdom of Belgium. In the particular context of the invasion and subsequent occupation of their country, their experience underlines another specificity of the First World War: the emergence of transnational home fronts.¹¹ For Belgian refugees did not simply add, with imperial soldiers and labourers, to the multicultural character of British society; their war work demonstrated the role that exile communities could play, across national boundaries, in the mobilisation of their home society. This chapter will first address the nature and scale of this unprecedented encounter between Belgian civilians in exile and host communities in Great Britain. It will then demonstrate how the reception of Belgian refugees highlighted key aspects of the mobilisation of British society for war. In the first weeks of the war, the fate of refugees forced to flee the German invasion of Belgium underlined the tragic necessity of the conflict Britain had been plunged into. The country's commitment to uphold the rights of the "Gallant Little Belgium" was only reinforced by the perceived "frightfulness" and "barbarity" of the German enemy. As the war wore on and imposed great sacrifice and new hardships on the British people, tensions arose and occasionally degenerated into confrontations with Belgian refugees. Those did not simply

cultural study of Belgian identity in exile' (Ph.D. Thesis, University College London, 2015). De Vuyst, Jolien, Kevin Myers, and Angelo Van Gorp, 'The Paradox of the Alien Citizen? Access, Control and Entitlements of Belgian Refugees in Birmingham during the First World War', *Journal of Refugee Studies* (January 2019), pp. 1–18. Of particular relevance to this chapter is a special issue of *Immigrants & Minorities* edited by Jacqueline Jenkinson, with contributions from Daniel Laqua, Rebecca Gill, Christophe Delcerq, Helen Baker, William Buck, and Lorna Hughes. See Jenkinson, Jacqueline, 'Soon gone, long forgotten: uncovering British responses to Belgian refugees during the First World War', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 34 (May 2016), pp. 101–112.

¹⁰ Purseigle, Pierre, 'Home Fronts: the mobilization of resources for total war', in Roger Chickering, Dennis E Showalter, and Hans J Van de Ven, eds., *The Cambridge history of war. Volume 4, War and the modern world*, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 257–284.

¹¹ The key text on the Belgian experience of the First World War is Schaepdrijver, Sophie, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, 2004.

stem from the material and cultural strains of wartime mobilization; they also laid bare persisting misapprehensions of the experience of refugeedom and of the specificities of Belgian mobilization.

It took about a month for the British public to appreciate the scale of the migration provoked by the German invasion of Belgium and France. By September 1914, British newspapers reported frequently on the plight of refugees and express the country's solidarity with the first civilian victims of the war.

Since the devastation of that heroic little land [Belgium] began, its inhabitants have turned to England, their only available shelter, and a stream of fugitives, largely destitute, has set in to our shores. At first, it trickled, it now flows strongly, and it may yet become a cataract. Whatever the magnitude, it must not only be received, but welcome and instantly provided for, until this tempest be overpast.¹²

The British government had made no significant preparation to deal with this unexpected aspect of the European crisis. Faced with numerous other and complex emergencies, public services and charities nonetheless set out to provide for the refugees' needs. While Belgians accounted for 95% of refugees in Britain, it remains difficult to offer a precise estimate of the number of people who left Belgium to seek refuge across the Channel in the first weeks of the war. This is in no small part because the British authorities chose to deal with refugeedom as a transnational problem and lumped 29 nationalities together under a single category. As a post-war report indicated, "Belgian" refugees formed a 'truly cosmopolitan congregation' and fell into three sub-categories: "(1) those driven from their country in a state of complete or partial destitution; (2) those with means who preferred to come to this country rather than endure the German occupation; and (3) those who, too well or, more accurately speaking, too unfavourably known in their own country found it desirable to be known as victims of the war."¹³ A Central Register of Belgian Refugees soon recorded the arrival of over 200,000 'Belgian' refugees. At its peak, the refugee population reached 210,000 and as of 1 June 1919, the card index produced for the Central Register listed the

¹² *The Times*, 14 Sep. 1914

¹³ Ministry of Health, *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees* (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1920), 60.

names of 225,572 individuals who had been welcome in the United Kingdom.¹⁴

This population reflected both the diversity of Belgian society and the geography of the continental frontlines. Unsurprisingly, considering the southwestern trajectory of the German army, two-third of the Belgian refugee population hailed from the Flemish provinces (Antwerp, East and West Flanders, Limburg) while fifteen per cent had fled the predominantly Walloon regions (Hainaut, Liège, Luxembourg, Namur). The remainder originated from 'mixed' provinces such as Brabant.¹⁵ Directly related to the advance and retreat of the armies in the field, the influx of refugees to Britain virtually ceased following the occupation of Belgium. The linguistic and social fabric of the wartime Belgian community in Britain remained essentially unchanged between the evacuation of Antwerp in September 1914 and the first repatriations at the end of 1918.¹⁶

The Channel ports were logically enough the refugees' gateways into Britain. 35,000 people thus arrived in Folkestone in the space of five days in late September 1914. British sources indicate that 38% of the Belgian population eventually settled in the London Metropolitan Area. A report sent to the Belgian Minister of the Interior in August 1917 discussed the presence of 50,468 Belgian refugees in London alone.¹⁷ The city also served as clearing house from which to despatch refugees to the other nations and across England's counties. By 1918, Scotland had received about 20,000 refugees; 4,500 had made their way to Wales while another 3,000 settled in Ireland. More should certainly be done to refine our knowledge of the spatial distribution of refugees across the country. At any rate, it is clear that while Belgian refugees soon became a fixture in wartime London and in a few other cities like Glasgow, their presence was as conspicuous as it was exceptional in most other communities.

¹⁴ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*. See especially Appendix n°5, 58ff. For an early discussion of the composition of the Belgian refugee population, see De Jastrzebski, T.T.S., 'The Register of Belgian Refugees', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (March 1916), pp. 133–158.

¹⁵ According to the Central Register, the urban element was also overrepresented and two towns, Antwerp and Ostend, with less than one-sixteenth of the total population of Belgium accounted for the origin of one third of the refugees. Ostend, Malines, Termonde, Herstal, Willebroeck, Antwerp and Louvain had the greatest proportion of refugees in respect of their population. See *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*.

¹⁶ G. A. Powell, ed., *Four years in a refugee camp. Being an account of the British government war refugees camp, Earl's Court* (London: Baynard Press, 1920), 28

¹⁷ AGR Brussels, *Comité officiel Belge pour l'Angleterre*, T.476/184

In the last 25 years, the historiography of the First World War has focussed on the cultural dynamics of social mobilization; on the ideas, images, discourses that sustained the commitment of Britons to fight an 'uncivilized' enemy. In this regard, refugees played a critical role in the cultural mobilization of Britain. Their plight, the particular form of victimisation they suffered as a result of the invasion appear to vindicate the vision of a conflict construed as a war for Civilization against Barbarism. The singularity of their experience obviously contrasted with that of the home front communities that had been spared from the military operations. Refugees thus came across as the beleaguered victims of a cruel conflict, whose sufferings and distress could not be imagined by the population in the rear. As it happened, British civilians were fully aware of the disproportionate ordeal the refugees were going through and of the unequal distribution of the burden of war.¹⁸ Although the presence of refugees testified to the success of German armies, refugees were nonetheless considered to be heroes whose exile in Britain was not a sign of defeat but a testimony to the courageous resistance shown towards a fearsome aggressor. Accordingly, the assistance provided to the Belgian refugees became 'a striking tribute to the country which commanded the world's admiration'. Indeed, as far away as New Zealand could local elites claim: 'But for these fellows we should be eating sauerkraut and drinking lager already'¹⁹. While such pronouncement could be dismissed as anecdotal bluster, the presence of refugees on the British home front was instrumental in facilitating its cultural mobilisation. At a time when the British public had had no contact with the enemy, those 'homeless victims of the barbarian'²⁰ embodied the war at the very moment when soldiers of the BEF were joining the continental fray. In this context, the positive reception of refugees constituted, as the London Times put it, the 'country's obligation of honour'.²¹ Relief was thus conceived as a duty that the authorities invoked to underline the demands of interallied solidarity.

It is perhaps worth reflecting further on the role that refugees performed on the home front, as they alighted in London:

The courage, patience, and good humour of the Belgian refugees was astonishing.

¹⁸ *Northampton Independent*, 17 Oct. 1914

¹⁹ A.G.R., T.533, 9-16

²⁰ *The Times*, 10 September 1914; Imperial War Museum, London (hereafter IWM) Essington-Nelson Miss A 86/48/1

²¹ *The Times*, 14 Sep. 1914

Many of them told terrible stories which made it quite impossible to retain any doubt as to the German atrocities.²²

The history of the 'refugee' is inseparable from that of the 1914 atrocities which provide the backdrop against which we must approach their representation.²³ On their arrival as well as in the course of their settlement, refugees functioned as vehicles for the dissemination of images of brutality and suffering. Just arrived at the Gare du Nord in Paris, Belgian refugees and their French counterparts, were telling 'dreadful things'.²⁴ According to the London Times:

as they sit there they are talking about one thing – of what the 'Bosches' (sic) have done to the villages they have passed through already. 'they cut the hands off the little boys, so that there shall be no more soldiers for France. They kill the women, and the things they do to the young girls, Monsieur, are too terrible to be told. They burn everything and steal and destroy. Back there is nothing but wilderness.'²⁵

Settled in communities spared by the invasion, the refugees brought tales of the invasion reinforced by the authority that their direct experience conferred upon them. The influx of Belgian refugees therefore brought the local population face to face with the realities and disasters of modern warfare at a time when British military involvement was still limited. In Folkestone, the refugees' gateway to Britain, 'each boat was carrying a contingent always worthier of help and pity'.²⁶ In Northampton, where about 200 refugees reached their final destination, they served to provide tangible evidence of the distress of war:

The arrival of the first batches of Belgians here, and train loads on their way north brought home to us the tragedy of their martyred country. [...] Kind hearted ladies were ready at the station with steaming coffee, buns, sweets, which they eagerly devoured, smiling wondrously the while at the contrast between their reception here and the horrors from which they had fled.²⁷

During the first weeks of the conflict, when the restriction of information prevented people knowing what was going on at the front, Belgian refugees supplied news about the conduct of war and its impact. The misfortune of war found its expression in the tragedy of family separation described by one British female volunteer:

²² *The Times*, 26 Sept. 1914

²³ Horne and Kramer, *German atrocities*, 175

²⁴ *Le Petit Parisien*, 27 Aug. 1914.

²⁵ *The Times*, 2 Sep. 1914

²⁶ Armand Varlez, *Les Belges en exil* (Bruxelles – Londres: Librairie Moderne, 1917), 40

²⁷ Holloway, *Northamptonshire and the Great War*, 220

On evening another and myself were sent to Charing Cross to meet a late train, after waiting, an hour in the very dimly lighted station we went to the trains, at the last moment, were all being sent into Victoria & we were hurrying out when a young man came up to us seeing our sashes and asked if we spoke French & then told us his pathetic story – he was trying to meet all the refugee trains to find his mother & sisters – refugees from Brussels- & apparently had been doing this for nights.²⁸

At a time when Britain was still coming to terms with the outbreak of the war and organising itself to meet the demands of modern warfare, the reception of refugees illustrated the emergence of the British home front; a civilian society whose chief organising principle was the successful prosecution of the war, the material and emotional support of combatants in the field, and the relief of war victims.

The experience of refugees first contributed to consolidating the national community at war. Their distress confirmed the need for solidarity in the face of the enemy's onslaught. The reception of refugees was not simply a moral duty but served as a reminder of the nature of the German threat. Indeed the Belgian refugees were not only war victims but had also fallen prey to a 'barbaric' enemy. Their plight reinforced a system of representations according to which the war must lead to the foe's complete capitulation. 'Innocent' targets of a military operation that refused to comply with the traditional laws of war, the refugees were victims of a conflagration understood in social-Darwinist and ethnic terms, as a life and death struggle.²⁹ In a nutshell, the 'refugees' offered a metonymy of the war, of its stakes, around which a coherent system of representation hinged as well as the social practices that ultimately made up the social mobilisation of belligerent nation.

The speed of the German advance and the scale of the migration it brought about surprised British commentators who frequently evoked language of natural disaster to describe the effect of the 'Teutonic tide' and its 'formidable waves'.³⁰ Britain, like other allied and neutral countries dealing with a sudden influx of refugees initially struggled to organise its response to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis unfolding on its shores. This was no surprise as the mass influx of refugees was but one of many unforeseen and urgent issues that arose in the first weeks of the war. National organizations such as the War Refugees Committee

²⁸ IWM Essington-Nelson Miss A 86/48/1

²⁹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 'Violence et consentement: la 'culture de guerre' du premier conflit mondial,' in Rioux and Sirinelli, *Pour une histoire culturelle*, 259.

³⁰ Gaubert, 'Scènes et types de réfugiés'.

(hereafter WRC) were nonetheless created with the support of the government to lay the institutional and legal foundations of the reception of refugees. Meanwhile, in keeping with the rapid mobilisation of civil society across the country, local committees organised themselves to welcome refugees in their community. The number of such relief committees stabilized at around 1,500 in England alone in 1915. In most cases, these bodies had been created spontaneously on the initiative of local notables and pre-existent institutions or communities.³¹ On 16 September 1914 the Mayor of Newport in Wales convened a meeting where volunteers concerned with the welfare of Belgian refugees agreed to form a committee. Offers of hospitality were then forwarded to the WRC. In the meantime, various personalities and representative bodies joined the committee. Anxious to keep its official endorsement, the committee asked the Mayor to retain the chairmanship of an agency which now benefited from the free and regular collaboration of the local newspapers, the South Wales Argus and the Monmouthshire Evening Post.³² This example illustrates the typical formation of refugee committees across Britain, but also underlines how local civil societies set out to respond to the many emergencies arising out of the war. In this case however, local and national organisations involved in refugee relief paid particular attention to the involvement of Catholic societies and networks, as they inferred the denominational characteristics of the refugee population from the Catholic heritage of the Belgian nation. The WRC thus tasked the Catholic Women's League with welcoming refugees at railway stations. Refugees were expected to recognise the white sashes, imprinted in black with *Ligue des Femmes Catholiques*, that the League's volunteers wore. One of those volunteers, Miss Essington-Nelson, recorded her experience of meeting refugees as they stepped off trains in Victoria and Charing Cross stations in London.

When the trains arrived we helped in the sorting, ourselves trying to find the Belgians from French, Russians, American & even Armenians. Girl guides were there with coffee, soup, etc. & the women's emergency corps was doing excellent work. At one end of the station a man, appointed for the task, sat on a raised platform with lists of hotels, boarding houses & lodgings with the prices, for those who could pay for themselves. [...] After helping them into the motor busses we left them to pass out, amid the cheers of the crowds outside, to the different dépôt (sic) where the first nights were always spent in order to register them.³³

³¹ Cahalan, *Belgian refugee relief*, 170-171.

³² *Reports of the Newport (Mon.) Belgian refugees committee*.

³³ I.W.M. Essington-Nelson Miss A 86/48/1.

As this diary indicates, the refugee population was nonetheless more diverse than previously expected and relief organisations soon realised that they needed to call upon other denominational or social groups.³⁴ One such charitable organisation was the Jews' Temporary Shelter in Whitechapel that initiated the humanitarian response of the Jewish community.³⁵ A dedicated Jewish War Refugees Committee was formed by the end of August 1914.³⁶ Originated from Russia and Galicia, most 'Belgian' Jewish refugees had fled Antwerp in the wake of the invasion and formed a multinational group. During the war, 8,000 of them sought refuge in Britain and were supported by a host of Jewish relief organizations.³⁷ Despite the persistence of social and political tensions within the community, the mobilisation of British Jews and their collaboration with local and state authorities enabled them to provide their coreligionists in exile with dedicated refuges across London. Their employment, however, proved rather more problematic than their accommodation. Indeed according to the WRC, the strict observance of the Sabbath among these predominantly orthodox Jews raised a serious difficulty that compounded the situation of a largely unskilled population.³⁸

The support provided to refugees shows how important specific group solidarities were for the general war effort. The Railway Executive Committee, on behalf of the British Railways, decided to offer hospitality to Belgian railwaymen while the National Fire Union held its hand out to Belgian fire-fighters.³⁹ Civil society thus contributed a formidable effort in favour of the Belgian refugees, encouraged by a Government keen to leave philanthropic organisations carry this burden. In the Commons debate held on 31 August 1914, Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, summed up the state's initial response:

We all have the greatest sympathy with these destitute refugees from a country for which we feel so much as we do at this moment, but there is a certain number of funds which are being raised by private action for the purpose, and I would rather

³⁴ Varlez, *Les Belges en exil*, 40

³⁵ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, 53

³⁶ The institutional history of the Jewish War Refugees Committees and its relations with the national and governmental agencies is dealt with in Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 142-149.

³⁷ *The Times*, 24 Mar. 1919

³⁸ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, 26.

³⁹ 'Memorandum (n°2) for the use of Local Committees for the Care of Belgian Refugees', in *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, 94

wait and see how that works out before answering the Noble Lord's question.'⁴⁰

However, in keeping with the broader dynamics of social mobilisation, the Government soon found itself compelled to assert state control over refugee relief as civil society organisations struggled to meet the demands of the war effort. Soon, the state had not only to sustain, but also to substitute for, private philanthropy in cases where charitable energy flagged.⁴¹ Two chronologies must be considered. One is that of the material support to the refugees, the other is of the attitudes towards refugees. As early as 1915, local and national organisations noticed a worrying drying up of their financial resources.⁴² In Britain, the WRC and the Local Government Board responded by launching a remobilisation campaign. Herbert Samuel, Chairman of the Local Government Board, forwarded a letter to the British press on 7 January 1915, reminding them of the principles that governed refugee relief and contrasting the British effort to that of neutral Holland:

The sympathy of the British people for the Belgians had shown itself, among other ways, by the widespread offer of hospitality to the refugees. ... But the small country of Holland is generously giving refuge to twice as many Belgians as the United Kingdom. ... In view of all that these refugees have suffered and of all that Belgium has done for the cause of the Allies, I trust that it is only necessary for the present urgent need to be made known to the country in order to evoke a response adequate to meet the situation.⁴³

Admittedly, shortages and economic disturbances weighed heavily on philanthropic initiative, of which the middle and upper classes were the backbone. By the summer of 1916, even the support for "better-class refugees", largely funded by upper-middle-class and aristocratic donors, could no longer be sustained. Lady Lugard, who had led this particular relief operation, felt compelled to approach the Local Government Board as her Belgian Hospitality Committee could "no longer count upon the substantial help from private subscriptions."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See also Herbert Samuel's remarks on 9 Sep. Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 9th volume of session 1914, 66, House of Commons Debates, 18 Sep. 1914. For a broader perspective, see Pierre Purseigle, '1914-1918: Les combats de l'arrière. Etude comparée des mobilisations sociales en France et en Grande-Bretagne,' in Anne Duménil, Nicolas Beaupré, Christian Ingrao, eds., *Experiences de guerre. 1914-1945* (Paris: A. Viénot, 2004).

⁴¹ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, 15

⁴² National Archives, London MH 8 / 7 and Cahalan, *Belgian refugee relief in England*, 86ff.

⁴³ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, 99

⁴⁴ TNA, MH 8/7. Letter dated 22 June 1916

But the discrepancy between this chronology and that of the national mobilisation, whose crisis is traditionally deemed to begin in 1916, is revealing.

Up to the beginning of 1915, refugees symbolized the consequences of barbaric German warfare. Thronging to the rear, they were regarded as the heroic victims of German militarism. Thereafter tensions surfaced and incidents broke out between refugees and their hosts. 'Dirty Belgians', 'German' and other abuses were hurled at the exiles, prompting their spokesmen to demand greater respect. Sources of tensions between the refugees and the host communities varied both in nature and importance. Refugees were party to the 'social relations of sacrifice' that the historiography of the First World War has recently insisted on. The strains generated by the situation on the housing market for example constituted a major bone of contention between refugees and local communities.⁴⁵ Close examination of private sources and official and charities' reports suggests something of the prejudices, frustrations, and sufferings that soured relations between the Belgian refugees and their hosts. The diary of Miss Coules, written in London between June 1914 and November 1915, describes these successive changes of attitude:

Everyone was Belgian mad for a time. Mother helped furnish a home for Belgians & gave a monthly subscription & Mercedes got up a choir of 20 girls – we called ourselves the Black Dominoes, as we wore long black cloaks and masks – to sing the national anthems of the allies in the streets, in aid of the Belgians. We made quite a considerable sum, & it was great fun. But the Belgians are not grateful. They won't do a stroke of work & grumble at everything & their morals...! It may be true enough that Belgium saved Europe, but... save us from the Belgians! As far as I am concerned, Belgianitis has quite abated.⁴⁶

Recriminations led to tensions which occasionally erupted into physical confrontations. An anti-Belgian riot broke out in May 1916 in London when the crowd subjected Belgian citizens and property to the same kind of treatment inflicted on suspected Germans at the outbreak of the war.⁴⁷ That local residents identified refugees with the 'enemy' is exemplified in a letter written by Mrs Fernside from Fulham, where these disturbances took place:

⁴⁵ For the situation on the metropolitan housing market, see Susanna Magri, 'Housing,' in Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., *Capital Cities at War. London, Paris, Berlin, 1914-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 374-417

⁴⁶ I.W.M., Coules Miss, M 97/25/1

⁴⁷ Panikos Panayi, *The enemy in our midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (Providence – Oxford: Berg, 1991).

The Belgians here are causing a lot of trouble. On Sunday, they nearly murdered a policeman and a soldier and yesterday the English people and kids collected in hundreds in Liller [illegible] Rd where a lot of Belgians have opened shops & last night the scene was beyond description. They have served them like they served Landsowne and the other Germans. Windows & shops smashed up everywhere. With the Irish Germans etc. now the Belgians we have our share of the troubles.⁴⁸

WRC officials quoted a letter from the Charity Organisation Society of Fulham dated 24 May 1916, to stress how the perceived “preferential treatment” of Belgians in receipt of allowances was arousing hostility, particularly among the working-classes.⁴⁹

Two years after their arrival in Britain, Belgian refugees were often accused of lacking enthusiasm for work while they preserved an ‘alien’ lifestyle and failed to assimilate. In many ways, attitudes towards refugees mirrored those towards immigrant communities. Yet these tensions, like anti-Belgian riots, owed a great deal to the specific strains of wartime mobilisation. Since August 1914, the soldier-in-arms stood at the top of the wartime social hierarchy. Civilians were fully aware of being ancillaries to the conduct of the war; the patriotic sacrifice of the British Tommy provided the benchmark against which their comportment was to be assessed. The home front was accordingly defined as the civilian performance of duty, sacrifice, and solidarity. As the war dragged on however, civilians faced their own process of victimisation caused not by the violence of the battlefield, but restrictions, hardships, and above all, by soaring casualties and the subsequent grief. As result, the home front played a different part in the national wartime script; an ambivalent role defined by both participation in the war effort and victimisation. The changing attitudes towards Belgian refugees, reinforced by deep and reciprocal ignorance as well as linguistic or legal marks of otherness, testified to this ambivalent transformation of civilian society. No longer were the refugees exclusively granted the status of victim. Now that many families confronted material hardship, separation, and grief, refugees also found themselves accused of enjoying undue comfort, of idleness, and grim opportunism. The disappointment of the host communities matched the initial investment in the figure of the ‘refugee’. This trope of mobilisation was eventually turned against the exiles themselves, who became victims of their hosts’ self-delusion by the end of 1915, as evidenced in Panteg, Wales:

A general impression of the Belgians after a years’ acquaintance with them shows us

⁴⁸ I.W.M., Fernside Mrs E Con shelf & 92/49/1; 23 May 1916

⁴⁹ TNA, MH 8/7

that they - in common with our own nation - possess the weakness of human nature. Their trying and troublous (sic) past, the present misery and desolation of their land, and the despairing uncertainty of their future, have possibly combined to make a people, who were temperamentally emotional and excitable previously, nervous and irritable and difficult to please. We have had the ungrateful and the appreciating. On the whole, harmony has prevailed, and we look back on a year's work with feelings of joy and satisfaction, conscious that we have done what we could to relieve the dire needs of a gallant nation in time of trouble.⁵⁰

Local populations no longer ascribed to them any dignifying quality and increasingly demanded from them a total participation in the war effort. Belgian elites were consequently called upon to defend the reputation of their fellow countrymen for fear of seeing a few 'black sheep' compromising refugee relief and undermining Britain's support to Belgium. In response, Madame Vandervelde, a prominent Belgian notable and wife of Socialist Minister Emile Vandervelde, toured the country in 1917 to denounce misunderstandings and abuses.⁵¹ In the speeches she gave throughout her journey around Britain, she strove to rebut anti-Belgian accusations and rumours of shirking.⁵² The Glasgow Herald reported the address she gave in the city on the 6th of November, 1917:

Madame Vandervelde who was received with great cordiality, said she thought that for some time there had been a great deal of misunderstanding about the Belgian soldier and what he was doing, and this she was desirous of trying to remove. She read a letter from London, in which it was stated that on one occasion, when 300 brave Belgian soldiers had arrived at Liverpool Street Station, after making their way out of their own country occupied by the enemy, by hairbreadth escapes on their way to join the fighting forces, a comment was made in the press as to why these men were making a hiding place of England. The rumour once started gained currency at the expense of a country always willing to give to the uttermost of its manpower. Several times young Belgians had come to her in her office in the most absolute despair because they had been insulted in the streets by people who said they ought to be fighting. These poor boys showed her their medical certificates declaring to be absolutely unfit, generally on account of heart disease or consumption, which often showed no outward sign to the uninitiated.

Vandervelde's speech underlined the central and unsurprising place ascribed to military service in the assessment of patriotic and allied sacrifice. Back in June 1915, a letter sent to

⁵⁰ BDIC, O 8947, Reports of the Newport (Mon.) Belgian refugees committee, and forty other Belgian refugees committees in Monmouthshire and neighbourhood

⁵¹ A.G.R. T 476 Comité officiel belge pour l'Angleterre

⁵² *The Glasgow Herald*, 7 Nov. 1917

the Editor of the *Times* by a local interpreter had already underlined the sensitivity aroused by the presence of male refugees of military age on the British home front. The correspondent wrote to report the difficulty that a village constable had had to convince three young Belgian men of his right to enforce Belgian conscription law. The letter ended with the policeman's complaint about "some of these Belgiums (sic) [who] gave a rare lot of trouble."⁵³

These tensions were in no small part due to the specificities of military mobilisation in Belgium. In June 1915, the country only required the conscription of unmarried men between 18 and 25 years of age. Overall, as a result of its invasion and occupation, the country merely mobilised 20% of its male population aged 15 to 45.⁵⁴ This stood in sharp contrast to the mobilisation of 53% of British males through volunteering or conscription. The latter's establishment in 1916 across England, Wales, and Scotland after a long and divisive debate only underlined the incongruous situation of potential allied soldiers who were spared the rigours and dangers of military service while sheltered in Britain. This likely explains why 1916 saw the outbreak of anti-Belgian riots and disturbances; the eruption of pent-up frustration which had been building up for months in some communities.

The integration of Belgian workers in Britain's war economy was another issue framing attitudes towards refugees. In an industrial conflict, labour was indeed a key resource whose supply and allocation could determine the success or failure of armies in the field. War work was also central to the political and cultural definition of patriotic and allied sacrifice. In this regard, British criticism of refugees grossly underestimated their economic contribution - a staple of anti-immigrant discourse in wartime as well as in peacetime.⁵⁵ The sudden influx of refugees in the first weeks of the war added to the economic disruptions entailed by the mobilisation, prompting the Local Government Board to appoint a Departmental Committee devoted to employment of Belgian workers. Under the leadership Sir Ernest Hatch, its task was to facilitate the productive employment of Belgian refugees and to avoid or mitigate the risk of competition with British industrial workers.⁵⁶ Soon however the demands of the war

⁵³ *The Times*, 3 June 1915

⁵⁴ Olbrechts, R., 'La population', in Ernest Mahaim, ed., *La Belgique restaurée : étude sociologique*, Bruxelles, 1926, pp. 4.

⁵⁵ For wider debates over immigration in Britain, see Holmes, Colin, *John Bull's island: immigration and British society, 1871-1971*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 1988.

⁵⁶ *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 February 1915

economy allowed for a successful integration of Belgian workers, who had brought to Britain the skills and experience gained in another advanced, industrial economy. To a large extent, the economic geography of Britain explained the spatial distribution of refugees across the country. As a major centre of employment, London therefore concentrated the bulk of the Belgian populations. The capital was also perceived as a site of opportunity for a few Belgian entrepreneurs, including Charles Pelabon who set up a large munition factory at Richmond.⁵⁷ Other Belgian-led initiatives led to the creation of primarily Belgian-staffed enterprises that set out to meet the needs of the British and allied armed forces. This was for instance the case in the garden-city of Letchworth, Hertfordshire, where the Kryn and Lahy Metal Works were founded in March 1915. Before long, large clusters of Belgian workers were found across the country.⁵⁸ Further repatriation of Belgian refugees from the Netherlands brought up to 30,000 extra industrial workers to Britain. By 1917, 1,900 Belgians were working for Jacksons in Salisbury, while Vickers employed 5,800 of them in Barrow-in-Furness.⁵⁹ Official Belgian reports confirmed the image of a community overwhelmingly at work in Britain. In March 1918, few individuals among the 17,000 Belgian refugees in Glasgow still relied on charitable support in the absence of paid employment. Predominantly working-class, relatively skilled, Belgian refugees – often with previous experience of trades and industries central to the war effort – rarely struggled to find jobs on the British home front. Many members of the Belgian professional or upper-middle classes did however experience real and at times lasting difficulties.⁶⁰ Despite their significant contribution to the economic life of wartime Britain, refugees were regularly denounced as idling profiteers of British generosity. In response, relief organisations and Belgian notabilities strove to set the record straight. Among them, Emile Cammaerts – a poet and intellectual who had moved to Britain in 1908 and soon became a fixture of Anglo-Belgian relations – wrote in the British press that most refugees had “become an independent worker, worthy of [their] King and of [their] country, and taking, in many cases, [their] share of war work”. Cammaerts acknowledged the existence of a few

⁵⁷ BDIC O 9044: Wallon, Justin, *Une cité belge sur la Tamise*, n.d., p.18. For a recent study, see Declercq, Christophe and Helen Baker, ‘The Pelabon Munitions works and the Belgian village on the Thames: community and forgetfulness in outer-metropolitan suburbs’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 34 (May 2016), pp. 151–170.

⁵⁸ AGR, Comité officiel belge pour l’Angleterre, Rapport au Min de l’Int, 31 août 1917, p. 97

⁵⁹ *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*, p. 24

⁶⁰ AGR T 476, Rapport sur la situation des Belges résidant à Glasgow Glasgow, 6 March 1918

regrettable exceptions, but made a point of stressing the willingness of “better-class” refugees to make up for them.

Practically every sound workman is working, and if there are still a few idlers here and there their place has been filled by a men belonging to the professional classes. I am told several lawyers and doctors are employed at the Letchworth factory, and I know for a fact that one of our poets is turning out shells in Twickenham.⁶¹

Early in 1918, the Belgian Consul in Edinburgh was moved to publish, in the same vein, an open letter that illustrates the persistent gap between dominant British representations of Belgian refugees and the reality of their experience.

I am equally ready to concede that many of the best Belgian refugees have been demoralised by exile, pauperised by indiscriminate charity, humiliated by police supervision. I grant that it is often very difficult to recognise in those poor people either “the honoured guests of the British nation” or representative of a breed heroes. But when all is said, I submit that grievous injustice is done to the mass of Belgian refugees. They do not ask for CHARITY, they only ask for honourable work. [...] The best proofs that the Belgian refugees are only anxious to earn their livelihood is provided by statistics of the Glasgow Belgian Refugees Committee, who are not likely to under estimate their financial needs. [...] Nineteen Belgians out of every twenty are earning their livelihood.⁶²

The economic integration of Belgian refugees does not simply reveal the tensions inherent in communities whose multicultural character was sharply and suddenly reinforced as a result of the war. It also underlines another and often neglected transnational dimension of the British home front: the presence and operation of war-related industrial ventures that were not simply initiated, managed, and staffed by Belgian entrepreneurs and workers, but supported by the Belgian government and run – in part – in accordance with Belgian legislation. There is perhaps no better illustration of this transnational home front than the National Projectile Factory, created at Birtley, between Newcastle and Durham, as a result of an Anglo-Belgian Convention signed on 11 February 1916. To meet the needs of its Ministry of Munitions, the UK Government committed to financing the construction of a munitions factory that would be operated by Belgian personnel recruited and managed by the Belgian government, including military personnel. This transnational undertaking also relied on private sector expertise, as the British firm Armstrong Whitworth Ltd, provided technical and

⁶¹ *The Observer*, 20 February 1916

⁶² AGR T 476 - Rapport du 18 Février 1918, par Paul Zech-Dupont

professional support.

We owe a great deal to local and amateur historians who have unearthed key private archives to document the creation and life of this Belgian factory and its attendant “colony”, Elisabethville.⁶³ A recent article by Daniel Laqua focussed on the relationship established between the Birtley Belgians and their surrounding community and the subsequent memorialisation of an ambivalent encounter defined by partial segregation, tensions, and intermarriage.⁶⁴

The Birtley factory is perhaps more significant for the peculiar combination of domestic and foreign jurisdiction it brought about to facilitate Allied economic cooperation. The disturbances that erupted in the colony on 21 December 1916 evoked the conflicts that often pitted soldiers mobilised in war industries across Europe and their management. In this case however, Birtley operatives – including Belgian soldiers – challenged the authority of the Belgian Gendarmerie that enjoyed a limited extraterritorial jurisdiction by virtue of the 1916 Convention.⁶⁵ A thorough analysis of this conflict lies beyond the scope of this chapter. This example nonetheless illustrates how the experience of Belgian refugees reveals the transnational features of the British home front; a belligerent society not simply defined by multiculturalism, but by a process of economic mobilisation for coalition warfare that occasionally entailed creative accommodation with national sovereignty in the name of inter-allied solidarity.⁶⁶

Attitudes towards refugees did not change with the dip in morale during 1917 or the military success of 1918. In fact, the reception of refugees and the subsequent tensions reflected the inner strains of the belligerent societies. Again, the prominent position bestowed upon the Belgian victims of the military operations by the war cultures did not prove sufficiently resilient to overcome tensions brought about by the pressures of social mobilisation. While commentators initially commented on the unfamiliar traits and voices of

⁶³ Debauche, Robert, ‘Birtley-Elisabethville’.

⁶⁴ Laqua, Daniel, ‘Belgian exiles, the British and the Great War: the Birtley Belgians of Elisabethville’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 34 (May 2016), pp. 113–131.

⁶⁵ TNA, MUN 5/78/327/15, Report on disturbances at Birtley Belgian colony on 21 December 1916 ; MUN 5/78/327/10, Notes of interview with Ministry representative at Birtley National Projectile Factory on unrest at the factory, 25 April 1919.

⁶⁶ AGR, T 567 / 111; I 494 / 241

the exiles with genuine sympathy and solidarity, the strains imposed by the war on the host communities soon led to tensions with refugees whose otherness and idiosyncrasies abetted confusions with enemy aliens.⁶⁷ In Alton, Hampshire, a refugee recalled how a Scottish officer had mistaken Flemish for German and therefore proceeded to arrest a group of such suspicious Belgians.⁶⁸

Wartime social mobilisation rested on discriminatory processes that turned out to be successively inclusive and exclusive, at the benefit or at the expense of refugees and other war victims. Whilst the evidence presented above is consistent with a gradual shift from solidarity to confrontation, one ought nonetheless to be wary of concluding that bitterness and tensions obliterated the refugees' gratitude. Undeniably, the British communities that welcomed them derived a legitimate and well-founded pride from the help they provided. As a matter of fact, this national or inter-allied solidarity was celebrated on several occasions even before the refugees' homecoming as in Cardiff in 1916, where the refugees planted a tree in tribute to the city's hospitality.⁶⁹

The centennial commemorations of the First World War in Britain made a significant contribution to the reintegration of Belgian refugees in the collective memory of the conflict. Significant enough in its own right, this does not exhaust the value of our renewed historiographical interest in the experience of Belgian refugees of the Great War. A social history of refugeedom, equally attentive to its cultural and economic aspects, does indeed underline the original features of the British home front in 1914-1918. It, too, serves as a reminder that local, national, and transnational perspectives should no longer be artificially opposed but productively integrated in the national historiographies of the First World War.

⁶⁷ 'This invasion has turned London into a city where allied tongues may be heard everywhere. In omnibuses and trains, in the shops and theatres one sees foreigners and one listens to foreign speech.' *The Times*, 10 Sep. 1914

⁶⁸ Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an age of genocide. Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (London: Cass, 1999), 61

⁶⁹ See Cardiff Refugee Committee in *Report on the work undertaken by the British government in the reception and care of the Belgian refugees*.