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Original Citation

Rebecca, Gill (2016) Belgian refugees in World War 1: local archives & histories. *Local History News* (119). pp. 6-7. ISSN 0969-3521

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Belgian refugees in World War One: local archives and histories

Rebecca Gill

Twentieth century world wars led to many refugees seeking sanctuary from violence and persecution in other countries. Yet our knowledge and interest in these population displacements is far from consistent. Belgian refugees fleeing the violence of the German invasion in 1914 have been relatively forgotten compared to attention granted the Armenian refugee, or Spanish, Jewish, Czech and Polish refugees fleeing later conflicts.¹ Recently however this gap has narrowed with interest in Belgian refugees by media outlets, and historians in Britain and Belgium.² In recovering the history of Belgian refugees we can better address the question of 'forgetting' but we can also, through a focus on local history, establish what legacies and personal memories persisted.

Pierre Purseigle has examined memorialisation and victimisation in wartime communities which privileged the combatant, and his mourners, over others such as refugees or prisoners of war.³ Indeed, the presence of almost a quarter of a million Belgian refugees in Britain received no official memorial in Belgium or Britain, and this has been reflected in their omission from national histories of the war. And yet, alongside memorials to the local war dead in villages and towns, there exist (or existed) commemorative plaques, church tablets, statues, and illuminated addresses presented by Belgian refugees to their hosts in recognition of their hospitality.⁴ Of course, we should not assume their words of gratitude meant that the Belgians' stay in Britain was characterised by unsullied fraternal feeling. But they do challenge us to consider more fully the nature of their reception and subsequent residency in Britain.

Interest in recapturing this history has arisen from two quarters. On the one hand, those in Britain and Belgium attempting to fill gaps in family histories where a relative was a Belgian

refugee. On the other, historians of local communities who wish to illuminate social and political ramifications of the Belgians' accommodation in Britain. For both the family historian and the historian of a local community, the local press can provide an invaluable resource, though it should not be used uncritically. Press reports of the arrival of Belgians were often extensive and record that the Belgians were given a hero's welcome. It is not unusual to find interviews with Belgian refugees or accounts of their flight from the German army, but it is also worth remembering the propaganda value of this interest in welcoming the victims of German atrocities. The tone of these early reports should not blind us to the very varied nature of local responses across the four years of war, which often depended on whether a community had prior experience of accommodating refugees (as in the east end of London), food shortages, labour relations etc. Family historians can supplement these reports with information from the national register of wartime refugees at The National Archives in London (though beware the alternative spellings of Flemish and French names used by the statisticians, and that refugees moved around the country), as well as the registers of refugees that the local police were required to keep, and which are available in county archives where these survive.

Some Belgians, particularly those with sufficient personal resources, came independently to Britain in the first few days of war, but the majority came as part of organised evacuations from Ostend to Folkestone, then on to London where they were received by the newly-founded War Refugees Committee based at Aldwych. Peter Cahalan provides a detailed history of this body and its relationship with various government departments.⁵ But accommodation in each locality around the country varied (some Belgians were housed and kept

by the municipal authorities as in Glasgow, others by purely voluntary agencies, and the vast majority by Belgian refugee relief committees founded by local councils at the behest of the Local Government Board). To recapture this diversity requires detailed investigation by local historians. Press reports will usually provide information on the constitution of such committees, and local archives will sometimes house their papers. The Imperial War Museum in London also holds many archive copies of these records. Unfortunately not all such records have been preserved and a catalogue search for 'Belgian refugees' in the local archives can often prove frustrating. In this case digging is required to trace the arrangements made for Belgians through the surviving papers of local government, local Trades Councils, political parties and voluntary associations, and Church records, particularly of Catholic dioceses. Mention may also be made of Belgian refugees in the personal diaries and letters of those involved in their reception (usually after their names have been identified in the local press).

Local history, and the history of individuals and their families, allows us to recapture the range of different arrangements made for Belgian refugees in Britain which depended on

the history of a place and its people. These fill gaps in family histories and help make sense of memories passed down the generations; but they also point to other often overlooked continuities and legacies. Many of those involved in assisting Belgian refugees in Britain did so as part of wider political and



Sculpture commissioned from a local artist Alex F Smith by Belgians in Keighley to commemorate their stay

civic commitments that informed their post-war work in local government, political parties and voluntary associations.⁶ Understanding their approach to Belgian relief and employment tells us something of the range of attitudes that existed to charity, welfare, labour, international obligations, and political action – attitudes which shaped responses to the war in Britain and beyond.

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Notes

1 Though they have not been ignored completely by historians: Belgian refugees are the subject of a chapter in Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox's compendium of refugee policy in twentieth-century Britain, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (London, 1999); and Kevin Myers has undertaken a case-study of educational provision for Belgian refugees, 'The Hidden History of refugee schooling in Britain: the case of the Belgians, 1914 – 1918', *History of Education*, 30/2 (2001).

2 See the BBC's coverage: (www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zcn3b9q project); and a forthcoming special edition of *Immigrants and Minorities* edited by Jacqueline Jenkinson.

3 Pierre Purseigle, 'The Reception of Belgian Refugees in Europe: A Litmus Test of Wartime Social Mobilisation', in John Crawford and Ian McGibbon (eds), *New Zealand's Great War: New Zealand, the Allies and the First World War* (Auckland, 2007).

4 For example, in the West Riding I have come across such memorials in Marsden, Halifax, Otley and Keighley.

5 Peter Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War* (London, 1982).

6 For example Katherine Storr has traced connections between those involved in Belgian refugee relief and their subsequent work for international charities after the war, *Excluded from the record. Women, refugees and relief, 1914 – 1929* (Oxford, 2009).