HOW TO RESEARCH BELGIAN REFUGEES IN BRITAIN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A guidance booklet from 'Tracing the Belgian Refugees'

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
Belgian refugee researcher profiles

When you are looking into the history of Belgian refugees in the United Kingdom during the First World War, it is usually for at least one of the following reasons:

- You are related to someone who spent time in the United Kingdom as a refugee from Belgium in the period 1914-1919.
- You are related to someone who helped Belgian refugees in the UK during the period 1914-1919 (accommodation, employment, charity, etc.).
- You are someone with a strong interest in this particular part of the history of The First World War.

Primary sources

In researching the past, sources play an important role. Primary sources are from people who have been directly involved (e.g. eyewitnesses). There are no primary spoken resources left alive, and very often important archive material (such as letters or diaries) remains hidden in the family attic and - regrettably - a lot is thrown away when an older relative passes away. In addition to memorial plaques, image sources and official documents from that time, other primary sources include archive material that is still accessible (of which only a small part is available digitally), and newspaper archives.

Registers

There is no overall list of Belgian refugees who came to the UK. It was only at the end of 1914 that the Belgians were obliged to register. The first months of the war were characterised by a certain degree of mobility between the different host countries (UK, France and the Netherlands) and different registration systems were operating in parallel. The best way to kickstart any research on an individual Belgian is to search the Belgian and British national archives, in Brussels and London (Kew).
Central Register of War Refugees (Brussels)

The Belgian national Archives in Brussels (Rijksarchief) holds the largest publicly accessible register of Belgians who were in the UK in 1914-19. Almost 100 metres of filing boxes are stored there as The Central Register of War Refugees. The files are listed alphabetically by surname of the respective individuals. Each file is different. In some cases, there is only one page with hardly any useful information. However, there are often several pages for one single person and you can easily find out where people were staying and when. Different family members of one family will often be classified together. The inventory of the Register can be found online (see 'useful links') in Dutch and French.

You do not have to be fluent in Dutch or French to understand that from page 13 onwards the contents of the many archive boxes are listed alphabetically. Specific details can be found by visiting the online inventory (see 'useful links').

The Central Register is not available digitally, but the Belgian State Archives do provide a paid service for requests by email.

Registration cards (Kew)

The National Archives in Kew, London, holds many Belgians' registration cards in the UK, in series MH. These are not available digitally either. So you need to go onto the online catalogue and explore MH8 (see 'useful links' for relevant links to Kew's online catalogue).

Although arranged alphabetically, not everyone is in the expected position. These registration cards were used a lot and often members of one family have been put on the card of another family (for example because one family lacked the head of the household, or because one family had several servants).
Searching the registration cards at Kew can be a bit hit and miss, and you may not find the individual Belgian you are looking for. However, you can visit and look at the cards free of charge, but you have to register first – the website has details of how to do this. They will also send you copies for a fee.

**The subsequent journey**

From this point on, a potentially long journey begins. The next two steps, however, are important. Based on information obtained from Kew and/or Brussels, you will have found out about locations where the Belgians you are interested lived. Therefore, you can use this information to look in local archives (or sometimes in local studies libraries) for information from parish registers, police reports, council reports, medical reports and the like. This search differs for each location, and the kind of information available varies considerably. In a further piece of information Tracing The Belgians will provide more information on local archives.

**Births, marriages and deaths**

Another source of information if you haven’t already done so is to look at Ancestry.co.uk or findmypast.co.uk to see if they have information about Belgians who were born, died or got married in the UK in the period 1914-1919. You can also look up information about British hosts or people who helped refugees, for example using the 1911 Census (the 1921 census is currently not available, but if a Belgian remained in the UK then you could try searching the 1939 Register). These websites are not free to use, but are available in many libraries so it’s worth asking if this is the case. For Belgian records you can try the Belgian State Archives' 'Genealogist' web page which is free, but incomplete (see 'useful links')
Military records

Many Belgian men who were in the UK in 1914-1919 were discharged or wounded soldiers in the Belgian army. Their military records are available but unfortunately only if you visit Brussels. The Royal Military Museum in Brussels keeps the personal files of all officers born before 1900, and the files of NCOs and Privates born between 1845 and 1888. You can search for names online (see 'useful links'). For NCOs and Privates born after 1888 you have to contact the Belgian Armed Forces documentation centre in Evere: rue d'Evere 1, B-1140 Evere. Email: info.ca@mil.be This is a functioning army barracks (not far from the airport) where you can visit and view the files.

Another useful source of information about Belgian WW1 veterans is the online ‘Golden book’ (see 'useful links').

Digitised newspapers

Subsequent searching for information about persons and locations best happens through digitised newspaper archives. These can prove invaluable sources of information, but sometimes require a bit of patience!

British newspapers

The British Library has an extensive archive of local and regional newspapers available online (paid service, again it’s worth asking at a UK library to see if they have it available). The archive offers just under 43,000 digitised newspaper articles containing the search term "Belgian refugees" for the period 1910-1919. Obviously, you can narrow down all this information by looking at specific periods or newspapers. If you don't immediately get more information about specific people, you still gain much more local and daily background information that will make it easier to imagine life back then.
Belgian newspapers

hetarchief.be is an online archive of digitised newspapers as well, but concerns Belgian newspapers that were published during the war, including refugee newspapers. A totally random search term 'Verstraelen' yields over 150 results, including 18 in the most important newspaper for Dutch-speaking Belgians in the UK, De Stem Uit België. For instance, Mr. and Mrs. Verstraelen-Kegels from Wintam (Bornem) were staying in Sheffield in August 1915, at 208 Brook Hill. Another totally random search term 'Ceulemans' produced over 1378 results, including 47 in La Métropole d'Anvers and 36 in L'Indépendance Belge, the two most important newspapers for French-speaking refugees in the UK.
The plot thickens

Although the information given up to this point should help to retrieve information about Belgian refugees in the UK, there are still many further possible avenues to follow. This includes visits to local archives, to sites and - even 100 years after the date - just asking around in specific communities. Only then will you fully appreciate the value of cultural heritage and of the necessity of preserving archival material professionally as well as to make it publicly available. This is also where you get to meet other people. That is why you can make your search into the past of added value for you too! And from time to time, as you will notice, comparisons between then and now will emerge. We are going to tackle this eventuality in one of our blog posts, which you will find on the website.

Further information

Secondary sources also play an important role in the research of the past. They will interpret primary sources, put them in context or approach them thematically. Our intention is to publish a more complete guide to these online later in 2019, together with an annotated list of the most important secondary sources.
To conclude

Finally, there is an online and social media community who can also be useful sources of information. There are several regional champions of research on Belgian refugees: Helen Baker in Richmond/Twickenham, Alison MacKenzie in Royal Tunbridge Wells, Toni Vitti in Rhyl, to name but a few. They are very passionate about the subject, very knowledgeable and have a broad network of kindred spirits. You will also find all of them are very active on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter are often used. It wouldn't be the first time someone who is looking for more information on a Belgian family has been in touch with the descendants of the host family or vice versa because the word spread online or on social media.

**Good luck with your search and keep in touch with us!**

**Useful links**

*Tracing the Belgian Refugees database*
https://belgianrefugees.leeds.ac.uk/database/
Use this to input data on a Belgian refugee or search the data available.

*Births, Marriages and Deaths*
https://search.arch.be/fr/rechercher-des-personnes

*Belgian national Archives in Brussels - The Central Register of War Refugees online*
Finding aids
French: https://search.arch.be/nl/?option=com_rab_findingaids&view=findingaid&format=pdf&eadid=BE-A0510_002167_005730_FRE
Dutch: https://search.arch.be/nl/?option=com_rab_findingaids&view=findingaid&format=pdf&eadid=BE-A0510_002167_005730_DUT
Online inventory

UK National Archives at Kew
http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C10851
http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/browse/r/h/C628

Military Records
Search for names: http://www.klm-mra.be/D7t/en/content/military-personel-files
'Golden Book':
http://www.tenboome.webruimtehosting.net/guldenboek/Guldenboekprojecttotaal/goldenbook.htm

Newspapers
https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/