

Chapter 2

HISTORIES AND MEMORIES

Recounting the Great War in Belgium, 1914–2018

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Where World War I is concerned, as with many other themes, Belgian historians have long distinguished themselves by an absence of (self-)critical reflection about their works, practices, and methods. As this chapter will show, there has been no dearth of research into the war and its consequences.¹ However, the absence of any culture of historiographical debate has too often prevented historians from putting their works into perspective and revealing both their logical structures and their evolution. Seen through a century of Great War histories, Belgian historians have undeniably plied their “trade”: publications have (almost) never ceased, subsequently listed in comprehensive bibliographies. More recently, inventories have been painstakingly drawn up and complemented by practical source guides.² But an overall line of thinking about the way in which World War I has been recounted over a century by Belgian historians is still missing.

This lacuna seems all the more flagrant because works about the memorial culture emerging after the Great War have increased in number for the past two decades, in Belgium as elsewhere. Narratives about the war produced by monuments, school textbooks, and museums have, as we shall see, become almost classic research themes of historical investiga-

tion. But the narrative produced by historians themselves, and the part they have taken (or not) over a century in the debate about the past of war, have, for their part, remained obviously strangely hidden.

Memories of the Great War

1914–40

Although the Belgian nation-state had enjoyed a comfortable peace since its independence in 1830, the invasion of its national territory by Germany, one of the powers supposed to guarantee its neutrality, plunged the country into the heart of the European conflict from August 1914 onward. For the four ensuing years, most of the country lived under an occupying government that affected the lives of six million Belgians. The hitherto unknown violence of the invasion, which caused fifty-five hundred civilian victims between August and October 1914, also gave rise to a mass exile: more than a million men and women took refuge in France, England, and the Netherlands, where six hundred thousand of them remained until the armistice in 1918. As far as the narrow strip of national territory that remained free was concerned, it was protected, somehow or other, by a few hundred thousand Belgian soldiers who were put to flight and, in the autumn of 1914, fell back into the Yser plain, where they stayed until September 1918.

Throughout the interwar period, World War I arose as a principal factor lending structure to collective Belgian memories. The memory of the 1914–18 war was, first and foremost, inscribed in stone. In just a handful of years, mainly between 1920 and 1924, steles, statues, commemorative plaques, and memorials flourished in almost all the country's towns and villages, forming a huge network of monuments.³ And the heart of this network lay, unsurprisingly, in the country's capital: on 11 November 1922, the tomb of the Unknown Soldier was inaugurated in the center of Brussels. Illustrating the incorporation under way of the 1914–18 experience within an older patriotic narrative, this monument was erected at the foot of the Colonne du Congrès, a tower built in the mid-nineteenth century as homage to national awakening and liberal parliamentarianism. At the end of the war, and for decades thereafter, this has been where war veteran associations met, enjoying pride of place in these commemorations.⁴

By paying tribute to the soldiers slain for the motherland, Belgium became part of a huge transnational commemorative movement that spread throughout Europe. During earlier years, monuments to unknown soldiers had seen the light of day in France and England—countries that were

followed, also in 1922, by Czechoslovakia, Greece, and Serbia.⁵ But unlike the case of its two powerful neighbors, in Belgium the civilian experience of the war also found its place in the monumental memory. The supreme “heroes” were, needless to say, the combatants, and in particular King Albert I, commander in chief of the army who, with the war, became a living myth.⁶ However, alongside the “hero,” the figure of the “martyr” was also inscribed in stone. Monuments paid homage to civilians killed during the 1914 invasion, in particular in those “martyr cities,” Dinant and Louvain. Others were dedicated to the memory of those who, like Gabrielle Petit and Edith Cavell, paid for their resistance to the occupying Germans with their lives. Other more controversial monuments honored those who were deported to Germany.⁷ The monumentalization of memory thus encompassed a plurality of war experiences in the name of a shared suffering “for the motherland,” a notion in which national, regional, but also communal forms of belonging all fitted together. Excluded *de facto* from this category were exiled persons, suspected of having abandoned the country at the very moment when it was in danger; these persons soon disappeared from the collective memory.

The monumental memory emerged above all “from below.” Monuments were usually erected by towns and villages (*communes*), without the help of national and provincial authorities, and funded by local subscriptions.⁸ Throughout the interwar period, the Belgian state remained remarkably withdrawn from commemorations. After the signing of the Locarno Pact in 1925, which was meant to mark international détente, the central government even refused to participate in the inaugurations of memorials recalling the massacre of civilians in 1914 or accusing Germany of “atrocities.” What ensued was nothing less than a divorce between official memory and local memory, as is attested to by the inauguration in 1936 of the *Furore Teutonico* monument paying homage to the 674 civilians killed in Dinant during the invasion: the ceremony was held in the presence of a large crowd and many local notables, but without any representative from the central government.⁹ The sole exception to this noninterventionism on the part of the state, the Eupen-Malmédy region, separated from Germany and annexed to Belgium in 1919 after a simulacrum of a referendum, suffered the repression of a German countermemory: homage to soldiers hailing from those cantons, who fought for Germany, to which they were at that time attached, was banned in that region.¹⁰

In a more lasting way, the “laissez-faire” attitude of the Belgian state with regard to commemorations, and the place it left to initiatives “from below,” would permit the emergence of a Flemish countermemory of the war. During the first months of the conflict, a “united front” did, to be sure, come into being around a Belgium whose very survival was threat-

ened. But this initial consensus was swiftly smothered, in particular under the influence of a radicalized fringe of the Flemish movement, a movement that had been organized since the mid-nineteenth century to lay claim to a Flemish cultural recognition in a nation-state dominated by the French-speaking bourgeoisie. On the Yser front, a *Frontbeweging* (literally: front movement) came into being among the troops from 1917 onward, to denounce the injustices suffered at the front by Flemish soldiers and claim the (cultural) autonomy of Flanders. In occupied territory, “activists,” for their part, were involved in an overt collaboration with the occupier in the hope of seeing the claims of the Flemish movement being fulfilled. The immediate postwar period and the upsurge of Belgian patriotism that went with it would have the effect of congealing that antagonism. This was illustrated by the controversies that went hand in hand with the program of Belgian justice responsible for punishing those who had failed in their patriotic duties during the war. Among these latter, there were both war profiteers and spies, as well as Flemish and Walloon activists. All were accused of having betrayed the motherland, a heroic image of which was developed as a counterpoint to those trials that had a central place in Belgian newspapers of the day.¹¹ The “profiteer” was the person who attracted the most condemnation during the initial postwar years, but it was, nevertheless, another figure, that of the Flemish activist, who would become a central memory issue during the following decades.

The matter of how convicted Flemish persons were treated—be it the execution of sentences, the restoration of political rights, or amnesty—lay at the heart of political arguments between the wars. Before long it polarized Belgian memories of the war, as is shown by the rifts between veterans’ associations. Situated, to begin with, in the Catholic and Flemish movement, the *Vlaamsche Oud-Strijders* (VOS) became radicalized in the 1920s and ended up incarnating the legacy of the *Frontbeweging*. They did indeed develop a frenzied pacifism, but they also rose up in support of a Flemish nationalism that veered off in an ever more anti-Belgian direction. A not inconsiderable number of Flemish war veterans nevertheless remained faithful to Belgian patriotism, incarnated by the powerful National Federation of Combatants and, even more radically, by the National Association of Combatants at the Front during the 1920s, and the Union des Fraternelles de l’Armée de campagne, as well as the Fédération Nationale des Croix du Feu during the 1930s.¹² As we can see, far from disappearing with the liberation, the community divisions occurring during the war became lastingly rooted during the following decades, including in the commemorative landscape.

In the Yser plain, in the 1920s, memory of the war was galvanized by the Flemish movement, keen to give voice to its claims—under the

slogan *Ici notre sang, à quand nos droits* (Here is our blood, what about our rights)—which gradually evolved toward an anti-Belgian logic. In 1930, the nationalist Flemish content of the Yser commemorations was confirmed by the erection of the Yser Tower, an imposing monument intended to be at once Christian, pacifist, and Flemish. The romantic rhetoric that was used for it was the exact mirror of the rhetoric to be heard around the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.¹³ And there, too, it was war veterans who carried the memory. There was just one difference, but a fundamental one: at the Yser Tower, it was not Belgian heroes who were honored but “Flemish martyrs,” who died for a Belgian homeland that was not theirs. The political program of this setting of memory was displayed loud and clear on that monument: “Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ.”

1940–45

Less than a quarter of a century after the 1918 Armistice, Belgium was once again invaded by the German army. In May 1940, after an eighteen-day military campaign that ended with the surrender of the Belgian army, the country’s second occupation got underway, which did not come to an end until five years later. In the eyes of contemporaries, the memory of the Great War would be the matrix for “reading” World War II: for the occupying populations as for the occupied populations, the memory of the years 1914–18 was still very much alive, and for many of them World War I was not just a past recounted by others but a social experience directly lived.

“Transfers of experiences” from one war to another were particularly visible in the emergence of the initial resistance movements in 1940. The actions they ushered in were, in an initial period at least, directly copied from those undertaken two decades earlier. Thus it was that *La Libre Belgique*, an underground newspaper published during the first occupation, was reborn from its ashes in 1940. Certain news networks created in 1914–18 were, for their part, “simply” rekindled: at the head of one of the most important news networks during 1914–18, with *La Dame Blanche*, Walthère Dewé resumed those activities, for example, in 1940, by founding the Clarence network, based on a social commitment that had developed twenty-five years earlier.¹⁴

In a broader sense, traces of 1914–18, represented by monuments (such as the tomb of the Unknown Soldier) and anniversaries (for example, 11 November) were all places and moments marked by tensions between the occupied and the occupiers. The anniversary of 11 November 1940 was thus a particular challenge, because the ban on armistice commemorations in that particular year marked the end of what had seemed to

be the summer when everything might be possible—that period when Germany’s victory was probable, and when a state collaboration could be envisaged. During the following years and up until the end of the conflict, despite that ban, 11 November remained a special moment for commemorating World War I, even though that commemoration was limited both in its geographical settings (an urban phenomenon was essentially involved) and in its social settings (that memory was essentially underpinned by the middle classes).¹⁵

Where the occupier was concerned, the memory of the first occupation also turned out to be crucial. The German *Westforschung*, which had had a certain importance from the early 1930s onward, partly recruited people among those who had administered Belgium in 1914–18. With a view to preparing the coming invasion, the German military machine had every intention of making the most of past experience, which is why it painstakingly went through the administrative reports drawn up at that time with a fine-tooth comb. Once the second invasion had become a reality, and during the first two years of the war in particular, references to the previous occupation increased in number. In this way, the occupying power intended to lend meaning to the policy being adopted, whether it was the *Flamenpolitik*, economic governance, or relations with the Church.¹⁶ What is more, the occupier became involved in one of the most active memorial policies: monuments that were reminders of the 1914 massacres, like the one at Dinant, were destroyed, the German archives brought together by the Commission des Archives de la Guerre were seized, and school textbooks were “cleansed” of the narrative of Belgian “martyrdom” in 1914–18.

1945–2018

The memory of the Great War did not disappear after World War II. On the contrary, during the first decades after 1945, it provided the frameworks, both physical and mental, in which commemorations of World War II were conducted. As symbols of national resistance, the places of memory of the Great War were spontaneously reoccupied immediately after the Liberation. In September 1944, with Brussels only just liberated, people and authorities returning from exile thus gathered around the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. During the following decades, the commemorations included in their homage, alongside the World War I soldiers, who remained the model of patriotic heroism, both the combatants of the 1940 campaign and the resistance fighters of 1940–44. In addition to their never denied attachment to the Belgian nation, the new category of veterans thus remained faithful to the commemorative language that

came into being immediately after 1918, a language through which they tried, as much as possible, to link their war experiences to the ordeal of the 1914–18 front.¹⁷

A similar “retraditionalization” of the new war was also enacted in the Flemish countermemory. At the Yser Tower as well, the spirit of World War I continued to float over the pilgrimages that were resumed in the late 1940s. Homage to Flemish soldiers, who were allegedly victims of an unjust Belgian state in 1914–18, now went hand in hand with an homage to other supposed victims of that same Belgian state, namely the Flemish “idealists” who collaborated with the occupier in 1940–44 and who, for that reason, suffered an unjust legal “repression” after the Liberation.¹⁸ In that Flemish countermemory, as in the Belgian memory, the registry of martyrs grew longer after 1945, but as we can see this did not alter the patriotic interpretation of commemorations.

In this polarized arena, the Belgian state struggled to be heard and understood. As in the interwar period, groups of veterans, political associations, and local programs were given a free hand where commemorations were concerned. The bitter failure of the Belgian Museum of the World Wars attested to that weak position of the public powers that be when it came to memory culture. Unanimously adopted by the parliament in 1945, the project for a Belgian Museum of the World Wars was aimed at bringing together all the archives, publications, and memories concerning the history of the two world wars, which, once again, seemed to constitute just one history.¹⁹ But that project would never see the light of day for lack of funding,²⁰ and the fragmentation of the commemorative landscape was duly noted: the Belgian state would not take under its wing any centralized policy of memory, after World War II, either.

Memorial practices and representations coming into being after the Great War thus survived the 1940–45 experience, despite the obvious differences between the two wars. Far from upsetting the legacy of 1914–18, on the contrary, the memory of World War II became grafted onto the old patriotic memory, attesting to the symbolic importance preserved by the Great War. The commemorations for the fiftieth anniversary of World War I, held between 1964 and 1968, illustrated the lasting quality of that legacy. In October 1964, a national parade was organized as a tribute to King Albert and war veterans, while a mass celebrating the memory of the invasion was held in the Saint-Michel Cathedral in the heart of Brussels. The commemorative wave came to an end in 1968 with a whole host of (local) events, celebrating the “50th Anniversary of Victory,” in the presence of veterans from 1914–18, for whom it was often one of their last public appearances. New cultural vectors were also mobilized for that anniversary. In 1964, inspired by the success of the BBC program *The*

Great War, French-speaking Belgian television launched *1914–1918: Le Journal de la Grande Guerre*. During the four years that followed, the war was recounted through the use of documents, reconstructions, and oral testimony. Broadcast during prime time, and in a period when there was only one television channel, the program quickly became an institution for television viewers and a model for the Belgian school of the historical documentary.²¹

During the ensuing decades, it was nevertheless above all at the local and no longer national level that the memory of the Great War was kept alive. At Dinant, where we have seen how the war affected people's minds, the memory of the invasion remained very vivid throughout the twentieth century, as well as being tinged by Germanophobia: up until 2001, the German flag was not included among the European flags decorating the Pont Charles de Gaulle.²² In other cities, in particular in the Westhoek region, local memory and transnational memory continued to reciprocally fuel one another for a century.²³ At Ypres, the tradition of the “last post”—the bugle call to the dead, in use in the Commonwealth armies, which came into being in 1928 from a private initiative—is still practiced to this very day: every evening, the bugle calls of the local fire brigade attract many tourists by playing this musical homage. But beyond those towns and villages that were the most affected, the 1964–68 commemorations were also the swan song of the memory of 1914–18, at least in the form it had hitherto taken.

Starting with the end of the 1960s, the Great War gradually began to retreat from collective memories. There were many different causes for this. First and foremost they had to do with a generational change, namely the gradual death of war veterans of 1914–18. The memory of the Great War had developed during the postwar decades, as we have seen, because of the commemorative action of thousands of veterans assembled in associations. Starting from that organization “from below” of the memory that they incarnated and built upon in one and the same movement, the “elders” of 1914–18, by leaving the stage, finally also sealed the fate of their war memory. No other memorial player took up the baton to take the memory of 1914–18 into the public place: the public authorities remained at a distance from the commemorative field of tension, while the circles of memory of 1940 to 1945 gradually freed themselves from that guardian figure, represented by the Great War veteran—a heroic figure, to be sure, but, in the end, inhibiting and even troublesome, to such an extent did the comparison of the sufferings endured during the two world wars invariably seem to favor the “generation of fire.”²⁴

Furthermore, Belgian patriotic memory, which had dominated the narrative of the 1914–18 experience, was directly contradicted in that period

by the political development of the country. The erosion of Belgian national sentiment undermined a memory that, henceforth, in Flanders, struggled to compete with the Flemish countermemory. In the 1970s, that political development became an institutional reality: the reforms introduced by the state granted an ever broader autonomy to subnational regions and communities.²⁵ Keen to root their legitimacy in the past, these new subnational entities laid claim to various places of memory, which had hitherto been living in quasi-autonomy, while at the same time making a direct or indirect contribution to the development of new memorial structures.²⁶ This phenomenon has been particularly visible in Flanders. It has come to the fore around World War II places of memory, in particular with the program to create an ambitious holocaust museum, which opened its doors in 2012 under the name *Kazerne Dossin: Musée de l'Holocauste et des Droits de l'Homme*. World War I has not, however, been completely forgotten, as is shown by the support given by Flanders (but also by the European Union) to the museum *In Flanders Fields* that opened its doors in 1998. Since the 1980s, the Flemish authorities have also taken charge of the Yser Tower, declaring the site to be a “memorial of Flemish emancipation.” In this context, the monument has been “cleansed” of its most embarrassing references to a controversial past, in particular the collaboration during World War II. Recognized in 1997 by UNESCO as a monument for peace, this old symbol of nationalist Flemish memory is today refocused on a universalist peace discourse. Anyhow, the Belgian motherland, for which the soldiers of 1914–18 repeatedly reminded others that they had sacrificed themselves, appeared like a left-over of history.

There was a final factor, and not one of the least significant, that explains the dwindling interest in 1914–18: the new place taken by World War II in collective memories, in Belgium and elsewhere. From the 1970s onward, the memory of World War II was gradually extricated from the memorial settings of World War I. From then on, it was less patriotic heroism that was promoted than the sufferings endured by the various categories of victims (first among them the victims of Nazi racial arbitrariness). A new relation to the past saw the light of day and rendered the old heroic narratives of the trenches obsolete.²⁷ Now putting genocide of the Jews at its center and erecting human rights as a key, the memory of World War II came across as the predominant new memory paradigm, casting the 1914–18 war into the shadows. An edifying example is provided for us by television: the Great War had been the object of much pioneering attention in 1964–68, but it subsequently disappeared from Belgian TV channels. It was World War II that would, from then on, give the historical documentary its respectability. It was not until the end of

the 1990s and the “rediscovery” of the Great War that the 1914–18 conflict reappeared on the small screen.²⁸ And in that memorial “rediscovery,” historians would, for the first time, play a significant part.

The impressive scale and intensity of the recent centenary commemorations cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that the memory of this conflict had never completely disappeared. On the contrary, since the end of the Cold War and the Yugoslav Wars, historians had begun to reinvest this historiographical field by emphasizing the conflict’s seminal character. They were quickly followed by the general public, as already demonstrated by the vivacity of the ninetieth anniversary commemorations in 2004–8. Still, in many regards, and this obviously stands in comparison with other countries, the commemorations of the centenary of the Great War have marked the resurgence of the war as an important element of Belgian collective memory. This is not only the consequence of the unprecedented media hype surrounding the war but a much broader phenomenon. Between 2014 and 2018, books and all kinds of special press editions flooded the market, and numerous television documentaries²⁹ and a plethora of exhibitions, some of them with tremendous success,³⁰ presented the war or aspects of it. World War I museums were created or renovated,³¹ and “classical” World War I-related sites were rediscovered and/or invested with new meaning. At first glance, this resurgence may seem unexpected, given the fact that the memory of World War II, the resistance, and the Shoah had come to overshadow World War I in Belgian memory culture as we have seen. Even more so that, for the first time, there were no longer any direct witnesses left of the war years. However, this is by no means contradictory: indeed, there are still many adults who have known and been close to people with first-hand experiences of the Great War. This is why the centenary has in fact provoked a rediscovery of 1914–18 in a very intimate sense. As most of these adults are bound to disappear in the decades to come, the centenary commemorations might very well prove to be the last of their kind, with direct emotional ties still present. It is this we would refer to as the “centenary effect.” In other words, the current public enthusiasm is rooted to a large extent, albeit not exclusively, in family and/or local memories. It is rooted in the long-forgotten war correspondence or notebook one literally “stumbles” across, in all kinds of documents or objects one finds or might find by chance in one’s attic, which all of a sudden establish an affective and personal link with this painful past that is undoubtedly more and more distant but continues to move and challenge today’s Belgians. This intimate dimension also underlies the way public demand for historians and archivists, museums, and the media expressed itself: while people wanted to understand the war on the most general level, this interest was

very often grounded in the desire to understand family or local history as part of a larger framework and to enable a reflection on the foundations of today's world. Overall, it is clear that the unprecedented scale of the commemorations of the "Great Centenary" exceeded all expectations.

Unsurprisingly, this upsurge of family and local memories was accompanied by political commemorative initiatives on all levels of the Belgian federal state, with commemorative policies varying considerably from one region to the other: Already in 2009, in its governmental agreement, the Flemish region had displayed its desire to commemorate, with much pomp and circumstance, the centenary of World War I with two explicitly declared objectives. On the one hand, this meant giving a powerful impetus to the economic and tourist sectors by making the most of the income from tourists, hailing in particular from the Commonwealth, who would pass through its territory between 2014 and 2018. On the other hand, the governing N-VA, the New Flemish Alliance, a regionalist and nationalist party, was intent on using the commemorations (and the international attention they provided) as a vehicle for gaining international recognition. Therefore, it moved away from the traditional victimizing discourse that we have seen and ventured to put forward a universal message of peace.³² Bypassing the federal level, it was in particular the declaration "In Flanders Fields" that sought to establish the Flemish government as an important actor of the international commemorations of 2014. However, the initiative eventually failed for different reasons. On the one hand, the declaration's integral pacifism prompted critical reactions as much in French-speaking Belgium as on the international scene. For many Walloons (and also, for that matter, for many Flemings) the exclusive emphasis on peace was ill-befitting the Belgian World War I experience of occupation, atrocities, and civilian deportations: "Should all that have been accepted, because anything is better than war?"³³ Internationally, the criticism came first and foremost from countries with a slightly more heroic memory culture, such as Australia and Canada, whose representatives wished to put forward a more positive interpretation of death on the battlefield. Another, although less outspoken reason for the rejection of the Flemish initiative might have been the unwillingness of the international community to be drawn into the minefield of Belgian politics.

The other regions and the federal authorities had no intention of letting Flanders enjoy a monopoly over World War I commemorations and reacted by developing their own commemorative program. In Wallonia, while the ambition to politicize the centenary was less pronounced, the regional government nevertheless made important efforts to mark its presence and carried a commemorative discourse that was rather consen-

sual in the sense that it put forward very broad democratic values and did not try to flank an otherwise political agenda. This eventually reflects the fact that historically speaking, in Wallonia, the memory of World War I has never been nearly as important for the construction of a regional identity as in Flanders.

Compared to the involvement of the Flemish and Walloon regional governments, the federal government has been a relatively less important actor of the Belgian centenary. In fact, its role has above all been to coordinate the major international ceremonies organized in Liège (4 August 2014), Nieuwpoort (28 October 2014), and Brussels (11 November 2018), where it tried as well as it could to project the image of a united country. These events were important international venues and can be considered the Belgian contribution to the transnationalization of commemorations that we have seen throughout the centenary. As a consequence of this multilayered state activism, the 2014–18 centenary has arguably been turned into the greatest commemorative event in the history of the Belgian nation-state,³⁴ just when this latter seems inexorably doomed to disappear.

However, one should be careful not to overestimate the importance of the centenary “from above.” As far as the attitudes and expectations of the broader public were concerned, and this is equally true for the northern and the southern part of the country, the political tensions arising between the Flemish government on the one side and the Walloon and federal government on the other did not structure the centenary as a whole. Instead, what you could see everywhere was the triumph of local and family expectations that surely integrated the international dimension of the conflict, but which did so without necessarily being framed nationally. This is in stark contrast to the way the nation-state has been staged in many commemorations and exhibitions commissioned by the authorities.

Histories of the Great War

1914–18

Obviously enough, the memory of the Great War was not part of the monumental culture, the political debate, and the new mass media. The first writing of the history of the war was more or less contemporary with events. This had to do with the fact that since the start of the conflict it was evident for all the belligerents that the combat was not being played out solely on the battlefield. There was also a “war of words.”³⁵ This was organized from 1914 onward around two major issues: the *Kriegsschuldfrage*,

or war guilt question, and the atrocities that accompanied the German invasion. In 1915, the German, French, and British governments published “books” that were respectively “white,” “yellow,” and “blue,” attempting to justify their positions and discredit the enemy’s theses. As a work of propaganda, that primitive writing of the history of the war also drew inspiration from historical methodology: publication of sources, critical reading and archival overlaps, use of oral testimony, etc. And, in return, those “books” became essential sources for the first histories of the war, which soon saw the light of day in a more classic form.

Whether what was involved was the *Kriegsschuldfrage* or the atrocities, Belgium lay at the heart of the debate. Its position was due to its being a historical subject buffeted between the powers dominating Europe, but also because it produced a historiographical discourse. Renowned historians such as Léon van der Essen, a professor at Louvain University, and Godefroid Kurth, teaching at Liege University, took up their pens while the war was still raging in order to describe certain conspicuous episodes in it.³⁶ For its part, from 1916 onward, the Belgian government published three “gray books” dealing with the controversies associated with the origins of the war, the German invasion, and the use of irregular troops (*francs-tireurs*). From the month of January 1915 on, it took part in an institutional way in these discussions, with the creation of a Bureau documentaire Belge (BDB), based in Le Havre. It was headed by Fernand Passelecq, a lawyer who, after the war, would be called upon by the Belgian government to draw up the list of Germans guilty of violations of the law of nations. Throughout the war, Passelecq put forward arguments, including against his own government, to refuse the “tricks of political propaganda”: for better or for worse, he tried to introduce what he called a “rigorous scientific discipline,” underwritten by “serious documentary researchers, and even historians.”³⁷ But this scientific, not to say hermetic, character of the works produced within the BDB also had the effect of making them largely inaudible during the war.

The various volumes that appeared between 1915 and 1919 within the BDB formed *de facto* the first history of Belgium in the Great War. They of course revisited the already mentioned controversies, but they also strove to provide information about other subjects, such as forced labor in Germany, the question of languages in occupied Belgium, the activity of the government in exile, and the Belgian military campaigns in Africa. Among this historiographical output, before the term was coined, one book stood apart from the rest. We owe it to a sociologist, Fernand van Langenhove, who worked at the Institut Solvay before the war and later became secretary of the BDB. In 1916, aged just twenty-seven, he published *Comment naît un Cycle de Légendes: Francs-tireurs et atrocités en*

Belgique, which distinguished itself dazzlingly from the flood of writings dealing with that issue that appeared at the time.³⁸ In order to understand how the violence that marked the 1914 invasion was triggered, he made the decision to analyze only German sources, in particular the testimony of soldiers, press articles, and official reports and records. His study demonstrated that German soldiers were in fact victims of a “legend”: the existence of *francs-tireurs*, which was imaginary, but fueled by the memory of the war of 1870. It was that legend, van Langenhove concluded, that explained why those soldiers transgressed moral boundaries—taking it out on the civilian population, and in particular on women and children—that were also par for the course in German ranks.³⁹ Translated into four languages during the war, the work was praised by Marc Bloch at the end of the conflict. French medievalists hailed both the analytical rigor and the critical distance of the book in a context of extreme political polarization: “What is truly noteworthy is the fact that it was written in 1917, by a Belgian.”⁴⁰

1918–45

The immediate postwar period seemed to perpetuate that early historicization of 1914–18. With the goal of providing the sources and instruments necessary for that historical narrative, the Commission of War Archives (CAG) was created in November 1919 by the government, as the brainchild of the Royal Commission of History. With the help of various provincial committees, the CAG had the task of collecting and inventorying, throughout the country, the archives relating to the Great War. In this way, Belgium became part of a movement to safeguard documents that was occurring all over Europe, and saw the birth of the Kriegsarchiv in Germany, the Imperial War Museum in Great Britain and the Comitato nazionale per la storia del Risorgimento in Italy. Within the steering committee of the CAG, there were mainly historians and archivists complemented by a small political representation and Passelecq, the former director of the BDB.⁴¹ The chairman of that committee, and the driving force behind the creation of that institution, was Henri Pirenne, the tutelary figure of national historiography. Internationally recognized for his scientific qualities before the war, Pirenne also became a “Belgian hero” when the war ended because of the stout patriotism he had shown under the occupation, which resulted in his deportation to Germany.⁴² In spite of the prestige of its chairman, the CAG declined rapidly, essentially because of a lack of support from the Belgian state. In 1928, that pioneering work was abandoned once and for all: the rich archives brought together by the CAG were incorporated in the General Archives of the

Kingdom (AGR), where they would end up being moved from depot to depot to the point where they became no more than an inextricable shambles, and fell into oblivion for more than half a century.⁴³

Over and above archives, interest in the history of the war found a second institutional reading during the 1920s, one also aimed at providing the tools necessary for the “scientificization” of the narrative. The *Revue Belge des Livres Documents et Archives de la Guerre 1914-1918* (RBLDA) started to be published in 1924. Much more than producing original contributions, it focused on publishing critical surveys of the very abundant written output dealing with the Great War in Belgium and in its Congolese colony.⁴⁴ With the intent of addressing a broad public, the RBLDA tried to sort out the wheat from the chaff amid that flood of publications, its yardstick being the criteria of positivist methodology that had triumphed in the nineteenth century. While offering an overview of all the Belgian production about 1914–18, the RBLDA thus acted like an authority (de)legitimizing the work of those who were writing the history of the Great War, professionally or otherwise.

Throughout the interwar years, the 1914–18 event in fact gave rise to an unprecedented tide of books, chronicles and pamphlets, where, in the end, the work of historians accounted for just a very small part.⁴⁵ As had already been the case during the war, veterans, journalists, novelists, and ordinary citizens took up their pens to describe the war, usually through the prism of those key episodes and figures represented (where Belgian memory was concerned) by the invasion of 1914 and the role of King Albert and (where nationalist Flemish memory was concerned) the “martyrs” of Yser and the activist combat. This often engaged writing about the war benefitted from at least as much attention and recognition as the output of professional historians. The figure of the witness, in particular, was erected as the authority par excellence with the credentials to deliver a narrative about the past. Within a movement of ego-history of European scope, Belgium stood out for the attention paid to the occupied country. A number of witnesses with a civilian experience of the war committed their memories to paper, when, in a more ambitious vein, they did not try to assemble “documents to serve history.”⁴⁶ Encouraged by the symbolic capital it held (in particular through the figure of Cardinal Mercier, archbishop of Malines and emblem of the resistance against the occupier), the Catholic Church also emerged at the end of the war as a historiographer.⁴⁷ One of the best-known works to which this tendency gave birth was the one by canon Jean Schmitz and dom Norbert Nieuwland. In no less than eight volumes and relying on the power of personal testimony, which they compared to the published documentation, these two clerics retraced the history of the invasion and the first weeks of occupation in the provinces

of Namur and Luxembourg. Over and above this truly monumental work, a whole host of small parish chronicles appeared during the 1920s and 1930s, with a mixture of patriotic ardor, Catholic moralism, and a desire to bear witness.⁴⁸ Attesting to the power of this wave of evidence, in a period when ego-history was not yet in vogue among historians, Pirenne himself published his *Souvenirs de captivité en Allemagne* in 1920.⁴⁹

The limited role played by professional historians in writing about the war also had to do with forms of logic peculiar to the discipline. In Belgium, as elsewhere, the professionalization of history was developed in the nineteenth century based on studies of the Middle Ages (and to a lesser degree of modern times). During the first half of the twentieth century, there were no departments of contemporary history in Belgian universities, and the very legitimacy of such a history was still bitterly disputed: hindsight would be necessary for historical objectivity.⁵⁰ From then on, those who, all the same, focused on the contemporary period were usually confined to nineteenth-century studies. The disdain shown by academic history for more recent events, which would only disappear after 1945, was nevertheless shaken, a first time, by the power of the 1914–18 event. Rare historians, armed, moreover, with the legitimacy they had acquired as medievalists, like Pirenne, then went beyond the prejudices of their professional culture and plunged into the intricacies of writing about the all too recent history of the Great War. The Pact of Locarno, which was meant to announce an international reconciliation as from 1925, provided, backdrop-like, the frame in which there emerged a “scientific” exposé of the conflict.

The most noteworthy book produced by that historiography wavering between patriotism and internationalism appeared in 1928. We owe it to the irreplaceable Pirenne, who here proposed a broad summary of the history of occupied Belgium (and to a lesser degree of Belgium in exile), based on the publications of the different national commissions of enquiry after the war, the archives brought together by the CAG, and the work of his colleagues within the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.⁵¹ The book was in fact included in what undoubtedly represented the most outstanding historiographical effort undertaken between the wars, namely the transnational project that was launched in the early 1920s by the Carnegie Endowment. Created in 1910, this private American foundation was, after the war, at the origin of a series that included no less than 150 volumes, dealing with some 15 countries. Proposing a huge socioeconomic history of societies in war, this series stood apart from current national historiographies by rejecting their patriotic logic and dismissing the military facts—the pacifist logic of the Carnegie Endowment *oblige*.⁵²

The Belgian series ran to seven volumes, which all appeared between 1924 and 1928.⁵³ They undeniably upset the historiography of occupied Belgium by painstakingly and with hindsight dissecting the policy for the provision of supplies, Belgian industry, and the German administration. Some of the works, especially those devoted to unemployment and German legislation, are still reference works on the subject to this day.⁵⁴ The history they proposed was entirely focused on the experience of occupation: exile was only broached through a monograph devoted to the government that had taken refuge in France, while the experience of the soldiers was wiped from the map—in the tradition of all the Carnegie volumes. In addition, the training of the eight authors to whom we owe the seven volumes of the Belgian series merits attention. If the final summary was unsurprisingly entrusted to Henri Pirenne, no other historian was brought into the project: there were five jurists, one sociologist, and one engineer. Even in a history as ambitious as the one proposed by the Carnegie Endowment, professional historians occupied, as we can see, a marginal position when all was said and done. Here as elsewhere, they suffered the full brunt of competition from other academic disciplines, in particular the then-emerging social sciences.⁵⁵

For other essential aspects of the Great War, such as the history of the front, professional historians abandoned the terrain, sometimes even in an outright way. Inspired by the social and economic history dear to Pirenne, the CAG thus laid claim, loud and clear, to the “exclusion of military facts” from its documentary explorations.⁵⁶ From then on, military history, which represented a major part of book production between 1918 and 1940,⁵⁷ remained the prerogative of the military men themselves. It was written around specific institutions, in particular the Army Museum, which became a state institution in 1923, and magazines that had the same status, such as the *Bulletin belge des sciences militaires*. These autonomous organizations guaranteed for military historiography a remarkable quantitative development, but they also had the effect of cutting off the other, more innovative tendencies, which were focused on the Great War at the same moment. Through these channels, it was in effect a literally nonacademic history that was written, where a detailed erudition was often combined with a frenzied patriotism to narrate the moments, great and small, of a regiment or a battle. And in this field, too, the moral importance of the witness, whether he was a proud general or a modest trooper, largely took precedence over that of the historian.

Further, after the 1920s, which had seen one or two figures cross the threshold of “immediate history,” academic historiography largely abandoned the study of World War I. The CAG, as we have seen, was dissolved

in 1928, the year when Pirenne's book put a full stop to the Belgian series produced by the Carnegie Endowment. From the 1930s onward, there was no longer any doubt about the established fact that the Great War had not managed to impose contemporary history in universities. Less than ever, scholarly historiography was attuned to other forms of narrative about the conflict, as is shown by a parallel between academic historiography and school textbooks. After the end of hostilities, the 1914–18 experience was incorporated in the teaching of history. It was also present in other subjects: at the beginning of the 1920s, almost all reading material devoted to national education was devoted to the Great War.⁵⁸ Throughout that decade, particularly in French-speaking Belgium, school textbooks were hallmarked by a distinctive Belgian nationalism and a marked Germanophobia. The cultural demobilization of that historiography came late—it was only in the early 1930s that more pacifist textbooks saw the light of day—and was short lived. The years leading up to World War II in fact saw the international climate become abruptly more tense, involving a sudden patriotic remobilization of that historiography. As a result, the non-conversion of Belgian school textbooks to the pacifist ideology between the wars can be read as a resistance to the canons of the new international morality that emerged with the Locarno agreements,⁵⁹ but it also implicitly revealed the relative powerlessness of professional historians to be heard. With the Great War, some of them did indeed move away from the positivist ethos of the nineteenth century and wrote a history of the present time, ahead of the pack. But nor did their hieratic narratives go astray in a proliferation of more influential memorial discourses, which gave pride of place to individual subjectivities, and the irreducible nature of the perceptible experience.⁶⁰

1945–90

The post–World War II period was marked by the legitimization and institutionalization of contemporary history. Whereas the Great War had only very partially managed to erect the twentieth century as a respectable subject for a university historian, that situation was turned on its head everywhere in Europe after 1945.⁶¹ In Belgium, contemporary history once and for all gained a foothold in the academic landscape from the late 1960s on, as is well illustrated by the creation of the *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* in 1969 and the Belgian Association for Contemporary History three years later. But in that development of a contemporary history, which before long would be the field that attracted the greatest number of students in Belgium, World War I would only play a minor part.

In the meantime, World War II pushed the 1914–18 experience to the sidelines. Up until the 1990s, Belgian historians were largely disinterested in the Great War: that conflict seemed decidedly obsolete in relation to burning issues such as the forms of research potential offered by the period 1940–45. Even military history found new questions to pose in the crushing defeat of 1940, and in the battle of the Ardennes, and before long would only broach World War I from its margins, the way its leading figure Henri Bernard did. Social and political approaches underwent an identical shift from the 1960s onward. This is attested to by the career of the Brussels-based historian José Gotovitch: when, in the early 1960s, he had already written his first master's dissertation devoted to the Great War⁶²—because his research supervisor had barred him from working on the period 1940–45—and when he had been one of the historical advisors for the television program *1914–1918: Le journal de la Grande Guerre*, Gotovitch subsequently abandoned that terrain and became one of the leading lights in Belgium of the history of World War II. Among other things, he contributed to the development of the Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale (CREHSGM). This research laboratory and documentation center was founded in 1969 and funded by the state; during the ensuing decades, it played a leading part in the remarkable rise of the historiography of the 1940–45 conflict. There was a striking contrast with the lack of legitimacy that the Great War was then suffering from.

That lack of legitimacy came across clearly, first and foremost, at the level of archival policy. While the CREHSGM gathered and inventoried everything relating to World War II, the 1914–18 period, to all appearances, was not among the priorities of the General Archives of the Kingdom. A similar lack of interest could be detected in universities: in them, World War I remained a marginal subject, despite the boom that contemporary history was enjoying in the groves of academe. An analysis of the articles published in the *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* shows the quite relative importance of the Great War in that contemporary historiography: only seven contributions out of 431 were devoted to World War I between 1969 and 1999. The report drawn up by the planners of the bibliography on the history of World War I in Belgium, which appeared in 1987, was harsh: "The historical output relating to the subject is old and obsolete, when it is not non-existent."⁶³ The history of the Great War was only tackled in a sporadic and fragmented way. It was henceforth focused around three debates.

The first of these controversies had to do with the fate of Flemish soldiers. In the nationalist Flemish memory, these combatants were presented as victims twice over, of both the violence at the front and the

bullying tactics of a French-speaking military apparatus. And this injustice appeared all the more intolerable because those soldiers represented 80 percent of the troops on the Yser, whereas the Belgian population was made up of 55 percent Dutch speakers as opposed to only 45 percent French speakers. This inequality in the sacrifice made grew from then on into a basic myth of Flemish nationalism: launched in 1917 by the activists, the figure of 80 percent Flemish soldiers became, for more than half a century, part of the arguments that rang out in the Yser Tower, but also in Flemish history books.⁶⁴ It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that different Flemish historians came up with a critical approach, conducting their debate in the specialized literature but also in the columns of an influential newspaper like *De Standaard*. That historiographical debate was, needless to say, politically charged, but it was also heuristic in nature: what sources were to be used to know the language spoken by the soldiers? It was only in the latter half of the 1980s that two military historians put a full stop to the discussion about what they called “the myth of the 80 percent”: Luc De Vos and Hans Keymeulen demonstrated that the percentage of Flemish soldiers among the Belgian war dead was 64 percent, a really high casualty rate but lower than what nationalist Flemish mythology had always maintained.⁶⁵

The second debate focused on the activist Flemish movement under the occupation, and more broadly on the impact of World War I on Flemish nationalism. In the 1920s, the activists had been presented, in nationalist Flemish circles and, in particular, by their historians, as “idealists” expressing a long-felt Flemish frustration in the face of Francophone injustices. This image would be demolished in the 1970s by historians who were keen to go beyond conventional wisdom. In 1974, Lode Wils, an eminent specialist of the Flemish movement, set the cat among the pigeons: activism, he argued, was a creation of the occupier’s *Flamenpolitik*, and not vice versa.⁶⁶ The anti-Belgian stance of the Flemish movement, which did not exist prior to 1914, had been merely artificially imported by Germany to justify German occupation and to destroy the Belgian state. Without *Flamenpolitik*, he concluded that there would not have been any separatist Flemish nationalism. The following decades saw Flemish historiography clashing around Wils’s thesis, with some refuting it by highlighting the autonomy of the Flemish activists and the traces of anti-Belgian sentiment in the Flemish movement before 1914, while others radicalized it even more by asserting that the activism (and to a certain degree the Flemish movement) had, even before the war, been spurred on by German pan-Germanism.⁶⁷

The third and final discussion point had to do with the role of Albert I in 1914–18. Up until 1945, books about this issue had more to do

with hagiography than with historiography, playing a direct part in the construction of the myth of the “king-cum-knight,” emblem of Belgian military heroism.⁶⁸ It was only from the 1970s onward that a new generation of historians would go beyond this mythological narrative, especially under the influence of the Royal Question and the virulent controversies about the attitude of Albert I’s son and heir, Léopold III, during the second occupation. For the first time, the archives were put to use and markedly nuanced the image of a king heroically standing up to German barbarism. Various authors showed that, with his concern to preserve European equilibrium, the sovereign had attempted to obtain not so much a military victory but a peace based on compromise during the war, especially by engaging in talks with Germany.⁶⁹ Over the years that followed, the historian and archivist Marie-Rose Thielemans pushed this analysis considerably further: Albert, for her, had been a pacifist, not to say defeatist king.⁷⁰ The initial myth, as we have seen, was thus almost completely stood on its head, which, in return, certainly gave rise to other more subtle writings.⁷¹ Subsequently, this issue became less fervent, and the debate shifted from Albert’s diplomatic action to his linguistic policy.

These three debates that punctuated the historiography of the Great War from the 1960s to the 1990s shared several features in common. First of all, they attested to the emergence of a new generation of historians who, relying on in-depth archival investigation, were keen to be done with the myth that had hitherto dominated Belgian and Flemish memories. From then on, while scholarly historiography and collective memories had been developed without too much contact during the interwar years, a dialogue came into being in the 1960s. The emergence of a new critical function devolving to historiography came into being at this point: henceforth, historians had a moral duty, that of analyzing and deconstructing the received ideas of the public debate. Illustrative of this were the abovementioned works about World War I, but also, in an even more vigorous manner, the critical historiography of World War II, which was forcefully introduced from the 1970s onward.⁷²

Another shared and probably less heartening feature of these three debates was their isolation. Everyone took their place within a political history that was, in the end, traditional, and also dominated by the community challenges that are constructing and also unraveling Belgium. If this historiography was open to public debate, it was in no event open to the new international tendencies emerging at that time around the Great War.⁷³ Those three quintessentially Belgian debates completely sidestepped the social history that, from the 1970s onward, was renewing knowledge of the conflict at the international level. This ignorance was explained by the fact that these three controversies were, above all, the

result of discussions coming from other historiographies. They were part and parcel of the Flemish movement and of the history of the royal function—two historiographical issues that were major ones at that time—without ever taking the Great War as a subject *per se*.

As far as social history is concerned, which became *de rigueur* at that time in the history departments of the universities of Brussels and Ghent, it is currently disregarding the short timeframe of the world wars. Whereas an economic and social historian such as Pirenne had lent respectability to the historiography of 1914–18 during the interwar years, his successors now focused on other subjects and other time frames.⁷⁴ Only a handful of isolated efforts saw the light of day. Let us mention, in particular, the works of Peter Scholliers, which, from the late 1970s onward and throughout the 1980s, turned out to be close to those then being written by Jürgen Kocka in Germany and Jay Winter in England.⁷⁵ A later example of transnationalization is provided for us by the history of women: drawing inspiration from French and Anglo-Saxon debates, pioneers such as Eliane Gubin and Denise De Weerdts focused on the role of women in 1914–18, and the impact that the conflict had on relations between the sexes.⁷⁶ But these new readings of the Great War, proposing an approach that was at once more social and less nationally confined, would have no sequel, and gave rise neither to historiographical currents nor to institutional networks.

If Belgian historians missed out on the swift development of European historiography about the Great War in the 1970s and 1980s, they also showed little interest in a German historiography that, in the same period, focused anew on the Belgian case. In the wake of the discussions caused by the *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Grasp for World Power) by Fritz Fischer,⁷⁷ the occupation policy in Belgium would be the subject of various German research projects. The *franc-tireur* issue, the role of Cardinal Mercier, and the destruction of the Louvain Library are some of the subjects dealt with in these books, which, for the most part, appeared during the 1980s.⁷⁸ But these works had few repercussions in Belgium. It was not until the later half of the 1990s that Belgian historians joined the European bandwagon.

1990–2000

The end of the twentieth century saw the Great War make a spectacular comeback within Belgian historiography. This stepped-up interest in a subject that, just a few years earlier, seemed irrevocably dated was part and parcel of a wider reemergence at the international level. There were many different reasons for this, and, on the basis of a classic explanation,

they had to do with the geopolitical developments that were then causing upheavals in Europe. The civil war, which tore the former Yugoslavia (precisely where, of course, World War I had started) asunder, seemed to announce the return of nationalism, in varying forms, while the collapse of the Eastern Bloc brought out new lines of thought about the historical unity of what became the “short twentieth century.” According to this argument, while World War II remained a central event, it was no longer the springboard of analysis. From then on, it was the Great War that was interpreted as the matricial catastrophe in a century that started in 1914 and ended in 1989.⁷⁹

In Belgium, this historiographical renewal can be broken down into three distinct sequences. In 1997, the Belgian historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver published *De Grootte Oorlog*, a somewhat ordinary title for a work that is anything but ordinary. Her book presented nothing less than the first summary account of Belgium in 1914–18 since Pirenne’s book, which appeared seventy years earlier.⁸⁰ The book, which was immediately acclaimed, was a tour de force. In it, De Schaepdrijver proposed an ambitious general survey of Belgian experiences during the 1914–18 period, based on a bibliography that we might describe, at the very least, as fragmented and incomplete; but she herself also delved into the archives, in particular personal ones. Combining political, social, and cultural history, the book married an academic approach—it swiftly became the reference book on the period—with an attractive narrative style, which lay at the root of its public success. For several weeks, a history book was at the top of the nonfiction bestseller lists, a rare occurrence in Belgium. Its Dutch version alone was reprinted nine times between 1997 and 2008. As for its author, who had hitherto held a somewhat marginal position in the national historiographical arena (she had obtained a PhD from Amsterdam University and had since taught in the Netherlands), she was propelled to the very core of the new developments taking place around the 1914–18 war.

If the book by Sophie De Schaepdrijver, who has meanwhile been teaching at Pennsylvania State University, sounded the alarm, it was initially just a solitary work. During the years that followed, academic research into World War I in Belgium would become institutionalized, taking two complementary directions. The first was that of a cultural history, with a firm foothold at the Catholic University in Louvain (UCL), gravitating around Laurence van Ypersele. In 1994, this historian had submitted a doctoral thesis about King Albert I. Unlike in the previous generation, it was no longer royal practice but the myth constructed around the “warrior-king” that was now the subject of analysis.⁸¹ This approach, in terms of history, to social representations subsequently hallmarked all

the output from UCL. From the end of the 1990s, this output focused on the impact of the Great War on Belgian society, in particular through studies of war memorials and memories of the atrocities of 1914.⁸² More recently, this trend would broaden its area of interest to other themes, such as resistance and espionage in occupied Belgium, the occupation of the Ruhr, and the “purification” after the German occupation.⁸³ On the international level, this first Belgian “school” of 1914–18 enjoyed an important process of legitimization with the co-opting of its leading light, Laurence van Ypersele, within the steering committee of the International Research Center of the Historial de Péronne, with which she had long shared a cultural approach to war.

The second area of development was, for its part, included more in the tradition of social history. It first emerged within the old Centre de recherches et d'études historiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, renamed, from 1997 on, Centre d'études et de documentation Guerre et Sociétés Contemporaines (CegeSoma). This change of name conveyed the enlargement of the chronological focus of this public institution, which now included the whole of the twentieth century in its themes.⁸⁴ In it, World War I, in particular, was promoted as a special area of investigation, and the CegeSoma soon became a fully-fledged player in the historiography of 1914–18, proposing doctoral theses, holding conferences, and devoting themed issues of its magazine to it, and, more recently, initiating public history projects around commemorations for the centenary of the war. The history of war experiences it promoted, giving pride of place to the people involved, the institutions, and their agency, with an often explicit comparison between the two world wars, subsequently gained a firm foothold in the academic arena, in particular at Ghent University where it encountered a powerful tradition of social history.

Alongside CegeSoma, another federal institution played a leading role in this historiographical renewal. From the latter half of the 1990s onward, the General Archives of the Kingdom (AGR) conducted a remarkably committed policy involving the availability of the 1914–18 archives, contrasting radically with the lack of interest that had surrounded those documents since the interwar period.⁸⁵ Over a fifteen-year span, more than two hundred archival inventories for that period were published by the AGR. This structural effort, the only one capable of making another writing of the history of Belgium in 1914–18 possible, also went hand in hand with a policy promoting new research findings. In 2001, a conference-*cum*-assessment was organized about the state of sources and historiography, and, in 2010, another such event was devoted to the end of the war.⁸⁶ Lastly, where publishing was concerned, the AGR distinguished itself by creating a collection devoted specifically to the Great

War. Launched in 2001, this series of *Etudes sur la Première Guerre mondiale* today includes some twenty volumes, most of them doctoral dissertations that duly enjoyed a wider readership.

The comeback of the Great War in historiography was in fact also conspicuous in master's theses produced in history departments. This fact is not insignificant when one knows that, in Belgium, it is here that a basic part of research, one relying more broadly on archival work, takes place. The quantitative analysis of master's theses submitted since 1957 shows that it was only from the 1980s onward that the Great War became a (legitimate) topic of study within the Belgian academic world.⁸⁷ And it was only in the 2000s that the number of dissertations increased significantly, attesting to the clear revival of interest for World War I.

The predominance of the Catholic University of Louvain where academic production is concerned can also be observed with regard to final dissertations. More generally, in spite of a more limited number of students, French-speaking universities are “producing” two-thirds of these works, seemingly revealing a greater interest in World War I in the south of the country than in the north. This imbalance is even more flagrant where doctoral theses are concerned: over the past three decades, ten theses about the Great War have been submitted in French-speaking universities, as opposed to five in Flanders. How are we to explain this lopsidedness? In the first analysis, we might put forward the hypothesis that the “patriotic” character of the Belgian experience in 1914–18 would pose more of a problem in Flanders, whereas it would be desirable in a French-speaking Belgium, which is apparently ever more attached to unitarianism. But, in a more prosaic way, the explanation probably has to do above all with systems of historiographical logic. The early re-



Figure 2.1. Master's Theses on World War I in History Departments (n=349).

Source: Statistics from database compiled by Sihem Talbi (Université du Luxembourg). Chart by the author.

ception of the school of Péronne in French-speaking Belgium, traditionally paying heed to French debates, has undeniably relaunched interest in 1914–18 in this part of the country. And the leading part played by van Ypersele, institutionally associated with the Historial de Péronne and the Catholic University of Louvain has done the rest: one-third of the dissertations about the Great War produced over the last decade have been under the supervision of this professor. This helps toward a better understanding of why, up until the 1990s, the majority of these were submitted in Dutch-speaking universities, and why there was a reversal

MASTER THESES ON WWI ACCORDING TO UNIVERSITIES (N=349)

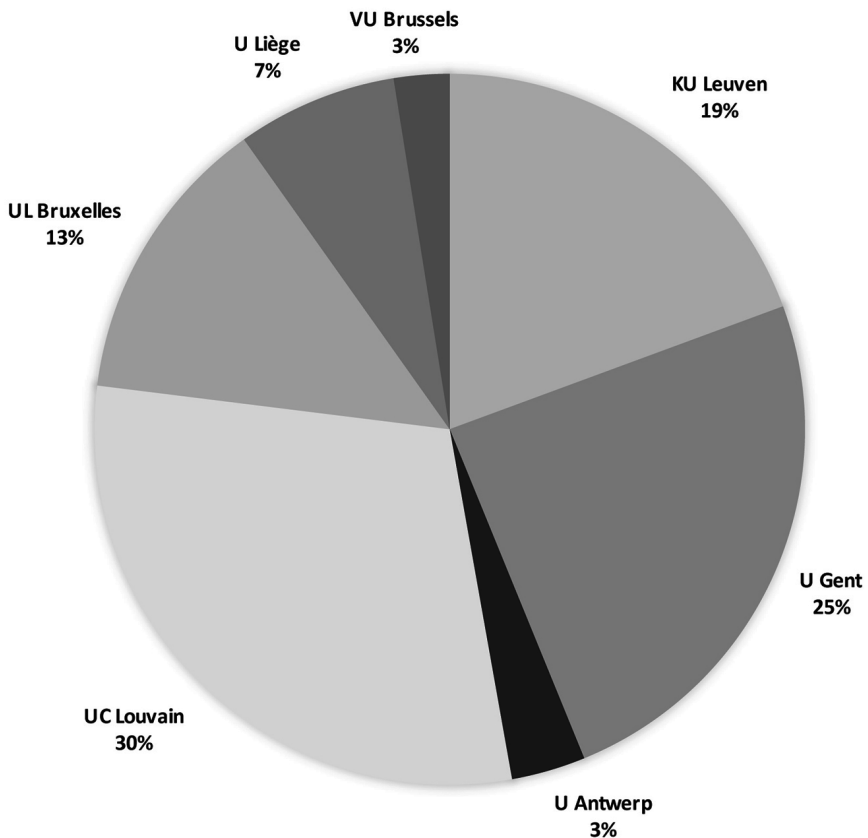


Figure 2.2. Master's Theses on World War I by Universities (n=349).

Source: Statistics from database compiled by Sihem Talbi (Université du Luxembourg). Chart by the author.

of this tendency from the early 2000s onward. Lastly, where these final theses are concerned, at the very least it has to be said that the Great War is still attracting more male students (61 percent) than female students (39 percent).

Current Perspectives

“How can one not be interested in Belgian history?” This was the question raised by the US-based British historian Tony Judt and others in 2005, with a twist of irony.⁸⁸ The historiography of 1914–18 nevertheless offers a thoroughly serious answer to this question. Since the 2000s, Belgian historians are not in fact the only ones to have (re-)become interested in the experience of Belgium in the Great War. Within the framework of an international questioning about the emergence of “total war,”⁸⁹ the Belgian case is now attracting the attention of foreign historians. Published in 2001, the already classic book by John Horne and Alan Kramer (Trinity College, Dublin) about the “German atrocities” of 1914 illustrates this interest, but also the interest that Belgium presents in a transnational line of thinking about the violence of war and the way it affects civilians.⁹⁰ The effect of this book, which won the prestigious Fraenkel Prize for Contemporary History, was to reposition Belgium at the hub of the international historiography of 1914–18. Following in the direct wake of Horne and Kramer, other authors would focus on the German invasion in Belgium to the point where the subtitle of “untold story” chosen by one of them may seem somewhat inappropriate.⁹¹

In a more original way, other works produced abroad over the past decade are enriching thinking about the all-encompassing nature of war by also taking Belgium as a paradigmatic case. The exploitation of manual labor in occupied territory, the artistic and patrimonial plunder, and forms of civilian resistance are all subjects that contribute just as much to an international discussion as to making up for the gaps in domestic historiography.⁹² This internationalization of research can also be felt with regard to doctoral research: more than one-third of the theses submitted over the last three decades about Belgium in 1914–18 were done so abroad (mainly in Germany), which represents a noteworthy exception with regard to other periods of Belgian history.⁹³ In this way, where summaries are also concerned, the case of (occupied) Belgium has been fully incorporated in a transnational history of the war.⁹⁴

The disillusioned assessment that the English historian Martin Conway put forward in 1994—the history of Belgium is “remarkably ne-

glected”—is thus no longer valid for the experience of the Great War.⁹⁵ On the contrary, this period seems to be one of the only periods when the Belgian case has been taken into account in an international debate. Unlike what happened during the 1980s, and the silence that surrounded the works being produced in Germany, a dialogue was struck up this time between international historiography and Belgian historiography. The conference held in 2003 at the Free University in Brussels, titled “Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale,” illustrated the intensity of that dialogue, because one-third of the forty or so speakers at that conference came from abroad.⁹⁶ In Belgium too, from now on, the Great War is being written about and included within a transnational framework, and the influence of an intrinsically international project like the *Historial* of Péronne cannot be overestimated in this regard.

Present-day historiography is organized around three experiences—occupation, exile, and the front—that bolster Belgium as a laboratory of total war, foreshadowing what Europe would be in the first half of the twentieth century.⁹⁷ Through this kaleidoscope of experiences, whose diversity for the past ten years or so has enjoyed a certain historiographical depth, social history seems to be making its comeback. If the cultural approach has indisputably given a new impetus to a subject that seemed exhausted, by proposing a questioning about the “culture of war” and the legacy of the conflict, the social organization of war experiences today seems to be one of the main threads of research in progress. If the history of the occupation was much written about from the interwar period onward, the great synthetic works of that period are also being renewed today by a historiography that is more attentive to interplays of scales and local practices.⁹⁸ The dynamics of social control, subsistence, and resistance are now being put under the magnifying glass,⁹⁹ just like the margins of maneuver and processes of adaptation where institutions are concerned, be they police or legal bodies, under occupation.¹⁰⁰ For its part, experience of the front had for many years only been broached in the shadows of the controversies about the Flemish movement and the attitude of King Albert; this then vanished from the areas of concern of historians, as is shown by its absence from the conference “A Total War?” held in 2003. Since then, a certain number of historians have reinvestigated the experience of Belgian soldiers, in particular through the lens of the institutions and disciplinary organizations they had to deal with.¹⁰¹ Lastly, for almost a century, refugees were the real blind spot of history and of the memory of 1914–18. In the end they, too, found their historian during the 2000s, who highlighted the socially differentiated character of experiences of exile.¹⁰² To these three henceforth defined fields was

timidly added the history of the colonies in 1914–18 and the history of multicultural aspects on the Belgian front, which remain areas that are largely undeveloped.¹⁰³ The time when just a few issues—the linguistic division and the royal function—were still informing the historiography of the war is well and truly behind us.

Through this thematic development and thanks to the creation of institutional infrastructures, Belgian historians have gained a firm foothold in the discussion about the war past. But we shouldn't be fooled by this success: since the conflict itself, the voices of historians have never been the only ones to make themselves heard. The many witnesses who, for decades, had occupied a pivotal place in commemorations, died a long time ago, of course, but other bearers of memories have also been part of the revival of interest around 1914–18. The powers that be, in particular, have become quintessential players in the memory of the Great War.

What has been and still is the place of historians in this context? As we have seen, Belgian historians have long struggled to make themselves heard in the debate about the war past. It was only in the 1960s, when the generation of witnesses was dwindling, that historians assumed an important role in this debate, by attacking the myths that had brought into being both Belgian and Flemish patriotic memories. In an ever more independent way, from the 1990s onward they even developed a new history of World War I, which was less straitjacketed in systems of national logic. However, the commemorative wave of 2014–18 can be considered a reminder of the fact that, to borrow the famous words of Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, "The war of 1914 belongs to nobody, not even historians."¹⁰⁴ In French-speaking Belgium and at the federal level, historians have been integrated into the commemorative framework, something that has not failed to stir up certain questions about the (potential) absence of critical voices with regard to such explicitly political projects.¹⁰⁵ On the Flemish side, however, within a commemorative policy dominated by issues of tourism and national assertion, historians have simply been sidelined. And this, in its turn, has stirred up angry reactions, in particular from the historian Sophie De Schaepdrijver, railing against a "Flemish affront to all its historians."¹⁰⁶

The centenary has led historians to work differently and to interact with a multitude of commemorative actors they had not necessarily been used to working with, be they politicians, the media, or large private companies wishing to organize events and exhibitions. The role and practice of the historian has deeply been affected by this: while his expertise remains of course recognized, he must also—one might argue too often—deal with imperatives that are at times incompatible with the principles governing the academic field. Public history practices are still not as de-

veloped as they should be and will have to be professionalized in a new context, where history tends to become a product.

This critical remark notwithstanding, professional historians have, as a matter of fact, been present at all levels throughout the centenary: they have made an effort to popularize recent World War I research in books,¹⁰⁷ in the media (in many regards taking the place of the necessarily lacking witnesses), in documentaries and docudramas (without, however, having a word to say in the editing process), in numerous scientific committees of exhibitions, or simply in giving lectures to a broader public. In this context, one cannot fail to note the variety of cases. Sometimes historians were used to obtain public funds (the major exhibitions in Liège-Guillemin and at the Royal Museum of the Army); then there were scientific committees that only existed on paper (e.g. Liège), or committees whose recommendations have finally not been followed (MRA). In other cases, the historians' advice has been completely taken into account: the Bruges exhibition with Sophie De Schaepdrijver is a case in point just as the RTBF (Belgian public television) documentaries, where Marianne Sluszný called upon professional historians to correct her synopsis. Sometimes historians receive payment (as much for their work as for staying quiet), sometimes not. Is it possible to avoid instrumentalization? Can we protect our research (and our reputation) against being used for political (or other) purposes? Experience tells us this can be difficult, at times.

Whenever historians have been listened to, the result was an undeniable intellectual gain. However, one should be careful not to think that this gain was automatically synonymous with public attention. In fact, as people with a little PR-experience know, the emotional and the spectacular tend to draw more audience than intellectual reflection, even if we should avoid thinking of these as being principally antithetic toward one another. On a slightly different note, one should not fail to acknowledge that the massive turnout in Liège and Mons on 4 August 2014 was very much due to the presence of Prince William and Princess Kate. Likewise, in Nieuwpoort on 28 October 2014, and in Ploegsteert on 11 December 2014, people flocked to see Angela Merkel and Michel Platini respectively. And on 11 November 2018, the public moved to the Column of Congress to see King Philip and Queen Mathilde. It should be noted, however, that this "star" effect should not obscure the real public enthusiasm for 1914–18.

In any case, the sustained presence and engagement of historians throughout the centenary, whether on the Walloon or on the federal side, has undoubtedly facilitated the launching of several research projects on the Great War.¹⁰⁸ It seems that Belgium has gone quite far in that direction, at least by international comparison: there have been no

less than thirty-four theses on World War I funded as part of the centenary commemorations, sometimes directly by the federal government,¹⁰⁹ sometimes by the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation,¹¹⁰ sometimes by all Belgian universities. The new research takes advantage of the countless archival resources freshly inventoried or newly uncovered by families. While social history seems to have gained some ground on cultural history,¹¹¹ this new social history remains in many regards inspired by the cultural history approach.¹¹² The most recent aspects are interdisciplinarity, the emergence of the history of emotions and gender history, as well as transnational history.¹¹³ Occupied Belgium is no longer studied without taking into account the North of France, which was also occupied.¹¹⁴ In the same vein, occupier-occupied relations can no longer be addressed without using the archives of all the countries involved to cross-reference points of view. And the end of the war can now only be understood in terms of multiple longer postwar processes, characterized by multiple intersecting chronologies that altogether broaden the field of investigation.

Looking back on the commemorative wave of 2014–18, it has to be said that both the history and the memory of the Great War have never, since the between-the-wars period, been the subject of any such attention, be it political or scientific. But at a time when the public authorities are turning the past into an area of intervention, and at a time when historians are attempting to combine the demands of a transnational science with a concern for a public history, the role of both in the production of a narrative about the past is, more than ever, a controversial challenge.

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Notes

1. We are indebted to Professor Laurence van Ypersele (Université catholique de Louvain) for offering crucial advice on different parts of this chapter.
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3. Stéphanie Claisse, "Ils ont bien mérité de la Patrie! Monuments aux soldats et aux civils belges de la Grande Guerre: Mémoire(s) et Reconnaissance (1918–1924)" (PhD diss., Université catholique de Louvain, 2006); Stéphanie Claisse, *Du Soldat Inconnu aux monuments commémoratifs de la guerre 14–18* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 2013).
4. Francis Balace, "Le soldat inconnu belge: Du lieu de mémoire au lieu d'affrontement," in *Les soldats inconnus de la Grande Guerre. La mort, le deuil, la mémoire*, ed. François Cochet and Jean-Noël Grandhomme (Saint-Cloud: Soteca, 2012), 363–98.
5. Kenneth S. Inglis, "Entombing Unknown Soldiers: From London and Paris to Baghdad," *History and Memory* 5, no. 2 (1993): 7–31.
6. Laurence van Ypersele, *Le roi Albert: Histoire d'un mythe* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1995).
7. Stéphanie Claisse, "Le déporté de la Grande Guerre: Un "héros" controversé; Le cas de quelques communes du Sud Luxembourg belge," *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent* 7 (2000): 127–47.
8. Axel Tixhon and Laurence van Ypersele, "Du sang et des pierres: Les monuments de la guerre 1914–1918 en Wallonie," *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent* 7 (2000): 83–126.
9. Axel Tixhon, *Le souvenir des massacres du 23 août 1914 à Dinant: Étude des commémorations organisées durant l'entre-deux-guerres* (master's thesis, Université catholique de Louvain, 1995).
10. Andreas Fickers, "De la 'Sibérie de la Prusse' aux 'Cantons rédimés': L'ombre diffuse de la Grande Guerre dans la mémoire collective des Belges germanophones," in *Une "guerre totale"? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, ed. Michaël Amara, Serge Jaumain, Benoît Majerus, and Antoon Vrints (Brussels: AGR, 2005), 615–33.
11. Laurence van Ypersele, "L'appel à la mémoire et ses derives," in *La patrie crie vengeance! Le châtimeur des inciviques belges au sortir de la Grande Guerre*, ed. Xavier Rousseaux and Laurence van Ypersele (Brussels: Edition Le Cri, 2008), 147–57.
12. Alain Colignon, *Les anciens combattants en Belgique francophone, 1918–1940* (Liège: Libr. Grommen, 1984); Guido Provoost, *De vossen: 60 jaarverbond van Vlaamseoudstrijders, 1919–1979* (Brussels: VOS, 1979); Gita Deneckere, "Oudstrijders op de vuist in Brussel: Het amnestieconflict tijdens het interbellum," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 25, nos. 3–4 (1994–95), 273–327; Martin Schoups and Antoon Vrints, *De overlevenden: De Belgische oud-strijders tijdens het interbellum* (Kalmthoud, Polis, 2018).
13. Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Les décombres de la guerre: Mémoires belges en conflit, 1945–2010* (Waterloo: Renaissance du Livre, 2012).
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- Nandrin and Laurence van Ypersele (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis Brussels, 2000), 89–125.
15. Benoît Majerus, *Occupations et logiques policières: La police bruxelloise en 1914–1918 et 1940–1945* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2007), 298–312.
 16. Benoît Majerus, “Von Falkenhausen zu Falkenhausen: Die deutsche Verwaltung Belgiens in den zwei Weltkriegen,” in *Besatzung. Funktion und Gestalt militärischer Fremdherrschaft von der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Günther Kronenbitter, Markus Pöhlmann, and Dierk Walter (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 131–45; Benoît Majerus, “Conceptualizing the occupations of Belgium, Luxembourg, and The Netherlands (1933–1944),” in *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe*, ed. Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 10–20.
 17. Evert Peeters, “Het gevecht tegen de tijd: Patriottische oorlogsher denkingen als vorm van contestatie, 1945–1965,” *Journal of Belgian History* 42, no. 2 (2012): 20–47.
 18. Frank Sebrechts, *Duurzamer dan graniet: Over monumenten en Vlaamsebeweging* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2003); Marnix Beyen, “Elle est de plus en plus noire, la masse des flamingants: Comment s’est forgée l’image de l’occupation et de la répression en Flandre (1945–2000),” in *Collaboration, répression: Un passé qui résiste*, ed. José Gotovitch and Chantal Kesteloot (Brussels: Labor, 2002), 99–114.
 19. Suzanne Tassier, *L’histoire de la guerre mondiale: Pour un Musée de la guerre mondiale et un Office de documentation contemporaine* (Brussels: Office de publicité, 1944).
 20. Marnix Beyen, *Oorlog en verleden: Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938–1947* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 251–53.
 21. Jacques Grégoire, “Quand la télévision partait pour la Grande guerre,” *Bulletin d’information du Centre liégeois d’histoire et d’archéologie militaire* 10, no. 2 (2007): 5–22.
 22. See Tixhon, *Le souvenir des massacres du 23 août 1914 à Dinant*.
 23. Delphine Lauwers, “L’Ypres Salient come luogo della memoria europea? Public History e turismo di guerra dal 1919 ai giorni nostri,” *Memoria e Ricerca* 37, no. 2 (2011): 87–113.
 24. Alain Colignon, “La Belgique, une patrie d’anciens combattants?” *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent* 3 (1997): 115–42.
 25. Jean Stengers, “La déconstruction de l’État-nation: Le cas belge,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’Histoire* 50 (1996): 36–54.
 26. See Benvindo and Peeters, *Les décombres de la guerre*.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. Grégoire, “Quand la télévision partait pour la Grande Guerre.”
 29. In Flanders, the ten-episode series *In Vlaamse Velden* on VRT Eén (funded by the province of West Flanders) has to be considered a huge popular success, just as the RTBF documentary *14–18: l’histoire belge* by Marianne Slusznay and Michel Mees on the Walloon side. Another successful documentary was André Darteville’s *Trois journées d’août 1914* on the German atrocities of August 1914.
 30. The two most important exhibitions of 2014–15 have been *14–18, c’est notre histoire* at the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and *J’avais 20 ans en 1914* at Liège-Guillemin Central station.
 31. Already in 2013, the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper had been entirely renovated. Examples for newly created museums are the Interpretation Center Plugstreet Experience in Ploegsteert (inaugurated in 2013) and the Mons Memorial Museum (inaugurated in 2015).
 32. There have been some highly successful initiatives in that regard. Take, for instance, the “Flanders Fields Gardens,” the first of which was inaugurated in London, or the illumination of the front lines from Nieuwpoort to Ploegsteert in October 2014.

33. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, quoted in Christian Laporte, “Un affront flamand à tous ses historiens,” *La Libre Belgique*, 31 January 2013. See also Laurence van Ypersele, “The Preparations of the 14–18 Commemorations by the Walloon-Brussels Federation and Wallonia,” *Journal of Belgian History* 42, no. 4 (2012): 186–91.
34. Nico Wouters, “‘Poor Little Belgium?’ Flemish- and French-language Politics of Memory (2014–2018),” *Journal of Belgian History* 42, no. 2 (2012): 198.
35. John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
36. Leon Van der Essen, *L’invasion allemande en Belgique: De Liège à l’Yser* (Paris: Payot, 1917); Godefroid Kurth, *Le Guet-apens prussien en Belgique* (Paris: Champion, 1919).
37. Michaël Amara, *La propagande belge durant la Première Guerre mondiale (1914–1918)* (Brussels: Université libre de Brussels, 1998), 17.
38. Fernand van Langenhove, *Comment naît un cycle de légendes: Francs-tireurs et atrocités en Belgique* (Paris: Payot, 1916).
39. Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914*.
40. Marc Bloch, “Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre: Psychologie collective,” *Revue de synthèse historique* 8 (1921): 34. Bloch was mistaken: the book was published in 1916, not 1917.
41. Christophe Martens, *Belgische historici en de verwerking van de Eerste Wereldoorlog: Eenstudieaan de hand van de Commission des Archives de la Guerre en de Revue Belge des Livres, Documents et Archives de la Guerre (1919–1928)* (master’s thesis, UGent, 2011).
42. Peter Schöttler, “Henri Pirenne face à l’Allemagne de l’après-guerre ou la (re) naissance du comparatisme en histoire,” in *Une “guerre totale”? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale: Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique*, ed. Michaël Amara, Serge Jaumain, Benoît Majerus, and Antoon Vrints (Brussels: AGR, 2005), 507–17; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, “‘That Theory of Races’: Henri Pirenne on the Unfinished Business of the Great War,” *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine* 41, nos. 3–4 (2011), 533–52.
43. Amara, *La propagande belge durant la Première Guerre mondiale*, 6.
44. See Martens, *Belgische historici*.
45. As is illustrated in the pages of Lefevre and Lorette, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*.
46. Jean Schmitz and Nobert Nieuwland, *Documents pour servir à l’histoire de l’invasion allemande dans les provinces de Namur et de Luxembourg*, 8 vols. (Brussels: G. Van Oest & cie, 1919).
47. Frédéric Dauphin, “L’Eglise belge et la Grande Guerre 1914–1922,” *14–18 Aujourd’hui-Today-Heute* 1 (1998): 52–70.
48. Giselle Nath and Maarten Van Alstein, *14–18 van dichtbij: Inspiratie gids voor lokale projecten over de Grote Oorlog* (Leuven: Acco, 2012), 132.
49. Henri Pirenne, *Souvenirs de captivité en Allemagne (mars 1916–novembre 1918)* (Brussels: M. Lamertin, 1920).
50. Edwin Witte, “Pioniers en pionierswerk: De Belgische contemporaine vakgeschiedenistussen 1890 en het midden van de jaren 1950,” in *De Tuin van Heden: Dertig jaar wetenschappelijk onderzoek over de hedendaagse Belgische samenleving*, ed. Guy Vanthemsche, Machteld De Metsenaere, and Jean-Claude Burgelman (Brussels: VUB Press, 2007), 19–105.
51. Henri Pirenne, *La Belgique et la guerre mondiale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1928).

52. Alain Chatriot, "Comprendre la guerre: L'histoire économique et sociale de la guerre mondiale; Les séries de la Dotation Carnegie pour la Paix internationale," in *Histoire culturelle de la Grande Guerre*, ed. Jean-Jacques Becker (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005), 33–44.
53. The German committee would also devote a volume to occupied Belgium: Ludwig v. Köhler, *Die Staatsverwaltung der besetzten Gebiete: Belgien* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1927).
54. Jacques Pirenne and Maurice Vauthier, *La législation et l'administration allemandes en Belgique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1925); Ernest Mahaim, *Le secours de chômage en Belgique pendant l'occupation allemande* (Paris: PUF, 1926).
55. Jean-François Crombois, *L'univers de la sociologie en Belgique de 1900 à 1940* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Brussels, 1994).
56. Martens, *Belgische historici*, 43.
57. About half of the five hundred pages of the bibliography of World War I prior to 1985 (where the facts are concerned, above all prior to 1940) have to do with military history: see Lefevre and Lorette, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*.
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59. *Ibid.*
60. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Rancoeurs et grands coeurs: Les fictions d'occupation en Belgique," in *La Grande Guerre: Un siècle de fictions romanesques*, ed. Pierre Schoentjes and Griet Theeten (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 183–204. This is a feature common to interwar European historiography: Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre: Un essai d'historiographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 19.
61. Pieter Lagrou, "Historiographie de guerre et historiographie du temps présent: Cadres institutionnels en Europe occidentale, 1945–2000," *Bulletin du Comité international d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* 30–31 (1999–2000), 191–215; Henri Rousso, *La dernière catastrophe: l'histoire, le présent, le contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
62. José Gotovitch, *Contribution à l'histoire de la presse censurée 1914–1918* (master's thesis, Université libre de Brussels, 1961).
63. Lefevre and Lorette, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, 6.
64. Christine van Everbroeck, "Une conscience née dans le feu: Divergences à propos du pourcentage de victimes flamandes de la Première Guerre mondiale," in *Les grands mythes de l'Histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*, ed. Anne Morelli (Brussels: Editions Vie ouvrière, 1995), 233–42.
65. Luc De Vos and Hans Keymeulen, "Een definitieve afrekening met de 80 percentmythe? Het Belgisch Leger (1914–1918) en de sociale en numerieke taalverhoudingen op der de gesneuvelden van lagere rang," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Militaire Geschiedenis* 8, nos. 1–2 (1988–89), 589–612.
66. Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en aktivisme* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1974).
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68. Van Ypersele, *Le roi Albert*, 231–42.
69. Carlos Wyffels, ed., *Actes du Colloque Roi Albert* (Brussels: AGR, 1976); Jacques Willequet, *Albert 1er, roi des Belges: Un portrait politique et humain* (Paris: Delarge, 1979).

70. Marie Rose Thielemans, ed., *Albert Ier: Carnets et correspondance de guerre 1914–1918* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Duculot, 1991).
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72. Pieter Lagrou, “De maatschappelijke rol van de historicus: De casus van de geschiedschrijving over de tweedewereldoorlog,” in *De maatschappelijke rol van de geschiedenis. Historici aan het woord*, ed. Edwin Witte (Brussels: Vlaams Instituut voor Geschiedenis, 2010), 47–52.
73. Prost and Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre*.
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80. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog: Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: Atlas, 1997).
81. Van Ypersele, *Le roi Albert*.
82. Claisse, *Du Soldat Inconnu aux monuments commémoratifs de la guerre 14–18*; Tixhon, *Le souvenir des massacres du 23 août 1914 à Dinant*; Aurore François and Frédéric Vesentini, “Essai sur l’origine des massacres du mois d’août 1914 à Tamines et à Dinant,” *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps présent* 7 (2000): 51–82.
83. Xavier Rousseaux and Laurence van Ypersele, eds., *La patrie crie vengeance! Le châtiement des inciviques belges au sortir de la Grande Guerre* (Brussels: Edition Le Cri, 2008); Nicolas Mignon, “‘L’occupant’ au pluriel: Autorités civiles et militaires belges sur la rive droite du Rhin (1921–1925),” in *Quand les canons se taisent*, ed. Patrick Neffors and Pierre-Alain Tallier (Brussels: AGR, 2010), 127–50; Emmanuel Debruyne, “Combattre l’occupant en Belgique et dans les départements français occupés en 1914–1918,” *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d’histoire* 3 (2012): 15–30.
84. Antoon Vrints, “Een verruimde blik: Het Studie- en Documentatie centrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij (Soma) en de Eerste Wereldoorlog,” in *België en*

- de Eerste Wereldoorlog: Bronnen-Stand van hetonderzoek*, ed. Pierre-Alain Tallier and Richard Boijen (Brussels: AGR, 2002), 329–34.
85. Pierre-Alain Tallier, “Les ‘Archives de la Guerre’ et les fonds associés conservés aux Archives générales du Royaume,” in *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale: État des sources—État de la recherche*, ed. Pierre-Alain Tallier and Richard Boijen (Brussels: AGR, 2002), 25–38.
 86. Pierre-Alain Tallier and Richard Boijen, eds., *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale: État des sources—état de la recherche: Actes du colloque des 8 et 9 novembre 2001* (Brussels: AGR, 2002); Patrick Nefors and Pierre-Alain Tallier, eds., *Quand les canons se taisent* (Brussels: AGR, 2010).
 87. This database was compiled by Sihem Talbi (Université du Luxembourg) based on master’s theses used in *De vele gezichten van de nieuwste geschiedenis. 3. Bibliografie van de licentiaatsverhandelingen en doctoraatsproefschriften betreffende de nieuwste geschiedenis, tot stand gekomen aan de afdelingengeschiedenis van de Belgische universiteiten, 1945–2001* (Gent: Academica Press, 2003); the *Bulletin d’Information de l’Association Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, and completed by the references of Tallier and Soupart, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale: Bibliographie—Tome 2 (ouvrages édités de 1985 à 2000)*.
 88. Tony Judt, ed., *How Can One Not Be Interested in Belgian History? War, Language and Consensus in Belgium since 1830* (Ghent: Academia Press, 2005).
 89. Roger Chickering, *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John Horne, ed., *Vers la guerre totale: Le tournant de 1914–1915* (Paris: Tallandier, 2010); Stig Förster, *An der Schwelle zum totalen Krieg: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft 1919–1939* (Zurich: Schöningh, 2002).
 90. Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914*.
 91. Laurel Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Jeff Lipkes, *Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007). It is noteworthy that the recent German controversy surrounding Ulrich Keller’s book (Ulrich Keller, *Schuldfragen: Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914* [Paderborn: Schöningh, 2017]) did not provoke much reaction on the Belgian side, even if the rejection of Keller’s main hypothesis claiming that the Belgian army led an irregular war against the German invaders was consensual. See, for instance, Laurence van Ypersele, “La thèse délirante du professeur Keller sur 14–18,” *La Libre*, 3 June 2019, retrieved 19 September 2019 from <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/la-these-delirante-du-professeur-keller-sur-14-18-5b11992f5532f10b07e52e8>; Christophe Brüll and Geneviève Warland, “Débats récents sur l’invasion allemande en Belgique en 1914: À propos d’Ulrich Keller, Schuldfragen,” *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, forthcoming. 50, no 1 (2020): 112–124.
 92. Christina Kott, *Préserver l’art de l’ennemi?: Le patrimoine artistique en Belgique et en France occupées, 1914–1918* (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2006); Christoph Roofl, “Dinosaurier-Skelette als Kriegsziel: Kulturgutraubplanungen, Besatzungspolitik und die deutsche Paläontologie in Belgien im Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 27, no. 1 (2004): 5–26; Jens Thiel, “Menschenbassin Belgien”: *Anwerbung, Deportation und Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2007); Tammy M. Proctor, “Missing in Action: Belgian Civilians and the First World War,” *Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine* 35, no. 4 (2005): 547–72; Christoph Schmidt-Supprian, *The Antwerp Question: The Significance of the Port City of Antwerp for Germany during the War* (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2006).

93. We have listed twenty-four doctoral theses between 1981 and 2013, ten of which were presented abroad.
94. Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Annette Becker, *Les cicatrices rouges, 14–18, France et Belgique occupées* (Paris: Fayard, 2010).
95. Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940–1944* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.
96. Michaël Amara, Benoît Majerus, Serge Jaumain, and Antoon Vrints, eds., *Une ‘guerre totale’? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale: Nouvelles tendances de la recherche historique* (Brussels: AGR, 2005).
97. Bruno Benvindo and Benoît Majerus, “Belgien zwischen 1914 und 1918: Ein Labor für den totalen Krieg,” in *Durchhalten! Krieg und Gesellschaft im Vergleich 1914–1918*, ed. Arnd Bauerkämper and Elise Julien (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 127–48.
98. Antoon Vrints, *Bezette stad: Vlaams-nationalistische collaboratie in Antwerpen tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 2002); Luc Vandeweyer, *Een kleine stad in een “Groote Oorlog”: De Eerste Wereldoorlog en het activisme te Tienen en omgeving* (Tienen: Aqua Fortis, 2003).
99. Antoon Vrints, *Het theater van de straat publiek geweld in Antwerpen tijdens de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011); Laurence van Ypersele and Emmanuel Debruyne, *De la guerre de l’ombre aux ombres de la guerre: L’espionnage en Belgique durant la guerre 1914–1918* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2006); Jan van der Fraenen, *Voor den kop geschoten: Executies van Belgische spionnen door de Duitse bezetter (1914–1918)* (Roeselare: Roularta, 2009); Giselle Nath, “Stad in de storm: Arbeidersvrouwen en het hongerjaar 1916,” *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 65, nos. 1–2 (2011): 205–27.
100. Majerus, *Occupations et logiques policières*; Aurore François, *Guerres et délinquance juvenile: Un demi-siècle de pratiques judiciaires et institutionnelles envers des mineurs en difficulté (1912–1950)* (Bruges: La Charte, 2011); Mélanie Bost, *Traverser l’occupation 1914–1918? Du modus vivendi à la grève, la magistrature belge face aux occupants allemands* (PhD thesis, Université catholique de Louvain, 2013).
101. Bruno Benvindo, *Des hommes en guerre: Les soldats belges entre ténacité et désillusion, 1914–1918* (Brussels: AGR, 2005); Luc Vandeweyer, *De Eerste Wereldoorlog: Koning Albert en zijnsoldaten* (Antwerpen: Standaard, 2005); Stanislas Horvat, *De vervolging van militair rechtelijke delictentijdens Wereldoorlog I: De werking van het Belgisch Krijgsrecht* (Brussels: VUB Press, 2009); Jos Monballyu, *De jacht op de flaminganten: De strafrechte lijke repressie van de Vlaamsgezinde militairen aan het IJzerfront* (Brugge: De Klaproos, 2010); Tom Simoens, *Het gezag onder vuur: Over de conflicten tussen soldaten en hun oversten aan het IJzerfront* (Brugge: De Klaproos, 2011); Benoît Amez, “La justice militaire belge en 14–18: Représentations culturelles et réalités quantitative,” *Annis: Revue de civilisation contemporaine Europes/Amériques* 10 (2011).
102. Michaël Amara, *Des Belges à l’épreuve de l’exil: Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale; France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-Bas, 1914–1918* (Brussels: Éditions de l’Université de Brussels, 2008). See also Evelyn de Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten: Vluchtelingen en krijgsgevangenen in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Zaltbommel: Europese Bibliotheek, 2000); Pierre Purseigle, “Les mobilisations sociales à l’épreuve de l’exil belge: Étude comparée France—Grande-Bretagne,” in *Une “guerre totale,”* ed. Amara, Jaumain, Majerus, et Vrints, 429–42.
103. Let us nevertheless mention Jeannick Vangansbeke, “Comrades in Arms? Het diplomatieke steekspel tussen België en het Britse Empire in Afrikatijdens de Grote

- Oorlog,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 38, nos. 1–2 (2008): 131–58; Dominiek Dendooven and Piet Chielens, *La Première Guerre mondiale: Cinq continents au front* (Brussels: Racine, 2008).
104. Prost and Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre*, 1.
 105. Wouters, “Poor little Belgium?” 198.
 106. Laporte, “Un affront flamand à tous ses historiens.”
 107. For example, Chantal Kesteloot and Laurence van Ypersele, eds., *Du café liégeois au Soldat Inconnu: La Belgique et la Grande Guerre* (Bruxelles: Racine, 2018).
 108. Jan Naert, Florent Verfaillie, and Karla Vanraepenbusch, “On the Public and Academic Impact of the ‘14–18’ Commemorations: The Belgian Centenary Generation of Doctoral Research,” *Journal of Belgian History* 46, nos. 3–4 (2016): 227–51.
 109. See the Belspo-Brain Projects (2013–17): “Experiences and Memories of the Great War” (MEMEX WWI) and “Great War from Below” (GWB). The results of the MEMEX WWI Project can be found in Geneviève Warland, ed., *Experience and Memory of the First World War: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Insights* (Münster: Waxmann, 2018).
 110. See, for example, the project of the French-speaking Community of Belgium (2013–17): “Commémorer 14–18: L’impact de la Première Guerre mondiale sur l’évolution du Droit International: les juristes belges.”
 111. Laurence van Ypersele, Geneviève Warland, and Michaël Amara, eds., “La Belgique et la Grande Guerre,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 272 (2018): 3–134.
 112. See, for example, Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *Gabrielle Petit: The Death and Life of a Female Spy in the First World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Emmanuel Debruyne, “Femmes à Boches”: *Occupation du corps féminin, dans la France et la Belgique de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018); Benoît Majerus and Anne Roekens, *Vulnérables: Les patients psychiatriques en Belgique (1914–1918)* (Namur: Presses universitaires de Namur, 2018).
 113. See in particular Dominiek Dendooven, “Subaltern War Experiences in the First World War: Non-European Involvement in Belgium and Northern France, 1914–1920” (PhD diss., Universiteit Antwerpen, 2018), and Enika Ngongo, *Le Congo et la Grande Guerre: Enjeux et mutations pour la colonie belge (1914–1931)* (PhD in progress, Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles).
 114. For example, Jan Naert, “Hoeders van de staat. Burgemeesters in bezet en bevrijd België en Frankrijk (1914–1921)” (PhD, Universiteit Ghent, 2020); or Elise Rezsöhazy, “De la protection du secret militaire à l’occupation des populations civiles. Les polices secrètes allemandes derrière le front Ouest (1914–1918)” (PhD, UCLouvain, 2020).

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