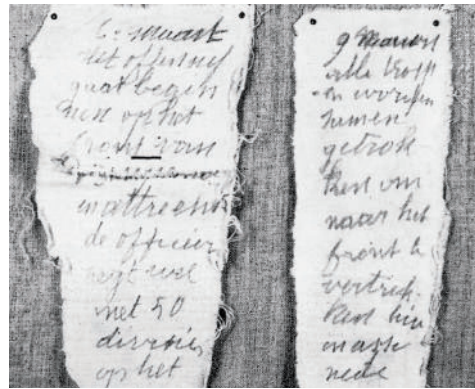


The Belgian-Dutch Border During the First World War

A Second Belgian Front?

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[ALEX VANNESTE]



Of the war-related events in Belgium during World War One, the greatest attention is invariably, and rightly, given to the dramatic hostilities at the Western Front on both sides of the now legendary river Yser and the heavily-hit area round the three frontline towns, Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide and Ypres (Ieper). One should however not lose sight of the fact that the civilian population of the whole country suffered greatly during the more than four years of German occupation and the havoc that the German advance at the beginning of the war and the withdrawal at the end of it created. Not so well-known are the forms of resistance at the Belgian-Dutch border, which, more than anywhere else in the country, were very intense and specific.

In contrast to the Second World War, Germany had several strategic and political reasons not to involve the Netherlands, a neutral country, in the war. This meant that the nearly 300 mile long Belgian-Dutch border was the only Belgian border with a country that was not at war. This would have far-reaching consequences for Belgium, the Allies and the Netherlands itself. For from what follows it will become apparent that the Germans were not able to seal off that border with regular manpower.

The clandestine paper *La Libre Belgique*, which is still published today, began to appear in February 1915 on an irregular but more or less weekly basis. Initially an edition of 1,000 copies was printed but a year later it had grown to 25,000 copies. This is the front page of issue no. 62, February 1916. The caricature of the German Emperor has as its subject the fruitless search by German counterespionage for the printer of the paper, its distributors and its readers. The text below it reads: 'For more than a year I've been looking for you, night and day, you disgusting little girl, and you keep getting away.' (Archive La Libre Belgique)

Left Information, collected by spies, noted on pieces of linen that could easily be hidden or sown into clothes. The text on the left reads: 'The offensive will begin on the Péronne-Bapaume Front, and will be carried out - as the officer says - with 50 divisions upon the British Front, as rapidly as possible. There are also on the east Imperial troops - 15-20 divisions. He says that it will be on a broad front.'



At the start of the hostilities, the Belgian army consisted of about 200,000 troops. After its retreat behind the Yzer, less than half of those remained. These heavy losses were of course due to the fighting during the German advance after the invasion on August 4, 1914. In addition, even before the fall of Antwerp, on October 9, 1914, more than 30,000 Belgian troops had fled to the Netherlands, where they were interned. This led to King Albert and the army command issuing an appeal, especially via Dutch newspapers, to all able-bodied Belgian men who hadn't been mobilized, to join the diminished Belgian army behind the Yzer. Around Christmas 1914 there followed a second, similar appeal, from Cardinal Mercier this time, in the form of a pastoral letter, *Lettre pastorale sur le Patriotisme et l'Endurance* (1914) that had to be read in all Belgian churches. The result of all of this was that of the more than 30,000 Belgian volunteers who would go to the front during the course of the war, a large part did so immediately after the two appeals. Recruiting agents in the occupied areas saw to it that volunteers were enlisted and they were then escorted to the Dutch border. There they were led across by experienced passeurs or border-crossing guides. In Flushing (Vlissingen) they were taken by boat to Folkestone

The Flight, a pastel by the Antwerp painter Eugeen Van Mieghem (1875-1930). (Private collection)



and from there to a harbour in northern France. After that they were assigned to fighting units behind the front line.

During the course of the first few months of the war, the allied intelligence services were able to join forces and put themselves under the coordinating command of a number of British agents, who were planning to establish themselves in the Netherlands (Flushing, Rotterdam). The British intelligence services were at that time much better organized than the Belgian or even the French. Espionage in the occupied territory was organized from the Netherlands. Around 7,000 agents were active in Belgium and northern France, spread over some three hundred local, regional and national services of varying sizes. Some only had a few agents, others several hundreds. They were used for air observation (around airports), territorial observation (the movement of troops), and in particular for railroad observation. Agents from all levels of society, young and old, men and women, carefully recorded which trains were coming from where and where they were going, with how many and what sort of troops, what kind of weaponry, at what time, etc. All this information was recorded in the most creative ways, sometimes in code and on all sorts of materials (pieces of paper, clothing, packaging, etc.), and relayed by couriers in an equally inventive way to the border, where message smugglers were able to get them to agents in the Netherlands. The central interallied intelligence services analysed and assessed the messages and sent the relevant information on to Folkestone or London, where military staff could use them to advantage.

In Belgium the regular post was in the hands of the occupier and strictly censored. This led, from the very beginning of the war, to the creation of clandestine organizations – like *Le Mot du Soldat* or *Familiegroet* – dedicated to collecting the letters of people with relatives fighting at the front – a father, brother, child, or other beloved one. Again through couriers, this secret post was transported to the border, brought to the Netherlands by letter smugglers

and via Flushing to Folkestone, and then to northern France, behind the front line, where the letters were distributed to the soldiers at the front. The answers then travelled the opposite route.

Classic food smuggling along the Belgian-Dutch border was already flourishing before the war and assumed much greater proportions during it. The collapse of commerce, trade and the general economy had created a shortage of just about everything, especially of products that were quite readily available in the Netherlands (rice, coffee, oil, butter, flour, beans, etc.). This kind of smuggling was of course carried out by Belgians, but also by Germans stationed at the border and especially by the Dutch. Some did it out of pure necessity and earned little or nothing from it; while others, especially the Dutch, became rich smuggling, in spite of intense surveillance by Dutch soldiers along the Belgian-Dutch border, and great efforts by the Dutch authorities to thwart the traffic in contraband, not least, and with reason, to prevent a shortage of these products in the Netherlands.

A different form of contraband was the smuggling of Dutch newspapers. With the exception of the clandestine *La Libre Belgique*, which was founded during the war, and some small local papers, the Belgian press was also strictly censored. Belgians who wanted information about how things were going at the various fronts could only get it from newspapers smuggled in from the Netherlands and sometimes from Great Britain, which often reported extensively on these topics.

It is quite clear from all of this that the Belgian-Dutch border was a line that was often crossed by all kinds of people and for different reasons, and that it happened throughout the war. But there is more.

Flying Monday

One of the most universal results of the outbreak of war in a certain region or country is the sad fact that it nearly always occasions a substantial part of the population to flee. Either civilians are forced by the aggressor to run, driven away usually by military pressure; or the situation is so harrowing that they seriously fear for their personal and social safety; or the socio-economic situation becomes so wretched that civilians seek refuge somewhere else out of sheer misery, fear or panic. World history offers many examples of this, in every shape and form, and the First World War was certainly no exception to this rule. Germany never resorted to systematic expulsion or deportation of certain sections of the population during the Great War. The population took flight *itself*. This happened in several waves.

A first wave of refugees was created immediately after the German offensive, in the first week of August 1914. Heavy bombardments caused some 20,000 Belgians, primarily from Liège and the surrounding area, to flee to Limburg under pressure from the onrushing invaders. The majority hoped to reach the neutral Netherlands. The residents of hard-hit Visé, in particular, tried to escape from the chaos, as well as countless people living in the border villages of Voerland. A day after the invasion a quarter of the 650 residents of the municipality of Moelingen, for example, had already fled to the Netherlands. Many traveled in the direction of Brussels and France, but even more went via Limburg and the Kempen (Campine) to the Netherlands. From Flanders, too,



Antwerp refugees in Dutch Roosendaal reading messages, hoping to find relatives and friends who had also fled. For 8 months Roosendaal was host to about 25,000 Belgians. (From *The Illustrated War News*, October 21, 1914)

especially from the Antwerp Campine, refugees could already be seen traveling to the Netherlands. Towards the end of August the number of refugees from the Liège area was still increasing substantially, again especially in the direction of the Netherlands. In just the first few weeks of this world conflict, in August 1914, about 100,000 people fled to Dutch Limburg and North Brabant, and this number would only continue to grow.

When the Germans swept across Wallonia they drove - particularly as a result of the battles near Charleroi and Mons around August 20 - a new wave of refugees from Hainaut, Namur and Luxemburg in front of them, this time towards France; whole villages in the Sambre-Meuse valley were emptied. Meanwhile, the fear of German brutalities grew among the whole Belgian population, fuelled by numerous accounts in the press, which was still available. Yet a large part of the population, especially in the provinces of Namur and Luxemburg, were actually surprised by the rapid advance of the Germans, so many stayed where they were.

From the moment the Germans made moves to occupy northern Belgium, an exodus began from Flanders towards Antwerp and subsequently the Netherlands. The big flight from Flanders that began on August 24, 1914, became known as *Flying Monday*, or sometimes *Crazy Monday*. To get away from the dreaded bombardments, fleeing in the direction of Antwerp was the only option. Then from the port city many traveled on to Ghent. Most of these refugees ended up in West Flanders and France, and a number of them in the Netherlands.



The Dutch refugee centre Kloosterzande in the town of Hontenisse in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, where Belgian refugees found temporary shelter in barracks and tents. The camp had room for about 4,000 people. Because it was impossible for private individuals or the local authorities in the Dutch border towns to house the enormous number of Belgian refugees, many of them were soon sent on to more northerly or easterly state refugee centres. (Collection C. Buijsrogge, Terneuzen)

When it became apparent that Antwerp was also threatened, refugees could still go in three directions: to Great Britain via Antwerp's port or by train from Central Station through East Flanders to one of the North Sea harbours; to France via East or West Flanders; or, finally, to the Netherlands via the Campine. The number of refugees increased sharply, especially in September. In that month 10,000 fled to Great Britain, 20,000 to East and West Flanders and 20,000 to the Campine and the Netherlands. When the Germans announced, on October 7, that Antwerp would be bombarded, it led to a massive exodus from the city and its surroundings. On October 7 alone 30,000 Belgians arrived in Roosendaal and soon afterwards there were no less than half a million Belgians staying in North Brabant. Many refugees also traveled to Ghent and towards the coast. In the extremely short space of just three or four days after the bombardments and the massive exodus, Antwerp had become a ghost town, an empty city.

The surprise attack on East and West Flanders finally led to a last wave of refugees, who were driven towards the coast, from where some of them went to Great Britain, to the Netherlands and to France. When the first battle of the Yser became imminent (October 15, 1914) even more residents of the threatened area fled to France.

So after several months of war, residents from all the Belgian provinces could be found in the Netherlands, France and Great Britain. In the Netherlands, refugees from Antwerp, Brabant, Limburg and Liège were in the majority. In France there were mainly residents of Hainaut and West Flanders,

The massive arrival of Belgian refugees in Dutch Bergen op Zoom. (Collection F. Duinkerke, Bergen op Zoom)



while in Great-Britain there were chiefly people from Antwerp and Brabant. The largest number of refugees was to remain with our northern neighbours, others traveled on to Great Britain and from there sometimes even to France, and a small number even farther, to Canada, the United States, South America, South Africa, New Zealand and a few other countries.

Refugees weren't always registered very carefully in the host countries, which makes it hard to determine their exact number. Nevertheless there is a consensus that the Netherlands, with its 6 million inhabitants, took in 1 million refugees. France took in almost 350,000 and Great Britain about 250,000. Since France and Great Britain were combatants in the war, many refugees could be put to work there in the war industry and in agriculture. Most of the refugees therefore stayed there till the end of the war or even nearly a year later.

But in the Netherlands the situation was different. The Netherlands was a neutral country and wasn't really allowed to put refugees from a warring country to work. It had no choice but to restrict itself to humanitarian help. The many refugees were taken in by private individuals and local governments or were housed in one of the many so-called state refugee centres. Providing the refugees with food and drink, clothing and shelter was a gigantic challenge for the Dutch, and forced the authorities to dig very deep into their coffers. It seems to us – and to many others – that Belgium could have been a bit more forthcoming in offering its thanks to its northern neighbour after the war.

On top of that the Netherlands also had to look after more than 30,000 interned soldiers, and thousands of German deserters during the war.

Under pressure from the Germans most of the refugees returned to Belgium from the Netherlands at the end of 1914 and during the first months of 1915. Even so, throughout the war many more Belgians fled to the Netherlands, both agents from the intelligence services, who were being pursued by German counterespionage, and civilians. It is assumed that at least 100,000 Belgians stayed in the Netherlands during the course of the war.



Killing wire

It is evident that the occupier could not tolerate any form of exfiltration especially of Belgians to the Netherlands, be they civilian refugees, army volunteers, letter, message or common smugglers, or deserters. Until the spring of 1915 crossing the border was, given the circumstances, relatively easy. After all, the Germans could not deploy endless numbers of troops to seal off the border hermetically. That is why they decided, in the spring of 1915, to completely fence in Belgium with electric wire: a triple fence of which the middle one carried a deadly charge of 2,000 volts.



The electric wire fence, here at Wortel, near the village enclave of Baarle-Hertog, along the Belgian-Dutch border. One can clearly distinguish the central electric wires (2,000 volts) and the two fences that protected it on each side. This barrier was guarded night and day by armed border guards, who as a rule patrolled on the Belgian side. Contact with the central wires mostly resulted in instant death, which is why the fence was commonly called the *killing wire*. (Collection H. Janssen, Merklplas)

On top of this, the fence was guarded by armed patrols and border guards who had been given instructions to foil any attempts to cross the border with the use of firearms. Along the border a *Grenzgebiet* was established where the most rigid safety measures and controls prevailed and inside that zone there was a closely guarded *Grenzstreife*, 100 to 500 meters wide, an area that was strictly forbidden to all civilians and even to German troops, with the exception of border guards.

All of this did not however prevent the busy border traffic from continuing in both directions. Clever passeurs - mostly former smugglers - continued to guide volunteers across the border. Agents - spies - at the border continued to smuggle thousands of secret messages across it for the use of the allied intelligence services. Letter smugglers did not hesitate to tackle the fence to smuggle hundreds of thousands of letters to the Netherlands for soldiers at the front, and vice versa. Smuggling continued to flourish. Deserters took great risks in order to escape the horrors of war.

Tens of thousands of times people passed through the lethal fence, either alone or in small or larger groups led by *passeurs*. In spite of the 'killing wire', as it was commonly called, the resistance at the border remained extremely active. It will therefore not come as a surprise that the fence also claimed victims: nearly one thousand, who were electrocuted or shot by border guards. The majority of victims were Belgians, but British, French, Russian and German citizens died at the fence too.

It goes without saying that the number of victims of the electric fence falls far short of the number of victims among the troops fighting at the front: about 600,000 in Belgium alone, 550,000 of them in the mud of the Ypres Salient. Even so, the recruiters, couriers, intelligence agents, message and letter smugglers from the areas bordering the Netherlands deserve our gratitude and thanks for their unremitting contributions in the fight against the occupier – on *their* front. ■

Translated by Pleuke Boyce



One of the techniques for safe passage through the fence was by using a *passeur's* or folding frame. With some training and with the help of a border guide, one was able to get 'to the other side' that way. Nonetheless there were many fatalities, even with the use of this type of frame. (Frame belonging to the Historical Society Marcblas, Merksplas; photo by H. Jansen, at the reconstruction at Zondereigen)