

# **A Civilian War Effort: the *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918**

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## **Introduction**

In 1915, Herbert Hoover sent a special representative to occupied Belgium to report on an organization that functioned as the “complement” to his Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). This organization was the Belgian “National Committee for Relief and Food”. (From now on I will refer to it as “The Committee”.) Hoover’s expert, the psychologist Frank Angell, when embarking on this task barely knew that such an organization even existed; he later admitted to having been under the impression that “as the saying was, ‘the Americans were doing it all’, or at any rate were the only responsible party in the organization. It appeared, however, that the Belgians had a very complicated organization of their own (...).”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California, Frank Angell Papers, Box 3, typescript “The Belgians Under the German Occupation”, n.d. (but written in late 1916 and slightly revised in December 1918), p. 1. There is no recent monograph on the Committee; by way of introduction, see Sophie De Schaepdrijver, La Belgique et la Première Guerre Mondiale, Berlin – New York 2004, Chapters IV and VII, and the war chapters in Liane Ranieri, Emile Francqui ou l'intelligence créatrice (1863-1935) (Paris-Gembloux, 1985).

This “very complicated organization of their own” merits a closer look of its own. Like the CRB, it was a colossal collective effort, much of it voluntary. Unlike the CRB, this effort had to be waged exclusively within the excessive constraints of a military occupation. In what follows, I want to place the Committee’s effort within the context of the war as experienced by civilians.

## 1. Civilian

The civilian dimension matters for two reasons. The first is that Belgium’s First World War experience was mainly civilian in nature: together with Serbia it was the only European country to be occupied in its (near-)entirety; and most Belgian men of military age lived through the war as civilians. (The mobilization rate was 20%, as against 86% in Germany and 89% in France.<sup>2</sup>)

Second, the history of Belgian relief in wartime is, essentially, the history of civilian action in times of civilian helplessness - helplessness before military violence. The extreme vulnerability of civilian society before armed violence – so ill-befitting the fond hopes of the new century, as laid down in the Hague agreements of 1899 and 1907 that sought to limit war’s impact on civilians - burst upon the scene in the very first weeks of the war, when the invading German troops killed 5,500 men, women and children, and left many more in deep distress.<sup>3</sup>

The misery befalling civilian society is well expressed in the diary of an attorney and provincial representative, the Socialist Charles Gheude. In October 1914, Gheude visited the small brabançon town of Aarschot, which had been, two months earlier, the site of the first large-scale massacre of the invasion.

“**Tuesday. October 20.** Went to see the district of Aarschot today. The ghastly images I saw have left me feeling powerless [*désemparé*] and bruised. I have

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<sup>2</sup> Sophie De Schaepdrijver, “Death Is Elsewhere: The Shifting Locus of Tragedy in Belgian First World War Literature”, *Yale French Studies*, Theme Issue 102: *Belgian Memories*, Catherine Labio ed., 2002, 94-114.

<sup>3</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer, *‘German Atrocities’ 1914: A History of Denial*, New Haven-London, 2001.

seen one long continuous stretch of ruins (...); the countryside desolate, not a living soul in sight for miles on end... And then I saw Aarschot. Amidst its debris I looked for some promise of resurrection, in vain. A few poor people have just returned, but they will have a hard time finding shelter and they risk starving or freezing. There is not a single unpillaged dwelling with an intact roof left; the cold air blows in through broken windows. Not one straw mattress; no food. If it weren't for the charity of the German garrison there, the wretched I saw in that hell would starve... What to do? How to aid those poor people? What relief to bring them?

Never have I felt a sharper sense of impotence before distress. It is impossible to put together any kind of administration: not a single member of the elite [*notable*], not a single citizen with the necessary insight and authority are left. The few inhabited dwellings cannot be made habitable again: there is not a single worker left in the city and there are no building materials (...). We have no means of transportation and cannot bring in any food, coal, clothing or mattresses...

What to do? What to do? It is a desperate case, terrifying. We are surrounded by the imploring looks of women and children with red eyes and shivering old men (...). How can we resist the urge to give alms – the only means at our disposal? With that money, these unfortunates will be able to buy some bread or potatoes in the country. But afterward?...”<sup>4</sup>

Three weeks later, Gheude returned:

“**Friday, November 13.** What has happened to poor Aarschot since our first visit? Slowly, its inhabitants return, but there seem to be no more than a thousand within its wretched walls, where there used to be more than eight thousand! Many come to see what is left of their house, and when they find no

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Gheude, Nos Années Terribles, Tome I: L'Emprise (Bruxelles: Lamberty, s.d. [1919]), pp. 211-212. (N.B. all translations SdS.) Gheude was to serve as a member of the Committee for the south brabançon town of Nivelles.

more than a few charred walls, they leave again. The others vegetate and await relief.

The Germans have put a teutonic citizen in charge of the city (...). One alderman and two councilmen, overwhelmed and powerless, are all that is left of legitimate local authority. The Town Hall, the court of the Justice of the Peace, the schools have all been destroyed. How to resurrect communal life and meet urgent needs?

That is the question before us. In one hospitable house, still standing and only half pillaged, we assemble our best endeavours [*nos bonnes volontés*] around a table weakly lit by two candles, and we draw up the first measures.

Outside, it is raining. The sadness of the streets – silent but for the guards' heavy steps - is rendered even more dismal by the falling dusk. Our feeling of catastrophe intensifies when upon leaving we see [German] barricades near the railway station, guarded by soldiery [*des soudards*] with bayonets that gleam amidst the shadows. (...) Does the enemy fear an attack? (...) Will gunfire and warrior rage descend upon the doomed city yet again? We are full of renewed dread and growing pity as the purring car takes us home through the dark night and driving rain.”<sup>5</sup>

From this description, two main themes emerge. The first is that of civilian helplessness. The outburst of military violence that devastated Aarschot, could occur again, if a renewed attack unleashes the invading troops' fear and rage, taken out against the defenseless city and its remaining people.

Yet here is a second theme which to some extent contradicts the first: it is that of civilian action. Action must be taken to remedy the misery of this victimized town, and not by giving alms (a wretched palliative that humiliates both giver and taker), let alone by accepting the invading troops' handouts, but by devising and maintaining structural relief arrangements, a hope-generating effort that confers dignity all round. The task, as described by Gheude, looks close to impossible. The means are pitiful. Yet there is

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<sup>5</sup> Gheude, pp. 258-259.

nothing for it but to try, and so, in the middle of a devastated ghost town dreading new atrocities, there is a gathering of goodwill (*bonnes volontés*) around a table.

Gatherings such as these occurred all across the invaded country: urgent meetings of local and provincial officials, notables, businessmen, union leaders, representatives of charitable organizations and the like. They met to stave off disaster. Relief had to be organized, or at least improvised.

It is in this context that the Committee itself came into being. In the days between the departure of the Belgian government on August 17, and the entry of the German troops in the city on August 20, the Committee started life as an ad-hoc creation, grown out of the municipal arrangements of greater Brussels and out of the network of Belgian and American financiers established in Brussels; from the start, the neutral envoys – the US and Spanish ministers, joined later by their Dutch colleague - served as official guarantors. Thus was created a “Central Food Committee” (*Comité Central d’Alimentation*) that aimed to purchase and distribute basic foodstuffs to the population of greater Brussels. Given the menace that weighed on the entire country, an agreement was reached to extend its workings to all of Belgium, and the organization was renamed accordingly, calling itself the National Committee from late september 1914. The next problem to tackle was that of importing food despite the British blockade. The main obstacle to this was lifted on October 16 when Field Marshal von der Goltz, governor-general of occupied Belgium, formally agreed to shield the foodstuffs imported by the National Committee from German military requisitioning. (This shows that the invaders’ and the civilians’ interests could converge: von der Goltz was responsible for maintaining order and avoiding food riots in his army’s newly-conquered hinterland.) In order to negotiate British consent, the Committee had sent a delegation to London (after obtaining passports from the occupying authorities), which met with Herbert Hoover. By October 22, the new CRB opened its offices, not a moment too soon – “gaunt famine stalks nearer”, as the US minister noted in Brussels.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brand Whitlock, Diary, October 23, 1914. In: The Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock, Allan Nevins ed. (New York, 1936), Vol. II, p. 58. On the beginnings of the Committee and the CRB, see the relevant chapters in George Nash, The Life of Herbert Hoover, Volume 2: The Humanitarian, 1914-1917 (New York, 1983), in Liane Ranieri, Francqui (see note 1), and in

In the occupied country, the Committee set about to “co-ordinate and channel existing goodwill” (*imprimer une direction unique à toutes les bonnes volontés*).<sup>7</sup> It established a hierarchy of committees, provincial and local, worked with what remained of the Belgian administration, and incorporated the phalanx of voluntary relief organizations already in the field. It was financed by private donations, and, more importantly, by the sale, in Belgium, of the foodstuffs imported by the CRB. With the money generated by the food operation, the Committee subsidized its relief work; in fact the Committee consisted of two separate bodies, one for food aid and one for other forms of relief, most importantly the aid to the unemployed and the aid to the other destitute (from 1917, with misery worsening, both operations were merged together), as well as the aid to families bereft of breadwinners because of the war. The “food” department operated commercially and sustained the “relief” department.<sup>8</sup> This vast operation became responsible for the care and feeding of millions; it eventually extended to all of occupied Belgium (though its action was severely restricted in the areas closest to the front, the so-called *Etappe*), and it also came to feed the North of France. Within Belgium, it worked with an estimated 125,000 agents. The occupation government looked askance at this pervasive organization, “a government of its own, wielding powerful jurisdiction all over Belgium.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that for all its range and responsibilities, the Committee never lost its informal character – that of an ad-hoc gathering of *bonnes volontés* to address urgent problems.<sup>10</sup> Relative local autonomy was upheld.<sup>11</sup> The provincial

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Professor Ranieri’s recent biography Dannie Heineman, patron de la SOFINA : un destin singulier, 1872-1962 (Brussels, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> In the words of its postwar historian and wartime secretary-general, Albert Henry: L’Oeuvre du Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation pendant la guerre, Brussels, 1920, p. 289.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Henry, Le ravitaillement de la Belgique pendant l’occupation allemande (Paris-New Haven, 1924), pp. 47-48, 53-54, 61. By the end of 1918, the total worth of foodstuffs sold by the Committee was 2.4 billion francs (3.4 billion with the North of France included).

<sup>9</sup> As Baron Von der Lancken, the head of the Political Department (see below) told Brand Whitlock; reported in the latter’s diary on April 15, 1915 (Nevins, ed., p. 124). See also Michaël Amara and Hubert Roland, eds., Gouverner en Belgique occupée. Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz – Rapports d’activité 1915-1918. Édition critique (Brussels, 2004), pp. 37, 97.

<sup>10</sup> This resulted in some administrative idiosyncracies, such as the existence of separate relief bureaux for different types of need, a remnant from the early days of the invasion when, as Frank Angell wrote, the local and provincial committees “found a great many bodies already in the field and being obliged to depend on voluntary help in carrying out their plans for relief, it would have

Committees were given much room to interpret guidelines as they saw fit. In the province of Luxemburg, for example, unemployment relief was given not in the form of food stamps or small allowances, but in the form of wages, with the unemployed enrolled in a large scheme of public works. There were also differences on the local level: for instance, some communes kept the administrations of prewar charitable bureaux strictly separate from the war relief organization, with the argument that charity and relief were not the same thing; others merged these organizations so as to benefit from prewar expertise regarding local need. Crucially, the Committee never became a formal organization operating in a corporate capacity; its members on all levels, from the local to the national, operated as private citizens. This non-status sheltered it from direct control by the occupation regime.

This informal organizational culture had more than just a tactical significance. It acquired a distinct political dimension: to contemporary commentators, including the American agents in Belgium, the pragmatic efficiency and thrift of civilian relief work served as a kind of rebuke - implicit but continuous - of the military occupation regime's unwieldy hierarchies and squandering of civilian resources. The diary of Brand Whitlock, the US minister to Brussels and "guarantor" of the relief work, time and again juxtaposes the nimble pragmatism of the Committee and the CRB with the occupiers' rigid insistence that "an organization must be created and everything hammered into it."<sup>12</sup> Relief was a form of civilian action using means that were exclusively, indeed essentially, civilian: hard work and perseverance, flexibility and subterfuge, furthered by the organizational resources of civil society, the municipal apparatus, the fluid and international networks of the business elites. The makeshift and vulnerable – vulnerable in the sense of depending solely on goodwill and agreements - nature of the means put to such a useful and urgent end constituted a title of honour: civilian action was a claim to civilian honour in the face of military force. All the more so as this was civilian action on behalf of civilians.

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been suicidal to have set aside organizations already enthusiastically at work." (Angell, The Belgians, p. 93)

<sup>11</sup> Again, until 1917, when straitened circumstances necessitated greater uniformity in relief; but this enforced measure does not alter the organizational philosophy of the Committee's work.

<sup>12</sup> Brand Whitlock, *Diary*, June 17, 1915 (Nevins, ed., pp. 167-168)

Elevating civilians' welfare to priority status constituted a rebuke to the German military's "instrumentalizing"<sup>13</sup> of civilians; this further strengthened the political dimension of the relief effort.

The essentially civilian – and, by extension, civic - aura of the relief effort strengthened a vision of the war as a crusade against militarism. In other words, it fit in with a vision of the moral stakes of the war.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. War

From the start, the Committee aimed at maintaining, among the occupied population, an outlook of hope - a hope based on what was widely considered the "immanent justice" of the eventual restoration of Belgium as an independent state. ("Immanent justice", because a regime brought about by force could not be allowed to endure.) The Committee saw itself as a "provisional government".<sup>15</sup> Like a wartime government, it offered material support and aimed at maintaining a "home front" vis-à-vis the invader. Let me explain what I mean by "home front" in this context.<sup>16</sup> In the First World War, civilian life too was mobilized – or mobilized itself for war; the German, French, Austrian and other "home fronts" served the military front (materially and culturally) and constituted "homes" for the front soldiers on leave. Occupied Belgium could not be a "home front" in this manner; but it was a "home front" in a more immediate sense: civilians were

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<sup>13</sup> To use Isabel V. Hull's term in Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany (Ithaca, NY, 2005)

<sup>14</sup> On "Belgium" as shorthand for the moral issues of the war, see Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Occupation, Propaganda, and the Idea of Belgium," in: Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites, eds., European Culture in the Great War: the Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918 (Cambridge, 1999), 267-294, and id., "Champion or Stillbirth: The Symbolic Uses of Belgium in the Great War", in Tony Judt et al., How can one not be interested in Belgian history? War, language and consensus in Belgium since 1830 (Dublin-Ghent, 2005), pp. 55-83.

<sup>15</sup> In the words of its president, Ernest Solvay, in November 1914; Rapport général sur le fonctionnement et les opérations du CN de Secours et d'Alimentation, Volume One, Le Comité National. Sa fondation, son statut, son fonctionnement. (Brussels, 1919), p. 368.

<sup>16</sup> The notion of "home front" with regard to occupied Belgium is elaborated in my report on the section "Life under Occupation" in Serge Jaumain et al., eds., Une guerre totale ? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale (Brussels, 2005), 109-116.



facing the enemy directly, and the home – the domestic, the familiar, the routine – became a theatre of *confrontation*. This did not entail active resistance necessarily (though that too obtained) so much as an array of attitudes and actions denoting *refusal* – the refusal of legitimacy to the occupying power. The collective refusal, for instance, to keep a national press going under censorship: the vast majority of the prewar newspapers and journals ceased to appear in protest. Another example is the refusal to continue higher education; the universities closed down. In addition, a silent ban was observed on activities that in one way or another benefited the German war effort. The railroads, for instance, had been taken over by the German army for the ferrying of troops to and from the Western front. The personnel was German. But the locomotives had to be maintained by Belgian workers. This led to tensions and refusals; in the Spring of 1915, machinists collectively refused to resume work in the two major railway works of Luttre and Mechelen. The Committee aimed to support, materially, workers like these. Unemployed railwaymen, for instance, were hired (at basic “living wages”) as clerks. A special section within the Relief operation (called “Aid and Assistance to the Press”) created a cheap-meals program for out-of-work journalists and their families. These efforts remained extremely limited, because the occupying powers, who very closely scrutinized the Committee’s work, cracked down on all aid to “recalcitrants”. The Committee was forbidden to grant aid in cash to the striking machinists at Mechelen; but it was able to grant relief in kind.<sup>17</sup>

Another dimension of the “home front” effort was that of enacting solidarity in confronting the hardships of war. This was not a foregone conclusion, not even given the extreme violence of the invasion. Not for nothing does Charles Gheude’s account of devastated Aarschot (see above) end with the image of the purring car taking the provincial delegation home to unscathed Brussels. The invasion had hit some regions very hard and spared others; likewise, malnutrition and pauperization struck some groups much earlier and much harder than others. Defining the war as a national calamity calling for nationwide empathy required an effort in the face of indifference. And there was a fair amount of indifference, even callousness, around, as evidenced by the phenomena of

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<sup>17</sup> Albert Henry, *L’Oeuvre* (see note 7), pp. 294-296. The German Governor-General eventually had the entire city blockaded and workers deported in order to break the strike.

“calamity tourism” – people chartering coaches to visit ruined villages by way of a Sunday outing – and of profiteering. Therefore, imagining the entire occupied country as one community of fate, and acting on that sense of community, was a “war effort” of sorts; and this was the task that the Committee set itself. To all intents and purposes the Committee became a locus of redistributive justice – beginning with its basic financing mechanism of selling the CRB foodstuffs to those who could still afford it, and, with these funds, supporting the unemployed and the destitute. The Committee’s redistributive efforts did not meet with societywide approval. The aid to the unemployed, specifically, came under a lot of attack as so much ‘support of the idle’ (and as the creation of a dangerous precedent of entitlement).<sup>18</sup> Francqui, the director of the Committee, showed some impatience with this line of reasoning: the alternative, he pointed out, was working for the Germans.<sup>19</sup>

Francqui made this point publicly, after the war; under the occupation such statements could not be made. Committee members were forbidden to express themselves as committee members. The National and the provincial committees were forbidden to correspond with local authorities or to enforce their guidelines; let alone to requisition native foodstuffs. The Committee’s work was hampered by an array of interdictions. The first governor-general of occupied Belgium, Colmar von der Goltz, had agreed – even quite enthusiastically so - to the Committee’s action, in October 1914; but Goltz’ successor, Moritz von Bissing, was rather less warmly disposed towards the Belgians’ relief efforts.

The reason for this difference is that Goltz was still operating in a logic of mobile warfare, in an offensive logic; maintaining public order for the safety of the troops was an absolute priority. Von Bissing, who succeeded him in late November 1914 – in other words, when the Western Front had frozen into stalemate – operated in a logic of occupation; a

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<sup>18</sup> See Sophie De Schaepdrijver, “Bruxelles occupée, ou l’impossible dialogue,” in: Roland Baumann and Hubert Roland, eds., Carl Einstein-Kolloquium 1998: Carl Einstein in Brüssel: Dialoge über Grenzen/ Carl Einstein à Bruxelles: Dialogues par-dessus les frontières (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 127-142.

<sup>19</sup> Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CRB Papers, Box 501: Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation, Dernière Réunion des Délégués des Comités Provinciaux, le 3 juillet 1919. Allocutions. N.d., n.p., p. 5.

logic in which public order, though obviously still a priority, did not appear as threatened as it had been during the invasion; and, more importantly, a logic of legitimacy – of striving to rest the German takeover of Belgium on a basis of consent. The legitimacy of the Committee stood in the way of whatever legitimacy the occupation powers would be able to garner; the Committee spokesmen accurately identified the question of the control over relief as “a question of *panaches* for von Bissing.”<sup>20</sup> The resulting course of action was that of discrediting the Committee and its work; a task that fell to the Political Department, a bureau created by Von Bissing to create goodwill among the occupied by means of specific church politics, language politics, and the launching of complacent newspapers. The Political Department in its trimester reports commented time and again on the political prestige of the Committee. As the Department’s head, Baron Von der Lancken, wrote – with his customary acumen - at the end of July 1916:

“We must not hide the fact that the influence of the Committee on the Belgian population is sizeable. (...) The common opposition of all Belgians vis-à-vis the Germans is concentrated in the Committee. In other occupied enemy countries, political forces concentrate in secret societies; here, they are channelled by an organism born of economic distress, which the occupying power has had to tolerate to avoid catastrophe.”<sup>21</sup>

Lancken’s Department aimed at counteracting this prestige. The CRB was maligned – incidentally, to little avail: “The report emanating from Teutonic sources that the CRB was a huge business enterprise of the American provision dealers found no credence”.<sup>22</sup> A novelty was the creation of the *Vermittlungsstelle Comité National*, a special section where Belgians who felt unjustly treated by the Committee could voice their complaints.<sup>23</sup>

Whether this discredit campaign enhanced German credit, remains to be seen, but it is a fact that as the occupation dragged on, rancor rose, including rancor against the

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<sup>20</sup> Brand Whitlock, *Diary*, April 16, 1915 (Nevins ed., p. 126).

<sup>21</sup> Amara and Roland, *Lancken* (see note 9), p. 217.

<sup>22</sup> Angell, *The Belgians*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> On this *Vermittlungsstelle*, Amara and Roland, *Lancken* (see note 9); and Volume One of the Committee’s General Report (see note 15).

Committee; fraud in foodstuffs, and insults to or even physical attacks on Committee agents, seem to have become more widespread from 1917. The material situation, dismal enough in the first half of the war, took a sharp turn for the worse; unrestricted submarine warfare and extreme exploitation by the occupants deepened scarcities. Malnutrition became so widespread that children were too weak to walk to school and the sight of people fainting in the street became common. Prices soared; and so did unemployment. By the Spring of 1916, half of Belgium's skilled workmen were out of work, and the other half were precariously eking out a living. Un- or underemployment was the salient feature of life in occupied Belgium in the second half of the war.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Effort

Work, in the occupied country, was a dwindling resource. The national capacity for very hard work had been a core element of Belgian self-definition before the war; presently the outlets for very hard work, or indeed any kind of work, were shutting down one after another. Grass grew on the docks of Antwerp harbour. In the great smelting works of Ougrée (in Liège), by the Spring of 1916, the only piece of machinery still working was a very large boiler used to heat the soup for the soup kitchen. The restrictions on imports of raw materials and exportation of goods, the impossibility of commuting, the ban on communication between citizens of different municipalities, the requisitionings of material, the war taxes and fines, the closure of factories and workshops unwilling to work for the occupants, and the dismantling of infrastructure, all paralysed honest activity. Conversely, there was an increase in disreputable activities – speculation, smuggling, or catering to the recreative needs of German soldiers on leave. The most

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<sup>24</sup> See De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique*, Chapters IV and VII, and Peter Scholliers and Frank Daelemans, "Standards of living and standards of health in wartime Belgium", in Robert Wall and Jay Winter, eds., *The Upheaval of War: family, work and welfare in Europe, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1988), 139-158, as well as Peter Scholliers, "The policy of survival: food, the state and social relations in Belgium 1914-1921", in J. Burnett and D. Oddy, eds., *The Origin and Development of Food Policies in Europe* (London-New York, 1994), 39-53. See also the excellent studies in Serge Jaumain and Valérie Piette, eds., *Bruxelles en 14-18: la guerre au quotidien* (Brussels, 2005).

respectable kinds of work became tainted: after the partition, by the occupation government, of the occupied country in a Flemish and a Walloon fraction, work in the (still-existing) ministries came under suspicion of collaboration, and the civil servants at the higher echelons of the administration – together with quite a few clerks and maintenance personnel - collectively resigned. The only “war effort” open to many Belgians was a *negative* one, that of refusing to work. *Endurance* took the place of active *effort*, which made for a very cramped position indeed.

To counteract the creeping paralysis, local authorities with the assistance of the Committee created public-work programs. As Frank Angell observed, until mid-1916, “despite (...) almost insuperable obstacles the Belgians, in every province where there was the slightest possibility of devising schemes of work, actually cut down unemployment up to the time when deportations began, or until the daily ration became too scanty to give working strength.”<sup>25</sup>

But the work schemes were banned by the occupants from mid-1916, since they stopped the best workers from taking up work for or in Germany. Likewise, the vocational courses created by the Committee were closed down. One area of Committee-created activity remained in existence throughout the war: that of clothing workshops (*ouvroirs*), which gave women a very minimal wage to work on the used clothes sent to Belgium through the CRB. Tens of thousands of women gained a little money (or food stamps) in these workshops; the one in central Brussels employed 15.000 women and girls. This program offered a modicum of assistance to women who were otherwise excluded from unemployment relief.<sup>26</sup> It was also held to be beneficial in that it imparted needle skills, and a sense of community and bearing: in the Antwerp workshop, the women were given lectures on educational subjects, and encouraged to sing Flemish folk-songs with piano accompaniment. The work would also, some patrons believed, liberate these women’s

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<sup>25</sup> Angell, *The Belgians*, Chapter V, pp. 105-106.

<sup>26</sup> I want to note in passing that unemployment relief was granted only to full-time and continuous workers in industrial and commercial establishments, which excluded most women. On women’s experiences under occupation, see Eliane Gubin, “Les femmes d’une guerre à l’autre. Réalités et représentations 1918-1940”, *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps Présent* 4 (1998), 249-281.

minds from “many a social sophistry”. This ‘civilizing’ effort was not uniformly appreciated: in Luxemburg, for instance, the aristocratic ladies who ran the program complained that their workers lacked discipline and cleanliness, and demanded higher wages, imbued as they were with a sense of entitlement: southern Luxemburg was an area very hard hit by the invasion; the women felt that, as war victims, they had certain rights to relief. This notion was still profoundly alien to a scheme that saw itself as fundamentally charitable, and that claimed the right to grant aid not merely on the base of need but also on the base of “merit”: women of ill repute were refused work in the workshops.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, cash relief to the unemployed and to women whose husbands were in the army was refused those who consorted with Germans (though food aid was never refused); the German complaints department regularly dealt with such cases.<sup>28</sup> In what the governor of Brabant would after the war call a “crusade against bad cinemas”, people who went to the movies, or allowed their children to do so, were temporarily stricken off the relief rolls. The same went for traditional forms of popular entertainment such as carnivals or cock-fighting.

The examples show that the relief effort had a definite elite bias: the Committee rather unabashedly claimed the right to embark on a “civilizing” mission. In fairness it must be said that this priority seems to have met with a certain degree of consensus: Socialists, too, could be heard to deplore the “dissipation” of workers’ energies. The elite bias of Committee recruiting seems to have struck few observers as unjust: Gheude, a Socialist, could not conceive of a solution for ruined Aarschot that would not be led by “*notables*” or other “citizens with the necessary insight and authority”. The latter could and did include those who had not been members of the prewar notability; but members of Committees were always, in Frank Angell’s words, people “of proved executive ability”.<sup>29</sup> As this definition leaves a lot of margin, it was to be expected that certain groups would feel discriminated as groups. Radical Flemish nationalists most vocally so;

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<sup>27</sup> On these *ouvriers*, Angell, The Belgians, Chapters III and V.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Henry: Etudes sur l’occupation allemande en Belgique (Brussels, 1920), pp. 449-462, especially pp. 460-461. Examples of letters to and from the *Vermittlungsstelle* and dealing with such cases can be found in the annexes to Volume One of the Committee’s General Report (see note 14). See also Whitlock, Journal (Nevins, ed.), pp. 286-287 (August 15, 1916).

<sup>29</sup> In an overview of relief efforts in the industrial town of Seraing; Angell, The Belgians, p. 117.

those willing to co-operate with the German authorities were eventually granted a relief effort of their own, as a means to de-legitimize the Committee *and* ensure some legitimacy for the separate Flemish administration.<sup>30</sup> There was serious discontent in Socialist ranks over the employer bias in some of the Committee rules; yet the Committees on all levels were open to Socialist representatives, and in a way this was the Party's entry into national politics. Women, on the other hand, although they performed many of the day-to-day tasks (such as the physical distribution of soup), were excluded from all but the most topical steering committees - such as the running of the clothing workshops, and, interestingly, the aid to the "poor and proud" (*Assistance Discrète*). Belgium's wartime welfare arrangements provided a channel for political energies in a silenced public culture. (Note in this context how the very notion of energy – of action, initiative, decisiveness - looms large in the self-definition and in historians' portrayal of the Committee and CRB leaders.) But these political energies were male ones mainly: with relatively few men in the army, women were not called upon to take men's places, and, with rewarding pursuits in short supply and food a grave matter, men monopolized the domain of victualling responsibilities – thus at the same time safeguarding its prestige. The collective endeavour of relief, then, freed a great many civilian energies and ambitions immobilized by warfare, but excluded others, or relegated them to a subservient position.

The relief effort was, it must be remembered, also a quest for credit; Hugh Gibson, the secretary to the US legation and later Ambassador to Belgium, in his memoir of the first year of the occupation deplored the presence of what he called "halo-grabbers".<sup>31</sup> Hence the tensions between the Committee and the CRB, of which Brand Whitlock, in his diary, left such eloquent testimony.<sup>32</sup> From his point of view, the sometimes baffling reticences of the Committee's leaders to work with CRB delegates come across as ungrateful. From the point of view of the Committee's leaders, too-overt tutelage by the CRB interfered with how they defined their "home front" mission; Emile

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<sup>30</sup> De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique*, Chapter VIII.

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Gibson, *A journal from our legation in Belgium. A diplomatic diary* (London, 1917), p. 303.

<sup>32</sup> The reader may also consult the relevant chapters in George Nash's biography of Herbert Hoover, and Liane Ranieri's biography of Emile Francqui (see note 6).

Francqui emphasized repeatedly that if patriotic resolve was to be maintained by Belgian civilians, it was due to the prestige of the Committee. Still, as long as the cooperation lasted (that is, until the U.S. entry into war; after that, the Committee became more of a self-controlling operation), tensions never paralyzed the action; it was clear to all observers that the legitimacy of the CRB and that of the Committee vis-à-vis the population went hand in hand; the American flag was a reassuring symbol of the resolve of a great power – and, by extension, international public opinion – to endorse the right to independent existence of a smaller nation and to protect its unarmed citizens.

## Conclusion

To what extent can the Committee's effort be called a "success"? The assessment of its postwar historian, Albert Henry, who had been secretary to the Executive Committee, was on the dispirited side: in view of the havoc that four years of malnutrition, and especially the last two years of the war, had wrought on national health, he wrote that "those who witness the paltry results of four years' worth of colossal effort, might find a reason for discouragement"... if it weren't for *one* achievement, and that was the drop in infant mortality compared to prewar levels, due to the Committee's incessant efforts to improve infant nutrition and care.<sup>33</sup> In the most terrible year of the war, 1918, Committees contrived to launch new programs for school nutrition, and programs for providing meals – with carefully calculated nutritional value - to breastfeeding mothers. This dogged commitment to preserving what Committee members called the "live forces of the nation" cannot but have contributed to the restoration of Belgium's public authorities after the war. Relief being a moral effort, this concrete presence of the "shadow government" at the heart of civilians' greatest concern – their offspring –

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<sup>33</sup> Albert Henry, Le ravitaillement de la Belgique pendant l'occupation allemande (Paris-New Haven, 1924), p. 198.



translated into postwar legitimacy. A comparison with Berlin is instructive: there, the fragile nature of postwar public authority can be linked to the increasingly lopsided and opaque distribution of relief during the war, and its indifference to the next generation, as evidenced by the fact that in that same year, 1918, in the capital of the German Empire pregnant women saw their few little privileges – such as being served first in soup queues - taken away.<sup>34</sup> In occupied Belgium, *cantines maternelles* and *couques scolaires* were paltry means against a major problem, but in their imperturbable way they made a point. The story of the Committee is instructive for historians of modern military occupations, because it points to the existence of something crucial in between *collaboration* (or even *accommodation*) and *resistance*, to wit, the assertion of civilian dignity against armed power; an assertion that squared perfectly with enlightened perspectives on either side of the Atlantic.

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<sup>34</sup> Belinda Davis, Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and everyday life in World War I Berlin (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); see also Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, ed., Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1918 (Cambridge, UK, 1997).