

## The paradox of the alien citizen?

De Vuyst, Jolien ; Myers, Kevin; van Gorp, Angelo

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## **The Paradox of the Alien Citizen? Access, Control and Entitlements of Belgian refugees in Birmingham during the First World War**

Britain's liberal policy towards refugees has been their proud boast. However, from the 1880s to the 1920s this developed into a restrictive and selective migration policy. During the First World War 250,000 Belgian refugees arrived in Britain. Inquiring the archives of the War Refugees Committee Birmingham and District on traces of these developments, a tension linked to the discussion on the allocation of social benefits could be established. This tension, that is referred to as the paradox of the 'alien citizen', is explored through the analysis of the access to Britain, the control on British territory, and the entitlements of Belgian refugees to social benefits. It is argued that this seemingly paradox was the outcome of process of state formation. It reveals how the presence of refugees challenged the British state with the question as to what extent one was responsible to provide for non-citizens, which is still a topical issue.

Keywords: First World War, Belgian refugees, Great Britain, Birmingham, migration policy

### **Introduction**

Britain's liberal policy towards refugees from the late-seventeenth until the middle of the nineteenth century is an established historical fact. That any foreigner could enter British territory freely and live almost free of restriction and control was a popular conceit of Victorian liberalism and it is now regularly invoked by contemporary politicians and commentators. It was, and it remains, a proud boast that Britain has a history of granting refuge to anyone regardless of their politics or religion, their nationality, ethnicity or skin colour (Shaw 2015). However, and as historians have also made clear, both the right to refuge, and associated freedom of movement, were subject to, and constrained by, the myths and technologies of the modern state (Shaw 2015; Bayly 2004; Skran 1998; Marrus 1985). Whilst a series of legislative acts, particularly the 1870 Extradition Act and the 1905 Aliens Act, briefly ensured a right to refuge, how that right was exercised was actually dependent on a complex series of negotiations between central and local state actors and philanthropic organisations (Shaw 2015; Bashford and McAdam 2014; Winder 2013; Reinecke 2009; Orchard 2008). Even before the outbreak of the First World War, and whatever their formal legal status, the rights of migrants, to free movement and social benefits, were conditioned by a powerful but volatile "ethnically exclusive nationalism" (Reinecke 2009: 41; MacRaild and Darwen 2018; Hickman 2005; Fahrmeir et al. 2003).

Both the power and volatility of that nationalism became especially clear with the outbreak of the First World War. The Great War acted as a catalyst in the hardening of the

boundaries between citizens and aliens, between insiders and outsiders, between those qualified for the benefits of citizenship<sup>1</sup> and those who were excluded from them. The 1914 Aliens Act, introduced as a temporary wartime measure but which remained largely unchanged for more than half a century, suspended an individual's right to asylum and, instead, made the recognition and the reception of refugees a prerogative of the state. The significance of 1914 therefore cannot be doubted. It prefigured the consistently hostile attitude of the British state to individual rights generally, and the right to asylum specifically, that would persist for the remainder of the twentieth century. It also signalled, in the recognition and reception of approximately 250,000 Belgian refugees (Cahalan 1982; Kushner 1999), the state's capacity to both welcome refugees and, at the same time, subject those refugees to stringent controls and restriction. The 'alien citizen', feted and welcomed but also scrutinised, controlled and provisional, may sound like a paradox but this article argues it was the outcome of process of state formation, inflected by war and by the mobilisation of ethnic identities, in which refugees could only ever conditionally settle in Britain (Reinecke 2009). Moreover, and in light of the experiences of later groups of refugees granted the right to settle in Britain, and even those black British citizens of the Windrush generation, an argument can be made for this paradox being constitutive of the much vaunted 'British tradition of tolerance' (Webster 2018).

In making this argument it is important to turn the abstraction of the state into concrete and visible actors and practices. This is necessary because a distinctive characteristic of British liberalism was an attempt to render the state invisible (Joyce 2013; Hall and Schwarz 1985) and to rely on local government agencies and voluntary and charitable societies to enact state power. So although the reception of approximately 250,000 Belgian refugees was discursively represented as a national duty, its actual operation was largely left to the voluntary War Refugees Committee (WRC), established in August 1914, and to the Local Government Board (LGB) who, after January 1915, financed and supervised voluntary and charitable efforts at the local level. Existing studies have much to say about the conduct of these local relief efforts and, in some cases, their representation of refugees.<sup>2</sup> However, and to date, there has been little research that analyses how decisions made at the local level had implications for the practices of citizenship and welfare entitlements.

This article examines the work of the War Refugees Committee Birmingham and District (WRCB). The WRCB was responsible for the reception and care of approximately 5,000 Belgian refugees in Birmingham during the war.<sup>3</sup> The WRCB's work is recorded in a set of official archives that include a Belgian Refugees Register, minutes, correspondence,

leaflets and other documents. Taken together they give an insight into the organisation of the relief work and how it impacted the daily life of the refugees in Birmingham. These archival records help to demonstrate how developments in state formation, and concomitant changes brought about by the war in the area of migration policy, impacted on Belgian refugees. More specifically, the article argues that the surge of anti-alien sentiment during the First World War served to politicise questions around the allocation of social benefits to Belgians. On some occasions, Belgian refugees were granted social benefits because they were deemed equivalent 'citizens'. On other occasions, however, they were denied benefits for they were considered to be 'aliens'. Yet, how could it be that a Belgian refugee was considered to be both a citizen and an alien at once? In this article, we explore this tension and question this seemingly paradox we term the 'alien citizen' by analysing successively the access of Belgian refugees to Britain, the control of Belgian refugees on British territory and the entitlement of Belgian refugees to social benefits.

### **Access: Guests of the Nation**

The alien debate that emerged in late Victorian Britain, and in which migrants and refugees were increasingly represented as a problem, developed out of specific conditions in London's East End. The Eastern European Jews who settled around Whitechapel seemed visibly exotic and diseased to contemporaries. Their arrival meant increasing competition for existing housing, rising rents and overcrowding. The aliens, a term virtually synonymous with Jew, became associated with increased competition for jobs and depressed rates of pay. Anti-alien, and anti-Semitic, political movements were founded and succeeded in turning essential local problems into matters of national significance (Shaw 2015; Winder 2013; Wrigley 2003; Cesarani 1992; Holmes 1988; Gainer 1972). The alien debate opened the way for a shift towards a national policy of selectivity and exclusion.

The resulting 1905 Aliens Act<sup>4</sup> aimed to prevent the landing, and facilitate the removal, of so-called 'undesirable immigrants'. An immigrant was deemed undesirable if they were a criminal, sick or unable to support themselves and dependents (Wray 2006). The effect, and the intention, was to exclude impoverished migrants from entering Britain, whilst also granting executive power to the Home Secretary to deport aliens (Reinecke 2009; Feldman 2003b; Gungwu 1997; Gainer 1972). However, and in a clause whose significance remains debated by historians, the act also recognised a right of asylum for those migrants, pauper or not, who risked political or religious persecution abroad (Orchard 2017). This right to asylum remained in practice for a little under a decade, swept aside the day after the

declaration of war with Germany in a spy fever that, as well as stimulating recurrent bouts of anti-German rioting, resulted in the passing of the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act (Kushner and Knox 1999).

The 1914 Aliens Act<sup>5</sup> greatly expanded the powers the British government had obtained in 1905. The power to control migration matters was extended to not only control migrants at the borders, but also within Britain. In practice, the state acquired the right to prevent and limit the landing of immigrants, as well as to issue prohibited areas, to require immigrants to reside and remain within certain places and to deport whenever the state claimed that the domestic safety was endangered (Kushner and Knox 1999; Orchard 2017). In addition, an elaborate registration system was produced to collect and process information on foreigners on British territory. Initially registration was only obligatory for enemy aliens, but it was soon extended to also include friendly aliens (Torpey 2002; Reinecke 2009).

In the space of just a decade the state had significantly expanded the bureaucratic means to manage immigration and, perhaps more importantly, symbolically constructed its control as a central myth of the modern state (Bayly 2004; Feldman 2003b; Skran 1998). The 1914 legislation marked a significant legislative and administrative change but to view it only in these terms, or to designate it simply as a retreat from liberalism, is to ignore the educative or ‘prize-giving activities’ of the state (Gramsci 1947). The discursive naming of immigrants and refugees had a far-reaching cultural and educational impact, enabling a whole range of actors in government and in civil society, to discuss them as an a priori threat to the nation. In fact, by the outbreak of the First World War, as historian David Cesarani argued, “British society had become habituated to immigration restrictions and the identification of foreigners as bearers of disease, criminal proclivities or dangerous ideas” (Cesarani 1992: 34). This was a language of state increasingly deployed to organise the many codes of difference that identified, and distinguished between, many modes of belonging to Britain.

Yet to be a patriot, rather than a zealous nationalist, in the autumn of 1914 was to recognise the special claims of Belgians to asylum. This was no longer their declaratory right but oppressed nations or peoples, especially in the face of a common enemy, were worthy recipients of British hospitality. This was the dominant theme of media reporting. German atrocities against Belgians were exaggerated and obsessively and pruriently reported. Belgium, and Belgian refugees, became the materialisation of Britain’s motivation to go to war (Kushner and Knox 1999). This mythologisation was shaped in two contrasting ways. On the one hand Belgians were considered to be heroes, on the other they were seen as victims. It resulted in the creation of the images of ‘Brave Little Belgium’ and ‘Poor Little Belgium’ as

two sides of the same coin (Amara 2008; Horne 2010; Ewence 2017). Women and children, and their supposed passivity and vulnerability, were the dominant iconographic themes of these discourses (Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002; Green 2014). Portrayed as persecuted foreigners, there was no doubt that the “thousands of innocent sufferers” were deserving of Britain’s support and sympathy.<sup>6</sup>

In governmental statements, in media reporting and in official historical accounts of the conflict hospitality to Belgian refugees was thus discursively represented as “the Nation’s duty to Belgium” (Ministry of Health 1920: 99). As a national and civic duty, aid for Belgians was helped to define the contours of a ‘moral’ and ‘civilised’ patriotism that permeated civil society. In the first annual report of the War Refugees Committee in Birmingham, published in October 1914, it was the Committee’s “obligation to the Belgians” to offer them “in the name of the nation, hearty and unconditional hospitality.”<sup>7</sup> The symbolic repertoire deployed in these records, of nation, obligation and sympathy, was significant. It provided the rationale for relaxing the imagined strict regulations against immigrants but it did not deny, nor did it seek to minimise, the national, ethnic or religious differences of the Belgians. The result led to the Belgians setting foot in England “in a strange atmosphere of popular sympathy and official suspicion” (Cahalan 1982: 107). That sympathy appeared genuine but it was also conditional. When it became clear that the expected military victory would not materialise by Christmas 1914 and the Belgian Repatriation Fund was established at the same time as the Belgians were arriving in September 1914, both state and civil authorities increasingly turned their attention to systems of containment and control.

### **Control: Caught in a Web of Regulations**

Initially, the Belgians received a very enthusiastic and warm welcome in Britain and Birmingham (Anon 1914b). But this enthusiasm was also temporary. Press coverage of the Belgian refugees, abundant at the beginning of the war, soon disappeared and emotive appeals to protect the Belgians were replaced by reports of the new social figures in the national landscape (Jenkinson 2016).<sup>8</sup> Reports about differences in culture, the language barrier, strange eating habits or a lack of hygiene, induced frustration (Amara 2008). The Belgians could not live up to the enormous expectations created by the image of ‘Brave Little Belgium’, nor was the actual refugee presence similar to the image of ‘Poor Little Belgium’ (De Schaepdrijver 2005; Green 2014; de Jastrzebski 1916). The cultural differences were more difficult to overcome than expected. Though first heavily pampered, the Belgian refugees found themselves in “the position of the much-adored kitten which has grown into an

unwanted cat” (Marwick 1991: 84). Disillusionment, disappointment and frictions eventually grew to the point that the Belgians fell victim to the widespread anti-alienism (Amara 2008; Purseigle 2007b).

The anti-alien discourse impaired ‘the other’ in general (Cesarani 1992). Although the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act’s purpose was to mark the difference between friendly and enemy aliens, in practice this turned out to be very ambivalent (Kushner and Knox 1999). All differentiations gradually subsided and the 1914 Act increasingly affected all aliens including ‘friends’ (Reinecke 2009). Throughout the war the act was amended on several occasions. One of those amendments, put into practice on 28 November 1914, imposed compulsory registration on the Belgians (Amara 2008).<sup>9</sup> By establishing a central register, supervision of the Belgian refugees was tightened. Steadily, the 1914 Act not only became a constraint on the freedom of the refugees, it also impinged upon the Belgians’ everyday life as it, for instance, impeded seeking employment and housing, and also confined opportunities of leisure. The register functioned as a control mechanism in three domains: the movement of the Belgians, the employment policy and the conscription of Belgian male refugees (Amara 2008; Holmes 1988; Cahalan 1982).

In 1916 –the war entered arguably its most devastating military phase with the Battles of Verdun and the Somme – conscription became a major theme in public debate. In January 1916, the Military Service Act made enlistment for all unmarried English men between the ages of 18 and 41 compulsory. As Belgian men were still subjected to the Belgian Military Service Act, they were in a far better position regarding conscription. Only unmarried Belgian men between the ages of 18 and 25 were called to the colours. This contrasted sharply with the English Military Service Act of 1916 (Cahalan 1982). The presence of able-bodied, single Belgian men of military age invoked resentment amongst the British people. Newspaper headlines, such as “Fight or Go”, leave nothing to the imagination (Daily Mail 1916, as cited in Amara, 2008: 297). Belgian young men were deemed to be “shirkers” and “alien job-snatchers”.<sup>10</sup> As tensions were running high, the British Government and Belgian diplomats in England pressured the Belgian Government to amend the Belgian legislation. Eventually, on 21 July 1916, a Military Service Act was promulgated. Belgian men between the age of 18 and 40, whether they were married or not, were now subject of conscription (Amara 2008). In this regard, the registration of Belgians proved to be a useful tool not only to control the refugees but also as an alternative reserve for Belgian conscription (Cahalan 1982). A police case in Birmingham exemplifies the influence of the tensions arising from this public debate as well as of the official migration control on the individual treatment of Belgians refugees.



On 27 June 1916 the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that three Belgian munition workers, arrested after allegedly drunkenly assaulting women on the street, had been sentenced to a month's imprisonment and a fine. According to the newspaper the men physically attacked the women (Anon 1916). The next day the incident was discussed at a meeting of the WRCB. When comparing the newspaper report and the WRCB minutes, the case was more nuanced or possibly even downplayed in the WRCB minutes. Of course, newspapers often reported on crimes, whether or not connected to refugees, while the WRCB was an organisation mixing care and compassion with a sense of public duty. In addition, the WRCB also reported privately on these cases. The committee stated that the three men had been involved in a street disturbance, but that "[t]hese disturbances seem likely to be frequent as there is a good deal of misunderstanding going on."<sup>11</sup> One week later, the Home Secretary was informed about this case and recommended deportation. The WRCB tried to act as a mediator and plead with the Home Office for the release of at least one of the three men.<sup>12</sup> Although "an alien shall be triable in the same manner as if he were a natural-born British subject" and despite the attempts of the WRCB, the men were not released after their month in prison as was normal in these cases.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the Home Office decided to transfer the three Belgians to London where they were enlisted in the Belgian Army. The men's families not only had to bear the burden of the fine but also lost the family income. By the time the three men were deported, their families were left destitute.<sup>14</sup> For one of the men the deportation even had a fatal outcome. He contracted an infection at the front and died shortly after the war.<sup>15</sup> It is thus clear that the deportation had far-reaching implications for these men and their respective families.

In this case of alleged assault the police investigation, the sentence and the subsequent Home Office actions were all undoubtedly affected by the conscription debate. However, the decision to deport the men was only made possible by a legislative clause that effectively collapsed the loudly proclaimed distinction between enemy and friendly aliens that had framed the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act. It read that the "Secretary of State may, if he thinks it necessary in the interests of public safety, direct that any of the provisions of this Order as to alien enemies shall in particular cases be applicable to other aliens."<sup>16</sup> In other words, even being named as a friendly alien and widely recognised as a refugee as a result of enemy action, did not free the Belgians from a discursive apparatus designed to monitor and remove threats to the nation (Shah 2000). Whilst at the beginning of the war newspaper reports represented Belgian refugees through affective bonds of sympathy, and perceived them as friendly aliens, gradually the focus shifted towards the 'alienness' of the Belgian refugees.



This sense of alien difference, and of Belgian governmental reluctance to enact a shared age of conscription, transgressed the contours of British patriotism.

In the ensuing actions of state actors the legal status of aliens seems to have mattered less than the coercive attention of the modern state. The compulsory registration of aliens with police, enabled state actors to increase their knowledge about migrant and refugee populations and facilitated the direct involvement of the central state in local cases of welfare. The case of alleged assault in Birmingham demonstrated that there were clear and increasing limits on the authority and independence of the WRCB. This has conventionally been interpreted as the end of a long-established *laissez-faire* tradition in England (Holmes 2005; Lunn 2005) but it is perhaps more accurate to identify this as a new form of governmentality. In it the central state remained comparatively small and much welfare remained within the voluntary sector but, at the same time, new forms of knowledge and new relationships between the state and powerful institutions in civil society were forged (Hall and Schwarz 1985). Some aspects of social welfare provision were seized by the central and local state at the expense of the voluntary sector. Philanthropic organisations, like the WRCB, were increasingly subject to state management and finance (Daunton 1996; Lewis 1996).

Yet, and at the same time, a symbiotic relation between state and voluntary sector, a “game of give-and-take” (Gente 2002: 269), also emerged. It was considered expedient for the state to leave problems needing personal action to voluntary and philanthropic bodies, a process of state formation that allocated different classes, genders and ethnicities distinct roles and responsibilities. Women, in particular, became associated with, and responsible for, the caring and educational work that was mediated by personal contact. However, and as the police case seems to exemplify, questions of national safety, and of law and order, remained masculine responsibilities of the central state.

### **Entitlements: A Tentative Position**

As well as losing some aspects of control over the fate of refugees in Birmingham the WRCB also experienced increasing difficulties in granting social benefits. By 1916 the greater part of WRCB funding was provided by the central state which required those public resources to be put to “responsible use” (Cahalan 1982: 306). Yet, the WRCB did not always grant entitlements in a consistent manner. To supplement their funds, the WRCB, for example, involved the Birmingham Citizens’ Committee (BCC) and received funding, because “Belgians were on the same footing as English citizens, paying full rates & taxes etc.”<sup>17</sup> The BCC was an organisation using public funds, from organisations such as the Prince Wales’

War Fund or the City Air Society, to alleviate some of the hardships Birmingham citizens encountered, such as unemployment or loss of the breadwinner, and which were caused by the outbreak of the First World War (Roberts 2014). So, in their capacity as civilians, the Belgian refugees fulfilled their duties, for instance by paying taxes. In the WRCB's line of reasoning, the Belgians were deemed equivalent citizens, thus achieving the right of assistance from the BCC. The public funds of the BCC were then used to relieve some hardships Belgian civilians underwent. In some cases, however, Belgians were denied the right of assistance due to their alien character. This was, for instance, the case with the maternity benefit that the wives of Belgian soldiers who were fighting in their home country did not receive even when their husband had had a job and an income in Birmingham and had paid weekly contributions to the National Health Insurance Commission. The regulation, however, stipulated that aliens who had left the country were denied the benefit.<sup>18</sup> This example demonstrates that social rights of Belgian refugees were fragile and is a strong indication of the ethnicisation of welfare.

The Belgians' entitlements to social benefits were either granted or denied depending on the stance one took towards their citizenship. The WRCB's inconsistent decisions can be explained by the temporary character of the exile of the Belgian refugees. Towards the end of November, when it was already clear that the war would not be over by Christmas 1914 and funds were drying up, the WRCB was forced to adapt its policy to this new situation. In the first months of the war, the committee was primarily focused on the provision of basic needs, such as accommodation, nutrition and clothing. Yet, in its annual report of 1915, the WRCB acknowledged that "the nature of the Committee's work [had] undergone a profound change."<sup>19</sup> By that time, the WRCB's objectives had changed from provisional services to steering the refugees towards permanent housing, employment and poor relief. In order to relieve the strain on its financial funds, the WRCB combined its focus on repatriation with advocating self-support. Striving for these combined goals resulted in the WRCB acting upon a rather tentative approach. In what follows we elaborate on both aims.

In 1915 the WRCB expanded the organisation of English language lessons in order to facilitate the Belgians to become self-supportive. The Employment and the Housing sub-committees had to support the Belgians in finding suitable employment and housing, respectively. The Housing sub-committee helped to find either small houses for individual families or larger houses in which two or three families had to live together. Only those families that were unable to support themselves due to illness, the age or the absence of the breadwinner were receiving help.<sup>20</sup> Belgians that started to receive good wages and to settle

down were considered to be financially independent. Additionally, refugees also started to organise their own initiatives, an example being the Belgian Workmen's Association (BWA). The BWA cooperated with the WRCB, more specifically the Employment sub-committee, as from January 1915 onwards. Acting as a trade union, the BWA assisted fellow Belgian workmen in their work and insured an income for their members in case of sickness.<sup>21</sup> The BWA also tried to assure certain rights for the Belgian workmen, such as to mediate in the case of conflicts with employers, to provide interpreters in court cases and even to enable Belgian workmen to send money to their families in Belgium.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the BWA also donated money to Belgian as well as British charities, such as the National Committee for Relief in Belgium or the Lady Mayoress fund.<sup>23</sup>

The Belgians obviously tried to obtain their own space in the city of Birmingham as active, deserving and respectable subjects. They became, to a certain extent, part of society. This was also acknowledged by the WRCB. It was believed that "the vast majority of our Belgian guests have settled down quietly among us."<sup>24</sup> The committee reported that "the Belgian Refugees [were] absorbed into English life, both socially and industrially."<sup>25</sup> By providing them their hospitality, the refugees had "yet found another country which endeavours to be equally their home."<sup>26</sup> Although the committee wanted the Belgians to feel at home in Birmingham, this was still a conditional sense of belonging and one limited in time. The Belgians may have settled down, they nevertheless remained guests. It, again, laid an emphasis on the temporary character of the Belgian exile that the WRCB repeatedly returned to throughout the duration of the war. Repatriation was the stated policy goal and refugees were encouraged to save money in order to defray the cost of their repatriation to Belgium.<sup>27</sup>

In order to facilitate their return, the Belgians were also encouraged to sustain their language and culture (Kushner 1999). In this respect, the Belgian exile was an exception in comparison with other refugees or immigrants in Britain. 'Belgianness' had to be kept alive, and assimilation had to be confined as much as possible (Kushner 1999; Kushner and Knox 1999). This inevitably led to ghettoization (Amara 2008). In Birmingham the area surrounding the committee's headquarters at Islington Row and several back-to-back housing neighbourhoods showed a large presence of Belgians. This was, however, not as strong as in Birtley or Richmond (see, for instance, Laqua 2016; Declercq and Baker 2016; Fowler and Gregson 2005). The preservation of the Belgian culture was made possible through, among other things, leisure facilities and patriotic events, such as the celebration of the Belgian

Independence Day. An institution that had the preservation of Belgian culture as one of its foundations was the Belgian school.

Upon entering England, most Belgian school children were sent to local British elementary schools (Myers 2001). In his study on the Belgian refugee relief during the First World War Cahalan (1982), however, mentioned three factors that help explain why Belgian children were not easily admitted in the British school system. The same three factors we would like to reformulate as factors explaining the establishment of the Belgian schools. Firstly, the Catholic Church, which held a dominant position in the Belgian educational system, took an interest in the education of Belgian children beyond Belgium. The Belgian episcopate perceived England as an overwhelmingly non-Catholic environment, and as a threat to the Catholic faith of Belgian refugees. Catholic schools for Belgian refugee children were designed to preserve the Catholic faith. Secondly, Belgian and British curricula differed. Parents questioned the quality of the English curriculum as well as its relevance for Belgian children, as they were aware that one day they would have to return to their home country. Thirdly, Belgian schools were deemed necessary because of the cultural differences. Belgian parents were not happy with their children losing their mother tongue and culture (Cahalan 1982; Myers 2001). Belgian schools would allow the Belgian refugee children to “have their nationality developed” (Cahalan 1982: 344-345). Spread over England, hundreds of Belgian schools were founded. The WRCB reported that there was a “strong feeling on the part of the refugees that the present system of education was very unsatisfactory.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, on 14 February 1916 a Belgian School was established to meet the needs of the Belgians in Birmingham.<sup>29</sup> The school was funded by both the WRCB and the Belgian government, which had also approved its Belgian curriculum. The school had Belgian teachers who taught the pupils in either French or Flemish. It was hoped that the school would strengthen the children’s touch with their fatherland.

The Belgians held on to their culture, which interfered with and complicated the coexistence with the British. By maintaining – and being encouraged to maintain – the differences, the Belgians were confirmed in their otherness. Not only were they described as aliens, they were also presented as a different race (Anon 1914a). Although the WRCB in its annual report of 1916 wrote that the Belgians had settled down, in the same report they also mentioned that “[the refugees’] whole outlook upon life and their domestic and social habits differ fundamentally and irreconcilably.”<sup>30</sup> Especially regarding the British and Belgian working class, “one could no more expect these to mix than oil and water.”<sup>31</sup> From this point

of view, it seemed difficult if not impossible to overcome the differences between both nations.

### **Conclusion: The Paradox of the Alien Citizen?**

As the war progressed it became clear that many Belgian refugees had the same duties as the citizens of Birmingham, but never obtained the same rights. This tension, we referred to as ‘alien citizen’, not only related to the tentative position of the WRCB’s refugee relief, but also touched on questions around citizenship and the allocation of social benefits. The Belgians’ religious, cultural and ethnic differences seemed to make it difficult to treat them equally but, as arguably one of the earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century recipients of the increasingly codified status of ‘deserving refugee’, they could be treated sympathetically (Gatrell 2013). Yet this sympathy was highly conditional not only on their perceived behaviour and their respect for normative codes of conduct, but also on external factors related to the conduct of war. When they were identified and named as ‘aliens’ benefits were denied. This volatile approach caused many difficulties and uncertainties in the refugees’ daily life. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Belgians had access to, and at the same time were excluded from, citizenship and corresponding social benefits. With Haddad (2003: 322) it can be argued that “[t]he refugee is, by definition, between sovereigns, which situates her, ambiguously, both inside and outside the state.” The Belgians lived as it were in between borders: physically they were in England, but as citizens they still belonged to Belgium.

An explanation for the emergence of the paradox of the ‘alien citizen’ can be partly found in the anticipated short-term nature of the Belgian exile but it is also explained by longer-term processes of state formation. It is important to remember that the negotiation, and ultimately the transformation of the boundaries of the state and other agencies, was a dynamic process whose contours were unpredictable (Feldman 2003a). This dynamism is an important factor in helping to explain the apparent paradox of the ‘alien citizen’. On one side, and as this paper has demonstrated through close archival analysis, there were clear material and ideological constraints to what the central state, still heavily reliant on the institutions of civil society, could achieve. Local state actors, and perhaps especially philanthropic organisations, could develop their own view of entitlement mediated by local traditions of service and by relationships with refugees. The extent to which Birmingham represents a typical case of refugee relief remains an open question. For although there have been detailed studies of welfare in Leeds, Glasgow, Huddersfield and Twickenham, they rarely, or only erratically, address the interaction between central state regulation and local actors, conditions and

traditions. Detailed comparative studies of refugee relief would, as a result, reveal a good deal about the factors that help explain either relatively hostile or relatively sympathetic reactions to refugees.

Although local actors, and their traditions of service and philanthropy, were important in Birmingham there was, at the same time, a move towards greater central state intervention in the regulation of migration, in the definition of citizenship and in the eligibility of migrants to claim resources from the state. The discretionary power given to the Home Secretary around migration flows symbolised the growing desire of the central state to control its borders and its population. The restricted access to social benefits is also proof of the increased interventionism of the state. The emergence of the interventionist new liberal state required a definition of who was entitled to exactly which benefits. These definitions were both the product of and subject to the claims of an exclusivist nationalism under which the benefits of citizenship were attributed differentially according to gender, race, class and disability (Hall and Schwarz 1985). In this development the “benefits of belonging” manifested themselves (Reinecke 2009: 42). National welfare, among other things, was an exclusionary entitlement and attribution of citizenship (Soysal 1994; Feldman 2003a). But welfare systems have never been universal, and by giving benefits to citizens it had to be defined who was to be left out (Feldman 2003a).

The understanding of citizenship and national identity, thus, was subject to change. The process of self-definition, however, was partly shaped and constructed by the understanding of the ‘other’ (Cesarani 1992). Haddad (2008: 54) writes in this respect: “This imagined ‘other’ is as necessary as the imagined ‘self’ in sustaining our idea of the ‘nation’ and hence our sense of identity.” The alien debate and changing attitudes towards foreigners were a challenge to the definition of national identity as “changing definitions of immigrants and aliens were matched by revisions of citizenship” (Frank and Reinisch 2014: 485). It can be determined that subsequent refugee crises implied the evolution of the nation-state becoming more national (Frank and Reinisch 2014; see also Myers 1999a/b). In this process, national identity became more exclusive, specifically by excluding those who were considered as ‘alien’ (Horne 2010). The Belgian refugees, however, were not totally excluded from the social benefits. The emergence of the paradox of the ‘alien citizen’ in that regard was also related to a state that was dealing with a tension between the rights of refugees and the unwillingness to accept foreigners (Orchard 2008). The presence of the refugees, then, challenged the British state with the question as to what extent one was responsible to provide for non-citizens (Fulbrook and Cesarani 1996; Kushner 2006). It is a topical question for

which there was and still is no clear answer. An increased interventionism of the state, the shift towards control of migrant populations and the changed relations between migrants, citizens and the state were among the evolutions which were highly significant for the Belgian exile as they permeated all aspects of their daily lives.

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1. The introduction of the welfare benefits by the Liberal governments of 1906–1914 indicated an expansion of the state in social affairs. Social policy was increasingly seen as a governmental area. The welfare measures taken by the Liberal government were consequently “often regarded as laying the foundations of state welfare” (Lewis 1994: 42). Examples of welfare benefits connected to citizenship were old-age pensions introduced in 1908 and the National Insurance Act of 1911. These benefits are now often seen as precursors of the welfare state established in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, it needs to be noted that not all residents who were considered British citizens had equal access to social benefits and that differences existed between gender, class or generation.
2. Some examples are: Cahalan 1982; Kushner 1999; Myers 2001; Purseigle 2007a; Amara 2008 and the *Immigrants and Minorities* 2016 special issue entitled ‘British responses to Belgian Refugees during the First World War’.
3. In the twentieth century Birmingham had become a major player in the industrial and economic market. Industry underwent an important change and the development of small factories and new industries, particularly the brass and metal sector, led to Birmingham being “one of the economic capitals of the world” (Briggs 1952: 52). A numerically small but influential middle-class elite “defined the political, economic, religious and social character” of Birmingham (Harvey 2011: 110). This elite consisted of the foremost Nonconformist families, which were interconnected through marriage, business and politics. Families, such as Cadbury, Sturge or Chamberlain, were also particularly active in philanthropic works: the men dedicating themselves to the ‘civic gospel’, while women were active in numerous charitable organisations (Harvey 2011; Briggs 1952). It is thus no surprise that many members of the mentioned families were committed to the WRCB. In Birmingham, approximately 5,000 refugees were accommodated. This refugee community existed for the most part of working-class men, attracted by the employment opportunities. They often travelled first and, after finding a job, their families came over, which resulted in many movement to but also from Birmingham (Roberts 2014; *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)* in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service).
4. United Kingdom, ‘Aliens Act, 1905’, 5 Edw. 7 c. 13.
5. United Kingdom, ‘Aliens Restriction Act, 1914’, 4 & 5 Geo. 5 c. 12.



6. 'War Refugee Committee Report', October 1914, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
7. *Ibid.*
8. It could be said that what started as "a torrent" in the "first flush" of wartime was reduced to "a stream" after 1915 and had become "a trickle" by December 1917 (Jenkinson 2016: 106). Most probably, both compassion fatigue and the so-called 'D' (Defence) Notices, issued to forbid newspapers to publish negative stories on the Belgians, have impacted this process (Moeller 2002; Jenkinson 2016).
9. From then on, all refugees aged sixteen or older had to register and carry a certificate of registration. Whenever they wanted to change their residence, this had to be declared to the nearest police station. In April 1915, it was decided with another amendment that Belgians only could enter prohibited areas provided that they had identification papers. From 1916 onwards, Belgians were enforced to hold an Identity Book with them all the time. This was not to be taken for granted as before the war passports were highly uncommon.
10. See, for instance, the *Birmingham Mail*, 20 May 1916, the *Times*, 2 June 1916, the *Daily Express*, 17 and 20 May 1916 and *Le Métallurgiste Belge*, June 1916.
11. 'Allocation Committee Minutes (1915-1916)', 28 June 1916, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/12 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
12. 'Allocation Committee Minutes (1916-1917)', 5 July 1916, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/13 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
13. United Kingdom, 'British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act, 1914', 4 & 5 Geo. 5 c. 17.
14. 'Allocation Committee Minutes (1916-1917)', 2 August; 18 August 1916, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/13 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
15. 'Mees Constant, Merxem – 27/11/1885', n.d., *Artillerie – Dossiers Troep*, 6291369 in Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History.
16. 'Statutory rules and orders, 1916', *Archives du Comité officiel belge pour l'Angleterre (réfugiés belges en Angleterre)*, Correspondance and dossier spéciaux, box 63 in State Archives of Belgium.
17. 'Minute Book of the Executive Committee', 6 March 1918, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/4 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service; 'Allocation Committee Minutes (Jan 1918)', 1 May 1918, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/14 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service. The outbreak of the war caused much hardship among the citizens of Birmingham. Consequently, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Alderman William Henry Bowater, organised a meeting of social welfare workers from across the city to tackle the problems, resulting in the formation of the Birmingham Citizens' Committee. This committee tried to centralize the provisions of the City Aid Society and the Birmingham branch of the Charity Organisation Society. Concretely, the Committee managed national relief funds, granted temporary allowances for Birmingham citizens in need and assisted in questions of unemployment (Roberts 2014).
18. 'Allocation Committee Minutes (1916-1917)', 13 June 1917, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/13 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
19. 'War Refugee Committee Report', 1915, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.

20. *Ibid.*; 'War Refugee Committee Report', 1916, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
21. 'Employment Committee Minute Book (Sept. 1914 – Apl. 1919)', 27 January 1915, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/15 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service; 'Belgian Workman's Association – Règlement/Standregels', n.d., *Prentenkabinet Guerre 1914-1918*, S.III 13644 in Royal Library of Belgium.
22. 'Belgian Workmen's Association, Birmingham. Geldelyk Verslag op 31 December, 1915', *Algemene Leeszaal*, MIC IMP 557 in Royal Library of Belgium.
23. 'Belgian Workmen's Association, Birmingham. Bilan du mois d'avril 1918', April 1918, *Algemene Leeszaal*, MIC IMP 557 in Royal Library of Belgium.
24. 'War Refugee Committee Report', 1916, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
25. 'War Refugee Committee Report', 1915, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
26. *Ibid.*
27. 'Minute Book of the Executive Committee', 4 January 1915, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/4 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service
28. 'Minute Book of the Executive Committee', 27 October 1915, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/4 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service
29. 'Minute Book of the Executive Committee', 16 February 1916, *War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District)*, MS 652/4 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service
30. 'War Refugee Committee Report', 1916, *Birmingham Institutes*, F/3 in Birmingham Archives and Collections Service.
31. *Ibid.*

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