

NEW RESEARCH PROJECT – “ The transition from war to peace in Brussels, 1918

Over the course of the following months, CegeSoma will conduct research on a turbulent episode in Belgian history: the transition from war to peace in Brussels between September and December 1918. During these months, a multitude of events took place, including the establishment of 'red' German soldiers' councils, the exodus of the occupying forces, the reprisals of Belgians against pro-German citizens, the rapid reinstatement of public order by the police and the law courts, the re-establishment of the free press, and the festive welcome of King Albert and mayor Adolphe Max.

A focus on one of the darkest pages in the history of World War I in Belgium

"Post card announcing the return of mayor Adolphe Max and king Albert to Brussels, 1918." Brussels Municipal Archives.

An additional aspect that has received only scant historiographical attention up until now, is the presence of thousands of refugees – men, women and children – in Brussels during October and November 1918. These refugees originated mainly from the border regions in Northern France (Valenciennes, Cambrai, Douai, etc.), and had been evacuated by the German army in response to an imminent allied offensive. Contemporary observers have described the lengthy marches of these French citizens through Belgium, which took place in the most chaotic of circumstances, as one of the 'darkest pages in the history of the occupation'. Once arrived in the capital (or elsewhere), their situation barely improved. Little was provided to accommodate the evacuees, leading to problematical living conditions. Furthermore, the influx of large new groups was considered as a potential threat to the social order.

An exhibition in the BELvue Museum (2018)

The aim of the research project is an exhibition aimed at a broad audience, which will take place in the autumn of 2018 in the prestigious surroundings of the BELvue museum. CegeSoma will attempt to provide a new synthesis of the last wartime months and the first months of 'free' Brussels, by focussing on the daily lives of the city-dwellers. How were the thousands of hungry (and often sick) refugees for instance received in Brussels? In which way did urban authorities try to safeguard the public health after an outbreak of the Spanish flu? How did the German army loosen its grip on the capital, and how was this power vacuum filled up by the Belgians? What were the reasons behind the ecstatic popular reception of King Albert on 22 November 1918? What was the impact, moreover, of the parliamentary speech on voting rights made by the King during the same day? Did Belgium finally wave goodbye to the nineteenth century? What was the relation between the social upheavals in Germany and those that took place in the Belgian capital? The end of the war was synonymous with both joy and sorrow: city-dwellers paid their respects to the deceased, while the long-awaited liberation generated a climate of euphoria. At the same time, Belgian refugees and prisoners of war (many of whom had forcedly remained abroad for almost four years) returned back home, leading to a pressing housing shortage.

This variety of themes will be at the heart of the upcoming exhibition, which will form part of the general commemorations of 2018.

The research project will be executed by historian Jens van de Maele under the guidance of Chantal Kesteloot.