

An Inside Look at Brussels 1914-1918

During the Great War, Brussels lived a unique experience. Even though the Belgian capital escaped the fighting, it was Europe's largest city to endure the war under occupation. This forgotten history is illustrated on the new website www.brussels14-18.be/en, a public history project carried out by CEGESOMA, and launched by the Région de Bruxelles-Capitale and VisitBrussels. The website traces the history of civilian populations using photographs of the 1914-1918 period.

This website retraces the history of Brussels at war, from the pacifist appeal made by Jean Jaurès in July 1914 until the Marolles neighbourhood's popular memory staging five years later (picture). The viewpoint includes that of the different populations who lived side by side in the occupied city: Belgians, Germans, but also refugees fleeing the violence of the front and persons to be deported for forced labour in enemy territory as from 1917. The history of working-class Molenbeek connects to that of the rural areas of Uccle, which is a reminder of the fact that, at the beginning of the 20th century, Brussels was an important urban centre while in part remaining a rural community.

In 1919, the inhabitants of the Marolles stage different events marking the history of the capital during the Great War. They make a parody of the justice administered by the German occupier in 1914-1918. (© Académie royale de Belgique)

The German occupation upset all aspects of daily life. The public space was transformed: the Royal Palace became a makeshift hospital, the Palace of Justice was used as a soldiers' barracks, and the boulevard Lambertmont was turned into a kitchen garden. Social tensions increased but at the same time the war also forced people to find new strategies to fight poverty, hunger and unemployment. This website illustrates that the occupation was not a passively endured experience. It gave rise to patriotic resistance as well as to collaboration with the enemy. Other, apparently more trivial areas, such as philanthropy or leisure activities, were also taken up by the citizens of Brussels during the war. All this goes to show that the 1914-1918 conflict was not merely a military matter. The civilian population was at the forefront. Brussels was a laboratory of total war and this will put its mark on the whole 20th century.

To bring this forgotten history back to life, exceptional material has been used, namely war photographs. The history of the occupation is told through these images. For the first time, family archives are accessible to everyone. They are completed by 1914-1918 press photographs, as well as by images kept in Belgian archive centres (*Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Musée de l'Armée, Archives du Palais royal, etc.*) or foreign collections (*Bibliothèque nationale de France, Nationaal Archief Nederland, Imperial War Museum*).

The site www.brussels14-18.be/en is now available.

Bruno Benvindo
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