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6

Geneviève Warland (Ed.)

Experience and Memory of the First World War in Belgium

Comparative and Interdisciplinary Insights

Herausgegeben vom Arbeitskreis
Historische Belgienforschung im deutschsprachigen Raum

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'The Great War as Cultural Heritage'

Preface

One hundred years ago, Guillaume Apollinaire, the poet and journalist who had been wounded in battle, wondered: 'What should we call the current war? They have begun to call it "the War of 1914," then, upon the arrival of 1915, they said "the European War," then, once the Americans entered, they spoke of "World War" or "Universal War"... "The Great War" also has its defenders. "The War of Nations" could gain some votes. "The War of Races" would be defensible. "The War of Alliances" or "the War of Peoples." But the "War of Fronts" would possibly best express the character of this gigantic struggle.¹ Indeed, since 1914, the image of the military fronts that was mirrored in domestic fronts formed a kind of worldwide kaleidoscope of complex situations. These included air, sea and land fronts, fronts of invasion and of refuge, fronts of work and of overwork, fronts of military and of civilian prisoners, fronts of hospitals where one fought against wounds and illnesses, fronts of grief, of cemeteries and of remembrance. Some fronts went on to form the heart of the catastrophes of the coming century: There, civilians had been at the centre of the war, invaded, occupied, looted, bombarded; they became ordinary targets in a total war. There, the Ottoman Empire carried out a full-scale test of population transfers, repressive measures, and even policies of 'systematic extermination'² towards the Armenians and the Assyrians. In these territories, the Great War came to transform, whether deliberately or unknowingly, into a worldwide *laboratory*, a testing ground for violence, a place to put it into practice and to optimise its effects on people and on materiel. At the heart of this laboratory lay Belgium, invaded in the earliest days of the war, then occupied by its enemies, a small part of its territory remaining a battlefield throughout the entire world war.

In a fascinating self-reflection, the Memex team makes Belgium, a laboratory twice over, between 1914 and 1918 and then in a century-long memory, a jumping-off point for the most innovative social sciences. Historians, political scientists, psychologists and literary scholars have united their efforts, on different scales, to examine the time of war with an eye towards emotions, and the time following the war with an eye towards cultural heritage, through to the present day. We can summarise their work in a phrase: 'the war as cultural heritage'. Immaterial cultural heritage such as that of emotions: fear, hatred, the discovery of the Other, rejection, accommodation, terror, disgust, compassion, tenderness. Oh so material cultural heritage such as that

1 Guillaume Apollinaire. *Mercur de France*, 16 November 1917, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, La Pléiade, Gallimard, p. 514.

2 Formulation of the ICRC. (Archives, Geneva).

of destructions, reconstructions, commemorations. The scales are temporal, from the ‘micro’ of the day-to-day and month-to-month experience of the war – what smaller than the pages of a diary? – to the ‘macro’; of a memory that has been reconstructed over one hundred years. The scales are also spatial: from the local of small villages and cities, through the regional, and all the way to Europe and even the world in the World War. For a century, we have pitied ‘Poor little Belgium’ and also celebrated the heroism of ‘Brave little Belgium’: a country that is perhaps small, but whose population has experienced all forms of war and its memories. The current authors – maybe *because* the country is small – have been able to analyse these experiences with such mastery, turning the complexity of comparisons and of interdisciplinarity into strengths. The populations of Belgium become an interface between the ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ scales, between very specific war experiences, such as the gasses tested at Ypres or the forced labour deportations, and the large-scale universality of tragedy, such as the hope of peace in ‘the war to end all wars’ or a pacifism that was just as popular yet impotent then as it is now.

In 1943, in the middle of another war, Arthur Koestler reflected: ‘Statistics don’t bleed; it is the detail which counts.’³ Yes, the authors of this book know that social sciences need to work quantitatively, to establish statistics and patterns, on scales as immense as that of the Great War, to the scale of the individual and of diverse and shifting groups understood in terms of social, economic, cultural, and generational factors, and all of this over one hundred years. But they also know that neither statistics nor geography nor concepts bleed; it is people who bleed. This is the ‘detail’ envisioned by Koestler, which strongly resembles the ‘Space of experience’ (*Erfahrungsraum*) theorised by Reinhart Koselleck. We are impressed by the way in which the authors lead us through mental and physical destructions and through the reconstructions and distortions of memory with a mastery of the most varied sources. They examine these both as creations inscribed in history and through their reception by the other social sciences – from intimate poems to expositions and monuments, from landscapes to postage stamps, etc.

For all of their work, which is simultaneously precise and wide-ranging, their intellectual attention to detail in understanding and making understood, the quality of their writing, apparent even in the choice of titles, the authors of this exemplary collective deserve the utmost gratitude.

Annette Becker

Paris-Nanterre

Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne, Somme)

3 Arthur Koestler, *Arrival and Departure*, 1943.

Experience and Memory of the First World War in Belgium: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Insights

Preface by the Editors of "Historische Belgienforschung"

The First World War features prominently in the German-Language historical research on Belgium – and not by chance. In 1914–1918, Europe witnessed an armed conflict that was characterised by industrialised warfare resulting in 20 million casualties. 50% of these were civilians. However, it was not only a war of armies and industries but also a war of words, of propaganda and of remembrance which lasted a long time after the cannons finally fell silent a hundred years ago.

"In a country where war was fought, it lingers, even if that war is already a century behind us." This motto borrowed from the mission statement of the *In Flanders Fields*-Museum in Ypres epitomises the essence of the research presented here. Accordingly, the objectives set by the authors of this volume are "to reflect on the legacy and memories of WW1 that are still alive and relevant for contemporary Belgian society." The focus is multidisciplinary, combining local, national and inter- or transnational perspectives. Based on thorough theoretical and methodological considerations and a plethora of sources, the contributions of this volume meet the aspirations in such a way that we, as the Working Group *Historische Belgienforschung*, take full pride in the fact that Geneviève Warland entrusted this meticulously edited book to our publication series. This volume proves that "little Belgium" has a large history in store that should no longer remain at the periphery of public and scholarly attention.

It is our Working Group's main purpose to foster the German-Language research on Belgian history. Therefore, it may seem a little paradoxical that this volume presents only research by scholars from Belgium. However, this is a reflection of the close contacts we were able to encourage between Belgian-based scholars and those working in a German-speaking academic environment outside the country. The fact that this volume is published in English is intended to make the research results available to a wider community than a publication in any of Belgium's three official languages could hope to reach. We sincerely wish this book the attention it deserves.

Tatjana Mrowka (current editor-in-chief) /
Sebastian Bischoff / Christoph Jahr / Jens Thiel

Cologne / Berlin, January 2019

Geneviève Warland

Introduction¹

Emotion, Experience, Memory

1 Yet another book on the First World War?

The centenary of the First World War has provoked a wave of publications geared towards different kinds of audiences: the general public, schools and academia. 2014 saw an unprecedented peak in the number of publications of any sort in Belgium (as in other countries); 2018 has seen a revival of publications, but the number does not seem to be as high as in 2014.² Such an outpouring of books illustrates a real interest for this tremendous event that killed more than 18 million soldiers and civilians around the world. This interest is manifested in family curiosity supported by the discovery of objects and documents, which were in some cases digitized.³ It has been sustained by local history associations that organized conferences and exhibitions and by the media that created websites dedicated to 1914–18, documentary films and historical fiction.⁴ Finally, scholarly research on WWI, its manifold experiences, its political and social impacts as well as its memories in Europe and beyond has been vigorous.

As part of the overwhelming remembrance and commemorative activities around the First World War, this book helps to reflect on the legacy and memories of WWI that are still alive and relevant for contemporary Belgian society. It looks at these aspects with a multidisciplinary focus of interest in psychology, history, literature and political science. This book not only provides a historical insight on WWI, but also pays attention to the current representations of this war and to the impact of the commemorations of the conflict during its centenary. It has a truly interdisciplinary character as most of the chapters are written by representatives of two of the disciplines mentioned above. Authors crossed their methodologies on the topic that they jointly

1 I would like to thank Olivier Klein, Olivier Luminet and Laurence van Ypersele for their valuable comments.

2 See Tallier 2019 (forthcoming).

3 See the initiative financed by the European Commission *Europeana 1914–1918* aiming to collect objects and documents through several campaigns and digitize them in order to share individual and collective memories of the War throughout the whole European Union: <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/world-war-I>.

4 As for the Belgian case, see respectively the very informative and well-illustrated website <https://www.rtbf.be/14-18>, the well-conceived documentary produced by the RTBF 14–18: *L'histoire belge* and the well-documented and moving television series *In vlaamse velden* produced by the VRT.

studied. Moreover, chapter drafts benefited from cross-disciplinary comments from authors of other chapters.

The analysis concerns the national level, but also the subnational, regional and local levels. For instance, the study of WWI through stamps operates at the level of the Belgian State, whereas the analysis of war memory related to the cities of Antwerp and Liège is anchored in local experiences and memories. Moreover, some comparisons are drawn with other countries like France, Germany, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina with regard to representations of WWI among young Europeans, expanding the scope of the book to the European level.

Composed of seven chapters that I outline below, this book is situated in the wave of cultural history that has dominated the field of WWI Studies since the 1990s⁵ and is one of the main contributions of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* founded in 1992.⁶ Its four main topics are related to individual war experiences, individual and collective war representations, war literature, and war commemorations, which are also central in cultural historical approaches. In a nutshell, it is the various ways of experiencing and remembering the First World War that are at the center of our analysis. The analysis deals with lived, intellectual, spiritual, political and emotional relationships of individuals to the war, which are embedded in their respective contexts.

Besides its interdisciplinary character situated in the history of the memory of WWI, the originality of this book lies in three main aspects: firstly, it depicts a history of emotions imbued with concepts and methods borrowed from psychology, which are linked to social frameworks and social norms of the time of the First World War. Secondly, it ventures onto the path of a research field that is gaining interest: the history of cultural and monumental heritage. Thirdly, it attempts to gauge the effectiveness of commemorative events understood in a broad sense: official celebrations, special TV programs or broadcasts, exhibitions, concerts, plays, books and special issues of journals.

Therefore, it is not just one more book on the First World War, but a book which takes a non-conventional stance by bringing together researchers from several fields who were eager to confront their theoretical backgrounds, hypotheses and methodologies. While being often a theoretical and a methodological challenge, it has also been an exciting intellectual adventure that I will now present in more detail.

2 The Memex WWI project

This book is the result of an interdisciplinary research project *Recognition and Resentment: Experiences and Memories of the Great War in Belgium* (MEMEX WWI) that brought together fifteen academics, researchers and PhD students from five Belgian

5 See Prost and Winter 2004, Jones 2013. For the Belgian case, see Benvindo, Majerus, Vrints 2014 and Vrints 2016.

6 See for instance Julien 2004 and *Historial de Péronne's* presentation at <https://www.historial.fr/en/>.

universities and scholarly institutions from December 2013 to December 2018. It has been financed by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) and is part of its program *Brain-be: Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks*.

It is worth mentioning that the *Brain-be* selection of 2012 in the Axis 3: *Cultural, historical and scientific heritage* attests a deliberate decision of the Belgian Federal State to support large research projects on the First World War during the centennial years. As a matter of fact, another project was funded as well: *The Great War from Below: Multiple Mobility and Cultural Dynamics in Belgium (1900–1930)*, which is a research project in social history on less-studied groups – collaborators, resistance fighters, veterans, forced laborers – and on the demographic impact of the war, particularly on marriage in the interwar period. Conversely, MEMEX WWI is situated in cultural history, psychology, literature and political science.

Originally, the research aimed to bridge two perspectives on the First World War – experiences and memories – in order to enhance Belgium’s WWI heritage. Four main topics of research were covered in the MEMEX WWI project: war time experience, war monumental heritage, war literature, and war memory. Each topic was studied by a PhD student who was supervised by two directors from different universities and/or different research fields and involved diverse methodologies drawn from history, political science, philology and psychology. These methodologies included historical criticism and contextualization, discourse analysis and the study of political implications, literary criticism and semantic analysis, as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis of data collection.

The chapters of this book reflect both the four MEMEX WWI research axes and the multiple methodologies, and they dealt with topics which the MEMEX WWI members have worked on during the last five years.

3 An interdisciplinary project

As a pioneer in the study of emotions in a historical-societal perspective (*gesellschaftsgeschichtlich*), Ute Frevert, professor at the Free University Berlin, underlines the fact that the First World War provoked a wave of emotions that were experienced at an intensity level never reached before. This includes negative emotions such as despair, anxiety, hate, or resentment, but also positive ones like empathy and hope.⁷ She invites the study of such emotions with the help of concepts and theories developed in psychology, but equally insists on the necessity to contextualize these emotions by taking into account the social norms and values of the society of that time. In particular, she highlights a tendency among psychologists studying emotional issues of applying theoretical models and conducting empirical research with individuals with-

7 Frevert 2009, 196. The list given by Frevert is adapted for the sake of the argument.

out paying much attention to social and cultural – that is, collective – frameworks, which are spatially and temporally particular:

„Völlig unterbeleuchtet jedoch bleibt bei ihnen die Frage, inwieweit solche Mechanismen kulturell geformt werden, in welchen sozialen Kontexten sie entstehen und vergehen. Welche Erfahrungen und Lernprozesse sind damit verbunden? Welche sozialen Konstellationen befördern oder erschweren welche Formen emotionaler Regulierung? [...]“⁸

Conversely, historians insist on the necessity of considering the feelings that people report in their cultural environment (*Gefühlkultur*) – for instance, the *bourgeoise* of the *Belle Époque* –, as well as in their social or institutional contexts – like the Belgian army during the Great War. Professor Frevert also insists on paying sufficient attention to attitudes and representations imbued with the norms of that time.

Such interactions between historians and psychologists, the former being more relativist and the latter more universalist, lie at the heart of the MEMEX WWI project. Historians always recalled the need to adjust the psychological analysis to the context of the time and its norms and values. In contrast, psychologists emphasized the need to properly define – with the help of existing theories – emotions, attitudes and representations that they primarily approached as structural matters.

That being said, in an influential paper, social psychologist Kenneth Gergen argued that so-called “universal” (social) psychological processes are heavily dependent on the sociocultural context of the times, leading him to assert that “social psychological research is the systematic study of contemporary history”.⁹ He therefore called for a greater articulation between the two disciplines, which he viewed as complementary. The present book offers an opportunity to do so.

Moreover, social psychologists conduct inquiries by asking people questions in order to determine collective representations through the use of data collection and quantitative analysis. Several chapters of this book are based on this methodology. Graphs mentioning scales and proportions tend to be the pivotal point on felt emotions, on WWI representations, and on attitudes. With regard to such interpretations founded in statistics, the MEMEX WWI cultural historians and literary scholars as well as the political scientist, used to practicing discourse analysis, were at first thrown off balance. Nevertheless they recognized the usefulness of the psychological tools and methods as seen in many chapters but still kept a critical stance towards the value of statistics.

8 “An unanswered question remains [among psychologists]: to what extent such mechanisms are culturally formed, in which contexts do they appear and disappear. Which experiences and learning processes do they imply? Which social circumstances support or complicate what kind of emotion regulation?” (Frevert 2009, 200).

9 Gergen 1973, 319.

4 Insight into the book chapters

The first part of the book addresses the issue of emotions in a context of war and also addresses attitudes towards the Germans through the diaries of Belgian soldiers and scholars, the ones experiencing the war at the front and the others at the home front in an occupied country and during their captivity in Germany. Both chapters associate a psychologist – Olivier Luminet – with historians – Rose Spijkermann and Antoon Vrints for chapter one and Geneviève Warland for chapter two and delineate the psychological strategies and the writing strategies adopted by the diarists to overcome anxiety, inhuman living conditions in the trenches, deprivation, disillusionment, sadness and loneliness. The two chapters show how they regulated their emotions in using coping mechanisms like attention orientation and cognitive change through the act of writing, religious faith, historical reasoning, humor, concentration on the activities of daily life. They also interpret the discursive level: metaphors, processes of exaggeration or minimization. In the first chapter, a comparison is drawn between four diaries written in French or Dutch by Belgian soldiers belonging to different social backgrounds. The second chapter is based on the diaries of two well-known Belgian historians, Henri Pirenne and Paul Fredericq. It mainly deals with their attitude towards the Germans, showing a specific evolution in their feelings throughout the war and during its aftermath.

In the second part of the book, social representations of the war are analyzed using two approaches: cultural memory and social psychology. The formation of First World War memories in two fort cities, Antwerp and Liège, both during the war and in the interwar period is studied in the first chapter through literary texts, monuments, commemorative plaques and street names. The role of political and civic actors that discursively produced urban space in selecting narratives is also taken into account. Using the conceptual frameworks of cultural memory and of commemorative narrative – that insists on narrativisation processes which distort past events in order to provide a message adapted to the time –, the historian Karla Vanraepenbusch and the literary scholar Myrthel Van Etterbeek highlight the contrasts between these two cities, the first being the embodiment of the defeat of the Belgian army and therefore the victim of “German barbarity”, and the second the embodiment of Belgium’s glorious resistance. Two literary tropes of the First World War are then contrasted: ‘poor little Belgium’ and ‘brave little Belgium’.

The second chapter written by two literary scholars – Elke Brems and Reine Meylaerts – and two social psychologists – Pierre Bouchat and Olivier Klein – firstly examines the literary reception of Tom Lanoye’s first volume of translated international war poetry, *No Man’s Land*: reviews in journals, on websites, comments on blogs and websites of online bookstores etc. Secondly, it looks at the way in which Lanoye’s translated war poetry is read by analyzing through empirical research the way current Flemish students in literature at the University of Leuven react to this poetry. Its results indicate a link between the emotions of respect, sympathy, and sorrow felt by the students – which testify to the capacity of Lanoye’s hybrid translation to invest the

poems with new meaning and make them relevant for the 21st century reader – and their pacifist attitude, which coheres with the cultural significance of these poems.

Based on a survey conducted in the frame of a European COST project,¹⁰ the third chapter examines current representations of the First World War among young Europeans. Carried out by a political scientist – Valérie Rosoux – and the abovementioned scholars in social psychology, Pierre Bouchat and Olivier Klein, this chapter goes beyond the spatial frame of Belgium by focusing on two groups of States with clearly different profiles – France and Germany on the one hand and Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina on the other. Three issues of the First World War were analyzed in the collective representations of a sample of students in history and in psychology coming from these countries: the country's responsibility for the outbreak of the war, the degree of violence of their own soldiers and enemy soldiers, and finally the suffering endured and inflicted throughout the war. The interpretation of the results makes clear how far current political and ideological context impacts on past representations. A link can be established between reconciled and not reconciled visions of the past and current patriotic or pacifist attitudes towards war in general and the First World War in particular. It clearly demonstrates that the reconciled past vision leads to a pacifist attitude and to empathy for soldiers and civilians as victims. Such a past vision is the result of the 'memory work' – that means the modification of the official narrative of the past – and of temporal dimension.

The third part of the book is devoted to the cultural memory of the Great War during its Centenary. It particularly focuses on the impact of commemorative activities. The first chapter written by two historians – Chantal Kesteloot and Laurence van Ypersele – examines the iconography of the First World War through postage stamps, and investigates the decision-making processes concerning stamp issues beginning in the war until the present in Belgium. The analysis of these everyday objects over one hundred years allows us to understand the policies of memory undertaken by the Belgian public authorities. Besides the dominant representation of the heroic figure of King Albert, the first stamps issued after the war recalled Belgian heroism – such as the defense of Liège – as well as suffering – for instance, the martyrdom of the city of Dendermonde – promoting thereby local identities within a shared national narrative. Both historians follow the evolution of stamps' illustrations, which became more diverse over time and took into account the events at the front and the war experience of civilians. They also study its various functions as in the cases of stamps carrying a surcharge for the benefit of charitable works or of current stamps issued in the context of the Centenary which are only sold to collectors.

The second chapter, which is again a collaboration between the political scientist Valérie Rosoux and the social psychologists, Pierre Bouchat and Olivier Klein, is devoted to analyzing the effects on young Belgians of exhibitions and documentaries

10 *IS1205: Social Psychological Dynamics of Historical Representations in the Enlarged European Union.*

produced in Belgium during the Centenary of the First World War. The main assumption is that with their scenography and their narrative these media produce an immersive experience aiming at identification and persuasion. Nonetheless, the five study cases show that contrary to the psychological rule of narrative persuasion, both of these forms of cultural mediation did not significantly contribute to reinforcing a pacifist attitude. These exhibitions and documentaries also elicited feelings of anger, opening the door to negative attitudes towards peace. The paradoxical nature of this phenomenon highlights the contrast between the objectives displayed by the designers of such cultural products and the effects observed in a psychological research based on questionnaires. It also indicates the existence of a tension between, on the one hand, the valorization of peace as an almost absolute value and, on the other hand, the accentuation of emotional devices favoring the empathy of participants called to identify with the victims of war.

The preface and the conclusion open the floor to renowned specialists in the research issues of the MEMEX WWI project discussed in this book: the historian Annette Becker (University Paris-Nanterre and Historial de la Grande Guerre Péronne, Somme) and the social psychologist Bernard Rimé (Catholic University of Louvain). The overview of these chapters leads to the observation that this book belongs to a tradition of research mainly conducted in the frame of the nation-state,¹¹ a frame that the historical research at an international level intended to overcome for the WWI centenary. Here are two examples: the first one is a scientific website called *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*¹², which gives a global perspective on the war through entries by areas, states and topics written by WWI researchers worldwide. The second one is a three-volume publication, *The Cambridge History of the First World War* edited by Jay Winter¹³, which includes transnational chapters (as well as in the first volume dedicated to the *Global War* as in the two other volumes respectively to *The State* and to *Civil Society*). Nevertheless, the Far East (Japan and China) and Latin America remain in the background in these centenary publications. In that sense, if the centennial furthered research on the war on continents other than Europe, such as Africa¹⁴, it did not bring a thoroughly global approach to the First World War at the political, economic, social and cultural levels. An overall synthesis still seems to be missing whereas a lot of research is still yet to be done on local, regional, national and transnational levels on less studied topics: forms of occupation during WWI and its aftermath, war economy, prisoners of war, religious faith in enduring the war, welfare and healthcare. This means that WWI research continues to have many fields to discover even after the centenary.

11 See for instance Boyce, Jansen, Purseigle 2014.

12 See <http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>

13 See Winter 2014.

14 Especially Africa. As for the Belgian case and its colony in Congo, see Ngongo, Piret, Tousignant 2018.

5 Emotion, experience, attitude, representation and memory as keywords

“The one thing a centenary history of the First World War should not be is a monument”, wrote John Horne 2014 in his contribution *The Great War at its centenary* to the abovementioned *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. A retrospective glimpse of these four commemorative years indicates that the centenary history of the First World War has not been a monument. Many people participated in the various public displays (marked by some impressive artistic performances), visited exhibitions and museums, saw films, read books; along the way, they got incentives to reflect on WWI events, experiences and impacts as well as on wars in general.

This book partly documents the issue of the centenary as an important stage in the history of the memory of WWI, as in the cases of the chapters on postage stamps, on the reading of poetry, the screenings of documentaries and on visits to exhibitions. It follows the war memory in the long run through the analysis of French speaking and Flemish literature and of monuments and street names in the cities of Antwerp and Liège. Collective representations of the First World War, which form a set of knowledge and concepts shared by groups of people or a whole society are the focus here. Several past or current collective representations of WWI are disclosed and discussed: negative representations of the war time with deaths, cruelty, privation, positive representations conveyed by solidarity, hope ...

The book further looks at experiences, which is the second topic of the MEMEX WWI project: experiences of the war in itself as lived by Belgian soldiers and renowned historians; experienced memory of the war leading to collective representations of soldiers and civilians as victims and to pacifist attitudes. As indicated in the overview and developed in the book, the key notions associated to the concepts of experience and representation are emotions and attitudes. The book argues that emotions are at the basis of positive or negative attitudes, which correspond in psychological terms to appraisals that individuals held towards elements in their environment: both positive and negative attitudes of soldiers who resisted in the trenches, negative attitudes of rejection by historians who condemned German barbarism, and finally positive pacifist attitudes of 21st century young Europeans, who are still moved by WWI experiences of combat and suffering, but also negative ones loaded with anger.

One hundred years after its end, in a time when the communicative memory of the First World War transmitted in families is gone with the death of the last witnesses and replaced by the cultural memory constructed with documents, images, films, objects, sites, that is the whole material heritage of WWI, it is striking to see how multifaceted and prolific the range of commemorative activities and scientific research has been. It is hoped that the MEMEX WWI project with this book as an output may have contributed to this success and also foster further multidisciplinary research on the First World War.

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Part I

**Belgian Soldiers and Civilians in the First World War:
Insights in the History of Emotions**

Fighting and Writing. The Psychological Functions of Diary Writing in the First World War

1 Introduction

Diaries, letters, autobiographies and memoirs: ‘The most dangerous of all sources’. At least, according to the historian Jan Romein (1946), and an opinion shared by other historians of the mid-twentieth century.¹ They were regarded as subjective, distorting and often written out of vanity, rancour or self-justification. A decade later, Jacques Presser (1958) did perceive these sources as valuable, and created the term ‘egodocument’ for these kinds of writings. He coined the word for all texts in which the author wrote about his or her own feelings, thoughts and actions. His use of egodocuments was quite exceptional for the time, considering that most other historians still perceived them as doubtful sources.² It took some more decades before egodocuments were fully accepted as an historical source. The development of social and microhistory in the 1970s considerably raised the interest in egodocuments. Nowadays many studies within social and cultural history are based on this kind of sources: it is acknowledged that the use and the study of egodocuments can contribute to a different, personal perspective, ‘by endowing ordinary lives with agency, dignity, and texture.’³ Whether a text is factually true, which used to be one of the main questions at the beginning of this kind of research, is no longer relevant. It is rather the subjectivity of an author’s writings, the creation of a certain image of himself and his own version of reality that is of interest for contemporary historians.⁴

First World War research fits well in this larger trend. For a long time, personal texts of the main protagonists of this war, soldiers, were excluded from historical research. One of the first historians who considered these texts as sources for research was Jean Norton Cru in 1929. In *Témoins* he stated that the writings of soldiers had to be critically scrutinized in order to become useful as an historical source, and as a result examined 300 novels, memoirs, and letters published in French. In particular, Cru wanted to check the correctness of soldiers’ statements about their whereabouts, and he detected other implausible and incorrect accounts and forms of expression. Although he was hypercritical about what he considered a credible testimony, fore-

1 Romein 1946, 204.

2 Baggerman 2005, 108. Presser 1958.

3 Dekker 2002, 7–12. Dekker quotes Mary Lindemann in the *Encyclopaedia of European Social History*.

4 Dekker 2002, 7–12.