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A Country of Heroes? Belgium in Russian Propaganda during WWI... and after

On 5 August 1914 Ivan Kudashev, the Russian envoy to Belgium, informed Saint-Petersburg that “the Belgians were fighting like heroes” against the German invaders¹. His exclamation was completely at odds with what Russian and other observers had said about Belgium’s defensive capacities only a few weeks before: that it was a weak and neutral country, which was slow to mobilize its army, where the necessary modernization of the army was bogged down in political quarrels, and the government ministers and the king were bickering over who had precedence in the army command². Five weeks into the war, on 6 September, the king dismissed the majority of his generals and resolutely took matters in his own hands. He stubbornly resisted the attempts of the French and British to dictate the Belgian strategy, claiming that if Belgium wanted to retain its neutral status, it could not be perceived as dancing to the allied tune. The Belgian army, however, effectively managed to slow down the German advance and deflect German troops from deployment in France. By early November the front came to a halt in the very west of the country, where a small stretch of land behind the river Yser, between the North Sea and the Ypres Salient, remained the ‘Free Fatherland’.

The German invasion of neutral Belgium on 4 August 1914 provoked huge indignation worldwide, but no-one had any illusions about the resilience of the tiny country and its mock army. The Belgian withdrawal, as of mid-August, to the north, in the fortified city of Antwerp, was met with disbelief by the Allies, because it allowed the Germans to cut through the centre of the country to France. The Russian media contented themselves with repeating official bulletins about the western front. When on 9 August Aleksandr Tokarskii, a former member of the State

¹ Kudashev to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 23/7–5/8/1914 (Russian Historical Military State Archive, Moscow (henceforth: RGVIA), fond 2000, opis’ 1, delo 3495, list. 32, 33).

² Wim Coudenys, *Voor Vorst, voor Vrijheid en voor Recht. Kolonel Andrej Prezjbjano, een Rus aan het IJzerfront* (Antwerpen: Polis, 2017), 54–56.

Duma, for the third time read in the papers that Liège had fallen, he noted matter-of-factly: “We think this is a lie, again”³. Newspapers were more interested in the fate of Russian subjects in the Kingdom of Belgium, such as the alleged 400 Russian students who had been arrested in Liège for putting up resistance against the invaders, Russian volunteers in the Belgian army, or the many Russian tourists and businessmen who were on the run and had announcements published in the national papers about their whereabouts⁴. However, when the Germans turned their ire on civilians and historic towns such as Aarschot (19/8), Liège (20/8), Andenne (20/8), Tamines (22/8), Dinant (23/8), Namur (24/8), Leuven (Louvain, 25/8), Arlon (26/8) and Dendermonde (4/9), the mood completely changed and the ‘rape of Belgium’ became the centrepiece of allied war propaganda⁵.

In early September Vladimir Zhabotinskii, the European correspondent of *Russkie vedomosti*, wanted to see with his own eyes the destructions in Leuven, a town he had visited only three months earlier⁶. His request was turned down by the occupants, so instead he went to Mechelen, between Antwerp and Leuven, which had also suffered severely. He promptly baptised the town “the little brother of Leuven”⁷. The sympathy and identification with poor little Belgium became such, that by mid-September Boris Suvorin could write in *Novoe vremia* that only six weeks earlier no-one had heard of “the noble King Albert, the Soldier-King, the Knight-King without fear or reproach,” but that now “he had become a dear friend”⁸. Another observer wrote that “before our eyes a peaceful, mercantile people had become a nation of heroes, whose deeds enthralled our hearts”⁹. The popular weekly *Niva* published pictures of German destructions and of the brave Belgian army, led by King Albert. It praised the King, who did not like protocol, went into the trenches to shake the hands of his officers and soldiers, called them ‘comrades’ and promised to mail soldiers’ letters home¹⁰. By early September Belgium had

³ Aleksandr A. Tokarskii, *Dnevnik 1914–1915 gg* (Saratov: Izdatel’skii centr ‘Nauka’, 2015), 25.

⁴ Coudenys, *Voor Vorst*, 58–59.

⁵ Larry Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium. The Untold Story of World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). On Belgium during WWI, see: Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootste Oorlog: het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: Atlas, 1997); Luc Vandeweyer, *De Eerste Wereldoorlog: koning Albert en zijn soldaten*. (Antwerpen: Manteau, 2014); Luc De Vos, Tom Simoens, Dave Warnier and Franky Bostyn, *14–18. Oorlog in België* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2014); Tom Simoens, *De chaos van het slagveld. Het Belgische leger in de loopgraven 1914–1918* (Antwerpen-Amsterdam: Horizon, 2016). For a Russian view on Belgium’s international position during WWI, see Aleksandra O. Khorosheva. *Vneshniaia politika Bel’gii nakanune i vo vremia Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moskva: Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN, 2007).

⁶ Vladimir Zhabotinskii, *Povest’ moikh dnei* (Ierusalim: Biblioteka-Aliia, 1985), chapter ‘Na pereput’e’ (<http://gazeta.rjews.net/Lib/Jab/pov13.html>), access: 9 VII 2018.

⁷ Zhabotinskii, “Mladshii brat Luvena”, *Russkie vedomosti*, 27/9/1914.

⁸ Boris Suvorin, “Korol’ velikago naroda”, *Velikaia voina v obrazakh i kartinakh*, 1 (1915²), 40.

⁹ N.V. Vasil’ev, “Bel’giia”, *Velikaia voina v obrazakh i kartinakh*, 1 (1915²), 42.

¹⁰ “Bel’giiskii korol’ na voine”, *Niva*, 34 (23/8/1914), 3 (back cover).

become the ‘country of heroes’; the Belgian decision to withdraw to Antwerp, so criticized by Allied politicians, diplomats and military, was perceived as a necessary and logical strategy by the popular press: “Antwerp is the strongest fortified city in the world, second only to Paris. Here, the Belgian army found some well-deserved peace after those enormous efforts. The Belgian heroes will gather strength and at the appropriate moment will fly like eagles from the mighty fortress of Antwerp and throw themselves on the brutal oppressors who so barbarically have ransacked their poor country. [...] Russia, France and England will never forget what a huge, invaluable service Belgium has rendered them. To revenge the innocent blood of noble Belgium they will wreak havoc on Germany, the main culprit of the war who has violated international law and wages a devastating war in a barbaric way”¹¹.

There is no doubt that the events of August 1914 provoked a surge of patriotism and a deep feeling of solidarity with the Allies – France and the UK – and the ‘innocent victims’ of German and Austrian aggression, Serbia, Poland, Luxembourg and Belgium. However, as the war drew on, these sentiments needed constant fuelling¹². Sustaining the myth of raped, poor and heroic Belgium, became an important goal of the war propaganda. This was not an easy task, as only very few Russians were familiar with the kingdom; on the other hand, this ignorance undoubtedly played in the hands of the propagandists. Fortunately, the poets, playwrights, novelists and artists who were hired by the propaganda services had a soft spot for Belgium. Since the turn of the century Belgian literature enjoyed a certain popularity in Russia. Its initiator, the critic and translator Mariia Veselovskaia, would be at the forefront of Belgian war propaganda in Russia¹³. Many of her contemporaries were enthralled by the social criticism of the poet, critic and playwright Emile Verhaeren, or the symbolist plays by Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck. Highlights of this Belgian fashion had been the 1908 performance of Maeterlinck’s *L’Oiseau bleu*, directed by Konstantin Stanislavskii, and Verhaeren’s visit to Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in 1913¹⁴. Poets such as Ilia Erenburg or Aleksandr Blok travelled

¹¹ *Muzhestvennaia bor’ba Bel’gii s verolomstvom Germanii* (Moskva: I.D. Sytin, 1914), 28 & 31–32.

¹² Cf. *Velikaia evropeiskaia voina. Katalog* (Moskva: Izdatel’skii dom Rudentsovykh, 2014).

¹³ Cf. Mariia V. Veselovskaia, *Molodaia Bel’gii. Sbornik* (Moskva: I.N. Kushnerev i Ko, 1908); *eadem, Chem byla Bel’gii do voiny 1914 g.* (Moskva: Zvezda N.N. Orfenova, 1914); *eadem, Bel’giiskaia revoliutsiia 1830 g.* (Moskva: Zvezda N.N. Orfenova, 1917). On Veselovskaia, see Roger Tavernier, “Maria Veselovskaja (1877–1937) en haar Russische belgicana. Naar aanleiding van enkele weinig bekende teksten van 1917”. *Ex Officina* 4, no. 1–2–3 (1987): 75–128; Rozhe Tavernir, “Dve ljubvi Marii Veselovskoi: Zhorzh Rodenbakh i Bel’gii”, in *Strana Sinei ptitsy. Russkie v Bel’gii*, ed. Emmanuel Vagemans (Moskva: Nauka, 1995), 268–79; cf. also Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), fond 80 (Veselovskie) & Institut mirovoi literatury (IMLI RAN), fond 159 (Veselovskaia M.D.).

¹⁴ Inna Soloviova, «L’Oiseau Bleu de Maeterlinck sur la scène russe», *Annales de la Fondation Maeterlinck* 11 (1956): 37–40; *Emil’ Verkharn. Biobibliograficheskii ukazatel’* (Moskva: Knizhnaia palata, 1988); *Emile Verhaeren en Rusland. Emile Verhaeren et la Russie.* (Sint-Amans-aan-de-Schelde:

to Belgium and marveled at the contrasts between rural, Catholic and mystic Flanders and industrial, socialist and materialist Wallonia¹⁵. On 20 August 1914 Valerii Briusov, Verhaeren's Russian promoter and translator, addressed 'The Flemish', the "people of Verhaeren" whose history – and present – consisted of a long series of battles against foreign foes¹⁶. Henceforward poetry, or rather: doggerel verse, became the preferred means of war propaganda¹⁷. The young Georgii Ivanov produced a cycle of poems that explicitly referred to Belgium: "The beaten beasts will disappear, / like foam on water after a storm, / but the sainted ruins of Leuven / will always bathe in the light of eternal dawn". (To the Vandals) "The stream of times and death takes everything away, / but on earth the memory is there to stay, / of that tiny people and of Albert, / its heroic King". (Belgium)¹⁸ Meanwhile, Vladimir Voinov's poem 'Liège' claimed that now "The law of the jungle had nailed the rule of law to the cross"¹⁹. Mariia Veselovskaia lashed out at Emperor William II, "who had taken everything from the Belgians, except its honour"²⁰. Echoing Erenburg's 1910 poems about mystical Bruges, Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik implied that the "unrest of the world" (*volnieniia zemli*) had now disturbed Bruges' eternal peace²¹. The translator Aleksandr Pechkovskii elaborated on the theme: "You have probably never heard of Bruges? In that town, more than anywhere else, reigns the old soul of Belgium. What does that mean, the soul of Belgium or Flanders, as it was called in the past? Because this is exactly what has been preserved, notwithstanding the change of time, the war, everything. Sometimes it is expressed in old folksongs, or in the quiet streets of the town, or in the soft tunes of the carillon that descend from the old towers, reflected in the sleepy water of the canals, or in the old houses and churches that could tell so much. This is perhaps the soul of Flanders, these old popular traditions that have been forgotten elsewhere and only could survive in such a quiet backwater as old, peaceful Bruges"²².

Provinciaal Museum Emile Verhaeren, 1990); Zhan Blankoff, «Emil' Verkharn glazami russkix», in *Strana Sinei ptitsy. Russkie v Bel'gii*, edited by Emmanuel' Vagemans (Moskva: Nauka, 1995), 239–50.

¹⁵ Il'ia G. Erenburg, *Liudi. Gody. Zhizn'. Kniga pervaiia, vtoraiia, tret'ia* (Moskva: Kudozhestvennaia literatura 1966), 153; *idem*, *Zapomni i zhivi...* (Moskva: Vremia, 2008), 92; Mariia A. Beketova, *Aleksandr Blok. Biograficheskii ocherk* (Leningrad: Academia, 1930), 166–167.

¹⁶ Valerii Ia. Briusov, "Flamandtsam", *Velikaia voina*, 1914, 26.

¹⁷ Cf. Grigorii Shuvalov, "Bel'giiskaia tragediia i russkaia poeziia", *Razgovor. Poeticheskii zhurnal* 2 (2015), 48–65; Irina V. Kuptsova, "Obraz Bel'gii v tvorchestve rossiiskikh khudozhestvennoi intelligentsii v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny", *Klio* 5 (77) (2013): 97–101.

¹⁸ Georgii V. Ivanov G., "Vandalam", *Niva* 38 (20/9/1914), 733; Georgii V. Ivanov, "Bel'giia", *Niva* 41 (11/10/1914), 783.

¹⁹ Vladimir V. Voinov, "L'ezh", In *Sovremennaia voina v russkoi poezii* (Petrograd: Novoe vremia, 1915), 168.

²⁰ Veselovskaia, *Chem byla Bel'giia*, 7.

²¹ Tat'iana L. Shchepkina-Kupernik, *Otvzuki voiny. Stikhotvoreniia* (Moskva: I.D. Sytin, 1915), 13.

²² Aleksandr P. Pechkovskii, „Dusha Bel'gii”, in *Mnogostradal'naia strana (O Bel'gii)* (Moskva, 1914), 19–20.

The realities of war, however, required something more dramatic. The siege of Antwerp, its fall on 10 October, and the miraculous escape of the Belgian King and his troops across the river Schelde towards the coast and the river Yser, where they would take up their final stand, stirred the Russian imagination and was eagerly exploited by the Russian war propaganda. In early October 1914 – the fate of the “strongest fortified city in the world, second only to Paris” was still in the balance²³ – the newspapers announced that Leonid Andreev had written a new theatre piece. In *Korol', zakon i svoboda* – ‘The King, and Law, and Liberty’, i.e. the final verse of the Belgian national anthem *Brabançonne* – count Clermont (king Albert) instructed ‘the famous Belgian author’ Emile Grelier (Verhaeren) to open the locks and flood the area between the Antwerp defenses and the Germans assailants. Inundations were indeed part of the Belgian tactics, not only around Antwerp, but also later, at the Yser river²⁴.

Andreev and the Russian war propaganda, however, could not be bothered with facts and implied that roughly half the country had been submerged; the flooded earth policy of the Belgians only added to their heroism. Andreev’s piece premiered on 3 November in the Petrograd Aleksandrinskii theatre and later toured to Odessa, Tula, Moscow and Rome. The dress rehearsal was open to the public, and its revenue destined for the Belgian people²⁵. “Many were crying, the Belgian consul was sobbing. This is not the moment to criticize the piece. Andreev’s story evokes too many sharp and painful memories”²⁶. Overall, *Korol', zakon i svoboda* was a hideous play, consisting of loose, unstructured dialogues modelled after Maeterlinck and full of references to the events of August and September 1914. Critics wrote that the piece “was full of false-sounding military effects; it was full of banality and testified to a lack of knowledge about the subject and ignorance of the essence of the affair”²⁷. They conceded, however, that it was an expression of wartime patriotism, “a bloody lump of moaning and human despair of the betrayal of the ideals, the highest achievements of culture that were now crushed by the brutal force of nature”²⁸. Patriotism and pathos definitely prevailed over accuracy. When, at the end of October, the Yser region was inundated, and Andreev was asked to adapt his play to the new situation, he

²³ Tokarskii, *Dnevnik*, 82.

²⁴ Paul Van Pul, *De Belgische militaire onderwaterzettingen rond de versterkte plaats van Antwerpen in augustus en september 1914. Een historisch-geografische reconstructie* (Brussel: Waterbouwkundig Laboratorium, 2014); *idem*, *In Flanders flooded fields: before Ypres there was Yser* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2007).

²⁵ Cf also “De Koning, de Wet, de Vrijheid. (Russisch tooneelstuk)”, *De legerbode*, 28/11/1914.

²⁶ Iu. S[obolev], “‘Korol', zakon i svoboda’. Na general’noi repetitsii v teatre Sukhodol’skogo”, *Teatr*, 22–23/10/1914, 6; “Bel’giiskii konsul o p’ese L. Andreeva”, *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 29/10/1914.

²⁷ En-En, “Moskovskie pis'ma: Teatr voiny i teatry”, *Golos Rusi*, 11/11/1914, 3.

²⁸ Lorentso. “Dramaticheskii teatr: ‘Korol', zakon i svoboda’ L. Andreeva”, *Odesskie novosti*, 16/11/1914, 5.

simply refused. Meanwhile, Aleksandr Khanzhenkov had turned *Korol', zakon i svoboda* in a major propaganda movie²⁹.

The image stuck. In 1914 and 1915 the Russian military contemplated inundation tactics for the defense of Warsaw and Petrograd, only to abandon this idea when they realized this would impact on the mobility of the army and risked to flood the capital itself³⁰. At the end of 1914 Il'ia Repin was working on a painting of King Albert on the battle field, but the press called it 'King Albert at the moment the dykes were sprung.' Repin was not amused: "The journalists have written about 'King Albert' without even seeing the painting. Locks, a horse that's been reined in, these are all figments of their imagination. The King is underway with two of his aids, while being bombarded with hellish shells"³¹. Repin, by the way, was not the only Russian artist who contributed to the Belgian war propaganda in Russia. November 1914 saw the opening of an exhibition, 'Art from the Allied Nations' (*Iskusstvo soiuznykh narodov*), the proceeds of which were destined for the civil casualties of Belgium, Poland and France. The event had been initiated by the artistic jack-of-all-trades Nikolai Rerikh (Roerich), who put up for auction 37 Flemish and Dutch old masters from his own collection³². A few months later, during the annual salon of *Mir iskusstva*, Rerikh exhibited work of his own, apocalyptic canvases painted in early 1914, which were now presented as visions of the coming destruction of Belgium³³. After the war, the sack of Leuven, memories of a visit to Bruges and Maeterlinck (Rerikh had illustrated his work and designed the scenery for his plays) would result in the so-called Roerich Pact (1929), a Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments which would inspire the creation of Unesco after WWII³⁴.

²⁹ "P'esa L. Andreeva i padenie Antverpena", *Utro Rossii*, 30/9/1914, 5 & *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 3/10/1914, 6; "Korol', zakon i svoboda' na ekrane", *Teatr*, 9-10/11/1914, 4; I. Teneromo, "Voina i kinematograf", *Vechernie izvestiia*, 1/3/1915, 3; <http://ruslitwwi.ru/materials/video/01149-Korol'-zakon-i-svoboda.html>, access: 9 VII 2018.

³⁰ Dokladnaia zapiska po GUGSh. Osoboe deloproizvodstvo, 7/1917 (RGVIA, f. 2000, op. 1, d. 8247, l. 35); Personal files Victor Jamotte and Paul Carbonnelle, Royal Museum of the Armed Forces, Brussels (henceforth: KLM); cf. also Mikhail K. Lemke, *250 dnei v Tsarskoi stavke (25 sent. 1915-2 iuliia 1916)* (Peterburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1920), 295; Dokladnaia zapiska po GUGSh. Osoboe deloproizvodstvo, 16/12/1915 (RGVIA, f. 2000, op. 1, d. 8201, l. 67).

³¹ Repin to D.M. Levashov, 28/11/1914 [Irina P. Sirotinskaia, „Pis'ma na rodinu (Pis'ma I.E. Repina k D.M. Levashovu)”. In *Vstrechi s proshlym. Sbornik materialov Tsentral'nogo Gosudarstvennogo Arkhiva Literatury i Iskusstva SSSR* (Moskva: TsGALI SSSR, 1986)].

³² V. Shchavinskii, "Vystavka 'Iskusstvo soiuznykh narodov'", *Starye gody*, 1915/1, 75-88; P.I. Miatkov, „Sobranie zapadnoevropeiskoi zhivopisi Nikolaia Konstantinovicha Rerikha”, in *Mezhdunarodnaia nauchno-prakticheskaia konferentsiia "Rerikhovskoe nasledie"*, Tom 3, *Vostok-Zapad na beregakh Nevy* (Sankt-Peterburg: Rerikhovskii tsentr SBbGU, 2003), 89.

³³ A. Gidoni, "Tvorcheskii put' Rerikha", *Apollon*, 4-5 (1915): 34.

³⁴ Nikolai K. Rerikh, "Gorodu Briugge", *Tverdnyia plamennaia* (N'iu-Iork: Vsemirnaia liga kul'tury, 1932), <http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/roerich/roer292.htm>, access: 9 VII 2018; Nikolai K. Rerikh, "Korol' Al'bert", *Nerushimoe* (Riga: Uquns, 1936), <http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/>

On 3 November 1914, three weeks after the fall of Antwerp, the liberal Petrograd daily *Den'* devoted a special issue to Belgium, with contributions by Zinaida Gippius, Fedor Sologub, Vladimir Piast, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Igor' Severianin, Leonid Andreev and Aleksandr Blok³⁵. When in early 1915 a Russian version of Hall Caine's immensely popular and extremely propagandistic *King Albert's Book* was conceived (in the British 1914 original only the Russian ambassador, Merezhkovskii and Aleksandr Kuprin had participated)³⁶, the contributors of *Den'* were the first to be invited. Andreev imagined that King Albert would ride into Berlin like a horseman of the Apocalypse. Fedor Sologub tried to console the Belgians with the idea that in the end justice would prevail: "But I know that the spirit of King Albert does not hesitate. / Soon he will see his beloved country liberated. / Victory is already making its laurel wreath. / He will triumphantly return to his plundered palace". The futurist poet Igor' Severianin wondered, whether Belgium was "real or a chimera. / Will you exist? Do you exist? Did you exist? / But your beautiful image is dear to us / with its triumph and tragedy..." Zinaida Gippius compared Belgium with Poland, whose body and soul had been destroyed by the Germans. Belgium, however, had fared better: "O Belgium, country of the holy dead! / Your name is written on the cross, but your soul is living and free / [...] / Golgotha exists for the sake of resurrection, / and we believe that it will come"³⁷. *Kniga korolia Al'berta* went through two editions, the second much more voluminous than the first. In its wake, a *Bel'giiskii sbornik* was published, in which some major and many minor authors participated. It was presented as a "token of honour to a small nation that had conquered the world with the severe beauty of its spirit"³⁸.

Whereas the highbrow contributors of *Den'* and *Kniga korolia Al'berta* indulged in historical references and Flemish-Belgian mystique, lesser gods in minor journals and propaganda brochures were far less subtle. One Andrei Svetsitskii devoted a whole cycle of poems to "The Destruction of Belgium." In 'Antwerp has

roerich/roer210.htm, access: 9 VII 2018. See also Roger Tavernier, "Nikolaj Roerich en zijn prent over Leuven en Reims", *Ex Officina* 29 (1), 2016, 4–5; Roger Tavernier, "Het pact van Rërih: over Leuven, Reims en... Brugge" in 'Liubliu tebia, Petra tvoren'e'. *Feshtrifit v chest' Emmanuelia Vagemansa. 'Ik hou van jou, Peters creatie.' Festschrift voor Emmanuel Waegemans*, eds. Pieter Boulogne et al. (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2016), 443–460.

³⁵ Natal'ia Iu. Griakalova, "Russkie pisateli – geroicheskoj Bel'gii. Spetsial'nyi vypusk gazety 'Den'", in *Russkaia publitsistika i periodika epokhi Pervoi mirovoj voiny: politika i poetika. Issledovaniia i materialy*, ed. Vadim V. Polonskii (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2013), 266–279; "Hulde uit Rusland aan België", *De Legerbode*, 1/12/1914.

³⁶ Nick Milne, "Pen and Sword", Pt. II: Advertising King Albert's Book, <http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/unconventionalsoldiers/3241/>, access: 9 VII 2018.

³⁷ Leonid N. Andreev, "Bel'giitsam", in *Kniga korolia Al'berta. Posviashchaetsia bel'giiskomu koroliu i ego narodu predstaviteliami narodov i gosudarstv vsego mira* (Moskva: Ideia, 1915), 7–12; Fedor K. Sologub, "Uteshenie Bel'gii" 20–21; Igor' Severianin, "Poeziia o Bel'gii", 22–23; Zinaida N. Gippius, "Tri kresta", 23–24.

³⁸ "Ot redakcii", in *Bel'giiskii sbornik* (Petrograd, 1915), 7.

fallen' he lamented that "Antwerp is on fire, Antwerp is dressed / in the purple robe of fire... / O, times of unexpected, innumerable suffering! / This hour is full of madness and suffocation"³⁹. The popular weekly *Niva* published Vladimir Krakovetskii's poem 'Antwerp': "An exhausted night had fallen over the fallen city, / In the dead streets the enemy was marching... / And in the dead silence of an old quarter / Sounded heavy, measured steps..."⁴⁰. The poem sat among pictures of the devastation in Belgium, under the title: 'In the country of heroes. Belgian towns destroyed by the Germans'. On 18 November 1914 the Petrograd People's Home performed the play 'Antwerp has fallen, but Belgium is alive!' It was a dreadful drama that played in an Antwerp military hospital and in which a Belgian, a German, a doctor and a nurse were discussing the situation and justifying their positions, while in the background the *Brabançonne* was playing⁴¹. These and other events were meant to collect money for the Belgian heroes. One collection, organized by the Moscow city council on 23 October 1914, brought in 100,000 rubles⁴². One anecdote proved particularly popular and persistent in the Russian context: how King Albert, during a sortie from beleaguered Antwerp, was kidnapped by his chauffeur. When the man refused to obey orders and return home, the King pulled his revolver and shot his abductor on the spot. Whereupon the King returned to the Belgian lines as if nothing had happened. When he entered the city, he was met by a huge crowd who had learned about the danger their King had narrowly escaped⁴³. The anecdote was even put in verse by Aleksandr Petrov⁴⁴.

There were limitations, however, to what literary critics could digest. The Petrograd student and future Bolshevik Petr Shevtsov took inspiration from Andreev and tried his hand on *Bel'giitsy* (The Belgians), a horrible play featuring King Albert, Maurice Maeterlinck, the student Maurice Belgique, German and Belgian puppet soldiers, as well as the inhabitants of Aalst and Brussels. When Shevtsov made enquiries why the leading leftist journal *Russkoe bogatstvo* had not reviewed his piece, Vladimir Korolenko, who himself was a huge admirer of King Albert, did not spare his criticism: "Your play is a penny dreadful. Its setting is absolutely

³⁹ Andrei E. Svetsitskii, *Za rodinu i pravo. Pogibel' Bel'gii. Prusskie zverstva. Na Karpatakh* (Moskva: tip. Poplavskogo, 1914), 15.

⁴⁰ Vladimir Krakovetskii, "Antverpen", *Niva* 41 (11/10/1914), 783.

⁴¹ Aleksandr A. Narovskii, *Antverpen pal, no Bel'giia zhiva! Eskiz v 1-m deistvii* (Petrograd: Russkoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1914).

⁴² *Pod nemetskim igom, ili geroi razgromlennoi Bel'gii* (Moskva: Tip. P.B. Bel'tsova, 1914), 11–13. Cf. also *Otchet po organizovannomu Moskovskim gorodskim obshchestvennym upravleniem, Vserossiiskim soiuзом gorodov i Vserossiiskim zemskim soiuзом i proizvedennomu 30 noiabria–1 dekabria 1914 goda odnodnevnomu sboru pozhertvovanii v pol'zu postradavshego ot voiny naseleniia Bel'gii i Pol'shi* (Moskva: Gorodskaiia tipografiia, 1915).

⁴³ S.I. Nikiforov, *Korol'-geroi. Chest' doblestnoi Bel'gii* (Odessa: Iuzhnaia tipografiia, 1914), 8; cf. Tokarskii, *Dnevnik*, 67.

⁴⁴ Aleksandr Petrov, *Slavnyi korol' Al'bert. Novye voennye pesni Bel'gii* (Moskva: A.S. Balashov, 1914), vi.

implausible, with Germans popping up at the border as if falling from the air. It does not contain living souls, i.e. people with a character of their own. On one side, there are only roaring wild beasts who burn, plunder and rape; on the other side are the innocent Belgians, who speak in an elevated language. This is puppet theatre, in which angels and demons are clashing with each other. In other words: your characters lack personality and resemble the patriotic articles of which the papers are full⁴⁵.

Thanks to the war propaganda, in 1915 Maria Veselovskaia could yield the fruits of the literary crop she had been cultivating since more than a decade⁴⁶. *Niva* devoted many pages to Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck, who was considered the literary soul of Belgium. “Who would have thought that the Belgians were such heroes? Haven’t you read Maeterlinck then? Of course, but who would have thought that they would become victors? Of course they would! They are, after all, the people of Maeterlinck!”⁴⁷. The apogee of war propaganda through Belgian literature, undoubtedly, was the publication of no less than two different translations of Charles De Coster’s *La Légende et les aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d’Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs* (1867, *The Legend of Thyl Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak*). Already in 1913, in *Golos minuvshogo*, Veselovskaia had called the novel ‘the Belgian Bible,’ a name coined by the Belgian literary critic Fernand Nautet in 1892⁴⁸. *Golos minuvshogo* serialized the first Russian translation by Vasilii Kariakin; in his preface the literary critic Vladimir Friche did not make any reference to the ongoing war, but the thesis of the novel – the struggle between democratic Flanders-Belgium and despotic Spain during the religious wars of the 16th century – did not require a lot of fantasy to understand⁴⁹. The second translation appeared in Korolenko’s *Russkoe bogatstvo*. In his introduction, the translator Arkadii Gornfel’d, made a direct comparison between past and present. “Belgium of Lamme Goedzak and Belgium

⁴⁵ Petr Shevtsov, *Bel’giitsy. Tragediia v 4-kh deistviiakh* (Petrograd: P.G. Kelleev, 1915); Korolenko to Shevtsov, 5/11/1915, in Igor’ Petrov, „Materialy k biografii P. Shevtsova”, <http://labas.livejournal.com/1140604.html>, access: 9 VII 2018.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Poety Bel’gii. Sbornik* (Moskva: Universal’naia biblioteka, 1915); *Bel’giia v literature. Sistematicheskii spisok knig i zhurnal’nykh statei o Bel’gii, imeiushchikhsia v bibliotekhe O-va prikazchikov v Irkutskke. Sostavlennyi Bibliotechnoi komissiei* (Irkutsk: Tipografiia Irkutskogo T-va Pechatnogo Dela, 1916).

⁴⁷ Kornei I. Chukovskii, “Dusha Meterlinka”, *Niva* 52 (27/12/1914): 1017–18. Cf. also “Meterlink i voina”, *Niva* 43 (25/10/1914): 832–3; V.N. Nikonov, “Moris Meterlink”, *Niva* 46 (15/11/1914): 881–886.

⁴⁸ Veselovskaia, “Starshie i odinokie novoi bel’giiskoi literatury (Van-Gassel’, De-Koster, Pirme)”, *Golos minuvshogo* 9 (1913): 7–21. Cf. Fernand Nautet, *Histoire des lettres belges d’expression française* (Bruxelles: Rozet, 1892), 100 & 117.

⁴⁹ Vladimir M. Friche, “Natsional’naia Bibliia bel’giitsev”, *Golos minuvshogo* 1 (1915), 225–227; Sharl’ De Koster, “Legenda o podvigakh Ulenshpigelia”, *Golos minuvshogo* 1 (1915): 228–263; 2 (1915): 303–377; 3 (1915): 298–370; 4 (1915): 303–377; 5 (1915): 303–359; 6 (1915): 307–367; 7–8 (1915): 285–392.

of King Albert, Belgium of William the Silent and Belgium of (Brussels) mayor Max, Belgium of the printer Simon and of the poet Maeterlinck, are they not the timeless Belgium of Thyll Ulenspiegel, united in its endless diversity throughout the centuries?"⁵⁰. Eventually Gornfel'd's translation would prevail, not in the least because the popular *Niva* had it circulated on a large scale⁵¹.

At the end of November 1915 the Russian conservative daily *Novoe vremia* repeated that the gallantry of the tiny, but brave nation shown in 1914 would forever endear Belgium to the Russians⁵². This, however, was an exaggeration. For a couple of months already the Russian interest in Belgium had been waning. As of 1915, the *Letopis' voiny*, Russia's official chronicle of the ongoing war, almost exclusively focused on the Russian front. Sporadic drawings and photographs of the Belgian lines had no relationship whatsoever to the surrounding articles. As the Russian empire was sinking deeper and deeper in the quagmire of the war, the relative calm of the Belgian army in the 'Free Fatherland', which so contrasted with the gruesome experience of the French, British and Russian trenches, could hardly be presented as heroic behavior.

All of this changed, however, after the February Revolution of 1917. Notwithstanding the general war-weariness in the Russian population, the Provisional Government wanted to continue the war effort; it absolutely wanted to prove to its Allies that Russia had not succumbed to anarchism and defeatism and would honor its previous engagements. In return, the Allies, as well as neutral Belgium, sent socialist delegations to Russia so as to bolster the new regime and... urge them to remain in the war. To justify this policy, the Russian population needed reminding why Russia had entered the war in the first place. On 18 May 1917, the Petrograd daily *Birzhevye vedomosti* printed an emotional 'Belgian Appeal to the Russian Nation,' in which Bernard de l'Escaille, the secretary of the Belgian legation, beseeched the Russians not to seek a separate peace with the Germans, unless they wanted to suffer the same fate as Belgium, i.e. rape and destitution⁵³. The newspaper had the appeal widely circulated⁵⁴. All of a sudden, Belgium became

⁵⁰ Arkadii G. Gornfel'd, "Bibliia Bel'gii", *Russkie zapiski* 1 (1915): 104; Sharl' De-Koster, "Til' Ulenspiegel'. Roman", *Russkie zapiski* 1 (1915): 107-172; 2 (1915): 54-120; 3 (1915): 86-152; 4 (1915): 84-157; 5 (1915): 65-144; 6 (1915): 108-182.

⁵¹ Cf. "Bibliia Bel'gii", *Niva* 44 (31/11/1915): 804; Arkadii G. Gornfel'd, "Sharl' de-Koster i ego 'Bibliia Bel'gii'", *Niva* 49 (5/12/1915): 899-902; Sharl' De Koster, *Legenda ob Ulenspijele i Lamme Goodzake, ikh prikluchniiaxh, geroiskixh zabavnykh i dostoslavnykh, vo Flandrii i inykh stranakh* (Petrograd: Niva, 1916).

⁵² Cf. "De Hulde van een Groot Russische Dagblad. De Belgische leeuwen", *De Legerbode*, 24/2/1916.

⁵³ "Mol'ba Bel'gii k Russkomu narodu", *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 5-18/5/1917.

⁵⁴ *Mol'ba Bel'gii k russkomu narodu* (Petrograd, 1917) (KLM, Moscow files, 3540). De Buisseret (Belgian ambassador in Petrograd) to Beyens (Minister of Foreign Affairs), 25/5/1917 (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, Classement B, nr. 35); cf. "Liga propagandy 'Mol'by Bel'gii k russkomu narodu'", *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 24/6-7/7/1917; Stephan De Spiegeleire, *Diplomatie tussen*

again a hot topic in the Russian war propaganda. Many 1914 titles went through a new print run⁵⁵, but there were new ones too.

Vladimir Sabler, a former Ober-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church now writing under the pseudonym Vladimir Desiatovskii, wrote a hefty volume about *Belgium under the German Knout. The invasion by the German army, murder, theft, rape, the destruction of towns and villages. A sketch*⁵⁶ Emile Vandervelde, the leader of the Belgian socialist mission to revolutionary Russia, implored Russia's revolutionary soldiers not to abandon Belgium: "During the three years that Belgium was mourning for its lost freedom, there was only one day of joy, i.e. when we learned that you had thrown off your shackles and that the sun of liberty had risen over mighty Russia. And we said to ourselves: if you could fight so well when you were in fetters, how well will you perform now that you are free?"⁵⁷ Mariia Veselovskaia herself wrote a brochure about *E. Vandervelde, the leader of the Belgian socialists*, mixing stories about Vandervelde's Russian journey and her own (literary) reminiscences of Belgium. She hoped that after his return to Belgium Vandervelde would tell his comrades that the Russians felt it their democratic duty to fight for Belgium's liberation⁵⁸. One of the most remarkable pleas, however, came from the Russian military agent at the Belgian headquarters in the 'Free Fatherland'. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrei Prezhbiano had been representing the Russian Imperial Army in Belgium since September 1914; in March 1917 he had swiftly sided with the new regime. Prezhbiano's pamphlet *A couple of words about Belgium, its army and people* was written on behalf of the Russian General Staff and was a masterpiece of political opportunism and paternalism. The revolution had not only given rights to the Russian people, but had also brought (re) new(ed) obligations. Prezhbiano reminded his countrymen of the sacrifices that they would have to bring for the war effort and presented Belgium as an example of wartime bravery and... of democratic and bourgeois virtue in times of peace⁵⁹.

traditie en revolutie. De Belgische diplomaten t.o.v. de Russische februari-revolutie (maart-november 1917) (Leuven: University of Leuven unpublished MA-thesis, 1984), 195.

⁵⁵ M.O. Margulis, *Bel'giia* (Kiev: Vserossiiskii Zemskii Soiuz. Komitet Iugo-Zapadnogo fronta, 1917); Evgenii E. Sno, *Bel'giia. Etnograficheskii ocherk* (Petrograd: O.N. Popova, 1917).

⁵⁶ Vladimir K. Desiatovskii, *Bel'giia pod gnetom germantsev. Nashestvie germanskikh voisk, ubiistva, grabezhi, nasiliia, razrushenie gorodov i dereven'* (Petrograd: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1917).

⁵⁷ Emil' Vandervel'de, *Russkii soldat, Brat moi, spasi Bel'giuu!* (Petrograd: Akts. Ob-vo Muravei, 1917), 14; cf. Ta'iana G. Zazerskaia, „Ne revoliutsiia sozdana eti trudnosti, ona lish' vyaviavla ikh“. Iz otcheta bel'giiskoi missii o poezdke v Rossiuu (mai-iium' 1917 g.), *Otechestvennye arkhivy* 3 (2017): 79–109.

⁵⁸ Veselovskaia, *E. Vandervel'de (vozhd' bel'giiskikh sotsialistov)* (Moskva: Zvezda, 1917), 40.

⁵⁹ Andrei K. Prezhbiano, *Neskol'ko slov o Bel'gii, eia armii i narode* (Petrograd: Voennaia tipografiia, 1917), 3 & 16. On Prezhbiano, see Coudenys, *Voor Vorst*, & Vim Kudenis, "Voennyi agent v Bel'gii A.K. Prezhbiano v 1917 godu", in *Voennaia istoriia Rossii XIX–XX vekov. Materialy X Mezhdunarodnoi voenno-istoricheskoi konferentsii*, eds. Denis Iu. Alekseev and Aleksei V. Aranovich (Sankt-Peterburg: SPbGUPTD, 2017), 408–428.

Prezhbiano's hopes were dashed in October 1917, and Belgium completely disappeared from the Russian radar. Even the newly appointed Belgian ambassador to Petrograd, the socialist and former literary critic Jules Destrée who was supposed to incarnate the Belgian-Russian (literary) alliance, had to flee the country⁶⁰. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 not only signified that the Bolsheviks had betrayed the Allied cause, but also that Russia had relinquished its special relationship with the 'country of heroes'. From the Belgian point of view, 'heroism' was now preserved for those Belgians who had survived the Russian ordeal, such as the members of the Belgian armoured cars division who had fought in Galicia (an idea that had been suggested to king Albert by Prezhbiano in 1915) and had been evacuated via Siberia and the US. During their passage from San Francisco to New York, 'King Albert's Heroes' became part of the American war propaganda⁶¹. After the Revolution and Russian Civil War, memories of the wartime friendship attracted a lot of Russian émigrés to Belgium; many believed that King Albert would serve as a surrogate tsar and protect them from the Bolshevik yoke. Indeed, Belgium only recognized the Soviet Union after King Albert's demise in 1934, and it would continue to sympathize with the Russian military in exile. Testimony to that is the beautiful Russian collection in the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History in Brussels⁶². Last but not least, the Belgian wartime legacy also survived in the Soviet Union. Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, although largely forgotten in their own country, remain until this day the points of reference for 'Belgian literature', while the *Legenda ob Ulenshpigele* became a classic. The credit for this lasting legacy undoubtedly goes to Mariia Veselovskaia, who throughout the 1920s and 1930s managed to remain in contact with her Belgian friends and preserve, through literature, the memory of (wartime) Belgium⁶³.

⁶⁰ Jules Destrée, *Les fondateurs de neige. Notes sur la révolution bolchévique À Péetrograd pendant l'hiver 1917-1918* (Bruxelles: G. van Oest et Cie, 1920); Rose-Marie Müller, «Jules Destrée: in vaderlandse opdracht in Rusland», in *Potemkinse Dorpen. Belgen in Rusland*, ed. Emmanuel Waegemans (Antwerpen: Dedalus, 1994), 81-94.

⁶¹ S. Popova, "Voennye zlokliucheniia bel'giitsev v Rossii", *Voennoe-istoricheskii zhurnal* 2 (1996): 46-52; August Thiry and Dirk Van Cleemput, *Reizigers in de Grote Oorlog. De odyssee van een Belgisch pantserkorps 1915-1918* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2008); *idem*, *King Albert's Heroes. Hoe 400 jonge Belgen vochten in Rusland en de VS veroverden* (Antwerpen-Utrecht: Houtekiet, 2015).

⁶² Coudenys, *Voor Vorst*; *idem*, *Leven voor de tsaar. Russische ballingen, samenzweerders en col-laborateurs in België* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2004; R. edition forthcoming, 2018).

⁶³ Elena D. Gal'tsova, "M.V. Veselovskaia i ee perepiska s frankoiazychnymi pisateliami Bel'gii v istorii rossiisko-bel'giiskikh kul'turnykh svizei nachala XX veka (Rodenbakh, Verkharn, Ellens)", in *Sibirsko-frantsuzskii dialog i literaturnoe osvoenie Sibiri XVII-XX vekov* (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2016), 419-428.

Wim Coudenys

A Country of Heroes? Belgium in Russian Propaganda during WWI... and after

Summary

The *treacherous* German invasion of Belgium and the *heroic* resistance by the Belgian king Albert, his army and subjects played a crucial role in the Russian war propaganda during WWI. German cruelties justified Belgian retaliations, and when these were slow in coming, imagination stepped in. Undaunted by any factual knowledge of Belgian politics, history, geography or military tactics, Russian novelists and poets adopted literary images derived from Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, Rodenbach or De Coster so as to instill Russian patriotism and indignation at German (cultural) barbarism. Soon enough, these images were adapted in paintings, war posters, propaganda films, sensationalist plays and pulp literature. These images were so strong that they even inspired real Russian politics: the tactics of inundation the Belgians used (with mixed results) convinced the Russian military to invite Belgian specialists to the Russian front; and when the negotiations over French arms for Russian troops started in 1915, the Russian government wanted to bring its troops under *royal* Belgian command, rather than under the *republican* French. The Russian image of Belgium created during the war would have an lasting impact: Russian émigrés after 1917 molded the image of king Albert after their late Emperor and wanted to believe that he would protect them (in vein). Soviet authors visiting Belgium only saw the country through the images of war. And Russia's most popular Belgian novel – Charles De Coster's *Til Ulenspiegel* (1867), about the civil war in the Low Countries in the 16th century – was first translated in... 1915 as part of the Russian propaganda war. In this case, as in others, suggestive 'literary images' were considered more appropriate and effective than cruel, factual representations.