

NEWSLETTER

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NEWS

THREE QUESTIONS TO ...

Florence Matteazzi, researcher for the project 'the Belgian National Railway Company and the deportations during WWII'.

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BELGIUM WWII

Discover new articles on the resistance, the post-war judicial repression, events that gave colour to the beginning of 1943 and some biographical sketches.

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YOUNG HISTORIANS' DAY

Discover the abstracts of the 26 master's theses that were presented during this event.

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PUBLICATION



KUNST VOR DAS REICH / LE TRÉSOR DE GUERRE DES NAZIS

You were unable to attend the January book presentation by associate researcher Geert Sels ? Discover the list of his next lectures or contact the author to organize a lecture.

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THREE QUESTIONS TO ... Florence Matteazzi,

scientific collaborator on the research project 'The Belgian National Railway Company and the deportations during the Second World War'.



Florence, you joined CegeSoma in June 2022 to work on the 'SNCB' project, after having studied and taught history, worked in an archive for the city of La Louvière, and then managed the Tourist Office of the city of Soignies. Can you explain to us what the research project you are currently working on is comprised of and what kind of results it should lead to?

It is a historical investigation, carried out at the request of the Government, on the role played by the Belgian National Railway Company in the deportations of Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners and victims of forced labour during the Second World War. This investigation was entrusted to CegeSoma by the President of the Senate, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Mobility. It is a kind of duty of remembrance that Belgium wished to undertake, like its Dutch and French neighbours.



My contribution to this inquiry is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the deportations of civilians during the Second World War and the importance of the

SNCB's action in this respect, and the second part focuses on the resistance of the SNCB's senior civil servants and on the networks of resistance fighters that existed within the SNCB.

For the first part, I consulted the archives of the legal purge after WWII at the AGR1 and more specifically the personal files of railway workers convicted after the war for collaboration, notably those of certain senior officials. The interest here is to understand the various mechanisms that were set in motion. If, for example, a railway worker refused to obey an order, what was the administrative machinery that was set in motion? Would he lose his job? Would he be punished? Was there pressure at the level of the hierarchy to obey orders, even if it meant deporting civilians? In November 2023, the results of the investigation will be presented in the form of a report by Nico Wouters to the Senate, and depending on these results, there will be scientific and societal debates.

The second part of my work, focused on the resistance, will be the subject of an article in the *Journal of Belgian History*. The question is whether at the level of the top management, at the level of the general management and the eight departments that existed at the time at the SNCB, there was support for the resistance or not. There are known facts such as the attack on the 20th convoy in April '43, where, undoubtedly, if three young resistance fighters left Brussels by bicycle to be in the right place at the right time to attack this convoy, it is because they knew the time of the passage and the importance of the convoy. In this case, it is obvious that there were leaks of information and secret internal documents. I am trying to show who are the high officials who supported their agents and allowed these leaks of information to the resistance.

What do you think is the societal interest of this investigation broadly speaking?

About 7% of the employees of the SNCB were recognized as resistance fighters after the war, i.e. about 7,000 out of 100,000 staff members. It is important for today's society to emphasize the courage of these railway workers, who were constantly under surveillance by their German counterparts. Between 800 and 900 railway workers paid with their lives for their acts of resistance. Wartime collaboration was less than support for the resistance: there were 1,200 purge files. Now, there are a multitude of small gestures that the railway workers made and that we find in the testimonies but which are absolutely not quantifiable. How many train drivers slowed down enough at level crossings in the hope that some prisoners would succeed in jumping off at these points, where there was often a guard who could eventually serve as a relay and help them if necessary? How many railway workers hid envelopes of the resistance in the mail of the SNCB knowing that these bags would not be searched? How many of them gave their lunch boxes or water to prisoners? These are all acts of resistance because they were not allowed but they are very difficult to quantify.

In the course of your research, did you discover any files or archival documents that caught your eye?

Yes, something quite amusing but also quite risky ... The station of Saint-Ghislain-Hornu had found a trick to divert 90 tons of coal per week for the benefit of the social service that helped the railway workers during the war. When a convoy containing coal arrived, the technicians designated one or another wagon as 'defective' and put a label on it. These cars were diverted to the workshop. They would hastily unload some of the coal and hide it. The label was



then removed, the wagons were put back into service ... and for them the 'repair' mission was accomplished in time, all with the complicity of some of their leaders.

And finally, let's get crazy ... if you were given a year, an unlimited budget and a team of researchers at your disposal, what aspects of the great conflicts of the 20th century would you dream of exploring?

I am very interested in social history, and particularly in the history of children who were affected by the events. I am particularly thinking of the children hidden during the war whose parents did not always return. For them, getting on with their lives must have been terrible. But I am also thinking of the children who were lucky enough to find their parents: for them it was also complicated to continue to live while wondering why someone wanted to deport and murder their innocent parents. This is a reflection that I heard a lot when I conducted interviews with the hidden children for my dissertation. I think that the children, future 'Aryan products', *Lebensborn*(*) children, must have had similar reflections: "Why was I born there? Was it for a political or economic purpose?" Some may have discovered their origins very late... Reconstructing oneself and living with weights such as these, are themes that really interest me a lot.

Thank you Florence for this exchange and good luck !

(*) A series of hostels, maternity hospitals and crèches set up under the aegis of Heinrich Himmler from 1935 as part of a "racial selection" program.

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Belgium WWII – Quid novi ?



Spring is the time of plans and projects... and even though this one is virtual, let us take a look at what is new on the website www.belgiumwwii.be.

80 years ago...

Several articles are chronological in nature. In other words, they briefly remind us of the events that shaped the beginning of the year 1943, from [the declaration that Walloons were 'Germanic people' \(17 January\)](#) to [the strafing of the Gestapo building by Jean de Selys-Longchamps \(20 January\)](#), [the attack on the 20th convoy \(19 April\)](#) and [the protest of the Belgian bishops against the seizure of church bells \(15 March\) by the occupiers](#). Descriptions of all these events and numerous others can be accessed via the timeline on the website.

Biographical journeys

The biographical dimension of the conflict is particularly highlighted in the new articles published online. To everyone interested in the history of Liège – the “*Cité ardente*” (Fiery City) – we can recommend the articles about [Fernand Dehousse](#) (and the [Rassemblement démocratique et socialiste wallon](#)) and [Joseph Bologne, first socialist mayor of the city](#). These notes form an excellent addition to the text about [the city of Liège under the occupation](#). The story of [another equally controversial mayor, Albert Moortgat, is also developed. Moortgat was a brewer and chief magistrate of the municipality of Breedonk](#). Complementing the recapitulatory article about the courageous attack on the 20th convoy, the website also contains information about the key figures of this unique

event. [Youra Livschitz](#), [Robert Maistriau](#) and [Richard Altenhoff](#), who is often considered as the fourth man involved in the operation. The personality of [Luc Somerhausen, resistance fighter and co-architect of our institution](#), is also further highlighted. In the series about 'destinies of war', we present a new article about [the resistance fighter Nelly Vos](#), whose story was also extensively told in the documentary "Nelly & Nadine" of 2022. Two key players in the difficult issue of provisioning – [Emiel De Winter](#) and [Etienne Woestyn](#) – are also presented and the topic of [provisioning and food shortages](#) is extensively covered in an article in the section about occupied Belgium on our website.

Repression of collaborators

Three articles pick up on and further develop the theme of the judicial punishment of collaboration with the enemy: [the first one cover the historical precedents and the legal basis for these policies](#), [the second one is a quantitative assessment](#) and [the third one highlights the different aspects of this policy, ranging from the judicial to the administrative](#). These articles complement earlier contributions. They enable us to get a clearer picture of the policies that were implemented by the Belgian state in the wake of the occupation. These policies indeed still stir up controversy and have led to false claims, while research has never ceased to advance and today gives a more nuanced picture of the legal context and the practices of the different official bodies involved.

The Resistance and its legacy

Now more than ever, [the memory – or rather the absence of memory – of the Resistance](#) was addressed within the framework of the commemorations of 8 May. [This issue had already been examined in a video in our section '5 key questions' dedicated to the Resistance](#). Two new articles lay the basis for a continuation of these debates: A first one about [the history of the museum of the Resistance opened in 1972, which shall re-open its doors in 2024 after a full refurbishment](#). The second one was published in the section '[debates](#)' and deals with [the process of creating heroes \('heroization'\) orchestrated through the latest celebrations of 8 May](#).

A collective work

Today, the website Belgium WWII offers some 800 articles. Over 120 authors from all Belgian universities have contributed. The objective remains the provision of reliable and accessible articles about the history of Belgium during the Second World War. The content of the website is constantly being updated. And the website is also the fruit of the work of numerous volunteers and trainees who help translate texts and publish them online. Thank you to all of you for making this possible!

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Young Historians 'class of 2022': a beautiful bloom



Since 2006, CegeSoma organizes a meeting where young historians are given the floor. The aim is to let them share the findings of their master's thesis with a wider public and to meet colleagues from other Belgian universities. On 27 April 2023, no less than 26 young graduates gathered in Brussels to share their research findings. They were selected based on the quality of their thesis and had to present the fruit of their research in ten minutes. Given the number of participants the schedule was quite tight. All have mastered this challenge with flying colours. Their original and high-quality presentations managed to captivate the audience. The 'class of 2022' will enter the annals of this event.

Our colleagues specialized in both World Wars, the Cold War and Colonization oversaw the conference and acted as hosts: Céline Rase, Guy Vanthemsche, Alain Colignon, Widukind De Ridder, Koen Aerts and Michael Auwers.

Below you will find the abstracts of the different presentations held and the programme of the day. If you are interested in a subject in particular, [do not hesitate to contact us](#), we would be pleased to transmit your request to the young historian in question.

First topic: Front, occupation & society (session hosted by Alain Colignon and Widukind De Ridder)

- Antonin LUCIC : *La Caserne de Gendarmerie d'Ixelles : Origine, construction, vie interne et adaptation, de la fin du 19ème siècle à 2018.* ULB (S. Jaumain)
- Robin DEMESMAEKER : *Piano aan het front - Concerten en cinema voor Belgische soldaten tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog.* VUB (N. Demuelenaere)
- Noémie ADAM COLQUHOUN : *L'expérience carcérale des prisonnières politiques déportées au pénitencier allemand de Siegburg durant la Grande Guerre.* UCLouvain (E. Debruyne)
- Tine DE KEYSER : *Klaar voor de loopgraven? Het rekrutenleven in de Belgische militaire opleidingskampen in Frankrijk tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog.* KULeuven (P. Pasture)
- Ilona DAUW : *Émotions et occupations à l'Est. La vie quotidienne dans les journaux personnels polonais durant la Première Guerre mondiale.* UCLouvain (E. Debruyne)
- Pieter VAN GYSEL : *De speciale brigade van het Parket Generaal Gent in de periode 1943-1944.* UGent (M. De Koster)
- Hugo REIP : *L'alliance socialiste-communiste à la Province de Liège (1936-1949).* ULiège (E. Geerkens)
- Vladimir SEMENOFF : *Le personnel diplomatique, militaire et consulaire belge en Russie pendant la révolution et la guerre civile (1917-1920).* ULB (P. Lagrou)

Second topic: Memories & representations (session hosted by Michael Auwers)

- Hazel DE WEVER : *Het Rode paradijs of de Sovjethel? Tegenstrijdige visies op de Russische Revolutie en de ontwikkeling van het Sovjetproject tijdens het interbellum.* KULeuven (L. Verpoest)
- Basile MOYAERTS : *Een Zingend Imperium: Een onderzoek naar de muzikale propaganda in de Sovjet-Unie tussen 1945 en 1964.* KULeuven (P. Pasture)
- Elyse DE LAET : *Herinnering aan de Holocaust: de herinnering aan de Shoah in Oost-Europa en West-Europa, vergeleken aan de hand van het Polin museum en de Kazerne Dossin.* UGent (B. De Wever)
- Arno BEKAERT : *Bombs away?! Visies op de geallieerde air raids op Duitse steden in de Angelsaksische wereld van de 20ste eeuw.* UGent (B. Bevernage)
- Soufiane RAHMOUN : *Historiographie de Philippe de Marnix : de l'appropriation d'une figure emblématique en Belgique entre le 19e et le 20e siècle.* ULB (P. Lagrou)
- Robin GROESENEKEN : *De la couronne de laurier au casque bronzé: Militaire beeldvorming van Koning Albert I door de ogen van de Belgische pers in de naoorlogse periode (1919-1934).* KULeuven (M. Kohlrausch)

Third topic: Collaboration, wake of the war & repression (session hosted by Céline Rase and Koen Aerts)

- Thomas WINDELS : *La Fin du Stalag I A. Quotidien et vécu des prisonniers de guerre belges du Stalag I A à la fin de leur captivité, des derniers mois de 1944 jusqu'à leurs libérations en 1945, en Prusse-Orientale et dans les alentours.* UCLouvain (E. Debruyne)
- Koen SERGEANT : *Berouw komt na de zonde. Een onderzoek naar de naoorlogse strafuitvoering tot 1970 bij militaire collaborateurs veroordeeld door de Brugse krijgsraad in de periode 1944-1945.* UGent (K. Aerts)
- Luna LIPPENS : *Blankenbergse vrouwen in de collaboratie en de naoorlogse repressie: Een bijdrage tot een gendergeschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog.* UGent (B. Dewever)
- Maxime CONROTTE : *La publicité de l'exécution capitale au coeur de la répression de la collaboration (Bruxelles, 1944-1949).* UCLouvain (X. Rousseaux)

Fourth topic: Colonizers & colonized people (session hosted by Guy Vanthemsche)

- Yannick MICHAUX : *Militair recht en discipline in de Force Publique, een studie van de beroepskrijgsraad van Stanleyville 1922-1930.* VUB (B. Henriët)
- François SAINT LAGER : *Les professeurs de droit de l'ULB et la colonisation belge (1908-1940).* ULB (A. Lauro)
- Elene VERNAEVE : *"C'est magnifique ... mais imparfait": De vervoersnetwerken van de 'Huileries du Congo Belge' in Belgisch-Congo (1919-1939).* UGent (E. Vanhaute)
- Becht KREYNEN : *Tussen Kolonie en Metropool: De Erkenning van Belgische koloniale veteranen na de Eerste Wereldoorlog (1917-1951).* VUB (N. Demuelenaere)
- Nick MAJCHROWICZ : *Les indigènes, je présume ? Een studie over beeldvorming van Congolezen in de Biographie Coloniale belge en Biographie belge d'Outre-Mer.* UAntwerpen (M. Beyen)
- Marijn PETRENS : *'Rumble over the jungle: de Congokwestie binnen de Belgisch-Amerikaanse relaties, c. 1940-1965.* UGent (R. Van Doorslaer)
- Lilian EYLETTERS : *Indemniser les anciens coloniaux européens pour l'indépendance du Congo : La Commission d'Indemnisation des Dommages du Congo (1965-1976).* ULB (A. Lauro)
- Robbe VERBRUGGE : *Beschaving of onderdrukking? De postkoloniale beeldvorming van de Congomissionaris in de Vlaamse dagbladen, 1965-2021.* KULeuven (I. Goddeeris)

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Kunst voor das Reich.

Op zoek naar naziroofkunst uit België.



On 25 January, [Geert Sels](#), associated researcher at CegeSoma, presented his work '[Kunst voor das Reich. Op zoek naar naziroofkunst uit België](#)' within the framework of the Public History Meetings of CegeSoma.

If you were not able to attend... please find below the list of our next conferences (in Dutch) about this topic.

- Saturday 3 June (10.00 am) in Berchem. Organisatie Amarant (<https://www.amarant.be/activiteit/op-zoek-naar-naziroofkunst-uit-belgie/>)
- Thursday 15 June (6.00 pm) at Hotel Falligan, Kouter 172, Gent. Organisatie Brafa (Reservation via press@brafa.be – <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7067129163849031680/>)
- Sunday 18 June (11.00 am) at the Rubenianum, Antwerpen (<https://www.rubenianum.be/nl/activiteit/over-oorlogskunst>)
- Sunday 25 June (2.00 pm) at Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen (<https://kazernedossin.eu/event-item/boekvoorstelling-kunst-voor-das-reich/>)

In the meantime, the book was also published in French at Racine editions under the title '[Le trésor de guerre des nazis. Enquête sur le pillage d'art en Belgique](#)'.

If you would like to organise a conference yourself in Dutch or English about the topic, feel free to contact [Geert](#)

[Sels](#) directly.

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