



Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte
Departement Geschiedenis



Faculty of Humanities
School of History

Asia In Flanders Fields

A Transnational History of Indians and Chinese on
the Western Front, 1914-1920

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DENDOOVEN**

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Prof.dr. Marnix Beyen
Prof. Mark Connelly

Asia In Flanders Fields

A Transnational History of Indians and Chinese on the Western Front, 1914-1920

(Azië in Flanders Fields)

Een transnationale geschiedenis van Indiërs en Chinezen aan het Westelijke Front, 1914-1920)

Dominiek Dendooven

Voor M.

Toonbeeld van elegantie,
Grappigste vrouw ter wereld,
Wijze raadgeefster
En bron van alle geluk

"Man does not reveal himself in his history, he struggles up through it"

Rabindranath Tagore, 1916

"... You have to reform yourself before reforming society and the world"

Lu Xun, 1919

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Foreword: a Personal Quest

Bruges seems an odd place to start a narrative on the First World War. Despite its relative nearness to the former frontline - it's a mere 50 kilometers / 31 miles to Ypres - there is little that reminds the visitor of those four years. As the centre of the Marinegebiet Flandern the city was occupied for four years and the only fighting it had seen, apart from skirmishes around the dates of the German entry and of the liberation, was the spectacular raid on its port of Zeebrugge on St George's Day 1918.¹ Yet, as a young inhabitant born and living in Bruges I was day-in day-out confronted with two matters that will stay with me for the rest of my life : history and a meeting-place of the world. Living in a 15th century house and cycling through the city centre, passing the Belfry tower and riding along the mediaeval canals on my way to school, "history" was simply ubiquitous. But so were tourists from all over the world. It was and is common in a highly popular international destination like Bruges to spend one evening in a café in the company of an American, a German and a Japanese or to be addressed in the street by a turbaned fellow asking you the way to a must-see site. Both aspects I immensely enjoyed: history was a passion from an early age and the chance to meet so many foreigners made up for the impossibility of intercontinental travel on my part. And it enhanced one's language skills as apart from - maybe- some tourists from Holland no visitor would understand nor speak the local Flemish variation of Dutch. Bruges is a place that invites consideration of the past and of history. In the 2014 Bollywood-hit "PK", the highest-grossing Indian film of all time, the historic city centre of Bruges is the backdrop for the first quarter of the film. When the heroine, played by charming top-actress Anushka Sharma, returns to her Delhi flat a large propaganda poster from the First World War adorns the wall and reminds her to "Remember Belgium". Still in 2014 Chinese president Xi Jinping visited the College of Europe. Addressing an audience including the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, he elaborated on the way the Chinese see history and on the history of China, stressing the fact that "the memory of foreign invasion and bullying has never [been] erased from the minds of the Chinese people".² We can only

¹ De Schaepdrijver S. (2014) *Bastion : occupied Bruges in the First World War*, Veurne: Hannibal Publishing.

² https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/uploads/event/speech_by_xi_jinping.pdf (accessed 23 February 2016).

wonder whether the references in Xi's speech and in the Indian film had anything to do with the centenary of the start of the Great War. I would not be surprised at all if that was the case. It certainly is not a coincidence that both India and China are central to my narrative.

Both aspects I love(d) so dearly in Bruges - an omnipresent 'sense of history' and a chance of 'meeting the world' - I re-encountered when moving to Ypres in 1996 though on a somewhat smaller scale. A large majority of the visitors were British and due to the destruction of the town in the First World War, visible historical remnants were mainly restricted to that war and its aftermath, leaving only fragments to testify to Ypres' magnificent mediaeval past and the centuries up to 1914. However, certainly when I started working for the then new In Flanders Fields Museum in 1998, I realised that much more than in Bruges, the world was an integral part of the local, or rather regional, history. Yet, that aspect of its past wasn't very visible. Not only did the omnipresence of British tourists obscure the fact that during the war more armies than that of the UK, Canada and Australia (to name just the best known to the laymen-visitors) had been present here, one also had to 'read between the lines': to go beyond the most obvious and most directly visual sights. It is when visiting a smaller, remoter cemetery, or when walking all the way to the back of a cemetery that one encounters Indian or Chinese headstones - or African in a French cemetery. It is only when having a proper look, a more intense gaze that one sees the Indian, West Indian or South African names on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing. And it is only when browsing through lists of names on headstones or memorials that one comes across clearly native Canadian, Russian or Danish names.

At work in the museum it struck me how difficult it was to find information on this fascinating part of history. There was a wealth of material on every conceivable British regiment (that is infantry and cavalry - the less 'prestigious' a unit, the fewer historical productions on their feats) and on every battle. Yet, the number of monographs on non-European units could be easily counted on two hands and in most cases they had been published in the decade immediately following the events. One had to make do with passing references in diaries and memoirs, both from military and civilians. And the same conclusion could be made when browsing through the collection of objects at the In Flanders Fields Museum: only a handful could be related to colonial troops. From some - even large categories such as the Chinese Labour Corps - there was not even a single object in store nor on display. Later I found out this also

applied to the much larger 'national' institutions such as the Imperial War Museum or the Belgian Army Museum. The extremely limited number of exhibits from colonial units in their collections is striking and telling for the way non-European military and labourers were considered towards the end and immediately after the war when these collections were established. The situation is somewhat better for the collections of photographs, film and art in these major establishments, but this seems largely due to the attraction the exotic element of these military and labourers had on artists, including photographers and filmmakers. Objects from or made by the 'natives', however, were mostly lacking. As it was improbable these people had left nothing behind, it was clear from the outset that these were yet another group of 'forgotten voices' from the First World War and hence, they could be added to a list including civilians living near the front, refugees, prisoners-of-war, internees, forced labourers and many others.

A chance meeting towards the end of 1998 or the beginning of 1999 added an extra dimension to my emerging quest. When going through the museum I noticed a turbaned Sikh contemplating the large photograph of the maharaja of Patiala visiting the Belgian front and we started a conversation. The man was Bhupinder Singh – the same name of the maharaja on the photograph. A member of the Sikh diaspora living in Holland, he explained to me that the reason for his visit was that this was part of their history. Moreover, that Ypres was one of the few places (but far from the only place) in Europe of historical significance to his people. Then and there I started realising the potential of this part of history and what a mistake it was and would be not to include this in the way we look at the Great War. For this was more than just another forgotten group involved in the war where one could argue that for the sake of respect and historical justice this group had to be included (more actively) in commemoration issues. This was a history we shared, a common ground and hence a chance for meeting, and for learning about and from each other. Moreover, in today's de facto multicultural societies, having common '*lieux-de-mémoire*' and by consequence sharing a common history has a potentially even more charged political meaning in as far as this can open fresh opportunities for dialogue.

It was the start of a whole range of activities organised by In Flanders Fields Museum ever since April 1999 not only with the purpose to integrate this forgotten part into the history - and historiography- of the First World War, but also with the explicit wish to get our public

acquainted with these cultures who were present at the front in Flanders during the Great War. Events included Vaisakhi 1999 (commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa, the brotherhood of initiated Sikhs), some conferences and talks, several smaller exhibitions on the Indian Army in Flanders and two major exhibitions, respectively on the multicultural presence at and behind the front (Man - Culture - War, 2008) and on the Chinese Labour Corps (Toiling for War, 2010).

For each event, the basic approach was similar and coincided with the approach the In Flanders Fields Museum takes on the history of the First World War³:

- Providing a history of the war from a **local/regional perspective**. Set in the middle of the landscape - in a *lieu-de-mémoire par excellence* - it is bound to tell that history, taking into account the landscape where the historical events happened. By focusing on a limited geographical circumscription, one is able to familiarise sufficiently with specific sources emanating from that region, certainly if one is familiar with the local language/dialect spoken. The geographical area the In Flanders Fields Museum covers is that of the front in Flanders and its rear, its (quite extensive) lines of communication.
- A **'bottom-up' perspective**. The museum wants to tell the story of the ordinary man and woman in war, irrespective of 'the side' they were on (allied, German, neutral), or their status (military, civilian, officer, refugee, medical personnel, ...). It does so by focusing on personal objects, personal stories and by quoting personal documents (letters, memoirs, diaries, interviews). The result is a highly subjective, often even contradictory narrative of the First World War. By overcoming boundaries of nationality, gender, status, the viewpoint is genuinely that of the individual caught in the maelstrom of events over which s/he had little or no control. It also enables the avoidance of a too overtly national or euro-centric viewpoint.
- Letting individuals in war tell their story implies a **focus on war experience**. Each personal quote, each personal story, each personal object relates to how the war was experienced by a particular individual. Interpreting these require a high level of empathy with the subject and a certain knowledge of the contexts (cultural, geographical, military). A focus on war experience brings us to the core of what war did to people.

³ See the mission of the museum:
<http://www.inlandersfields.be/en/practical/discover> (accessed 5 April 2016).

This is of course just one of many possible readings of the history of the First World War, but it remains the guiding principle to which I abided over the course of the years and to which I also hold in this present work: a restriction to a geographical area I am familiar with, trying to construct a history not only top-down but also bottom-up, with an important accent on (war) experience. This is not an uncommon approach - to name some of the better known - David Van Reybrouck's hard to emulate *Congo: the epic history of a people*⁴ or, for what concerns the historiography of the First World War, the (at least in a large part) oral history-based 'battle books' of authors such as Lyn MacDonald⁵ and the Imperial War Museum's Nigel Steel and Peter Hart.⁶ Though inspirational and certainly popular with a large part of the history-reading public, the latter publications only partly conform with this form of study: yes, I look at how those on the field experienced the war and this will be related to the view 'from above', but much more space will be dedicated to context, to insights and to the "bigger story". In contrast with the aforementioned witness account-based books, the sources I will use are more diverse and will be instrumental in building a narrative that transcends that of the individual to that of the ethno-cultural group to which one belonged. Moreover, in the eyes of many scholars some of the deficiencies of the aforementioned books are their limited bibliography and reference system and the general lack of academic discourse. This does not imply that these contributions are inferior, only that they belong to another domain: that of public history (a designation to how history is presented to the public and how the public 'meets' history in everyday use, as opposed to the academic discipline of the same name).

The two - public and academic history - however, should not be in opposition to one another, nor should it be a matter of one-way traffic. That public history solely concerns the translation of academic insights towards larger audiences, is truly a misconception on behalf of some within academia. Documentaries, popular books and exhibitions - to name just these externalisations of public history- have not only a language proper to their medium, but also generate a dynamic of their own. Hence

⁴ New York, HarperCollins, 2014, 639 p.

⁵ *They Called it Passchendaele. The Story of the Third Battle of Ypres and the men who fought it.* (London, Viking) was first published in 1978 but is still in print, a reminder of the popularity of this genre. A whole series of books along the same pattern followed: *The Roses of No Man's Land* (on female experiences) in 1980, *Somme* in 1983, *1914* in 1987, *1915* in 1993 and *To the Last Man: Spring 1918* in 1999.

⁶ For instance *Passchendaele. The Sacrificial Ground.* (London, Cassell, 2000) but both authors have produced books along similar lines on the Battles of Gallipoli and Jutland and on the war in the air.

public history has the capacity to contribute to academic debates and does so. In 2014 scholars from the history departments of the universities of Antwerp, Ghent, Louvain and Luxemburg published a (first) counter-factual history of Belgium.⁷ Among the reasons to do so, the editors note both the necessity to uplift this domain of history from the realm of fiction writing or amateur(ish) history writing and to counter existing prejudices on behalf of academics to this particular field of study which when applied in an academically responsible fashion is indeed able to enlarge our insight into how the past evolved.⁸ So, it could be argued that in this case the impulse that directed the switch from public history towards academic history was negative, namely the urge to improve and professionalise. A similar phenomenon could be seen through the late 1990s and early 2000s regarding battlefield archaeology. Initially the domain of a wide scope of amateur-archaeologists ranging from mere scavengers and treasure-hunters to dedicated and cautiously operating semi-professionals, academically schooled archaeologists were forced to follow the trend and to include twentieth century conflict in their work field.⁹ Nowadays, battlefield or conflict archaeology is considered an established sub-discipline of archaeology, is being taught at a number of universities and has since 2005 a dedicated peer reviewed journal of its own, the *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*. More positive impulses whereby public history stimulates academic history are legion as well. The Museum Dr. Guislain in Ghent takes for instance a very broad perspective on its theme of the history of psychiatry. When developing their exhibitions, the subjects are usually determined by the museum team which also develops the narrative. However, in order to do so in a proper way, academics such as historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, but also non-academics such as fellow-curators and artists are asked to contribute to both exhibition and catalogue. Recent examples are “Exotic Man. Other cultures as entertainment” in 2009 or “Characteristic Faces. On Hawk noses and chipmunk cheeks” in 2014.¹⁰ By doing so the museum enhances

⁷ Van Ginderachter M, Aerts K and Vrints A. (2014) Het land dat nooit was. Een tegenfeitelijke geschiedenis van België. Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij, 384, Van Ginderachter M, Aerts K and Vrints A. (2014) *Het land dat nooit was. Een tegenfeitelijke geschiedenis van België*, Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 11-13.

⁹ Dewilde M and Saunders NJ. (2009) Archaeology of the Great War : the Flemish experience. In: Saunders NJ and Cornish P (eds) *Contested objects : material memories of the Great War*. Abingdon: Routledge, 251-265., p. 251-3.

¹⁰ Allegaert P and Sliggers B. (2009) *De exotische mens. Andere culturen als amusement. L'Homme exotique. Les autres cultures sous forme d'attraction. Exotic Man. Other cultures as entertainment*, Tielt Lannoo.; [Museum_Dr._Guislain]. (2014) *Karakterkoppen. Over haviksneuzen en hamsterwangen. Characteristic Faces. On hawk noses and chipmunk cheeks*, Tielt: Lannoo.

interdisciplinary research into themes often seldom explored before in academia. The approach is not unlike that of In Flanders Fields Museum and both institutions have been seen joining forces for a double exhibition with single catalogue.¹¹

This study is largely the product of such a process: what started with a personal interest became public history with exhibitions, talks and popular publications, as soon as the potential of the subject was realised. To materialise these historical products, I got acquainted with both private collectors and historians, indologists, sinologists, anthropologists and literary scholars all over the world. Their involvement was an absolute requirement to maintain the scientific standards of each of the projects. However, with the passing of time I came to understand more and more how the insights I gained could add something new to the existing academic literature on this subject. At the same time, transcending public history and writing an academic work, would enable me to get the most out of my subject. For the major restrictions of public history are that one is pretty much bound to the availability of visual material to construct a narrative and that one is often bound to an all too often too limited space. Moreover, academic history is expected to match one's understandings with existing historical theories and hypotheses, in other words: to take the interpretation of the sources and data one step further. For me, the time has come to transform the insights gained through years in public history into a solid piece of academic work and to contribute to the academic discussion in my field of study.

¹¹ [In_Flanders_Fields_Museum] and [Museum_Dr._Guislain]. (2013) *War and trauma : soldiers & ambulances 1914 - 1918, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; soldiers and psychiatrists 1914 - 2014, Dr. Guislain Museum, Ghent*, Tielt: Lannoo.

Introduction

In this thesis I investigate how two culturally subordinate groups from Asia experienced the First World War in Flanders and Northern France and what consequences these engagements had, in the short and longer term, for the individual and on a collective level, in several domains of human activity. As I am not primarily concerned with “decision-making” but with “experience” my aim is to present a “bottom-up” perspective on the Great War, and my protagonists are those at the lower stage of hierarchy at the front: the rank and file, including labourers and ‘camp followers’, especially from within an imperial context, as well as the intermediate level of interpreters and (indigenous) non-commissioned officers. A privileged role is provided for the local population who stayed on behind the front in Flanders: their sources are seldom considered in First World War historiography but are vital to obtain the bigger picture of what was going on.

In this Introduction I will demonstrate the importance and novelty of this subject by assessing the existing historiography and exposing my research objectives. Some relevant theoretical concepts and existing terminology are problematised, rejected or (partly) accepted and the contexts delimiting my research subject will be outlined: the event- and time-based context of warfare on the Western Front and its immediate result, the political and societal context of empire and the geographical context of Flanders and Northern France.

A transnational history of the First World War

As I want to investigate parallels and distinctions in war experience between two subordinate groups, this is a comparative and transnational cultural study. With transnational history I mean that certain situations, contexts and evolutions were not solely due to phenomena within particular nations but were also - or primarily - the result from the interactions between groups belonging to different nations. While comparative history studies different peoples or developments to see how they differ or are similar, transnational history takes into account the flows of peoples, ideas and other things in the understanding that historical processes do not originate and unfold only within nation-states but “are constructed in the movement between places, sites and

regions".¹² Unlike what some people understand as world history, transnational history does not claim to embrace the whole world, nor does it downplay the national context: the importance and specificities of states, empires and other polities have to be taken into account. However, some themes, practices and processes existed across boundaries of nation, state, empire (or even across other socially constructed dividing lines such as race) and hence require a comparative and transnational approach if they want to be properly understood.¹³

At the same time, my subject is firmly set within the context of the British Empire. Both groups I consider sojourned on the Western Front while in imperial service. Those from the Indian subcontinent were imperial subjects, while the members of the Chinese Labour Corps, though proper Chinese nationals, were integrated in the British Army. Their recruitment was enabled by what has been called the 'informal empire', in this case Britain's considerable influence in and on China. Finally, the geographical area I restrict myself to was during most of the war in majority occupied by British armies. As a consequence my thesis can also be seen as a contribution to the history of the British Empire and Commonwealth. Yet, I entirely follow the train of thought of John Darwin that British imperialism was an integral part of a globalised colonialism.¹⁴ To discard ideas of exceptionality on behalf of the British Empire and for the sake of comparison, inclusiveness and integrality, Appendices 1 and 2 give an overview of subordinate groups on the Western Front in the First World War, including examples from other polities. Still, the British Empire did indeed bear some unique features which differed from other imperial projects. The scope of this PhD thesis, however, does not elaborate on subordinate groups under French, Belgian or American rule, but their different treatment and perception is sometimes taken into account for the sake of perspective and comparison.

And, obviously, this is most certainly a First World War history: its subject is that war and chronologically it is demarcated by on the one end the arrival of the first Asian troops on the Western Front (1914), and on the

¹² Bayly CA and a.o. (2006) AHR Conversation: On Transnational History. *The American historical review* 111: 1441-1464., p. 1444.

¹³ Stanard MG. (2009) Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda. *Journal of Contemporary History* 44: 27-48. p. 29-31.

¹⁴ Darwin J. (1999) Decolonization and the End of Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 541-557. p. 544.

other end their return home one year after the Armistice in Europe (1919-20).

Being at the crossroads where several historical fields of interest meet, in particular transnational history (or global or world history) with its subdivision of British empire studies, and First World War studies, I need to position my thesis in the context of recent developments within these important domains of historical research.

Regarding the historical writings on Empire in the world wars, Ritchie Owendale in the *Oxford History of the British Empire* distinguishes two schools. One considers the Empire in terms of the influence on British foreign policy, while the other emphasises the extent to which the wars influenced developments within constituent parts of the Empire, respectively in relation to the growth of the Empire, and later to independence movements and decolonisation.¹⁵ It is clear that my contribution fits in the latter tradition. A protagonist of the field is Ronald Hyam whose central thesis was that Britain's Imperial century came to an end, "if not actually with the shots at Sarajevo in 1914, then in 1915 in the mud of Flanders".¹⁶ John Darwin, however, suggests the beginning of Imperial decline started with the crisis of Empire that followed the First World War. That is to say: he locates the beginning of the historiography of that subject in that period.¹⁷ Either way, the idea that this was the beginning of a semi-voluntary 'long retreat' from Empire should be discarded. It fits particularly ill with evidence of the revitalisation of the colonial mission after the war at the expense of any ideas of self-determination, a phenomenon also visible after the Second World War. Moreover Britain retained a firm grip in the areas that mattered most to her (such as India).¹⁸

There is a consensus, though, not only that the First World War was an important caesura in the history of the British Empire but also that it had something to do with the decline of that polity. Yet the evidence is usually

¹⁵ Owendale R. (1999) The Empire-Commonwealth and the Two World Wars. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 354-365.

¹⁶ Hyam R. (1976) *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion*, London: B.T. Batsford. p. 377.

¹⁷ Darwin J. (1999) Decolonization and the End of Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 541-557. p. 541.

¹⁸ Owendale R. (1999) The Empire-Commonwealth and the Two World Wars. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 354-365. p. 363

centred on the metropolitan core: the rise of the USA at the expense of Britain, the financial burdens, political and social changes, etc.¹⁹ Less attention is given to the consequences of the war in the periphery. These eventual consequences in the Imperial fringe can hardly be called decolonisation, as that is a process that only started after 1945. What I will describe in this thesis therefore are some of the roots of this process. And in this respect it is part of the (proto-)history of that historical phenomenon that united so much of the world's population.²⁰

A researcher considering colonial cultures cannot avoid 'postcolonialism'²¹ (without hyphenation to distinguish it from the hyphenated timestamp 'post-colonial'). This current trend in humanities re-interrogates the past with a view to expose the particular conditions under which 'knowledges' were produced in colonial societies, the self-referential ways in which the subjects of their study were 'represented' and in particular the relations of domination at play by which their own constructs were imposed on those subjects, despite the latter's 'different' understandings.²² From a perspective of historiography postcolonialism aims to take a look at the circumstances, both before and after formal independence, whereby colonised peoples seek to take their place as historical subjects. It wants to elaborate politics of the 'subaltern' which it defines as subordinated classes and peoples.²³ Postcolonialism is explicitly activist: it "*seeks to transform the restrictive, centralising hegemony of the cultural nationalism that may have been required for the struggle against colonialism; It stands for empowering the poor, the dispossessed, and the disadvantaged, for tolerance of difference and diversity, for the establishment of minorities' rights, women's rights, and cultural rights within a broad framework of democratic egalitarianism that refuses to impose alienating western ways of thinking on non-European societies.*"²⁴

¹⁹ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 163.

²⁰ Darwin J. (1999) Decolonization and the End of Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 541-557. esp. p. 552.

²¹ Sometimes termed as colonial discourse theory.

²² Washbrook DA. (1999) *Orients and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire*. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 596-611. p. 596.

²³ Macintyre S. (1999) *Australia and the Empire*. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 163-181. p. 179 ; Young RJC. (2003) *Postcolonialism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 6.

²⁴ Young RJC. (2003) *Postcolonialism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press., p. 113.

Central in postcolonialism is the concept of 'translation': "a way of thinking about how languages, people, and cultures are transformed as they move between different places"²⁵ whereupon 'places' can be used in a metaphorical sense: how an individual or group can be transformed by changing their sense of their own place in society. Hence it involves questions of power relations or of forms of domination. Postcolonialism examines processes from disempowerment to empowerment, how victimised objects evolve into subjects who begin to recognise that they are in charge of their own destiny.²⁶

Postcolonialism has many interfaces with and is sometimes considered to include Subaltern Studies, the Gramsci-inspired series on Indian history that became influential in the 1980s. The members of the Subaltern Studies-group identify with the subject-position of the subordinate, concern themselves with relationship of domination, and self-consciously make their own historical accounts into contestatory acts.²⁷ Prior to Subaltern Studies, so Rose O'Hanlon writes, historiography had treated the subordinate peoples as if they had no consciousness of their own, and hence no ability.²⁸ She advocates history from below as a project to recover the experience of those hidden from history which to her is the recuperation of the 'subaltern' as a conscious human subject-agent: to bestow him with a mode of consciousness and practice which are his own - not bestowed upon him by any elite or external leadership.²⁹ In order to uncover these suppressed narratives and perspectives, the historian of subaltern groups has to work with whatever 'fragments', 'traces' (a Gramscian term) which survive and to privilege these sources. In addition to sources of state officials, of newspapers, of those to be found in institutional collections, of 'private papers' which are to be read 'against the grain', he uses narratives of storytellers and balladeers, and folk memories available in oral accounts as well as a whole corpus of objects and rituals,... . Such alternative sources are often particularly difficult to interpret as they usually do not give simple, direct access to the 'authentic' voice and history of subaltern groups.³⁰

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 29.

²⁶ Ibidem, p.144.

²⁷ Raychaudhuri T. (1999) India, 1858 to the 1930s. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214-230. p. 224.

²⁸ O'Hanlon R. (2012) Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia. In: Chaturvedi V (ed) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 72-115. p. 75.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 80.

³⁰ Washbrook DA. (1999) Orient and Occident: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British*

Postcolonialism and Subaltern Studies are on many levels eye-openers. I am heavily indebted to insights such as the difficulty to reach the voices of the voiceless and the need to include less classical source material such as song or objects to obtain these. The postcolonial scholars reveal the psychological-intellectual problems of understanding the colonial experience from within, from 'below'. Concepts such as 'translation' are definitely useful when studying the First World War from a transnational point of view. Yet, the agenda of anti-colonial activism sometimes imposed distortions to which scholars of postcolonialism and subalternity remained oblivious.³¹

Two cases in point are the fact that castes or tribal organisations were not inventions of the western mind imposed by the latter on the colonised societies but rather based on something real that existed in precolonial societies, or the fact that there was a much greater variety in the European perception of the colonial 'Other' than colonial discourse theory would allow.³² Macro-theories are often prone to generate exclusivity, to the believer there is but one truth, and this seems particularly true for the Subaltern Studies school with their perhaps too great emphasis on Gramscian thought. I would not go as far as Robert Johnson who stated that "these studies which reject historical knowledge as flawed, resort to throwing out evidence altogether in favour of novel-like suggestions",³³ but in Subaltern Studies and other postcolonial studies the concept definitely comes first and the historical evidence seems selected or is interpreted thus that it fits the theoretical concept. By adhering to only one dominant theory, the historian runs the risk of becoming an intellectual prisoner, an option from which I refrain, preferring methodological eclecticism. Moreover, the chronological and methodological order of my research is inverse to that of postcolonial thought: instead of looking for evidence to fit a theory, my starting points are observations, and theories might help me to interpret these findings. Another important difference is that, despite the fact that their claim was

Empire. Volume V. Historiography. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 596-611. p. 601-2; Pandey G. (2012) *Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories.* In: Chaturvedi V (ed) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial.* London: Verso, 281-299. p. 282-4.

³¹ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism,* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 93-5.

³² Bayly CA. (1999) *The Second British Empire.* In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54-72. p. 68; Washbrook DA. (1999) *Orients and Occidents: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire.* In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 596-611. p. 603-6; Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism,* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 95.

³³ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism,* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 96.

precisely to do that, postcolonial theorists often tend to deny the subjects of their studies individual agency (the ability to act and decide) in their own history while it is exactly one of my aims to demonstrate that the colonial 'Other' did possess agency, even in very peculiar and restrictive circumstances.

To some the principal outcome of post-modern influences on Imperial history such as postcolonialism, has been to elevate cultural history to be the pre-eminent branch of the subject, leaving behind even social history and displacing older specialisations in political and economical history.³⁴

This bears a remarkable similarity with the field of First World War Studies, which since the early 1990s has known a remarkable surge that was particularly marked by a cultural turn.³⁵ The historiography of the Great War too witnessed the integration of comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives and the inclusion of hitherto marginalised voices, such as women, civilians, but also colonial conscripts.

Until the late 1990s - early 2000s, the number of books on the role of empire, particularly of non-European groups, in the Great War, was extremely limited.³⁶ On the 140,000 Chinese labourers on the Western Front, apart from a concise French report in 1939,³⁷ an American PhD-thesis in 1973³⁸ and a monograph privately published in 1982,³⁹ nothing much more was published between 1923 and the new millennium. On the Indian Army Corps, all was quiet on the Western Front between 1920 and the mid 1990s, apart from some regimental histories and the studies by Jeffrey Greenhut⁴⁰ in the early 1980s. Only in the late 1990s and particularly in the most recent years since 2008, there has been a notable rise in the interest in the non-European involvement during the First World War.⁴¹

³⁴ Hopkins AG. (1999) Development and the Utopian Ideal, 1960-1999. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 635-652. p. 648.

³⁵ Prost A and Winter J. (2004) *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris: Editions du Seuil. p. 42-50.

³⁶ Owendale R. (1999) The Empire-Commonwealth and the Two World Wars. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 354-365. p. 23.

³⁷ Wou P. (1939) *Les travailleurs Chinois et la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Pedone.

³⁸ Griffin NJ. (1973) The use of Chinese labour by the British Army, 1916-1920 : the "Raw importation," its scope and problems. Norman: University of Oklahoma.

³⁹ Summerskill M. (1982) *China on the Western Front. Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War*, London: Michael Summerskill.

⁴⁰ Notably Greenhut J. (1983) The imperial reserve: The Indian Corps on the western front, 1914-15. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 12: 54-73.

⁴¹ Both academic phenomena described above, the cultural turn in First World War Studies and postcolonialism, are linked to evolutions within the context of the wider

In their overview of the historiography of the First World War, published little over a decade ago, Antoine Prost and Jay Winter conclude that the First World War remains overwhelmingly written from and thought about in a purely national perspective: “à chaque nation sa Grande Guerre”.⁴²

Erez Manela reaches a similar conclusion regarding the history of anticolonialism and decolonisation.⁴³ Indeed, despite the redress of late, the historiography remains fairly unbalanced. War is a subject that is far too often treated from a strictly national point-of-view. To paraphrase Dutch comparatist and cultural historian Joep Leerssen’s words on nationalism,⁴⁴ national or eurocentric history is like using binoculars: one focuses on the past and gets this closer, yet this is accompanied by the side effect of a tunnel vision which blocks a lateral view. The result is that one no longer sees who is standing beside, and looking in the same direction. In other words, blinded by the focus on one’s own group’s history, one does no longer see analogous developments in other groups’ histories. And if a transnational perspective is exercised it is at best a European one.⁴⁵

Most histories of colonial troops have indeed a ‘national’ perspective: by Indian or British scholars on the Indian Army, by West-Indian or British scholars on the Caribbean involvement, On the Chinese Labour Corps, there is a clear distinction in the approach taken by Chinese, British or French scholars, yet most are exclusively interested in the Chinese and not in any other ethnic or national group.

In consequence, many questions remain unanswered. There is still something lacking in the literature which after all is either national or Eurocentric, or focusing on ‘bigger nations’, or on only one category (such as aboriginal people in the British Empire).

This is being realised by more and more scholars, certainly from the youngest generation. Significantly, in 2010, in the very first issue of the

world such as the reality of multiculturalism in western societies and the ascent of countries as China and India on the world stage.

⁴² Prost A and Winter J. (2004) *Penser la Grande Guerre. Un essai d'historiographie*, Paris: Editions du Seuil. p. 264.

⁴³ Manela E. (2007) *The Wilsonian moment : self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. XI.

⁴⁴ Leerssen J. (2015) *Nationalisme*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. p. 118.

⁴⁵ This ‘new’ European perspective was epitomised, according to Prost and Winter by the realisation of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne in 1992, to whose research centre both authors belong. Despite the inclusion of some Belgian and Italian members, both museum and research centre seem to narrow ‘the European perspective’ down to a comparative British-French-German perspective. This is also the case in Prost & Winter’s overview where only works in English, German or French (and the occasional Italian) have been taken in consideration.

new *First World War Studies*, Sir Hew Strachan, éminence grise of British military history, called for widening the scope of scholarship into the First World War.⁴⁶ His appeal did not fall on deaf ears and on the eve of the centenary of the outbreak of war the Oxford University Press monograph series *The Greater War, 1912–23* has been initiated, led by Robert Gerwarth, currently Director of the *Centre for War Studies* at University College Dublin. With Harvard professor Erez Manela, he wrote the introduction to the first volume in the series entitled *Empires at War, 1911-1923*.⁴⁷ Both authors further elaborated the statements from the introduction to the series in an essay with the strong title: *The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911-1923*.⁴⁸ The two texts read like a programme for a new historiography of the Great War, one which is more inclusive and less confined to the old chronological and geographical boundaries. Gerwarth and Manela plead to break out of the two “classic assumptions”, namely a) that the war began in August 1914 and ended on 11 November 1918 and b) that it was a war between nation-states and largely a European affair. Time-wise, they opt for 1911, when the Italo-Turkish War (and the Balkan Wars following soon after) marked the beginning of armed imperial conflict, while 1923 is the year “the massive waves of violence triggered by imperial collapse” (as the authors call it) ended. Indeed, it was the year not only the Treaty of Lausanne was signed finally settling the conflict between Turkey (as successor of the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies, but also the year the Civil War ended in Ireland and the year the last remnants of the White army were crushed by the Bolshevik forces in the new Soviet Union. The second stand of the authors is that the First World War should not be seen merely as a war between European nation-states but as a war of multi-ethnic, global empires. There was obviously national mobilisation to recruit manpower and build support for the war effort, yet the war itself was primarily fought for the survival and expansion of empire. And it was empires rather than nations that were mobilised for the war. Thinking about the Great War as a conflict of nation-states is by consequence a case of reading history backward.

My research entirely ties in with Gerwarth and Manela’s view and hence can be seen as a contribution to this new historiography of a ‘Greater

⁴⁶ Strachan H. (2010) The First World War as a global war. *First World War Studies* 1: 3-14.

⁴⁷ Gerwarth R and Manela E. (2014) *Empires at war : 1911-1923*. In: Gerwarth R (ed) *The Greater War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xvii + 283.

⁴⁸ Gerwarth R and Manela E. (2014) The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911–1923. *Diplomatic History* 38: 786-800.

War'. Despite working from a geographically limited perspective, that of the Western Front, my scope is imperial and transnational and notwithstanding the 'terminus post quem' is August 1914, this study goes well beyond the chronological confine of 11 November 1918. The two groups considered in the case studies were all still present in Flanders throughout most of 1919, some even well into 1920, and my story does not end when they left Europe, as it takes into account some of the afterpains from their war experiences back at home.

Questions and Research Objectives

The first question I asked myself was that from the curious and interested local inhabitant of the former Front: "but who was here?" The result was an overview establishing who was present on the battlefield of Flanders and along its lines of communication and the nature of their engagements. The preliminary research results have been presented in the major temporary exhibition *Man-Culture-War. Multicultural Aspects of the First World War* at In Flanders Fields Museum in 2008, and in the accompanying book, authored with Piet Chielens *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*. Such an overview was a *sine qua non* to understand the extraordinary multicultural nature of the Belgian and Northern French front zone. Appendix 1 offers a list of present-day United Nations Member States of whom the presence of 'inhabitants' at the front in Flanders or along the lines of communication can be substantiated. Yet, such a list based on contemporary independent states cannot reflect the myriad of ethnic, linguistic or otherwise culturally different groups that were present and that included Maori, Native Canadians and Americans, a South African Native Labour Corps, Congolese in the Belgian Army, African-Americans and African-Canadians, and ethnic minorities or minorised majorities from Europe or European settlement colonies such as Alsatians, Flemish or French Canadians. Appendix 2 offers an overview establishing which groups were present on the Western Front and the nature of their engagements (infantry unit, labour company, etc.). This is essential to understand the extraordinary multicultural nature of the Belgian and French front zone, which can be considered a true multicultural society before the term was even invented. The significance (quantitative and qualitative) of these involvements in the First World War are briefly sketched in military, political, cultural as in other domains. By explicitly including white minorities and other European culturally

subordinate groups in this overview, I want to demonstrate how complex concepts of race, ethnicity and subordination were for some experiences were shared by all subordinate groups despite issues of skin colour, language or religion, while other experiences weren't, and how alienation was gradual and relative to each group and individual.

Secondly, the question arose how it must have been for these people who often came from far flung places and entirely different cultures to be engaged in a modern war in Europe. For nearly all members of the non-European ethnic groups involved in the war on the Western Front, this was the first and probably only time in their lives they would visit the continent and engage in the culture of their colonial overlords. To quote Santanu Das, in his reversal of Joseph Conrad's famous book title: hundreds of thousands of non-white men travelled to the heart of whiteness to witness "The horror! The horror!" of Western warfare.⁴⁹ They lived among or along Europeans, met them, and engaged with them. The presence in Europe, and their engagement in a modern war, must have made a lasting impression on these hundreds of thousands of colonial subjects. An impression that must have transformed the way they saw the world and in particular the way they looked upon the 'white' man.

The Western Front and its immediate rear was thus a **zone of contact** par excellence, and my field of study is limited to those groups who were present in Flanders and Northern France during and immediately after the war. This specific geographical area of which I sketch the characteristics in the next section, and this within its specific timeframe, can be considered **a social laboratory**, a space where different groups with different backgrounds are exposed to more or less similar experiences in a similar context, and **where through the interaction with other groups, a translation takes place** in the sense used by the adherents of postcolonial studies. War service and the immersion in European cultures, not in the least that of the "ordinary people" among whom they lived and with whom they engaged, transformed the non-European groups and individuals present at the front: it changed their sense of belonging, their sense of place in society and in the world. It had the potential to challenge imperial power relations, to empower the subordinates and to enhance their political and societal consciousness.

⁴⁹ Das S. (2011) *Race, Empire and First World Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 4.

I am particularly interested in how far the sojourn in Europe affected the colonial subordinates' political awareness, in other words, if it could have stirred nationalist feelings. Most authors on Empire and decolonisation see the First World War as a defining event, a watershed marking a clear 'before' and a clear 'after'. According to Henri Grimal the origins of the movement towards decolonisation are to be found in the First World War "and its influence on coloniser and colonised alike", yet he starts his historical overview of the decolonisation in the British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires in 1919, merely stressing the stability of the Empires during the war.⁵⁰ Somewhat contradictory, Rudolf von Albertini assumed on the one hand that the British and French were astute enough to treat the colonial war veterans as a privileged group, therefore binding them more closely to colonial power, while on the other hand he had no doubt that due to their war experience they had become more receptive to anti-colonial slogans.⁵¹ Michael Mann is another of the few authors to acknowledge a link between combat experience in the First World War and emerging colonial nationalism after that war. In the conclusion to his essay on the role of nationalism in the two world wars, he states that "*the war was a total war, mobilising whole populations, and this increased nationalism during the war. Among the troops, however, this was subordinated to compliance with officers and comrades, which was traditional in well-trained armies, while nationalism never eliminated class or racial divisions.*"⁵² In his chapter, however, he does not include concrete data substantiating this view and it is hence entirely based on assumptions. Paul R. Brass, an American political scientist specialised in South Asian (ethnic) politics, stresses the fact that the politicisation of cultural identities is only possible under specific conditions and these need to be identified and analysed.⁵³ Was the Great(er) War such a specific condition? And, if so, what were the circumstances that led to such politicisation?

In any zone of contact reciprocity is quintessential. For most Europeans - apart from those who had settled or resided in the colonies - the First World War was also the first time they ever met or even saw

⁵⁰ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 5, 9-10.

⁵¹ von Albertini R. (1969) The Impact of Two World Wars on the Decline of Colonialism. *Journal of Contemporary History* 4: 17-35. p. 20.

⁵² Mann M. (2013) The role of nationalism in the two world wars. In: Hall JA and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172-196. p. 193.

⁵³ Quoted in: Özkirimli U. (2010) *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 89.

representatives of non-European cultures, and if they had, they certainly had never seen them in such large numbers nor lived along them. We can question how far the West was equally a zone of translation to these Europeans? To what extent was their view of the self and of their place in the world transformed through their engagement with other cultures? Or even, how far, was there true mutual engagement, in the sense of a real meeting, between these different groups? To answer this question, my focus will obviously not be on the military policies towards non-European groups, nor on the attitudes of white officers, but I will mainly investigate the attitudes, reactions and experiences of the local population, and this chiefly in Flanders. This, at the same time, is a very novel approach, for this group is seldom or never taken into account by First World War historians. Far too often in historiography it seems the Great War was fought in an area devoid of local inhabitants. Yet these people left diaries, memoirs and interviews that prove complimentary and highly valuable sources. And the main reason why these (often well published) voices of the locals were seldom if ever used by historians is extremely banal, yet fundamental: language. Those who do not command at least a passive knowledge of French or Dutch⁵⁴ cannot access these sources. This is probably also one of the reasons why many historians avoid 'doing' transnational history.⁵⁵

By giving central stage to the non-European rank and file on the one hand and to the local population in Flanders and Northern France on the other, this study is unique and leading to insights lacking in the existing historical literature. For the few historical studies that take a perspective that goes beyond the national, usually do so from a top-down or an elitist viewpoint. Elites are important and they do play a role but when their impact 'on the ground' is not taken into account, something is certainly lacking. In both studies of nationalism and postcolonial studies all too often the agency of those at the bottom-end of society are disregarded. During the First World War, however, we see a growing awareness of the self and by consequence, a growing contesting of the societal status-quo, not only among the élite, but also among the lower strata and among 'middlemen' in my particular case of the armies in Flanders. The war itself

⁵⁴ "Flemish" as such does not exist. It is a common denominator of a group of Southern Netherlandish dialects. In the area we take into consideration, the local dialect is West-Flemish, a variation of which was also commonly spoken on the French side of the border.

⁵⁵ Stanard MG. (2009) Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda. *Journal of Contemporary History* 44: 27-48. p. 29.

and the men who fought it are curiously absent in many more often well acclaimed studies. Erez Manela in his otherwise magnificent *Wilsonian Moment* does take an international and non-eurocentric approach to the hopes and despairs raised after the Armistice but he hardly spends a single word on the Chinese and none on the Indian labourers then still present in Europe, despite focusing on the reactions in India and China in two of his four case-studies. Without having given due attention to war experiences he boldly states that : “the ‘revolt against the West’ that was launched after 1919 emerged not from the experiences of the war [...]”.⁵⁶ Even in *Empires at War*⁵⁷, in which Gerwarth and Manela rightfully plead for “a greater chronological dimension [...] and a greater territorial reach than the well-published struggle on the Western Front”, only a few of the book chapters give due attention to the involvement of colonial troops in that indeed “well-published” but arguably most important of the fronts.⁵⁸ And only in the chapter on China⁵⁹, its author elaborates on the experiences of - in his case- the Chinese Labour Corps and both the short and longer term effects of their stay in Europe. It is highly remarkable that the war itself is absent from these works on post-war claims for self-determination and the evolution of empires and nationalism. After all, didn’t the war involve too many people and wasn’t it too enormous an event to ignore? In my narrative the war takes central stage. For it was in this particular context that men from far-flung places encountered individuals and situations whom otherwise they never would have met, and which had a profound, probably lasting influence on both sides.

Two case studies: India and China on the Western Front

Attempting to write a transnational history of ALL ethnic groups present on the Western Front in the Great(er) War within the scope of a doctoral dissertation would be intellectual folly. Goalposts to demarcate the limits of a particular research project and case studies are an absolute

⁵⁶ Manela E. (2007) *The Wilsonian moment : self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 124.

⁵⁷ Gerwarth R and Manela E. (2014) *Empires at war : 1911-1923*. In: Gerwarth R (ed) *The Greater War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, xvii + 283.

⁵⁸ Taking into account the manpower deployed, the number of countries involved, the succession of battles and the geopolitical impact attributed to it. It was certainly considered as such during and after the conflict.

⁵⁹ Xu G. (2014) *China and Empire*. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at War 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214-234.

requirement to bring it to a good end and thus the choice of case studies is an important one. These need to be sufficiently characteristic, not to appear too untypical in their contexts, yet need to be distinct enough to leave room for differentiation and nuance. I believe my two cases fit the purpose.

To start with, perhaps the most untypical of the two cases: China was not a colony - at least not officially. Its situation at the beginning of the 20th century has often been described as semi-colonial. Despite being nationals of a sovereign state, the hired Chinese labourers were subject to British military law and were considered on equal footing with other 'native' labourers. In other words: in the eyes of the British they were colonial troops and treated accordingly. The Chinese labourers all belonged to one ethnicity, namely Han-chinese, and mainly came from only two northeastern provinces: Shandong and Zhili (now Hebei). In general they shared language and culture including religion and the internal differences were linked to class.

India on the other hand, was the prototype of what Eriksen describes as a plural society: a society composed of groups which were socially and culturally discrete but which were integrated through economic symbiosis and the political domination of one group (i.e. the colonial masters). The constituent groups are distinctive concerning language, religion and customs. There are few shared values but the groups are held together in a political system by the coercive force of the state, the police and the military. As a unit of disparate parts which owes its existence to external factors, the plural society often lacks a common social will.⁶⁰ This does not imply that such a society has no shared values at all, nor a common social will. India's patchwork of ethnic groups, languages, cultures and religions was to a great deal reflected in the Indian contingents present in Europe. India sent both an army and a labour corps to the Western Front, recruited from different strata of society and serving in Europe at different moments: the military mainly in the first year of the war, the labourers towards the end and in the immediate aftermath of the war. Not all of the Raj was represented on the Western Front: ethnic groups from the south of the subcontinent and the Bengali people were largely absent from both army and labour corps. India had been - at least - partly governed by the British for nearly two centuries, a rule that was increasingly contested by ever growing sections of Indian societies.

⁶⁰ Eriksen TH. (1993) *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*, London: Pluto Press. p. 49.

Yet, despite important differences, both the Chinese and the Indians on the Western Front had a lot in common, which enables for a fair and balanced comparison of these two Asian groups.

In both China and India, the war was seen by a number of political leaders as an opportunity.⁶¹ In China's case, the war would enhance the international role and prestige of the country in the coming new world-order, while India could expect 'home rule' (self-government) as *quid-pro-quo* for its loyal service to the British Empire. And while the outcome of the war proved a disillusion in both countries resulting in anti-imperial commotion with the May 4th-movement in China and the launching of Gandhi's non-violent resistance movement in India, they were both represented in their own right at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919.

Both China and India had relatively large numbers who travelled to Europe to serve in the war, and moreover the figures are almost equal. With nearly 140,000 Chinese labourers (of whom some 96,000 in British service, the remainder working for the French), China sent the largest contingent of workers to the Western Front, and their labourers stayed the longest. For India, it is estimated about 138,000 men were sent to Europe: up to 90,000 in infantry and cavalry units, and more than 48,000 in the Indian Labour Corps. And while most Indian military men left Europe after the first year of the war, Indian labourers were to be seen unto late 1919.

These large numbers and their relatively long residence in Europe, not only during the war but also in the immediate post-war period, explains the many local witness accounts from the front zone on both groups. No other non-European groups were so often described by Flemish and French inhabitants than the Chinese, closely followed by the Indians. It is not without importance to stress that due to the presence of a considerable number of often noted Flemish missionaries in these countries, both China and India were not completely unknown to the local population in Flanders, be it that the general knowledge of the countries would have been extremely superficial. It is also a remarkable fact that in both groups' war experiences, the missionary effort, either through the YMCA or through missionaries-turned-into-officers, did play a role.

⁶¹ Xu G. (2017) *Asia and the Great War. A Shared History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 61.

Both groups were loudly and clearly considered subordinate, and this both in racial as in military terms. While labour units have always been considered being on the lowest stage in a perceived military hierarchy of status, the Indian military units - ultimately under the high command of British officers -were evidently treated as an imperial reserve. Most members of these units, both Chinese and Indian, shared their poor and rural background, and a large majority was illiterate. This, however, does not signify a complete absence of schooled and literate members, nor a lack of personal accounts of the war. On the contrary, the Chinese and Indians are the two non-European groups which left us the largest corpus of witness accounts of the Great War, and while in absolute numbers still relatively small in comparison to European witness accounts, it is diverse, and in some cases even originating from illiterate labourers or soldiers.

There are not only sufficient local witness accounts and sufficient sources originating from the Chinese and Indians, but both groups are arguably also the best studied of all non-European subordinates on the Western Front. Both in the countries of origin and among members of the Chinese and Indian diasporas, the interest in this part of their history is on the ascent. Hence this dissertation did not come about in a complete void. Even while I was writing, Xu Guoqi published *Asia and the Great War. A shared history* in Robert Gerwarth's *The Greater War-series*. Xu rightfully argues that the war played a powerful role across most of Asia, "shaping national aspirations and development, foreign relations, and Asians' perceptions of themselves and the world", and he calls the war and its aftermath "a striking collective experience" for many Asian countries.⁶² His book is hailed by Jay Winter as "the first scholarly work to tell the story of the Great War from an Asian perspective".⁶³ Yet, once, again, the voice of those on the ground', both Asian and European, is largely lacking. This present study is heavily complementary to Xu's work, for it is not just the second scholarly work to tell the story of the Great War from an Asian perspective, but it also does so as the first one with a clear perspective "from below" and in a true transnational and transcontinental spirit, taking into account not only the Asians' perspective on the Europeans they met, but also the Europeans' perspective on the Asians.

Research challenges

⁶² Ibidem, p. 3-7.

⁶³ In his foreword to Xu G. (2017) *Asia and the Great War. A Shared History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press., p. viii.

Engaging in such a broad enterprise has its strengths and weaknesses, its opportunities and pitfalls. Certainly when there are only a few, if any, examples to follow and emulate. As outlined above, most monographs take either a top-down or bottom-up perspective, and usually within a 'national' scope.⁶⁴ There is a need now for studies that broaden the perspective, not that narrow it to a very specific group. Yet, when a broad perspective is applied, the role of the combatant and labourer near the front is seldom taken into account. Hence, it is time for studies that are not top down or bottom up but try to be both. It is, however, obvious, that it is not always easy to 'hear the voice' of those at the bottom of society. Their past comes in fragments which are seldom unequivocal. Often these sources and voices appear as noise but it's the historian's duty to turn this noise into more coherent voices through which the past can speak to the present. On the other hand it has to be taken into account that some were left with no position at all from which they could speak. These silences mark out the limits of our historical knowledge. One can try to find 'alternative sources' such as objects from, or photographs depicting these groups, but it is clear that such a solution can only offer a glimpse and that the subjects themselves will probably remain silent forever.⁶⁵

With a new and still rather obscure research subject, the decision as to what sources to use and where to find them is a particularly difficult one. Unlike many other historical research projects not one type of archives and certainly not one particular corpus of records could provide me with the information I need. Army records such as the well known War Diaries (or the French equivalent of the *Journaux des Marches et des Opérations*) that are so quintessential in military history are for instance of little use. Not only did very few war diaries of labour units survive - e.g. the National

⁶⁴ Some examples of these perspectives from the Indian and Chinese cases: while Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. offers a bottom-up approach of the Indians on the Western Front, Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. takes a top-down approach. Idem for Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. as opposed to Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als talk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo.

⁶⁵ Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R. (2011) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*, New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan. for instance, offers in some of the contributions an overview of such 'traces' such as photographs and sound recordings from Indian prisoners-of-war in Germany.

Archives in Kew keep the war diary of just one company of the Chinese Labour Corps- but the information in such a basically administrative record simply does not convey much on the individual war experience of the unit's members. The often illiterate subordinates leave their traces elsewhere: one encounters them in objects they crafted such as 'trench art'; in songs; in photographs, films, and art made by European observers; and particularly in memoirs, diaries, letters and interviews, more often from observers who met and engaged with them than from the subordinates themselves.⁶⁶ The reports of the censor of Indian mail are in this respect an important exception. For these reasons, more than other historians, I will draw much of my information from published sources, monographs and other 'secondary' sources. Much indeed has already been published, in particular in national histories of the troops in question, but the innovation lies in bringing disparate data together and looking at it from a different angle. In this respect this thesis is perhaps more in line with the anglo-saxon historiographical tradition.⁶⁷

Even for those with maybe rather good language skills, there will always be restrictions. I do not read Punjabi or Chinese, yet these were languages used by the groups I consider. As a result a whole range of possible sources are beyond my reach. I can only make use of those fragments of which a translation or abstract was made available. In order to correctly assess the content of these non-European sources, one needs to be acquainted with the culture involved. Again, I am not a sinologist nor an indologist and often depended completely on the help of such specialists for a correct interpretation of events or opinions voiced in those sources. A good case in point is a shell in which a Chinese labourer or interpreter had carved some characters. These can easily be translated by anyone with a proper command of Chinese. But to have the text recognised as a poem from the 8th-century Tang Dynasty-poet Meng Haoran and to have it interpreted as an utterance of homesickness through assessing the Chinese place names and expressions, one needs a highly skilled specialist. Hence, this was more of a collaborative project than many other PhD

⁶⁶ For instance, on 'trench art' made by Chinese labourers, see: Saunders NJ. (2012) Travail et nostalgie sur le front de l'Ouest: l'Art des tranchées chinois et la Première Guerre mondiale In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 427-442., on songs and tales by non-European POWs in Germany, see Mahrenholz J-K. (2008) Ethnographic Audio Recordings in German Prisoner of War Camps during the First World War. In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tiel: Lannoo, 161-166.

⁶⁷ Van Ginderachter M, Aerts K and Vrints A. (2014) *Het land dat nooit was. Een tegenfeitelijke geschiedenis van België*, Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij. p. 20.

researches : it simply couldn't be done without some of the people mentioned in the acknowledgement.

It might prove impossible to provide a full answer to all my research questions or to comply with all research objectives in the most exhaustive manner, but raising them and setting these goals in itself is already filling a gap in the existing historiography of the First World War.

The rising interest in this theme, both within ethnic minorities within our increasingly multicultural communities as well as in the former colonies and other countries who had their subjects sent over to Europe, is proof of the fact that these questions are by many considered as important and very relevant for today's society. It might be a piece of forgotten history, but it is a history we share and hence common ground for both 'old' and 'new' Europeans and for Europe and parts of the formerly colonised world. Very real research problems such as a lack of sources on behalf of some at the bottom of society with as result that their voices can't be reclaimed in full, should not refrain us from attempting to write their history. Moreover, it is necessary to redress the image we have of the Western Front in the First World War, to make it more global, more transnational and more transcultural. Raising some questions and pointing out some gaps in our historical knowledge and pointing out where an answer to these questions may lay, even without answering them in full, is a valuable enough contribution to the historiography of what was indeed a Great War.

The Contexts: waging an industrial war, for the Empire, in Flanders and Northern France

Contexts are the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.⁶⁸ On the one hand they clearly delimit one's research subject while on the other hand understanding these same contexts are absolutely vital to make a right assessment or interpretation of certain events. The particular contexts I judge of uttermost importance to rightfully acknowledge subordinate war experiences, their impact and consequences are the

⁶⁸ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/context> (accessed 6 April 2016).

specific nature of warfare on the Western Front, the political-societal context of empire and the geographical-cultural context of western Flanders and Northern France during the First World War.

An industrial and total war

The First World War was a total war in which for the first time civilians became direct targets. It was the first industrial war in which states combined the ingenuity of science and technology with the powers of industry and society in order to destroy each other in a mechanical process.⁶⁹ It was a war fought by armies of millions, no longer composed of professional soldiers or mercenaries, but of volunteers and conscripts from all layers of society. The distinction between civilians and military became less clear as both contributed to the war effort. The result was that there was no longer such a thing as 'innocent civilians'. The destruction of enemy society rather than beating its armies was now the war aim. This implied that in warfare, all restrictions, all moral scruples were lifted - the enemy was reified, dehumanised, demonised.⁷⁰

In the Great War, 19th-century tactics, doctrines and mentalities collided with 20th-century technique. Both cavalry charges and moving infantry troops on the battlefield in large marching formations were entirely unsuccessful. Machine guns shooting up to 450 bullets per minute, now inflicted heavy casualties on every mass assault, whether on horse, on foot, in or out of marching order. The weaponry in use ranged from the most primitive to the most sophisticated : from daggers, trench clubs and bayonets through rifles, machine guns and trench mortars to flame throwers, combat gases and the heavy guns. For the first time the war was fought on the ground, under ground, on water, under water and in the air. The number of injured was staggering: more than half of all French soldiers were wounded twice or more.⁷¹ Most men had been intermittently numbed and terrified, and enduringly emotionally damaged.

⁶⁹ Koch K. (2010) *Een kleine geschiedenis van de Grote Oorlog 1914-1918*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Ambo/Manteau. p. 15.

⁷⁰ Kramer A. (2007) *Dynamics of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.p. 2-3; 31.

⁷¹ Mann M. (2013) The role of nationalism in the two world wars. In: Hall JA and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172-196. p.180.

Though men were still slaughtered with clubs or bayonets, especially during trench raids, less than one percent of the soldiers in the First World War died in close combat - by fighting man to man- more than 70 percent died through artillery fire. The most common type of shell would contain a shrapnel charge that exploded in hundreds of fragments, each potentially lethal.⁷² Many casualties were literally “blown to bits”. While on the one hand the sight of bodies dismembered through shell fire was particularly unsettling, on the other hand the artillery, and particularly the heavy artillery, enabled the gunner to kill ‘en masse’ without ‘confrontational tension’:⁷³ the gunner did not have to look his victim in the eyes and his shooting had become a mere technical activity. This reduced the psychological impact of killing on the gunner and heavily enhanced the lethal effectiveness of the armies. Killing and being killed on the battlefield was no longer a matter of individual bravery, skill and agility. It had become a mechanised, industrial and impersonal process in which in a very short time, large quantities of casualties could be made.

For the targets, either military or civilian, either at or behind the front, death could now come at any instant. Nowhere was safe from the heavy guns, which for many resulted in a constant climate of personal fear against the backdrop of a destroyed landscape and the humming of the artillery.

The sheer volume of firepower, laid on over a period of time and combined with a stabilised frontline resulted in a landscape that bore more resemblance to a desolate swamp or desert (depending on the season) than to a centuries old highly cultured and inhabited territory. Its outlook was beyond description. In the words of journalist and critic C.E. Montague in 1917: “*No eloquence has yet conveyed the disquieting strangeness of the portent. You can enumerate many ugly and queer freaks of the destroying powers [...] But no piling up of sinister detail can express the sombre and malign quality of the battlefield landscape as a whole*”.⁷⁴ Yet many war artists such as Paul Nash, Christopher Nevinson or William Orpen tried to convey the haunted sites they witnessed to canvas. But some things were indeed impossible to record. Orpen remembered

⁷² Koch K. (2010) *Een kleine geschiedenis van de Grote Oorlog 1914-1918*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Ambo/Manteau., p. 20; Kramer A. (2007) *Dynamics of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 251-2.

⁷³ The term is introduced by Randall Collins in *Violence: a Micro-Sociological Theory*. (Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷⁴ Malvern S. (2004) *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War. Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p. 27.

“an officer saying to me: “Paint the Somme? I could do it from memory - just a flat horizon-line and mudholes and water, with the stumps of a few battered trees”, but one could not paint the smell.”⁷⁵ In the acclaimed TV documentary series *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century* Paul Fussell is asked what the trenches were really like. His answer was : “*The first thing was it smelled bad. It smelled bad because there were open latrines everywhere. There were bodies rotting everywhere. Nothing could be done about them. You could throw a shovel full of quick lime on them to take some of the smell away, but the odor of the trenches was appalling.*”⁷⁶ Fussell’s telling quote claims “open latrines” and “bodies rotting” as prime sources of the bad smell at the front. But the impact these two elements must have had, goes far beyond the mere senses. The association of crap with all things animal, or better bestial, has always been strong and in this respect the problem of how to deal with excrements became of an extreme importance.⁷⁷ According to Julia Kristeva in society the abject - things expelled from the body and yet still of the body such as faeces, urine, blood or even the body itself when it has become a cadaver - need to be constantly and ritualistically warded off and purified to make a symbolic order, or law or culture possible. In a context where the abject can’t be expelled, the identity of that order is threatened and its frailty exposed.⁷⁸ Psychosis and dysfunction might be the result. The Chinese philosopher Mencius (Mengzi), who came from the province of Shandong where most members of the Chinese Labour Corps in the First World War originated, strongly linked dealing with the dead with human nature itself. According to him man became human the moment he realised he could not let the dead rot in the ditches.⁷⁹ That was to him the beginning of civilisation. Not being able to bury (or cremate) the dead or to dispose of excrement are strong indicators for the process of dehumanisation the men in the trenches underwent. Conditions in the trenches were wretched in many other ways as well. Apart from death and injury, the men suffered fear, horror, grief, fatigue and discomfort. Life was worse than the worst slum one could have ever

⁷⁵ Orpen W. (1924) *An Onlooker in France, 1917-1919* London: Williams and Norgate. p. 20.

⁷⁶ http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_fussell_03_trenches.html (accessed September 2013).

⁷⁷ Dendooven D. (2017) Trench Crap. Excremental Aspects of the First World War. In: Saunders NJ and Cornish P (eds) *Modern Conflict and the Senses*. Abingdon: Routledge, 183-195.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Malvern S. (2004) *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War. Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p. 103.

⁷⁹ Behuniak J. (2005) *Mencius on becoming human*, Albany: State University of New York Press. p. 68.

experienced: the trenches were damp, dirty and vermin-infested. With no privacy at all, men ate, washed (if possible at all), slept and went to the toilet together. Also in this respect the soldiers were 'animalised': they lived in a primitive way in trenches and dugouts, literally within the earth, a pack primarily trusting their basic instincts of survival.

Many of the subordinates were not active soldiers and thus would not serve in the trenches. Yet, in many camps behind the frontline the situation was only slightly better. Hundreds of thousands lived closely together under a constant strain in circumstances where hygiene and privacy were far beyond the standards many had become used to. Tents or huts accommodated up to forty individuals (and perhaps more) and latrines were all too often dug in the open. Camps closer to the frontline were subject to regular shellings. It was not uncommon for men to leave the tents or huts in the pitch dark and in foul weather to spend the remainder of the night in a flooded trench that had been dug for cover during such emergencies. And by lack of such a minimal shelter, some sleep had to be found in the open. Nearly all non-combatants would at one stage or another have been confronted with the same horrible smells and views as the men in the trenches. After the enemy's withdrawal or push-back, they would be living in these entirely destroyed landscapes, being engaged in dreadful but necessary jobs such as burying as yet unburied corpses (of which many were half decomposed or dismembered).

The zone that was laid bare and which after the war would be officially designated 'De Verwoeste Gewesten - Les Régions dévastées' (the devastated areas) was ever increasing. In 1919 the City of Ypres that never was ON the frontline (though always very near to it) was officially declared 100 percent destroyed. Even at quite a distance from the front, for tens of miles along the lines of communication, the rural landscape had been transformed into an industrial landscape serving the needs of the frontline with kilometers of new roads, railroads and narrow track rails, and hundreds of casualty clearing stations, ammunition and other dumps, workshops, laundries and camps. This was to a large extent a male universe in which women were confined to the fringes. At and near the front, the normal gender balance in society was distorted. For those serving at the front a normal family life, including its sexual aspects, was a faraway dream.

Those who found themselves in this area characterised by mass killing and mass destruction on an unprecedented scale, were confronted with

feelings of disorientation and helplessness in the face of violence and chaos.⁸⁰ They became lost and experienced what 19th century philosophers described as alienation. Marx described how human activity could come to be experienced as something external, alien and hostile, a frustration of ordinary people who feel that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies.⁸¹ Marx used the term in his critique of capitalism as a labour process whose sole purpose was to maximise profit. At the beginning of the twentieth century the proletariat he had described was faced with the new phenomenon of a total, industrialised war. And for the first time in history hundreds of thousands of people were brought to the battlefields of Europe from colonial territories. People who had never even seen a factory, who had never lived in a suburb. For them, the alienation was even more extreme.

Empire

The Great War was not only a war of nation-states, it was also a clash of empires. Empire and war have always been closely linked. Wars largely determined the rise and fall of empires and military power was at empire's core.⁸² In each empire subtle and less subtle systems of power and subordination were central. Understanding the conditions that empire imposed is thus vital to assess the subordinate positions and the resulting experiences of some of the groups at the Western Front.

It is still quite a common interpretation both among certain historians and among part of the public that the Great War was the result of imperialism. Yet, despite the fact that empires fought the war and that imperialism is closely connected with the First World War, it is not the imperialist 'system' that was to blame for the war. For decades, colonial conflicts between France, Germany and Britain had been solved peacefully by dividing the spoils - the only losers each time being the native peoples. By 1914 there were hardly any 'unoccupied' areas in the world left to compete for and Germany's overseas territories were not coveted by Britain or France: they were too poor in resources and strategically too

⁸⁰ Kramer A. (2007) *Dynamics of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 236.

⁸¹ Swain D. (2012) *Alienation : an introduction to Marx's theory*, London: Bookmarks Publications. p. 7.

⁸² Lieven D. (2013) Empire, ethnicity and power. A comment. In: Hall JA and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 197-211. p. 210.

unimportant.⁸³ It is a truism, however, that the First World War took place at the heydays of European imperialism: in 1914 European powers held 85 % of the globe as possessions of one kind or another. As one of its most prominent historians, John Darwin recognises there are several schools of thought on empire in history. There are those who see empires as aberrations in the course of world history. They consider empire as a “pathological condition” stressing the shocking symptoms such as racist ideology, sometimes brutal coercion, roistering pageantry and epistemic violence. Yet, in the long view of world history, empires have been among the commonest political forms, and the nation-state system is the true aberration. On the other hand, neither is there a strict distinction between empire and nation-state. The British, French and German empires were composed of territories ruled as a nation-state (Britain, Germany and France) and as imperial dependencies.⁸⁴

The very word ‘empire’, according to John Darwin, is “bedevilled with scholarly pedantry: defining and redefining it is an academic parlor game, and about as much use”.⁸⁵ Without falling into that trap, nearly all definitions of empire include pretty much the same elements: empires are big, composite entities, formed of previously separate units and diversity (ethnic, national, cultural, sometimes religious) is their essence. But this is not a diversity of equals: there must be a relation of domination between core and periphery, whereby the dominant core people are clearly culturally different and superior to the political subordinate, peripheral ones.

Ethnic allegiance is potentially dangerous for imperial authority, but regularised and reformed it could be put to very good use. A case in point is the concept of the martial races of India, “a combination of shrewd political calculation, indigenous notions of caste and imported social darwinism”.⁸⁶ However, the presumption that imperial powers created in their colonies tribal organisations that had not existed before as they needed more clearly defined local entities to work with, or to pursue divide-and-rule tactics is a gross simplification, not seldom advocated by

⁸³ Kramer A. (2007) *Dynamics of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 70; Koch K. (2010) *Een kleine geschiedenis van de Grote Oorlog 1914-1918*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Ambo/Manteau. p. 63-67.

⁸⁴ Jones H. (2014) The German Empire. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at war : 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 52-72. p. 57.

⁸⁵ Darwin J. (2013) Empire and Ethnicity. In: Hall J and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 147-171. p. 154.

⁸⁶ Das S. (2014) *Indians on the Western Front*, Paris: Gallimard. p.12.

postcolonial *savants*.⁸⁷ Most colonial authorities built on, formalised and sometimes accentuated long existing ethnosocial divisions and hierarchies.

Empires could also generate 'supra-identities'.⁸⁸ Both David Killingray⁸⁹ and John Darwin, for instance, observe the existence of an imperial ethnicity within the British Empire which the latter defines as "the assertion or acceptance of an ethnic identity that promised (or seemed to) a privileged access to the resources and opportunities that an empire could offer".⁹⁰ In the case of the white settler colonies, for instance, it was understood that those nations-to-be would be British, would remain part of the Empire, and that an unbreakable bond would tie them to Britain. But also the early leaders of the Indian National Congress favoured internal self-rule within the empire, rather than *purna swaraj* which was after all only officially adopted by Congress in 1930. Darwin's points are that ethnic identities could often be forged in collaboration with empires, as rallied against them and that ethnicities could be used to harness imperial power, as well as to resist it. Again, it is not an "if..then"-statement: allegiances could and did shift or could be and were divided.

All imperial ideology was transparently racist, as epitomised by Kipling's 1899 poem *The White Man's Burden* in which it is the duty of the superior race to take responsibility for "new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half child", implementing a combination of Darwinian emphasis on the fitness of the white man with the suggestion of a pseudo-paternalistic mission to uplift or improve the natives. However, racism is not the ideological essence of imperialism, nor were all advocates of empire racist. Some imperialists did believe the colonised were subhuman and

⁸⁷ Bayly CA. (1999) The Second British Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54-72. p. 70; Washbrook DA. (1999) Orientals and Occidentals: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 596-611.; Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan., p. 85 and 115; Gat A and Jakobson A. (2013) *Nations : the long history and deep roots of political ethnicity and nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 48.

⁸⁸ Gat A and Jakobson A. (2013) *Nations : the long history and deep roots of political ethnicity and nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 255.

⁸⁹ Killingray D. (2008) 'A Good West Indian, a Good African, and, in Short, a Good Britisher': Black and British in a Colour-Conscious Empire, 1760–1950. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36: 363-381. p. 364.

⁹⁰ Darwin J. (2013) Empire and Ethnicity. In: Hall J and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 147-171. p. 165.

hence incapable of improvement, while others affirmed their capacity to be educated and civilised though the process might take a long time.⁹¹

There is a large variety in attitudes towards the Other and hence there is a variety of racisms rather than one singular, monolithic combination of discriminatory doctrine and practice. The American historian of racism and white supremacy George M. Fredrickson differentiates between racism, racialism, xenophobia and other forms of attitudes towards the Other.⁹² Xenophobia, an (irrational) fear of the Other, is an ancient and virtually universal phenomenon - Hobsbawm called it “probably the only global (negative) mass ideology”⁹³ - while racism and racialism are historical constructions associated with modernity. Whatever definition one prefers, racism has two components: difference and power. Fredrickson describes in very clear terms what racism means: THEY are different than WE in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This difference is a motive to use the power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways considered cruel or unjust if applied to members of one’s own group.⁹⁴ While racism is a belief that some races are superior to others and that these others therefore require different treatment, racialism was a term rather used to describe differences between races.⁹⁵

In many cases racism that prevailed had already been refined before the start of the First World War, and sometimes inferior races were no longer entirely inferior. ‘Genetic’ explanations were thought up, demonstrated, used and abused. Some races provided good warriors. Others were deemed to be hard, stupid workers. Therefore within all the overseas groups discrimination mainly occurred on the basis of ethnicity, without there necessarily being any racial characteristics. Again, the concept of the martial races of India is a good case in point. In India broadly spoken two main races were identified and formed the basis for army recruitment: a fair-complexed, sanskrit-speaking, martial people of ‘Aryan’ stock and a darker-skinned, inferior race. However, according to racist theory the original Aryans had suffered racial degeneration by mixing with the dark-skinned Dravidian and other races. In handbooks on the ‘martial’ races,

⁹¹ Fredrickson GM. (2002) *Racism : a short history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 107-8; Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 110.

⁹² Fredrickson GM. (2002) *Racism : a short history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁹³ Quoted in: Gat A and Jakobson A. (2013) *Nations : the long history and deep roots of political ethnicity and nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 326-7.

⁹⁴ Fredrickson GM. (2002) *Racism : a short history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. p. 9.

⁹⁵ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 107.

ethnic groups were singled out on grounds of martial prowess and loyalty to British rule. This was defined on both internal and external characteristics. For instance, only unshorn Sikhs with turbans were regarded as genuine members of the martial race (and that in turn was instrumental in establishing the turban as a more distinct Sikh emblem). “Effeminate” Bengalis, especially, were kept out. Only members of the Brahman caste were regarded as being of proper Aryan stock, the other castes being considered as descended from inferior races.⁹⁶ In the First World War the distinction between ‘martial’ and ‘non-martial races’ was heavily reflected in the compositions of the Indian Army Corps (composed of ‘martial races’) and the Indian Labour Corps (composed of ‘non-martial races’), as we will see later.

Is there then an adequate and yet precise term that covers what I would like to indicate: minorities, marginalised majorities, all those who had a ‘lower’ position in an imagined though very real cultural or ethnic hierarchy? The imprisoned Gramsci used the term ‘subaltern’ to stand in for ‘proletarian’, to escape the prison censors. The word was attractive to the members of the Subaltern Studies group as it enabled them to cover much more than what the ‘proletarian’ meant in a classic marxist analysis of capitalism, such as the ‘peasant’. In Ranajit Guha’s original category ‘the subaltern’ encompassed all forms of ‘subordinate’ who do not belong to the ‘elite’; that is all “of inferior rank [...] whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way”.⁹⁷ In other words, by lack of definition of the concept of subaltern as a substantive social category, the term was applied to anyone and everyone oppressed by the Raj.⁹⁸ This vagueness has been a source of criticism. According to Prathama Banerjee it is “simply a common noun”, a category invented by academics, that is “defined by nothing else but his/her subalternity *vis-à-vis* the elite and the dominant”.⁹⁹ In my view too, subaltern is indeed not a very useful term, though not primarily for the reason Prathama Banerjee points out. First of all, the word is too linked to Subaltern Studies and hence implies not only too narrowly a connection to

⁹⁶ Rattansi A. (2007) *Racism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 50-1.

⁹⁷ Guha R. (2012) On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India. In: Chaturvedi V (ed) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 1-7. p. 7.

⁹⁸ O'Hanlon R. (2012) Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia. In: Chaturvedi V (ed) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso, 72-115. p. 87.

⁹⁹ Banerjee P. (2015) The Subaltern: Political Subject or Protagonist of History? *South Asia: journal of South Asian Studies* 38: 39-49. p. 39-40, 43.

South Asia but also an uncritical adherence to their ideological activism.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, when dealing with military history and writing in English, there might be an unwelcome confusion with military terminology where subaltern indicates junior *officers* (and hence a contradiction with the term as it is used in the context of Subaltern Studies). At the same time a much more neutral term for the hierarchical position of what is meant by subalterns exists, namely: subordinate, as a synonym of 'lower-ranking'. This is the term I will favour throughout this book.

Two hundred million Europeans ruled over 700 million colonial subjects and this rule seemed undisputed in the beginning of the 20th century. The metropolitan justification of colonialism was that the principal deposits of raw materials were needed to sustain the European industries and the population depending upon it, but that these were to be found in the continents outside Europe where the populations were not using them. Hence, the argument went, the riches did not belong to the African or Asian peoples but were the 'common wealth of humanity'. Colonisation had to be organised to retrieve and commercialise products which "weak owners are holding without benefit to themselves or to anyone", so not by virtue of 'might is right' but of the 'right of the strong to help the weak'.¹⁰¹ So colonisation was not seen as an act of dispossession as it was the coloniser's duty to take care of the 'weak' populations, and to take charge of their development. He must educate them and protect them against the ills that beset them. He must enable them to share in management and development and to benefit from joint enterprise. This is what usually came to be understood by Rudyard Kipling's wording the "White Man's Burden". This was not mere propaganda or window-dressing: for a large majority of imperial administrators and for many of the settlers too, this civilising mission was a genuine belief.¹⁰² At the same time, however, this principle was serving the interest of the 'caretaker powers' and they did not contain any provisions for the future.¹⁰³ In practice, the colonial economy was forced into complementary development to that of the metropolis of whom it was dependent on the international markets. The movement of labour in the colony was equally determined by the decisions made in the metropolis. This economic dependence was reinforced through political and military measures. There

¹⁰⁰ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 97.

¹⁰¹ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 9.

¹⁰² Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 3.

¹⁰³ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 25.

was a lower standard of living and a stronger sense of deprivation in the colony. Discrimination on the basis of language, religion or other cultural forms was routine among non-dominant ethnic groups within multi-ethnic empires.¹⁰⁴

There were, however, important differences between empires. In the British doctrine economic development, progress towards democracy and self-government were inseparable. One result was the concept of 'indirect rule'. Indirect rule was contrary to governing colonies as if they were nations-to-be. It denied that one of the purposes of colonialism was to impose foreign culture and values upon the dominated peoples. No, these should be encouraged to retain their culture, codify their customary law and preserve the ethnic boundaries that predated conquest. In order to be able to do so, they had to be protected against the pressure of external influence and this, for an indefinite time, was the task of an 'Imperial Guardsman'.¹⁰⁵ The French on the other hand, had a different colonial tradition, based on the principle of 'indivisibility' of the Republic's territory and on the assimilation or evolution of its subjects towards citizenship. But the true purpose of the future "closer union between the colonies and the metropolis" was rather vague: some saw it as a mere question of equality before the law, while others considered it to be an absorption of the colonial peoples in the French cultural sphere, including the adoption of language, customs and general attitudes of the metropolitan French. But there was no single doctrine within the French empire. The formula applied by colonial authorities was one of "much subjection, very little autonomy and a touch of assimilation".¹⁰⁶

Already from the concept of 'indirect rule' it can be understood that the British Empire should not be seen as some monolithic entity exclusively and firmly led by London. At the beginning of the 20th century, it covered one-fifth of the world and London governed over 400 million subjects of many faiths and ethnic groups - perhaps as many as one quarter of the global population. There were some 60 dependencies covering 3.2 million square miles, British India that consisted of a further 2 million square

¹⁰⁴ Özkirimli U. (2010) *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ Darwin J. (2013) Empire and Ethnicity. In: Hall J and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 147-171. p. 153.

¹⁰⁶ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul., p. 59-60; Hiers W and Wimmer A. (2013) Is nationalism the cause or consequence of the end of empire? In: Hall J and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 212-254. p. 234.

miles and 322 million inhabitants and the five dominions covering 7.6 million square miles and 24 million people. While the huge 'sub-empire' of India was ruled as a military despotism and commercial enterprise, tempered by philanthropic ideas, the dominions as colonies of white settlement had a special self-governing status. Other entities included protectorates (who had 'asked for British protection', e.g. Afghanistan, Nepal and as from December 1914 Egypt), occupied territories (Cyprus, Egypt from 1882 to 1914), condominiums (like the Sudan, governed with Egypt), naval and military fortresses (e.g. Gibraltar and Malta), treaty-ports and 'concessions' (such as Shanghai or Weihaiwei) and, not to forget, a "rebellious province at home" (Ireland). The British Empire was much more than a polity, it was a world system that also included a large 'informal empire'. The term refers to influence and interference, mainly but not only economic in character, in territories not formally governed by the British in the Middle East, in Latin America or in Asia.¹⁰⁷ The occurrence of highly diversified types of rule with its diverse forms of domination with the British Empire makes it a bold statement to proclaim that the other empires "were significantly harsher in their treatment of subject peoples" as Niall Ferguson does.¹⁰⁸

In all colonial empires, the main preoccupation of the mother country was to maintain its authority and this was something Britain and France (as well as other colonial powers) had in common. For, in general it was true that both were mainly concerned with the present and gave little thought to the (distant) future of their empires. Both assumed they had natural superiority and this prevalent thought was only strengthened through the prestige of their civilisation and their economic power.¹⁰⁹ The racial categorisation of the subordinate 'Other' from the second half of the 19th century made it easier to justify European rule. But racial categorisations also assisted officials faced with a bewildering variety of peoples with their own customs, beliefs and cultures. They tried to make sense of the fact of European domination and there was often a conviction involved that non-white subjects were incapable of improvement. British assistance, guidance and rule adopted a patronising air, even towards

¹⁰⁷ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 1, 59 ; Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Ferguson N. (2004) *Empire : how Britain made the modern world*, London: Penguin. p. 295.

¹⁰⁹ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 2.

assimilated colonial subjects, which felt as a humiliation to many indigenous people.¹¹⁰

Despite much talk about assimilation, “not white was not quite” and this was certainly so in the context of the British Empire and its armies. The ‘colour bar’ was an essential part in empire and increasingly so in the course of the 19th century. When the 1867 Reform Act enfranchised employed, married male householders in Britain, the consequence was “a more rigid line between whites, deserving of the vote, and the blacks and other natives who - depending on the point of view- were either not ready for enfranchisement or were inherently inferior, could never govern themselves, and were only fit to serve white interests in the British Empire”.¹¹¹ British ambiguity in matters of race and colour was reflected in the law: while the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914 stated that “any person born within His Majesty’s dominions and allegiance [was] a British subject”, the *Manual of Military Law* declared that “any negro or person of colour” was an alien.¹¹²

Even in the domains where British imperialism might seem a beneficial force, there was always hypocrisy involved, such as the ‘glass ceiling’ that prevented ‘loyal’, educated, and Anglicised non-whites from being admitted to the highest levels of government and administration within the Empire. The fundamental purpose of the Empire was to increase the wealth and power of British people and the question is in how far the idea of assimilation was a cover to perpetuate the domination and leadership of the ruling minority.¹¹³ Moreover, western-educated imperial subjects were a threat as they were more likely to challenge authoritarianism and point out the contrast with principles such as freedom and democracy so often advocated in the metropolis.

The frustration of deprivation and imposed inferiority was perfectly voiced by Rabindranath Tagore in his famous address *Nationalism in the West* from 1916, in a section containing two explicit taunts at the address of his fellow-Nobel Prize winner but staunch imperialist Rudyard Kipling:

¹¹⁰ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p. 11.

¹¹¹ Rattansi A. (2007) *Racism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 52.

¹¹² Killingray D. (2008) ‘A Good West Indian, a Good African, and, in Short, a Good Britisher’: Black and British in a Colour-Conscious Empire, 1760–1950. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36: 363–381. p. 374.

¹¹³ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul., p. 4; Jackson A. (2013) *The British Empire. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 123.

“While depriving us of our opportunities and reducing our education to the minimum required for conducting a foreign government, this Nation pacifies its conscience by calling us names, by sedulously giving currency to the arrogant cynism that the East is east and the West is west and never the twain shall meet. If we must believe our schoolmaster in his taunt that, after nearly two centuries of his tutelage, India not only remains unfit for self-government but unable to display originality in her intellectual attainments, must we ascribe it to something in the nature of western culture and our inherent incapacity to receive it or to the judicious niggardliness of the Nation that has taken upon itself the white man’s burden of civilising the East?”¹¹⁴

This imperial context with the assumption of western superiority which in turn was exteriorised in racism and discrimination was in the first quarter of the 20th century clearly a hegemony as defined by Gramsci in his prison notebooks: *“a sociopolitical situation in which the philosophy and practice of a society fuse or are in equilibrium; an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation. An element of direction and control, not necessarily conscious, is implied”*.¹¹⁵ In other words empire and the discourses associated with it were so dominant, that it was considered common sense. In this context being a non-European subordinate inevitably implied to be alienated from oneself.

Flanders and Northern France

Without any doubt for most non-European troops Flanders and Northern France was a very alien landscape with a very difficult climate and a very different culture. It must have reinforced the already strong sense of alienation they suffered due to the war conditions. And for some, apart from the maybe culturally alien prospect of being buried, the certainty that after being killed in a foreign country they would remain eternally remote from their own population, captive in this clay soil overhung with

¹¹⁴ Tagore R. (2010) *Nationalism*, London: Penguin Books. p. 47.

¹¹⁵ Özkirimli U. (2010) *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 212.

a leaden sky, must without doubt have been terrifying.¹¹⁶ A brief sketch of the culture, geography and climate in Flanders is needed if we fully want to understand the situation of alienation a non-European labourer could be confronted with.

In Belgium, the front line ran for fifty kilometres, from Nieuport on the coast to Ploegsteert on the French-Belgian border. From there, on the other side of the river Lys, in France, it continued in an area where for a further 10 miles the landscape, culture and partly the language was very similar to that in Belgium and where the events of war were mostly dictated by what happened at Ypres. Though part of France, this area culturally identified and identifies with Flanders and is hence known as French Flanders. The deadlock in Flanders, began in October 1914 with the Battle of the Yser and the 1st Battle of Ypres, and ended on 28 September 1918, when the war of movement finally resumed with the 'Liberation Offensive'.¹¹⁷ The war-stricken zone was the southern part of the province of West Flanders, a rural backwater which was less densely populated than the rest of the country and nowadays better known under its unofficial name Westhoek ('West Corner'). The front line ran through or near the towns of Nieuport (Nieuwpoort), Dixmude (Diksmuide) and Ypres (Ieper) while Furnes (Veurne) and Poperinghe (Poperinge) formed the backbone of the rear area.¹¹⁸ These five towns were small in size – none had more than 17,000 inhabitants – but had a rich cultural heritage. In September and October 1914, many refugees from more eastern parts of Belgium arrived here, spurred by the German advance.¹¹⁹ Some stayed in Flanders' Westhoek, in an attempt to remain on Belgian territory; most, however, continued their flight and ended up in France or the United Kingdom. The local inhabitants, who held on in their own region, were marginalised not only by the refugees, but also by hundreds of thousands

¹¹⁶ Pinxten R. (2008) Dying in a distant country, in a foreign war In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War I. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tiel: Lannoo, 201-204., p. 204.

¹¹⁷ The Liberation Offensive is the name given in Belgium to that part of the Final Offensive in which occupied Belgium was liberated. The offensive started on 28 September 1918 and was stopped by the declaration of armistice on 11 November 1918. It was conducted by the 'Army Group Flanders', led by King Albert I of the Belgians as commander in chief.

¹¹⁸ I have used the French names here, as this is how these towns would be known to the British (and the French) then and now. However, the recent official Dutch version is shown in brackets.

¹¹⁹ M. Amara, *Strangers in a Strange Land. Belgian Refugees 1914-1918* (Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2004), 7-36 and M. Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale (France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-bas) 1914-1918* (Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2007), 405. The latter is the first in-depth study of the Belgian refugees of First World War.

of troops. In the Yser area (Nieuport-Dixmude), the majority of the military belonged to the Belgian Army, but near Ypres and Poperinghe and further afield in Northern France, it was a multinational and multi-ethnic force that occupied the territory. For the local population, most of whom had never come into contact with foreigners except for those of the neighbouring country, it was a most extraordinary situation which is reflected in their diaries, memoirs and interviews. Their attitudes towards the soldiers and labourers range from a certain degree of sympathy and curiosity to incomprehension and xenophobia. The situation for the locals in French Flanders, with small towns like Bailleul and Armentières (near the front) and Steenvoorde, Hazebrouck, Cassel (in the rear) was little different than it was in Belgian Flanders.

It is difficult to ascertain a definite figure for the local population because of the lack of census. Consequently, the exact percentage of the local inhabitants to the total temporary population (refugees and military) is not known, but it seems that it could never have been more than 10 to 15%.¹²⁰ Some indication may be provided by the few known figures, such as the births registered in Roesbrugge-Haringe. In 1913, 55 children were born in this large village northwest of Poperinghe on the river Yser. In 1917, no fewer than 285 babies were born here, of which only 41 were registered as “children from inhabitants”, the others being the offspring of “strangers and war refugees”, and seventy noted as “illegitimate children”.¹²¹ It is important, in this context, to stress once again the international nature of the military forces present in Flanders. In the course of the war, more and more villages and zones would be evacuated. Ypres was entirely evacuated in May 1915, soon after the first massive use of gas on the battlefield and the front nearing to barely 5 kilometres from the city’s centre. Other evacuations followed military necessity: villages nearer to the front such as Dickebusch and Vlamertinghe were partly evacuated in 1915 and 1916, in July 1917 with the offensive (Third Battle of Ypres) approaching a whole range of villages in the Yser area were

¹²⁰ This is a very rough estimation, based on a wide range of sources, such as the reports, written by local priests immediately after the war (*Bischoppelijk Archief Brugge, Verslagen 1914-1918*), as well as a comparison of the sizes of military units, compared to local population figures, e.g. at the end of 1914 in the district of Furnes, the local population was just 25,000 while 18,822 refugees were counted. Moreover, Furnes was home to the headquarters of the Belgian army, which at that time counted 6 divisions, each between 16,000 and 24,000 men). A. Vandebilcke & P. Chielens, Vluchten voor de Oorlog. in: P. Chielens, D. Dendooven and H. Decoodt (eds.), *De Laatste Getuige. Het Oorlogslandschap van Vlaanderen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), p. 75.

¹²¹ J. Gheysens, ‘Roesbrugge-Haringe: zijn belang in het geheel van wereldoorlog 1914-1918’, *Aan de Schreve*, 3 (1973), 30.

evacuated and on the eve of and during the German Spring Offensive in April 1918 the remaining inhabitants of most villages south and west of Ypres, and of the town of Poperinghe were forced to go into exile. Only towards the summer of 1919 would the first inhabitants return to their completely destroyed fatherland.

The language spoken in this region, including most of French Flanders, was a local dialect, one of the many Flemish versions of Dutch. In the Belgian part, only learned people such as teachers and priests would have mastered (some) French as well. The local Belgian elite for whom French was the social language and often the mother tongue, had mostly left the country in the first months of the war. Those staying behind and not going in exile were usually those who were either extremely dedicated and had a duty of responsibility towards the locals or those who would risk to lose all by leaving (such as farmers). Those mastering some words of English were initially extremely rare, though this figure would considerably rise after some weeks and months living among British troops. My own grandmother, for instance, who was born in 1907 in Ypres and as young girl had been living with her aunt in Poperinghe, spoke English quite well though she didn't know how to read or write it. She had picked up the speech from the British troops frequenting her aunt's café.

In those days all inhabitants from this part of Flanders bar some individuals would have been practicing Catholics. This enhanced the role of the local parish priest as an authoritative moral guide of his local community. Villagers usually listened to and abided by his words. The priest, together with the local burgomaster (mayor) was definitely one of the village dignitaries, but often unlike the elected burgomaster one with moral authority. The traditional roles of mayor and parish priests changed somewhat during the war and their authority was not seldom reduced (or enhanced?) to that of a go-between, a mediator voicing the local's interests not only with the Belgian authorities, yet also with the town major (or commandant de place for the French army) whose duty it was to supervise the good order in a particular locality but for whom military interests prevailed.¹²²

¹²² In the village of Dickebusch (Dikkebus), for instance, the local priest Achiel Van Wallegem, took on many extra-ordinary non-clerical duties, such as the payment of allowances to refugees, arranging safe-conducts for local inhabitants or giving notice to families whose children were due to be evacuated. On a regular base he met the local burgomaster, Engel Van Eeckhout, for a division of tasks or for consultation. The relationship with the military authorities were often strained, e.g. when Van Wallegem on 1 July 1915 asked permission to use the class room of the boys school as a temporary

Flemish Catholicism also explains a certain positive bias of the locals towards fellow-catholics in the French armies or among for instance the Irish and Canadian (especially French Canadian) rank and file. On the other hand, a slightly more negative attitude can be discovered towards protestants from whatever denomination, especially - and obviously - in memoirs or diaries from members of the clergy. It is however noticeable that the local opinion of non-christians such as Indians or Chinese was usually more neutral in respect of religion. Perhaps because these groups could not be considered 'apostates' and there was always a chance they would one day be welcomed within the creed. Not without importance is that Flanders in those days was an important 'exporter' of missionaries and every parish would have had at least one former 'son' in an often far flung place such as China, India, the Philippines or the Congo, to name just a couple of the more popular mission regions.¹²³

Being a quintessential agricultural area, most inhabitants who stayed on during the war were farmers, farmhands, craftsmen or retailers (or a combination). It is estimated nearly 30 % of the Flemish population could neither read nor write. Estaminets - pubs- played a central role in social life and each village would have counted quite a number of cafés, estaminets or cabarets. During the war their number would only increase, with locals not seldom 'holding café' in their kitchen / living room to make some cash. The local drink, beer, continued to be produced in ever larger quantities during the war. For indeed, the local inhabitants who did not flee were initially overwhelmed by the events, but quickly adapted as well as possible to the situations they were confronted with. All but those living in the smallest of cottages or in a shed or hut, had to accommodate military personnel, with as a general rule: the bigger and more comfortable a house, the higher the ranks of those billeted. Apart from many miseries, the war also brought opportunities and the presence of thousands of men in search of commodities such as food, drinks, souvenirs or sex stimulated commercial instincts. Living together,

church and this was refused by town major (and mustard king) Geoffrey Colman for the reason that officers were billeted in the adjoining schoolmaster's house. (Van Walleghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 192-3 and the footnotes on <http://www.inflandersfields.be/nl/16-07-2015> (accessed 6 April 2016).

¹²³ Allossery P. (1925) *Onze West-Vlaamsche zendelingen: proef van eereijst*, Brugge: Verbeke-Loys. of which the two volumes list all missionaries from the bishopric of Bruges (i.e. the province of West-Flanders).

http://www.brugsevereniging.be/_userwebpace/familiekundebrugge/Missiewerk%20Bisdom%20Brugge.htm (accessed on 7 April 2016) is an online database of West-Flemish missionaries, originally compiled in 1939.

however, was never easy and the list of incidents between civilians and soldiers is clearly long despite a lack of research into this field.¹²⁴

The landscape of Flanders was and is utterly flat, especially in the Yser polders and in the valley of the Lys. The flatness appeared peculiar to many, if not most, soldiers and especially hill people such as the Gurkhas, did not feel at ease in such an open and level land.¹²⁵ Only to the south and west of Ypres, the plain gives way to a line of hills and low lying 'ridges' which often proved to be of strategically high importance during the war. It is along the north-eastern foothills of this low 'ridge' that the Ypres Salient came into being, with 'Pilckem Ridge', Passchendaele, 'Mount Sorrel' and 'Hill 60' which are respectively 25, 50, 62 and 60 metres above sea level. South-West of Ypres the 'ridge' is somewhat higher and includes some real hills such as Wijtschate (85 metres), Kemmel Hill (156 metres), Mont Noir (152 metres) and Cassel (176 metres). These are, however, pretty much exceptions in an otherwise low and flat landscape that would only become more undulating once over Calais and nearing the Boulogne - Saint-Omer line. It was a highly cultured and farmed landscape with many villages at a short distance (3 to 5 kilometers) and many more hamlets in between. The subsoil was mainly clay with a varied quantity of loam and sand. Combined with a high water table, this had over centuries resulted in a very delicate water management system and the land was interspersed with hundreds of canals, brooks and ditches. Months and years of ongoing shelling would utterly destroy this elaborated drainage system, transforming the landscape on and near the frontline in a vast marsh of mud, at least in the wet seasons.¹²⁶

Woods were few but the presence of many groves, rows of trees and hedgerows had created a rather scenic landscape not unlike a bocage. The necessities of war - in particular wood - would heavily reduce these scenic landscape elements between 1914 and 1915 while on the frontline the

¹²⁴ Some recent studies have taken a look into crime within the British armies, including criminal acts against civilians: Stanley P. (2010) *Bad Characters. Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, Millers Point NSW: Pier 9.; Emsley C. (2013) *Soldier, Sailor, Beggarman, Thief. Crime and the British Armed Services since 1914*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.; and on sexual crimes: Cherry B. (2016) *They Didn't Want to Die Virgins. Sex and Morale in the British Army on the Western Front 1914-1918*, Solihull: Helion & Company Limited., p. 259-285. On crimes committed by the Chinese Labour Corps : Dendooven D. (2012) Les "Tchings": mythe et réalité à propos du Chinese Labour Corps dans la région du front en Flandre occidentale. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 459-474.

¹²⁵ Willcocks GSJ. (1920) *With the Indians in France*, London: Constable. p. 263-4.

¹²⁶ Kramer A. (2007) *Dynamics of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 39.

near complete annihilation of all flora was due to the continuous shelling.¹²⁷

The only times in this book I will venture briefly out of my self-imposed geographical restriction of Flanders are occasional references to the situation in the Channel ports, which being the beginning, or end for that matter, of the Lines of Communication to the front, were militarily closely related to the front in Flanders. And in the chapter on the Indians, besides considerations regarding the situation of Indian prisoners-of-war who though mostly captured in Flanders, were detained in Germany, I have included witness accounts from the area called Le Vimeu in Picardy and this for the sake of comparison and complement. Le Vimeu is a low-lying undulating tableland (with an altitude between 100 and 170 meters) with just as Flanders distant horizons. It is situated between the rivers Somme in the North and Bresle in the South and west of Abbeville. Though it had a distinct history of small metallurgy workshops, it was and remained mainly an agricultural region with none of the villages larger than a couple of thousand inhabitants. A backwater of France, with most inhabitants not speaking 'proper French' but rather a strong picardian dialect and being catholic, it was also culturally not that much different from the Flanders' Westhoek.

The climate in this part of Europe, finally, is extremely changeable and variable. While in June 1915 it was rather dry and warm with days of more than 30° C, the following winter was one the wettest ever, with up to 75 days with rain. The early months of 1917, with the coldest March of the century, saw extremely low temperatures with 22 consecutive days of freezing weather. And unlike the summer of 1915, the summer of 1917 was characterised by bad weather with much rain.¹²⁸ For many coming from warmer or less changeable climates, it was difficult to adapt to the circumstances of Belgian and French weather even with appropriate clothes. The latter was, however, not always at hand: the Indian troops arriving in Flanders in October 1914 were for instance still in their summer

¹²⁷ Stubbe L. (2006) Een lappendeken met groene naden: het landschap van de Ieperboog 'anno 1914'. In: Chielens P, Dendooven D, Decoodt H, et al. (eds) *De laatste getuige : het oorlogslandschap van de Westhoek*. Tielt: Lannoo, 147-152.; Stubbe L. (2008) Planten met een oorlogsverleden. Invloeden van de Eerste Wereldoorlog op de planten van de Frontstreek. *De Bron* 16: 19-21.; Dendooven D. (2009) Het terrein effenen. Aanleg, Infrastructuur en landbeheer. In: Cornilly J, De Caigny S and a.o. (eds) *Bouwen aan wederopbouw 1914/2050*. Ieper: Erfgoedcel CO7, 99-102.

¹²⁸ <http://www.meteo.be/meteo/view/nl/1105072-1911-1920.html> (accessed 28 August 2017).

uniform.¹²⁹ But while it is quite possible to protect oneself more or less against the cold with wool garments, fire and blankets, it was the at times incessant rain that was cursed by both those in the camps as those in the trenches in Flanders. It could rain in any season and it is much harder to get oneself sufficiently sheltered from the rain, certainly if the latter lasts for hours or days on end. It was the rain in combination with the clayish subsoil that made the mud such an icon of the Western Front in the First World War. And everyone who has walked or stood for several hours in a rain soaked muddy landscape can testify how hard it is to get rid of the filth.

The territory, the period and the circumstances were each elements that could contribute to a certain sense of alienation, a different psychological universe with conditioning attitudes and reflexes. Yet, alienation is gradual, is relative. Its level depends on many factors. For those who served as subordinates in imperial units in a modern warfare in Flanders the alienation must have been manifold that of the 'ordinary' British, French or German soldier. For no individual the experience would have been exactly the same: those familiar with a flat, rather featureless landscape will have felt more at ease in Flanders than those who came from a mountainous area, 'white' subordinate groups would usually be considered hierarchically higher evolved than 'coloured' and in the British armies those who spoke English eventually possessed more agency than those who didn't. Yet, the contexts are required to explain why similarities AND differences in experience might have occurred.

¹²⁹ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 154; Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p. 28.

Chapter I. India on the Western Front

This chapter on combatants and non-combatants from the Indian subcontinent is the first of two case studies in which I focus more in depth on the experiences of a particular Asian group. Maybe I should rather write 'groups' in plural. The Indians in Europe could be serving in three different 'forces' each with its own characteristics: the Indian Army Corps, the Indian Cavalry regiments and the Indian Labour Corps. Moreover, the Indians were by far ethnologically and culturally the most diverse of the groups present on the Western Front, a hotchpotch of religions, castes, and other 'subnational groups' such as tribes. What they had in common is that they were all hailing from the still today ethnically and culturally very diverse northern parts of British India.

To avoid confusion with the present-day republic of India, to overcome political sensibilities and to be more inclusive, the term South Asia is very popular in more recent academic production and this at the expense of 'India'. However, I will stick to the historical term of (British) India. While 'South Asia' as a concept is less used outside the academia and outside the anglo-saxon readership¹³⁰, I also assume my readers are sensible enough not to confuse the historical India with the present-day political entity of the same name. Moreover, most descriptions of 'South Asia' seem not to include Burma while it did belong for most of its territory to British India.

Likewise I will not discard the anglicised term 'sepoy' for 'sipahi' as a recent scholar did.¹³¹ The term sepoy for the lowest ranks in the British Indian army is by no means derogatory¹³² and is generally established both in western and in Indian writings. By consequence, I do not see the point for exchanging it for a less common alternative.

The diversity that is characteristic to the Indian 'forces' and their war experiences is extended to the nature of the cultural encounters they underwent. In Europe the Indians were confronted with different types of Others: the British overlord (in the army and in the hospitals), the German enemy (in prisoner-of-war camps) and the locals (at the front).

¹³⁰ Before I started working on this topic, I had never encountered the term.

¹³¹ Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. throughout and p. 193.

¹³² In contrast to for instance the commonly used 'coolie' or 'chink' for Chinese labourers, see Part II.

These different encounters happened in different contexts and provoked different reactions. This explains why quite some attention will be given to the circumstances in which these encounters took place. However, due to the nature of the sources there are limits to the contextualising effort. The category 'locals' includes both French and Belgian civilians. While in the European sources we are clearly aware what has been uttered by a Belgian and what by a Frenchman, we cannot do so on the Indian side. No Indian letters specifically mention Belgium or Belgians. After all, it was only a very small portion of Belgium that was in allied hands, there were few if no characteristics that enable to differentiate the northern French from a Belgian landscape, the passage on Belgian territory for Indian troops was probably too short to differentiate between French and Belgian subjects, and the cultural differences between Northern French and West Flemish rural populations were minimal.

This chapter contains eight sections.

- In a historiographical section, I give an overview and assessment of what has been written on the Indian presence in Europe during the First World War. While the infantry regiments of the Indian Army Corps have received quite some attention, especially by military historians, this is much less the case for the cavalry regiments and the Labour Corps. Especially the latter, despite counting nearly 50,000 men, has been largely ignored. Equally neglected, perhaps apart from the situation in the Indian hospitals in England and then in particular Brighton, has been the interaction between the local population and the Indian visitors. It is mainly in these two domains that I make a difference: my aim is more than to offer a synthesis, it is to enlarge the scope of research by integrating the Indian labourers and the local populations into the history of the Indians on the Western Front in the Great War.

- In order to do so it is necessary to complement the military overview of engagements and the composition of the Indian Army as it features in Appendix 3 with a larger cultural context. In the first of two contextual sections, we take a closer look at the rank and file of the Indian Army Corps and the Indian Cavalry Regiments: who served in the Indian military, why they were on the Western Front, what characterised their deployment and how their exploits were perceived by both the colonial overlord and the Indian military themselves. Rather than a military-history approach, I stress the socio-cultural dimensions of their engagements. This provides a necessary backdrop to interpret encounters with the local population or accounts on how the war was perceived.

- As the Indian Labour Corps has been neglected by the academia, this rather unknown force is subject to a second contextual section. Based on new archival material, supplemented by the limited number of scholarly articles, I describe the workers' provenance and recruitment and the composition of the Indian Labour Corps and the nature of their toil at the front. The ethnically very diverse labour companies offered problems as well as opportunities to their European supervisors which included a significant number of missionaries. Taking into consideration the European residence of the Indian Labour Corps inevitably triggers us to question similarities and differences with its Chinese counterpart, which is the subject of the next chapter.
- How the Indians were experienced by the locals is the topic of the fourth section. While the attitudes of the British officer class and public opinion towards the Indian presence on the continent and in the South English hospitals has been studied to a certain extent, this is not the case for the Belgian and French populations. Unfamiliarity with the available sources and the language in which they are set prevented this. Yet, a corpus of mainly published French and Flemish witness accounts enable me to complement this with a description of the levels of encounter with the Indians, and an analysis of the opinions held on them by the local population near the French and Belgian front.
- How the Europeans and European society more generally were seen by the Indians is mainly known through the reports of the censor of Indian mail. This large and important corpus is well-known and has been extensively used by historians in the past but usually to fathom the morale of the Indian troops. For this section, I browsed both unpublished and published letters to reappraise them from a different point of view, looking for accounts of cultural encounters with Europeans and considerations on both European and Indian customs.
- Despite the fact that quite some scholarly attention has been paid to the situation of Indian prisoners-of-war, this chapter also needed a section devoted to the Indian prisoners' experience. For if we question how war experience transformed the way ethno-cultural groups saw themselves and the Other, we cannot omit the particular experience of captivity. The Indians are among the few non-European ethno-cultural subordinate groups for which both sources and secondary literature are available to provide us with answers. Yet, not only did I approach the available material with the specific question on how this experience might have influenced their ways of seeing the world, I also added hitherto unused sources shedding light on the transitional period between the very moment of being taken prisoner and the arrival in the camp.

- The seventh and eighth sections ponder on what the passage in Europe could ultimately have meant for these Indian temporary migrants. It looks into possible consequences of this large body of experiences on a social, cultural and political level, and questions in what respect self-awareness and self-identification was enhanced. It considers, finally, what ultimately their experience of the war in Europe has meant for the returning veterans, and for the India to which they returned. Did the veterans take up leading roles and, if so, in which domains of human activity?

On the historiography of India in Europe in the First World War

In 1916 the Belgian author Cyriel Buysse visited the front in Flanders and in a cemetery with mainly North-African graves he contemplated: "*Later, when all is over, Belgian and French women will come to pray on the graves of their fallen husbands and sons; but who will ever kneel beside the abandoned grave of Mohamed or of Ibrahim in Flemish soil?*".¹³³ The names of Mohamed and Ibrahim in this quote could easily be replaced by those of Muhamad and Sharif, to mention just two names from the Indian plot at Grootebeek British Cemetery near Ypres. Indeed, for decades the presence of non-European rank and file, including from India, on the Western Front had been ignored to the point that it was entirely forgotten but for a very small group of specialists. That has all considerably changed in recent times.

Not only public interest in the Indian presence on the Western Front in the First World War has increased in the last two decades, so has the historiographical production. From all non-European groups present in Europe during the war, the Indian case is arguably the best studied. The main reason is according to me quite simple: they included combatant troops. Besides the enhanced fascination for fighting men, this means the availability of a large corpus of archive material and of regimental histories facilitating history writing. For non-combatant troops, the archive material is usually much less abundant and unit histories are hardly existing. For the Indian presence on the Western Front, the result is

¹³³ Published in: *Van een Verloren Zomer* (1917), Buysse C. (1980) *Verzameld werk*, Brussel: Manteau. vol. 6, p. 457.

a huge discrepancy in historiography between the Indian Army Corps and especially its infantry regiments on the one hand, and the cavalry units and the Indian Labour Corps on the other hand.¹³⁴

Military history writing of the Indian Army Corps started during the war with the account of J.W.B. Merewether and Frederick Smith¹³⁵ who for this purpose had been appointed to the staff of the army corps. Added to this was the more personal history of the Indian Army corps' commander, General Sir James Willcocks¹³⁶, followed in the subsequent decades by a whole series of regimental histories of the classical type.¹³⁷ Later contributions on the Indian Army Corps in Europe such as those of American military historian Jeffrey Greenhut¹³⁸ focused on the fighting capacity of the Indian regiments in Europe. Central questions in this matter were the adaptation to the European climate, the supposedly higher number of self-inflicted wounds and desertions among the Indians, the nature of the relationship between the men and their British officers and the quantity and quality of the reinforcements coming from India. Greenhut's assumptions were accepted by David Omissi in his standard work *The Sepoy and the Raj*¹³⁹ but have been refuted by Gordon Corrigan¹⁴⁰, Simon Doherty and Tom Donovan¹⁴¹ and most recently by George Morton-Jack in his acclaimed re-assessment of the Indian Army

¹³⁴ Stadler F. (2015) Historiography 1918-Today (India). 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. (accessed 2015-04-07).

¹³⁵ Merewether JWB and Smith FE. (1917) *The Indian corps in France*, London: John Murray.

¹³⁶ Willcocks J. (1920) *With the Indians in France*, London: Constable.

¹³⁷ Such as: Shakespear LW. ([1924]) *History of the 2nd King Edward's Own Goorkhas (The Sirmoor Rifle Regiment) : 1911-1921*, Aldershot: Gale & Polden.; Anon. ([1932?]) *Regimental history of the 4th Battalion 13th Frontier Force Rifles (Wilde's)*, London: Butler & Tanner.; Thatcher WS. (1932) *The fourth battalion, Duke of Connaught's own : tenth Baluch regiment in the Great War, 129th D.C.O. Baluchis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ; Drake-Brockman DH. ([1935]) *With the Royal Garhwal Rifles in the Great War, from August, 1914, to November, 1917*, Haywards Heath: Clarke. ; MacMunn GF and Spurgin AR. ([1936]) *The history of the Sikh Pioneers, 23rd, 32nd, 34th*, London: S. Low, Marston ; Anon. (1992) *47th Sikhs War Record : The Great War 1914-1918*, Chippenham: Picton publishing.

¹³⁸ Greenhut J. (1981) Race, Sex, and War: The Impact of Race and Sex on Morale and Health Services for the Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914. *Military Affairs* 45: 71-74. ; Greenhut J. (1983) The imperial reserve: The Indian Corps on the western front, 1914-15. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 12: 54-73. ; Greenhut J. (1984) Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army. *Military Affairs* 48: 15-18.

¹³⁹ Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

¹⁴⁰ Corrigan G. (1999) *Sepoys in the trenches : the Indian corps on the Western front 1914-1915*, Staplehurst: Spellmount.

¹⁴¹ Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions.

corps on the Western Front.¹⁴² Though the latter work is definitely setting a standard, it is also sometimes guilty of a 'too straight' reading of the official military records. Morton-Jack for instance downplays the effect the European climate had on the Indian rank and file. His arguments, however, are invalidated when contrasted by sources originating from the Indians themselves, as will be demonstrated in forthcoming pages.¹⁴³

The Indian Army on the Western Front also featured in a number of more general scholarly works on the Indian Army or on the impact of the Great War in India, though generally in these works the passage in Europe is considered a sideshow in a narrative focusing more on the economy or the coming-of-age of Indian nationalism.¹⁴⁴ Few indeed are the passages in these books that focus on the Indian military personnel that resided in Europe. The same can be said of Rozina Visram's pioneering overview of the South Asian presence in Britain.¹⁴⁵

In all contributions mentioned above, the Indian Labour Corps is largely absent. Despite the large number of men who served in the corps, scholarly work has only just begun: besides their inclusion in the more

¹⁴² Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴³ Popular overviews of the battle history-type have been published with a Belgian or French public in mind, e.g. Dendooven D. (2014) *Het Indian Army Corps bij Ieper, 1914-15. Shrapnel* 2014: 22-34.; Faivre D. (2005) *Les indiens 1914-1915 ou le sacrifice d'un peuple dans la boue d'Artois : septembre - décembre 1914*, Saint-Venant: Association de Recherches Historiques et Archéologiques militaires. ; Lecomte B and Vasseur L. (2005) *Les combattants des Mille et Une Nuits 1914-1918 : Les soldats Indiens au Pays de l'Alloeu et dans le Nord de la France*, Laventie: l' Alloeu Terre de Batailles, 1914-1918. ; Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. ; Dendooven D. (2015) *Les Indiens sur le front occidental. Nouvelles de l'Inde*. Paris: Ambassade de l'Inde, 6-9. Due to the centenary of the events the need for public engagement was felt in India too. Military accounts taking in all seven Indian Expeditionary Forces of the Great War have been published by the Centre of Armed Forces Historical Research (Chhina R. (2014) *India in the First World War 1914-1918*, New Delhi: Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research.) and by prominent politician Amarinder Singh (Singh A. (2014) *Honour and fidelity : India's military contribution to the great war 1914-18*, New Delhi: Roli Books.), former Chief Minister of Punjab and grandson of Bhupinder Singh, who as Maharaja of Patiala had visited the Western Front. Kant V. (2014) *India and the First World War : 'if I die here, who will remember me?'*, New Delhi: Roli Books. takes a broader perspective with due attention to Indian wounded and prisoners-of-war. These books, however, offer in the first place a synthesis of the existing scholarship, but add few new insights.

¹⁴⁴ Roy K. (2006) *War and society in colonial India, 1807-1945. Oxford in India readings*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 375. ; Roy K. (2012) *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars*, Leiden: Brill.; Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD. (1978) *India and World War 1*, New Delhi: Manohar.; Pati B. (1996) *India and the First World War*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.; Chakravorty UN. (1997) *Indian nationalism and the First World War, 1914-18 : recent political & economic history of India*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.

¹⁴⁵ Visram R. (2002) *Asians in Britain : 400 Years of History*, London: Pluto Press.

general studies on labour units¹⁴⁶, all credit in this respect is due to Indian historian Radhika Singha and her pioneering work in this field.¹⁴⁷ Even in David Omissi's eye-opening anthology *Indian Voices of the Great War, Soldier's Letters, 1914-18*¹⁴⁸, the labourers are not represented. Despite its military bias, this book marked a 'cultural turn' in the study of Indian military personnel in the First World War as it focused on the experiences of the Indian rank and file. It drew attention to the large corpus of (excerpts of) letters written by Indians in service and the associated reports left by the censor of Indian mail in the India Office Records (IOR).¹⁴⁹ The nature of these documents and how to interpret them is highly problematic: what we have is a selection of translations of letters made by a British officer and his staff. They were written in a number of Indian languages and thus had to be translated into English - a translation that unquestionably was not faultless. With these examples and his reports, the censor wanted to demonstrate certain facts regarding the morale of the troops - so we can only wonder how much they are representative. Without any doubt the soldiers subjected themselves to a form of auto-censorship, certainly once they realised their letters were read by the authorities. The letters are more than often not quoted in full. Moreover, due to the high level of illiteracy among the Indian rank and file a large majority has been dictated to a scribe who might or might not have embellished or patched up the letters according to his taste. That these letters were in many cases written to be read aloud in family or village gatherings, undoubtedly influenced their wording. And, last but not least, for a correct interpretation of a letter, one needs to be acquainted with both sender and addressee, their relationship but also the context

¹⁴⁶ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount.; Descamps F. (2009) *Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps*. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroupen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219.

¹⁴⁷ Singha R. (2010) *Front lines and status lines : sepoy and 'menial' in the Great War*. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 55-106. ; Singha R. (2011) *The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18*. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. ; Singha R. (2015) *The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919*. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62.

¹⁴⁸ First published in 1999 by Macmillan, this book has known some reprints, most recently in India: Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking.

¹⁴⁹ British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR), L/MIL/5/825-828.

and cultural background.¹⁵⁰ A case in point is the Indian directness which is reflected in many of the letters and the messages they convey and which is instantly recognisable for those who have travelled India or have been engaged in conversation with Indians.

However, as David Omissi rightly states in his introduction: the crucial issue is what we *can* learn from these letters, rather than what we *cannot* learn from them.¹⁵¹ This corpus remains of utter importance for they give a voice to the otherwise historically voiceless. Even taking into account all the filters, they enable us to pick up something of the experiences and opinions of the ordinary sepoy. No wonder the censor's reports with the letters have been extensively used.¹⁵² This recently led one scholar to state that the censor's reports have been "over-used"¹⁵³, something I profoundly disagree with: the reports with the letters not only form quite a substantive corpus of which the full potential hasn't been exploited, but its intrinsic value is also enhanced by being a unique source that is able to offer us a glimpse of an aspect of the past which is usually beyond the reach of historians. Unlike the Europeans who served in the First World War, the number of diaries and memoirs of Indian officers and other ranks can be literally counted on one hand, while the only oral history project involving Indian First World War veterans was quite limited, both in its scope and in the historiographical production it generated.¹⁵⁴ Hence, for this chapter, I will again make extensively use of the collection of Indian

¹⁵⁰ Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. p. 6-7 ; Markovits C. (2010) Indian soldiers' experiences in France during World War I : seeing Europe from the rear of the front. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 29-53. p. 35-40.

¹⁵¹ Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 9.

¹⁵² They have been critically assessed in: Markovits C. (2010) Indian soldiers' experiences in France during World War I : seeing Europe from the rear of the front. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 29-53.; Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury.; and Das S. (2017) Sensing the Sepoy: Objects, Letters and Songs of Indian Soldiers, 1914-1918. In: Saunders NJ and Cornish P (eds) *Modern Conflict and the Senses*. Abingdon: Routledge, 307-326. p. 316-8, and have been used in a rather illustrative capacity in: Olusoga D. (2014) *The World's War*, London: Head of Zeus. and Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury. as well as in most of the earlier mentioned military histories.

¹⁵³ Kaushik Roy at the "India and World War I. Across Generations"-conference, United Service Institution of India - Shiv Nadar University, 6 November 2015.

¹⁵⁴ All 42 interviewees were Punjabi Sikhs and besides some short references in other publications, the only conclusions were published in: Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225.

letters, having specifically browsed them with the aim of uncovering accounts describing cultural encounters, rather than “the morale of the troops” as most earlier scholars did.

Still, the extracts of letters are not just all there is. There are other rather unsuspected sources that give us direct access to the sepoys themselves and remarkably enough, they are to be found in Germany. The presence of Indians on the Western Front and by consequence in the German prisoner-of-war camps not only fascinated many in Germany, but it also offered a window of opportunity to many officials in the Reich.¹⁵⁵ For German academia, the presence of non-European prisoners-of-war (POWs) was an occasion to conduct scientific research on or with these men.¹⁵⁶ One of the results, besides hundreds of photographs¹⁵⁷ or POW camp magazines entitled *El Dschihad* and *Hindostan*¹⁵⁸, is a corpus of some 200 sound recordings on which the POWs sing songs or tell stories, often reflecting on their own life.¹⁵⁹ The Berlin based research institute

¹⁵⁵ Propaganda-wise the Indian presence could be used not only to denounce British imperialism but also the ‘immoral’ use of ‘barbarian’ troops against a civilised opponent, and there were attempts to convince the Indians in the trenches (and in particular the muslims among them) to come over to the German side to join the struggle against the British. See: Liebau H. (2011) The German Foreign Office, Indian Emigrants and Propaganda Efforts Among the 'Sepoys'. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 96-129. After all, in the Ottoman Empire, the highest religious authority of the Caliphate had called Muslims across the world for jihad against the Entente and the kaiser was the Ottoman sultan’s ally: Motadel D. (2014) Jihad 1914. *History Today* 64: 41-42.

¹⁵⁶ Lange B. (2011) South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 149-186.

¹⁵⁷ Kahleyss M. (1998) *Muslims in Brandenburg : Kriegsgefangene in 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.; Kahleyss M. (2011) Indian Prisoners of War in World War I: Photographs as Source Material. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 207-230, Kahleyss M. (2011) Indian Prisoners of War in World War I: Photographs as Source Material. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 207-230.

¹⁵⁸ Liebau H. (2011) *Hindostan: A Camp Newspaper for South-Asian Prisoners of World War One in Germany*. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 231-249.

¹⁵⁹ Mahrenholz J-K. (2008) Ethnographic Audio Recordings in German Prisoner of War Camps during the First World War. In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tiel: Lannoo, 161-166. ; Mahrenholz J-K. (2011) Recordings of South Asian Languages and Music in the Lautarchiv of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several*

Zentrum Moderner Orient has in the past few years taken the subject of South Asian POWs during the First World War to their heart, resulting in several publications.¹⁶⁰ Their focus, however, was mainly on the *Inderlager* [Indian camp] in Zossen-Wünsdorf where for most of the war the Indian prisoners were concentrated. While I do take into account the sources originating from that camp such as the sound recordings, I will equally enlarge the scope of the captivity experience by including unknown sources from much nearer to the front such as a publication made by the German Army Headquarters in Lille for their soldiers at the front. This will enable me to include in the assessment of the Indian POW's experiences the highly traumatic, transitional period of the capture and its immediate aftermath, including the first encounters with that other European group the Indians became acquainted with: the Germans.

My approach ties in with that of Santanu Das, arguably the central figure in scholarship on Indian experiences in the First World War. Throughout his numerous publications,¹⁶¹ Das' purpose it is to make a synthesis with a strong sensorial emphasis (body, gender, sexuality and affect), taking into account the broadest possible range of sources: not only the British reports of the censor and the German sound recordings but also objects, photographs, monuments and personal items that recently emerged in

kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 187-206.

¹⁶⁰ Ahuja R. (2010) The corrosiveness of comparison : reverberations of Indian wartime experiences in German prison camps (1915-1919). In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 131-166. ; Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R. (2011) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*, New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan. The latter book was also published in German : Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R. (2014) *Soldat Ram Singh und der Kaiser : Indische Kriegsgefangene in deutschen Propagandalagern 1914-1918*, Heidelberg: Draupadi Verlag.

¹⁶¹ Das S. (2007) Sepoys, Sahibs and Babus: India, the Great War and Two Colonial Journals. In: Hammond M and Towheed S (eds) *Publishing in the First World War : essays in book history*. New York Palgrave Macmillan, 61-77.; Das S. (2008) India and the First World War. In: Howard M (ed) *A Part of History. Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War*. London: Continuum, 63-73.; Das S. (2010) Imperialism, nationalism and the First World War in India. In: Keene JD and Neiberg MS (eds) *Finding common ground : new directions in First World War studies*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.; Das S. (2011) The Singing Subaltern. *Parallax* 17: 4-18. ; Das S. (2011) Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history In: Das S (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 70-89.; Das S. (2012) Sensing the Indian Sepoy in the First World War. *Comparative critical studies* 9: 7-18.; Das S. (2014) Touching Semiliterate Lives: Indian Sepoys in the First World War and Life Writing. In: DiBattista M (ed) *Modernism and autobiography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Das S. (2014) *Indians on the Western Front*, Paris: Gallimard.; Das S. (2015) Reframing life/war 'writing': objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914-1918. *Textual Practice* 29: 1265-1287.

India and other countries. With his background in English literature studies, Santanu Das has a particular interest in (Indian) literary products related to the Great War, of which Mulk Raj Anand's *Across The Black Waters* from 1939 deserves specific mention.¹⁶²

What I will ultimately add to this historiography, based partly on new sources, is an assessment of the experiences of not only Indian soldiers but also Indian labourers on the Western Front and this against the backdrop of meetings with the European 'Other'. What I aim to present in this chapter is how cultural encounters in Europe had an impact on the ordinary Indian's (self) image. I will examine the nature of meetings between European civilians and the Indian military and how they were seen and thus experienced by the local inhabitants and vice versa. This approach is new as a) it concerns not only the sepoys, but also the labourers, b) as it takes into account the local inhabitants. It will draw from a wide variety of sources, both published and unpublished, of which the reports of the censor with their excerpts of Indian letters, the German sound recordings and interviews with the local inhabitants in Flanders and northern France stand out.

The Indian Army Corps and the Indian Cavalry Regiments

*"The fighting is of five kinds. First, there are the aeroplanes which move about dropping bombs and causing great havoc. They are like the great bird of Vishnu in the sky. Next is the battle of the cannon which is earth-splitting. Then there is the fighting on the sea, of which the fashion is this: that the ships remain concealed in the parts of the sea and then, watching their opportunity, the English fire at the Germans and the Germans at the English [...]. In the fighting with rifles the bullets fall fast like hail."*¹⁶³ Thus a wounded Garhwali tried to explain the industrialised war to his brother. For the Indians the war in Europe was a brutal acquaintance with modern warfare, and some of the new technologies were difficult to cope with. In

¹⁶²The only Indian novel in English set in the First World War, the story draws heavily on the reminiscences of the author's father, at one time regimental clerk, and his comrades who had served with him in France. Many of the situations in the book can be matched with real events and the book might be considered as fictionalised Indian war experiences, be it written by an exponent of the next generation with clear left-wing and nationalist opinions. I use the edition published by Shalimar Books in London in 2014.

¹⁶³In a letter dated 12 February 1915. British Library, India Office Records, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f° 89. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 36.

the beginning every airplane was fired at, irrespective of whether it was a German or an allied plane. It could not be believed such a flying monster could have other than bad intentions. Yet, as with all new devices encountered, after some time the novelty wore off, and the Indian rank and file would barely look up when airplanes flew past.¹⁶⁴

Soldiering in late colonial India was generally not the occupation of the very poorest and most military were from the middle peasantry. It will be their voices we will be mainly hearing in the following pages. As these men usually served for five to seven years (though some served much longer), the bond with family and village was seldom entirely severed, which partly explains the high number of letters sent home, and as they usually served their entire time with the same regiment a strong emotional attachment with the unit was common. The Indian Expeditionary Force A (IEF A) that was sent to Europe, better known on the Western Front as the Indian Army Corps, was composed of two Infantry Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions.¹⁶⁵ Due to the martial races theory the vast majority of the men came from the north and northwest of the subcontinent: the then provinces of Punjab, North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the United Provinces (UP), as well as from the independent kingdom of Nepal.¹⁶⁶

The closer one's home was to the cooler climates of the Himalayas the more apt one was seen to be recruited as a soldier. The Garhwali, for instance, lived and live in the Himalayas bordering Tibet. Urban populations were usually not tapped for recruits, nor the western educated, the latter for fear of their potential for political opposition.¹⁶⁷ However, all this only applied to the military - not to militarised civilian labour. Therefore a separate section will be devoted to these lesser known Indian Labourers. One thing, however, both labour and military had in common was that their composition was multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual.

It is estimated a total of some 138,000 Indian soldiers and labourers were deployed in Europe:¹⁶⁸ up to 90,000 combatants (and followers¹⁶⁹) and

¹⁶⁴ Merewether JWB and Smith FE. (1917) *The Indian corps in France*, London: John Murray. p. 107-8.

¹⁶⁵ Appendix 3 gives the order of battle of the two Infantry Divisions, while Appendix 4 does the same for the two Cavalry Divisions.

¹⁶⁶ Appendix 6 provides a map of British India as it was organised in 1909.

¹⁶⁷ Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p. 255.

little less than 50,000 labourers. More than 14,000 wounded Indians were sent to various hospitals in Britain in 1914-15 (out of a total of 50,000 Indian wounded) and some 1,000 were at one point held captive in a German camp. Most of the latter were taken prisoner, but British sources suspect little over 90 to have been deserters.¹⁷⁰ At least five sepoy were shot for cowardice.¹⁷¹ The cultural-ethnic composition of IEF A must have broadly reflected that of the Indian Army which in 1914 consisted of 40 % Muslims, 30 % Hindus, 19 % Sikhs, 10 % Gurkha's and 1 % others.¹⁷² Some 50 % of all Indian military personnel was recruited in the Punjab.¹⁷³ Regarding the age structure of the Indian Army Corps, no absolute nor even relative figures are available. Yet, as a sepoy could serve for up to 25 years¹⁷⁴, we can presume that compared to the European armies, many were relatively older. And, hailing from a colony where child labour was common, some could be extremely young, not in the least among the followers who did menial work. During his inspections Walter Lawrence, the Indian Civil Service (ICS) mandarin responsible for the Indian hospitals in England, encountered two boys of twelve years old who were brought out as syces and even a child of ten that had arrived in France as a bellows blower.¹⁷⁵

While the military performances by the Indian Army Corps have been sufficiently described elsewhere, it is useful to point out some facts that had an important impact on the circumstances of their deployment in Western Europe.

¹⁶⁹ The Followers were a non-combatant class of personnel which included a large number of bakers, blacksmiths, butchers, carpenters, cooks, hammermen, gardeners, herdsmen, shoemakers, shoeing smiths, packers, sweepers, syces, tailors, washermen, weighmen, etc.... Their number ran in the thousands.

¹⁷⁰ Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 19-20.

¹⁷¹ Morton-Jack G. (2006) The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914-1915: A Portrait of Collaboration. *War in History* 13: 329-362., p. 341.

¹⁷² Pradhan SD. (1978) Indian Army and the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 49-67., p. 34. A more precise overview per regiment is given in Appendix 5.

¹⁷³ Markovits C. (2010) Indian soldiers' experiences in France during World War I : seeing Europe from the rear of the front. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 29-53. p. 34.

¹⁷⁴ Corrigan G. (1999) *Sepoys in the trenches : the Indian corps on the Western front 1914-1915*, Staplehurst: Spellmount. p. 13.

¹⁷⁵ Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury. p. 102.

The Indian Army was deployed in France and Flanders not because it was wanted but because it was badly needed. In August 1914 Prime Minister Asquith felt strongly that it was undesirable to send 'native troops' to Europe and his cabinet was generally also averse to it.¹⁷⁶ However, it was Kitchener who forced the decision and summoned the sepoy to Europe, telling the General Staff in Simla on 27 August 1914: "*We are in a tight place [and] are employing every source*".¹⁷⁷ When they finally arrived, at the dire moments of the First Battle of Ypres, the Indians were rushed into the frontline. It is important to point out, however, that the Lahore Division was not deployed in full. The Indian units were considered 'reservoirs of men' deployed by the British when and where they needed manpower most urgently. Battalions, half battalions and even companies were used separately to support various British divisions, while the Indian troops had at least expected to stay together. On 29 October 1914 general Willcocks wrote in his diary: "*Where is my Lahore Division? Sirhind Brigade: left in Egypt, Ferozopore Brigade: somewhere in the north, divided in three or four pieces, Jullundur Brigade: the Manchesters in the south with the 5th division, the 47th Sikhs half with the one or the other British division, for the other half somewhere else. The 59th and 15th Sikhs: in the trenches [...]*".¹⁷⁸ It is obvious that this was not favourable for co-ordination or for the morale of the Indian troops. Yet, their deployment had been vital for saving the new-born Ypres Salient for the allies as "*they filled a gap in the line when we had no other troops to put in*".¹⁷⁹ From 23 October 1914 to the end of First Ypres, the Indian Corps held around 12 miles, or 34 percent of the BEF line!¹⁸⁰ Their exploits, however, came at a high cost: the 57th Wilde's Rifles suffered nearly 300 casualties in the last week of October 1914 alone. By the end of the First Battle of Ypres the average strength of Indian Army battalions was less than 550. It had been 764 strong upon arrival in France.¹⁸¹

After the First Battle of Ypres (19 October-22 November 1914) and the Battle of La Bassée (10 October- 2 November 1914), the Indian divisions

¹⁷⁶ Olusoga D. (2014) *The World's War*, London: Head of Zeus. p. 47.

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in : Morton-Jack G. (2006) *The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914–1915: A Portrait of Collaboration*. *War in History* 13: 329-362. p. 338.

¹⁷⁸ Willcocks J. (1920) *With the Indians in France*, London: Constable. p. 65.

¹⁷⁹ John Charteris, chief intelligence officer in Haig's I Corps, as quoted in Morton-Jack G. (2006) *The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914–1915: A Portrait of Collaboration*. *War in History* 13: 329-362. p. 340.

¹⁸⁰ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 151.

¹⁸¹ Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. p. 117-8.

were involved in both defensive and offensive operations around their sector of Neuve Chapelle. Besides 'normal' trench warfare including raids and defensive actions, they took part in British offensives such as the Battle of Neuve Chapelle (10-12 March 1915), the Battle of Aubers Ridge (9 May 1915), the Battle of Festubert (15-25 May 1915) and the Battle of Loos (25 September- 8 October 1915). Only once were they rushed north of the border, once again for a major defensive operation, when they took part in the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April - 25 May 1915). The first year of the war was pretty much a period of trial and error, both for the British and for the Indian Army. The Indians would get acquainted with war on an industrial scale, including the use of gas at 2nd Ypres and deep mines at Aubers Ridge, and would bear the brunt of the first major British offensive of the war (i.e. the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle).

When they had left India, the sepoys initially had little information or knowledge about where they were going. Many believed they were on their way to what they called *vilayat*,¹⁸² i.e. Britain, finding themselves in France and Belgium instead.¹⁸³ Thousands of miles away from home, in a strange environment and completely unprepared for the terrible weather conditions, the Indians fought for a cause that some of them barely understood. In that context, the special role of a British officer in the Indian Army Corps and his relationship with the men was very important. That relation can best be described as paternalistic.¹⁸⁴ The officer understood his troops more or less: as a rule he not only spoke their language, but he was also familiar with their customs, ethics and culture. When many of those officers fell in the first battles, British-Indian companies finding themselves without commanding officer were sometimes integrated in British units where nobody understood them.

The encounter of the Indian rank and file with killing in an industrialised manner was probably never so brutal as during the Second Battle of Ypres. Initiated with the first major gas attack in world history on 22 April 1915, the German troops had been able to advance their frontline for

¹⁸² In Urdu *Vilayat* refers to any foreign country. During the Raj, however, it referred more exclusively to Britain. The word is at the origin of the English term *Blighty*, which during the First World War became widespread soldiers' slang for Britain or broader understood: 'home'.

¹⁸³ Ahuja R. (2010) The corrosiveness of comparison : reverberations of Indian wartime experiences in German prison camps (1915-1919). In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 131-166. p. 145.

¹⁸⁴ Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. p. 62.

several miles north of Ypres. Two days later, the Lahore division was moved north and on 26 April it attacked with French North-African troops to their left. During this attack which happened in disadvantageous circumstances, the Germans discharged chlorine gas. This unfruitful attack in which Indian military for the first time were involved in chemical warfare, was to be repeated the following days, be it without the emittance of gas. The casualty figures of the Indian Army Corps units at the Second Battle of Ypres were appalling. The 40th Pathans lost 320 men, the 47th Sikhs 348 (out of 444 !), the 129th Baluchis lost 231, the 57th lost 275, All in all, the Lahore Division lost nearly 30 % of the men engaged on 26 and 27th April 1915.¹⁸⁵ Less than one month later, after the Battle of Aubers Ridge and just before the end of the Battle of Festubert, the Indian Corps' total number of Indian troops had fallen to about 7,000 while it had been 15,000 in mid-October 1914 (with only two of its three brigades present!).¹⁸⁶

The great number of casualties of the Indian troops does not mean that their efforts were appreciated by the military authorities: early May 1915, when the British-French command in the Ypres Salient decided to make a strategic retreat, the British Generals French and Plumer voiced their concern about the strength of the French wing. The French commander General Foch assured them that the British flank in the North would be secured by "really good troops". Plumer explained that according to him this should mean: "*Not less than three regular French divisions should be kept between the British left and the Belgian right, and that French troops (not coloured) be placed on the immediate left of my troops. The Indian troops which were on my left have now been relieved by white troops.*"¹⁸⁷ Or in other words, if we manage to get rid of the weak coloured units, then so must you. Such latently present or explicitly voiced racist thinking was omnipresent in the armies of the First World War. But simply add up the figures: coloured troops fell in the same proportion and, if deployed,

¹⁸⁵ Leigh MS. (1922) *The Punjab and the War*, Lahore: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Printing, Punjab. p. 206. For an overview of the casualty figures at 2nd Ypres, see Omissi D. (2015) The Indian Army at the Second Battle of Ypres. In: Zanders JP (ed) *Innocence Slaughtered. Gas and the transformation of warfare and society*. London: Uniform Press, 118-133. p. 130.

¹⁸⁶ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 165.

¹⁸⁷ The National Archives, Kew: WO 158/201: Second Army: Plumer's force: Operations April 27-May 11, 1915. Putkowski J. (2015) Toxic Shock: the British Army's Reaction to German Poison Gas during the Second Battle of Ypres. In: Zanders JP (ed) *Innocence Slaughtered. Gas and the transformation of warfare and society*. London: Uniform Press, 86-117. p. 97-8.

in the same numbers, i.e. as courageously and honourably as their white colleagues. In nationalistic, colonial and imperialistic thinking penetrated by European supremacy and superiority there was no option other than that the other was inferior, primitive, different.¹⁸⁸ The colonial troops were made the scapegoat for the European ineffectiveness and failures.

This British sense of superiority was felt throughout the Indian ranks. Amar Singh,¹⁸⁹ a loyal and anglophile Rajput nobleman who kept throughout his life an extensive English-language diary, noted that *“whenever we fail in the slightest degree any where people raise a hue & cry whereas if a British troop fails under the same circumstances no one mentions it. [...] When we had the reverse at Givenchy & Festubert, there was hue and cry. However, no one at that time said that there were British troops in as well. [...] Then again when we had such a brilliant success at Neuve Chapelle I heard General Blackadder himself say that people are singing the praises of the Indian troops as if there were no Britishers with them. [...] I do not know what is expected of the Indians. After all a man can give his life up and no one can say the Indians have been sparing themselves in any way”*. When on a staff meeting Amar Singh suggested at one point to send the Indian troops to Egypt and bring all the British troops out, *“Brunker turned to me rather fiercely & said that you can’t fight with native troops only. This hurt me very much because after all why can’t the Indians be thought fit to fight by themselves.”*¹⁹⁰ The superiority of the white soldier was a common view that had pervaded the British establishment of the Indian army and administration.¹⁹¹ It was also reflected in the hierarchy of the Indian army where even the most junior British lieutenant outranked the most senior Subedar-major, the highest rank obtainable for an Indian. This racist ideology in which a natural inferiority was attributed to the Indians greatly frustrated and resented

¹⁸⁸ Dendooven D and Chielens P. (2008) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 7.

¹⁸⁹ Amar Singh (1879-1942) grew up at the court of the princely state of Jodhpur, joined the Jodhpur Lancers and served with these troops in the suppression of the Boxer Rising. In the First World War he served as Aide-de-Camp to the Commander of the Sirhind Brigade, Major-General Brunker. His family residence, Castle Kanota, now houses the General Amar Singh Kanota Library & Museum, named after him.

¹⁹⁰ Ellinwood DC. (2005) *Between two worlds : a Rajput officer in the Indian army, 1905-21 : based on the diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur*, Lanham: Hamilton. p. 389.

¹⁹¹ Gregory M. (1986) The influence of racial attitudes on British policy towards India during the First World War. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14. p. 101-6; Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. p. 103-4 ; Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p. 257 ; Kant V. (2014) *India and the First World War : 'if I die here, who will remember me?'*, New Delhi: Roli Books. p. 45.

men like Amar Singh.¹⁹² All this, however, co-existed with the fact that quite a number of British officers in Indian service felt a certain, be it paternalistic, sympathy for the Indian troops.¹⁹³ While British superiority was institutionalised and to a large degree internalised, genuine mutual respect and friendship between Indian and British officers occurred as well.

That the Indian rank and file was used as cannon fodder was an opinion Amar Singh reported as being “*very prevalent amongst all the Indians*”.¹⁹⁴ One letter - of many - voicing this opinion is written by a Sikh sepoy of the 107th Pioneers in Gurmukhi on 23 March 1915: “*My brother such a war will not be again, nor has never been before. It is Mahabharat, the death of the Punjab. [...] The English also suffered heavily. They put the black man in front and the second line is of white soldiers. Of complete regiments only 400 or 200 are left. We black man suffered heavily. They put us in front.*”¹⁹⁵ George Morton-Jack is convinced the Indian Corps’ senior commanders did not sacrifice Indians to save white troops, his main argument being that the Indians fought just as much as British troops.¹⁹⁶ Yet, certainly concerning the 2nd Battle of Ypres, one could argue that colonial troops - which on the British side means Indians - were used as shock troops in a counter offensive where all circumstances were to their disadvantage: the exhausted troops had to attack in a place that was unknown to them without sufficient airborne and artillery support and against a virtually invisible enemy. Still, they explored and prepared the field so it could be expanded into a new allied line of defence by others after them. Even if the presumption of being used as cannon fodder can be disputed, in the eyes of the Indian rank and file the perception was certainly there.

In addition to the terrible conditions the Indian troops had to fight in and which were alike to all belligerents, the two major problems they had to face were the poor reinforcements (from India) and the high number of

¹⁹² Das S. (2011) Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history In: Das S (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 70-89. p. 77.

¹⁹³ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 35.

¹⁹⁴ Ellinwood DC. (2005) *Between two worlds : a Rajput officer in the Indian army, 1905-21 : based on the diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur*, Lanham: Hamilton. p. 391.

¹⁹⁵ BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f° 151.

¹⁹⁶ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 276.

casualties amongst British officers. The corps arrived in France with 10 percent reserves for the Indian units and those reserves were already used up for the replacement of the sick and unfit even before the corps arrived on the front. The reserve system in India was completely inadequate and a large number of Indians arriving in Marseille as reinforcement proved to be unsuitable for service, because they were too old, too weak, suffering from ill health or untrained. The high number of casualties made the problem even more acute. The solution was found by sending complete Indian units from India to Europe, without looking for new recruits. That in turn caused problems in India. Upon arrival in France, these regiments would be split up, the men being sent where reinforcements were due. In June 1915 Walter Lawrence reported that the 15th Sikhs was then composed of men taken from nine different units. "This is no longer a regiment; it has no cohesion", Lawrence wrote Kitchener.¹⁹⁷ Replacing the British officers in the Indian army was considered another major problem.¹⁹⁸ As said, there was supposed to be a special relationship between the British officer and his Indian men, and obviously the arrival of new officers who did not understand the Indians at all, did not know their background and had problems communicating with them, was not favourable to the morale of the Indian troops.¹⁹⁹ Yet, in practice, in battle Indian officers (Viceroy's Commissioned Officers or VCO's²⁰⁰) were seen to reorganise and lead their units after they had lost their British officers. And hardly no officers are mentioned in the sepoys' letters, suggesting rather feelings of indifference to them.²⁰¹

With the arrival of Kitchener's Army towards the end of 1915 the Indian infantry divisions were no longer needed in France : their work was done and they were moved to Mesopotamia, not because they were

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 165.

¹⁹⁸ Ellinwood DC. (1978) The Indian Soldier, The Indian Army, and Change, 1914-1918. In: Pradhan S and Ellinwood DC (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi, 177-211. p. 189.

¹⁹⁹ Olusoga D. (2014) *The World's War*, London: Head of Zeus. p. 71.

²⁰⁰ VCOs, holding a commission issued by the viceroy, were also known as "Indian officers" or "native officers". They only had authority over Indian troops and were subordinate to all British King's (and Queen's) commissioned officers and King's commissioned Indian officers. The men promoted to VCO rank had long service and good service records, spoke reasonably fluent English, and could act as a common liaison point between officers and men and as advisers to the British officers on Indian affairs. Because of inherent British racist attitudes the VCOs were not trained to command anything larger than a platoon, thereby adding to the self-fulfilling prophecy of Indian ineptitude and inability.

²⁰¹ Morton-Jack G. (2006) The Indian Army on the Western Front, 1914–1915: A Portrait of Collaboration. *War in History* 13: 329-362. p. 352.

considered to have failed, nor for fear of another Flemish winter nor because of casualty replacement problems, but because of the Indian government's strategy regarding that region, argues George Morton-Jack.²⁰² However, besides considering whether they were needed, we must also remember they had not been wanted at the Western Front in the first place. Throughout the First World War it was the official British policy not to have black and brown men kill white men and this primarily to maintain the myth of white supremacy. Moreover, there was also the fear for "*the passionate love of battle which is now stirring in the hearts of the warlike races of Hindustan*", as it was stated in a letter to *The Times*.²⁰³ In other words: let's not give the subordinate military too much fighting experience. Once the Indian infantry was no longer needed in Europe, they were disposed of. The regiments of the Indian Army Corps would remain the only non-European combatant units of the British Empire ever to have been engaged in battle in Europe.

The Indian Army Corps on the Western Front, including its British battalions but excluding the Cavalry Divisions, suffered a total of some 34,250 casualties which was slightly more than the entire strength upon arrival. By October 1915, every officer and all but 28 men of the 47th Sikhs' original contingent had been killed or hospitalised for over ten days.²⁰⁴

When the Infantry - totalling some 30,000 men - left for Mesopotamia, the two Indian Cavalry Divisions remained in France, all in all some 13-14,000 men. They would play a role in the Battle of the Somme, the German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line and the Battle of Cambrai before being transferred to Palestine in March 1918.²⁰⁵

One thing the Indian Army Corps of 1914-15 had in common with the other British troops and with the Indian Labour Corps of 1917-20, was the role of the the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). On the outbreak of war this Christian charitable organisation had offered to

²⁰² Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 154-170.

²⁰³ Letter published 14 Sept 1914 and quoted in Olusoga D. (2014) *The World's War*, London: Head of Zeus. p. 23.

²⁰⁴ Omissi D. (2015) The Indian Army at the Second Battle of Ypres. In: Zanders JP (ed) *Innocence Slaughtered. Gas and the transformation of warfare and society*. London: Uniform Press, 118-133. p. 127.

²⁰⁵ Markovits C. (2010) Indian soldiers' experiences in France during World War I : seeing Europe from the rear of the front. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 29-53. p. 33.

arrange for rest and recreational facilities for military personnel, both at home, at the front and in the rear areas.²⁰⁶ In France alone, there would be over 300 YMCA centres by 1918 which often incorporated a canteen, chapel, concert hall, library, games room, classroom, and a quiet room. Activities included providing writing paper, film showings, libraries, concert parties, folk dancing, religious services and educational lectures.²⁰⁷ For the IEF A it was the 'Army YMCA of India' based in Calcutta that took on the charge. Early November 1914 it had arrived in Marseilles at a moment the town was out of bounds to the Indians and the men confined to their camp. To keep the men entertained, one of the first things it did was setting up a cinema in a shed where films were shown of Max Linder "*whose French idea of humour seemed to satisfy that of the sepoy*".²⁰⁸ For some it was perhaps the first time they saw moving pictures. After a year there were thirteen YMCA centres catering for the Indian needs. The strong educational vocation of the organisation was reflected in lantern lectures on topics like the war or the geography of Europe and especially in highly popular French classes for which it produced French phrase books in Urdu, Gurmukhi and Hindi. Of these phrase books it is claimed in November 1915 that about 100,000 had been circulated,²⁰⁹ which might be an exaggeration as this would mean every single man was given one. The YMCA was also important in providing scribes to write letters for the illiterate and it did so not only in its centres, but also in the hospital wards. According to the author of a published report on the deeds of the Army YMCA of India, his organisation managed to engage officers and soldiers to assist in the writing of letters for followers such as sweepers, which meant traditional caste segregation was breached, "*no small thing in the history of India*".²¹⁰ One item not mentioned, however, is proselytism. Despite being overtly a Christian enterprise, in order not to offend the religious sentiments of the Indian rank and file, all references to Christianity and all religious tracts or teachings had been strictly forbidden by the authorities.²¹¹ The YMCA's

²⁰⁶ Baron B. (2009) *The back parts of war : The YMCA Memoirs and Letters of Barclay Baron, 1915-1919*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

²⁰⁷ Hanna E. (2015) Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). In: Ute Daniel PG, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (ed) *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

²⁰⁸ Saunders JK. ([1915]) *With the Indians in France. Being an account of the work of the Army Y.M.C.A. of India with Indian Expeditionary Force A*, Calcutta: Army Y.M.C.A. of India., p. 3. This is a report printed for private publication. A copy is preserved in the IWM, K.75345.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²¹¹ Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury., p. 101-2 ; BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18577 : "Grants to YMCA".

remarkable role will be highlighted again when treating the Indian Labour Corps, in the next section, and the Chinese Labour Corps, in the next chapter.

The Indian Labour Corps

When questioned about the climate in Europe in December 1917, Kala Khan answered his correspondent in Bathinda in the state of Patiala that: “...the earth is white, the sky is white, the trees are white, the stones are white, the mud is white, the water is white, one’s spittle freezes into a solid white lump, the water is hard as stones or bricks, [and] the water in the rivers and canals and on the roads is like thick plate glass”²¹², thus expressing his unfamiliarity with the words for snow and ice. Even if this Punjabi muslim had witnessed those phenomena in the past, they would have been rare and nothing like the conditions of the cold wave reigning over western Europe between mid December 1917 and mid January 1918, with permanent snow and minimum temperatures down to -20°C.²¹³

Kala Khan was not a soldier, he was a member of the Indian Labour Corps, that as from June 1917 had supplemented the cavalry divisions and several divisional troops and followers that had remained in Western Europe after the two Indian infantry divisions had left. But while the Indian Army Corps has enjoyed at least some interest on behalf of both the academia and the public, the Indian labourers have been subject to a near complete oblivion and this despite their considerable number of 48,000. The Indian Labour Corps consisted of semi-skilled and unskilled labourers from six provinces (United Provinces, Bihar & Orissa, Assam, Burma, Bengal and North West Frontier Province) and the princely state of Manipur. Geographically there was a clear emphasis on the North East of

²¹² Letter in Urdu to Iltaf Hussein, dated 27 December 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 342. A note on the unfamiliarity of the workers with snow and ice is also to be found in Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 15.

²¹³ <http://www.prevision-meteo.ch/almanach/1917> and <http://www.meteo-media.com/nouvelles/articles/les-hivers-de-la-grande-guerre/32793> (accessed 1 June 2016). This and other remarks regarding the cold refute George Morton Jack and other authors’ minimalising of the effect the Western European climate had on the Indian rank and file, e.g. Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 154-9.

the Indian subcontinent. None, for instance, were recruited from the Madras Presidency. Some of the companies' designations were geographical and referred to the province (e.g. North Western Frontier Provinces Indian Labour Companies), the princely state (e.g. Manipur Indian Labour Companies) or the district (e.g. Ranchi Labour Companies) they were hailing from. Others were named after the people they were recruited from such as the Oraon, Chin, Lushai or Naga Indian Labour Companies.²¹⁴ Interestingly, quite a significant number of Indian labourers were recruited from what was then labelled 'depressed classes' and nowadays better known as *Adivasi* or 'Scheduled Tribes' (S.T.), the latter being the official terminology adopted in the Constitution of the Indian Republic. The essential characteristics of these historically disadvantaged indigenous people are according to the actual Ministry of Tribal Affairs of the Government of India: "*indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, shyness of contact with the community at large, geographical isolation and backwardness*".²¹⁵

A case in point are the Lushai Hills - now the Indian state of Mizoram. The hills had only been integrated in British India, and thus formally colonised, in 1895 and at that time the hill people were completely illiterate. It would take until 1942 before there even was a 'jeepable' road to its most important settlement Aizawl, now the state capital.²¹⁶ Yet, a majority of the known labour companies were composed of people of such tribal communities and little is known on how they experienced the war in Europe and what impact this passage had on them.

In the early months of 1917 the Indian administration had sent out very vague instructions to the six provinces from where the labourers were to be recruited and the results were a wide range of different establishments and terms of engagement. Some labourers were contracted for a year, while others signed up for the duration of war (which in practice would mean until their return to India after the war had ended). In Manipur Raja Churachand offered to recruit 2000 Nagas and Kukis. Some Kuki chiefs, however, objected and a small military force had to intervene. Eventually 1200 Nagas and 800 Kukis under the command of Colonel Cole who had

²¹⁴ Appendix 7 offers an overview of the companies of the Indian Labour Corps.

²¹⁵ <http://tribal.nic.in/Content/IntroductionScheduledTribes.aspx> (accessed 30 May 2016). The bureaucratic designation 'tribal' and its official definition are antiquated and often disputed. India's most tribal state, Mizoram, for instance, with over 90 percent 'tribals', is also one of its most literate regions.

²¹⁶ Pachuau JLK and van Schendel W. (2015) *The Camera as Witness. A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press. p. 87, 165.

been the state's British political agent would leave for France in May 1917. An attempt to raise a second batch of 2000 later in 1917 would ignite a rebellion of the Kukis and Chins that would last for 3 years.²¹⁷ It was the most important, but not the only case of resistance against the recruitment drive. In the princely state of Mayurbhanj (Bihar and Orissa) the Santhals refused to join and petitioned the British political agent.²¹⁸ Missionaries and their networks were also instrumentalised in the recruitment effort. It explains for the relatively large number of Christians among the Indian labourers: not less than 5,000 in the first contingent sent over to France. They were supervised by 11 chaplains in addition to lay readers from several denominations.²¹⁹

For those 'willing to serve', it was often rather a matter of economic necessity, thus stresses Radhika Singha.²²⁰ Many of the men had to scrap a living from heavily mortgaged, overcropped and underfertilised land.²²¹ In the case of the men recruited from Assam many allotted as much as three-fourths of their pay to their dependents. These 'dependents' might have included creditors as due to a terrible famine in 1911-12 many in the Assam hills were still paying back rice loans. The provincial government had promised life-long exemption from house-tax and the labour tax to those who served.²²²

²¹⁷ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 258-9 and Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 204-7.

²¹⁸ Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 202-3.

²¹⁹ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18410: "Chaplains for Labour Corps" ; Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 200-202.

²²⁰ Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 199-200.

²²¹ Imperial War Museum (IWM), 01/60/01: H.A. Orton. This three page typescript is entitled "A piece of history for the Indians who now are resident in this country". Herbert Arnesby Orton served as an officer with the Indian Labour Corps from 1916 to 1919. The author states he wrote it in 1919, which would mean soon after the event.

²²² Pachuau JLK and van Schendel W. (2015) *The Camera as Witness. A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press., p. 191.

Other sources, however, point out that there were many others for whom economic necessity was not the prime drive to sign up for the Indian Labour Corps. Lord Amthill, a former Governor of Madras and acting Viceroy and now advisor on Indian Labour, urged the India Office to allow small selected and well accompanied groups of Indian Labourers to visit London. After all, within the Labour Corps there were *“representatives of many grades and classes, a good many men of education and persons, like village and tribal chieftains, whose influence in their own country is far reaching”*. They had not come to earn money but to *“see the world”*. Eventually the request was granted and in 1918 a total of 260 selected labourers in parties of ten and accompanied by two officers were each entertained for a full week in the imperial capital.²²³ Captain Kashi Nath, a former public servant of the provincial government of the United Provinces and the supervisor of that province’ 23rd (U.P.) Labour Company who published one of the rare accounts on the Indian Labour Corps in France, related how besides *“labourers, agriculturists and menial followers”* there was also *“a schoolmaster, several schoolboys, the runaway son of a wealthy merchant, a grain-trader of means who had quarrelled with his brothers [...] and a Gurkha soldier who had received an incapacitating wound in Flanders”*.²²⁴ While the latter’s wound was apparently and remarkably not a hindrance to be recruited for overseas labour, age often was. Certain personnel were found unsuitable for work on grounds of being either too young or too old. It was decided in December 1917 to repatriate the elderly but to retain the youngsters *“until such time as they become suitable”*.²²⁵

Among the officers of the Indian Labour Corps too many were older than average. Not only because there was a scarcity of officers at this period in Britain, but also because men with the requisite experience (and a certain knowledge of language and culture) were usually found among the retired Indian Civil Servants.²²⁶ Finding suitable officers for the Indian Labour Corps was not easy: despite already having selected 58 officers, of whom some spoke besides Hindustani another Indian language, the India Office was at the end of August 1917 still struggling to find potential officers

²²³ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18759: “Entertainment of Parties from Indian Labour Corps in France”.

²²⁴ Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 5.

²²⁵ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18302: “Raising of Indian Labour units for service in France” ; TNA, WO 95/43/9 :War Diary. Branches and Services. Deputy Assistant Adjutant General (3rd Echelon, Indian section).

²²⁶ TNA, WO 107/37: “Work of the Labour Force during the War: Report”, November 1919, p. 41.

speaking Assamese, Manipuri, Khasi, Synteng, Lushai, Gurkhali or Santali.²²⁷ It explains the importance of and the reliance on the supervisors who had accompanied the contingents from India (and who often had been the recruiters). Among them there were white planters such as Mr. Ardagh from the still well-known Maijan Tea Estate in Upper Assam, government officials such as the famous ICS Administrator and anthropologist John Henry Hutton or missionaries such as the Belgian Jesuits Henri Floor and Frans Ory who were active in Chota Nagpur.²²⁸ Other officers were recruited from the 'domiciled community'²²⁹, such as Jim Corbett who was to become famous as a hunter-turned-conservationist.²³⁰ Finally, officers were recruited among 'Eurasians' (of mixed European and Asian ancestry), and among educated Indians (in the United Provinces), but that was not approved by all. The Director of Labour at British Army Headquarters, Brigadier-General Evan Gibb, was convinced "*that we should get better Labour results if India would refrain from sending any more Eurasians and Indian officers.*"²³¹ The presence of 'native' officers was certainly a marked difference with the other non-European labour corps where there were none at all.²³²

The presence of missionaries among the headmen of the Indian Labour Corps is a marked difference between the Indian Labour Corps and the Indian Army Corps. In 1914-15 there was particular cautiousness the British would not appear to try to convert the soldiers to Christianity. Bibles were banned from the Indian hospitals in South England and there was even objection to the letter-writing paper the YMCA provided the sepoys in France with and which bore the inscription "Christian Anjuman".²³³ But this caution was no longer observed for the Indian Labour Corps in 1917. To missionaries and YMCA alike, being present

²²⁷ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18302: "Raising of Indian Labour units for service in France".

²²⁸ Singha R. (2015) The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62. Henri Floor had scientific credentials and was considered a specialist in the local language Kharia: Vints L. (2013) 'Vier moet branden'. Belgische missionarissen in India. In: Goddeeris I (ed) *Het wiel van Ashoka. Belgisch-Indiase contacten in historisch perspectief*. Leuven: Lipsius, 83-102. p. 88.

²²⁹ The term was used for people of European descent who had permanently settled in India. They were also referred to as 'poor whites' or anglo-indians.

²³⁰ Das P. (2012) *World War I and the Shillong Connection* Available at:

<http://www.prasantadas.com/?m=201211;>

http://www.jimcorbettnationalpark.com/corbett_coljim.asp (accessed 3 June 2016).

²³¹ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18302: "Raising of Indian Labour units for service in France".

²³² As remarked by Radhika Singha during the "India and the Great War" - conference, New Delhi, 6 March 2014.

²³³ Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury. p. 101-2 ; BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18577: "Grants to YMCA".

among the Indian labourers in Europe offered not only an occasion for proselytism for the different Christian denominations they adhered to but also an opportunity for educating the Indians.²³⁴ Sources from the India Office Records suggest even a moderate form of competition between different christian denominations to have chaplains appointed to the Indian Labour Corps.²³⁵ It remains an open question if the attempts to make converts were successful as we have no knowledge regarding baptisms. The efforts on the educational level were at least admirable: at one point ten missionaries in service of the YMCA, fluent in some five principal Indian languages, organised 266 “entertainments and lantern-lectures”, each attended by 200-500 men. What was shown the men “suggested thought or was of some educational value” and could, for instance, focus on agricultural improvement. Moreover, just as they had done for the soldiers, the YMCA produced textbooks in Hindi and Urdu and organised classes in the vernacular language and English.²³⁶

There were large variations in the contingents sent to France: from 6370 to 417, and from twelve different tribes. As many men would not be prepared to work and live together, these were matters that had to be taken into account when a contingent was split into companies.²³⁷ In theory in France the Indian Labour Corps was organised in units (corps) of about 2000 men, consisting of four companies of 504 men: 495 ‘natives’ led by five officers from the Indian Army Reserve of Officers and four (European) NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers). The company was the operational basic unit. All men were subject to the Indian Army Act and Indian Army Regulations were in force.²³⁸ However, this was mere theory. In practice, it is highly questionable if every company had its full cadre.

²³⁴ The same J.K. Saunders who in November 1915 had written an account on the work of the YMCA for the India Army Corps in France without mentioning any religious zeal, now stressed the opportunity for missionary work within the YMCA camps. Saunders JK. (1917) The missionary opportunity of the Young Men's Christian Association in the Camps. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 15: 277-282.

²³⁵ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18410: “Chaplains for Labour Corps”.

²³⁶ McMillan AW. (1920) Indian Echoes from France. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 6-7.

²³⁷ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 258-9.

²³⁸ Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 135.

Starling and Lee mention only seven officers or supervisors for 2000 men which would have meant no more than 2 officers per company!²³⁹

The Indian Labour Corps was mainly deployed in the *départements* of the Somme and the Pas-de-Calais and the labour they performed was very varied: an “Oraon Company, headed by a Belgian Jesuit” cleaned French village streets, Lushai companies recycled the timbering of old trenches and made them into charcoal (which was heavily needed for trench braziers and gas masks), one of the Khasi companies did railhead work, 65th and 66th (Manipur) Companies did work on camp construction and made duckboards, while 24 (United Provinces), 77 (Kumaon) & 66 (Manipur) Companies repaired roads, made bricks and worked in quarries making a.o. checkers for road works. A company of the United Provinces made mattresses on self-made looms, while unnamed other companies did forestry work, battlefield clearance and salvage or helped building an aerodrome.²⁴⁰

In the few letters known to have been written by or on behalf of Indian labourers contentment over their lot and the nature of their work is expressed. A Christian from the 42nd Ranchi Labour Company considered their work, which consisted of collecting iron and recuperating wood from the old trenches as “*very light*”, allowing to sing while working. He was also happy that they were often visited by Europeans (“Sahibs”) who “*laugh and talk with us*” and he was content with the material provisions.²⁴¹ This does not mean the labourers were never deployed in the danger zone: “*Aeroplanes are overhead and shells fall on the ground, not to speak of the rifle firing. We are about 12 miles from the fighting*”, explained one of his comrades of a Bihar labour company earlier.²⁴² It was particularly during the onslaught of the German Spring Offensive that the labourers would come in contact with the realities of industrial warfare: in the last week of March 1918 some of the companies came under direct shell fire resulting in the losses of several dozens of lives, yet despite the

²³⁹ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 259.

²⁴⁰ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18577: “Grants to YMCA”; Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 208-9; Singha R. (2015) The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62. p. 37; Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 260.

²⁴¹ Letter in Hindi to Ranchi, dated 9 March 1918. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

²⁴² Letter in Hindi, dated 26 September 1917 by an Indian Christian to a correspondent in Ranchi. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

circumstances, there was no straggling or panic, something that struck their officers and supervisors.²⁴³ *“Our life has been a veritable hell. We have been shelled and bombed night and day [...]. The Germans being twice on us we had to run for dear life, leaving nearly everything [...]. Our men never showed any panic and behaved splendidly. None of us could sleep through for the last month, as the shells went bang, bang every minute, with pieces flying over our heads.”*, thus did the Belgian Jesuit Father Ory S.J., who accompanied the Ranchi Labour Corps, describe the events in a letter to the Archbishop of Calcutta, his fellow countryman Dr. Brice Meulman S.J..²⁴⁴

Being mostly from tribal societies, communication even with other Indian personnel was at times difficult. An Indian cavalryman who was attached as a medical officer to one of the Lushai labour companies complained that the men were *“utterly filthy and take no care of their health. I don’t know a word of their language but have got along with English. If I had not known some English I should have gone mad among these people”*.²⁴⁵ Captain Kashi Nath noted that at a certain moment his company was neighbouring Khasi and Naga companies but *“beyond the realisation that they were from our own soil the strangeness of language and demeanour prevented any closer intimacy”*.²⁴⁶ Residing in Europe also meant the acquirement of certain European tastes. Officers and headmen remarked with astonishment that *“the articles most sought after by these unsophisticated aborigines are curiously, note-books, sardines, sausages and soap.”*²⁴⁷ And, just as some observers noticed with the Chinese labourers (as we will see in the next chapter), the Indian labourers became involved in a watch craze, with men buying as much as three watches.²⁴⁸ The commodity was not without symbolism, as it put the purchasing Indian worker on a level more akin to that of a European soldier for whom the wristwatch was a common possession as well as

²⁴³ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18510: “Behaviour of Indian Labour Companies during recent operations in France”.

²⁴⁴ Letter in English, dated 2 April 1918. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

²⁴⁵ Letter in Urdu to a driver at the General Hospital in Rouen, dated 19 October 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

²⁴⁶ Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 9.

²⁴⁷ Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 209 ; McMillan AW. (1920) Indian Echoes from France. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 10 ; Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 21.

²⁴⁸ Singha R. (2015) The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62. p. 49.

giving the illusion of being master of his time. The latter urge is also partly explainable by the variation in time of sunrise and sunset which was initially hard to understand for people from more tropical climes.²⁴⁹

While the first Indian labour units had only arrived in Marseilles in June 1917, already from February 1918 onwards the preparations for repatriation had to be made.²⁵⁰ This, however, did not go smoothly. There was in March 1918 within the Labour Corps growing unrest due to the haziness of the contractual terms. In some cases there was confusion whether the men had signed up for the duration of the war or just for one year. And had the contracts for one year started on the moment the worker was engaged or on the moment he arrived in France? A second matter had to do with the conditions within the corps. The Nagas, for instance, knew they would be put at work in the danger zone but others, such as the Santals, were promised never to be asked to go to dangerous places. The matter of the expiry of contract led to unrest and at least twelve strikes by Indian Labour companies have been recorded between March and December 1918 and general Sir H. Cox on behalf of the India Office felt compelled to visit each company to explain how due to the lack of available ships the repatriation had to be postponed. The men were offered a new contract including a considerable pay rise.²⁵¹ This was accepted by some without much protest, but many others refused. One lieutenant of the Indian Labour Corps stated that the Naga headmen said they could only hold their men a fortnight or so longer before they would put into effect their threat to burn their camp down.²⁵² From April 1918 onwards repatriation was duly organised for those companies whose contract had expired. Even so, in September 1918 there was still discussion within some companies as to the duration of their service and India had to be cabled to find out. In at least one case, that of the 83rd (NWF) Company, the term was for the duration of the war while the men were of the opinion their engagement was for one year only. As they were considered of "inferior physique" and thus of less use, the authorities gave in and the men were repatriated after 15 September 1918.

²⁴⁹ Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 8.

²⁵⁰ Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 134.

²⁵¹ John Starling IL. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 125 and 262.

²⁵² BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

According to Starling and Lee, by October 1918 all but three companies of the Indian Labour Corps had left Europe to return home. The men of the 78 (Burma), 33 (Bihar) & 85 (Kumaon) companies had signed for the duration of war but as this had not been well explained to the 78th company, these men left soon after.²⁵³ The disappearance of most of the Indian Labour Corps from Europe did not mean there were no Indians left, on the contrary, in Marseilles smaller Indian contingents kept arriving. These men, however, were not recruited as labourers but served in a military capacity. Most belonged to Divisional Ammunition Columns but there were many small groups of Indians attached to the Australian Auxiliary Horse Transport Companies, Remount Squadrons and Depots and other units. Though we are not well informed on these units, their number should not be undervalued: at the end of September 1919 General Cox estimated there were still some 13,000 Indians in France and Belgium.²⁵⁴ Only on 26 March 1920 would the S.S. La Plata sail from Marseilles with on board the last contingent of 929 "Indian ranks" to leave Europe.²⁵⁵

In any case, by their occasional collective resistance the Indian labourers had showed a high degree of agency and they had compelled their colonial overlords not to wait too long with organising their repatriation. Radhika Singha suggests this pushed Amthill to see the labourers in a different light. He now drove for what she calls "*a kind of post-fact transformation, one which would elevate the returning men into the kind of loyal citizens and persons of substance, who could have freely volunteered to serve empire. If granted certain privileges emanating from their service in France, the returning labourers could form the kernels of 'a party who believes in loyalty [...] and are actuated by the sentiments of good citizenship' "*".²⁵⁶ And, indeed, some kind of transformation did take place through their war service. Upon their return, men of the Indian Labour Corps were often re-cast as victorious warriors. They were

²⁵³ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 125.

²⁵⁴ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18577: "Grants to YMCA".

²⁵⁵ TNA, WO 95/43/9: War Diary. Branches and Services. Deputy Assistant Adjutant General (3rd Echelon, Indian section).

²⁵⁶ Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 211-4.

welcomed by bands and cheering crowds, memorials were erected and Labour Corps Days installed.²⁵⁷

These receptions form another marked contrast between the Indian Labour Corps and that other vast group of non-European workers, the Chinese Labour Corps, but there were many others. While the Chinese Labour Corps was rigidly bound to its contract and primarily had come out for money, there were more empire politics at play in the Indian Labour Corps: the Indian labourer's loyalty had to be sought and secured. Another distinguishing feature of the Indian Labour Corps from the other 'native' labour corps was a 'more military frame' as they had been trained and were usually accompanied by a higher number of officers who were generally closer to them.²⁵⁸ This more military disposition is not only corroborated by their recasting as victorious warriors upon their return but also by captions to official war photographs of the Indian labourers using explicit military terminology like 'battalions' and 'troops'.²⁵⁹

On a total estimated figure of 48,000, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission officially commemorates 1459 dead from the Indian Labour Corps in France.²⁶⁰ This is a figure that again raises interesting questions and comparisons with the Chinese Labour Corps. For it means that serving in the Indian Labour Corps was far more lethal than serving in the Chinese Labour Corps with its official figure of 'only' 1864 dead on an estimated 96,000 members in that same period in France. As Chinese and Indian Labour for the Western Front were recruited in the same period and arrived both in Europe in spring 1917, we can ask ourselves whether the Chinese were better adapted to the climate or whether the Indians were deployed closer to the frontline - or a combination of both? In any case, the British Army's Directorate of Labour did not consider the Indian Labour Corps on the Western Front to have been a success: "*Indian Labour, as a whole, cannot fairly be said to have justified the expense involved in transport and maintenance. The Contract was too short, the*

²⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 214 ; Pachau JLK and van Schendel W. (2015) *The Camera as Witness. A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press. p. 194 ; Das P. (2012) *World War I and the Shillong Connection* Available at: <http://www.prasantadas.com/?m=201211>.(accessed 14 September 2017).

²⁵⁸ Singha R. (2015) The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62. p. 31, 34.

²⁵⁹ In the photo collections of the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum.

²⁶⁰ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx> (accessed 2 June 2016).

organisation was confused and the men did not stand the winter in Northern France well.”²⁶¹

Besides the marked differences, there were also some clear similarities between the Indian and the Chinese Labour Corps, such as the nature of the work they did, the presence of missionaries among the labourers and, in particular, the efforts by the YMCA regarding education in both corps. In my next chapter, this will be more elaborated.

The Indians according to the locals



In the autumn of 1914 when hearing of the arrival of Indian troops in France German medallist Karl Goetz felt the urge to create what would be his first - but not his last - racially inspired work: a token mocking the deployment of the Indians in Europe.²⁶² While on one side he depicted a Highlander pushing an Indian to the frontline, the reverse represented a half-naked turbaned fellow carrying a banner with the text: “Grand Attraction des Indiers” (sic). Though Goetz was mocking the enthusiastic welcoming given to the Indians upon their arrival in Marseilles, at least this part of his observation was right: the Indian troops were indeed a “grand attraction” to the European population. Obviously, these enormously odd people aroused the curiosity of the inhabitants in every location they passed and numerous are the observations describing them.

²⁶¹ TNA, WO 107/37: “Work of the Labour Force during the War: Report”, November 1919, p. 45.

²⁶² For a technical description: <http://karlgoetz.com/ImageDetail.aspx?idImage=74> (accessed on 19 May 2016).

They were also the object of curiosity on behalf of British soldiers and officers. In April 1915 the Indian Army Corps had to issue an order explicitly forbidding unauthorised visits to the Indian trenches by officers and soldiers who did not belong to the Corps.²⁶³ Yet, this temporary migration of tens of thousands of Indian military and labourers to Europe was also accompanied by something of a culture shock to the local populace and xenophobia was an integral part of their reaction. After all, the Belgian and French civilians near the frontline were unwanting hosts for thousands of unwanted guests and the stranger in culture, language, and religion these guests were, the more difficult the living-together could be. At least on the continent, the Indian rank and file seem to have been kept less segregated from the Europeans than other non-European military personnel. This more liberal regime contrasted with the Indian hospitals in England, where after February 1915 Indian patients and personnel were no longer allowed to leave unaccompanied or to receive European visitors without formal authorisation. Fraternisation, after all, risked to threaten the cornerstone on which the Empire was built: the presumption of British supremacy.²⁶⁴ The available witness accounts make clear that in France and to a lesser extent in Belgium there was in effect ample opportunity to meet. However remarkable and maybe unexpected, these testimonies point to a rather smooth and uneventful coexistence between the locals and the Indians once the moment of initial mutual acquaintance had passed. There was room to absorb one's culture and customs, and to make friends despite the huge differences. Though their temporary residence did not leave clearly and as such recognisable influences in the hosting communities - therefore their stay was probably too short - locally, even on the level of individual families, the memories of the Indian visitors lingered on and occasionally bridged many generations.

It was on 22 October 1914 that the Ferozepore Brigade of the Indian Army Corps entered the freshly dug trenches between Hollebeke in the north and Messines in the south for the first time. The 1st Battalion Connaught Rangers - the British battalion that belonged to the brigade - had to undergo its baptism of fire first. The first Indian battalion to be deployed into battle was the 57th Wilde's Rifles in the region of Wijtschate-Oosttaverne. Soldiers of that unit are pictured in a famous set of

²⁶³ TNA, WO 154/14: War Diary, Deputy Judge Advocate General, Indian Army Corps.

²⁶⁴ Bardgett S. (2015) A Mutual Fascination. *History Today*. March 2015 ed. London: History Today Ltd, 41-47. p. 47.

(probably staged) photos in front of the pub 't *Nieuw Staenzyzer*.²⁶⁵ Not without importance is the presence in the background on these photographs of local inhabitants staring at the sepoys. They belong to the very first Flemings ever to have welcomed Indian visitors. That day, the first Indian casualty of war on the Western Front fell too.²⁶⁶ And more reinforcements were to be sent to the front. Achiel Van Wallegghem, priest in Dikkebus, wrote in his diary that, for the whole night from 22 to 23 October 1914, the Indian troops were brought in with English double-decker buses. He also wrote that it was the first time that the sounds of war could be heard so clearly in his parish.²⁶⁷ Van Wallegghem is an extremely important witness whom I will quote often. As a priest, he lived in the presbytery, traditionally one of the largest houses in the village. There is little doubt that Van Wallegghem regularly listened in on British and French officers, often chaplains, who had been quartered in his house. The information he gathered thus was included in his diary. Moreover, there is evidence of Van Wallegghem checking a rumour, just like any conscientious journalist would do. This method resulted in a higher factual accuracy of many of his comments and descriptions, which was in striking contrast with most of the other personal accounts, where too often rumours are taken for granted.²⁶⁸

After the First Battle of Ypres, the Indian Army Corps was deployed entirely in a sector of their own some 15-20 miles to the south, in the French valley of the Lys. Initially the locals there were somewhat afraid of these strange men considered “half-civilised” and the children even

²⁶⁵ IWM, Q 56325, Q 60743, Q 60744, Q 60749, Q 82 586. When the photographs and their captions are compared (on <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/> - accessed on 20 May 2016), it is clear that only one bears a proper correct caption. Three of the photographs are attributed to Paul Maze, one from the very same series to one H.S. Stanham (the latter with the completely anachronistic title : “The Retreat from Mons”). More importantly, the soldiers are from the 57th Wilde’s Rifles: a shoulder badge carrying ‘57’ is clearly visible on one of the photographs. This ties in with the position these men held on 26-30 October 1914: along the actual Ieperstraat on the outskirts of Wijtschate. The 129th Baluchis, wrongly identified on three of the four photographs, were actually stationed nearby, but not on this spot. The houses that form the backdrop on these photographs have been rebuilt quite similarly after the First World War and the spot where the photographs are taken is still recognisable in today’s landscape.

²⁶⁶ One Indian victim is indicated on the Menin Gate as having fallen on 22 October 1914: “LATURIA, Naik, 57th Wilde’s Rifles (F.F.). 55th Coke’s Rifles (F.F.). 22nd October 1914. Son of Phehu, of Tikar, Hamirpur, Kangra, Punjab”.

²⁶⁷ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 80.

²⁶⁸ Dendooven D. (2017) Introduction: Achiel Van Wallegghem and his diary. In: Dendooven D (ed) 1917. *The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*. Brighton: EER, 1-23.

refused the candies they were offered out of fear of being poisoned.²⁶⁹ This attitude changed once the inhabitants got more acquainted with the Indians. Initially the houses seemed to have been out of bounds to the Indian troops, who were billeted in barns, huts and tents. Paul Raoult, the teenage son of the schoolmaster of Saint-Floris, wrote in his memoirs²⁷⁰ how one night an Indian “*who had shown some affection towards him*”, knocked on the window. “*We were hesitant to open to him: “Maman”, he said while addressing my grandmother who lived with us, “Moi, Maman, beaucoup froid” [Me, mama, much cold] and he coughed loudly to underline his words. My mother finally opened. He entered the kitchen, keeping quiet, near to the stove, standing upright in his tunic, buttoned on the shoulders and hanging down to his knees. Once he had warmed enough, he thanked us while bowing and left [...]*” The fact Paul Raoult judged this unexpected visit worth a special mention in his memoirs demonstrates that having an Indian at home was actually quite an unusual thing to happen. It seemed, however, from other witness accounts and from the letters the Indian soldiers wrote that in other places and during other periods of the war, this would occur more easily and without much apparent restrictions. The local population also differentiated between the ethnic groups present in the Indian Army. The Gurkhas, for instance, appear to have inspired fear and distrust. “*They were vindictive and martial. After some unfortunate attempts, we refrained from frequenting them*”, Raoult wrote.²⁷¹ It is indeed remarkable that few, if any, photographs exist of Gurkhas (or Garhwals) posing with French or Belgian civilians while other ethnic groups are well represented.²⁷²

The Lahore Division would move into Belgium again shortly after the first (major) gas attack of 22 April 1915. In the morning of 25 April its column arrived in Ouderdom, a hamlet between Reninghelst and Vlamertinghe. Priest Van Wallegghem of Dickebusch specified: “*The Indians set up quarters in the farms of Maerten, Lievens and Desmarets.*”²⁷³ The men

²⁶⁹ Lecomte B and Vasseur L. (2005) *Les combattants des Mille et Une Nuits 1914-1918 : Les soldats Indiens au Pays de l' Alloeu et dans le Nord de la France*, Laventie: l' Alloeu Terre de Batailles, 1914-1918. p. 16.

²⁷⁰ Quoted in Faivre D. (2005) *Les indiens 1914-1915 ou le sacrifice d'un peuple dans la boue d'Artois : septembre - décembre 1914*, Saint-Venant: Association de Recherches Historiques et Archéologiques militaires. p. 151.

²⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 152.

²⁷² Possibly because they wore a slouch hat as compared to the more exotic ‘turban’ worn by other Indian troops.

²⁷³ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 161, and p. 30-2 and map p. 36-7 for the identification and location of the farms. The neighbouring farms of Jules Maerten and Hilaire Lievens were located north east of the hamlet of

were exhausted on arrival in Ouderdom. They had marched for 24 hours in a sometimes hilly landscape along cobbled roads, slippery from the rain. They were only given a short break in Boeschepe. The Lahore Division now came under the command of the British Second Army of Smith-Dorrien. The warning was issued to the Indian troops that when gas was used, they had to place a handkerchief or a flannel over their mouths. It was recommended to soak the handkerchief in urine.²⁷⁴ During the Second Battle of Ypres, the small hamlet of Ouderdom remained the main hub for the Indian troops. The wounded were treated in the farm of Cyriel Jacob. The current owner of that still active smallholding is his grandson Paul Jacob whose father often related him details of what he saw when the farm was being used as an Indian hospital: a larger barn at the back of the house was used for surgical operations and an adjoining woodshed was used to store the bodies of the deceased Indian soldiers before they were buried or carried off for cremation. The curious boy often sneaked inside the barn to watch the doings of the medical officers but was chased off when discovered.²⁷⁵ The burials took place in a small island on the Grootebeek (brook) nearby, nowadays the Indian plot on Grootebeek British Cemetery.²⁷⁶

Father Van Walleghem of Dickebusch noted in June 1915 that Indian troops had been staying in the region for a few weeks. His diary entry of 6 June 1915 deserves to be quoted in full. It is a perfect illustration of how the local population felt about the Indians, an attitude that of course was laced with a few xenophobic traits. Once again, we should keep in mind that virtually no-one in this corner of Flanders had ever seen a person with a different coloured skin before the war. This diary entry tells us almost as much about the mentality of the writer as the people he describes:

“Several Indian soldiers are also staying at the parish, mostly closer towards Vlamertinghe. Their skin is dark, their army dress typically British apart from a towel which they have artfully wound around their heads. They speak English, some even French. They are very curious and ask and talk a lot. They would walk for half an hour to get some milk, stand around

Ouderdom, while the farm of Henri Desmarets was halfway between Ouderdom and Dickebusch.

²⁷⁴ Anon. (1992) *47th Sikhs War Record : The Great War 1914-1918*, Chippenham: Picton publishing. p. 85.

²⁷⁵ Personal communication by Paul Jacob, during a number of conversations over the recent years.

²⁷⁶ Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p. 68-9.

*watching your every move as you serve them, are highly suspicious, but they can hardly be trusted themselves. If they can make a run for it without having to pay, they won't have a second thought about it, even if it means a quarrel. They get their Indian money out, called the rupee (2.80 Frs) and get angry when people refuse to accept their currency. They do not (or feign not to) understand the value of our money and when they want to exchange, they want more in return than the amount they have given. In fact, the people prefer not to do business with them. By and large they are friendly and polite, yet their curiosity often gets the upper hand. They take you in from head to toe and they especially like to take a peek through the windows of our homes. They bake some type of pancakes and eat a type of seed with a very strong taste"*²⁷⁷

The attitude displayed by the author towards the Indians is dual : despite the sometimes negative comments this fragment also demonstrates that there were frequent encounters between the local population and the Indian troops, something that could hardly be avoided as the troops were often quartered in or near occupied farms. And, although the diary writer accuses the Indians of being curious, his words show that the curiosity for each other was completely mutual: Van Wallegghem even tasted Indian food. Inquisitiveness about the cultural Other was and is a human trait. Here, however, Van Wallegghem's curiosity might have been enhanced by the fact many catholic missionaries from Flanders had been and were still active in India and their deeds were widely reported at home.²⁷⁸ One West-Flemish catholic hero whose story was definitely known to Van Wallegghem – and to other Flemings- was that of the Jesuit Constant Lievens, "the apostle of Chota Nagpur"²⁷⁹. Lievens (1856-1893) was born in Moorslede, a village 10 kilometers east of Ypres where he is still honoured with a statue and a permanent exhibition. Lievens had founded the successful mission among the 'tribals' in Ranchi and the aforementioned jesuits Floor and Ory who would accompany Indian labourers from that area to Europe, were just two of his direct successors. While Lievens was probably the most celebrated of the West Flemish missionaries, there were many more. Towards the turn of the century,

²⁷⁷ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 183. The original page of the manuscript can be viewed on <http://www.inflandersfields.be/nl/06-06-2015> (accessed on 19 May 2016).

²⁷⁸ Vints L. (2013) 'Vier moet branden'. Belgische missionarissen in India. In: Goddeeris I (ed) *Het wiel van Ashoka. Belgisch-Indiase contacten in historisch perspectief*. Leuven: Lipsius, 83-102. p. 85-89.

²⁷⁹ Tete P. (1993) *Constant Lievens and the history of the Catholic Church in Chotanagpur*, Ranchi: Archbishop's House.

Father Victor (Karel Verleure) had a convent, schools and orphanage built in Mulagumudu, in India's deep south, and he had invited Augustinian nuns from his hometown Ypres to assist him.²⁸⁰ The stories of these missionaries were printed in popular magazines, their deeds and appeals featured in village priests's sermons and their missions were supported through mission boxes and collections in local churches. So, despite the fact that Indians (or other Asians) had never been seen in Flanders, they were not unknown, be it through the lens of the catholic mission. In this respect it might be significant that Van Wallegghem uses "Indian soldiers" ("Indiaensche troepen") instead of "Hindous", which was after all the most common reference among both French and Belgian civilians to all Indian troops, no matter of what religion, caste or ethnology they were. Did Van Wallegghem as a learned man know the importance of differentiation? On the other hand, Van Wallegghem seems to have been unfamiliar with even the word turban (or "tulband" in Dutch) which he describes as a "towel". Remarkable, at last, is not only how the Indians in the short time they were in France (and Belgium) had gained some knowledge of French, but also how they insisted on paying in rupees.

After spring 1915 Indian infantrymen were no longer seen in Belgian Flanders and only occasionally the Indian cavalry that had remained in Europe after the two infantry divisions of the Indian Army corps had sailed for Mesopotamia, would be seen north of the French-Belgian border. Interviewed in 1978, 77 year old Gaston Boudry²⁸¹ still had clear memories of them. After explaining how in 1916 his family was forced to build a new hut on the border near Abeele, he continued: *"There we have seen Hindus. They were with the English. They came from India. They were camping there, in canvas huts. They walked around with their shirt above their trousers. They were camping there in the open on fallow grounds and in the meadows, not hidden or sheltered. All horsemen with lances and sabres. Lances at least 3 meters long. We were picking potatoes for a farmer, close to that. We told each other: they will take a lot of potatoes, but they didn't take nothing. They didn't know that, potatoes. They ate completely differently. That was an open fire, and stirring with their hands. And all was, yeah, rice, I suppose? I think so, I've never eaten it. Pancakes they were making to eat. These men were not black, they were half black,*

²⁸⁰ Vints L. (2013) 'Vier moet branden'. Belgische missionarissen in India. In: Goddeeris I (ed) *Het wiel van Ashoka. Belgisch-Indiase contacten in historisch perspectief*. Leuven: Lipsius, 83-102. p. 92-98.

²⁸¹ Zillebeke, 31 March 1901 - Ypres 16 October 1981. Interviewed in Zillebeke in 1978.

*darkish.*²⁸² Without making a moral judgment, Gaston Boudry stresses the cultural differences between the Indians and the Belgians such as the fact that the Indians did not tuck their shirts in their trousers but preferred to wear their shirts pajama-style (something that was considered impolite in Flanders), and the differences in eating habits. Boudry seemed to have only observed the Indian cavalymen, not to have engaged with them.

While in Belgian Flanders, meeting Indian cavalry was generally fleeting, the Picardian region of Le Vimeu,²⁸³ halfway between Abbeville and the coast, was for many months the rest area for the Indian Cavalry who were active in the Somme. Local families in that area still hold documents and objects that are proof of an often cordial relationship with Indian cavalymen: photographs, letters and postcards sent by Indian military, or even a pair of magnificent slippers sent by a soldier from India after the war as a gift to a local girl with whom he was in love but who had refused to marry him.²⁸⁴ On the occasion of an exhibition on the Indian presence during the First World War in 2003, a local doctor²⁸⁵ collected witness accounts on the Indian presence among his fellow-inhabitants. Despite the fact that all but one of the stories were told to the interviewer by 2nd or 3rd grade relatives (children and grand-children), they still give us a valuable insight in how the two communities - the locals and their South Asian guests- lived together and how recollections of this are cherished by local families and passed from generation to generation.

Communication, of course, remained an important factor. As with Van Walleghem, the ability of the Indians to learn at least some basic words and phrases of the local language particularly struck the French. And that local language was not always 'proper French', as is demonstrated by this quote from a lady whose grandfather ran an inn: *"The Indians seemed to be gifted to learn languages: most of them could express themselves in French within three months. In the villages of Le Vimeu where only Picardian patois was spoken, the Indians who were billeted here, only spoke the local dialect! [...]. One evening, a mason from Valines with the*

²⁸² Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kimmel: Malegijs. p. 167.

²⁸³ Including the villages Valines, Ochancourt, Fressenneville, Friville, Franleu and Feuquières.

²⁸⁴ Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 186.

²⁸⁵ Gressieux calls him "le docteur René Jean" (p. 186) but I was not able to trace a medic with such a name in Le Vimeu, nor in the immediate neighbourhood.

surname of Tintin and non-mobilised because of his numerous children was talking very loud in the inn with the aggressive air that is so typical of those familiar with the bottle. An Indian soldier while approaching my mother, told her: “Si Monsieur méchant, nous, couper cou, tout de suite” [“If mister nasty, we cut neck, immediately”] Others on the contrary, despite being soldiers, were more pacifist like that young Hindu soldier who night after night warmed himself at the fire and who wept saying: “Moi plus revoir papa et maman” [“Me never seeing back papa and mama”]. When in the evenings they were lingering too long at the fire before rejoining their billets, my grandfather used to say in a loud voice: “I will cook a cow”. After which they would all leave at once.”²⁸⁶

This anecdote also demonstrates that the locals got acquainted with the Indian customs, including food preferences and religious practices. It is no surprise that in a (partly) agricultural area as Le Vimeu, the reverend attitude towards cows of in particular the Hindu section of the Indian cavalry struck a note, as is also confirmed by the ensuing account: *“The following fact has often been told by my grandmother: a cow had had a little calf and the farmer’s wife went to draw the first milk, but the Indians took it, boiled it and savoured it. In India the cows are sacred: without doubt for them it was a ritual, or respect for the religion, to drink the first milk after calving.”²⁸⁷*

The curiosity demonstrated by the Indian rank and file that had struck Father Van Walleghem in Flanders in 1915 was also noted by the inhabitants of Le Vimeu. An anonymous witness from Fressenneville told the local interviewer: *“The Indian soldiers [...] often came to Fressenneville. Initially they troubled the inhabitants as they were very curious and watched through the windows into the interior of the houses. In the end the inhabitants understood rapidly that they, just like the other foreign soldiers, wanted to be well integrated. The food, the work, the tools, the objects, everything they discovered intrigued them [...]. I’m 76 years old now and I have known inhabitants of the region whose physique was an indication of their paternity. One of them, by the way, who was from near Valines, was nicknamed ‘l’Indien’.”²⁸⁸*

²⁸⁶ Geneviève Racine, née Jean, quoting her mother Marguerite Jean, née Quaillet in 1892 and her grand-father Théophile Quaillet, born in 1855. The latter was farmer and inn-keeper in Valines. Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 186-7.

²⁸⁷ Janine Haudrechy, née Deguerville, 3rd generation running a shoe shop in Valines, on the recollections of her grandmother, nick-named “Maman Boot” by the Indians.

²⁸⁸ Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 189.

The friendly attitude of the Indian troops towards the local population encompassed a particular fondness for the children, something which is also evident from a number of photographs²⁸⁹, but which obviously was not unique to the Indians. An anonymous witness from Franleu who was 5 years old in 1916 remembered how a large Indian often took him or her on the shoulders: *“He took me to eat in their kitchen which was in the café nextdoor. I ate pancakes with the soldiers which were soaked in sauce and also mutton”* while another interviewee from the village of Fressenneville recollected how her mother and older sister told her: *“These Indians often made pancakes that were prepared by them. And then, the children from Picardy and these soldiers from India got together “flat on their asses”, as my mother used to say, meaning they were sitting on the ground, with feet crossed. They were given dough which they rolled between the hands and they made them in small pancakes which were cooked and then eaten by all together.”*²⁹⁰ During these friendly encounters gifts were exchanged and photographs taken. Abel Trouvé (Valines, 1904-1983) used to show his visiting nephew (or niece) a cavalry banner and a turban “of an unimaginable length” and told him (or her) about photographs with proudly posing turbanned village boys.²⁹¹

As is clear from the earlier quote mentioning the man nicknamed ‘L’Indien’, the Indian soldiers’ fondness was not restricted to the children. Mrs Haudrechy recounted: *“There was in Feuquières a lady whom I have well known: she was a young girl at the time of the Great War. During this war an Indian soldier had fallen in love with her, and when the time was due for him to return to India, he proposed the young girl to marry him and to accompany him to his Fatherland, but the young girl refused the wedding. When this soldier Azir (for that was his name) had to leave, he had him a photograph made but demanded that on this photograph the portrait of the young girl and her mother who just had their photograph taken, was included. Once back in India, he sent the girl a wonderful pair of leather shoes as a token of his love. This pair of shoes, still in mint condition despite the passing of time, is still kept with piety by this family.*

²⁸⁹ One particularly striking photograph from the H.D. Girdwood collection in the British Library shows a group of sikhs presenting a present to a local boy on a farm near Merville in the summer 1915. British Library, Girdwood Collection, Photo 24/74. For an online image:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/Sikhs_and_French_villagers_%28Photo_24-74%29.jpg (accessed on 19 May 2016).

²⁹⁰ Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 190-1.

²⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 189-190.

*They are prepared to have them on display in an exhibition with a photograph of the girl and her mother.*²⁹²

At least one marriage seems to have taken place between an Indian cavalryman and a French girl. As a number of letters referring to this matter, both by the groom as by others, had been notified by the censor of Indian mail we are well informed on this event and this despite the differing contents of the letters.²⁹³ After having been engaged at the end of February 1917, lance dafadar Mahomed Khan of the muslim squadron of the 6th King Edwards' Own Cavalry married on the 2nd April of that year. According to the groom, he was billeted with the girl's family and the parents grew fond of him, which to Tammy Proctor proves how civilians could provide a link to home to these men so far away from home.²⁹⁴ The marriage, however, elicited much comment and led to friction between Mahomed Khan and his family in India. According to one letter-writer Mahomed Khan had to become a Christian, something which his comrades tried to prevent in vain, while Mahomed Khan himself maintained in the letters to his family the girl converted to islam. Maybe it was a shotgun wedding for on 6 October 1917 a comrade from the squadron wrote that a daughter had been born to the couple. It is an open question whether more marriages took place, but it certainly cannot be excluded. One Sikh veteran interviewee in 1974 claimed several weddings took place and even maintained that the brides were brought to the Punjab.²⁹⁵ However, further research into local archives such as parish registers is needed to corroborate or reject this assertion.

Not all love affairs, however, had an honourable end: the birth of (illegitimate) children as a result of intercourse between local girls and visiting military is inherent to every war. However, whereas the product of

²⁹² Ibidem, p. 191-2.

²⁹³ BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828: letters from 30 May 1917 (by a man of the 6th Cavalry to someone in Farrukhabad, U.P.) , 5 June 1917 (Mahomed Khan to a Dafadar in Rohtak, Punjab), 15 June 1917 (Mahomed Khan to someone from the 11th Rajput Infantry in Calcutta) and 18 June 1917 (Mahomed Khan to a namesake in Rohtak), Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 279 (letter by Abdul Ali to Farzand Ali Khan Bahadur in Sialkot, 28 February 1917), p. 298-9 (the aforementioned letter by Mahomed Khan to a namesake in Rohtak District, 18 June 1917), p. 313-4 (letter by Mahomed Khan to Manuch Khan in Risalpur, 20 August 1917) and p. 322 (letter by Zabur Shah to Sayid Muhammad Amir Shah in Risalpur, 6 October 1917).

²⁹⁴ Proctor T. (2010) *Civilians in a world at war, 1914-1918*, New York; London: New York University Press. p. 142.

²⁹⁵ Dr. Ganda Singh, interviewed on 19 March 1974. in : Pradhan SD. (1978) *The Sikh Soldier in the First World War*. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225. p. 223.

amorous liaisons between western 'white' military and local girls could more easily be covered up, this was impossible for those born out of affairs with non-white military personnel. Due to the gigantic taboo on extra-marital sex in the catholic Flemish and Picardian countryside, silence reigned over these matters and questions were never asked: everybody knew about it but nobody talked about it. During the exhibition in Valines in 2003, 72 year old Jacquelin D.²⁹⁶ presented himself as the grandson of an Indian cavalryman. His mother was born out of wedlock in 1916, and a brother by the same man followed 14 months later. Both were recognised by the lady's husband when he returned home after demobilisation. Only two souvenirs were left by the Indian officer who had fathered the children: a puppet he had given to his daughter and a photograph of him on horseback. According to grandson Jacquelin, the darkness of his skin caused some problems in his youth: his school mates bullied him as "the Indian" and "during his military service in Algeria it was worse". Though all along his life he was ashamed about it, he finally came to terms with his family's past: *"This Indian whose blood, bravery and spirit of non-violence is running through my veins and that other grandfather, the official one, who came back home in 1918 and continued his family life, accepting children born out of war and from another blood and skin colour as if there was nothing wrong with that: I am today very proud that that is my history."*²⁹⁷ Though it is remarkable and telling that Jacquelin D. at the same time attributes both bravery and a spirit of non-violence to the Indian grandfather he has never known, his case certainly demonstrates how the acquaintance with non-European troops could have certain personal consequences that would reach into the 21st century.

In (Belgian) Flanders, the Indian cavalry that was so prominent in Le Vimeu were only occasionally seen. From 1917 onwards, however, companies from the Indian Labour Corps would arrive. In his diary Brother Victor Van Staten²⁹⁸ from the Trappist Abbey of St-Sixtus in West-Vleteren

²⁹⁶ According to Lecomte B and Vasseur L. (2005) *Les combattants des Mille et Une Nuits 1914-1918 : Les soldats Indiens au Pays de l'Alloeu et dans le Nord de la France*, Laventie: l'Alloeu Terre de Batailles, 1914-1918. The man's full name is Jacquelin Declé and he lives in Buigny-lès-Gamaches.

²⁹⁷ Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 194-5.

²⁹⁸ Henricus Van Staten (Alkmaar, 22 June 1863 - West-Vleteren, 13 March 1934) was dutch-born and ordained in the Trappist Order in 1887 as Brother Victor. Since 1910 he lived in the abbey of St-Sixtus where he was responsible for cheesemaking. Throughout the war he kept a diary of which the original is still kept in the abbey. The war forced the trappists, who are an enclosed religious order usually allowing no access to their premises to laymen, to open the doors of their abbey, an extra-ordinary situation in extra-ordinary circumstances.

noted how on 21 June 1917 *“some thousand blacks from English-India²⁹⁹ have arrived in our woods. They carry all their stuff on their head.”³⁰⁰* Some weeks later his more ascetic colleague Father Edmundus Joye³⁰¹ made a lengthier observation: *“Blacks from India repair the streets and roads. Some work on our courtyard and carry away ashes and gravel in bags in order to make a road behind the chocolate shed in the wood. Thus they will be able to go from their huts in the calf meadow, behind our premises into the wood without being seen by the Germans in their balloons. The blacks from India are entirely different people than the blacks from Algeria the French had taken along heretofore. Those from Algeria seemed hostile to us and had a tendency to steal. The blacks from India are dressed as the English. Regarding their character, they seem not to be an extraordinary people. They have thick lips. Strong and muscular young men. I ignore their religion. There is one among them who seems a very best man.”³⁰²* Just like Gaston Boudry with the Indian cavalrymen, Maurits Liefoghe³⁰³ did not really meet when he saw men from the Indian Labour Corps, but only observed them: *“In the Hellegat on Rodeberg at a certain moment, it was full with men from India, men wearing turbans. Hindus, the people said. They ate all sorts of pancakes, a kind of thick pancakes. We had a look from time to time and they were splattering to make those pancakes. They were not here for warfare, for fighting. They carried ammunition to the front for the guns.”³⁰⁴* Others, however, did actively engage with the Indian troops, such as Oscar Ricour³⁰⁵ with the same men on the same spot: *“There were 'Hindus' in the Hellegat on Rodeberg and in the pine wood. They cooked those big pancakes there. Once when I was passing by, a few were sitting there on their bums, with open legs. Around a bucket. They were smoking. But not like we do. They had a long tube that they passed on to each other. They asked if I had some tobacco. I gave my tobacco pouch to one of those men.*

²⁹⁹ The term “English India” is probably due to Brother Victor being Dutch-born. While Belgians would rather just refer to “India”, the Dutch had the need to differ between “Nederlands-Indië” (i.e. the Dutch East Indies) and the other “Indiës”.

³⁰⁰ Van Staten V, De Cleyne L-M and Joye E. (2001) *De Abdij-Kazerne Sint-Sixtus, 1914-1918 : dagboekantekeningen*, Poperinge: Kring voor Heemkunde 'Aan de Schreve'. p. 130.

³⁰¹ Edmundus Joye (Lichtervelde, 10 March 1867 - 1 August 1937) was the sacristan and orderly of the abbey. Throughout the war, he kept a chronicle with occasional notes, of which the original is still in the abbey's collection.

³⁰² Van Staten V, De Cleyne L-M and Joye E. (2001) *De Abdij-Kazerne Sint-Sixtus, 1914-1918 : dagboekantekeningen*, Poperinge: Kring voor Heemkunde 'Aan de Schreve'. p. 139.

³⁰³ Westouter, 19 January 1900 - Jette, 9 September 1988. Interviewed in Jette in 1978.

³⁰⁴ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs.

³⁰⁵ Dranouter, 24 April 1892 - Poperinge, 1 September 1978. Interviewed in Dranouter in 1968.

*He put his hand in it and gave me back my pouch: empty of course. As dusk fell they started to sing songs in their own way.*³⁰⁶

Indeed, not all experiences with Indians were positive. Oscar Ricour's wife Marie Beck³⁰⁷ remembered how once she had the fright of her life in the family shop: *"One day the bell rang and I went to serve. A strapping fellow, a large Hindu, with hair sticking out of his cap here and there and he reeked of smoke. He was looking for something. He looked around everywhere and finally he bought shoe laces hanging there, while keeping staring at me. I thought: damned, something's not right, I believe, with that guy. And he gets out. One moment later the bell rang again. And believe it or not: it was the same guy. I thought: heck!, it's me he's after! Like a devil, he put his hands in his pockets and took out a gold ring and a few coins. And in this manner he put his thumb between two fingers. I immediately fled to the kitchen, the military police were sitting there. Quick, I said, there's a Hindu in the shop and he's after me. They went up to him and threw him out. He was never allowed in our shop any more."*³⁰⁸

There are, however, few traces of crimes against the local population committed by Indian military personnel. We know of one letter that points to the rape of a 19 year old French girl by two cavalymen, an act that is not only condemned by the Sikh writer as *"a vile thing"* but also as a matter of great humiliation for the regiment.³⁰⁹ The fact is corroborated by the only preserved page of the war diary of the Adjutant and Quarter-Master General of the Indian Cavalry Corps.³¹⁰ Both offenders were condemned to 10 and 7 years of prison.

In general, however, the local population seemed rather appreciative of the Indian labourers. Blanche Burgho³¹¹ who grew up in the 'Locre hospice' remembered how they had 'Irelanders' and 'Scotlanders' billeted but *"also Indians who were very polite and for whom there was no need to*

³⁰⁶ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kimmel: Malegijs.

³⁰⁷ Westouter, 11 January 1893 - Poperinge, 14 December 1973. Interviewed in Dranouter in 1968.

³⁰⁸ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kimmel: Malegijs. p. 167-8.

³⁰⁹ Risaldar Kabul Singh from the 31st Lancers (attached 29th Lancers) to Risaldar Sirdar Bahadur Mohinddin Sahib at Base Depot in Marseilles, in Urdu, 29 October 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 115.

³¹⁰ TNA, WO154/1: War Diary, Adjutant and Quarter-Master General, Indian Cavalry Corps, 9-11 November 1915.

³¹¹ leper, 1 March 1903 - 26 March 2003.

be afraid".³¹² That a lack of fear is explicitly mentioned by Blanche Burgho is not without importance. In the collective memory of the former Flanders front zone, this marked the main difference between the Indian and the Chinese labourers. The latter were feared, the former were not. Some Indian labourers remained active in Flanders at the end of the war and in the first post war year. The tasks of these Indian labourers should not be underestimated: more than a year after the Armistice the former front zone was a real desert where many unexploded ammunition and half-buried corpses were still lying around among the rubble and the weeds. Their arrival was welcomed by the local population as the Indian labourers came to replace the men of the Chinese Labour Corps who had a very bad reputation after a few crimes had been committed against Flemish civilians. When in September 1919 the feared so-called 'chings' (Chinese) were replaced by 'Hindus', Father Van Wallegghem sighed: "*These were quite curious and liked to have a look everywhere, but they were not bad*".³¹³ The curious and intriguing phenomenon of sinophobia in immediate post-war Flanders will be extensively studied in the next chapter.

The locals according to the Indians

Immediately after the war, general Sir James Willcocks, the commander-in-chief of the Indian Army Corps, probably voiced the prevailing opinion among colonial policymakers when he wrote: "*East is East and West is West. The Ganges and the Seine flow in different directions; the artificial meeting of these waters may not be an unmixed blessing. The Hindu on his return to Kashi or the Mahomedan at his prayers at the Jumma Musjid at Delhi may think differently of the white races across the sea to what he thought before the transports bore him across the Kala-pani, the black water. However, although everything may be changed after this war, personally I believe the East will return to its own ways, and very rightly so.*"³¹⁴ Willcocks paraphrased the famous first line of Kipling's *The Ballad of East and West* (1889) for he understands the sentence "*East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*" as an expression of the everlasting and unbridgeable cultural gap existing between Asian and

³¹² Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klaproos. p. 153.

³¹³ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 622.

³¹⁴ Willcocks J. (1920) *With the Indians in France*, London: Constable. p. 23.

European.³¹⁵ Yet, Kipling's much lesser known third and fourth lines, also repeated as the very last lines of the poem read: "*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!*".³¹⁶ Rather than demonstrating the existence of an insurmountable cultural wall, the accounts of encounters between French or Belgian locals and Indian military and labour, are much more exemplary of shared humanity and common values.

Isn't it in itself a remarkable fact we are able to acknowledge the opinions of the Indian rank and file? After all, wasn't a large majority illiterate? Despite undoubtedly low levels of literacy,³¹⁷ it is wrong to assume that all or even a very large majority was completely illiterate. In the written statements accompanying the sound recordings by the Prussian Phonographic Commission, many sepoy and VCOs state they had attended village or regimental schools.³¹⁸ Even if they were selected by the German scientists on their level of literacy or education, their number is still considerable. And the YMCA's claim that it sent "100,000" copies of a Hindustani-French phrasebook to the front would make no sense at all if all but some of the Indian rank and file were indeed illiterate.³¹⁹ Other soldiers even compiled their own phrasebook, such as Mir Mast, the deserted brother of Mir Dast VC, who compiled a word list Urdu-English with translations of words ranging from 'quicklyme' (sic) and 'retreat' to 'testacles' (sic) and 'brests' (sic).³²⁰ Nor should we assume all members of

³¹⁵ He was far from the only one to do so. Lord Balfour, Foreign Secretary, used the same quote when voicing his opposition against Indian home rule in 1917. Chakravorty UN. (1997) *Indian nationalism and the First World War, 1914-18 : recent political & economic history of India*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers. p. 278.

³¹⁶ Gilmour D. (2003) *The Long Recessional. The Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling*, London: Pimlico. p. 69.

³¹⁷ In the Punjab, the province from which most of the Indian rank and file were recruited no more than 5% of the population could read. Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 4.

³¹⁸ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, File Nr. 9; An excel list of all South Asian recordings with the available personal details of each of the recorded men is to be found on the CD-rom included with Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R. (2011) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*, New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan.

³¹⁹ Saunders JK. ([1915]) *With the Indians in France. Being an account of the work of the Army Y.M.C.A. of India with Indian Expeditionary Force A*, Calcutta: Army Y.M.C.A. of India. p. 7.

³²⁰ The original trench notebook with the list is preserved in the National Archives in Delhi. A photograph is to be found in Das S. (2011) *Race, Empire and First World Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 2. For analysis and comment on Mir Mast's phrasebook: see Das S. (2011) *Race, Empire and First World Writing*, Cambridge:

the Indian Labour Corps were illiterate. Notwithstanding few letters by labourers have been recorded and reported by the censor in comparison with those of cavalry- and infantrymen, the ones that do often hint to have been written (or dictated) by well educated people. Some of the labour companies had been recruited by European missionaries who first tapped the pool of pupils and ex-pupils of their missionary schools, something substantiated by the number of Christians in these labour units. In fact and as seen, the overall Indian ability to learn a European tongue such as French was highly admired by both the European population and their officers.

And even in the case they did not have the skill to write letters, their wordings recorded by scribes or - in the POW camps - by German scientists are proof of a high level of 'oral literacy', an ability to express their innermost feelings in quite elaborate spoken word, sometimes in the form of stories or poems. Despite the interpretation problems sketched in the section on the historiography, I mainly turn to the extensive corpus of letters published in the reports by the Censor of Indian mail³²¹ to see what these can learn us about the Indian acquaintance with Western Europe and its inhabitants.

Although after a while many Indians mastered some French, eventually helped by the Hindustani-French phrasebook that was sent en masse to them, communication was initially difficult. On 27 January 1915 a wounded Sikh wrote to his uncle in Jalhandar: "*No one has any clue to the language of this place. Even the British soldiers do not understand it. They call milk doolee and water doolo*" [du lait / de l'eau].³²² It partly explains the attention the Indians gave to local children, as noticed by many observers, for it allowed communication by bypassing language. Even after some months, some could not go beyond the most common words. A Pathan, posted in the Base Post Office in Boulogne, wrote the following at first sight enigmatic text to a friend in Peshawar: "*boku boku, bonsho, soa, koman tali vu. Vu pakhti India, vu no bon. Ji tri bon, rest isi. Oh Khaidad Dada tut swit.*", to add "*That's all the French I know! Bon santi hafwa.*" [beaucoup beaucoup, bonjour, soir, comment allez-vous. Vous partez India, vous non bon. Je très bon, reste ici. Oh Khaidad Dada, toute

Cambridge University Press. p. 1 and Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury. p. 119-120.

³²¹ British Library, India Office Records, L/MIL/5/825-828. Apart from the catalogue reference, I will note the available data concerning the author of the letter, the addressee, the original language in which the letter was written and the date. I will also acknowledge if a letter has been published.

³²² Letter in Gurmukhi. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

de suite.... Bonne santé, au revoir].³²³ Knowing some French, however, could solve many problems, even of a military nature. After the Second Battle of Ypres, the 40th Pathans had lost all its twelve original British officers and were now led by two second Lieutenants of the reserve without any knowledge of Pashtu. As some of the Pathans had picked up a little French, this briefly became the language of command.³²⁴ Other Indians even managed to write in French or had French letters dictated.

Obviously, the friendly engagements with the civilian population frequently featured in the letters sent home by the Indian rank and file, as well as being reported in accounts by officers.³²⁵ They would celebrate New Year together, comparing the event to their festival of Holi³²⁶ [the Hindu spring festival, usually in March]. In the previous section we have seen that friendship between French families and Indian troopers could run deep, something also amply demonstrated by a couple of letters, such as one in which a Ressaidar let his family in Peshawar know that he was writing his former French hosts on a regular basis and that in case the latter would need something from India, they could write and his family should be at their service.³²⁷ Many other letters give an expression to the feelings of mutual friendship with a host family.³²⁸ Negative comments on the French locals are much less prevalent, but our view is probably somewhat distorted: knowing their letters were scrutinised, the sepoy and labourers probably subjected to self-censorship in this matter. They were, however not inexistant. A very balanced view - with both negative and positive observations- was expressed by a Hindustani muslim in a letter sent to Simla in February 1916: "*We used to hear so much in India of the superiority of everything in Europe, that when I came here, I was much disappointed. There is no doubt that in many domestic matters the people here are superior to us, on the other hand there are some matters in which*

³²³ Letter, dated 8 October 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³²⁴ Waters RS. (1936) *History of the 5th Battalion (Pathans) 14th Punjab Regiment*, London: J. Bain. p. 166.

³²⁵ Alexander HM. (1917) *On two fronts, being the adventures of an Indian mule corps in France and Gallipoli*, London: W. Heinemann. p. 55, 108; Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 21-22 ; McMillan AW. (1920) *Indian Echoes from France. The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 18 ; Ellinwood DC. (2005) *Between two worlds : a Rajput officer in the Indian army, 1905-21 : based on the diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur*, Lanham: Hamilton. p. 379, 402-3.

³²⁶ Letter in Urdu sent to Jhelum, 6 January 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³²⁷ Letter in Urdu, dated 25 April 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³²⁸ Sher Bahadur Khan to Raja Gul Nawaz Khan in Jhelum, letter in Urdu, dated 9 January 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 135-6.

we are superior to them, as for instance in the cleanliness of our bodies and of our cooking and eating utensils. [...] The inhabitants of the villages never bathe, they simply take a corner of a towel, dip it in water and rub their faces clean". While he also criticised the state of the French villages - "*quite as dirty as Indian villages*", he praised the tidiness of the interior of houses, the industry of the French women and the honesty of the French in general.³²⁹ Amar Singh had an "*unpleasant surprise*" when a French friend invited him for dinner in a local restaurant, together with three other Frenchmen. "*The room was small and dirty and the food bad*". Moreover, while the Europeans were criticising the Indians for polygamous practices, one of the acquaintances present offered to find him a pretty girl. Though maintaining his courtesy, the Rajput officer found the whole event distasteful. Yet, this was a one off occurrence among much happier meetings with Frenchmen. As so many others, Amar Singh found the French treated him with more equality than his British colleagues did.³³⁰

For the Indians the Europeans were perhaps even stranger than the Indians were to the Europeans. While most French, Belgians and certainly British would at least have a notion of "India", however minimal, the Indians had been transferred to an unknown universe: to them Europe was a completely new and very strange concept, if it was a concept at all. They did not understand the language and the culture was completely different too. Especially in the early months after their arrival, the Indians were mystified by the phenomena they saw and experienced. When the 47th Sikhs left for the front, the battalion stayed in a large monastery near Saint-Omer (Wisques). On 20 October 1914, the Sikhs were helped by the monks to the best of their abilities. They were puzzled by the statues of the twelve apostles in one of the abbey's halls. The explanation that these were the gurus of the Christians was gratefully accepted, as mentions their regiment's history.³³¹ Earlier, on their way north, Indians had been wondering about the statue of Jeanne d'Arc in Orleans and a comparison had been drawn with Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, who had been leading her troops against the British in the Indian rebellion of 1857, just like the maid of Orleans had led the French against the English centuries before. One man who months later had been looking in vain for a postcard of the Jeanne d'Arc statue presumed "*the sale of the picture has*

³²⁹ Letter in Urdu, 4 February 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³³⁰ Ellinwood DC. (2005) *Between two worlds : a Rajput officer in the Indian army, 1905-21 : based on the diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur*, Lanham: Hamilton. p. 369.

³³¹ Anon. (1992) *47th Sikhs War Record : The Great War 1914-1918*, Chippenham: Picton publishing. p. 13.

*been stopped, lest it should affect adversely the present friendship between the French and the English*³³²

Such cultural misinterpretations must have thrived initially yet diminished in the course of the war. In a lengthy description of catholic worship to his wife, which demonstrated that he had regularly entered a church and even had assisted in mass, a Hindu cavalryman wrote on 20 May 1916 of the wayside crucifixes in past tense that *“many ignorant soldiers among us thought that they represented malefactors and were put up in order to act as a warning to criminals. At a distance they thought these were the bodies of malefactors nailed to the cross”*. Now that they knew more about the catholics and their religion many of his friends entered the little chapels to the Virgin Mary *“and bow their heads in prayer”*.³³³ Observations regarding the landscape, buildings and food were communicated to those who stayed beyond the Black Waters. As most came from a rural background, much attention was given to crops and farming methods, with particular attention to unknown wonders such as dog carts, horse drawn carts, motor cars, or reaping and threshing machines.³³⁴ Rajput nobleman Amar Singh who as a large landowner had a keen interest in agriculture made notes on incubators, milk separators, a mowing machine, and a chicken farm.³³⁵

As religion was central to many of the letters written home, the lack of religious or spiritual life was one of the few recurring critiques on the Europeans. This could range from negative comments on the keeping of pigs³³⁶ to a more profound criticism on hypocrisy in religious matters or the occurrence of superstition.³³⁷ On 22 March 1915 L.R. wrote in Hindi

³³² Hindustani muslim Jalal-ud-Din Ahmad to Haji Saadat Mir Khan in Etmadpur (U.P.), letter in Urdu dated 14 October 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 108.

³³³ Letter in Hindi dated 20 May 1916 . BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. See also the letter by a Sikh to his brother in Gurmukhi, dated 18 January 1915, published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 29-30.

³³⁴ Letters by a Sikh to his brother in Gurmukhi, dated 18 January and idem, dated 29 July 1915, letter from a hindustani muslim in Urdu, to a pensioned Dafadar in U.P., dated 8 January 1916, letter from a Dogra in Urdu dated 2 February 1916 and sent to Gujrat, letter to Rawalpindi in Urdu dated 2 May 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. The first one has been published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 29-30.

³³⁵ Ellinwood DC. (2005) *Between two worlds : a Rajput officer in the Indian army, 1905-21 : based on the diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur*, Lanham: Hamilton. p. 405.

³³⁶ Letter in Urdu by a Punjabi muslim to his brother, 7 Feb 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³³⁷ Letter in Marathi from a Brahmin in the hospital in Bournemouth to Dapoli (Bombay Presidency), 21 August 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

from the camp in Rouen to a friend in India: *“The inhabitants are honest and very polite. The morals are also good as regards civilisation, but as regards spirituality I am very sorry. They are all and all for sensual enjoyments. It seems to me that to eat and drink is the merry of their life. They have a catholic religion which is almost reduced to nothing but etiquette. And owing to this weakness they are very weak in spiritual morality. At best I come to the conclusion that with the loss of spirituality they will lose their national strength as our India did. The present bad condition of India is due to the loss of spirituality. In India also the religion is nothing but etiquette.”*³³⁸ As the end of this quote shows, talking to westerners could also incite autocriticism in religious matters. A Punjabi muslim from the 19th Lancers was asked by a Frenchman about his religion and its particular doctrines. After having answered, the Frenchman said he had asked about 20 Indians, and that everyone had seemed to be of a different faith. *“I felt much ashamed”*, the lancer wrote. By *“going out and seeing the world”*, he had come to realise how ‘false’ the sectarianism and exclusiveness of the Indian religions were and he blamed the *“ignorance of religious leaders”* for making India *“the laughing stock of the world”*. *“God is not the God of any particular religion, but He has the same regard for everyone”*, was his new world view.³³⁹

By quite a number of letter writers, India is indeed compared unfavourably to Europe. In a letter from early 1915 written from a hospital ship moored in England, a Hindu Sub-Assistant Surgeon wrote to a friend in Peshawar: *“When one considers this country and these people in comparison with our own country and our own people one cannot but be distressed. Our country is very poor and feeble and its lot is very depressed. Our people copy the faults of the British nation and leave its good qualities alone. We shall never advance ourselves merely by wearing trousers and hats and smoking cigarettes and drinking wine. In fact they have a moral superiority. [...] They do not marry until they have reached maturity. For a lad of sixteen to marry and beget children is looked upon with disapproval. You will never find a case of a boy leaving school and going to college who is already the father of children. Our boys are spoilt*

³³⁸ BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f° 148-9. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 45 . A similar remark on cleanliness can be found in Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 39-40.

³³⁹ Letter in Urdu, dated 25 September 1917 to a ‘pandit’ (wise man, teacher) in Rohtak (in the South-East of the Punjab). BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

*by our evil customs. [...] The children are very clean. You never see any of them eating or easing himself in the public streets”*³⁴⁰

Especially the status of women, the fact they were educated and the lack of purdah [the practice of female seclusion] struck many of the Indian visitors. *“If a woman goes by herself into the jungle no man will molest her”*, a Sikh wrote, *“In the smallest villages there are schools in which boys and girls are taught. [...] Women work in just the same way as men. For instance, one may be a station-master, another a schoolmaster - the difference is simply this, that God made them women”*.³⁴¹ Apart from the focus on the role of women in society, this fragment puts forward another aspect that is omnipresent among the Indian comments on France (and Belgium): education (and especially female education). Firoz Khan urged his friend or family member Rajalal Khan in Shahpur District to send Nadir Khan to school for *“I have seen in this country that no person is uneducated. [...] All the inmates of a house are educated, and when they see one of our men going about with a letter in his hand [to have it read] they are very surprised. No doubt they think that we are very stupid since we can’t read. Truly they are right. What is a man without education? Nothing.”*³⁴²

The (relative) respect and humanity with which they were treated by civilians in Europe sometimes heavily contrasted with the attitudes the

³⁴⁰ The original letter was written in Hindi and Urdu with some English words. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f° 50-51. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 33-34.

³⁴¹ Two letters in Urdu sent by the same man to Punjab on 29 May 1916 . BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. See also letter from a hindustani muslim Dafadar in Urdu, dated 8 January 1916, from a Brahmin in Hindi dated 19 april 1916, from Jat Dafadar Ranji Lal of the 20th Deccan Horse to one Prem in Rohtak District, 26 November 1916 (Urdu), from a Sikh Jemadar to Lahore district in Urdu, 15 December 1916, from a Sikh to Jalandhar District, in Gurmukhi, 31 January 1917 and from Hindustani Muslim Khalil Ullah from the 2nd Lancers to Ganiullah in Muttra District (U;P.), in Urdu, dated 3 March 1918. The letters by Ranji Lal and Khalil Ullah have been published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 257-8 and 356. The focus on gender in the Indian soldiers' letters has been extensively analysed in Markovits C. (2010) *Indian soldiers' experiences in France during World War I : seeing Europe from the rear of the front*. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 29-53. p. 45-53.

³⁴² Firoz Khan was a punjabi muslim serving in the Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade. This letter, written in Urdu, was dated 20 March 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 166. A similar letter is the one by Ressaïdar Harnam Singh to Gurdial Singh in Ludhiana District on 21 July 1916, published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 210.

colonial master displayed in India. This difference in how they were seen and treated by Europeans naturally struck the Indians, and it was not always a matter of being French/Belgian or being British. As Senior Assistant Surgeon Jagu N. Godbole wrote from N^o. 8 Indian General Hospital in Bournemouth to a friend in Poona on 18 March 1915: “*The people here are of a very amiable disposition. They talk pleasantly, treat us kindly, and are pleased to see us. We do not hear the words ‘damn’ and ‘bloody’ at all frequently, as in India. But this only applies to those who have not seen India. Those who have, gnash their teeth at us; some laugh and some make fun; but there are not many who do this. The people here are charming. It is impossible to say why they become so bad on reaching India.*”³⁴³ By asking this question, this educated Brahmin, who wrote in English and Marathi, might have got to the very heart of colonialism and imperialism which after all is a practice of domination.

The Indian letter writers were certainly at no pains to distinguish between continental and British attitudes towards them and the impression we get from the letters that the Indian soldier was “*much more chummy with the Frenchman than with the Britisher*” was something that also struck British observers, as a letter by a British Lieutenant from the Indian Medical Services to his father demonstrates.³⁴⁴ It was also confirmed in a series of interviews two scholars conducted with Sikh veterans of the First World War in the 1970s.³⁴⁵ The French and British approaches towards the Indians particularly contrasted once strict segregation was established in the Indian hospitals on the English south coast in late February 1915 and the inmates were no longer allowed to visit or to be visited by the locals. Measures such as scrupulously guarding the entrances and protecting the hospital walls by barbed wire, were in the eyes of the Indians overstepping the boundaries of legitimate authority, and they were generally met with disapproval and anger by both sepoys and hospital personnel.³⁴⁶ Not without reason the same Brahmin Sub-Assistant Surgeon, now in Brighton, referred to his hospital there as the “Kitchener Hospital

³⁴³ BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f^o 146.

Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 42.

³⁴⁴ Letter dated 27 december 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³⁴⁵ Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225. p. 223.

³⁴⁶ Jarboe AT. (2014) Propaganda and Empire in the Heart of Europe: Indian Soldiers in Hospital and Prison, 1914-18. In: Jarboe AT and Fogarty RS (eds) *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*. London: I.B. Tauris, 107-135. p. 115 ; Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. p. 81; Bardgett S. (2015) A Mutual Fascination. *History Today*. March 2015 ed. London: History Today Ltd, 41-47.

Jail".³⁴⁷ For Jagu Godbole, who had been questioning the colonial power relations earlier, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ultimately, in the final months of 1915 - just before the closure of the Indian hospitals in Brighton -, he attempted to murder Colonel Seton, who was in charge of these establishments. Godbole's act, for which he was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, was exceptionally dramatic but far from the only expression of dissent.³⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the British would strictly maintain the colour bar for Indian military residing in the U.K. It is particularly striking that even the military who were selected to take part in the Victory Parade in London on 19 July 1919 were lodged in a camp surrounded by close-fitting iron-hoardings, topped with barbed wire, and with a British sentry at each entrance³⁴⁹: even 'heroes' who had fought in many campaigns and were supposed to be guests-of-honour could not go out, except under escort and this just because they were Indian.

It brought some Indians to query British political intentions with India and to investigate the situation of French colonial subjects. One such person was Ram Jawan Singh, storekeeper at the aforementioned Kitchener's Indian Hospital in Brighton. Towards the end of September 1915 he wrote two letters. The first one, written on 26 September 1915, was to one Monsieur Jacques Derel in Vernon (Eure) in which he asked this French gentleman how the French Republic treated its Algerian subjects. How were they kept? Were they "*allowed to go out to the town when off duty without any guard to look after them*"? And was there a difference in pay with the French soldiers, and why? It should be no surprise this letter was among the few effectively withheld by the censor.³⁵⁰ In his second letter addressed to his father in Lucknow four days later - and passed by the censor, Ram Jawan Singh wondered what England "*will do for India after the war*".³⁵¹ The expression of anti-British sentiment was quite an

³⁴⁷ Letter in Marathi to a correspondent in Ratnagiri (Bombay Presidency) dated 16 November 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Other letters comparing the Indian hospitals with prisons or its inmates with prisoners, are dated 3 June 1915, 9 June 1915.

³⁴⁸ Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. p. 84-87.

³⁴⁹ McMillan AW. (1920) Indian Echoes from France. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 13.

³⁵⁰ Only two to three letters in every hundred thousand were held back, according to Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 8.

³⁵¹ Both letters by this Hindustani Hindu were written in English. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825-828. The first one has also been published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 102-3. The address of Jacques Derel is 5, avenue Victor Hugo in Vernon, a town halfway Paris and Rouen on the Seine. It makes one wonder how both correspondents did get acquainted with each other for Vernon was as far as we know never the location of an Indian base, hospital or

exception in the soldiers' letters. Perhaps even more rare were the ones containing the tone and language the British wished to read : pro raj and pro British.³⁵² Based on this evidence we could conclude that the bulk of the soldiers were at that point not politicised.

This, however, does not contradict the fact that the Indians did become more aware of who they were, and that their passage in Europe had the potential to lead to some form of groupness beyond the traditional societal confines to a certain degree of national awareness. The "*one style of dress with no caste distinction*"³⁵³ in Europe which was noted by so many Indians, could lead to ponderings upon questions of caste and religious distinction in India. An at first sight simple sentence as "*The ladies even carry off our excreta*"³⁵⁴ had a powerful meaning that went way beyond the writer's astonishment as in India this ritually polluting duty could only be done by Untouchables or low-caste sweepers. The latter's status within the Indian army units on the Western Front seemed to have increased steadily. On 17 July 1916 Sikh cavalryman Tara Singh wrote to Garbar Singh how his party en route from the Indian base in Marseilles to the front had to change trains in Paris: "*On that day we all ate at the same table*", continuing full of amazement that "*Our company was composed of five Sepoys, of whom three were Sikhs and two Musalmans, two sweepers and three cooks, but we all ate together at the same table. Moreover, we have often eaten food and drunk tea prepared by Musalmans.*"³⁵⁵ Soon after, a Pathan showed himself indignant at reading in an Indian newspaper about a call to the railway companies "*to set apart separate compartments for high castes and for sweepers and other unclean castes.*" "*What progress can you expect in a people like this*", he asked.³⁵⁶ And in the summer of 1917 in a eulogy to the work of the YMCA a member of the Hindustani Muslim squadron of the 6th King

camp. Moreover, N°5 in Avenue Victor Hugo is quite a stately home (dating from the late 19th or early 20th century) in the very centre of town, clearly the abode of someone well off.

³⁵² Singh G. (2014) *India and the Great War: Colonial Fantasies, Anxieties and Discontent. Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14: 343-361. p. 353.

³⁵³ Letter in Gurmukhi dated 29 July 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³⁵⁴ In a letter by a wounded Sikh to his father in the Punjab, 20 February 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825: Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, f° 146. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 38.

³⁵⁵ Letter in Gurmukhi, BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 208 and in Ellinwood DC. (1978) *The Indian Soldier, The Indian Army, and Change, 1914-1918*. In: Pradhan S and Ellinwood DC (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi, 177-211. p. 189.

³⁵⁶ Letter in Urdu sent to Jalandhar, dated 10 September 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

Edward's Own Cavalry stated that *"this Association has made great efforts to improve the character of sweepers and followers, with the result that now those men, if they do not claim to have equal rights with Europeans, have got all the other Indians to acknowledge that they have equal rights with them"*.³⁵⁷ The wording of this excerpt is significant. If no translation mistake was made by the censor's office it means sweepers and followers were recognised and accepted by their higher caste fellow countrymen as having equal rights, quite a remarkable feat.

Even a simple postcard has the potential to reflect the increased self-awareness of the Indian military in Western Europe. Addressed to Michaut Domingo (born 1874) and his wife Marie-Céline Saulnier in the village of Allery and kept with the family photographs throughout the 20th century, is a postcard that reads:

"Visse le 25 Novembre 1916

Madame, moi bien content village Visse, bonne santé, beaucoup bonjour petite fille Louise, petit garçon Louis. Madame dire beaucoup bonjour Mlle Germaine Darras et Cécile Niquet de la part du Soldat Amir. Monsieur Amir chez Monsieur Malapert Thétime à Visse-Maisnières par Gamaches (Somme)".³⁵⁸ [Madame, Me very happy village Visse, good health, much hallo little girl louise, little boy Louis. Madame, say much hallo Miss Germaine Darras and Cécile Niquet on behalf of Soldier Amir. Mister Amir, with Mister Malapert Thétime in Visse-Maisnières].

Despite the quite commonplace contents this postcard does reveal some details on the self-image of this Indian cavalryman. He was confident enough to write or to have a postcard written in French. Even if this was only in broken French, it is proof of a particular intellectual ability that would have enhanced one's self-esteem, and that maybe made him stand out against British comrades-in-arms. One indeed wonders in how far British soldiers picked up French during the Great War, apart from the odd word. For, if the Indians usually did and the British usually didn't learn and used some French, it would have made the Indians stand out and would definitely have enhanced not only the latter's self-esteem but also their popularity with the local population. The question, however, is difficult, if not impossible, to answer. The postcard is clearly a sign of a sincere friendship to a French, and thus white European, family, expressing a certain fondness of in particular the children. Moreover, the formulas

³⁵⁷ Letter in Urdu, dated 12th August 1917 and sent to someone in Kaimganj, United Provinces. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³⁵⁸ Gressieux D. (2007) *Les troupes indiennes en France : 1914-1918*, Saint-Cyr-sur-Loire: Allan Sutton. p. 192-3 depicts both front and back of the postcard.

Amir used do certainly not betray a certain reverence: they are not how one would address a superior, but rather someone of equal standing. And last but not least: not only “Soldat” is written with a capital letter (which could have been done on the initiative of a scribe), but Amir attributes himself the form of address “Monsieur”, a clear proof of his self-attributed status even though it is also most certainly the way in which his French hosts addressed him. The soldier’s self-respect is also evident from the front of the postcard: a studio portrait of a proud and obviously self-conscious “Soldat Amir”.

Between relief and desperation : being a prisoner of war

Offering an interesting contrast with the enhanced self awareness of the Indian rank and file behind the Allied lines in France and Belgium is the situation of the Indian prisoners of war. The matter of POWs in the First World War is generally an understudied topic. Yet, the Indian prisoners of war were of concern to the German propaganda effort, and by consequence, enough sources were left to allow us a perspective on how the Indian rank and file experienced such a fate. After initially to be found in a number of POW-camps, for most of the war the Indians were concentrated in the ‘model’ Halbmondlager [Half Moon Camp], in Zossen-Wünsdorf, just south of Berlin. It was one of two special camps built to accommodate mainly muslim prisoners-of-war, the other being the Tatarenlager (for Russian muslims), in Zossen-Weinberge. The Indians shared Halbmondlager with French non-European prisoners, but had their own section of the camp, known as the Inderlager. In April 1917 most of the Indian inmates interned at Wünsdorf would be transferred to a camp in Romania.³⁵⁹ The experience of the Indians in German captivity was obviously quite different than that of the rank and file in France.

Sikh Havildar³⁶⁰ Sundar Singh of the 33rd Punjabis was taken prisoner-of-war by the Germans during or shortly after the Battle of Loos. Wounded in the hand he was taken to Feld-Lazarett 9 in Haubourdin where he wrote three short letters: one to his father, one to his company commander and

³⁵⁹ Jarboe AT. (2014) Propaganda and Empire in the Heart of Europe: Indian Soldiers in Hospital and Prison, 1914-18. In: Jarboe AT and Fogarty RS (eds) *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*. London: I.B. Tauris, 107-135. p. 121.

³⁶⁰ A Havildar is the equivalent of a sergeant in the Indian Army. It is not used in the cavalry, where the equivalent is Daffadar.

one to the battalion commander. The three letters relate to the same event: his capture by the Germans and his hand wound, but depending on the addressee, they are differently worded. Apart from a general salute, the letter to the father reads: "*[...] I let it be known to my father, my wife, mother and brothers that I lie wounded in a German field hospital and am very well treated. Don't worry about me, I will be healthy soon as my limbs are OK. So, you can be entirely reassured. If my regiment lets you know that Havildar Sundar Singh went missing, do not write about this card to my regiment.*" The letter to the (British) officer commanding the 2nd company of the 33rd Punjabis conveys more details but strikes quite a different mood: "*Honourable Sir, Your servant is wounded in the hands of the Germans. I am hit by a splinter of a hand grenade in the shoulder and bruised in the neck. I am in some pain, but am still alive. Now I am in a field hospital, in which there are also many Englishmen. From the Indian Army there is no one besides me. I was determined to escape and to come back, but I can't go away, they do not let me go out. Other wounded were lying in my neighbourhood, but they have set me apart because of my Havildar insignia. To all officers I wish safety and victory and especially to the sikh subadar. I will see what fate has in store for me. I am very sad [...].*" And to the battalion commander, finally, he wrote: "*Your Honourable, I communicate herewith that wounded I have fallen in the hands of the Germans and that at present I am in a field hospital. Apart from me, there are some wounded from English regiments here but no Indians. I am very sad. No one understands my language here and neither do I understand a thing. I don't know the name of the field hospital. Please have mercy upon me and let's hope I might return into your benevolent service.*"

It is hard to judge in which letter Sundar Singh was most honest. In the letter to his family he might have been downplaying his real situation, emphasising the good treatment he was receiving. Its aim was not only to reassure them he was fine but also to warn them not to answer to the military authorities if the latter got in touch. Probably he was on the alert for avoiding them to know that he was quite content with his lot and well treated. Anyway, the letter to the family was certainly not downhearted and he seemed indeed to be content with his lot. The letter to the company commander conveyed details of his wound and Sundar Singh claimed he was determined to escape if only that would have been possible. The tone was much less self-assured. In rather neutral wordings he told his officer he was isolated from others, was feeling unsure about the future and depressed. In the letter to the battalion commander, the

tone was outright desperate : he could not understand anyone and no one could understand him. Still, in both the letters to the officers, it was striking that Sundar Singh stressed the fact that there were several British wounded but only one Indian. In other words, without being offensive, he told them in an indirect way the Indians were less prone to get wounded or to be captured and that he was in fact an exceptional case. To the company commander - of whom we can suppose he was closer to him - he even wrote that there are many 'Englishmen'. Though it is certainly not unusual that different addressees get different messages from the same sender on the same event - the same happens in daily life - it shows us the difficulty of interpreting a letter to a single consignee. There was probably truth in all three: he might indeed have been content to see his life saved, yet still feel isolated. There was, however, at least one outright lie: he perfectly knew where he was as he was permitted to write and send a letter home.

Sundar Singh probably assumed no one could or would read these letters, but eventually a German translation was published in November 1915 in an official brochure on the Indian troops in France, authored by Armeekorps-Ober-Kommando 6 (i.e. the 6th Army).³⁶¹ Besides a description of the Indian Army Corps with its composition and weaponry, some cultural and ethnical details and some letters, the booklet also contained some German sentences with their phonetically written Hindustani translation. The choice of sentences clearly points to the wish to incite the Indians to desert and join the German lines: "*Djawaano, idhar hamaare paas ao - Kerls, kommt doch zu uns herueber*" [Guys, do come over here], "*Mat darroo! Ham tumko nahie maarenge - Hab keine Angst, wir schlagen dich nicht tot.*" [Don't be afraid, we won't kill you].³⁶² Sundar Singh's letters were among other letters chosen to explain the German rank and file something of the presumed Indian soldier's psyche. The booklet was the work of Paul Walter, a former missionary who had acquired a fluency in Hindustani during his stay in India.³⁶³ On behalf of the German Foreign

³⁶¹ Anon. (1915) *Die indischen Truppen in Frankreich*, Lille: Armeekorps-Ober-Kommando 6 - Allgemeines Haupt-Quartier (Druckerei der Liller Kriegszeitung). p. 29-31.

³⁶² Ibidem, p. 26.

³⁶³ There is no certainty that Paul Walter did not make up these letters. However, there are some indications this was not the case and that the letters can be considered genuine, be it in German translation: the fact that the 33rd Punjabis were indeed at the Flanders front at that period, the fact that the letters are published including a sometimes elaborate salutation and closing sentences and the fact that there would be no obvious reason for someone to make up three letters from the very same person. Moreover, a document in the British Library, India Office Records, L/MIL/7/17276 Pt. 1 listing the Indian prisoners of war in Germany mentions two men with the name "Sunder

office and based in Lille, he acted as a propagandist among Indian POWs and led their interrogations. He was also supposed to encourage Indian deserters to return to their lines in order to convince other sepoys of going over to the German side.³⁶⁴ Paul Walter also informed the German rank and file on India and the Indians. Telling for Walter's opinion of the Indians' mental abilities is an article in the popular and well-read *Liller Kriegszeitung*³⁶⁵ from December 1914, in which he described them as an aryan culture that "*since millennia has been banished to a magical garden of myths and fairy tales. Out of this magical garden throughout history only big dreamy children have sprung, but not acting men*"³⁶⁶ to conclude that: "*Only when they have freed their own country from foreign domination, they can have a say. To do so, however, philosophy or literature are of no help, for this purpose there is only one way: 'Blood and Iron' "*".³⁶⁷

Both Sundar Singh and his 'publisher' Paul Walter can be linked to the sound recordings made by the Prussian Phonographic Commission, of which the shellac discs are kept in the sound archive of the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin. Of two Sundar Singhs - both sikhs- recordings are known: one was a 20 year old originating from the district of Patiala of whom one story and three religious songs were recorded on 8 December 1916³⁶⁸ while the other was a 32-year old from the district of Ludhiana who on 5 January 1917 told a "story" in the recording horn.³⁶⁹ While the former Sundar only knew Gurmukhi, the latter was able to write Urdu and Gurmukhi. This and his age of 32 makes him more probable to be our letter-writing Havildar, though there is no absolute certainty about this.³⁷⁰ Anyway, this Sundar Singh definitely showed initiative and gave proof of

Singh", a Havildar and a sepoy. Both, however, are stated to belong to the 9th Bhopal Infantry. Sundar/Sunder is also quite a common given name.

³⁶⁴ Liebau H. (2011) The German Foreign Office, Indian Emigrants and Propaganda Efforts Among the 'Sepoys'. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 96-129. p. 113.

³⁶⁵ Paul Walter: Indien und seine Soldaten., *Liller Kriegszeitung*, 27 Dezember 1914, p. 2.

³⁶⁶ "... eine Kultur, die seit Jahrtausenden in den Zaubergarten des Mythos end des Märchens gebannt ist. In diesem Zaubergarten sind im Laufe der Geschichte nur grosse verträumte Kinder, aber keine handelnden Männer gewachsen."

³⁶⁷ "Erst wenn sie ihr eigenes Land von der Fremdherrschaft befreit haben, können sie mitreden. Dazu aber hilft keine Philosophie und Litteratur, dazu gibt es nur ein Mittel: "Blut und Eisen"."

³⁶⁸ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 594, 595 & 597.

³⁶⁹ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 676.

³⁷⁰ As the information document accompanying each recording does not state one's regiment nor rank, it is difficult to match with certainty the letter writing Sundar Singh with the recorded Sundar Singh.

leadership, traits that might be associated with the rank of Havildar. He seized the opportunity of being recorded on 5 January 1917 for demanding a religious accessory: a Rumala [prayer book coverlet] for the Sikhs' holy book, Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Sundar Singh was not too shy to reprimand the Germans, be it in subtle wordings, and to play them off against the British who after all had provided them with a Guru Granth Sahib. After stressing the importance of the Holy Book to "every Singh" and explaining its meaning in Sikhism, he goes on saying: *"If we had been in India and our Guru Sahib had gone without a blanket, we would not have taken any food. We have tried a lot but our Guru Sahib has not received a rumala yet. If we were not to take food in this place we would die very quickly as there is no strength in our bodies for you know that these [men] get no food as in India. Therefore we cannot give up eating. That the English have sent us our Guru Granth Sahib, what is the point of that ? Think about this for yourself, and give us an answer soon. When we see the inhabitants of Germany, we are very happy, but we believe that the Germans do not think of us, as we of them. If the Germans would think of us in this way, they would honour the house of our Guru."*³⁷¹

Despite their situation - isolated and hungry - the agency displayed by the Indian prisoners through this recording is remarkable, including the explicit reference to hunger strike as an action method in Indian cantonments. Sundar Singh states the Sikhs to be positively disposed towards the Germans but expresses doubts whether the inverse was true, thus questioning the semi-official benevolence of the Germans towards Indian POW's . In a cunning way the imperial rivalry between the British and Germans is exploited in his demand. Most probably similar pleas had been sent by letter to the United Kingdom and/or India for some weeks later, in February 1917, the request was honoured, not by the Germans but by the Sikh Maharaja of Patiala who sent the Sikh prisoners of war not only Rumalas but also Chaninis [cloth canopies to cover Sri Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwara].³⁷² For the Sikhs in the camp it must have been clear to whom they mattered most.

³⁷¹ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 589; Mahrenholz J-K. (2011) Recordings of South Asian Languages and Music in the Lautarchiv of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 187-206. p. 201-2.

³⁷² Das S. (2010) Ardour and Anxiety: Politics and Literature in the Indian Homefront. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 341-367. p. 347.

Paul Walter, on the other hand, has not been recorded but he was explicitly mentioned in at least two recordings: one disc has been broken and only the written version survives³⁷³, but the other recording contains a poem in Gurmukhi by another Sikh, 27 year old Bela Singh from Kotli near Amritsar, recorded on 8 December 1916.³⁷⁴ On it Bela recounts how after two months in the trenches during a fierce German shelling his comrades ran away but he himself could not escape due to a hindrance. *“When the Germans saw me, they used all their force against me,/ and brought me violently; [where] they did not tell me./ When I saw Walter saheb, I had to laugh a lot”*³⁷⁵, thus expressing his joy due to the relief at finally encountering someone with whom he could communicate.

The communication problem when taken prisoner by the Germans should not be underestimated and proved potentially lethal, something made clear by the statements of three wounded Indian ex-prisoners of war which had been exchanged via Holland.³⁷⁶ One of them, sepoy Sarbajit Gurung of the 1/1 Gurkha Regiment, who was taken prisoner during the German attack on Givenchy, 20 December 1914 told his interrogator: *“The Germans made an attack on our trenches, killing most of my comrades and forcing others to retreat. I was left with another sepoy, Kaman Singh, in my trench. The Germans then appeared on the scene and killed Kaman Singh. Two of them approached me and spoke to me something in German of which I could catch only the word ‘Englishman’. I made the sound ‘Hun’³⁷⁷ (in Hindustani this word means ‘Beg your pardon’) and then the German soldier fired at me and the bullet hit me in the right jaw, and I fell to the ground.”* The German who shot him might not only have been on his guard for the Gurkhas (who after all were depicted in German propaganda as savages who preferred to kill Germans off-guard with their kukri [Nepalese knife with an inwardly curved blade]) but might have felt offended when this Gurkha called him a “Hun”, the common insult with

³⁷³ Lange B. (2011) South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 149-186. p. 154.

³⁷⁴ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 589

³⁷⁵ Ibidem; Lange B. (2011) South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 149-186. p. 152-3

³⁷⁶ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/17276: “Treatment of British and Indian prisoners of war in Germany”, Report of 23 September 1915.

³⁷⁷ मैं हूँ = main hoon = I am.

which the British designated the Germans, and something the Germans were well aware of.

In the same action as Sarbajit Gurung, Ram Nath Singh of the 9/ Bhopal Infantry Regiment got wounded and captured. He gave a very detailed account of his agony after being captured. He was well treated and well looked after but “*could only communicate by dumb show*” and out of suspicion, he refused all food the first four days of his captivity. After six days, Ram Nath was in a several hours long trip brought to a large General Hospital in a car “*carefully closed on all sides and not even a fissure or crevice left for me to see the surrounding country*”. That hospital, he relates, had only German inmates and “[...] *I was all by myself. The most annoying part of my first experience was that all those who could leave their beds flocked around me as if I were an object of curiosity. The door of my room was marked ‘Indian prisoner’ [...]. I remained here for 32 days. It was a living death to me. I could neither communicate my wishes and wants to others nor could I comprehend what the Germans wished to tell me*”. Besides the “fearful voicelessness”³⁷⁸ that marked nearly all initial encounters between Indian captives and German captors, Ram Nath was also put on display as an object of exotic curiosity - not unlike that of the Indian prisoners of war who would be subject to recordings or research projects.³⁷⁹

Particularly in the German hospitals, isolation was the rule for the Indian POWs. Early May 1915, the American consul in Cologne submitted a report on the situation of the 9 Indian patients to be found in hospitals for prisoners of war in his jurisdiction.³⁸⁰ With three of them conversation in a European or “usual Indian tongue” was impossible and one of them could not even be understood by his comrades. Due to the translation difficulties they were also not allowed to write home in their native language. After the consul’s visit it was decided this would be altered and that their letters and postcards would be forwarded to the University in Bonn for censoring.

³⁷⁸ Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 25.

³⁷⁹ Lange B. (2008) Academic research on (coloured) prisoners of war in Germany, 1915-1918. In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War I. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tiel: Lannoo, 153-159. ; Lange B. (2011) South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 149-186.

³⁸⁰ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/17276: “Treatment of British and Indian prisoners of war in Germany”.

At least in the camp at Zossen-Wünsdorf, set up for non-European prisoners and in particular Muslims, the Indians were less isolated, had others to talk to in their mother tongue and were able to cater for their religious needs and dietary requirements. As Muzaffar Khan, a Punjabi Muslim, told in his “life course”, recorded on 31 March 1917: “*When we got there [= in the camp] and saw our brothers, we were happy. Before that we had huge complaints, since the food and drink did not tally with our needs. We can cook our own food here ourselves and in the company of our brothers it tastes really good. We are very grateful for that*”.³⁸¹ The Indian preoccupation with food requirements is obvious from several recordings, yet the messages conveyed are contradictory. This, however, is only at first sight so. Muzaffar Khan expressed satisfaction, while Sundar Singh in his recording some months earlier pointed out that refusing food as they would do in India to have demands granted, was out of the question in a German POW-camp where the mortality rate was as high as 18 percent.³⁸² Probably, as a Muslim, Muzaffar Khan had perhaps less to complain about food and religious provisions than Sikhs and Hindus. After all, the prisoner of war camps in Zossen and Wünsdorf were set up as model camps to win over muslim POWs for the cause of Germany and his Ottoman ally.³⁸³

But then, what to think of the extraordinary irony displayed by Ch(h)ote Singh, a 29 year old farmer from Fatehpur (United Provinces). In the early days of 1917 he uttered several songs and stories into the horn of the Prussian Phonographic Commission's recording device. On the last of the recordings made, we hear him tell a story in Hindustani about the god Ram, interlaced with song.³⁸⁴ At the very end, he pauses, laughs heartily, pronounces some final words in a clear voice and then starts to laugh again. Translated, what he says is: “*Hahahaha. Sepoy Chhote Singh, Kaundhar, Zila [district] Fatehpur, Indiaman, In the 1914 war, gefeng German [he uses the German word for prisoner]; and I live with great pomp and ceremony [i.e. I live a life of ease and comfort], O great one; and within the camp I sit waiting in anticipation, and cheer the German king; when the ardour of His Majesty's sword cools, then will I see India again! Now, Maharaj [Your Majesty] there should be peace. Hahahaha*

³⁸¹ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 824. The record, however, is broken and we rely on the written transcript in the accompanying file.

³⁸² Das S. (2015) Reframing life/war ‘writing’: objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918. *Textual Practice* 29: 1265-1287. p. 1281.

³⁸³ Kahleyss M. (1998) *Muslimen in Brandenburg : Kriegsgefangene in 1. Weltkrieg*, Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.

³⁸⁴ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 668, recorded 5 January 1917.

[...]”.³⁸⁵ Ch(h)ote Singh presents himself, clear and complete as if in a roll call - quite aware that his words will be preserved for eternity. The life of “great pomp and ceremony” (ease and comfort) he refers to is a wonderful example of pure irony. Yet, despite the cheery tone and the laughter, the last part of his recorded words in which he urges the German emperor to make peace, is much less so. In fact his message is: “It’s about time there is peace so that I can return to India”. Remarkable is that he seems to address the kaiser - maybe he was indeed convinced or hoping the recording would be played for Wilhelm ? Anyway, underneath the humour, there is a message of longing for peace and to return home.

One of the most haunting - and best known - recordings in the Berlin Sound Archive is that of Mall Singh, a 24 year old literate sikh from the district of Ferozpur. In his recording entitled by the recorders “thoughts about himself”³⁸⁶ he talked in a sad voice about himself in the third person which according to Santanu Das is characteristic of the vibrant oral (story-telling) culture that was his own.³⁸⁷ Once again, food is central to the testimony: “*There was a man who would have butter back in India. He would also have two ser of milk. He served for the British. He joined the European war. He was captured by the Germans. He wants to go back to India. If he goes back to India, he will get that same food. Three years have already passed. There is no news as to when there will be peace. Only if he goes back to India, will he get that food. If he stays here for two more years then he will die. By God’s grace, if they declare peace then we’ll go back.*”³⁸⁸ Here, however, food is intimately linked with homesickness, his longing for Hindustan. Taste is indeed a strong carrier of memories. We do not know Mall Singh’s fate. Did he survive and make it back to India?³⁸⁹ So far, his poignant, sad voice on the sound recording is the only trace left of him. In some cases though, we know of what became of the recorded men. On 6 June 1916 gurkha Jasbahadur sang into the recording device of

³⁸⁵ Translated by Rana Chhina, to whom I’m grateful.

³⁸⁶ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 619, recorded 11 December 1916, “Gedanken über sich selbst”.

³⁸⁷ Das S. (2015) Reframing life/war ‘writing’: objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918. *Textual Practice* 29: 1265-1287. p.1278.

³⁸⁸ Mall Singh’s witness account is central to the 2007 award-winning documentary *The Halfmoon Files* by Philip Scheffner. The film was important in drawing attention to the rather unknown story of Indian POWs. <http://halfmoonfiles.de/en> (last checked on 28 May 2016). See a.o. Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury., p. 132-3 but I use the translation made by Arshdeep Brar for Das S. (2015) Reframing life/war ‘writing’: objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918. *Textual Practice* 29: 1265-1287., p. 1266.

³⁸⁹ He hasn’t been registered as deceased in the camp - there is no known grave - but neither was documentary maker Philip Scheffner able to trace him back in India.

the Prussian phonographic commission: “ [...] *I do not want to stay in Europe, please take me home to India. The Gurkha eats lamb, but does not eat duck. Alive we serve no purpose yet we cannot die [...]. That is why I want to return to my village. Back in my village I want to cut the grass in the fields. I want to leave this country.*”³⁹⁰ One Jasbahadur Rai from Gangtok in the Himalaya state and British protectorate Sikkim is buried at Zehrendorf Indian Cemetery near Berlin.³⁹¹ He died on 3 January 1917, six months after his sad voice had been recorded.

Soldiers as students - consequences of the Indian presence in Europe

*“I should like to see all the male population of India together with their wives brought to France to see the country, in order that they might profit by the experience”*³⁹², *“There are thousands of lessons here for a man to learn”*³⁹³ or *“If I had my way, I would put every man and woman in India on board ship and, after bringing them here, showing them over this country, would return them to India, so that they might learn how to use their lives to best advantage”*³⁹⁴ are just some telling sentences from letters sent back to India expressing the same idea. We also encounter it in Mulk Raj Anand’s novel *Across the Black Waters*, based on his father’s recollections from his war time in France.³⁹⁵ While expressing a certain tendency to essentialise the west as more progressive and less traditional

³⁹⁰ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 307, recorded 6 June 1916. ; Dendooven D. (2008) Troops of British India in Flanders, 1914-1919. In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War I. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tiel: Lannoo, 117-129. ; Lange B. (2011) South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 149-186. p. 169-170.

³⁹¹ <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/331399/JASBAHADUR%20RAI> (last checked 29 May 2016). It is quite probable this is one and the same person. Darjeeling and Gangtok - less than 100 kms apart from each other - historically both belonged to Sikkim, be it that the former was annexed by British India in 1852 while Sikkim remained (officially) independent until 1975. The Rai people to whom Jasbahadur belonged (irrespective whether it concerns one or two individuals) live in this sparsely populated region.

³⁹² From a letter in Urdu by a Pathan sent from France to Peshawar, 30 June 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³⁹³ A letter in Urdu from a Pathan to Jalandhar, dated 10 September 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

³⁹⁴ Letter by Pathan Sayed Habib in Urdu, to Sujab-as-Shah in Swabi, NWFP, dated 9 April 1917. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 285.

³⁹⁵ Anand MR. (2014) *Across the Black Waters*, London: Shalimar Books. p. 195, 224-5.

than it really was, especially in the matter of gender, the opinion of the Indians as voiced in their letters was one of seeing the potential to learn.

This was even so among the prisoners-of-war in Germany. Sib Singh, a 26 years old sikh from the area around Amritsar, said on 9 December 1915³⁹⁶: *“The German badshah [emperor, king] is very wise. He wages war with all the badshahs [kings]. When the war is over, many stories will be printed. And in India the Angrez [Englishman] is badshah, and we did not know about other badshahs. Only when the war began, we heard from several kings. In India this is one of the flaws: the people have no knowledge and know nothing.”* Quite possibly there is again irony involved: it is highly questionable that the author did consider it wise of the German emperor to wage war with all the rulers. And fascinating is the reference to the stories that will be *printed*. Is it one more case of irony, to be understood in the sense that printed and thus official stories are not necessary truthful? However, what is certain is that a concern about knowledge, about education is expressed: it is only when war broke out that we in India learned there were more rulers than the English.³⁹⁷ Sib Singh’s conclusion is that there is a need for more education and less ignorance. During their stay in Europe the soldiers not only wondered at the marvels but also studied them with the intent to apply them in India. There are examples abound: one Ressaïdar³⁹⁸ wrote a friend in Lyallpur (now Faizalabad) to keep an account of the results of his crops, how to instruct his tenants in the application of manure and promised him to tell all of the “useful lessons” in agriculture he had learnt in France.³⁹⁹ And a Sikh copied the way staircases were built, described the method of ploughing and made a plea for using iron agricultural implements.⁴⁰⁰

Education for both sexes was central to the new ideas the sepoys, sowars and labourers brought with them from Europe, though it was realised as

³⁹⁶ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Lautarchiv, PK 610.

³⁹⁷ Ahuja R. (2010) The corrosiveness of comparison : reverberations of Indian wartime experiences in German prison camps (1915-1919). In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 131-166., p. 156 ; Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 44. Sib Singh’s quotation “When the war began we heard of several kings” gave its title to this volume dedicated to the Indian prisoners in Germany in the First World War.

³⁹⁸ A Ressaïdar was a mid level rank in the Indian cavalry, the equivalent of a Captain. In the infantry the equivalent is a Subedar.

³⁹⁹ From a letter in Urdu, 2 February 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

⁴⁰⁰ Letter in Urdu to Ludhiana, dated 14 March 1916. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

well that educational efforts would not always be appreciated back home and would be rather swimming against the tide. Baluchi moslem Khan Mohamed Khan wrote to his father in the North Western Frontier Province: *“My own eyes have been opened since I came to Europe, and I have entirely altered the views which I held before. [...] If I live to return and if God gives me children, I will give them a good education, whether they be sons or daughters [...]. It is education alone which makes them wise and teaches them to hate and abandon those habits and customs in our country that are improper [...]. Such people, however, are only one in a thousand, and have to contend with great difficulties at the hands of the majority, who treat them as if they had lost their senses, whereas in reality it is the majority who are blinded by ignorance.”*⁴⁰¹ Similar views on education were shared by many other Indians in Europe.⁴⁰² It remains an open question, however, if their attitude towards women and literacy did undergo a change once back in India. Though there are some indications that this was indeed the case in the matter of education, e.g. the founding of schools by returning veterans,⁴⁰³ we have no clue whether the good intentions expressed on the issue of gender were in effect realised by a significant number of veterans. It is one of many blanks encountered when studying the experiences of colonial war participants.

Nevertheless, quite a few Indians who served in Europe explicitly expressed their determination to work on change in society and to do something about what they considered as India’s backwardness. *“If God spares me to return, I intend to start new customs”*, wrote a Punjabi cavalryman in March 1918, whereupon he praised European equality and in particular the fact that in Europe marriage usually was a free choice by both man and wife. To this he added a potentially seditious consideration of a political-societal nature: in former times this was also the case at home, so he thought, *“but later it was set aside by the intrigues of the Brahmins”*.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ Letter in Urdu by Khan Mohamed Khan (36th Jacob’s Horse) to Mahomed Abdullah Khan in Dera Ismail Khan, (NWFP), dated 11 October 1917. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 324.

⁴⁰² For example : letters dated 10 September 1916, 27 May 1918 . BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828.

⁴⁰³ As we can tell from commemorative tablets on schools such as the Jat School in Rohtak. Examples were shown by Prof. K.C. Yadav at the *India in the Great War* conferences at New Delhi (5-7 March 2014) and Ypres (24-25 October 2014).

⁴⁰⁴ Letter in Gurmukhi by Teja Singh, 2nd Lancers to Ganga Singh in Sialkot, Punjab, dated 6 March 1918. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 357.

Living intensely together in France had broken down certain caste boundaries - at least temporarily - and this despite the army's efforts to enable the Indians to maintain caste customs. It led one missionary to judge it highly improbable that the same caste narrowness as before could remain: "*Intermarriage is not likely to be proposed but interdining and smoking will probably form the earlier modifications*".⁴⁰⁵ That this was indeed the case is confirmed by the interviews conducted by S.D. Pradhan and DeWitt C. Ellinwood with 42 Sikh veterans of the First World War in the 1970s.⁴⁰⁶ All the veterans said they met many groups of other Indians and got along very well. Since they all belonged to one area, they must have started identifying themselves with each other. Yet, this in itself had a subversive element as the system of class regiments (all men in the regiment recruited from one ethno-cultural group) and class company regiments (all men in a company recruited from one ethno-cultural group) had precisely been adopted by the British to stimulate intergroup competition. If a common feeling of comradeship was to overcome boundaries of religion, class or caste, the counterpoise of 'natives versus natives' would be lost and the risk on a broader all-army mutiny as in 1857 would be much bigger.⁴⁰⁷ And in this respect, we can only conclude with S.D. Pradhan that the war in this way worked as a catalyst for the growth of nationalism.⁴⁰⁸

This new awareness that emerged through a common experience could surface rather unexpectedly. In a report an Indian collaborator of the YMCA related to an event he described as "*so unexpected, so remarkable, that a parallel could scarcely be found in the annals of the modern Indian Army*": during a late night concert in which two popular singers, a syce and a young soldier boy, were performing in front of a YMCA-hut packed with Indians from all ranks, a group of Indian officers all of a sudden entered. The foremost of them, a Ressaidar, asked if he could address the audience. "*After having been with you for more than four years*", he said, "*I am leaving you tomorrow at 6 o' clock in the morning. I have shared your pleasures and your sorrows, your privations - many as they were - and your comforts. [...] Although I feel glad to return again to my beloved*

⁴⁰⁵ McMillan AW. (1920) Indian Echoes from France. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 14.

⁴⁰⁶ Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225.

⁴⁰⁷ Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. p. 86-87.

⁴⁰⁸ Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225. p. 222.

country, India, which is your home also, it is hard for me to part from you. [...] Perhaps we may never meet again in this life. I feel, therefore, I must tell you an important thing before bidding you good-bye. You must know it." And in a dead silence he continued: "The advancement of our country rests upon two things - first, Education. [...] The second thing is Unity. We must forget our absurd prejudices of castes and religions. There is no such thing as caste. I myself come of a family which is proud of its high caste. I say in the sight of God there is no difference between man and man because of caste. Religion also must not be a matter of difference and disunity. Be a Hindoo or a Mahomeddan, a Christian or a Jew, a Parsi or a Buddhist, as you like, and be true and pure and faithful to whatever religion you belong. Do not look down upon a man of another religion with prejudice and enmity. [...] If we learn that lesson, there will cease to be differences and ill feeling among ourselves, and we shall be a united and progressive people." Though the YMCA-man reported the incident mainly because of the praise that was heaped upon his organisation, he also understood that the significance of what had happened ran much deeper: "It was a wonderful instance of the new realisation of Indian peoples".⁴⁰⁹

Besides words, objects as well can have the potential to reveal something about this new awareness. One striking and entirely unique item that can offer a glimpse in the rather unknown universe of tribal war experiences is a 'Naga dance hat' at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.⁴¹⁰ While in France, Chang members of the Naga Labour Companies had obtained German Pickelhaubes and once back home, made them into a dance hat with addition of mithan [domesticated Indian bison] horns and hair.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ BL, IOR, L/MIL/7/18577: "Grants to the YMCA", Undated report by S.M. Jafri.

⁴¹⁰ Cat. N° 1928.69.200 : <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID27450.html>. (Last checked 30 May 2016). The Pitt Rivers Museum Naga hat inspired contemporary Oxfordshire artist Steve Hurst in 2011 to make his own version: Hurst S. (2013) *Stephen Hurst. Ypres, the Great War and the Re-gilding of Memory. The Sculpture and Drawings of Stephen Hurst. In Flanders Fields Museum 15 June - 15 September 2013*, Ypres: In Flanders Fields Museum. p. 154-5.

⁴¹¹ Some time later, in 1920, this specimen was collected by James Philip Mills from the Indian Civil Service in the Naga Hills and sent to the Oxford archaeological and anthropological collections.



According to anthropologist Nicholas Saunders the item was a "symbolic substitute of a captured enemy head and proof of valour in battle".⁴¹² The German spiked helmet indeed underwent the same treatment as traditional Naga headhunting trophies, be it that here the horns were not attached to a human skull but to the leather helmet cap. By this act, the object clearly became more than just a souvenir and was given a specific ritual significance. And they were effectively used. Botanist and explorer Frank Kingdon-Ward was in Kohima when the 'Naga coolies' came home and he remembered that a great festival was held: "*We saw Angamis, Aos, Semas, Lhotas, and others doing their dances dressed in full war paint [...] several of the warriors who had come home from France joined in the dance wearing German helmets, which they had picked up on the field of battle.*"⁴¹³ Maybe the items had already been used on the Western Front - after all that's where the German helmets were procured and we know that in France expressions of the traditional culture were permitted, even encouraged : photographs in the Imperial War Museum of "Indian labourers from Manipur" show the men sporting traditional garb and spears and performing something labeled as a "sporting event" which could as well have been a war ritual or some other kind of demonstration.⁴¹⁴ And Lord Amthill in his capacity as advisor to the British Army's Directorate of Labour, wrote how the 39th (Manipur)

⁴¹² Saunders NJ. (2003) *Trench art : materialities and memories of war*, Oxford: Berg. p. 183.

⁴¹³ Quoted in : Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars., p. 212 . Originally the quote is from a discussion on a paper published in *The Geographical Journal*, April 1926.

⁴¹⁴ IWM, Q 6117, 6125 and 6128. The photographs were taken by Lt. John Warwick Brooke near Arras on 20 October 1917.

Labour Company had returned the entertainment offered by neighbouring units “*by giving exhibitions of Naga dances*”.⁴¹⁵

Due to their status and the memories they imbued, there might as well have been a political weight attached to these objects and their public display in a dance. While the advent of modern education and Christian missions had brought the different Naga peoples together and created common denominators such as christianity and the development of Nagamese as a lingua franca, it was as members of the Indian Labour Corps in France that Nagas truly developed a sense of uniqueness and commonality and thus of unity - we could as well call it a (sub)national sense. According to Naga historian Neivetso Venuh these Nagas drawn from different tribes who found themselves together in a faraway land agreed “*in their verbal resolution [...] to work for friendship and unity among themselves and give up their nasty weakness for head hunting and village feud.*”⁴¹⁶

There was indeed a strong element of awareness linked to a deployment in Europe. In their letters home the men showed admiration or criticism for the European way of life: they wanted to learn from its strengths or protect themselves from what they considered wrong. The Indian troops also started looking at the British with different eyes. They had observed the openness of French society and had been treated with more equality by the French than by the British. The strict rules of segregation adopted by the Indian hospitals in England were explained by wounded soldier Shambi Nath by “*the wish of the English that all the Indians should not acquire or learn the ideas of freedom which the people here possess*”.⁴¹⁷ They must have strongly felt the contrast between the official reason why war was being fought, i.e. the freedom and independence of Belgium, and their own fate as colonial subjects under British administration and this will undoubtedly have sharpened their political awareness.⁴¹⁸ To the Sikh

⁴¹⁵ Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 208.

⁴¹⁶ Venuh N. (2005) *British colonization and restructuring of Naga polity*, New Delhi: Mittal. p. 57-58 ; Singha R. (2011) The recruiter's eye on 'the primitive' : to France --and back -- in the Indian Labour Corps, 1917-18. In: Kitchen JE, Miller A and Rowe L (eds) *Other combatants, other fronts : competing histories of the First World War*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. p. 214-5.

⁴¹⁷ Shambi Nath to a friend in Simla, August 1915. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/825.

⁴¹⁸ Matthai J. (1915) *India and the War*, London: Oxford University Press. , p. 6-7; Chakravorty UN. (1997) *Indian nationalism and the First World War, 1914-18 : recent political & economic history of India*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers. p. 77.

veterans interviewed in the 1970s, the most important effect of the war was the rise of anti-British feelings. They had seen how French and British in their own lands enjoyed full freedom and they had compared the attitudes of the ordinary French people with the official British air of superiority.⁴¹⁹

The influence the passage in Europe must have had on direct political awareness was in every case moderate and subtle. It is true that few letters can be called subversive or even 'nationalist' and that references to India as a political concept are rare.⁴²⁰ When 'India' or 'Indians' is used, it is usually as a generic term referring to home, to the South Asian subcontinent and its inhabitants, and not to a polity.⁴²¹ Yet, the war clearly stimulated the identification with a certain idea of "India". After all, that is how the soldiers and labourers were referred to by the peoples they came in contact with, how they were identified by others.⁴²² Moreover, the letters, sound recordings and objects I referred to, do often point to a growing awareness of one's position, of a growing self-image with implicitly a political component. One of the last letters from France to be found in the reports of the censor⁴²³ is that of 30th April 1918 written by a labourer from the 25th (United Provinces) Labour Company to a pleader in Almora whom he addresses as 'Pandit' [a wise, learned man]. It sums up the hope for a united, self-conscious and autonomous India: *"I had a dream that Lakshmi [the hindu goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity] came to me here and told me to tell the Indians that 3,300,000 of them were all working separately in conflicting interests. All the inhabitants, whether men or women, Hindus and Mahomedans, ought to be in action. Tell [them] that if they want Swaraj [Home Rule] they must unite and be at one, as owing to their want of unity they have not ruled for 1,000 years. The goddess also told me to tell all the millions of Indians should unite in praising King George V. 'Then King George will be glorified and you will get Home Rule'. As she went away the goddess said she*

⁴¹⁹ Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225. p. 223-4.

⁴²⁰ Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. p. 82.

⁴²¹ This does not contradict that a certain Indian political awareness was already germinating, as was clear from the activities of the Gadr party and the Berlin revolutionaries. Especially the former specifically targeted military units.

⁴²² Chhina R. (2016) *Les Hindous. The Indian Army on the Western Front 1914-1919*, New Delhi: Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research - United Service Institution of India., p. x.

⁴²³ This does not mean that few letters were written after April 1918. Only the reports of the censor become much less detailed and contain many fewer excerpts from 1918 onwards.

would go to India and would restore such prosperity there as no Raja had never seen. She said she would show such special favour to India as India was a jewel among the nations".⁴²⁴

The conviction, expressed here in a more poetic way, that the British would eventually grant Indian self-determination in the form of home-rule seems not to have been uncommon among educated non-combatants and appears at least in one other letter in which a member of the 34th Indian Labour Corps praised former British Labour Party leader Arthur Henderson's support for Indian home-rule.⁴²⁵ However, such evidence of explicit political awareness was quite rare. The most important political development remained an "ill-defined self-confidence gained by the soldiers"⁴²⁶, "a palpable sense of self - a self newly located in a foreign setting".⁴²⁷ This internal metamorphosis was clearly apparent to and realised by observers who accompanied soldiers or labourers in France. Captain Kashi Nath coined it in his memoir of the Indian Labour Corps "*the silent change*".⁴²⁸ Their experiences, he wrote, will weaken the hold of superstition and the shackles of caste and other traditional restrictions. Nath marked in the men who had come back from France "*a greater independence, a higher sense of self-respect and more marked degree of alertness and smartness*". His appreciation was one year later corroborated by reverend A.W. McMillan, who had been a long time missionary in Benares and had helped organise the work of the YMCA among the Indian troops and labourers in France from 1917 to 1919. In January 1920 the padre summarised in an eloquent manner what the passage in Europe could have meant for the Indian rank and file: "[...] *the Government, in bringing thousands of Indians to France, launched upon a far-reaching educational scheme that will affect this present generation [...]. They [the men] have learned new conceptions of the unity of India; that they are men who will be listened to as authoritative witnesses because of the new things they have seen in foreign lands; that they realise their own importance and the magnitude of what India has done for Britain, and that they in their several communities will be men with progressive ideas both in the realm of social matters, religious customs,*

⁴²⁴ BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. written in Urdu.

⁴²⁵ Letter in Urdu by Ahmed Syed to Abdur Rahim Khan in Bara Banki District, 17 January 1918. BL, IOR, L/MIL/5/828. Published in Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. 349.

⁴²⁶ Ellinwood DC. (1978) *The Indian Soldier, The Indian Army, and Change, 1914-1918*. In: Pradhan S and Ellinwood DC (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi, 177-211. p. 200.

⁴²⁷ VanKoski S. (1995) *Letters Home: Punjabi Soldiers Reflect on War and Life in Europe*. *International journal of Punjab studies*. 2: 43-63. p. 57.

⁴²⁸ Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 45-48.

and politics. Combatants and non-combatants alike, they are men to be reckoned with, men who have received a concentrated education in a short space of time.”⁴²⁹ The letters and other accounts the sepoys and labourers left us, suggest that in the transnational moment of being in Europe they underwent a process of (self-)identification in which a new sense of self was forged.

Indian First World War veterans as agents of change ?

Experiences are lived individually by definition but conditioned socially by necessity.⁴³⁰ And indeed, the Indian War Experience as such does not exist. Gender, rank, religion, class and caste, intellect and the region within India the men came from, are just some of the many factors that influence how the war was experienced.⁴³¹ Moreover, we should never forget that what we have to work with are only fragments. Besides the palimpsestic treatment that befell the Indian letters and sound recordings before they came to us, as outlined earlier in this chapter, there are many more constraints: some experiences were simply never conveyed to paper or even communicated to others. There were no doubt - traumatic-incidents which might even have been plainly inexpressible.⁴³² And we hardly possess sources adding the benefits of hindsight such as memoirs. We entirely lose track of the soldiers once their military service is over. Individual experiences might have had a lasting impact on the Indians who had been over to Europe, but they did not result in a sustained social discourse on war experiences or memories. Yet, this should not prevent us from reaching some conclusions as to the impact of the European war experience on Indian soldiers and labourers, even if the lack of sources and the actual state of research does not enable us to draw a complete and definite verdict.

⁴²⁹ McMillan AW. (1920) Indian Echoes from France. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missionary problems* 18: 1-20. p. 1-2.

⁴³⁰ Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 26.

⁴³¹ Das S. (2011) Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history In: Das S (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 70-89. p. 72.

⁴³² Singh G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, London: Bloomsbury. p. 191.

The veterans returned to an India in turmoil. Soaring prices due to the war had caused economic hardships which resulted in public unrest and increasingly, ill feelings towards the government.⁴³³ And while the imperial government in 1918 no longer dismissed the idea of self-government for India as “*ridiculous and absurd*”, to use the words Viceroy Lord Hardinge uttered shortly before the outbreak of war,⁴³⁴ post-war Britain's refusal to grant India home rule created more hostility among the Indians towards them. Despite the fact that India was represented in its own right at the Paris peace conference (though with highly pro-British delegates), 1919 brought a further curtailment of civil liberties with the Rowlatt Act. Protest against this repressive Act further unified political opposition now with Gandhi at its helm. The absolute low of British repression was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar on 13 April 1919 when hundreds of unarmed protesters and completely innocent Vaisakhi pilgrims were fired upon by British troops under General Dyer.⁴³⁵ That this occurred in Punjab which had contributed the largest number of troops for the war effort, was of an extreme irony and it is highly probable that ex-servicemen figured among the victims. The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh is by many considered a shifting point, the moment which crushed “the last vestiges of hope formed in the wake of India’s war time contribution and irredeemably change[d] the relation between India and Britain”.⁴³⁶ From now a unified nationalist opposition under Gandhi would focus on non-violent non-cooperation with progressively as its ultimate goal no longer ‘just’ home rule but full independence.

In these circumstances some returning soldiers, now enhanced with the status of war veteran and the experience of Western ideals and education, became politically active. As Lalu in the best known Indian novel of the Great War, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Across the Black Waters*,⁴³⁷ the war for them had been a site of politicisation as they had begun to question both colonial knowledge and racist hierarchies when encountering Europe, war and desolation: “ [...] encouraged by all the

⁴³³ Pati B. (1996) *India and the First World War*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers. p. 96-7 estimates that in 1918 some 6 million Indians succumbed to famine and the influenza pandemic

⁴³⁴ Sen SN. (1997) *History of the freedom movement in India (1857-1947)*, New Delhi: New Age International. p. 144.

⁴³⁵ Ahir R. (2015) *A Brief History of Modern India*, New Delhi Spectrum Books., p. 106-127.

⁴³⁶ Das S. (2010) *Ardour and Anxiety: Politics and Literature in the Indian Homefront*. In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 341-367. p. 367.

⁴³⁷ Based on the war recollections of his father who had served as a subadar and regimental clerk in Europe.

privileges of journeys in ships and railways through foreign lands which they had never enjoyed before, heartened by the kindness of people everywhere, they had grown to the dignity of human beings and forgotten the way in which they had always been treated as so much cattle in India. They were beginning, through contact with the ordinary white folk, and through the knowledge that even coolies here seemed to be coolies only during their work hours, and then Sahibs in their own right, who put on suits and boots and walked out with their girl friends - to lose the fear and abjectness that their superior officers had inspired in them in the cantonments of India [...] And now they had been suddenly thrown back to the realisation of their real position."⁴³⁸ It is hardly surprising then that there are plenty of stories of rebellious ex-servicemen and it is telling that the worst protests against the Rowlatt Act were recorded in Punjabi districts which had seen the highest level of recruitment. A mob in Wagah,⁴³⁹ for instance, was led by a Havildar Sulakhan Singh. And throughout the Punjab, Sikh veterans were active in tenant agitations or in the Akali movement.⁴⁴⁰ In Rae Bareilly (U.P.), a forbidden agricultural gathering was organised by Brijpal Singh, a sepoy who attached to the 9th Bhopal Infantry had served on the Western Front and had spent years in a German prisoner of war camp. When he was arrested in March 1921, he claimed he was not afraid of machine guns, cannons or cavalry and protested that even the Germans had never handcuffed him.⁴⁴¹ Brijpal clearly used his status as veteran to exert moral authority and demand respectful treatment by the police.

Besides direct action, there was also the indirect political influence through the role the military had played in the various war theatres, not in the least in Europe. This had brought to many Indians a sense of pride which enhanced self-confidence. Britain had needed India and India had responded with financial, material and above all human resources. The sense of strength, dignity and hope, especially in the nationalist leaders

⁴³⁸ Anand MR. (2014) *Across the Black Waters*, London: Shalimar Books. p. 36.

⁴³⁹ Now the site of the most (in)famous border crossing between India and Pakistan.

⁴⁴⁰ The Akali Movement or Gurdwara Reform Movement was a campaign to bring all Sikh Gurdwaras under unified control. The movement also supported the struggle for Indian independence.

⁴⁴¹ Ahuja R. (2010) The corrosiveness of comparison : reverberations of Indian wartime experiences in German prison camps (1915-1919). In: Liebau H, Bromber K, Lange K, et al. (eds) *The world in world wars : experiences, perceptions and perspectives from Africa and Asia*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 131-166. p. 143-4 & 165; Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 49-50.

was further fortified by the unity the opposition now displayed.⁴⁴² This unity was somewhat of a reflection of what had happened in the regiments who had been deployed overseas where Indian groups who normally never would have mixed, got to know each other better, developed a sense of brotherhood and started identifying themselves with each other. According to S.D. Pradhan the war in this way worked as “a catalyst for the growth of nationalism”.⁴⁴³ Yet, within the British Raj, some war veterans reacted quite differently and became or remained pillars of the British imperial rule: still in the Punjab retired officers were active in associations carrying out pro-government propaganda, such as organising meetings and lectures to counter the nationalist opposition. That some sided with the British is not surprising, knowing that they and their relatives were entitled to preferential treatment in Punjab government appointments and that many had received allotments in the newly developed canal colonies.⁴⁴⁴

Apart from politics, (ex-)soldiers could also lead their communities in other domains: according to Prof. KC Yadav of the Haryana Academy of History and Culture “a wave of education was started immediately after the 1st World War which had an impact on architecture, language and health”.⁴⁴⁵ Commemorative tablets on schools such as the Jat School in Rohtak, witness of financial support by groups of soldiers to educational institutions in Haryana. It proves not only that communities could profit from the financial gain to be won by serving in the war, but also that soldiers were prepared to invest in the common good. The fact that they did so in educational institutions is particularly significant, considering the high level of illiteracy prevailing in India then. Another example is Darwan Singh Negi who upon the receipt of his Victoria Cross in the Indian hospital in Brighton made the special request to the King that a school in his native Garhwal Hills would be started. Eventually the Uttarakhand War Memorial Secondary School (उत्तराखण्ड युद्ध स्मारक माध्यमिक विद्यालय) was realised in Karn Prayag, the town nearest to his

⁴⁴² Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD. (1978) *India and World War 1*, New Delhi: Manohar. p. 12.

⁴⁴³ Pradhan SD. (1978) The Sikh Soldier in the First World War. In: Ellinwood DC and Pradhan SD (eds) *India and World War I*. New Delhi: Manohar, 213-225. p. 222.

⁴⁴⁴ Omissi D. (1994) *The Sepoy and the Raj : the Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. p. 69-71.

⁴⁴⁵ From the papers presented by Prof. K.C. Yadav at the India in the Great War conferences at New Delhi (5-7 March 2014) and Ypres (24-25 October 2014).

remote hill village. With less success he also campaigned for the construction of a railway to his village.⁴⁴⁶

In India's 'tribal' North East we see veterans taking up a somewhat different leading role: both in Mizoram and in Nagaland, ex-servicemen of the Indian Labour Corps were instrumental in establishing a tribal and regional groupness,⁴⁴⁷ rather than supporting Indian nationalism. When the Mizos returned home in July 1918, they received a hero's welcome all along the route to the principal settlement of Aizawl. Their participation in the war was generally considered a success: out of the 2100 Mizos who had left for France, only 71 had died and the returnees had brought with them a wealth of information about the outside world. But most important of all, it had created a sense of unity and boosted their self-esteem: they had held their own in challenging and alien circumstances, they had observed that their British headmen, which included missionaries and a former Superintendent of Zoram, had supported them, and they had experienced how Europeans in France had compared them favourably to other people from the Indian subcontinent. And as other Indians, they had also noticed how the French "*although they are white [...] do not look down on dark people [and] welcome us when we visited their homes*".⁴⁴⁸ For the Mizos, their involvement in the First World War was an important landmark that would be commemorated as the first time they acted on the world stage. Remembering their engagement in the Great War played a significant role in the Mizo nation-building process, which would ultimately cumulate in the achievement of Union Territory status (1972) and statehood (1987) within the Republic of India.⁴⁴⁹ Some Mizo war veterans would assume a leading role in their local society, such as the former war labourer, Sainghinga, who was not only honoured throughout his long life, but also became an active member of the Pawi-Lakher Regional Council.

⁴⁴⁶ Basu S. (2015) *For King and Another Country. Indian Soldiers on the Western Front. 1914-18*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury. p. 191.

⁴⁴⁷ Defined by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper as: "the tendency to treat ethnic groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed". Contrary to a reified term as 'identity' groupness has a variable and contingent character which implies that there are moments of extraordinary cohesion and of intensely felt collective solidarity. Groupness can be treated as an event, as something that happens, rather than as something constant and enduring. To Brubaker and Cooper, the important questions are when and how people identify themselves and perceive others in ethnic or national terms, insights that are particularly relevant for a study examining subordinate groups in a momentum such as the Great War. Brubaker R and Cooper F. (2000) Beyond "Identity". *Theory and Society* 29: 1-47.

⁴⁴⁸ Pachuau JLK and van Schendel W. (2015) *The Camera as Witness. A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press. p. 194-7.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 361-2.

And just over 200 kilometers to the north, among the tribes of the Naga Hills, we see to a large extent the same evolution: the Nagas in the Indian Labour Corps who had gone to France had set aside internal feuds and had begun to identify with a common Naga groupness, something they wished to perpetuate upon their return in 1918. To this end, the Naga Club was founded, an organisation which apart from returned labourers included other leading Nagas as well as British officials. Its goals were primarily social: to work for the welfare of the people, but also political: to foster unity among the Nagas. But while the vast majority of Indians were moving into the direction of Swaraj under the leadership of Gandhi, the Nagas were moving in a different direction : isolated from the rest of India, there were no contacts between Indian nationalists and the Naga Hills, which were kept out the provincial legislature. Grievances and problems were presented directly to the British government through the Naga Club. When the Simon Commission, who had to study constitutional reform for India, visited the Naga Hills' capital Kohima in January 1929, the Nagas demanded to be considered a separate nation: "*[...] that our hills may be withdrawn from the Reformed Scheme and placed outside the reforms but directly under the British Government. You are the only people who have ever conquered us and when you go, we should be left alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times*".⁴⁵⁰ The British obliged and when the Government of India Act was passed in 1935 the whole Naga areas were designated as "Naga Hills Excluded Area". In the run up to Indian independence in 1946, the veteran dominated Naga Club transformed itself into the Naga National Council keeping to its original views. Eventually, it was somewhat reluctantly integrated in India, attaining statehood within the republic as Nagaland in 1962.

It is, however, not easy to explain the different and rather positive evaluation of their wartime service by these two small ethnic polities. Both consisted (and still consist) of quite isolated tribal communities who were either already tight-knit (Mizo) or were brought together through their wartime service (Naga). They had been able to serve together during a relatively short period, never being dispersed as many other ethnic groups. And as labourers, they had not only suffered relatively fewer casualties, but they had also perceived the British and European attitudes towards them as rather benign. And finally, in the immediate post-war, they did not experience the same brutal repression as the Indian 'heartlands' and rather than opposing their British overlords, worked

⁴⁵⁰ Quoted in Venuh N. (2005) *British colonization and restructuring of Naga polity*, New Delhi: Mittal. p.57-8.

together with them in or through partly veteran-dominated organisations. These case-studies from the Northeast of the subcontinent prove that a too univocal judgment of the impact of the Indian war experience should be avoided, but at the same time confirm the observation that the passage in Europe had enhanced self-awareness and groupness.

We have seen that by and large there were three groups of Indian units present in Western Europe: Indian Infantry Divisions (October 1914-October 1915), Indian Cavalry (October 1914-March 1918) and Indian Labour (April 1917-March 1920). Each of these groups resided for a considerable length of time among the local population. The friendliness and camaraderie between the French and the Indians was a cause of concern for the colonial authorities, because in France as opposed to England, no attempts have been made to segregate the Indians from the locals. Despite their unease, the British authorities were convinced that the encounter between East and West would not have lasting influences. Yet, as I have made clear throughout this chapter: residing in Europe and meeting French (and Belgian) civilians did have a profound effect on the Indian rank and file. Through their war experience they had gained insights they had been lacking before, and this new sense of self urged at least a number of the returning veterans to take up leading roles in their home communities, either in the domain of education, or in the domain of groupist policies, be they nationalist or regionalist/tribalist, or even imperialist. Had they not served abroad, and had they never been acquainted with life in Europe nor met with their European fellow-humans, it is very doubtful if they would ever have chosen this path.

II. The Chinese Labour Corps

While the 1911 census had listed no more than 283 Chinese residing in France⁴⁵¹ and the Belgian statistic yearbook for 1913 recorded 111 resident Chinese nationals,⁴⁵² from 1917 to 1919 some 140,000 Chinese were brought to the Western Front, of whom nearly 96,000 worked in British service. It was not only the greatest non-European contingent serving the war effort on the Western Front, but also beyond doubt the greatest influx of Chinese ever into Europe. Still, it is amazing how relatively unknown this participation in the Great War remains. Though a substantial number of some 40,000 Chinese workers were recruited by the French, in this chapter I will concentrate on those who served in the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC), the name that was given to their unit in the British Army and which worked along the lines of communication, from the Channel ports to the front, only referring to the Chinese recruited by the French for the sake of comparison or when differentiation is not an issue.⁴⁵³

Unlike the men from the Indian subcontinent discussed in the earlier chapter, no Chinese were in Europe to fight. Though a small number had been professional soldiers in China, they were here to toil, working behind the front in the later years of the war and in the immediate post-war period. In this respect, their presence and the nature of their duties bear many similarities to the Indian Labour Corps. Yet, unlike the Indians, the Chinese were not subjects of the British Empire, even if they were serving in the British army. It is an important difference : the Indians were part of

⁴⁵¹ Live Y-S. (1994) *Chinois de France: un siècle de présences de 1900 à nos jours* [Vitry-sur-Seine]: Ed. Mémoire Collective. p. 7.

⁴⁵² Anon. (1914) *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo belge. Quarante-quatrième année - 1913*, Bruxelles: Ministère de l'Intérieur.p. 65.

⁴⁵³ The Chinese labourers working in French service had quite a different status and experience than those working for the British: not being employed by the army but by private companies, they would be found all over France, working in factories, docks, warehouses, mines or forestry work. Only a relatively small number was working for the army, usually behind the front. Even if they were supervised by officers, they were neither militarised nor subject to military law as their British counterparts. And while the latter were repatriated from mid-1919 onwards with the last boat leaving in March 1920, the last repatriation organised by the French government happened nearly two years later, in February 1922. Not a minor difference is that the Chinese recruited by the French had the opportunity to stay in France, which was denied to those in British service. Some 2,000 did so and the last survivor died in 2002 in La Rochelle, aged 105. See: Ma L. (2012) La "Mission Truption" et les travailleurs chinois en France. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 51-90. p. 76-81.

the same broad polity that was the British Empire and this implied a certain notion of loyalty, even if we can question its degree. Their subordination was an integral part of this polity. The Chinese, however, were also considered subordinate and treated alike, despite their being subjects of what was, at least on paper, a sovereign country. After the two Opium Wars, the Chinese-Japanese War, the Boxer Rising and many other conflicts in the long 19th century, China's integrity and sovereignty was indeed heavily jeopardised. Hong Kong and Taiwan had been annexed by Britain and Japan, and not less than fourteen foreign powers⁴⁵⁴ held all together some thirty concessions or leased territories, of which some jointly, where they enjoyed extraterritoriality. Moreover, the *Middle Kingdom* was paying huge war indemnities and had to allow foreign control over its customs and a high level of foreign influence in its government.⁴⁵⁵ In the years immediately preceding the First World War, foreign interests owned 84 percent of all steamer shipping, 90 percent of coal production, 93 percent of railroads and 100% of iron ore and pig iron production.⁴⁵⁶ This country, which Mao rightfully called a "semi-colony",⁴⁵⁷ had just become a fragile and unstable republic in 1912.

Another major difference between the Indian contingents and the Chinese Labour Corps was the latter's socio-cultural homogeneity. Whereas the Indian component on the Western Front was socio-culturally and linguistically nearly as diverse as the Indian subcontinent, almost all Chinese labourers were Han sharing the same culture, hailing from the same polity and all speaking Mandarin, be it in many dialects and regional variations.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, due to China's long history as a political unit, its

⁴⁵⁴ Britain, Japan, France, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Italy, the United States, Spain, Denmark, Holland, Sweden and Norway.

⁴⁵⁵ Ma L. (2012) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*, Paris: CNRS Editions., Introduction, p. 20-3.

⁴⁵⁶ Hou C-m. (1965) *Foreign investment and economic development in China, 1840-1937*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 127-8.

⁴⁵⁷ Bailey PJ. (2009) Chinese Contract Workers in World War I: The Larger Context. In: 张建国 张张 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 / *Zhongguo lao gong yu di yi ci shi jie da zhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社, Jinan Shi : Shandong da xue chu ban she, 3-18. p. 18.

⁴⁵⁸ Much more than with the Indian contingents, for whom nearly all sources are in English, language is an issue when writing on the Chinese Labour Corps and not reading Chinese is a major handicap. As a consequence I was not able to include and assess many publications in Chinese, lacking the necessary linguistic skills to do so. I accept it is an important shortcoming for a historian of the Chinese Labour Corps who declares to have an interest in the individual war experiences of its members. I have tried to overcome that deficiency not only by using translated material, but also by involving friends-colleagues, both Chinese and Belgian, who have mastered Mandarin. And I do express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Philip Vanhaelemeersch 冯

people strongly identified with their culture, deemed politically and morally superior over that of their neighbours, a phenomenon that scholarship has coined 'culturalism' rather than nationalism.⁴⁵⁹ The term 'culturalism' is apt as China did not see itself as a 'nation', at least not until the revolution of 1912: there was no national flag and no constitution defining citizens' rights. All lands under heaven were considered to belong to the emperor who ruled over all human beings. As such there was no idea of an international system, let alone China's place in it. As Xu Guoqi argued, this would only change with China's entry in the First World War.⁴⁶⁰

This chapter has six sections:

- The historiographical section presents an overview and assessment of what has until now been written on the Chinese Labour Corps. Even more than with the Indian presence on the Western Front, the Chinese labourers have been largely absent from the history of the First World War for decades. The emergence of the subject, mainly since the beginning of the new millennium, is clearly linked to China's reappearance on the international stage as a major economic and political power. Yet, unlike the historiography of the Indian contingents, important different accents are to be noted between the western and the Chinese view of the subject. This tension can also be observed in the domain of public history. The main question in writing history of the Chinese labourers of the First World War remains in how far the Chinese Labour Corps was an important factor, not only in the evolution of the war itself, but also in the coming of age of a new, modern and republican China. Did the CLC have an impact on the development of a new China, and if yes, to what degree? As sending out the CLC had everything to do with China's position in the world, the impression the labourers made on the locals, something never treated before, is of importance. Similarly, the war experience of the individual labourers and the interpreters - an important body of

浩烈, director of the Confucius Institute at Howest, Bruges, and Zhang Yan 张岩, History Department, Chinese University of Hong Kong without whom writing this chapter would have been impossible. I've opted to use the Chinese names in East Asian style, with the surname first and the personal name second. For the transliteration of Chinese words, I use the standard pinyin system.

⁴⁵⁹ Wang E. (1999) History, Space and Ethnicity: the Chinese World View. *Journal of World History* 10: 285-305. p. 295-6; Harrison H. (2000) Newspapers and Nationalism in Rural China 1890-1929. *Past & Present*: 181-204. p. 182.

⁴⁶⁰ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 26.

intellectuals within the CLC- has been obscured or downplayed until now. I give it central stage.

- To better understand the subordinated position of the CLC, it is necessary to sketch the larger context of their engagement within the British army on the Western Front. Being non-British subjects and non-military, it is important to establish not only who joined the CLC but also what the terms of their contract was. Being - intentionally?- all too brief, some of its terms, and especially the stipulation that the labourers would not be engaged in 'military operations' would be a source of friction, as was their militarisation within a British army unit. In such a setting, the quality of the officers and the ability to communicate with them was of the uttermost importance, yet it is precisely in these matters that we can observe shortcomings. Reacting against these and other abuses the Chinese labourers gave proof of quite a degree of agency. As with the Indian Labourers an important role has been attributed to the YMCA and the missionaries attached to the CLC, yet there were also proper Chinese initiatives to support the labourers. All would be instrumental in enhancing the noticeably growing self-awareness of the members of the CLC.
- No non-European group has been so often described in Flemish witness accounts as the Chinese Labour Corps and that is the subject of the third section of this chapter. But rather than just analysing what has been written by locals on the CLC, I will equally investigate the phenomenon of the remarkable shift in opinions on the Chinese. As long as the hostilities were ongoing, the prevailing local attitudes towards the CLC were mildly positive with a certain degree of curiosity and compassion. Yet, after the armistice the returning population in Flanders heavily distrusted the Chinese and the CLC was blamed for a whole series of crimes, resulting in their lasting very negative image in the Flanders. It has never been questioned why did this occur. Was it merely a question of blaming the 'Other' for all that went wrong or was there more to it? The question is important as it casts light on phenomena such as scapegoating, the persistence of 'bad press' and how the representation of a non-European group comes into being. By bringing in new sources and adding a shift through time, I will assess this long-standing negative view of the Chinese Labour Corps in Flanders.
- Establishing how the Chinese labourers experienced the war in Europe is less easy than in the Indian case by sheer lack of sources. For the CLC we

do not possess a rich source as the reports by the censor and extracts of their letters. Even more so, with an estimated illiteracy rate of some 80 % very few left us memoirs. Perforce, this section of the chapter will be based on the restricted number of memoirs available, in full awareness that we lack the voices of the bulk of the Chinese rank and file. Two memoirs are at the core of this section: those of interpreter Gu Xingqing and the elaborate and extraordinary reminiscences of Sun Gan who served as an ordinary labourer despite being educated.⁴⁶¹ In spite of Sun Gan not being an archtypical CLC-member, I will draw heavily from his memoirs, as he offers a rare but also very honest insight into the mentality and the experiences of the Chinese, coming from someone who after all was much closer to the labourers than the interpreters. The writings of Gu and Sun are complemented not only with what little other fragments of memoirs that could be found (and that has been translated in a western language) but also with material sources such as trench art. Based on this corpus, I consider how their war service changed the labourers: what impression they got from Europe and how these experiences transformed the way they looked upon China as well as their self-understanding.

- In the fifth section, I will question how their European adventure influenced the lives of the CLC members. As both physical wounds and combat stress are not confined to those who actually were in combat, many labourers did not leave Europe unscathed: some died, others got maimed, while many others were psychically harmed by the war. At the same time we see how the exhortations for self-respect which according to its authors would lead to an enhanced respect for the Chinese and thus for China, was internalised: in songs, poems and other utterings the labourers expressed how they represented what they now saw as their nation, the Chinese republic. Back in China, some were able to improve the lot of their families and villages through the money they had saved or through the adaptation of new technologies they had become acquainted with, while some others relapsed into poverty. Yet, while western technical skills are copied, it can also be noticed how the returned labourers' respect for western culture and christianity as its emanation, was abated.
- The Chinese Labour Corps has not been able to leave a direct mark on China's future, as I argue in the final section. The international status of

⁴⁶¹ Both memoirs have been translated into Dutch by Dr. Philip Vanhaelemeersch and were published in that language in 2010 and 2017 respectively.

the country had not improved through the deployment of the Chinese labourers in Europe. Mostly returning to their native villages, the labourers were hardly able to manifest themselves as a group and their impact on the emergence of a labour movement seems to have been minimal. They did, however, have an important indirect influence on many of those who would make the New China, including future political leaders and prominent educators.

On the historiography of the Chinese Labour Corps

“If anybody ever undertakes the task of writing a history of the CLC, it will be one of the most human documents possible, granted that the writer has the necessary vein of humour and appreciation of incidents which would not find their way into an official despatch”, thus wrote the North China Herald on 8 November 1919. Despite the brevity of this remark, it contains quite some truth. “If anybody ever”, the journalist wrote and few indeed were the historians who felt inclined to study the CLC. In this respect, the historiography of the Chinese Labour Corps shows a pattern bearing some similarities as well as some differences to that on the Indians. The main resemblance is that of a very long silence that lasted decades. The emergence of the Chinese Labour Corps as an object of study is even more recent than that of the Indians on the Western Front. Obviously in the intermediate period there was the odd work of scholarship, but generally speaking the presence of some 140,000 Chinese in France and Belgium during the war was entirely forgotten until some 15 years ago.

What then, explains this long silence and the (re)emergence of the subject ?

On the European side, we can point out that unlike the Indians, all Chinese were labourers and as we have noticed with the Indian Labour Corps, as such by many not deemed worthy of a serious study, let alone a unit history. So, unlike the regiments of the Indian infantry and Cavalry, we do not encounter something like a regimental history of the corps. Moreover, as the members of the Chinese Labour Corps bar the British officers assigned to them were not subjects of the British Empire, there was less a need to involve them in an imperial project of remembrance. The Imperial War Graves Commission would keep honouring the CLC-dead in making

their burial places permanent and maintaining these, but until very recently, it was never considered that a memorial be erected to these workers.⁴⁶² As said, they were only hired labour and not even subjects of the Empire.⁴⁶³ Apart from this there is a general lack of sources on the Chinese Labour Corps and the little what is available is quite fragmented. Such a situation is obviously discouraging for any historical research. One telling example: for only one of the companies of the Chinese Labour Corps, the 4th, has a war diary been preserved, be it only for the month of May 1917.⁴⁶⁴ As the war diaries are the day-by-day reports of a unit, the consequence is that it is nigh impossible to establish where a particular company has been working, at what time, what the nature of the work was, nor any other events related to that group's service. And last but not least there is the linguistic (and political) issue: ideally the historian of the Chinese Labour Corps should master English and Chinese and in the best of all possible worlds even French and Dutch (to include local sources from the 'host countries').

From a Chinese perspective, history has not been kind for the Chinese labourers of the First World War. The main reason the Chinese government had agreed to the recruitment of labourers was to have a stake in a future peace conference. Yet, in Paris in 1919, China did not get what it had wished for (and what it rightfully claimed) and the country was once more humiliated. In reaction the May 4th Movement emerged, a drive for national regeneration which included well-known figures such as the author Lu Xun and that would heavily influence both the Guomindang and the Communist Party. According to Rana Mitter in his acclaimed *A Bitter Revolution*,⁴⁶⁵ the May Fourth Movement and the closely related but wider New Culture Movement were the defining events of China's 20th century and at the very origins of the country's painful transition from a premodern society into a hi-tech superpower. In

⁴⁶² The Chinese memorial in front of the Chinese plot in Saint-Etienne-au-Mont Communal Cemetery was erected by the CLC-members themselves in 1919. In 1998 a plaque was put up in Paris' Chinese Quarter (Jardin Baudricourt, 13th arrondissement), followed some years later by a smaller plaque in Ypres' Saint George's Memorial Church. It was only on 15 November 2017 that a larger memorial park including two groups of sculptures was inaugurated at Visserijmolenstraat in Poperinghe (near the site of a former CLC camp and cemetery), followed on 10 December 2017 by a smaller memorial in Arras' Jardins du Palais Saint-Vaast. At the time of writing, the project for a CLC Memorial in London was entering its final stage.

⁴⁶³ Obviously, the same could be said of the Chinese workers in French service.

⁴⁶⁴ TNA, WO 95/4174/10, "Lines of Communication Troops. 4 Company Chinese Labour Corps, War Diary, May 1917".

⁴⁶⁵ Mitter R. (2005) *A bitter revolution : China's struggle with the modern world*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

other words: the events in China overshadowed the Chinese toiling 'expeditionary force' that had been sent out to represent the new republic in the World War. In scholarly works on the Chinese stand at the 1919 Peace Conference and on the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese Labour Corps usually gets only a passing mention, not seldom with wrong figures as to its strength.⁴⁶⁶ And this persisted for the remainder of the 20th century: since 1919 China in succession went through a period of warlords and competing governments in a fragmented country (until 1928), a nominal unification under the Guomindang (1928), a series of armed conflicts between the nationalists and the communists (1927-1935), Japanese invasions and occupations in Northern China (1931-32), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Civil War (1946-49), the establishment of the People's Republic (1949), the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-61) with the Great Chinese Famine, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).⁴⁶⁷ By then no one did remember the existence of a Chinese Labour Corps in the First World War apart from the former labourers and their families. But even in these personal cases history had not been kind. When asking family members of Chinese labourers who served in the First World War about souvenirs, not seldom the answer is something along the lines of: "due to events in the past, we have lost these", the "events in the past" more often than not being the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁶⁸

Besides often just passing mentions in published war memoirs and diaries, the first publication which paid considerable attention to the Chinese Labour Corps was an elaborate report on Chinese overseas labour commissioned by the United States' Department of Labor and written by the sociologist Chen Da 陈达.⁴⁶⁹ As Chen had been studying at Columbia University from 1916 onwards, some of his information was probably

⁴⁶⁶ Manela E. (2007) *The Wilsonian moment : self-determination and the international origins of anticolonial nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 107, for instance, states China "contributed some 200,000 laborers to the Allied war effort in the European theater".

⁴⁶⁷ Anon. (2010) *Quick Access to Chinese History. From Ancient Times to the 21st Century*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press. ; Mitter R and Pieke FN. (2014) *Modern China*, Amsterdam: AUP.

⁴⁶⁸ At least one returnee, He Licai 何立才, is even known to have committed suicide after he was accused during the Cultural Revolution for having travelled abroad. The only time he had done so was in 1917 with the CLC. See: Zhang Y 张. (2010) 《一战华工的归国境遇及其影响：基于对山东华工后裔（或知情者）口述资料的分析》. 《华侨华人历史研究》 *Overseas Chinese History Studies*: 54-61. p. 56 & 60.

⁴⁶⁹ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office.

obtained directly from fellow Chinese students who had served with the YMCA in France.

While generally too easily forgotten from the 1920s onwards, the memory of the Chinese Labour Corps surfaced briefly in the late 1930s and in the late 1960s. In the late 1930s both China and Europe faced the threat of Fascist onslaught, and this urged some to remember the worldwide coalition 'to resist militarism' in the Great War. It was indeed remembering, rather than scholarly history writing: Gu Xingqing⁴⁷⁰, who served as an interpreter with the CLC, published his memoirs with the explicit purpose to prepare his fellow-countrymen for a modern war, while the West was to recall how China once had sided its allies.⁴⁷¹

And in 1968, not coincidentally a year in which China was pretty much on the fore not in the least in France, Annie Kriegel published an article on the "French origins of Chinese communism".⁴⁷² In it, this leading historian on communism⁴⁷³ investigated in how far the roots of Chinese communism were to be found in the Chinese presence in France around the Great War: the labourers recruited by the French and British governments on the one hand, and the students brought to France (and Belgium) in the *Diligent Work-Frugal Study* program, including later CPC leaders Li Fuzhun, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaopeng on the other hand. Yet, Kriegel was not able to demonstrate a direct link between the Chinese labourers and the Chinese students and the question as to contacts and influences between labourers and (communist) students still remained and remains pretty open.

In that long period between the 1920s and the late 1990s, the only work in English on the Chinese Labour Corps available outside the academia was Michael Summerskill's rather descriptive in-house published *China on the Western Front*, a book that unfortunately lacked proper footnotes and only used English-language sources.⁴⁷⁴ It was, however, an important publication as for over two decades it was the only book on the CLC available to the public and known to First World War specialists.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁰ 顧杏卿. (1937) 《欧战工作回忆录》 *Ouzhan gongzuo huiyilu [Memoirs of my Work in the European War]*, 长沙 Changsha: 商务印书馆 Shangwu yinshuguan [Commercial Press].

⁴⁷¹ Wou P. (1939) *Les travailleurs Chinois et la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Pedone.

⁴⁷² Kriegel A. (1968) Aux origines françaises du communisme chinois. *Preuves* 18: 25-40.

⁴⁷³ and the sister and aunt of the leading First World War historians Jean-Jacques and Annette Becker.

⁴⁷⁴ Summerskill M. (1982) *China on the Western Front. Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War*, London: Michael Summerskill.

⁴⁷⁵ Even the well known and well acclaimed books by John Horne on the mobilisation of labour in the First World War failed to mention the 140,000 strong Chinese labour force (nor any other 'colonial' work force). Horne J. (1991) *Labour at war : France and Britain*,

It is only at the turn of the millennium that new publications on the Chinese labourers in the First World War would surface. His interest in Sino-French relationship drove sinologist and historian Paul J. Bailey to include the Chinese Labour Corps in his research, resulting in a number of articles of which the first were published in 2000.⁴⁷⁶ A pioneer in the field, he keeps the middle ground between a 'British', 'French' and 'Chinese' perspective on the subject. And after having published a short article on Chinese cemeteries in France and Belgium⁴⁷⁷, Brian Fawcett, an amateur-historian with a personal connection to China, had a lengthy overview of the CLC's deeds in France and Belgium published in the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.⁴⁷⁸ The contributions of Bailey and Fawcett were a prelude to a modest boom of scholarly writings on the Chinese Labour Corps a decade later. The new role that China now plays on the international stage, not only enhances the interest of westerners in that still relatively lesser known polity that represents one fifth of the world's population, but it also turns historians both in the East and in the West to investigate earlier periods when China had taken up a role in the international community.

In China, the episode of the First World War is now rather considered as a period in which the country engaged with the world at large. The Chinese labourers are now seen as active contributors in a struggle against militarist aggression and as actors in what was to become a new China.⁴⁷⁹ As Paul Bailey states: thus, the Chinese labourers transformed from 'coolies' into 'transnational agents'.⁴⁸⁰ This is also the view expressed by Xu Guoqi, the author of two standard works on China's involvement in the

1914-1918, Oxford: Clarendon Press. and Horne J. (1997) *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War. Studies in the social and cultural history of modern warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 292.

⁴⁷⁶ Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate.

⁴⁷⁷ Fawcett B. (1998) First World War Labour Corps Cemeteries in Flanders *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 38: 281-284.

⁴⁷⁸ Fawcett B. (2000) The Chinese Labour Corps in France 1917-1921. *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 40: 33-111.

⁴⁷⁹ This is in contradiction with the previous official Maoist view which, following Leninist thought, considered the war a clash between imperialist powers, all equally guilty to the slaughters. Those participating in it were minions serving the wrong cause.

⁴⁸⁰ Bailey PJ. (2012) Discipline, Résistance et "Face": le cas des Huagong (Travailleurs chinois d'outre-mer) durant la Première Guerre mondiale en France. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 247-264. p. 249.

First World War. In his *China and the Great War* Xu argued convincingly how the war was a vehicle for China's regeneration, renewal and transformation. In order to create a new national identity, however, China needed 'citizens' who participated in public life.⁴⁸¹ In this respect he sees the labourers as "the first wave of new Chinese participation in world affairs and the vanguard of China's new national identity",⁴⁸² something he further elaborated in *Strangers on the Western Front*.⁴⁸³ Xu demonstrates how to a great extent the labourers played a crucial role in (re-)shaping Chinese elites' perceptions of China and thus changed the course of Chinese history. In this respect, Xu is not only a Chinese historian, he is also a historian of China. Rather than the First World War, or China's role in the international community, he is examining how China itself was transformed through the war and through the Chinese Labour Corps.

Gregory James⁴⁸⁴ wrote the both literally and figuratively hard to overlook 1285 pages of *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*.⁴⁸⁵ While not being entirely apologetic, he tends to put the use of Chinese Labour in the First World War more into perspective from a particular British point of view, for instance stressing the tradition of hiring Chinese labour by the British military as had happened in the Crimean and South African War, or looking at the harsh treatment the Chinese Labourers at the Western Front received from the point of view of the British military. Exemplary for this stand is his consideration that "*the authorities can [...] be held guilty of excessive violence to compel order within the ranks of the corps*" while adding that "*It has to be accepted that within the context of the time, and*

⁴⁸¹ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 11 & 28.

⁴⁸² Ibidem, p. 147.

⁴⁸³ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press.

⁴⁸⁴ Initially Hong Kong resident Gregory James visited all cemeteries where members of the CLC were buried, compared the data on the graves with those in the CWGC registers and with data gathered in British archives (especially the medal roll index). This enabled him not only to establish that some 2,100 Chinese died in British service but also to compile an overview of all the names, their places of commemoration and other available personal information : James G. (2006) *Chinese casualties in the Chinese Labour Corps (April 1917-March 1920)*. Kowloon, xvi + 619. His huge effort will have a lasting importance, both practically and scholarly. He not only remedied the problem that it was nigh impossible for Chinese to retrace a particular individual who died in service as the War Graves Commission had only registered European transcriptions of the Chinese names, but his database also enables to see from which districts labourers were hailing from, or what the causes of death were, to name just some the possibilities.

⁴⁸⁵ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational .

with a colonial mentality of repression, those responsible saw no alternative to aggressive action".⁴⁸⁶ Gregory James clearly wanted to put things straight, namely the facts that have been misinterpreted, in particular by Chinese historians. Yet, his interpretations of sources - and it can't be said enough that probably no one else has gone through so many of them - often lack a certain critical attitude and at times he does not differentiate between primary and secondary sources.⁴⁸⁷ All too often he takes British sources for granted, not reading against the grain. And even while I certainly acknowledge that Gregory James had the sincere intention to draw a balanced sketch of the Chinese Labour Corps, unconsciously he seems to apply double standards to assess Chinese sources and British sources.⁴⁸⁸ Nevertheless, his book will forever remain a must-have for anyone who has an interest in the Chinese Labour Corps: not only for the huge amount of sometimes lengthy quotes, but also for the near exhaustive bibliography (including an overview of sources) which at least for the western side is an excellent starting point for every future scholar of the CLC .

Not only the different Chinese and western perspectives in history writing but also the involvement of politics are the main dissimilarities with the re-emergence of the Indians in the First World War as a field of study, especially when it concerns public history. On the one hand, in the People's Republic, some more orthodox party officials still consider the Chinese Labour Corps as the involvement of a different, despicable China

⁴⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 524.

⁴⁸⁷ At times the book is detailed in the extreme on issues such as rates of pay and compensations (12 pages) or food (supply) (13 pages) so that interpretations are absent or obscured.

⁴⁸⁸ When James offers a large and detailed overview of criminal acts allegedly or proven to be committed by Chinese labourers against prisoners-of-war, civilians, military personnel and other members of the CLC (p. 585-618), he is of the opinion that the story of Chinese violence against prisoners-of-war might have a "grain of truth" as "the theme is recurrent" (p. 587), giving an overview of a number of such accounts, but not taking into account that this might have been a case of mythification or urban legends, for these bear some characteristics of urban legends: all the accounts on such violence he quotes have been written in English, either by British or Americans, they are all stories 'from hearsay' or later reminiscences, and while the stories in itself are quite similar (i.e. Chinese attacking Germans in retaliation for bombardments), the details as to time and place are each time different. He accepts, or at least publishes without any comment or assessment, a sergeant Tom Haigh's account of a revenge killing by a Chinese labourer in November 1917, adding that it is "a tale unsurprisingly not found elsewhere in the literature" (p. 593-4). Yet he dismisses the story of interpreter Gu Xingqing in his memoirs of the Chinese turning away at an interallied sports event when they find out their flag is not hoisted as "founded on a fricassee of loose tales, clouded by the two-decade interval between the events and the publication of his reminiscences" (p. 659).

in an imperialist war or as a period in the country's 'century of humiliation' and thus not worthy of much public attention, while other officials see it as a way to demonstrate how China did play a role internationally, even at times when it was not as strong as now.⁴⁸⁹ The result is that due to this ongoing debate support for projects might be refused. At the same time, it has been suggested that in France the sudden official attention for the Chinese graves in 2008 had much more to do with French cultural diplomacy than with a genuine interest. It was no coincidence that Chinese relatives were flown in to pay their respects at the supposed grave of an ancestor in France, soon after the very eventful passage of the Olympic torch in Paris.⁴⁹⁰ And in China some claimed the story of the Chinese labourers had been commercialised "by the Belgian side" (i.e. the writer and In Flanders Fields Museum) for profit: "trying to cash in on this for tourism purposes and to gain better relations with China"⁴⁹¹, apparently not realising that both the museum and its personnel are publicly funded yet allowed to work independently and thus unable "to cash in".

None of the aforementioned authors has given the personal experiences of the Chinese in Europe and the local perspective on the Chinese a central place in their narratives. This is the main contribution I would like to make to the ever increasing body of scholarly writing on the Chinese Labour Corps. I will try to establish how the way the Chinese labourers (and interpreters) saw themselves, China, the West and the European Other has been transformed through their experiences in and immediately after the war. The nature of encounters with the local inhabitants amongst who they lived, as well as how they have been assessed by these locals is of particular interest. It allows us to appraise not only their personal experiences but also the lasting impression they left behind.

⁴⁸⁹ Personal communication by Xu Guoqi, 19 July 2012 at the *Whose Remembrance?* - workshop for historians, Imperial War Museum.

⁴⁹⁰ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2014) Chinezen in Poperinge en omstreken in... 1917. *Aan de Schreve* 44: 14-21. p. 21. This article had previously been published in 'China Vandaag', No.5/2009, available online on <http://www.chinasquare.be/dossiers/chinezen-in-poperinge-en-omstreken-in-...-1917/> (accessed 17 August 2016).

⁴⁹¹ Simpson P. (2010) Echoes of conflict. *South China Morning Post*. Sunday 12 September 2010 ed. Hong Kong. Available online on <http://www.scmp.com/article/724606/echoes-conflict> (accessed 17 August 2016).

Chinese labourers for Europe

In his memoirs gunner Alexander Paton of the 118th Siege Battery who served during the Third Battle of Ypres has little attention for the Chinese labourers working in the same area. But he remembered a large notice that had been erected in Reninghelst stating “Do not speak to the Chinese”. Under this official order, a soldier had laconically and wittily scribbled “who the hell can?”.⁴⁹² It is a humorous account that despite its shortness is illustrative for two characteristics that had a heavy impact on the Chinese labourers’ experience in Europe: the official British policy of segregation and the language issue. Yet, before elaborating on this, I must sketch more details on who they were, where they came from, how they ended up in Europe, and how they were organised, lived and worked.

Much has been published on the recruitment of the Chinese labourers, including the British and French motives for doing so and the long journey to Europe. It suffices here to refer to the most relevant literature.⁴⁹³ Yet, it is important to stress the reasons why the government of the young Chinese republic was keen on being actively involved in the war. According to Xu the push from within China to join the war was stronger than the pull from outside. Though the country remained officially neutral until August 1917, he considers this merely an expedient measure: China had been waiting till an opportunity arose.⁴⁹⁴ Already in 1915 government minister Liang Shiyi 梁士诒 (1869-1933) had developed his ‘labourers-as-soldiers scheme’: sending labourers would demonstrate the Chinese government’s goodwill towards the Allies and its ability to support the war effort. At the same time, Germany could not accuse China of violating its neutrality as the labourers would be hired through private companies. The plan would not only link the young republic with the international system, but Liang Shiyi also hoped the return of skilled workers from France would stimulate China’s industrial development. While France

⁴⁹² Paton AW. (1998) *Occasional Gunfire : Private War Diary of a Siege Gunner*, London: Bishop-Laggett. p. 121.

⁴⁹³ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 10-37 ; Ma L. (2012) La "Mission Trupitil" et les travailleurs chinois en France. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 51-90. ; Tan CGS. (2012) "Sans liaison ferroviaire": Weihai Wei et le Chinese Labour Corps. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 91-110.; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational ,p. 76-84, 144-151.

⁴⁹⁴ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 81-90.

accepted the Chinese offer quite easily and started its recruitment early in 1916, Britain was initially not at all keen on the idea. This, however, would change with the carnage of the Somme and the subsequent lack of manpower it faced. In the autumn of 1916 Great Britain started its recruitment campaign too.⁴⁹⁵

In practice China got involved in the war much earlier and much more directly when after a two month battle the German concession harbour of Qingdao in the province of Shandong was conquered by Japanese forces (with British support) on 7 November 1914. In January 1915 Japan had presented China with 'Twenty-One Demands' by which it wanted not only to confirm its position reached by military force, but also to expand its sphere of influence in China. A treaty was eventually signed in May 1915.⁴⁹⁶ It all made getting actively involved in the war more urgent and more important : if China wanted her full sovereignty returned, it absolutely had to be present at the peace conference which after that Great War would decide on the world's future.

So, gaining a place at the peace conference to free herself from Japanese domination was ultimately the main reason why China decided not only to send labourers to Europe, but also to break off relations (in March 1917) and to declare war (in August 1917) on the Central powers. Yet, even before the first British-employed Chinese labourer set foot in Europe, the country's fate at that peace conference had already been decided: a secret treaty, concluded between Britain and Japan on 21 February 1917 included the promise that the British would support Japanese demands over the German concession in Shandong at a future peace conference. Two weeks later, Japan concluded similar agreements with France and Russia. China was betrayed by its European allies even before its war effort truly started.⁴⁹⁷ In China itself, the disputes over the participation in

⁴⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 114-123; Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 182; Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 151.

⁴⁹⁶ Fenby J. (2014) *The siege of Tsingtao: The only battle of the First World War to be fought in East Asia.*, Melbourne e.a.: Penguin. p. 56; Xu G. (2017) *Asia and the Great War. A Shared History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 38-42.

⁴⁹⁷ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.179 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 168.

the war had exacerbated factionalism,⁴⁹⁸ encouraged warlordism and had led to civil war. As one contemporary decried it: the country experienced a “declaration of war abroad without fighting, and a fight at home without a declaration of war”.⁴⁹⁹

At first sight the obvious place of choice for the British to recruit Chinese labourers seems to be their colony Hong Kong and the neighbouring province of Guangdong. Yet the British Minister and the Governor of Hong Kong indicated that northern Chinese were more suitable as they were more adapted to the climate in Western Europe, ate farinaceous food, were easier to discipline and less malaria-infested.⁵⁰⁰ By consequence the vast majority of the British employed Chinese have been recruited in the Northeastern provinces of Zhili⁵⁰¹ (now Hebei) and Shandong⁵⁰², the latter counting for about 70% of the recruits. Interpreters and hospital assistants, of which there were some 500, could, however, come from every province in China.⁵⁰³

The recruits were generally between 20 and 40 years old, but also seem to have included young “boys of 14 to 18”, as well as “old farmers of fifty and sixty”.⁵⁰⁴ One man even claimed he was 87!⁵⁰⁵ The main condition for recruitment was their physical fitness. Most had not the faintest idea of where they would be heading, or what the war was about. Even in 1918, an American YMCA-man was told by one of the labourers in France that “*America entered the war because the Crown Prince of the United States has become engaged to one of the Princesses of France*”.⁵⁰⁶ The bulk of

⁴⁹⁸ There was much division between factions and regions on these matters. Sun Yat-sen, for instance, opposed the declaration of war.

⁴⁹⁹ Quoted in Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 203.

⁵⁰⁰ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 28.

⁵⁰¹ Zhili 直隸 was until 1928 the province which included major cities as Peking and Tientsin (Tianjin). It had an area of 115,000 square miles and a population of little more than 34 million (294 persons per square mile). After 1928 portions in the north were assigned to other provinces and the remainder was renamed Hebei.

⁵⁰² Shandong 山东 had an area of nearly 56,000 square miles supporting a population of nearly 31 million (550 persons per square mile).

⁵⁰³ Thompson E. (1920) The Chinese Labour Corps. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missions* 18: 313-321. p. 320.

⁵⁰⁴ Klein D. (1919) *With the Chinks*, London & New York: John Lane. p. 114 and 182.

⁵⁰⁵ McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p.198.

⁵⁰⁶ University of Minnesota, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, YMCA International work in China, Box 88, Folder 1: “The Chinese Labourer in France in Relation to the work of the

the Chinese labourers, some 80 %, could not read or write. This ignorance, while factually true, belies the sheer variety of backgrounds one could encounter within the corps. Sun Gan, himself a village teacher, estimated that about seventy percent of the labourers were farmers, ten percent workers, ten percent soldiers, seven percent artisans and the remaining three percent consisted of storytellers, actors, artists, intellectuals,...⁵⁰⁷ The reasons for joining up were diverse: besides the relatively high wages and short contract terms and unemployment at home, they also included seeking refuge from natural calamities and banditry, domestic disputes, curiosity and adventure or, for a small number of educated men, the wish to acquire knowledge and learn new skills. A majority seems to have been single or had siblings who could take care of their parents.⁵⁰⁸

Upon enlisting in China, the contract was read out to each recruit, his fingerprints were taken and a serial number attributed. That number was engraved on an armband which was subsequently riveted around the man's arm. He was from this point on known by this number, at least to the British. In the eyes of the recruiting authorities this was not only a way of ensuring that no one would take his place, but also that the wages due would be paid to the right person and his family (for a portion of the wage was paid to an allotted person in China). However, at the same time the labourer was deprived of his individuality. "*None of the Chinese had names, only a brass bracelet with a number on it*", so sergeant John Ward declared unwittingly, after explaining he called his batman by his number.⁵⁰⁹ Remarkably enough, while the English version of the contract used the pejorative but generally used term 'coolies', the Chinese equivalent used the term '*huagong*' 华工 which translates as (Chinese) labourers, reflecting the positive contribution Chinese officials hoped the Chinese labourers would make in enhancing China's

Young Men's Christian Association. Report to the International Committee of Young Men's Christian Association of North America of Special Mission of Dwight W. Edwards in France, April 13 - May 11th [1918], p.3.

⁵⁰⁷ 孙干. (2013) 《华工记》 *Huagong ji [Notes of a Chinese labourer]*, 天津 Tianjin: 社会科学出版社 Shehui Kexue Yuan chubanshe [Social Sciences Publishing House], section 213.

⁵⁰⁸ Zhang Y. (2016) The British Recruitment Campaign for the Chinese Labour Corps during the First World War and the Shandong workers' Motives to Enroll. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 19., p. 4 & 16.

⁵⁰⁹ Macdonald L. (1983) *Somme*, London: M. Joseph. p. 190-1 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 272.

international standing.⁵¹⁰ These two words, 'huagong' and 'coolies', could be emblematic for the different, even contrasting view of the Chinese and the British (or French) on the labour corps: while *huagong-labourer* implies a certain respectability and worthiness, the word 'coolie' is devoid of all dignity and merely served to dehumanise the Chinese workers.

In the contract it was stipulated that the labourer was (a) "*not [to] be employed in military operations*", (b) that the duration of employment was for "*three years, with liberty for employer to terminate contract after one year on giving six months' notice*" and (c) "*free food, clothing, housing, fuel, light and medical attendance*" would be provided.⁵¹¹ The whole contract was all too brief and unspecified - Xu labels it "intentionally misleading"⁵¹² - and these three regulations for instance would not only give rise to misunderstandings and erroneous expectations on behalf of the Chinese, but also allowed the British to interpret them in a very deliberate way. Concerning the promise of free food, clothing and housing, Wou Piontchong 吳本中, who published a booklet in 1939 clearly based on official reports that had been sent back to China, mentions that the 4th company at the eve of winter in 1917 still had not received greatcoats nor shoes while the 19th company was camped on a very unhealthy, boggy terrain lacking winter clothes and bathing facilities.⁵¹³ What food, clothing or housing was to be expected, was not made precise: was the food going to be Chinese or western, and what portions would be provided? And would the housing be in houses, huts or tents? The "liberty for employer to terminate contract after one year" would then again create the hope after the armistice of a swift return home. And what was meant with "not to be employed in military operations"? The Chinese were going to work for the British army at the front and were to be subject to shelling and aerial bombardments. And certainly after 14 August 1917 when China declared war on Germany, there was no official

⁵¹⁰ Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p.183; Bailey PJ. (2011) 'An army of workers': Chinese indentured labour in First World War France. In: Das S (ed) *Race, empire and First World War writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 35-52. p. 37 ; Bailey PJ. (2014) Chinese Labour in World War I France and the Fluctuations of Historical Memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14 362-382. p. 367-8.

⁵¹¹ Summerskill M. (1982) *China on the Western Front. Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War*, London: Michael Summerskill. p. 80-99.

⁵¹² Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 39.

⁵¹³ Wou P. (1939) *Les travailleurs Chinois et la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Pedone. p. 23-4.

insistence on the observance of this condition.⁵¹⁴ No official insistence on the observance, however, does not mean the contracting parties were no longer bound by it. This particular clause of the contract is a good case in point of how different the interpretations by Chinese and British historians can be. While Xu Guoqi on the one hand states: “... *from the day the laborers were recruited, France and Britain were not honest with them. They were promised [...] that they would not be sent to the battle zones. But many Chinese died from the hostile bombing, precisely because they worked near the front*”⁵¹⁵, Gregory James on the other hand, comments on this quote from Xu that: “*This is not, I submit a matter of “fact”. The Chinese were not sent to battle; the battle came to them*”.⁵¹⁶ It is all a matter of how you interpret “military operations”.

The Chinese embarked initially in the British leased territory of Weihai Wei, now Weihai, and later in Qingdao, and their shipping followed several routes. After the French ship Athos was torpedoed in the Mediterranean on 17 February 1917, killing 543 Chinese labourers recruited by the French⁵¹⁷, the course westbound over Suez was avoided and routes eastbound were preferred. For the British, the most common and practical voyage was: crossing the Pacific Ocean to the quarantine station in William Head on Vancouver Island, after passing through quarantine boarding a train in Vancouver and crossing Canada’s 5,000 kilometers from west to east, and in Halifax, St John or Montreal boarding a ship for Britain whence they would be moved to France.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁴ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 20.

⁵¹⁵ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 241.

⁵¹⁶ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 219.

⁵¹⁷ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2009) On the Recruitment of Chinese Labourers in Guangdong, the Athos Incident, and the Story of a Letter Never Delivered. In: 张建国 张张 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 / *Zhongguo lao gong yu di yi ci shi jie da zhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社, Jinan Shi : Shandong da xue chu ban she, 188-201. p.191-196.

⁵¹⁸ As Canada had a policy to remain a ‘white’ dominion, it usually levied a poll tax of \$500 per Chinese entering the country. This sum was waived on the condition that the Chinese were transported in heavily guarded sealed trains and that the transports took place in the uttermost secrecy. The latter measure obviously also helped not to attract the enemy’s attention to these important cross-atlantic shipments. Yet, not allowing the men to leave the train for a period of six days was inhumane, to say the least, but despite British protests to authorise a stop to stretch arms and legs periodically, the Canadian government remained adamant. Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 55-79; Peterson G. (2012) Sans nom, sans visage et top-secret: le transport de travailleurs du "Chinese Labour Corps" à travers le Canada. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en*

After an often trying journey, the point of arrival in France for all Chinese labourers, was the large base camp in Noyelles-sur-Mer, equally the site of No. 3 Native Labour General Hospital a.k.a. the Chinese hospital,⁵¹⁹ and the residence of Lt-Col Fairfax⁵²⁰, the experienced CLC's commander. It was here that the men were told for the first time that they were subject to British military law and would be supervised by British officers - something that had not been stipulated in the rather concise contract they had signed upon recruitment.⁵²¹ This militarisation came to many as a shock: "it gave me the feeling of finding myself in a thick fog. We had come here to work, but now we saw officers supervising labourers. It goes without saying that we were terror-stricken. Back in China I had never seen such a thing", Gu remembered.⁵²²

As the aforementioned name of the hospital already suggests, the Chinese were considered native, i.e. 'black' labour which had a lowly status. Being employed on fixed contracts, rather than enlisted in a military sense, they were subject to military discipline but not to summary punishments. In other words: in theory at least they could only be punished after a court martial. It is, however, doubtful whether this rule was scrupulously followed. In a lengthy description of Fairfax, dr. Stuckey⁵²³ who served in

France dans la Première Guerre mondiale. Paris: CNRS Editions, 111-130.; Maxwell JL. (2009) Essential Services: The Indispensable Roles of Canada and the Chinese Labour Corps during the First World War. In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 *Zhongguo laogong yu diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 75-81.; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 285-337.

⁵¹⁹ It officially changed name from Chinese General Hospital to No.3 Native Labour General Hospital in November 1917.

⁵²⁰ Bryan Charles Fairfax (1873-1950) had a strong Chinese connection: he had served in the Weihaiwei Regiment, had fought in the Boxer Rebellion and from 1904 to 1908 he had been 'Inspector of Chinese Labour in the Transvaal'. He drew on this experience to advise on the organisation of the CLC: James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 206.

⁵²¹ Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 163; Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 301; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 211-4.

⁵²² Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 50.

⁵²³ Edward Joseph Stuckey (1875-1952) was an Australian missionary doctor who accompanied a Chinese contingent and served in the Chinese hospital in Noyelles until March 1919. A typescript containing his letters from France is preserved at In Flanders Fields Museum: Fisher W. (2008) *Dr. Stuckey, gone with the coolies : the letters from Dr.*

the Chinese hospital in Noyelles, noted how he punished *“rough and ready in most cases - a smack on the face that jolts the man’s head half round and another on the other side to bring it back into position. [...] A man stealing an onion has the ‘cangue’ put around his neck with the inscription setting forth his crime and the onion tied close to his face.....”*, though he also acknowledged the C.O.’s sympathy and consideration of all under his care, realising *“that they are strangers in a strange land and often homesick”*.⁵²⁴

For some Chinese labourers, this subjection to military law would have drastic, even fatal consequences: in total fourteen labourers have been sentenced to death by British courts martial on the Western Front and eleven of these were confirmed, all for murder. One committed suicide before appearing before the firing squad, and the sentences of three others were commuted to penal servitude for life. In general, the Chinese were subject to a severer version of military justice, something proved not only by the relatively elevated number of death sentences, but also by an order from May 1919 that specified that the Suspension of Sentences Act, which allowed commanding officers to keep the convicted person in the field, did not apply to the Chinese: any convicted Chinese had to serve out his sentence.⁵²⁵

Still in Noyelles, where they stayed for at least 5 days before being dispatched to their allocated company, the Chinese were paraded for identification, whereby each labourer was again fingerprinted and these fingerprints were compared with the one on the contract in his possession. Besides a medical examination and the issue of clothing, the new arrivals were divided in three classes, according to their skills: the unskilled which formed the large majority, the ‘half-schooled’ who possessed certain skills or were more handy (of which there were some 5000 by early 1918) and finally the ‘European trained’ skilled labourers capable of handling modern tools (about 450 in early 1918). With the ‘half-schooled’ and skilled labourers specialised companies were composed. Eventually there would be 21 skilled companies, specialised in among other things forestry, port construction (Nos. 1,4 & 6 Cies) and railway maintenance (112 Coy). Two companies (Nos. 51 & 69 Cies) were

E.J. Stuckey concerning his work with the Chinese Labour Corp in France during 1917-1918. In Flanders Fields Museum, 208.

⁵²⁴ Fisher W. (2008) Dr. Stuckey, gone with the coolies : the letters from Dr. E.J. Stuckey concerning his work with the Chinese Labour Corp in France during 1917-1918. In Flanders Fields Museum, 208. p. 153. Also p. 174.

⁵²⁵ Oram G. (1998) *Worthless men : race, eugenics and the death penalty in the British Army during the First World War*, London Francis Boutle. p. 108.

assigned to the tank workshops in Erin⁵²⁶. This means some thousand Chinese were allowed to work on the British Empire's most secret weapon, a clear proof of the British trust in these men's capacities and reliance. A consequence of this allocation in companies upon arrival in Noyelles was that men who had never left their villages before and to whom the comrades with whom they had made the voyage to Europe had become very dear, were suddenly and to their great sorrow separated from each other.⁵²⁷ The unskilled workers were given a very wide range of tasks: loading and unloading material, digging rearguard trenches, building camps, shelters and other installations, building railroads, mending roads and even some agricultural work.

After the hostilities ceased on 11 November 1918, the nature of the work changed and the CLC was now used extensively on battlefield clearance. This means the men would not only clear the land for the local people, but also recover material that could be reused or sold for profit (such as rails, piping, copper, brass, sound timber,...). To that end salvage dumps were set up where petrol tins, rubber, old tyres, steel helmets, gas helmets etc... were sorted.⁵²⁸ According to *The Times* it was a contribution worth millions of pounds to the national wealth.⁵²⁹ As this kind of work also involved clearing ammunition, accidents were rife. Perhaps the grimdest task befell those Chinese allocated to Graves Registration Units for exhumation and reburial duties.⁵³⁰

In theory a company of the CLC, which consisted of a headquarter and 4 platoons, counted 500 men: 476 Chinese and 24 British. Among the Chinese personnel, there was nominally 1 interpreter-clerk, 5 'batmen'

⁵²⁶ BL, IOR, MSS EUR F 288/10, "The Chinese Labour Corps": a typescript report of 14 pages, written in Noyelles s/Mer on 24 March 1920, p. 3-6 ; Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 98 & 104 ; Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 154 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 397-402.

⁵²⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 51.

⁵²⁸ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 157.

⁵²⁹ *The Times*, 11 August 1919, p. 6.

⁵³⁰ The exhumation squads scanned the former battlefield looking for grass that was a vivid bluish green or, later, that was greenish black or grey - possible indications that a body was to be found near the surface. When digging up, the men not seldom had to grope for identity discs in rotting decomposing bodies. Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p.16.

serving the British Officers, and 470 'coolies' including one head-ganger and 31 gangers. The gangers were considered the intermediaries between the officers and the men: they received the assignment of the work and were responsible for its execution. This implied that the Chinese labourers were only indirectly commanded by white officers and NCOs (even if they spoke Mandarin). Being a ganger was not popular: it meant translating, interpreting and implementing the orders of the officers and seeing that quotas were met. On the one hand the British had to be careful that the ganger did not lose face with his men: if a ganger was publicly humiliated the men under him would refuse to obey his orders.⁵³¹ On the other hand, gangers often received the blame for unreasonable orders they passed on on behalf of the British, resulting in harassment and death threats uttered by their labourers or even murder attempts.⁵³² Just having one interpreter per company was another flaw in the organisation and proved insufficient in many cases: sometimes the British had to use pictures or had to make drawings to explain the labourers what they were supposed to do.⁵³³

As British personnel there should have been in each company a commander (captain or major), 4 subaltern officers (i.e. a lieutenant or 2nd lieutenant) for each of the platoons, one company sergeant-major, 8 sergeants (one for each of the two sections of each platoon) and 9 corporals (for the 8 sections + corporal-cook).⁵³⁴ The grades were easily sinicised to 'hafusai' (officer), 'sacemice' (sergeant-major) or 'kaopa' (corporal).⁵³⁵ It is, however, highly questionable whether there were many companies with a full British cadre. Especially in January 1919 there were "*serious reports in loss of efficiency in CLC companies due to the reductions*

⁵³¹ Griffin NJ. (1976) Britain's Chinese Labor Corps in World War I. *Military Affairs* 40: 102-108., p. 105.

⁵³² 孙干. (2013) 《华工记》 *Huagong ji [Notes of a Chinese labourer]*, 天津 Tianjin: 社会科学院出版社 Shehui Kexue Yuan chubanshe [Social Sciences Publishing House]. section 45, 105 & 162.

⁵³³ Ibidem, section 44 and 73.

⁵³⁴ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 147 ; Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 160-1.

⁵³⁵ 孙干. (2013) 《华工记》 *Huagong ji [Notes of a Chinese labourer]*, 天津 Tianjin: 社会科学院出版社 Shehui Kexue Yuan chubanshe [Social Sciences Publishing House]. section 53.

in British NCOs being demobilised".⁵³⁶ Though it was resolved no longer to demob British CLC officers and NCOs and this until the Peace Treaty was signed, there was no decision to strengthen the cadre nor what was to happen once peace was officially concluded. In consequence many companies throughout 1919 had an insufficient number of officers and NCO's.

The issue of language was even more troublesome with the Chinese Labour Corps than with the Indian troops and labourers: the number of officers mastering Mandarin was all in all limited and only one interpreter whose English was not always of excellent quality was designated to each company of 500 labourers. An often quoted anecdote is that of the officer who started the day's march by shouting "Let's go!" emphasising the word "go", which sounds in Chinese like the word 狗 gǒu: dog. The workers who assumed they had been insulted, refused to move.⁵³⁷ The witness accounts also point to a more difficult communication between the local population and the Chinese labourers. After all, the CLC was kept more segregated than for instance the Indian Cavalry who lived among the locals for significant periods of time enabling them to pick up some words of French.

Each company was to be housed in a camp of its own, and if one camp housed more than one company, there had to be a separate compound for each company. Most camps had between 100 to 1,000 men, but seven had more than 3,000.⁵³⁸ In normal circumstances the labourers would be housed in huts and only occasionally in summer tents could be employed. The relatively harsher treatment that befell native labour - and thus the Chinese - is also reflected in the official policy to segregate them from their white counterparts, in the ban on alcohol and in the prohibition of contact with white women. On paper the segregation policy was quite thorough: not only were the camps strictly out of bounds to all who did not belong to the CLC, but also was the Chinese labourer pretty much bound to his camp. Without a pass, he was not allowed to move beyond the 'camp precinct', a perimeter of several hundred yards. It was only the

⁵³⁶ TNA, WO 95/83/6, "Branches and Services. Labour Commandant", Oct 1918-Feb 1919.

⁵³⁷ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 156; Hayford CW. (1990) *To the people : James Yen and village China*, New York: Columbia University Press. p. 24.

⁵³⁸ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 144.

camp commander who could issue passes but even then the distance was limited to 5 kms. And never were more than 50 passes a day issued and the return was never later than one hour after sundown. At times, CLC officers felt compelled to relax these rules: at one stage Lieutenant Jim Maultsaid and his colleagues had to let their men free “on all possible opportunities” as his camp had no space for any kind of recreation whatsoever.⁵³⁹ For interpreters and gangers, other rules were in vigour and they enjoyed much more freedom. In general, it was the men forbidden to visit cafés and restaurants, but there is again sufficient proof many frequently did.

The British command of the Chinese Labour Corps identified basically two kinds of problems: on the one hand related to discipline and management, and on the other hand related to the improvement of efficiency. The latter advanced much once the shift was made from work by the hour to piecework but of course, having better qualified officers able to communicate with their men also helped. CLC officer Morris Cohen⁵⁴⁰ who knew the Chinese and appreciated them, explained how he “lined up the labourers and told them that that was the work to be done that day and as soon as they’d finished they could knock off and cook their suppers. They worked like beavers and it was completed soon after four o’clock”.⁵⁴¹ It was indeed thought task work was more suitable for the Chinese labourers as they were expected to be unwilling to do more work than they had been ordered to. Often their physical fitness was underestimated and more time was allocated for a task than would prove necessary. Yet, when officers insisted on further work that day, this led to problems as the Chinese labourers considered this a breach of faith, their gangers losing face with their men and by consequence losing interest in their work.⁵⁴²

Regarding the general management and discipline in the corps, it was acknowledged that there was a problem regarding the quality of many of the officers.⁵⁴³ Some were not familiar with the Chinese, their culture and their language. Lieutenant Jim Maultsaid, for instance, upon volunteering

⁵³⁹ McClune B. (2017) *The Dawn of Victory - Thank You China. Star Shell Reflections 1918-1919. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 282.

⁵⁴⁰ Morris “Two-Gun” Cohen (1887-1970) was a British-Canadian adventurer who was a friend and aide of Sun Yat-sen and eventually would climb to the rank of general in the Guomindang army.

⁵⁴¹ Drage C. (1954) *Two-Gun Cohen*, London: Jonathan Cape. p. 68.

⁵⁴² Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 138.

⁵⁴³ BL, IOR, MSS EUR F 288/10, “The Chinese Labour Corps”, p. 11.

for the CLC, confessed to have no qualifications at all.⁵⁴⁴ This induced Major Purdon, the second in command of the CLC, to publish a translation guide for his officers⁵⁴⁵, merely a drop in the ocean. Others again, not seldom missionaries, businessmen or civil servants in civil life, did know the Chinese but lacked the necessary qualities to lead or organise a unit, a problem that was also diagnosed in the Chinese gangers. And finally, the training of officers was too slow to cope with the new arrivals.⁵⁴⁶ Morris Cohen remembered that while some officers and NCOs were transferred to the CLC because of their experience, others were so *“because they weren’t liked in their own regiments”*. *“Many”*, he continued *“didn’t know how to handle Orientals and they showed it. Some lost their tempers and tried to throw their weight about, others were frankly frightened.[...] The coolies knew it at once, and they also knew that their officers weren’t much good anyway. So they just slacked and chiselled and when they found out that they could get away with it, they slacked and chiselled [...]”*.⁵⁴⁷

This ties somewhat in with what Sir Joseph Maclay, Minister of Shipping, said when he argued in January 1918 to stop importing Chinese labourers: *“They were becoming loafers and loungers, and were under no proper control. They were treated as Europeans rather than Asiatics”*.⁵⁴⁸ In this remark Maclay casts the stone only partly to the supervisors while describing the labourers themselves in quite negative terms.⁵⁴⁹ Yet, there certainly was a problem with the mentality of many British officers and NCOs who looked down on the Chinese, almost considering them subhuman. Under the telling title ‘With the Chinks’ 2nd Lieutenant Daryl Klein published in 1919 an account of the trip from China to France which

⁵⁴⁴ McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 138-9.

⁵⁴⁵ Purdon RI. (s.d.) *A Chinese phrase book for Chinese labour*, s.l..

⁵⁴⁶ TNA, WO 107/37, “Work of the labour force during the war: Report”, November 1919.

⁵⁴⁷ Drage C. (1954) *Two-Gun Cohen*, London: Jonathan Cape. p. 67.

⁵⁴⁸ TNA, CAB 23/5/16, “War Cabinet - Minutes of Meetings - Conclusions”, 17 January 1918 and WO 107/37, “Work of the labour force during the war: Report”, November 1919.

⁵⁴⁹ It was believed that many Chinese labourers were prone to gambling and that this caused quarrels, sometimes resulting in fights or even murder. A partial solution was found in starting a Chinese savings bank which avoided the workers carrying too much money they could gamble away. The establishment of YMCA facilities with its useful occupations and responsible recreation further reduced the opportunities to gamble. See: Descamps F. (2009) *Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps*. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p. 154-5.

testifies of his contempt for the Chinese and which contains many examples of the sometimes hysterical racist and class prejudices he and his fellow-officers believed in.⁵⁵⁰ It equally gives evidence of the brutal treatment that could befall the recruits: the officers boast “on the number of canes broken on the back, legs and shins, not to speak of the heads of the defaulters”, state that “Nothing knocks anything into a coolie so well as a nose-bleed” and board 1700 labourers - more often termed ‘coolies’, ‘chinks’ or ‘johnny chinaman’ than just ‘Chinese’- in an hour and thirty-five minutes “sweeping the little blighters in” with a cane that “would have broken had it not come from Malacca”.⁵⁵¹ The harsh, violent way the Chinese were treated by some officers, was something that also shocked many Belgian witnesses, as we will see in the next section.

Still, there were also other types of CLC officers. Lieutenant Jim Maultsaid, despite having no link whatsoever with China or the Chinese before entering the CLC, had a very high opinion of his labourers in the 169th company, befriended his interpreter and learned a great deal about Chinese culture from him. He was annoyed by the maltreatment that befell labourers in other companies where officers and NCOs “*lacked the ability to realise and understand that the boys were volunteers and human beings like ourselves.*”⁵⁵² And then there were indeed the missionaries, such as the Canadian presbyterian James Mellon Menzies.⁵⁵³ When in late 1916 the British legation in Peking asked the British missionaries to join as officers of the CLC, he was one of 16 male missionaries (out of 32) in North Henan to do so, and this despite conscientious concerns: after all, the situation of Christians killing Christians in Europe was not favourable to missionaries trying to spread Christ’s word. In France, the CO (Commanding Officer) of his company was PV Jackson, formerly of trading firm Jardine Matheson, “*whose only credentials seemed to have been supervising Chinese labourers in South Africa in 1903-04*”.⁵⁵⁴ Among the

⁵⁵⁰ A thorough analysis of the attitudes in Klein’s account is: Randoll G. (2012) *With the Chinks de Daryl Klein: ou écrire contre l’histoire*. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 445-458.

⁵⁵¹ Klein D. (1919) *With the Chinks*, London & New York: John Lane. p. 31, 89 and 197-8.

⁵⁵² McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 140, 150-1, 180.

⁵⁵³ James Mellon Menzies 明义士 (1885-1957) was a Canadian engineer and Presbyterian missionary. After his return from France, he became an archaeologist active in China in the 1920s and 1930s. He is still acknowledged in China as the foremost western scholar of Yin-Shang culture and oracle bone inscriptions. His former residence in Anyang is now the James Mellon Menzies Memorial Museum for Oracle Bone Studies.

⁵⁵⁴ Dong L. (2005) *Cross, Culture and Faith: The Life of James Mellon Menzies*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 71.

other officers and NCOs was an insurance agent from Shanghai, a teacher from Beijing, an assistant engineer from the Department of Public Works in Shanghai, a printer at the British American Tobacco Company and two agents of Standard Oil. Menzies was the only one fluent in Chinese. He was also the only missionary, and was shocked by the rude language and lifestyle of the other men. Even after being promoted from lieutenant to captain and commander of No. 108 Company, he continued his missionary work among the labourers, be it without striving to baptise. According to Menzies, his efforts were an absolute necessity to keep up the prestige of the West among the Chinese: *"All their thoughts of us are turned upside down by this war. We are needed to counteract this all. [...] For the sake of the Chinese we are needed in France. I am afraid that through misunderstandings, our work in China would be handicapped if it were not for the missionaries here."*⁵⁵⁵ Apart from staging Peking operas for the men, we are not well informed as to the nature of his missionary work in the CLC. And this is unfortunate as it is an interesting question how close Menzies actually was to his men for familiarity between British personnel and the Chinese was officially to be avoided: it was considered as vulgar and detrimental for both (white) prestige and the efficiency of the labour.

As with the Indians, the role of the YMCA should not be underestimated.⁵⁵⁶ Boredom after working hours was a serious issue : a large majority of the Chinese labourers was illiterate and hence could not read books or newspapers, and in the rare occasion they had been given a permit to leave camp, they were officially not allowed to visit cafés.⁵⁵⁷ This only enhanced the existing problem of gambling among the labourers. The first approaches to the YMCA as to see what recreational activities they could provide, were already made in December 1916, months before the first British employed Chinese labourer set foot in France.⁵⁵⁸ It is unclear how many YMCA-centres for the Chinese were eventually established. While one source claims that by July 1918 they had opened 50 centres ('huts') for the Chinese and that by the time of the armistice this had increased to 100,⁵⁵⁹ Barclay Baron, one of the top brass

⁵⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 67-75.

⁵⁵⁶ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 174-197.

⁵⁵⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als talk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 94.

⁵⁵⁸ Griffin NJ. (1978) Chinese labor and British Christian missionaries in France, 1917-1919. *Journal of Church and State* 20: 287-304. p. 293-4.

⁵⁵⁹ Cunich P. (2009) Y.M.C.A. Chaplains and the Chinese Labourers on the Western Front, 1917-1918. In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 *Zhongguo laogong yu*

in the British YMCA, writes in his memoirs that by the end of 1918 only fourteen centres for the CLC were in operation and this due to a difficult start caused by insufficient (Chinese speaking) staff, depleted stores and the German Spring Offensive.⁵⁶⁰ The YMCA's work among the Chinese labourers seemed to have really taken off after the American International Committee of the YMCA decided to join the British effort after May 1918.⁵⁶¹

To man their huts, the 'Y' recruited quite a considerable number of missionaries in China: from the Presbyterian Church of Ireland alone there were 40 Mandarin speaking missionaries sent to France.⁵⁶² The YMCA also recruited Chinese Christians who were studying in the USA. Among them later heavyweights such as Yan Yangchu 晏阳初 (James Yen) (1890-1990) who would become a world famous figure for his work in mass literacy and rural reconstruction.

For many missionaries it was a golden opportunity to spread the Gospel, while for the Chinese a church service with singing and a sermon in Mandarin, was a welcome relief from the monotony of camp life. The padres seized particular opportunities to impress the Chinese labourers with their Good News. Shortly after a company had been shelled and forced to retreat under the German onslaught of the Spring Offensive, Reverend O'Neill addressed them as such: "*I praised them for their good behaviour in the battle. They beamed with pleasure. Then, as I talked in a simple way about the true meaning of our religion, about God and Christ and Love, about danger and fear and death and immortality, they listened with rapt attention. It is almost painful to be watched so intently. One could not help feeling that the foundations of their faith and of their life had been ploughed up. By the experience of war, God had broken up their fallow ground. Now is the time and here is the place to sow the seed*".⁵⁶³

It is clear from accounts as O'Neill's as well as that from Menzies, that though army regulations did not allow proselytising, it was an integral part of the YMCA's work with the Chinese. This seems in contrast to the Indian case where the YMCA was explicitly urged to curb its proselytism.

diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War. Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 155-177. p.161.

⁵⁶⁰ Baron B. (2009) *The back parts of war : The YMCA Memoirs and Letters of Barclay Baron, 1915-1919*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. p. 71.

⁵⁶¹ Chen-Main Wang P. (2009) Caring Beyond National Borders: The YMCA and Chinese Laborers in World War I Europe. *Church History* 78: 327-349. p. 338.

⁵⁶² O'Neill M. (2012) *Frederick. The Life of My Missionary Grandfather in Manchuria*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing. p. 115.

⁵⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

According to Nicholas J. Griffin the Christian missionary work was designed avowedly to impress upon the Chinese the virtues of western culture and religion, the need to control their emotions, and the wisdom of cooperation with their white overseers, or in other words: to encourage the Chinese to endure their lot.⁵⁶⁴

Of course, the YMCA did much more than church services to distract the Chinese labourers: it organised performances of Beijing opera, theatrical shows (subject to censorship), or games of football and other sports. And it was well equipped to do so: for a long time the only object in Flanders Fields Museum possessed that was related to the Chinese Labour Corps was a Chinese *Official Rules for Basket Ball*, published in Shanghai in 1916 and sporting the YMCA's triangle. In the camps, the YMCA also opened small shops where Chinese products could be bought.⁵⁶⁵ More important were the courses the 'Y' provided: arithmetics, geography, learning to read and write in Chinese, or even some English. Forced by the labourers who found the traditional classic language and the traditional teaching methods "dry and tasteless", Yan Yangchu took the important decisions to teach them rather the North Chinese vernacular and to limit his teachings to the 600 most basic characters. These experiences would later be adapted to great success back in China in the Mass Education Movement. In January 1919 Yan Yangchu launched under the auspices of the YMCA the *Huagong Zhoubao* 华工周报 or *Chinese Labourers' Weekly* whose print run reached 15,000 copies and of which a total 45 issues would be published.⁵⁶⁶

While the importance of the YMCA should not be underestimated, it should neither be overestimated. The YMCA was smoothly organised and kept good records and those who served in it were per definition educated and published a lot. One of the results is a number of historical contributions in which the YMCA's work is often uncritically depicted as a

⁵⁶⁴ Griffin NJ. (1978) Chinese labor and British Christian missionaries in France, 1917-1919. *Journal of Church and State* 20: 287-304. p. 287-8 and 301.

⁵⁶⁵ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 95.

⁵⁶⁶ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 154; Hayford CW. (1990) *To the people : James Yen and village China*, New York: Columbia University Press. p. 26-8 ; Lee LY and Chen-main Wang P. (2012) Naissance d'un magazine destiné aux travailleurs chinois en Europe - analyse du concept, du contenu et du sens de la Revue hebdomadaire des travailleurs chinois. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 345-366. p. 348.

success.⁵⁶⁷ Yet, when we look into Chinese sources, we get another picture: Gu, for instance wrote how in his company (of some 500) only 130 men learned Chinese characters while just 60 men followed the courses of geography and arithmetics.⁵⁶⁸ And in Sun Gan's company only 100 labourers regularly attended the YMCA's activities.⁵⁶⁹ Even if we accept the aforementioned figure of some 100 YMCA-huts operational at the end of 1918, this would have been far from enough to serve all 195 companies of the CLC. More importantly, most authors take for granted the YMCA's claim that they raised the level of literacy level within the CLC from 20 to 38 %.⁵⁷⁰ Yet, according to Marianne Bastid-Bruguière this is certainly exaggerated and what the 'Y' did was improving a small minority that already possessed a rudimentary knowledge.⁵⁷¹

It is equally an open question whether the religious zeal of the missionaries proved successful. While Frederick O'Neill seized the retreat for the German advance in Spring 1918 as an opportunity to imprint his christian message, others were of a different opinion. "*Probably some [Chinese] were comparing in their minds the pacific teachings of Confucius and Buddha with the evidence of so-called Christianity around them*", so a conscientious objector serving with the Friends' War-Victims Relief Committee contemplated in the same period.⁵⁷² In any case it seems the number of converts was very low, and it is telling we do not encounter figures of – let alone boasting about – the number of converts in the writings of missionaries and YMCA-personnel.

Maybe as important as the YMCA was the effort initiated by Chinese fellow-countrymen to educate the labourers in France (and Belgium). The

⁵⁶⁷ Peter Cunich, for instance, takes it face value that "*the Association [...] enjoyed a remarkable level of success*" in reducing the amount of crime and disease among the Chinese labourers, solely basing himself on YMCA archives without taking into account Chinese views or questioning more neutral sources. Cunich P. (2009) Y.M.C.A. Chaplains and the Chinese Labourers on the Western Front, 1917-1918. In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 *Zhongguo laogong yu diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 155-177. p.162.

⁵⁶⁸ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als talk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 96.

⁵⁶⁹ Sun Gan, section 192.

⁵⁷⁰ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 154.

⁵⁷¹ Bastid-Bruguière M. (2012) Conclusion. le retour en Chine des travailleurs chinois de la Grande Guerre: quel héritage? In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 481-519. p. 499.

⁵⁷² Bell W. (1920) *A scavenger in France : being extracts from the diary of an architect, 1917-19*, London: C.W. Daniel. p. 72.

reason I have put Belgium in brackets is because France was an important given in this respect: leading Chinese nationalist figures such as the former minister of education and president of Peking University Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940) or the educator Li Shizeng 李石曾 (1881-1973) had long praised France as the model republic from which China should learn.⁵⁷³ Already before the war they had set up the *Diligent Work-Frugal Study* movement, in short Work-Study Movement to send students to the West, in casu France, in order to be educated in science, social progress and industry. They saw the coming of tens of thousands of Chinese labourers as a golden opportunity: “*The Chinese workers in France will form the nucleus of a future trained working class, who will contribute to the spreading of industrial know-how on their return in China. [...] Having been exposed to European civilisation, they can help reform society and eliminate undesirable habits*”⁵⁷⁴, so Li, who resided in France, said in 1917. To reach this goal, he set up the Sino-French Education Society, with evening classes for workers (in French service) and he founded the *Huagong Zazhi* 华工杂志, i.e. the Chinese Workers Journal, which would run for three and a half years. Though Li’s efforts were mainly focused on the labourers in French service, his magazine was with a print run of up to 30,000 copies, widely spread and it would obviously be read and read out in all companies of the CLC, whether in French or British service and whether residing in the French republic or in the Belgian kingdom. The paper constantly exhorted the Chinese workers to behave well in order to maintain China’s prestige and to fulfill their patriotic duty, thus contributing to the emergence of a national consciousness.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷³ Bailey PJ. (1990) The Sino-French connection: the Chinese worker-student movement in France, 1902-1928. In: Goodman DSG (ed) *China and the West : ideas and activists*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press. p. 82-3 ; Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 185-7 ; Bailey PJ. (2009) Chinese Contract Workers in World War I: The Larger Context. In: 张建国 张张 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》/ *Zhongguo lao gong yu di yi ci shi jie da zhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社, Jinan Shi : Shandong da xue chu ban she, 3-18. p. 13-15 ; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 199-205 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 77.

⁵⁷⁴ O'Neill M. (2014) *The Chinese Labour Corps. The Forgotten Chinese Labourers of the First World War*, Melbourne: Penguin. p. 59.

⁵⁷⁵ Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 189 ; Levine M. (2012) Le Chinese Labour Corps pendant la Première Guerre mondiale: prélude à l'activisme politique et culturel. In: Ma L (ed) *Les*

There were some important differences between the YMCA and the Work-Study Movement: not only was the YMCA a western initiative but it also had a proselytising objective. The Work-Study Movement on the contrary was Chinese (though with French support) and it had social and political rather than religious objectives. Li's project was clearly socially progressive, even subversive at times: in the 7th issue of the *Huagong Zazhi* he published an article describing an undoubtedly fictitious "Conversation in a Café" which might read as a (political) programme. The author meets some Chinese labourers and asks them why they had come to France and what differences they saw between France and China. His interlocutors name three reasons for them being there: 1) money - though not without emphasising that it was the quarreling and irresponsible officials and politicians in China who "*were the reasons we could not make a living. They forced us to cross the seas, though we love our Fatherland. They forced us to brave danger and to come to work here*", 2) patriotism - as France was a republic too, but with a better functioning juridical, political and societal order, they seized the opportunity to see how things were organised here. They would return learned and back in China they would be able to help the country back on its feet, 3) self-improvement - "*Without education one is but a fool*", the labourers declare. In France, they would not only learn to handle machines, but also how a society is organised. "*By denying us education our masters had denied us the happiness to which we were entitled*". In the last paragraph the fictitious labourers sing the praise of French syndicalism: "*What we see in France are unions, having power and perfectly organised. They group many millions of workers. They have banks for the common people. [...] They have co-operative shops. [...] There are evening classes educating young men and labourers....*" to conclude their monologue with "*One day, when we are back in China, we will gradually be able to make things better. Day by day our industry will improve. And all in China will benefit from it, not just us labourers!*"⁵⁷⁶ And this was just one of many similar 'conversations' used by the *Huagong Zazhi* to impress on the labourers behavioural models and respect for the French republican values.⁵⁷⁷ The Sino-French

travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale. Paris: CNRS Editions, 305-322. p. 311.

⁵⁷⁶ 华工杂志 "Ha-Kon-Tsa-Tcheu, *Revue Chinoise Populaire, publiée par le Groupe d'Éducation Populaire*", nr. 7 (10 May 1917), p. 15-17. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

⁵⁷⁷ Démurger S, Fournier M and Au-Yeung A. (2012) Assistance et éducation des travailleurs chinois pendant la Grande Guerre - Le rôle du Mouvement Travail-Etudes. In:

Education Association also placed Chinese students in factories or in preparatory French classes, among them many later prominent leaders of the Chinese Communist Party. One of the purposes was to dispell the traditional disdain Chinese intellectuals had for manual labour.⁵⁷⁸ Deng Xiaoping, for instance, started working in the factory of Le Creusot at a moment when there were still some 1,000 French-recruited Chinese labourers present there.⁵⁷⁹ But even those students who did not actually meet Chinese labourers, would certainly have known about their presence and learned about their working and living conditions.

The Chinese labourers gave proof of quite a degree of agency, especially when they were convinced the terms of their contract were not respected. Interpreter Zhang Bangyong 张邦永 remembered how the British wanted his company to work longer hours, something refused by the labourers with the eventual result that the Chinese started to work slower.⁵⁸⁰ And on 28 May 1917 some 200 labourers of the 4th company went on strike complaining they were not getting enough food. After the ring leaders had been punished an inspection was carried out finding 60 men to be undernourished due to a lack of rice. Their daily allowance was raised from 1/2 lb to 2lbs.⁵⁸¹ Apart from free food, another of the contract terms was that they were “not to be employed in military operations”. Yet, the Chinese considered being shelled or bombed as being part of the military operations. As a consequence, the day after a German air raid on Dunkirk in Sept 1917 in which some labourers had been killed, the Chinese refused to go to work stating that their contract stipulated they would not be placed in danger. They were forced back to work by armed guards. When two days later another raid occurred, more than 2000 went hiding in the dunes west of St Pol. Four days later still 104 were missing.⁵⁸² Not

Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 323-343. p. 340.

⁵⁷⁸ Bailey PJ. (1990) The Sino-French connection: the Chinese worker-student movement in France, 1902-1928. In: Goodman DSG (ed) *China and the West : ideas and activists*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press. p. 83-84.

⁵⁷⁹ Barman G and Dulioust N. (1988) Les années françaises de Deng Xiaoping. *Vingtième Siècle* 20: 17-34. p. 20-1.

⁵⁸⁰ 张邦永. (1991) 《华工参加第一次世界大战的片段回忆》. In: 戴伊 (ed) 《中国近代史通鉴, 1840-1949》. Beijing: 红旗出版社, 1215-1224. p. 1221. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

⁵⁸¹ TNA, WO 95/4174/10, “Lines of Communication Troops. 4 Company Chinese Labour Corps. War Diary”, May 1917.

⁵⁸² Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 150 ; Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 301;

only did the labourers cling together, but a number of authors also mention the existence of fraternities or secret societies which could be very effective in time of strikes.⁵⁸³

Riots and protests, however, were seldom tolerated. Though the British military authorities in September 1917 declared that “*no armed force has ever been used in France to compel the Chinese labourers to do their work or to remain in any locality*”, there is ample evidence that on more than one occasion they did so.⁵⁸⁴ On 16 December 1917, for instance, four men of No. 21 company CLC were killed and nine others wounded when guards opened fire on protesting labourers at Les Fontinettes near Calais. Another important disturbance took place on Christmas Day 1917 and involved the 55th and 105th companies in Reninghelst. What exactly started the violence, is not sure. According to the diary of father Achiel Van Wallegghem, resident in that village “... *the New Zealanders [...] swig and swill and reel and rant and pick quarrels with the Chinese. The Chinese become resentful and band together and in the afternoon and evening, fights break out in several places. Such wild fellows!*”⁵⁸⁵ to report the next day that “*We hear that several Chinese who had been in fights with the New Zealanders yesterday were shot this morning on Mont Noir.*”⁵⁸⁶ An official report of IX Corps states that about 150 men from the 55th company had come over from Poperinghe and rushed the camp in

Fournier N. (2005) Les travailleurs chinois à Dunkerque entre 1917 et 1921. Dunkerque: Ville de Dunkerque. p. 8-9.

⁵⁸³ University of Minnesota, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, YMCA International work in China, Box 88, Folder 1: “The Chinese Labourer in France in Relation to the work of the Young Men’s Christian Association. Report to the International Committee of Young Men’s Christian Association of North America of Special Mission of Dwight W. Edwards in France, April 13 - May 11th [1918], p.25; McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 227 & 236; Watthé H. (1932) *La belle vie du missionnaire en Chine : récits et croquis*, Vichy: Maison du missionnaire. p. 189 & 209. The latter speaks consequently of “frères trois points” (brethren three dots), a common catholic negative designation for freemasons though here used to designate a secret society. It is remarkable that while these western authors more easily use the rather negative “secret societies”, Xu Guoqi describes them more positively as “fraternities.... of people either from same villages or blood relations or groups based on sworn brotherhood”: Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 140.

⁵⁸⁴ Gill D and Dallas G. (1985) *The Unknown Army: Mutinies in the British Army in World War I*, London: Verso. p. 86 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 222.

⁵⁸⁵ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 279.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 280.

Reninghelst in order to kill an unpopular head ganger.⁵⁸⁷ The disturbances in the Chinese camp at Reninghelst were also mentioned by other authors, including Captain J.C. Dunn in his famous memoirs⁵⁸⁸ and the war diary of signaller David Doe.⁵⁸⁹ The official body count of 5 dead (two including the head ganger killed by the Chinese and three killed by British bullets),⁵⁹⁰ is substantiated by the Chinese graves from 25 December 1917 at Westoutre British Cemetery and Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, both just a stone's throw from Zwarteberg.⁵⁹¹ The unrest in the 105th company must have continued well into the new year, as on 6 January 1918 the Assistant Provost Marshall "*opened a POW-cage at Locre for reception of Chinese of 105 Coy, who were implicated in the recent riot*".⁵⁹²

The frictions and agency on behalf of the labourers urged the Chinese government to appoint two delegates to deal with the workers' complaints. Again, this was a marked difference with the past when the then Chinese Empire had officially shown no interest in their 'coolies' at work in the Crimea, the USA, South Africa or elsewhere while now the new Chinese republic was considering the labourers as working for the national interest.⁵⁹³ Pan Lianru 潘连茹 was the rather invisible agent for the British recruited Chinese while the young but very much committed Li Jun 李骏 was entrusted the care of the labourers engaged by the French. Li not only made routine inspections of all Chinese workplaces but also intervened and mediated in cases of unrest. He convinced the labourers that the "law" was not merely repressive but that it also made all citizens 'equal'. Li Jun would also delve deeper into the causes of dissatisfaction. A case in point was the attitude of the officers, and in particular the many missionaries who had travelled along from China. Many of these missionaries were used to dealing with their Chinese converts, who were

⁵⁸⁷ TNA, WO 154/8, War Diary Assistant Provost Marshal 9 Corps, 1 Feb 1916- 31 May 1918.

⁵⁸⁸ Dunn JC. (1987) *The War the Infantry Knew* London: Cardinal Sphere. p. 425-6.

⁵⁸⁹ IWM, 12171 P326, Pocket Diary of David H. Doe, 51st Signal Company, RE.

⁵⁹⁰ NA, WO 154/8, War Diary Assistant Provost Marshal 9 Corps, 1 Feb 1916- 31 May 1918.

⁵⁹¹ James G. (2006) Chinese casualties in the Chinese Labour Corps (April 1917-March 1920). Kowloon, xvi + 619. p. 33, 96-7, 161-2. On what he calls "the Christmas Day incident", see as well: James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 528-530.

⁵⁹² NA, WO 154/8, War Diary Assistant Provost Marshal 9 Corps, 1 Feb 1916- 31 May 1918.

⁵⁹³ Bailey PJ. (2014) Chinese Labour in World War I France and the Fluctuations of Historical Memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14 362-382. p. 369.

often poor devils from the lower layers of Chinese society.⁵⁹⁴ The Chinese labourers they had to deal with in Europe were often quite different. Among them were proud Chinese with a profound belief in the young Chinese Republic. Li Jun excelled at conveying the feelings of these Chinese: *“For many years they [= the missionaries] have been used to dealing with Catholics at home in China. They know nothing of our Chinese civilisation but they are familiar with all our bad habits. Therefore they approach our labourers as famished rickshaw drivers working in all weathers, the type of people intended to carry loads and other people in their sedan chairs. Just look at them here in our civilised France, they say! Ten times better nourished, better dressed, better housed and paid than in China!”*⁵⁹⁵

The men working for the British had no such wise advocate and diplomat as Li Jun at their disposal - or at least Pan Lianru is hardly ever mentioned in the sources. Hence, they were dependent on the diplomatic qualities of their interpreters and gangers, the goodwill of their officers and their agency to have their demands satisfied. Yet, the Chinese in British service were pretty much aware of Li's actions as he communicated openly through the *Huagong Zazhi*. In an article published on 10 September 1917 he not only announced China's official entry in the war on the side of the Allies (on 14 August 1917) but he also urged his compatriots *“to respect the law in order not to dishonour the civilised nature of the Chinese”*.⁵⁹⁶ The men of the CLC were certainly not only familiar with the recommendations of their government's representative in France but they were also informed about the ins and outs of their fellow-countrymen in French employment. At times, it must have held up a mirror to their own situation.

According to the Chinese historian and diplomat Jiang Tingfu 蒋廷黻 (1895-1965) who had worked with the YMCA in France, *“the French were much less race conscious, [...] more democratic in their manners and took*

⁵⁹⁴ As they had to renounce their own traditions, Christian converts in China, and especially Catholics formed rather isolated communities and were considered by many as outcasts. Libbrecht U. (2004) *De geelzucht van Europa. China en het Westen*, Leuven: Davidsfonds. p. 76-7.

⁵⁹⁵ 陈三井, 吕芳上, 杨翠华, et al. (1997) 《欧战华工史料(一九一七~一九二一)》 - *Ouzhan Huagong Shiliao (1912-1921) [Historic Documents on the Chinese Labour Corps in Europe during the First World War (1912-1921)]*, Taipei: Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica. p. 4102b6. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

⁵⁹⁶ 华工杂志 *“Ha-Kon-Tsa-Tcheu, Revue Chinoise Populaire, publiée par le Groupe d'Éducation Populaire”*, nr. 12 (10 Septembre 1917), p. 21-2. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

a more paternalistic interest in their laborers” while the British “stood on their dignity as officers, and perhaps as white men, most of the time”.⁵⁹⁷ And indeed, it is generally assumed that the Chinese in French employment were better treated than their compatriots in British service.⁵⁹⁸ Yet, again, this is not something that should be accepted without critical assessment even if the ‘French Chinese’ were indeed less militarised and hence less prone to disciplinary measures and did enjoy relatively more freedom. While there are accounts of frictions between British officers and the Chinese labourers, there are equally testimonies of relationships of a much kinder nature. As with the British, the French-employed Chinese were known by their numbers, not their names. French officers appointed to supervise Chinese labourers could be equally harsh and French writings on the Chinese resident in France was sometimes at least as racist as some British texts. A case in point is a report on a visit to a Chinese camp in Rouen by the Breton writer and journalist Auguste Dupouy in the reknown and popular literary magazine *Revue de Paris*: the whole article is one racist remark after another, for instance taking for granted that in China new-borns are fed to the pigs and that they are a people without pious or religious feelings. Dupouy despises the Chinese and is convinced the Chinese despised the westerners. He agrees with an *adjudant*, their supervisor, who states that venerable principles shouldn’t be adapted when handling the Chinese, only “une poigne de fer” (an iron fist) can manage them.⁵⁹⁹ And just as riots happened in the British service, there is sufficient proof of strikes and protests in French service who could be equally silenced by firing into the mob.⁶⁰⁰

It is important to stress that the Chinese stayed on the western front until more than a year after the armistice. While the nature of the work changed after the ceasefire - it now included clearing debris as well

⁵⁹⁷ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 147 ; The quote is popular with Chinese authors: Zhang J and Zhang J. (2006) *Weihaiwei under British rule*, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House. p. 136 ; Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 72 and Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 120-1.

⁵⁹⁸ Summerskill M. (1982) *China on the Western Front. Britain's Chinese Work Force in the First World War*, London: Michael Summerskill. p.151.

⁵⁹⁹ Dupouy A. (1919) Un Camp de Chinois. *Revue de Paris* 26: 146-162.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibidem, p. 161; Watthé H. (1932) *La belle vie du missionnaire en Chine : récits et croquis*, Vichy: Maison du missionnaire. p. 189-190; Marcilloux P. (2012) Les travailleurs chinois et la reconstruction du Pas-de-Calais. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 225-241. p. 233-4.

searching, exhuming and reburying the many dead - their living circumstances did not. A Belgian police report of August 1919 describes a Chinese camp hosting a company of some 400-450 men in West Flanders: it was a former camp for German prisoners-of-war and consisted of small bell tents or shelters in canvas in a compound of 80 meters on 80 meters surrounded by a high fence in barbed wire. The men were only allowed to wander freely without pass within a perimeter of 300 meters of the camp, though this was not monitored.⁶⁰¹

For most British-employed Chinese labourers their stay in Europe would have lasted for about two years, the long voyage from and to China not included. While the first shipment of Chinese labourers had arrived on 20 April 1917 and the last in July 1918, by March 1920 nearly all had left Europe. The very last task performed by the seventy Chinese labourers who had consented to stay behind for a little longer was to engrave the headstones of their fallen comrades.⁶⁰²

Flemish witness accounts on the Chinese⁶⁰³

“Do not travel alone, nor in the evening in southern West-Flanders, where one still can encounter many Chinese coolies, making this very lonesome area, quite unsafe. When meeting them, do not show fear, nor provocative

⁶⁰¹ Koninklijk Museum van het Leger en de Krijgsgeschiedenis [Royal Army Museum in Brussels](RAM), Archieven van Moskou [Moscow Archives], box 3061: “Délits commis par les travailleurs chinois” [crimes committed by Chinese labourers]. This file is originating from the Belgian Gendarmerie, which until 1992 fell under the Ministry of Defence. The name “Moscow Archives” refers to the fact that these archives had been confiscated by the German occupier in the Second World War, transferred to Berlin and subsequently ended up in Moscow after the fall of the Third Reich. After having been discovered by Belgian researchers in the 1990s, they returned in 2002.

⁶⁰² The last important contingent of 500 would arrive in China in May, the very last 73 CLC-men would arrive on 13 September 1920. Thompson E. (1920) The Chinese Labour Corps. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missions* 18: 313-321. p. 313-4 ; Tan CGS. (2012) "Sans liaison ferroviaire": Weihai Wei et le Chinese Labour Corps. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 91-110. p. 107.

⁶⁰³ This section is based on Dendooven D. (2009) Living Apart Together: Belgian Witness Accounts of the Chinese Labour Corps. . In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 *Zhongguo laogong yu diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 19-29. and Dendooven D. (2012) Les “chings”: mythe et réalité à propos du chinese Labour Corps dans la région du front en Flandre occidentale. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Boulogne-Ypres, 459-474.

audacity." This warning is to be found on the first pages of one of the earliest Belgian battlefield guidebooks, published in the months after Armistice Day 11 November 1918.⁶⁰⁴ The author, J. De Wit, did not stand out with his opinion on the Chinese labourers, who were still present in Belgian Flanders throughout 1919 to clear the battlefields from debris, unexploded ammunition and dead bodies. Tens of Belgian accounts bear witness of the 'bad behaviour' of the Chinese workers and the fear they inspired on the returning local population or early battlefield tourists.

Remarkably enough, nearly all these negative reports on the members of the Chinese Labour Corps concern the period after the war, mainly the year 1919. Witness accounts written down during the hostilities, such as diaries from 1917 and 1918, do mention the Chinese workers and this even extensively, though seldom carry the negative tone of these later statements. Therefore this section has clearly two different parts, first examining Flemish accounts on the Chinese during the hostilities and then focusing on the accounts from 1919 and much later. I will not only attempt to distinguish fact from fiction in these accounts but will also try to explain the reasons for this remarkable shift in perception which would be responsible for the lasting negative image of the CLC in the West-Flemish collective memory.

Appendix 8 offers an anthology of Flemish witness accounts on the Chinese Labour Corps. It makes clear that contrary to many other non-European groups there is no lack of witness accounts on the Chinese in Flanders. There are a number of reasons that offer an explanation for this wealth in CLC-related stories when compared to other non-European groups: not only were the Chinese deployed in very large numbers - larger than any other non-European group- but they would also stay on in the former front zone in Flanders until at least late 1919. This means that for many returning refugees who might have fled as early as October 1914, the Chinese would have been the only non-Europeans they ever encountered. And this would obviously leave a lasting impression. Flemish recollections have been recovered by volunteers in mainly three interview projects, respectively in 1978, the late 1990s and 2009-10, each project resulting in a publication.⁶⁰⁵ Hence this section, unlike its counterpart in the Indian chapter, will solely make use of witness accounts originating in Belgian Flanders. It should also be pointed out that apart from the 'odd one out' there is no corpus of witness accounts on the Chinese Labour

⁶⁰⁴ De Wit J. ([1919]) *Gids door de Vlaamsche slagvelden van Leie - Zee - Yzer*, Berchem.

⁶⁰⁵ More information and an assesment of these interview projects are to be found in Appendix 8.

Corps in France, making comparisons between the Belgian and French popular attitudes towards the Chinese or even the inclusion of French witness accounts difficult.

China and the Chinese were not entirely unfamiliar to the Belgian population. In the early 20th century Belgium had important economic interests in China including steel factories, the construction and exploitation of the important Peking-Hankou railway and the tramways in Tianjin. However, as with the Indians, it was the presence of many Flemish missionaries in North China that enhanced the interest of the local population in the Chinese and made the latter, at least virtually, somewhat less 'strange' or exotic in the eyes of the Flemings.⁶⁰⁶ In Pittem, the birthplace of our main Belgian witness Father Achiel Van Wallegem, a statue had been erected in 1913 to honour Ferdinand Verbiest, a 17th century Jesuit missionary in China who had entered the service of the Kangxi emperor.⁶⁰⁷ On a par with this glorification of the missionaries and the missionary effort, was a general negative image of China and the Chinese. In the missionaries' writings China was all too often represented as a retarded and underdeveloped country and the Chinese as barbarian pagans.⁶⁰⁸

Some Flemish missionaries were prominent figures and their stories tie in, directly or indirectly, with that of the Chinese Labour Corps. Father Henry Watthé,⁶⁰⁹ for example, was born in Houtkerque, in France but less than a kilometer from the Belgian border west of Poperinghe. During the war he would oversee a unit of Chinese labourers in French service in his native French Flanders.⁶¹⁰ Much better known, both in Belgium, France and China, was another member of the Lazarist order, Vincent Lebbe.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁶ Libbrecht U. (2004) *De geelzucht van Europa. China en het Westen*, Leuven: Davidsfonds. p. 84-9.

⁶⁰⁷ Witek JW. (1994) *Ferdinand Verbiest, 1623-1688 : Jesuit missionary, scientist, engineer and diplomat*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag.

⁶⁰⁸ Libbrecht U. (2004) *De geelzucht van Europa. China en het Westen*, Leuven: Davidsfonds. p. 83-4.

⁶⁰⁹ Houtkerque, 6 August 1878 - Vichy, 18 November 1935. Watthé, a member of the Congregation of the Mission, better known as *Lazarists*, served in China from 1903 to 1914 when his bad health forced him to return to Europe. After the war he founded the *Maison des Missionnaires* in Vichy, published a book on contemporary China in 1925 and his memoirs, including a chapter on his service with a French-employed Chinese Labour unit during the First World War in Dunkirk in 1932-4.

⁶¹⁰ Watthé H. (1932) *La belle vie du missionnaire en Chine : récits et croquis*, Vichy: *Maison du missionnaire*. p. 169-210.

⁶¹¹ Born as Frédéric 'Freddy' Lebbe in Ghent, 19 August 1877, died in Chongqing, 24 June 1940. He adopted the name Vincent at his Confirmation and in China the name Lei

Born in Ghent, Lebbe spent his youth in Ypres, where his father was a lawyer. In the summer and autumn of 1913 he visited his family and hometown accompanied by a Chinese boy⁶¹² and this event was highly publicised in the local newspapers.⁶¹³ Though not directly involved with the CLC, Lebbe had an indirect impact on the recruitment of labourers for Europe: as a staunch advocate of a truly Chinese catholicism, he took a firm pro-Chinese stand during the so-called Laoxikai 老西开⁶¹⁴-incident in 1916-17 when the French concession in Tianjin (Tientsin) was unilaterally expanded to include the adjoining catholic church. Lebbe resolutely sided with the Chinese, orchestrating protests against the French annexation and this gained him notoriety (with the French) and fame (with the Chinese)⁶¹⁵. This affair in Tianjin had been a serious setback for the French recruitment of Chinese labourers.⁶¹⁶

Yet, despite prominent Lazarists such as Lebbe, it was mainly the popular Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), better known under its colloquial name Mission of Scheut after the location of its mother house near Brussels, that created a bond between Belgium and Northern China.⁶¹⁷ Founded in 1865 with the explicit purpose to evangelise China, Scheut has since appealed to the missionary zeal of many young catholic Flemings and this well into the late 20th Century. The

Mingyuan - 雷鸣远. Lebbe's archives are preserved at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. Books, articles and even websites on his life are numerous. I made use of Leclercq J. (1955) *Vie du père Lebbe : le tonnerre qui chante au loin*, Tournai: Casterman.; Delbeke G. (1990) Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940) - De donder die zingt in de verte. *Het Tekon* 63: 113.; and www.vincentlebbe.org (accessed on 16 August 2016).

⁶¹² The boy was Ying Qianli 英千里, son of Ying Lianzhi 英敛之 of Tientsin, founder of the newspaper (with Lebbe) *Ta-kong-pao* 大公报 and (also with Vincent Lebbe) co-founder of the *Furen Catholic University* 辅仁大学.

⁶¹³ *Le Journal d'Ypres*, 22 November 1913, 29 November 1913 and 6 December 1913. The latter even had a portrait of Lebbe on its frontpage.

⁶¹⁴ The name refers to the Cathedral of Saint-Joseph or Laoxikai-church in the Laoxikai-quarter 老西开 of Tianjin.

⁶¹⁵ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2009) On the Recruitment of Chinese Labourers in Guangdong, the Athos Incident, and the Story of a Letter Never Delivered. In: 张建国 张张 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 / *Zhongguo lao gong yu di yi ci shi jie da zhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社, Jinan Shi : Shandong da xue chu ban she, 188-201. p. 188 ; Chen S. (2012) Shame on you!: Competing Narratives of the Nation in the Laoxikai Incident and the Tianjin Anti-French Campaign, 1916-1917 *Twentieth-Century China* 37: 121-138.

⁶¹⁶ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 20-21; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 151-2.

⁶¹⁷ The mother house in Anderlecht maintains a 'China Museum' which include a gallery of all CICM missionaries.

fate suffered by several of their ‘martyrs’ during the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901, had received much attention in the west and catholics in Flanders were definitely familiar with these stories.⁶¹⁸ One of the Scheut missionaries during the Great War was Florent Durein⁶¹⁹ from Reninghelst who had only recently been sent off to China. Somewhat unexpectedly, on 6 January 1918, we see him appear in Van Wallegghem’s diary: “*What a coincidence ! Some days ago the Durein family here received a letter from their brother Florent, missionary in China. A Chinese happened to be in the shop, saw the envelope and went off happily to tell this to his comrades. Half an hour later another Chinese enters who maintains to have lived in the village from where the letter had been sent, and to have seen the catholic priest at many occasions. Then he starts to describe the priest, and truly, it is a description of Florent. In order to be absolutely sure, the Dureins get out a pile of portraits of missionaries in China and truly in less than a minute the Chinese shows them the portrait of Florent. How is it possible!*”⁶²⁰ We know that at least one Scheut missionary who served as a chaplain in the Belgian army visited and assisted the CLC on a regular basis.⁶²¹

⁶¹⁸ Just one example of a whole series of hagiographic material published in Flanders after the Boxer Rebellion is De Meester J. (1902) *Een Vlaamsche bloedgetuige : E.P. Remi Van Merhaeghe priester-zending der congregatie van Scheut, geboren te Waereghem den 6 februari 1869, ter dood gebracht in zijne missie van Hsia-Ing-Tze (China) den 13 december 1901*, Roeselare: Jules De Meester. The local newspaper too had much attention for the vicissitudes of the China missionaries, as is proved by a random check on ‘Scheut’ in the local newspapers (searchable online via www.historischekranten.be).

⁶¹⁹ Florent Durein (Jiang Huairan 江怀仁) was born in Reninghelst on 9 March 1887 and joined the Scheut missionaries (CICM) in 1909 to be ordained one week before the outbreak of war in 1914. In August 1915 he left for China, to serve in what was called the Apostolic Vicariate of Eastern Mongolia (Northeast China). He died on 9 April 1920 and is commemorated on the family tombstone in Reninghelst churchyard and in the China Museum of the Scheut missionaries in Anderlecht. The Vicariate of Eastern Mongolia covered the provinces of Rehe and Inner Mongolia, both northern neighbours of the province of Zhili (now Hebei) from where many of the Chinese labourers hailed, a fact adding veracity to the story related by Van Wallegghem.

⁶²⁰ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 532.

⁶²¹ Father Leo Van Dijk (1878-1951) was denied his transfer to the British army to serve with the CLC where he allegedly would have been the only catholic missionary. Yet, he was allowed to visit them often. After demobilisation in 1919, he seems to have donned a British uniform and was able to accompany some 14 Chinese labourers on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Van Overmeire, D., “The private battle of father Leo Van Dijk CICM (1878-1951) for the souls of Chinese labourers”, paper presented at the international conference “Chinese Workers in the First World War”, Boulogne and Ypres, 26-30 May 2010.; Van Overmeire D. (2011) Leo Van Dijk CICM (1878-1951) op Chinese missie in België (1912-1920). *Verbiest Koerier* XXIV: 11-13.

On 6 August 1917 Father Van Wallegghem mentioned the Chinese for the first time in his important diary, dedicating a very lengthy passage to them.⁶²² As many of the remarks this local priest made are recurrent in other witness accounts and as Van Wallegghem is not only a rather fine but also a reliable observer, it is logical to make his the central Flemish statements on the Chinese in my narrative. He tries for instance to be nuanced: it is remarkable that right up to the day of their departure Van Wallegghem referred to them by their nationality, and not by more contentious but much more often used words such as ‘coolie’ or ‘tsjing’.⁶²³ We’ve seen in the previous chapter he did this with the Indians too. Another important element in our positive appreciation of Van Wallegghem is that the priest attempted to offer information that was as correct as possible.⁶²⁴

Van Wallegghem started his first diary entry on the Chinese labourers with a general physical description, not devoid of the xenophobic traits one could expect from someone who had never laid eyes on a Chinese, but which are perhaps also typical for any westerner who was confronted with a colonial (and thus deemed inferior) ‘Other’ at that time: *“Many Chinese have arrived in the region to work for the English. I do not know from where or how these men arrived here. Many seem very young. They are strange fellows and have very childish manners, no better than our 10-11 year old boys. [...] They are yellow in colour, have a flat nose and slanting eyes, and they almost always have a silly smile and almost constantly look around, so that it is quite astonishing that none have yet been killed on our busy roads. They wear a blue linen outfit and also one in a thicker grey fabric, raincoat and hood, they wear a straw hat or brown skullcap with earflaps yet they are particularly mad about civilian clothes and if they manage to get a civilian cap or hat they will never remove it from their heads. They walk in an ungainly manner and it is obvious they*

⁶²² Van Wallegghem A. (2017) 1917. *The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 193-6.

⁶²³ The Chinese in the Westhoek of Flanders were soon called ‘tsjings’ (pronounced “tchings”), a corruption of the English term of abuse “Chink”. As it seemed to me that the Flemish dialect word has a somewhat less negative and more neutral undertone than the clearly derogatory English equivalent - it is for example also used in quotes that are rather positive towards the Chinese- I have decided to maintain the Flemish word between inverted commas when used in quotations.

⁶²⁴ Van Wallegghem’s custom not to take for granted rumours resulted in a higher factual accuracy of many of his comments and descriptions. A good example is the aforementioned excerpt of the disturbances on Christmas Day 1917 which are corroborated by a number of other sources.

are not used to wearing such heavy shoes.”⁶²⁵ That the Chinese were ‘childlike’ is something common in many accounts, whether Belgian, French or British⁶²⁶ and is not necessarily to be seen as negative but rather a way of describing their simplicity. The first impression of the Chinese as being childlike and oafish was something father Edmund of the Abbey of Saint-Sixtus also found when he saw them for the first time less than a month later.⁶²⁷

Van Wallegghem continued his first description with an observation of how they were organised, how they were living and the tasks they performed: “[...] *Their sergeants have stripes, their policemen a red armband, and one sees that these are very conscious of their rank. In each company there is an Englishman directing their works. In one of the camps I also saw an interpreter. He looked like an important fellow and was wearing the long Chinese robe. They are lodged in camps enclosed with barbed wire and live in umbrella tents. They go to their work in groups. They are mostly used to repair roads and dig ditches but more so on the unloading bays. They are not lazy and work at least as hard as our citizens and English soldiers. But what a commotion when a group of these men passes you. They are boisterous and try to outdo one another. I prefer it when they sing a song, their singing is pleasant.*”⁶²⁸ Remarkable in this extract is the self-consciousness of the Chinese gangers and of the interpreter. It is an observation that ties in, not only with what some British wrote, but no doubt also with the self-image of many of the gangers and certainly of the interpreters: that they were here not only to earn money, but also to represent China. The interpreters (and some of the gangers) were moreover educated people considering themselves to possess a certain standing (which they certainly did in the Chinese context). Though it seems rather banal at first, Van Wallegghem’s remark that the Chinese labourers are hard working fellows is not without importance as it marks a

⁶²⁵ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 193-4.

⁶²⁶ For instance in Klein D. (1919) *With the Chinks*, London & New York: John Lane. p. 31 ; Whyman ANJ. (1921) *The psychology of the Chinese coolie. A paper read before the China Society on March 3, 1921*, London: East and West. p. 5 ; Bailey PJ. (2000) *From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I* In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 188.

⁶²⁷ Van Staten V, De Cleyn L-M and Joye E. (2001) *De Abdij-Kazerne Sint-Sixtus, 1914-1918 : dagboekantekeningen*, Poperinge: Kring voor Heemkunde 'Aan de Schreve'. p. 143.

⁶²⁸ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 194.

noted difference with the opinions of many Flemish observers, including Van Wallegghem, after the hostilities had ended.

“They already know a few words of English but virtually none of them can speak the language.”, so Van Wallegghem continues on 6 August 1917, *“For instance, as I was passing them shortly before noon one day, they kept on saying « Watch, watch? » What time is it? I believe their stomachs were grumbling, because when I showed them there were only five more minutes until midday, they nodded contentedly as they would soon be filling their bellies with their beloved rice. Rice is the order of the day for them: in the morning, in the noon and in the evening, always rice which they eat with their sticks.”*⁶²⁹ Though our priest in his remark on their food preferences, mentions only *“their beloved rice”*, in most other Flemish witness accounts, it was the Chinese predilection for leek, onions and especially garlic that was remarked upon, be it rather for the associated mouth odours.⁶³⁰ One spokesperson was even able to remember quite accurately the Chinese word for garlic and this more than 80 years after she would have heard it being used.⁶³¹

“In Reninghelst there are several thousands of these men at work and in Poperinghe even more”, Van Wallegghem went on on 6 August 1917, repeating his comment on the childishness of the Chinese but adding information on the harsh treatment they received: *“They are big children and should be treated like children. To keep them in order you must use convincing arguments and this is why their sergeants have a thin iron rod, which occasionally comes into contact with the men’s skin; this does not disturb them, they laugh and are again well behaved. They also use other punishments and recently as I was passing along one of their camps I saw one of them wearing a yoke around his neck (a kind of toilet seat) while another had a block and chain around his neck, and they had to dig a ditch ringed in this way.”*⁶³² Whether the men were indeed ‘not disturbed’ by

⁶²⁹ Ibidem, p. 194-5.

⁶³⁰ Leeuwerck E. (1976) "The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinge, 1917-1919. *Aan de Schreve* 6: 7-9. p. 9; Hagen G. (1996) Eenen dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 80 ; Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo. p. 211-212.

⁶³¹ In the interview, quoted in Hagen G. (1996) Eenen dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 80, Jeanne Battheu pronounces “shua” which is actually quite close to the Mandarin for garlic suàn - 蒜.

⁶³² Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 195.

being hit by an iron rod, is highly questionable, it is rather that the Flemish priest could not fathom their in his eyes unnatural reaction to being hurt. But that the beating suffered by the Chinese shocked the Belgians is clear from the only and short quote we have of the Chinese by Brother Victor of the Abbey of Saint-Sixtus (5 September 1917): *“Today a group of some 25 Chinese have arrived. They were all workers and the sergeant leading them was beating them mercilessly with his stick, as if they were animals.”*⁶³³ As we have seen, for many British supervisors, to beat their labourers seemed only natural.

In December 1917 Van Wallegghem observed a collective punishment, clearly linked to a strike - and thus a manifestation of agency and collective steadfastness on behalf of the Chinese: *“The Chinese in some camps are getting more and more rebellious. Yesterday they stabbed an English captain. Today in Busseboom there were some thirty who refused to work and they laid themselves on the ground to be beaten. They preferred the strokes of the cane to giving in. I walked past the camp of Verhaeghe and see three standing with their arms open tied to the wire. One has his leg tied up. That must be far from pleasant as today it has frozen quite hard.”*⁶³⁴ The three men ‘standing with their arms open’ had evidently been subjected to ‘Field Punishment No. 1’, a reminder that the Chinese labourers were submitted to the British Army regulations. According to Wou, this type of corporal punishment, also known as ‘crucifixion’, stirred the public opinion back in China.⁶³⁵

That the CLC men were often treated in a hard way by their British officers, was one reason why Belgian civilians pitied them. In one interview, Jeanne Battheu constantly spoke of the Chinese as “poor fellows” because of their illiteracy, because they were out of place and because of the harsh treatment they received on the part of their British officers.⁶³⁶ And even more than 90 years later, in the very last interviews with locals who had lived through the Great War some elderly Flemish were still pitying the Chinese: *“So far from home, they must have suffered*

⁶³³ Van Staten V, De Cleyl L-M and Joye E. (2001) *De Abdij-Kazerne Sint-Sixtus, 1914-1918 : dagboekantekeningen*, Poperinge: Kring voor Heemkunde 'Aan de Schreve'. p. 143.

⁶³⁴ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 271.

⁶³⁵ Wou P. (1939) *Les travailleurs Chinois et la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Pedone. p. 26.

⁶³⁶ Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 82.

from homesickness heavily and some 'tsjings' indeed got completely lost."

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Chinese traditions and habits were noticed, both directly and indirectly. The fondness for sparrows and especially the men's ability to tame the little birds, something the visitor still notices today when roaming the streets of a Chinese town, fascinated Flemish kids.⁶³⁸ Few things, however, are more culture-specific than funeral practices. Van Wallegem recorded on 28 February 1918 how in Reninghelst a Chinese was buried under a "round mound of earth"⁶³⁹, which is indeed customary in North China. Godelieve Ruysen,⁶⁴⁰ daughter of a Reninghelst farmer, remembered many decades later a conversation on Chinese burial practices she had with a British officer who used to visit the farm to buy milk and butter. The man worked in a sawmill that had been set up on one of the farm's fields. He explained that apart from duckboards and firesteps, "they also made coffins for the 'tsjings.' We asked the officer why they were buried in coffins while the fighting soldiers were buried in blankets. We could not understand what those little, yellow men had more [why they had a higher standing]. The officer explained it had to do with their beliefs. They were given food and tools in their coffin. He said they were here only to work and thus they would be able to continue their toil over there. Once I noticed that a lot of coffins were being made. Apparently many had been killed near Dickebusch."⁶⁴¹ Her fellow villager André Houwen even attended a Chinese funeral as a kid, being surprised he wasn't chased away, and he noticed: "They put such a fellow in a coffin made of sleepers and he was carried on bamboo sticks by six of them. And then they let themselves fall to the ground. Yes, that was their ritual."⁶⁴² That Chinese funeral customs were generally respected during the war is still noticeable at Chinese cemeteries and plots on the Western Front: according to the rules of feng shui they have been laid out on a ground

⁶³⁷ Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo. p. 213.

⁶³⁸ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs. p. 299-300 ; Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klapproos. p. 178.

⁶³⁹ Van Wallegem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 540.

⁶⁴⁰ Born 17 August 1897. Married Albert Cambron with whom she farmed in Reninghelst. Interviewed on her 107th (!) birthday in 2004 she remarked: "I can easier remember what happened in the Great War than last week" (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 17 augustus 2004).

⁶⁴¹ Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klapproos. p. 225.

⁶⁴² Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs. p. 168-9.

sloping towards a brook (or at least temporary streaming water) with the head towards the higher ground and the feet towards the water⁶⁴³. I will come back on the Chinese cemeteries in the section on material witnesses of the Chinese presence in France and Belgium.

As a priest Achiel Van Walleghem was obviously interested in the religion of the Chinese though he was not really able to fathom it, apart from the few Catholics among them. *“Concerning their religion, I have noticed some Catholics among them. Although nearly all are gawping at me, not knowing what my costume signifies, I did meet some pointing at me and from there to the sky. In Hector Dalle’s hut there was one who showed me the crucifix, pointed at me (God’s man), then to himself, and then pointed a finger towards the sky (God). The Reverend School Director of Poperinghe took the confessions of several of them, using two prints with the Commandments, one in Chinese and one in French. When he asked them to pray the Act of Contrition, the boys started to weep. In Proven I met a Chinese priest, with black soft hat and long jacket, but I don’t know his religion.”* (6 August 1917)⁶⁴⁴

While sharing religious beliefs and having common acquaintances could bring them together, the interaction between the Chinese and the local population was much more stimulated by commercial interests, as is clearly demonstrated by the following paragraph in Van Walleghem’s diary, dated 5 November 1917: *“An order has been issued prohibiting the Chinese from entering shops. Civilians are no longer entitled to sell them anything. Nobody knows the reason for this. Some claim that in the coffee houses Australian soldiers had poured rum in the coffee of some Chinese and had made them drunk. Others claim that they give too much away to women and children. However, after a while the order was attenuated for them. The Chinese are childish but not stupid. They do know the value of things and you will not be able to deceive them easily. They always look for the best and most beautiful items and will not readily buy trash. They pay but like to haggle about the price. They like the most beautiful shops and that is where they usually do their purchases. I have no idea what they earn but some of them seem to have a great deal of cash on them. They buy many watches and rings. Some shopkeepers have learnt a little*

⁶⁴³ Directorate of Labour. *Appendix to Notes for Officers of labour companies. Chinese Labour. October 1917.* A copy has been preserved in NA, WO 107/37, “Work of the labour force during the war: Report”.

⁶⁴⁴ Van Walleghem A. (2017) 1917. *The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Walleghem*, Brighton EER. p. 195-6.

Chinese to draw them and keep them as customers, and have found this to be an effective tool."⁶⁴⁵ The remarkable fact that local inhabitants were learning some Chinese, was repeated in the same diary some months later, on 8 January 1918.⁶⁴⁶ As asking what things are called and learning how to pronounce even just some words takes time, this remark not only assumes the existence of a rather friendly attitude towards the Chinese and vice versa, but also the opportunity and possibility of more profound and relaxed conversations between the two parties.

The Chinese' attraction to shops and their preference for watches had already been noticed by Van Wallegghem in his first description of them on 6 August 1917 and was confirmed in January 1918 when he precised that *"their favourite occupation is to gawp at shop windows, preferably those of sweet and fruit shops, and if they see something they like they will enter 10 at a time and start asking the prices of everything and if they do decide to buy something, they are very suspicious of being diddled. [...]* One of these days I came across a Chinese, wearing a small watch on each arm. How he was proud when he saw I was looking at his watches."⁶⁴⁷ This obsession with timepieces, mentioned by more witnesses,⁶⁴⁸ has also been noticed in connection with the Indian labourers where I remarked that a watch could additionally exemplify modernity as well as being master of one's time. Of course it could also have been a financial investment and thus a way of saving. In the same vein, Poperinghe inhabitant Ernest Leeuwerck remarked that the Chinese labourers were among the first he noticed to invest in gold.⁶⁴⁹ A more general cunning commercial instinct was noted by more Flemish commentators.⁶⁵⁰

The workers were also keen on having their photos taken, another modern device more easily available in Europe than in China. *"The*

⁶⁴⁵ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p. 258-9.

⁶⁴⁶ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 533.

⁶⁴⁷ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p.193-4.

⁶⁴⁸ Ernest Leeuwerck in Leeuwerck E. (1976) "The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinge, 1917-1919. *Aan de Schreve* 6: 7-9. p. 9; Valère De Corte in Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo. p. 211-212 ; Fisher W. (2008) Dr. Stuckey, gone with the coolies : the letters from Dr. E.J. Stuckey concerning his work with the Chinese Labour Corp in France during 1917-1918. In *Flanders Fields Museum*, 208. p. 70.

⁶⁴⁹ Leeuwerck E. (1976) "The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinge, 1917-1919. *Aan de Schreve* 6: 7-9. p. 9.

⁶⁵⁰ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs. p. 169; Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo. p. 211-212.

*photographer of Westouter has very much work with the Chinese who day-in day-out want to have portrait photographs taken. They ask a school girl to stand beside them and give her a 'folank' [franc] of pocket money, though are unhappy as they come out dark", wrote Van Wallegghem on 12 March 1918.*⁶⁵¹ Jeanne Battheu in Poperinghe, whose father was a photographer, often stood along when he made snaps and also noticed how their complexion caused the photographer certain headaches: "[...] a Chinese, has a yellowish outlook, isn't it? But the photos of the French and English were white [...] so when they came, they always said: 'plenty washie wash'. They thought the photos had to be washed to be white. But, yes, that's not possible, yellow is yellow and on the photographs they seemed black. That was to their dislike, they paid for it and hence, it should also be 'plenty washie wash'." As she was often around in her father's studio, Jeanne often had to pose with a Chinese. The ganger always asked her father politely: "*madame, madame*" and then she had to pose among the Chinese. Jeanne was pretty sure in the mid-1990s that she was "*still hanging somewhere in China*".⁶⁵² And there are indeed tens of photographs of CLC-men posing with local children, while the number of portraits with local adults can be easily counted on one hand. As with the Indians, the Chinese were not only charmed by local children or wanted them as an exotic touch to their portraits but dealing with children more easily enables to overcome the invisible boundaries of language and culture. As we will see in the next section, it was even possible that behind an at first sight rather plain photograph with a child a more obscure message was conveyed.

It appears from the accounts that actual meetings -get together - between Belgian citizens and Chinese labourers were quite rare, though not entirely unknown, and if they occurred they were rather superficial. The segregation policy adopted by the British army and the insurmountable language barrier made mutual contacts extremely difficult. As a consequence there are no accounts on (lasting) friendships between Chinese and Belgians as they existed between Indians and French civilians. Yet, there are accounts of friendly feelings towards each other: "*It was winter and my mother was ill and lay on a mattress next to the hot stove. At a certain moment a 'tsjing' entered; he was a regular visitor. He saw my mother lying there and put his hands to his head saying*

⁶⁵¹ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 543.

⁶⁵² Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 81.

“Madam ouch ouch madam, madam” and quickly ran away. Mother thought he was scared of becoming ill. But he soon returned with a few bags, in which there were amongst others oranges. “Here madam, madam”, he said. The *tsjing* showed compassion towards mother. That must have been in 1917 as it happened when we lived in the *Priesterstraat* [in Poperinghe]”, so Margareta Santy recounted towards the end of her life.⁶⁵³ Sometimes there was ‘talk’ of even having a party together: when the Chinese celebrated their New Year in the streets of Poperinge, the children of the town jumped and danced along and were cheered and photographed by their parents.⁶⁵⁴ “I still see that on TV. Snakes and the Chinese were inside. And so many colours too, that was magnificent”, Jeanne Battheu recollected in the 1990s, adding that it was the first time she saw men walking on stilts “as high as the roof”. This Northern Chinese folk art of *caigaoqiao* 踩高跷 could however easily been misinterpreted as another witness presumed that “the ‘*tsjings*’ also walked around on stilts in order to peep into the people’s bedrooms”.⁶⁵⁵

Because of social taboos some elements regarding meeting Chinese labourers were not mentioned in the accounts, and thus remain unknown. For instance, there are hardly any reports of romantic or sexual relationships between Flemish women and Chinese labourers. Yet they must have existed. Doctor Frederick Strange, captain and surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps and serving in the Chinese hospital, wrote in *The Lancet* that “the venereal wards were always full”.⁶⁵⁶ One living proof was Germain W., a man who was nicknamed ‘the *Tsjing*’. This man born in March 1920 in Westouter and displaying clear physical characteristics of the Chinese, lived in the village of Reninghelst until his death in 2001. His Asian traits were explained to the local children by telling them his mum suffered from jaundice when she had given birth. He also displayed a remarkable relationship with birds, who flew freely in his house.⁶⁵⁷ The

⁶⁵³ Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klaproos. p. 21-2.

⁶⁵⁴ Leeuwerck E. (1976) "The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinge, 1917-1919. *Aan de Schreve* 6: 7-9. ; Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 81.

⁶⁵⁵ Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo. p. 211-212.

⁶⁵⁶ Strange FC. (1920) The Chinese Hospital in France, 1917-1919. *The Lancet* 195: 990-991.

⁶⁵⁷ Personal communication by Piet Chielens, co-ordinator of In Flanders Fields Museum and native of Reninghelst. The ‘*Tsjing*’ was the sixth of eight children in the family, the others being born before 1914 and after 1921. It seemed the father was absent during and immediately after the war. There is a parallel here with the account in the previous

only other witness account with a sexual purview is that of an elderly Jeanne Battheu who remembered decades later: *“In Villa Jeanne, we were playing with postcards showing good looking girls and boys. Sometimes we would put them in the window. One day a Chinese entered, he thought he would find real girls. My grandmother chased him out with a broom”*.⁶⁵⁸ More honourable relationships occurred as well: interpreter Gu Xingqing mentions how his friend and colleague Dai Buyun had a Belgian girlfriend, Germaine, who was a refugee from Ypres living in Boeschepe.⁶⁵⁹

Van Wallegghem already hinted at it when he wrote that virtually none of the Chinese could speak English⁶⁶⁰ and it seems indeed that this impossibility to communicate easily with each other hampered most attempts to get to know each other. Short sentences, learning the odd Chinese word and body language were some ways of overcoming the language barrier, but it did not allow for conveying deeper messages.⁶⁶¹ The priest saw *“a Chinese being very angry at a schoolboy. I hear the boy had raised his little finger, something that makes them furious. When, on the other hand, one gives the thumbs up, they are extremely well-disposed”*.⁶⁶² The little words or signs Belgians and Chinese learned each other, were all too often aimed at making fun of each other: *“The people learned those poor souls quite some curses, and these Chinese had no idea what it meant”*.⁶⁶³ But true communication and thus a true encounter between the two communities seemed a bridge too far. Georges Decrock

chapter of Jacquelin D., the grandson of an Indian who was nicknamed “L’Indien” and whose grandfather after returning from the war had equally ‘carried on’, acquiescing in his wife’s wartime infidelities.

⁶⁵⁸ Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 82.

⁶⁵⁹ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 84.

⁶⁶⁰ Van Wallegghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Wallegghem*, Brighton EER. p.194.

⁶⁶¹ Leeuwerck E. (1976) "The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinge, 1917-1919. *Aan de Schreve* 6: 7-9. p.9; Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs. p. 169 and 299 ; Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 79-82 ; Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klaproos. p. 21-2.

⁶⁶² Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 530.

⁶⁶³ Hagen G. (1996) Een en dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109. p. 82.

from La Clytte summed it all up quite well in 1978 : “A real discourse with them was impossible, save the words ‘promenade Poperiche’ and ‘mademoiselle Poperiche’. I think they called Poperinghe Poperiche.”⁶⁶⁴ His “I think” in the last sentence is telling: he wasn’t entirely sure of the meaning of the sentence. And this was the case in nearly all the accounts that mention words or signs used to communicate with the Chinese labourer: each time the Flemish spokesperson was unsure or entirely ignorant of the precise significance. And in such a situation true meeting is indeed out of the question.

After the resumption of the war of movement in Belgian Flanders on 28 September 1918, inhabitants of the areas previously occupied by the Germans and returning refugees also came into contact with the Chinese Labour Corps. However, the moderately-positive attitude of the Belgians towards the coolies disappeared after the end of the war and public opinion completely turned against them. According to Laura Lannoote⁶⁶⁵ in one interview, they inspired more fear than joy among the returning population: “They were strange guys, conspicuously dressed, with strange eating habits and a strange language. The only thing they were not able to do, was to work”⁶⁶⁶, offering an interesting contradiction with the earlier mentioned quotation of Father Van Wallegghem from 6 August 1917 in which he praised the Chinese labourers’ work ethics. Many different witnesses declared and believed that armed gangs of Chinese wandered the area. In this respect it is important to sketch the larger context of banditry during and in the immediate post-war period. Both in France as in occupied Belgium, there was an important increase in violence immediately after the war, perpetrated by demobilised veterans, returning refugees or even wandering deserters after the liberation.⁶⁶⁷ Even Van Wallegghem had a different opinion by this time: “In July [1919] there were already some 350 men back [in Dickebusch]. They had a hard

⁶⁶⁴ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kimmel: Malegijs. p. 300.

⁶⁶⁵ Houthem, 1904 - Waasten, 24 Nov 1998.

⁶⁶⁶ Seys R and Smagge G. (1993) Te gast bij Laura Lannoote. *De Boezingenaar*. Boezinge, 68.

⁶⁶⁷ Cabanes B. (2004) *La victoire endeuillée : la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920*, Paris: Le Seuil. p. 76 ; Vrints A and Rousseaux X. (2010) La répression étatique d'un phénomène de crise sociale. Le banditisme pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale en Belgique. In: Tallier P-A and Nefors P (eds) *Quand les canons se taisent = En toen zwegen de kanonnen = When the guns fall silent. Actes du colloque international organisé par les Archives de l'État et le Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire (Bruxelles, 3 - 6 novembre 2008)*. Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 271-303.; Leloup P, Rousseaux X and Vrints A. (2014) Banditry in occupied and liberated Belgium, 1914–21. Social practices and state reactions. *Social History* 39: 83-105.

time, working with wood and levelling ground. Some were able to plant or sow somewhat, but most of the time too late and it didn't promise too much. Moreover, the area was made unsafe by all kinds of strange people: front wreckers and especially the Chinese. The English officers, of which there were very few now, no longer had any authority on these men. They ran away from their camps and wandered around, armed with easily accessible grenades and guns. And so, in early June, Jules Bailleul who lived at the Canada, was raided in his house, and while he fled, he was shot, and died some weeks later."⁶⁶⁸ Apart from the date, Van Wallegem had it pretty right: on the night from 9 on 10 May 1919 Bailleul's temporary housing, a wooden hut, at Sint-Hubertushoek (during the war known as Canada Huts), in Dickebusch was raided by three persons. One shot Bailleul in the head with a pistol. His daughter escaped, only slightly wounded. Some weeks later Bailleul died. Four days after the dreadful events, the newspapers reported that the murderers were Chinese, a statement repeated in an official letter by Belgian Minister of the Interior Charles de Broqueville on 30 May 1915 and based on a police report.⁶⁶⁹

The involvement of the minister was not a coincidence: between 29 April and 19 August 1919 not less than six (official) questions on the Chinese Labour Corps were raised in Belgian parliament.⁶⁷⁰ On several occasions throughout the summer of the first post-war year the West-Flemish senators Struye and de Vrière raised concern about the presence of Chinese labourers in former front zone. The senators presented their colleagues and the ministers with a list of crimes allegedly committed by Chinese mainly quoting the press, and asked for a swift removal of all "colonial troops". In his extensive answer of 17 June 1919, the Belgian Minister of War Fulgence Masson admitted he could do little: Belgium had no say over these units and the British Army still needed these men, certainly as peace was not yet officially concluded. The only thing the Belgian government could do was to kindly ask their British counterpart to raise the number of officers attached to the Chinese Labour Corps and to strengthen discipline within the Chinese units, e.g. by enforcing the rule that all Chinese had to remain within a 200 or 300 meter perimeter from their camps.⁶⁷¹ In his answer of 19 August 1919, after a new wave of

⁶⁶⁸ Van Wallegem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 619.

⁶⁶⁹ Brussels, Royal Army Museum (RAM), Moscow Archives, box 3061: "Délits commis par les travailleurs chinois".

⁶⁷⁰ Anon. (1919) *Annales Parlementaires de Belgique. Sénat*, Bruxelles. Meetings of 29 April 1919, 6 May 1919, 10 June 1919, 17 June 1919, 9 July 1919 and 19 August 1919.

⁶⁷¹ Archief van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken [Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels], Diplomatiek Archief [Diplomatic Archives], file 378: "Reconstitution de

crimes allegedly committed by Chinese in the former war zone and after the official conclusion of peace in Versailles on 28 June, Minister Masson advocated that the 12,000 Chinese labourers in West-Flanders were doing useful and dangerous work by clearing the battlefields, and that if the Chinese companies were to be removed at once, this duty would fall upon the Belgians. Hence, it would be more advantageous for Belgium to let them finish their work. In both his official answers of 17 June and 19 August 1919, Minister Masson stressed that according to him, the number of crimes committed by Chinese workers in Belgium, was largely exaggerated by the press and the public opinion.

The Bailleul case was indeed far from the only crime attributed to Chinese labourers in the press and by the locals. Throughout 1919, the Belgian newspapers featured a continuing stream of stories of murder, robbery and theft by Chinese in the former front zone in Flanders. The two most tragic events in West Flanders before the summer of 1919 and attributed to Chinese workers are probably the murder of Julien Vervaeke on 19 May 1919 and the death of Emiel Vantomme, one day after his house was raided on 7 June 1919. Vervaeke, 31 years old, married and a father of two, was cycling with his friend Denorme⁶⁷² from Wervik to Kemmel on that fateful 19 May 1919 when they made a stop at the 'British cemetery at Oosttaverne' [Oosttaverne Wood Cemetery]. After they got off their bikes, some Chinese appeared from a nearby shelter, apparently wanting to steal their bicycles and in the scuffle shots were fired. Vervaeke was killed on the spot with a bullet in his chest while Denorme managed to hide in a hole. Alarmed by the shots, some British soldiers ran to the scene only to see the murderers fleeing. These, however were known and arrested soon thereafter: it concerned nine Chinese labourers.⁶⁷³ Three weeks later, in the night of 7 on 8 June, at Lammerenhoek (in Wervik, along the road to Gheluwe), in his shop that was often frequented by Chinese, Emiel Vantomme, 36 years old, suddenly woke up when a window was smashed. He went to the window and was shot in the face. Subsequently four or five Chinese entered the room through the window. While two held Vantomme's wife, the two others went into the shop. However, the noise had woken up the three children of Vantomme who

la Belgique - Insécurité en Flandre - Travailleurs Chinois" [reconstitution of Belgium - insecurity in Flanders - Chinese workers]. This file somewhat echos the file in the Royal Army Museum and testifies of the fact that such requests on behalf of the Belgian government had effectively been addressed to the British government.

⁶⁷² The first name of Denorme is either Camiel or Leon. Both appear in the sources.

⁶⁷³ *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, 23 May 1919 and oral communication noted by John Desreumaux in Wervik.

were now crying loudly, making the Chinese flee without booty. Vantomme died the next morning.⁶⁷⁴

It is hard to find more and better evidence regarding the reported and rumoured crimes committed by the Chinese: in the spring of 1919 there were as yet no local authorities and thus no police present in what was then called 'the devastated region'. In consequence there are no official records the historian can rely on. The local population that had already returned to this desert could probably not be counted in the thousands, but rather in the hundreds and in some villages even on both hands: Hollebeke for instance had only 85 inhabitants by 31 December 1919,⁶⁷⁵, half a year earlier it must have been a quotient of this! It is obvious that in such a situation there are no local news reports : the local weekly *De Poperingenaar* would only resume its publication on 15 June 1919. Rumours were rife and unrest rose - even in higher echelons. It is very telling that on 17 June 1919 the Belgian Minister of War had his cabinet secretary writing to the Governor of the Province of West Flanders to enquire whether it was true that some thirty murders had been committed by the Chinese, including "une enfant morte ébouillante" [a child dead by scalding].⁶⁷⁶

In some cases there is, however, clear and hard evidence that indeed Chinese were involved in crimes: in the summer of 1919 when not only public opinion but also the parliament in Belgium showed concern regarding the so-called 'Chinese problem', a hastily reinforced gendarmerie kept quite detailed reports of all crimes committed in the Ypres region. Only for the month July 1919, in a report intended for the Minister of War eight crimes were reported as perpetrated by Chinese: several thefts, several burglaries, an assassination attempt and a homicide. The list suggests some of these crimes were the work of one and the same gang, as they happened in the same village or in neighbouring villages during one night or successive nights.⁶⁷⁷ One such well documented event later that summer (actually in the very beginning

⁶⁷⁴ *De Gazette van Brugge*, 11 June 1919; *De Poperingenaar*, 15 June 1919 (This was the very first issue of this regional weekly to appear after the armistice). Logie P-J. (2012) 'The Chinese Labour Corps' in *diskrediet 1914-1918 Wervik-Geluwe. Cahier 2012*. . Wervik: Cultuurdienst van de stad Wervik, 17-20. p. 18-9.

⁶⁷⁵ On 31 May 1920 it was 292 and on 31 December 1920, 488. With thanks to Philip Woets, of the Ypres Municipal Administration and dedicated local historian of his native Hollebeke.

⁶⁷⁶ Brussels, RAM, Moscow Archives, box 3061: "Délits commis par les travailleurs chinois".

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

of autumn) was an armed robbery on estaminet “*In de Ster - A l’Etoile*”, installed in a wooden hut in the hamlet of Kortewilde near Hollebeke (some 7 kilometers South East of Ypres) in the night of 27 to 28 September 1919. Awaken by the sound of explosions, the innkeeper, Henri Taillieu, grabbed a German rifle and shot three times towards his assailants. Chinese labourer 46564 was killed on the spot and the body of worker 62638 was discovered some days later.⁶⁷⁸ Three other Chinese labourers were arrested when they turned up in their camp in Voormezele. All five assailants belonged to 101 Company, Chinese Labour Corps. It is probably not a coincidence that this company, with a considerable record of service in Flanders, left for France less than a week later, on 2 or 3 October.⁶⁷⁹

In many other cases it is indeed much less sure that Chinese were actually involved. On 3 August 1919, the local newspaper *De Poperingenaar* reported that a gang of some 8 to 10 men had undertaken an armed robbery on a café in Boeschepe, just across the border. Two women had been killed. According to the newspaper, the criminals “*had their face blackened and were disguised as Chinese, as Annamites⁶⁸⁰ and as English soldiers*”. It seems criminal gangs intentionally disguised as members of the Chinese Labour Corps. Anyway, whether true or not, the perception that the Chinese labourers were a bunch of criminals was there!

Nevertheless, when dealing with post-war attitudes towards Chinese workers, it is of uttermost importance to point out that many stories of armed robberies and murders by Chinese labourers have been told during decades and have been passed on from one generation to another in the south of West Flanders. One just has to consider the accounts first published in 1978,⁶⁸¹ 2001,⁶⁸² and 2010,⁶⁸³ and which feature in the anthology of witness accounts (Appendix 8). In 1978 Gaston Boudry⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁷⁸ Respectively Gao Xinglin 高克林 and Zhang Tongsheng 張同盛, commemorated in Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge: Special Memorials 2 and 1. These special memorials do not mark the grave, but only indicate that they are buried ‘somewhere’ in the cemetery.

⁶⁷⁹ RAM, Moscow Archives, box 3061: “Délits commis par les travailleurs chinois”.

⁶⁸⁰ “Annamites” was a common denominator for all soldiers and labourers from Indochina, whether they were from Tonkin, Annam or elsewhere. Even Chinese working for the British were sometimes designated as “Annamites”.

⁶⁸¹ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kemmel: Malegijs.

⁶⁸² Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klaproos.

⁶⁸³ Vanoutrive P. (2011) *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*, Tielt Lannoo.

⁶⁸⁴ Zillebeke, 31 March 1901 - Ypres, 16 October 1981.

stated : “Ypres was then full of ‘tsjings’, who had to clean the front and clear everything. They weren’t doing a lot. They did little else than scavenging. They had to clear the battlefields, but they combed it out. Occasionally they came to look into our hut there,⁶⁸⁵ but if they saw someone was home, they went away. The first girl buried in Ypres, after we returned, was a girl shot by ‘tsjings’ at ‘De Wittenhuizen’.⁶⁸⁶ She was about sixteen years old. She lived there with her parents in a hut. She had been on the road and had felt pursued by Chinese. She went in and closed the door or shored it. They shot through the door and she was dead. I know where her grave is on the Ypres town cemetery, as my sister also died in 1919 and is buried in Ypres. They learned to shoot after the war, these Chinese. They had never shot before, had no rifles, but they found all kinds of things when clearing. They learned how to throw grenades and how to shoot.”⁶⁸⁷ Again, this witness account is at least in part based on facts: Marthe Staelens, 13 years old, was indeed killed on 25 July 1919 during an attack on her family’s small shop along the Kimmel Road on the outskirts of Ypres. In the middle of the night, shots were fired through the door of their hut, wounding father Gustave and killing young Marthe. She was indeed the first girl to be buried in Ypres after the return of the town administration.⁶⁸⁸ It should be noted, however, that no official account states that she was killed by Chinese labourers. The local newspaper report stated: “*It would seem the culprits are Chinese soldiers; there are several camps in the neighbourhood of their dwelling*”.⁶⁸⁹ Her brother Maurice is in fact the only witness stating that the assailants were Chinese though he also declared it was pitch black and he could not see much. No-one was arrested for the murder.

Likewise, Louis Garrein,⁶⁹⁰ shared this account of the CLC in the 20th century’s final year:

⁶⁸⁵ His family was then housed on Stationsplaats, now Colaertplein, opposite the Ypres’ railway station.

⁶⁸⁶ Literally “White House”. This was a hamlet along the Kimmel Road, just beyond the disused canal Ypres-Comines and opposite today’s Wittenhuisstraat.

⁶⁸⁷ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Kimmel: Malegijs. p. 298-9.

⁶⁸⁸ Town Archives of Ypres, Register of Births and Deads, 1919 -. Her death has been declared by Pierre Vandenbraambussche, local police commissioner (and later founder of the Last Post).

⁶⁸⁹ *De Poperinghenaar*, 27 July 1919

⁶⁹⁰ Zillebeke, 31 December 1906 - 20 December 1999. The son of small farmer in Zillebeke, Louis Garrein fled with his family early in the war, only to return in 1920. Between the wars he set up a thriving local trade in coal, beer and other drinks, becoming a well-known figure in the village.

*“In January 1920, we returned to Zillebeke. We had to live in a wooden hut. Living there was dreadful and extremely cold in the winter. The food was cooked with water taken from shell holes. Everything had been shot to pieces, there was barbed wire everywhere, shell holes, streets in duckboards, narrow gauge railways, trenches. [...] Some Chinese were still present here. We called them the ‘Tsjings’. There weren’t many of them and they didn’t stay here for much longer. They were dangerous lads. At night they burgled the people living in the wooden huts. In Houthem, they tried to break into the premises of a tobacco cutter. The latter grasped a rifle and shot through the door. One of the ‘Tsjings’ died on site, the other was able to escape.”*⁶⁹¹ On the one hand, the last two sentences most probably refer to the true event of the aforementioned attack on Henri Taillieu in Hollebeke - apart from innkeeper, Taillieu was also a tobacco cutter and his inn was halfway between Hollebeke and Houthem - where indeed one criminal was killed on the spot and another one’s body was later found. On the other hand, words as “the Chinese... are...dangerous lads” in this account from someone who had only returned in January 1920 and thus would have met just some of the very few remaining labourers, points to a phenomenon of generalisation. Right after the war, in the nearly lawless situation of the former Front zone where the nearest police station was to be found tens of kilometres away and where the few inhabitants having already returned lived in pill boxes or hastily built wooden huts, the Chinese had become ideal scapegoats for all unsolved crimes.

Intensified by racist prejudices, it is this image of the Chinese labourers as ‘dangerous lads’ that lingered in the collective memory of the Ypres region until quite recently. It entirely overshadowed any positive approach or even just more nuanced view of the CLC’s deployment. These negative recollections were taken for granted, even by local historians. In 1974 the authors of a monograph on the small village of Zillebeke still accepted bluntly that *“some murderous men eager to loot escaped the negligent supervision of their camps, went out to raid during the night and attacked the huts of the returned civilians. Defenceless and lonely travellers were even attacked in full day [...] The earliest returnees had to get their provisions in Poperinge and always carried a revolver to defend themselves against the ‘chinks’, if necessary”*.⁶⁹²

⁶⁹¹ Dumoulin K, Vansteenkiste S and Verdoodt J. (2001) *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*, Koksijde: De Klaproos. p. 121.

⁶⁹² Vandemaele J and Coudron G. (1974) *Zillebeke, verdoken dorp in de glooiingen van de natuur*, Rekkem: Jomale. p. 145.

For Northern France, many authors⁶⁹³ have ascertained the same phenomenon of scapegoating on behalf of the local population of the devastated zone towards the Chinese labourers, both British and French-employed. And, as in Belgium, the local authorities demanded the removal of all Chinese throughout the summer of 1919. Yet, unlike in Belgium, at least as far as we know, Chinese were even physically attacked in France, with examples of children throwing stones at passing Chinese on lorries.⁶⁹⁴ According to Marcilloux, targeting the Chinese, was also attacking the statist modalities of the reconstruction.⁶⁹⁵ In other words: in the eyes of the locals, the Chinese represented the French centralised way in which the reconstruction would be organised and which they opposed. Nivet explains it even more simply as plain mistrust for those who come from elsewhere.⁶⁹⁶ Further explanations for the negative perception of the Chinese by the locals are according to Marcilloux the persistence of the late 19th century negative image of the Chinese (the 'Yellow Peril') in Western Europe, the civilian nature of the Chinese contribution to the Great War (and thus considered 'minor' and a cause for resentment), and the fact that the Chinese labourers were seen as carriers of potentially subversive ideas (if we accept the thesis that the Chinese labourers were

⁶⁹³ Clout H. (1996) *After the ruins : restoring the countryside of Northern France after the Great War*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press. p. 96-8; Marcilloux P. (2003) Les "Chinois, pillards, voleurs et assassins" ou la grande peur du travailleur colonial, 1918-1919. In: Cesari L and Varaschin D (eds) *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 129-156. ; Marcilloux P. (2012) Les travailleurs chinois et la reconstruction du Pas-de-Calais. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 225-241.; Boniface X. (2012) Camps militaires britanniques et travailleurs chinois dans le Pas-de-Calais pendant la Grande Guerre. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 157-176.; Nivet P. (2012) Les travailleurs "chinois" dans le contexte de la reconstruction. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 203-223.; Dornel L. (2012) Les travailleurs chinois vus par l'administration militaire française (1914-1918): assignation, identification et représentations. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 265-284. p. 277-282 ; Regnard C. (2012) un quotidien violent? Réflexions sur les conditions de vie des travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 285-302.

⁶⁹⁴ TNA, WO 95/4173/1, "Lines of Communication Troops", "1st Labour Group Headquarters", War Diary, October 1917.

⁶⁹⁵ Marcilloux P. (2003) Les "Chinois, pillards, voleurs et assassins" ou la grande peur du travailleur colonial, 1918-1919. In: Cesari L and Varaschin D (eds) *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 129-156. p. 142.

⁶⁹⁶ Nivet P. (2012) Les travailleurs "chinois" dans le contexte de la reconstruction. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 203-223. p. 220.

politicised and had accepted syndicalist opinions).⁶⁹⁷ Apart from the argument on the persistent late 19th century negative image of the Chinese, the explanations given by these two French authors are inconvincing, insufficient or not applicable to the Belgian situation. On the one hand the existence of a pre-war negative image of the Chinese in (rural!) Belgium was highly plausible taking into account how the martyrdom of some Catholic missionaries during the Boxer Rising had been widely reported in the Belgian Catholic community, but there seems not to have been a more generalised scare for a 'Yellow Peril' as in France or the UK.⁶⁹⁸ Yet on the other hand, as I've argued, there was not a complete unfamiliarity with China and the Chinese, precisely through the many Catholic missions keeping in touch with those at home. Resentment against the Chinese as a consequence of anti-central government feelings are not applicable to the devastated zone in Flanders through most of 1919 as simply most civil authorities, whether local or central, had not yet returned and it was far too early for concrete plans for the reconstruction. Likewise, there is no indication that the Chinese were ever reproached by the locals or by the Belgian press for not having sent military support, but only labourers. This seems too much like an intellectual argument to me. And that the Chinese were disliked because of their potentially subversive stands is simply anachronistic and implausible: not only was it entirely beyond the possibility of local people and even of most of the civilians in France and Belgium to know about the social and political debates that were ongoing among the Chinese, but until now the consideration of the Chinese labourers in Europe as harbingers of social change in China is only a hypothesis, be it a plausible one, that is based on what happened after their return to China. Any manifestation of an enhanced social and political awareness while still in Europe was of quite a different nature: either rather neutral expressions of group awareness (displaying the Chinese flag, erecting a memorial stone) or they were staged to stress specific demands from the British (or French) employer.

Then, how to explain this phenomenon of scapegoating of the Chinese labourers and the persistence of their negative image so long after the war? As explained earlier, for many Belgian refugees who had just

⁶⁹⁷ Marcilloux P. (2003) Les "Chinois, pillards, voleurs et assassins" ou la grande peur du travailleur colonial, 1918-1919. In: Cesari L and Varaschin D (eds) *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 129-156. p. 150-154.

⁶⁹⁸ Libbrecht U. (2004) *De geelzucht van Europa. China en het Westen*, Leuven: Davidsfonds.; Witchard A. (2014) *England's Yellow Peril. Sinophobia and the Great War*, Melbourne: Penguin.

returned from exile in wartime, the Chinese were the only non-white troops they ever came into contact with. Moreover, the former refugees returned to a completely devastated area and were obliged to dwell in bunkers, abandoned shelters or wooden huts amidst a landscape of death and destruction. They had often lost everything and had to make a new living in this officially 100 % destroyed area where their future was very uncertain. At the same time they saw all these mightily strange men wandering around in their homeland. And not just some, but thousands of them, and this while there were as yet only few returned inhabitants. At the end of April 1919 Camiel Delaere, Dean of the Ypres Cathedral, estimated the number of returned inhabitants at 1200 in Vlamertinghe, at 420 in Elverdinghe, 125 in Dickebusch, 14 in Langemarck, 4 in Zillebeke and none in Messines and Poelcappelle. Even the city of Ypres counted just 125 inhabitants in April 1919, a figure that would rise considerably to 2,126 by the end of that year.⁶⁹⁹ This means that throughout most of 1919, the locals were largely outnumbered by the Chinese, estimated to be present with some 12,000 in Flanders in July 1919.⁷⁰⁰ In such a context the relationship between the Flemish and the Chinese could not be anything but strained. The Chinese to the Flemings became the scapegoat of all that went wrong.

On the other hand, more objective sources do bear witness to the degrading behaviour of at least some of the CLC men. It is an important question why this was the case and I believe there are a number of factors at play.

- There were certainly 'bad elements' in the Chinese Labour Corps, something that was acknowledged even by some of its members. Sun Gan, for instance distinguished the decent labourers among whom "*artisans such as masons, carpenters, tailors and barbers but also farmers, teachers, students and merchants*" from the "*rabble, irregulars from the army and bandits*" whose presence could only have led to "*murder, arson, robbery and immorality*".⁷⁰¹ According to Henry Watthé, a catholic missionary serving with a French Chinese labour unit in Dunkirk, there were many "*former soldiers of the famous White Wolf, long the terror of*

⁶⁹⁹ Baert K. (1999) De Terugkeer. Aspecten van de herbevolking van Ieper na 1918. In: Baert K, Baillieul J-M, Chielens P, et al. (eds) *Ieper, de herrezen stad*. Koksijde: De Klaproos, 9-20. p. 11-13.

⁷⁰⁰ Figure quoted by Belgian Minister Fulgence Masson in parliament on 19 August 1919: Anon. (1919) *Annales Parlementaires de Belgique. Sénat*, Bruxelles., Séance du 19 août 1919.

⁷⁰¹ Sun Gan, Section 256.

northern China” among his labourers⁷⁰², something considered quite plausible by scholars as Gregory James⁷⁰³ and Koen De Ridder⁷⁰⁴. The presence of criminal elements is obviously demonstrated by the above mentioned ‘certified’ crimes recorded by the Belgian gendarmerie. Equally telling is that all Chinese labourers that have been executed by the British military authorities, had been condemned for cases of murder: five of local inhabitants, five of fellow countrymen and one of a British sergeant.⁷⁰⁵ Yet, the occurrence of a certain number of criminals should not be surprising in a Chinese Labour Corps that counted some 95,000 members and where the main condition for recruitment had been to be sound in wind and limb.⁷⁰⁶ As often, the good name of the large majority was squandered by the misdeeds of a very small minority.⁷⁰⁷

- On the former battlefield weapons were readily available everywhere and this could lead to what in social psychology is named a ‘weapons effect’ : the availability or the possession of weapons enhances automatically a more aggressive behaviour in humans, particularly if these humans are already aroused.⁷⁰⁸ And few places would have had such an abundance in all kinds and types of weaponry as the former battlefields in 1919.

- At the same time there was, if not a ‘crisis of authority’, certainly a de facto situation of lawlessness in the former front zone. Most who served were young men who found themselves in a strange environment and without parental guidance. Yet, while during the war the region was populated by hundreds of thousands of military of all ranks, including military police, by early 1919 nearly all had left the former front zone. They had been either demobilised or were engaged in the allied occupation of the Rhineland. This had left a void in policing: in spring 1919 Belgian police (gendarmerie) was only to be found in Poperinghe and Roeselare and in between was a 30 kilometer wide empty and lawless

⁷⁰² Watthé H. (1932) *La belle vie du missionnaire en Chine : récits et croquis*, Vichy: Maison du missionnaire. p. 179.

⁷⁰³ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 609-10.

⁷⁰⁴ De Ridder K. (2014) Een Ne Zha-cultus in West-Vlaanderen? *Aan de Schreve* 44: 2-8.

⁷⁰⁵ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 581; Putkowski J and Sykes J. (1999) *Shot at dawn : executions in World War One by authority of the British Army act*, London: Leo Cooper. passim.

⁷⁰⁶ Thompson E. (1920) The Chinese Labour Corps. *The East & the West : a quarterly review for the study of missions* 18: 313-321. p. 316.

⁷⁰⁷ In China some returned labourers ended up as bandits (or reverted to banditry). Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 225-6.

⁷⁰⁸ Van Hiel A. (2013) *Sociale Psychologie*, Gent: Academia Press. p. 342.

zone. Only in the summer of 1919 would the Belgian authorities sufficiently reinforce the local brigade of Roeselare so that it could provide mobile squads to operate on the former battlefield. A Chinese company of some 450 was in theory kept under surveillance by what the Belgian gendarmerie labeled as 5-6 "*policemen anglais*" and 3-4 "*policemen chinois*"⁷⁰⁹ but, as seen, much evidence points to the fact that chances to roam the landscape freely and off guard were abundant. This lack of discipline and authority seems to have been in particular a British problem, for in Northern France the Chinese employed by the British were considered on the loose while those in French service did not seem to have caused many problems.⁷¹⁰ Anyway, in spring 1919 the Chinese in devastated Flanders - and especially the worse elements among them - must have felt as if they were given free rein after nearly two years of being closely monitored and segregated.

- Finally, the 'state of mind' of many members of the Chinese Labour Corps in 1919 was also favourable for what could be described as an enhanced tendency towards crime. They were living in a landscape full of death and utter destruction. Even a company whose duty was not to recover human remains and dig graves would have regularly encountered decomposing bodies. Most Chinese workers were not able to communicate with the locals and not only the linguistic but also the cultural barriers to engage with each other were vast. The mistrust and outright fear of the locals for the Chinese as expressed in many Belgian post-war witness accounts, would also have acted as a major obstacle and the Chinese must have been aware of these feelings. Mutual understanding, empathy and sympathy seemed impossible. In social psychology such a phenomenon is named 'intergroup anxiety' and again it is considered a factor that can play a role in (collective) aggression.⁷¹¹ To the feeling of total alienation that must have befallen the Chinese in 1919 Flanders, we might also add a feeling of betrayal: many Chinese no doubt expected that once the war over, they would be repatriated without much delay. This feeling was shared by some officers: Captain Menzies, the Canadian missionary turned company commander, considered that after the armistice the British government had broken its contract by retaining

⁷⁰⁹ RAM, Moscow Archives, box 3061: "Délits commis par les travailleurs chinois".

⁷¹⁰ Marcilloux P. (2003) Les "Chinois, pillards, voleurs et assassins" ou la grande peur du travailleur colonial, 1918-1919. In: Cesari L and Varaschin D (eds) *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 129-156. p. 145 ; Boniface X. (2012) Camps militaires britanniques et travailleurs chinois dans le Pas-de-Calais pendant la Grande Guerre. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 157-176. p. 172-3.

⁷¹¹ Van Hiel A. (2013) *Sociale Psychologie*, Gent: Academia Press. p. 393 and 490.

the CLC.⁷¹² Had not the vast majority of the soldiers returned home? The deception not to return home soon might have frustrated them even more. There is no hard evidence that the ‘betrayal in Paris’ which has led to so much outrage in China, and to the emergence (or better strengthening) of the May 4 Movement, had an impact on the labourers in France and Belgium. But it is in the order of things that it did : as we will see later in this chapter more in depth, by 1919 the Chinese Labour Corps as a collective would have much more identified with a certain idea of China, fostered by the intellectuals among their ranks through lectures and newspapers. There is no reason why a sense of a betrayal at the peace conference in Paris, would have turned the Chinese labourers against the locals but frustration and unpleasant stimuli such as stink, destruction, or rejection all arouse negative feelings that once again foster aggression.⁷¹³

Obviously, this enumeration of the contextual factors that according to me explain the noticeable rise in criminal behaviour on behalf of individual Chinese labourers in 1919, is in no way reductive: the Chinese Labour Corps, i.e. the Chinese as a group cannot be blamed collectively for the crimes. In each case there would have been a psychological interaction between individual traits and contextual features. Regarding the increase in violence perpetrated by veterans, refugees and deserters immediately after the Armistice, lawlessness, a crisis of authority and the overall availability of weapons have been invoked too.⁷¹⁴ Yet, the mental state in which the Chinese found themselves - utter alienation and a sense of betrayal - was even more favourable to cross the line for an individual, whether he had a penchant for crime or not.

From the earlier quoted post-war Belgian witness accounts, one could too easily conclude that the image of the Chinese was entirely negative and that there was a general lack of nuance in Belgian opinions on the CLC.

⁷¹² Dong L. (2005) *Cross, Culture and Faith: The Life of James Mellon Menzies*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

⁷¹³ Van Hiel A. (2013) *Sociale Psychologie*, Gent: Academia Press. p. 350.

⁷¹⁴ Cabanes B. (2004) *La victoire endeuillée : la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920*, Paris: Le Seuil. p. 76 ; Vrints A and Rousseaux X. (2010) La répression étatique d'un phénomène de crise sociale. Le banditisme pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale en Belgique. In: Tallier P-A and Nefors P (eds) *Quand les canons se taisent = En toen zwegen de kanonnen = When the guns fall silent. Actes du colloque international organisé par les Archives de l'État et le Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire (Bruxelles, 3 - 6 novembre 2008)*. Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 271-303.; Leloup P, Rousseaux X and Vrints A. (2014) Banditry in occupied and liberated Belgium, 1914–21. Social practices and state reactions. *Social History* 39: 83-105.

However, there were also differing assessments of the Chinese labourers in 1919 and these can offer further clues. One such account is from the famous Flemish writer Cyriel Buysse.⁷¹⁵ In an article for a Dutch newspaper, published in July 1919, Buysse wrote about a village where a solemn religious procession was held for the first time in five years “*the traditional blessing of the fruits of the earth: German prisoners of war in dirty grey uniforms, who are working in the region under the supervision of Belgian and French soldiers; Russian former prisoners of war, which Germany had to release and send here; and then the other foreign creatures, the amber Annamites and Chinese, with their slanting eyes, who are here to clear up the mess.*” What are they thinking, Buysse wondered: “*An inscrutable smile upon their wooden faces. Are they silently mocking what they are seeing? Are they thinking of their own religious ceremonies in their distant country? Or are they already dreaming of the future, of the future supremacy of their race over that impoverished and run down white human race, that committed suicide after years of madness? Who will tell! They smile mysteriously and enigmatically. They remain silent and wait [...]*”⁷¹⁶

The local population could not make head or tail of the Chinese. They didn't fit into their “mental framework” and this also explains their great mythification. Maybe the terms ‘*inscrutable smile*’ and ‘*wooden mugs*’ were merely an expression of the incapacity of the Flemings of that day to place these Chinese in their world. However, from the accounts of witnesses who had enjoyed higher education and thus could be considered as belonging to the intellectual elite like Achiel Van Walleghem or Cyriel Buysse, we can gather that attempts were made to fathom ‘the Other’. Like in the last quote: saying that someone's face is “wooden”, suggests an inability to situate the Chinese look. What emotions could you tell from it? There was childish naivety in that look, but there was also pride of origin – all this can be derived from the small

⁷¹⁵ Buysse (Nevele, 20 Sep 1859 - Afsnee, 25 July 1932) was a Flemish naturalist author and playwright whose works are still popular.

⁷¹⁶ Buysse C. (1980) *Verzameld werk*, Brussel: Manteau., vol. VII, p. 734-5 (originally published as a column *Op wandel in Vlaanderen I* in the Dutch newspaper *Haagse Post*, 19 July 1919), also quoted in Van Parys J. (2007) *Het leven, niets dan het leven. Cyriel Buysse en zijn tijd*, Antwerpen; Amsterdam: Houtekiet; Atlas. p. 557. On Wednesday 6 July 2016 in Merendree during works a skeleton was found that according to the forensic expert had belonged to “an Asian killed in one of the World Wars”. Merendree where the remains were discovered, is tens of kilometres from the former front but just some kilometers from where Buysse was residing in 1919. http://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20160708_02377015 (accessed 24 august 2016).

portrait that Buysse depicts of them in which he expresses the paradoxical aspect of that Chinese image in a masterful manner. This paradox and an impossibility to truly understand one another are probably the concepts that apply for the Flemish accounts on the Chinese Labour Corps and that have led to stories, almost myths, which to the present day continue to play a role in the collective memory of the former front zone in Belgian Flanders.

Chinese war experiences

*"We work ourselves to death for the westerners
It is not easy to earn our money this way.
The rules are different, the customs are different
We do not understand a word of the language
We ask our interpreter what to do next
for the slightest thing we have to appear in court
but no one listens when we reply
They make us bow for their punishments - where is justice then?"
"No grudge!
This is the way it should be
we were recruited to do hard labour
over rivers and seas we travelled to foreign lands
Our family receives part of our wage
Rice and noodles we get to eat, no waste
medication for free, and clothes
Our pay is not bad
The family is the better for it.
Didn't you join up out of free will?"⁷¹⁷*

Thus goes a 'song ' written by Sun Gan to soothe his friend Zhang Ruisheng (from Gaomi 高密, Shandong) who was often angry and displeased with his British wardens. As the words of the song demonstrate, Sun did his best to look at things from both sides.

It is one of the reasons why this Sun Gan 孙干 (1882-1962) is the most important of the six Chinese witnesses whose accounts of their experiences in Europe I analyse in this section. Sun was a young and poor

⁷¹⁷ Sun Gan, Section 86.

village teacher from the district of Boshan 博山 in middle Shandong. Having gone through teachers training college, he was obviously schooled. Yet, he joined up as a common labourer in June 1917, was given service number 63484 and would eventually serve in the 102nd Company. Unlike most of his fellow recruits, his main motivation to sign was not money but his strong desire to see the West. Sun left a 150 page manuscript that was only recently published in China⁷¹⁸ and hence had not been rewritten or edited for contemporary purposes as Gu did. His memoirs are extensive and cover his part in the war from his motivations to join up to his return in his village on 7 January 1920. The 258 numbered sections are somewhat unstructured, skipping from one subject to another. Sun often conveyed his inner feelings in poems, despite the fact he considered himself not a very good poet. Though not entirely representative for the bulk of the labourers due to the education he received, as a common labourer Sun at least did live and work among them, something the interpreters whose accounts I also use did not. His memoirs enable us to get as close as possible and imaginable to the ordinary men who made up the Chinese Labour Corps, even if this is through the eyes of someone who considered himself different due to the education he had received. The only two other 'common' Chinese labourers to whose accounts I have (partly) access were Jiang Jinghai 蒋镜海 who served with the 98th Company and Yan Zhensheng 杨振声. The latter was Shandong farmer recruited with registration number 1133 who left five pages of war recollections.⁷¹⁹ Yan had travelled to Europe via South Africa not really realising he was going to war. At the front he served in the 3rd company CLC, which was active near Poperinghe. Eventually, Yan Zhensheng and his comrades returned to their villages in October 1919, after a brief sojourn in San Francisco where they were welcomed by the local Chinese community celebrating the 'Chinese' victory over Germany.

⁷¹⁸ After a limited edition in 2009, it was republished as 孙干. (2013) 《华工记》

Huagong ji [Notes of a Chinese labourer], 天津 Tianjin: 社会科学院出版社 Shehui Kexue Yuan chubanshe [Social Sciences Publishing House]. I use the Dutch translation by Philip Vanhaelemeersch, now published as Gan S. (2017) *Vive Labeur. Wedervaren van een Chinese arbeider in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Veurne: Hannibal. I do, however, refer to the numbered sections in the Chinese publication and unpublished manuscript of the Dutch translation.

⁷¹⁹ "My experiences as Labourer Overseas" has been published in a collection of sources on the history of the province of Shandong, published in Beijing in 1998. It has been re-narrated and quoted in Vanhaelemeersch P. (2014) *Chinezen in Poperinge en omstreken in... 1917. Aan de Schreve* 44: 14-21.

These three accounts by common members of the Chinese Labour Corps have been complemented with three other accounts, two shorter and one longer, by interpreters who served in the Corps. Of these the lengthier memoirs of Gu Xingqing 顾杏卿 take centre stage. We are not well informed about his life, but we know he was born around 1896 in the neighbourhood of Shanghai and that he later became a language teacher in that very city.⁷²⁰ In 1937 Gu published his “Memoirs of my Work during the World War”, which clearly have been based on precise and elaborate notes he took during the war when he served as an interpreter with the 49th company CLC.⁷²¹ Moment and place of publication are no coincidence: after a series of earlier confrontations - Gu had lost some of his wartime notes during the Japanese bombardment of Shanghai’s Zhabei-suburb 闸北 on 28 January 1932- fully fledged war between China and Japan would break out in the summer of 1937. With the publication of his memoirs, Gu wanted to witness the realities of modern war and to encourage his fellow countrymen in the coming hard times, as is made clear in the three forewords to the publication. Besides Gu’s memoirs I used shorter quotes bequeathed by the interpreters Zhang Bangyong 张邦永 from the 64th company and Xia Qifeng 夏奇峯 who had resided in Reninghelst with his 39th company and was a personal friend of Gu Xingqing.

The restricted number of just six witness accounts - some very short - points to the difficulty of finding and accessing Chinese sources on the Chinese Labour Corps, and this despite their presence in large numbers on the Western Front. For the Chinese we do not have something like letters or reports of the censor, as in the Indian case, though they might have existed for the Chinese were allowed to write two letters a month and their letters were read by military censors both in France and in Weihaiwei.⁷²² The absence of a comparable source means we are denied

⁷²⁰ There is an English and Chinese wikipedia page dedicated to Gu :

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gu_Xingqing (accessed 30 December 2017).

⁷²¹ 顾杏卿. (1937) 《欧战工作回忆录》 *Ouzhan gongzuo huiyilu [Memoirs of my Work in the European War]*, 长沙 Changsha: 商务印书馆 Shangwu yinshuguan [Commercial Press]. It was translated in Dutch in 2009 by Philip Vanhaelemeersch and published with an extensive introduction as Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo.

⁷²² O'Neill M. (2012) *Frederick. The Life of My Missionary Grandfather in Manchuria*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing. p. 115. Up to date, there is even only one recorded example of an envelope sent by a worker to China: Chiu S. (2009) Paper Artifacts and Postal History of Chinese Labour Corps. In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》

the voice of the common Chinese worker. And so, if we want to learn how the Chinese experienced the Western Front, we necessarily have to take our recourse to memoirs or other accounts by the few educated labourers, interpreters, or YMCA-personnel, who unlike the bulk of the labourers were not illiterate. How many of these recollections have survived, we do not know but they probably do not run in the hundreds. And from those who had been written many were no doubt lost during the difficult period of the Cultural Revolution. In recent times, efforts have been made to remedy this. Historian Zhang Yan 张岩 (Chinese University of Hong Kong) has travelled the lengths of Shandong to interview relatives of CLC-members, asking them about recollections and souvenirs.⁷²³ Of the few surviving accounts, just some have been translated - nearly all into Dutch by Dr Philip Vanhaelemeersch - and at the time of writing the memoirs of Gu Xingqing and Sun Gan are still the only ones that have been integrally published in a western language.⁷²⁴

In consequence, as with other accounts of subordinate non-European groups, we have to remain conscious of the fact that much is left obscured. Not only because of sheer lack of records, but also because in the existing accounts some things were left unsaid or were either consciously or unconsciously ignored. A case in point is the mixing with fellow-Chinese from other regions, talking another dialect. While the known Chinese witness accounts give evidence of the 'coming together' of 'classes' who otherwise would difficultly mingle, i.e. the 'intellectuals' and the 'manual labourers', little has been written on the 'geographical' coming together of men from different provinces and districts speaking different dialects. Yet, we know from British witnesses that this didn't always go smoothly and occasionally caused trouble. Dr. Stuckey, for instance, reports that while in the Quarantine Station in Point William on Vancouver Island in April 1917 there was a mass fight between the men from Shandong and those from Tientsin.⁷²⁵ Yet, in the Chinese sources

Zhongguo laogong yu diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War.
Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 137-154. p. 142.

⁷²³ Apart from his publications, his quest has been documented in the award-winning Canadian documentary *Tricks on the Dead*:
<http://rareearthmedia.com/project/tricks-on-the-dead/> (accessed 17 August 2017).

⁷²⁴ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo.; Gan S. (2017) *Vive Labeur. Wedervaren van een Chinese arbeider in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Veurne: Hannibal.

⁷²⁵ Fisher W. (2008) Dr. Stuckey, gone with the coolies : the letters from Dr. E.J. Stuckey concerning his work with the Chinese Labour Corp in France during 1917-1918. In Flanders Fields Museum, 208. p. 35-37.

available to me I have never come across similar accounts of quarrels between Chinese from different provinces during their residence in Europe.

The labourers came to Europe to work. On the nature of the labour they had to perform not many details are written in the known accounts, probably as this was not deemed a very important detail. After all it consisted often of hard but menial duties. Yet, the overwhelming circumstances in which they had to work features largely. In his short memoir labourer Yan Zhensheng remembered how as long as the war lasted the labourers toiled day in day out: his company was first digging trenches in France and later unloading and carrying railway material, fuel and ammunition near Poperinghe. After the war, so Yan wrote, the nature of the work had changed - clearing the battlefield is lighter- but so had the landscape: *“Scattered everywhere are bodies and piles of rubble. Weed is rampant. Where once were wells, there is now just an empty plain.”* Water had to be brought in and at times the labourers were forced to drink urine. Yan remembered a song his friend Zhang sang:

*“ How sorrowful I am thinking about my mother
As a bird in a cage, I am
with wings I cannot spread
As a dragon in shallow water, I am,
stuck in the sludge.”*⁷²⁶

In his song Zhang contrasted his misery and the feeling of not being master of his own fate (*“as a bird in a cage”*) with his sense of parental piety. It reveals something of the alienation the Chinese labourers were subject to in the desert landscape of destroyed Flanders.

During their time in Europe, the Chinese not only witnessed but unwillingly also underwent the effects of modern warfare, not unlike combat experience. During the Spring Offensive, Sun Gan’s 102nd company was moved forward, nearer to the battlefield. After having received gas drill and being given gas masks, many labourers got frightened and outright refused to work. Others rubbed poisonous plants they had found in the field onto their skin in order to feign illnesses, resulting in a series of punishments. Strongly under the impression of the ongoing battle, Sun composed the following poem:

*“One day we are moved forward, the next day we have to retreat
everywhere rumble of thunder and lightning.
Giant dragonflies screen the sun’s light*

⁷²⁶ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2014) Chinezen in Poperinge en omstreken in... 1917. *Aan de Schreve* 44: 14-21. p. 16-8.

*their tails spitting blue smoke, faster than a shuttle
Criss cross through the air, as ant larvae
sometimes catching fire, ending up in flames in the sky
The twentieth century and her material civilisation,
survival of the fittest,⁷²⁷ supported by diligent study”⁷²⁸*

Even when further away from the battlefield, they had been at times shelled, resulting in chaos and death. “*Two solitudes bothered us day and night while in Europe*”, Gu Xingqing wrote, “*if with our help the mighty foe would be overcome, but also if we would be able to return to our land safe and sound*” and when thinking of those they would have to leave behind, he rhymed : “*A pile of yellow earth,
their spirits chained in a foreign land.
Misery!!*”⁷²⁹

As most participants in the war, some CLC-members who survived, did not so unscathed. Xia Qifeng, ended a letter to the authorities thus: “*My brain has been badly damaged in the past year as a result of shell shock.*⁷³⁰ *I am using a pen to write but I have forgotten some Chinese characters, and what I write doesn’t always come out in coherent sentences. Please forgive me.*”⁷³¹ And Gu has the story of a ganger in the 58th company whose wife had committed suicide after he had left for France despite her protests. When he heard the news, he was desperate to return home to care for his elderly mother but his requests were turned down. Overpowered with remorse for not having listened to his wife, he lost his mind and had to be locked up in the ‘mental compound’ of the Chinese hospital in Noyelles.⁷³² He was far from the only one: at times the hospital in Noyelles hosted over a hundred patients suffering from mental

⁷²⁷ The ‘darwinian’ wording is particularly striking and might reveal familiarity with Western knowledge.

⁷²⁸ Sun Gan, Section 92.

⁷²⁹ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 88.

⁷³⁰ Xia writes 《因受砲大震搖(Shell Shake)腦力大坏》 which translates literally “as my mental abilities have been seriously affected by the heavy droning of the guns”, adding the English ‘shell shake’ in parentheses, in itself an obvious distortion of the term ‘shell shock’ which he must have picked up.

⁷³¹ 陈三井, 吕芳上, 杨翠华, et al. (1997) 《欧战华工史料(一九一二~一九二一)》 - *Ouzhan Huagong Shiliao (1912-1921) [Historic Documents on the Chinese Labour Corps in Europe during the First World War (1912-1921)]*, Taipei: institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica., doc. 621. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

⁷³² Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 102.

affections.⁷³³ Even more tragical were suicides such as that from a twenty year old worker in the 120th company who had hanged himself in the camp kitchen. He had been often heard muttering “*Three years is too long, three years is too long*”. According to Gu the newly wed young man had not expected to be employed in a war situation.⁷³⁴ And there is evidence of another labourer who hanged himself in a latrine after receiving news his mother had died.⁷³⁵ While Captain and Surgeon Frederick Strange could not explain “why so many Chinese went mad in France”, others suggested it was the rapid introduction to modern wonders and modern warfare⁷³⁶. Probably the combination of post-traumatic stress (shell shock), the enormous culture shock and the partly therefrom arising equally enormous sense of alienation enhanced the mental vulnerability of the Chinese.

While in or on the way to Europe, the world opened itself to the Chinese. On the train that would bring him and 3,000 others from Vancouver to Halifax interpreter Gu Xingqing watched amazed how his bed was made by “*a negro. His face was black as soot. At first I wondered how someone could be that dirty but at second glance he appeared to be very clean. Only his skin was exceptionally black.*”⁷³⁷ Sun Gan too encountered colonial troops and workers such as South-African labourers which he at first mistook for Indians before being explained they were actually from “*Afeilika.*” He described them as “*Men with a shining black skin. The white of their eyes was white as snow [...]. Their lips and tongue were red as blood and their teeth too were white as snow. You’d only had to see them once to know they were no better than man eating wild animals*”⁷³⁸ His unfamiliarity with Africans was so great that he could only imagine them to be devilish. The Indians, who were also black, so he remarked, were not only taller, but always wore a turban.⁷³⁹ The aversion for Africans (and vice versa?) could sometimes take a nasty turn: after an earlier incident

⁷³³ Strange FC. (1920) The Chinese Hospital in France, 1917-1919. *The Lancet* 195: 990-991.

⁷³⁴ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 100-1.

⁷³⁵ Whyment ANJ. (1921) *The psychology of the Chinese coolie. A paper read before the China Society on March 3, 1921*, London: East and West. p. 8.

⁷³⁶ IWM, Documents 1932, “Private papers of George E. Cormack”, typescript memoirs, p. 18. Cormack was a businessman who had accompanied Chinese labourers to Europe. See also: James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational. p. 622.

⁷³⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 39.

⁷³⁸ Sun Gan, Section 113.

⁷³⁹ Ibidem, Section 119.

when a black driver had been threatened with being thrown in the water of the Dunkirk docks by some Chinese, on 3 June 1918 in the same harbour a fight broke out between some 20 to 30 men from each community, resulting in some heavily injured casualties,⁷⁴⁰ and in Bethune in 1919 British employed Chinese labourers attacked a camp of French employed North African labourers, resulting in a fatality.⁷⁴¹ The Annamites, “*somewhat shorter than us and with a somewhat darker skin*” were much more day-to-day to Sun. Though they didn’t understand Chinese or English, he soon found out they used the same characters and thus was able to communicate in writing.⁷⁴² This reference to Vietnamese workers or soldiers is remarkable and unique: while the French recruited some 43 to 49,000 soldiers and about 48,000 labourers from their Indochinese colonies, it was a policy to keep these spatially as far as possible from the Chinese (or other troops considered colonial), out of fear for the spread of anti-French feelings.⁷⁴³ The fact that they were able to communicate with each other will certainly have enhanced this urge.⁷⁴⁴

Yet, the ‘Other’ the labourers and interpreters of the Chinese Labour Corps most frequently encountered were their British officers and NCOs. That the British were often described by the Chinese in a bad light is not surprising knowing the harsh treatment to which they were sometimes subjected to, and the earlier mentioned problems with some of the British supervisors. A case in point are the words of Yan Zhensheng that while the British had medical facilities, the Chinese were denied medical care.⁷⁴⁵ This, however, might have more to do with British army regulations than

⁷⁴⁰ Fournier N. (2005) Les travailleurs chinois à Dunkerque entre 1917 et 1921. Dunkerque: Ville de Dunkerque. p. 13-14.

⁷⁴¹ Marcilloux P. (2003) Les "Chinois, pillards, voleurs et assassins" ou la grande peur du travailleur colonial, 1918-1919. In: Cesari L and Varaschin D (eds) *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 129-156. p. 146.

⁷⁴² Sun Gan, Section 115.

⁷⁴³ Rettig T. (2012) La Prévention des rencontres entre Chinois et Indochinois durant la Première Guerre mondiale: une politique impériale spatiale en France métropolitaine. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 387-407. esp. p. 389.

⁷⁴⁴ Going beyond the scope of this book, an in depth comparison between the Chinese labourers and the Vietnamese could prove to be very rewarding as it seems there are many similarities between the two groups: their reasons for joining up, their war experiences, the transformation they underwent and the (direct or indirect) influence of their presence in France on future leaders as Nguyễn Tất Thành (a.k.a. Nguyễn Ái Quốc, a.k.a. Hồ Chí Minh). Hill K. (2011) Sacrifices, sex, race: Vietnamese experiences in the First World War. In: Das S (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 53-69.

⁷⁴⁵ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2014) Chinezen in Poperinge en omstreken in... 1917. *Aan de Schreve* 44: 14-21.

with unwillingness on behalf of the British officers. After all of what use was a medically unfit labourer? The main medical facilities for the Chinese were in Noyelles-sur-Mer where a hospital with some 2,000 beds was available to them, but even there the Chinese were not allowed to use the same toilets as the British soldiers, and this largely to prevent the spread of trachoma which was prevalent in China.⁷⁴⁶

Despite the often strained relationship between the Chinese and their British supervisors, genuine friendship or at least mutual appreciation could also arise. Gu, for instance, writes how taking leave in Noyelles of the officers who had accompanied them on the long voyage from China to France, was hard: "*Bitter tears were wept when they shook each others' hands as a sign of farewell. It was an indication how naturally a spiritual bond grows among people who have found each other in the same adversity and misfortune.*"⁷⁴⁷ Of course, these men who had joined them in China were often fluent in Chinese and non- (or not yet) military and Gu as an interpreter had a privileged relationship with them. But other quotes are also indicative of a certain affinity between labourers and officers/NCOs. Gu names some of them in his memoirs: a certain Matthews who had "*no feelings of superiority towards the Chinese*" and treated them "*with mildness. Everybody loved him*" or Shanghai Briton C.S.M. Sharpley who called himself in the presence of the labourers 'a Chinese' and who was "*loved by the workers as a fellow-countryman*".⁷⁴⁸ Some objects also testify of positive feelings between men and officers: an engraved shell case with a vase of flowers bearing the inscription: "*Ypres - present by Lin Feng Chao to Lt. Sykes for memory 2/8/1919*"⁷⁴⁹ or a beautiful mythical lion cut in clay documented to have been given to Major A.S Campbell of the 59th company⁷⁵⁰. And a set of two photographs

⁷⁴⁶ O'Neill M. (2012) *Frederick. The Life of My Missionary Grandfather in Manchuria*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing. p. 115. It seems work at the Chinese hospital was of a high quality, resulting in some articles in *The Lancet*: Bowman FB and Saylor PD. (1917) Report on examinations of faeces of Chinese labourers. *The Lancet* 190: 791-792. and Strange FC. (1920) Fractures of tibia and fibula: their treatment by plating operations. *The Lancet* 195: 537-541.

⁷⁴⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als talk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 48-9.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 76-7.

⁷⁴⁹ In the collection of the late Jane Kimball (+ 15 August 2016), Santa Fe. A photo of the shell case is reproduced in: Kimball JA. (2004) *Trench Art. An Illustrated History*, Davis: Silverpenny Press. p. 101.

⁷⁵⁰ Imperial War Museum, EPH 3484.

show the presentation of an 'Umbrella of Ten Thousand People' to a popular commander leaving his company in Samer on 26 May 1918.⁷⁵¹

Gu, however, also comments on very bitter confrontations such as the well documented attack on 2nd Lieutenant Alfred J. Hadley.⁷⁵² On 8 January 1918 this officer, who was born in China and spoke fluently Chinese, was attacked by worker Yao Shengyuan and hit with a shovel at Wippenhoek (Abele), allegedly after he had urged the labourers to work more quickly and stop chatting. A courts martial condemned Yao to the death penalty, later commuted to five years imprisonment.⁷⁵³

While Gu as an interpreter was closer to them, 'common labourer' Sun Gan's comments on his British superiors are more detached and much harsher. During the voyage over the Pacific to Canada, Sun complains a first time about the attitude of the officers: "*Those Europeans treat me all too ridiculously, full of sorrows I am inside, who will relieve me?*"⁷⁵⁴ It is a complaint he would later, in France, often repeat, how "*the British supervised the work with the iron hand of the law*" and how the "*customs and mentalities of the Chinese labourers were miles away from that of the British for whom the law was everything*"⁷⁵⁵ Not seldom, he recollected the labourers' or his personal reaction to what was considered a maltreatment or an injustice. At work in Hazebrouck, for instance, there were grievances about the food of which the portions per meal were far below what was deemed necessary for a young and strong worker. Hunger created resentment and "*the British thought of themselves they held absolute sway, and with their feudal attitude they only gave orders. But no one was listening. There was mutual mistrust [...]. So each time the British imposed their orders in a brutal manner, the labourers gave them the opposite treatment [...]. That is why often during a day ten labourers*

⁷⁵¹ Imperial War Museum, Q 8815

(<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205244623> - accessed 30 December 2017) and Q 8816

(<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205227679> - accessed 30 December 2017). An 'Umbrella of Ten Thousand People' is a token of respect and gratitude to a popular official on the occasion of his departure.

⁷⁵² Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 65.

⁷⁵³ TNA, WO 213/20/86, "Records of the Judge Advocate General - Court martial proceedings", 8 Jan 1918; Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 65; Fawcett B. (2005) Alfred James Hadley and the Chinese Labour Corps. *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 45: 233-234. ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational. p. 530.

⁷⁵⁴ Sun Gan, Section 14.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibidem, Section 42.

*only did the work of one man*⁷⁵⁶ *“One day [...] one of our men had secretly opened a box and taken food. A Britisher discovered it and wanted to withhold part of his wage as a punishment. I went to him and started an argument: We labourers know about altruism and justice. You don’t give us enough to eat and do not answer to our petitions. No wonder we have to steal food. Isn’t that your fault?”* The Brit listened, but kept silent.”⁷⁵⁷ In the end such agency was rewarding and the British gradually relented their “feudal treatment of the labourers” as Sun Gan noticed.⁷⁵⁸

Despite his profound criticism of the British attitude towards the Chinese, Sun was actually quite nuanced, something his ‘song’ in the beginning of this section also demonstrates. He didn’t disapprove of every penalty imposed. One day, near Noyelles, he saw a punished labourer exposed for all to see, bearing a panel stating he had stolen an apple from a Frenchman. Sun’s reaction is: *“What the man had not realised is that through his attitude he had damaged his country’s dignity [...]. It might be clear: if the people are uneducated, this has an impact on the nation”*.⁷⁵⁹ Similarly, he could understand why the shops in Hazebrouck refused Chinese customers after some of them had damaged goods - he blamed the “people without manners” in the CLC.⁷⁶⁰ And Sun would acknowledge what he saw as a positive influence, for instance the British insistence of maintaining a high level of hygiene.⁷⁶¹

Sun’s sense for nuance is also shown when dealing with the local inhabitants. While he generally admired the westerners and their way of life, he did report when a fellow workman of his company was insulted and robbed by a Frenchman on (western) New Year’s Day 1918, an event that was followed by a clash between French and Chinese. Thereupon he was asked by the whole company to write a letter of complaint to the company commander demanding apologies from the French which after steps had been taken, duly followed.⁷⁶² Sun Gan differentiated between the Europeans, and compared the French with the British. It is interesting to read how he understood the differences between British and French and how he explained this from a historical perspective (despite the obvious flaws): *“the British were protestants, the French catholics. Those*

⁷⁵⁶ Ibidem, Section 42.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibidem, Section 43.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibidem, Section 45.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibidem, Section 38.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibidem, Section 107.

⁷⁶¹ Ibidem, Sections 53 & 108.

⁷⁶² Ibidem, Section 91.

two religions do not go well together. The British live closer to the colder climes. The French live closer to the warmer climes. People from warmer climes are more active, those from colder climes more introvert. The British are descendants of the Teutons. The French derive from the Latins. It is clear they do not belong to the same race. In England there is absolutism, in France there is democracy. The British and French I saw, differed in the following manner: the British were sincere and cautious, the French morally exalted and impulsive. The British appreciated steadfastness, the French loved aesthetics. But what had enabled them to work together now was the high level of education of their citizens.”⁷⁶³

With this remark of Sun Gan our attention turns towards that other group of Europeans with whom the Chinese got acquainted: the local population in Belgium and Northern France. As stated before, language issues and segregation often prevented real communication between the Chinese and the inhabitants of Flanders. It explains why some Chinese comments are restricted to mere observations. According to Yan Zhensheng the local women and children in Belgium were in a bad shape: *“Poorly clothed and bone-thin as matchsticks they regularly came to us to beg for food, clothes or some money. Sometimes they were looking at us for just some protection”*.⁷⁶⁴ It would be wrong to dismiss Yan’s remark as an expression of a feeling of Chinese superiority. Many refugees in the Poperinghe area where he resided were indeed living in miserable circumstances, as is also testified by Belgian accounts.⁷⁶⁵ That the fate of the Belgian civilian population stirred the Chinese is also expressed by Jiang Jinghai, another of the rare literate labourers. In his recently discovered diary, Jiang wrote about the fate of the civilians in German occupied Belgium - which he obviously only could have known through hearsay: *“ [They] were moved eastbound in cattle trucks, without food nor drink, mocked in the stations on the way, to work as convicts in agriculture and mines [...]. The suffering of the Belgians will forever be engraved in the hearts of the people. If later this story is told to the Germans, I will answer: “So it was indeed! So it was!”. May we never forget Belgium.”*⁷⁶⁶

⁷⁶³ Ibidem, Section 78.

⁷⁶⁴ Vanhaelemeersch P. (2014) *Chinezen in Poperinge en omstreken in... 1917. Aan de Schreve* 44: 14-21. p. 16-8.

⁷⁶⁵ E.g. Van Wallegem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 295.

⁷⁶⁶ 张岩 and 牛方玉. (2011) 《旅欧笔记与一战华工之民族意识》 [Notes on Traveling to Europe and the Rousing of the National Consciousness]. In: 张建国 (ed) 《威海记忆》 *Weihai Jiyi [Weihai Memory]*. Weihai, 56-60.

Being an interpreter, Gu not only had the linguistic skills to communicate more fluently but he also enjoyed much more freedom than the bulk of the labourers to wander around and get acquainted with the locals. He too pitied the Belgians. Once, during a shelling he hid with his friend and colleague Dai Buyun in a cellar of a Belgian family. Sitting opposite a terrified Belgian couple, holding their children of four-five and two-three years old in their arms Gu asked: *“We’ve come here to work for the war, but we got stuck here. But you, why are you remaining on this dangerous spot? Why don’t you flee as soon as possible?”* whereupon the Belgians answered in French that they were poor and were scared to starve if they would leave everything behind. *“Their words were heart breaking. They could only sigh deeply.”*, Gu remembered.⁷⁶⁷ But there were happier occasions to meet locals too : on another occasion, he and Dai stayed overnight in the house of civilians in Boeschepe. The house belonged to acquaintances of Dai’s girlfriend Germaine, a refugee from Ypres who resided in the village just across the French-Belgian border.⁷⁶⁸ As in some Indian accounts, Gu too was impressed by the performances of European women and he stated *“In their war zeal they were not inferior to the men at the front. This proves men and women are equal, both in their rights as in their obligations. [...] I noticed how the amount of work behind the front which was done before the war by the men, was now done by women. Tram drivers and motor car drivers, postmen, workers in ammunition factories, shopkeepers and factory directors, they were all women.”*⁷⁶⁹

Gu not only held the local population in France and Belgium in high esteem, but also stressed that the labourers left a splendid impression upon them: *“The first time Belgians and French saw a Chinese labourer, they were amazed. But the longer they spent time with the Chinese, the less strange they thought them to be. And for the Chinese labourers it was just the same. After a while they were accustomed to the western personality and they enjoyed being in their company. Moreover, in the short time they had been in France, the labourers had learned to make do in English or French. Their English or French was rudimentary, but they understood what the British or French wanted to say. And that was already quite a performance. After a while, the Chinese labourers started to visit Belgian and French families in their leisure time. Thus I have met many of them during my own little outings. There was then plenty of chit-*

⁷⁶⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 81-2.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 84.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 135.

*chat with the inhabitants, or home-made beer was drunk (the French drink beer like we in China tea - every home is well provided). Close ties were forged. The man or lady of the house did her uttermost best to please us. Never did they give the impression to see us as 'coolies'. The Chinese labourers on their end behaved well, there was not a tad of clumsiness in their behaviour. Often they brought tobacco from the camp to give it to their host. Belgians and French love to smoke, but because of the war tobacco was rationed. So they could not buy as much tobacco as they wanted. At work the workers loved to chat and joke with the more affable Europeans. Those Europeans thought that somewhat strange, as they are usually of the opinion that the Chinese are a people without humour. So, when they noticed these 'coolies', the lowest class in China, was as able as the whites to amuse themselves, they realised that the sterile Chinese only existed in theory. Generally, we can state our Chinese labourers left a positive impression on the white man. The British and the French called the Chinese the 'happiest child in the world'. It is clear why the people over there have such a positive opinion about the Chinese labourer's mentality."*⁷⁷⁰

This fragment, the most important and most elaborate on encounters between locals and Chinese in Gu's diary, is highly interesting though also quite problematic. Gu clearly saw things too optimistically, certainly if we compare with the available Belgian testimonies, and even if we do not take into account the generally negative post-war comments. There were indeed encounters, Chinese indeed visited local people and yes, there have been friendly engagements, but there are a lot of things Gu leaves untold. For instance, contrary to Sun Gan to whom we return soon, Gu let it appear as if all Chinese labourers were welcome visitors, as if there were no frictions, no bad guys among the labourers and as if all spoke enough French or English to make themselves understood. Without containing outright lies, Gu's account is untrue as it omits all negative aspects of the encounters between locals and Chinese. Though improbable, it might be that this is how in the 1930s when he wrote his story, Gu remembered it to be. After all, he had been in an exceptional situation: being an educated interpreter, fluent in European languages and having the freedom to walk around and pay visits. We know, however, that this was certainly not the case for the large majority of the labourers and that, despite the occurrence of friendly engagements, a lot of misunderstandings occurred. More probable, is that Gu intentionally

⁷⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 110-1.

left out more negative recollections and considerations as this would not have served the purpose of his publication: strengthening national feelings and explaining the nature of modern and total warfare to his fellow-countrymen. Yet, this does not mean we should discard all of Gu's writing, we should just keep in mind why he wrote it and how privileged he was.

In general, our main Chinese witness, labourer Sun Gan, displayed a great interest in the European ways of life. After all his desire to see the west had been to him an important motive to join up. Sun walked the streets of Hazebrouck and the surrounding villages to observe the locals in their daily routine. And as a teacher he was particularly interested in education. He observed how on Sunday, the streets emptied and the churches were filled with well-dressed locals and he even attended mass to see what was going on. As with the Indians, the occurrence of many small chapels along the roads struck him.⁷⁷¹ He noticed how in the villages everyone was buried in cemeteries usually to be found behind the church, and not in separate places for each clan or family.⁷⁷² He watched a funeral procession, noting that the only difference with China was that the mourning children were not crying loudly and were not clad in white.⁷⁷³ But he also observed happier situations, e.g. how western adults might kiss each other, even on the street, but only with people they know well. It was something that in China was only done with babies. Equally he was astonished by men and women publicly walking hand in hand and even kissing, which his fellow-workers considered as animal-like behaviour. Though Sun does not approve of the western habit, he also thought that the Chinese custom of avoiding a married woman's gaze might be too scrupulous.⁷⁷⁴ Sun was not only charmed by the elegance of French ladies, as compared to Chinese women, but was equally impressed by the disciplined way they worked the fields, in factories or in stores. Again, he attributed both elegance and their good behaviour to their level of education.⁷⁷⁵

Sun had no recollections of relationships between Chinese labourers and local women. He did remember though that Chinese workers employed by the French had the opportunity to marry French women as the "*the*

⁷⁷¹ Sun Gan, Sections 56-7.

⁷⁷² Ibidem, Section 77.

⁷⁷³ Ibidem, Section 104.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibidem, Section 131 & 145.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibidem, Section 99.

French were less ethnically biased than the British” who announced they would only allow mixed marriages on condition of receiving written consents from both the family and government in China.⁷⁷⁶ There is, however, no knowledge of such an event ever having happened and it is doubtful the British authorities would ever have consented to mixed unions. Interpreter Gu, in his memoirs, dedicated a whole chapter to “the Chinese labourers and their amorous affairs”.⁷⁷⁷ Despite the promising title, he too mainly elaborated on the different situation of the men in French and in British service, though he stressed that French women sometimes got acquainted with a labourer in British service and befriended them. And earlier on he had briefly mentioned his friend Dai’s soulmate Germaine. Gu specifically mentioned that though Chinese labourers indeed married French women, there was also quite some opposition against it out of fear for the ‘Yellow Peril’. He was right: the French minister of the interior at one stage forbade such weddings and French press widely debated the subject.⁷⁷⁸

Coming from a farming community, Sun Gan had a great interest in what the Flemings grew, how they worked the lands (“*with a horse or a machine*”), what animals they kept and even what trees were common. He devoted an entire section describing a wheat harvester and another describing a threshing-machine concluding that “*thus they economise many dozens of workload. It would be good if we Chinese would learn from this in the future.*”⁷⁷⁹ But his interest went far beyond the agricultural : he wrote an essay on the different kinds of airplanes and their uses.⁷⁸⁰ He marvelled at the use of flares, of rubber, of dogs and pigeons, and at a shepherd’s ability to manage his herd with his dog. Interpreter Gu Xingqing, on the other hand, also marvelled at western technology, but he was mainly focused on warfare: he wrote for instance a lengthy description of motor cars to prove their use in war.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁶ Ibidem, Section 171. This seems to have been the normal procedure according to French and Chinese authorities: Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 154.

⁷⁷⁷ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 105-9.

⁷⁷⁸ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 154.

⁷⁷⁹ Sun Gan, Sections 60-63.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibidem, Section 109.

⁷⁸¹ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tiel: Lannoo. p. 61.

Sun Gan did visit houses, comparing them to Chinese houses: *“On two floors there are a great number of rooms so that all family members have their own spot to sleep. When entering, you arrived in a large room, like the courtyard in Chinese houses. Here the family members met - men and women, young and old- to eat and to receive friends.”* And he seemed to have been welcomed as he was able to state: *“The everyday’s drink was boiled milk with sugar. Guests too were offered this”*.⁷⁸² Remarkable, unusual but yet understandable given his background, was Sun’s desire to visit schools and he did so on several occasions. In Hazebrouck he asked and was granted permission to attend class, an experience which provoked mixed feelings: *“At home I had been a teacher for quite some years but never I had managed to arouse as much diligence and zeal among my pupils as they did here in France. I was deeply ashamed [...]. In another room I greeted some teachers. I was fed up not knowing French and not being able to express myself unless in poor English and signs”*.⁷⁸³ On another occasion, he entered a small village school east of Hazebrouck where the teachers were a very friendly husband and wife. There was a mutual interest: they wanted to know everything about Sun while Sun was happy to assist in a lesson on ‘the Wild Tiger’ in which the dozen or so ten year-olds were asked to draw a cat. He admired not only their ability to draw but also the fact that some pupils came as far as ten miles by bike to attend school. In fact Sun had quite an interest in drawing and deplored the lack of its teaching in Chinese schools: illustrations not only strongly enhanced lessons, so he noticed, but it also helped him in a large degree to communicate with the locals. Before he went out to shop, he made drawings of the things he wanted to buy.⁷⁸⁴ Contrary to what he had expected he noticed that, just as in China, unwilling pupils were caned, something he strongly disapproved of, *“as would everyone who has studied education”*.⁷⁸⁵ Just once was Sun refused entrance to a school: a girls school. His - maybe too foregone - conclusion: *“the separation of the sexes is even stronger here than at home”*.⁷⁸⁶ Like other accounts of encounters between the Chinese and the locals, Sun Gan’s memoirs belie somewhat the official policy of segregation that was strictly imposed on the Chinese labourers. While most of the labourers were indeed confined to camp, those with good reason were more easily given a pass, Sun Gan

⁷⁸² Sun Gan, Section 60.

⁷⁸³ Ibidem, Section 64.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibidem, Section 71 & 73.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibidem, Section 97.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibidem, Section 96.

for instance to buy crayons, slates, pencil and papers for the writing classes he organised.

Pretty soon after signing up, Sun had become aware of the moral and mental gap that existed between the bulk of the labourers and himself as an educated person. More and more he thought about the causes of their behaviour and wrote it down in another of his poems:

"How does it come that the state of education is so bad at home?

Officials and scholars mistrust each other.

[...]

Many households are alienated from school.

Just look at our common laborers

One large force at home

a group of idiots abroad.

As regular as clockwork they break the rules and are whipped.

I can but listen and suppress

*and dare not to complain"*⁷⁸⁷

Yet, over the course of time he seemed to have grown closer to them and there was even some kind of mutual appreciation between the illiterate labourers and their educated comrade. Sun wrote their letters home - something he considered his duty- while in return the labourers offered to take over some of his manual work.⁷⁸⁸ It struck him how all British military and nearly all local men and women were able to write and how this contrasted with the situation among the Chinese labourers. After he had to refuse a young man's request to write him a letter home because he did not even know the name of his district, Sun sighed: *"Oh boy, what was the education of the common people in China poor!"*⁷⁸⁹ This, however, did not mean he looked down upon manual labour: *"In China I might have joined the world of intellectuals and had become a teacher, but I was convinced that China's weakness was due to the scholars who were of the opinion that the highest one could achieve was not having to work. [...] I wanted to change that bad habit [...] and in France I worked hard along the labourers."*⁷⁹⁰

Due to the negative comparison with the locals he had observed and out of fear that *"the respectable Chinese people will be ridiculed"*, Sun became more and more vexed by some habits of his fellow-workmen, not in the

⁷⁸⁷ Ibidem, Section 16.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibidem, Section 48-9.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibidem, Section 58.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibidem, Section 82.

least gambling, and this urged him to take action. He wrote a number of big-character posters warning against the dangers of games of chance and he dispatched these to several companies. In an adjoining letter to the interpreters and head gangers he explained the reasons for his initiative: *“How can we maintain the reputation of our Fatherland abroad, now that our country is about to emerge in full power? [...] I hope you will incite each other to return to China after three years and to help our country with what you have learned, to donate her the money you have saved, strong in power to do good, and to turn a bad reputation into a good one. And thus we would cease to be the scorn of the foreigners, but rather kept in high esteem by them”*. Sun did more than writing posters: though some did not bother, he convinced many labourers within his company of the importance of reading and writing, and once he had obtained a blackboard, he substituted their games for courses.⁷⁹¹ Fascinated by western technology, he made another appeal, probably again on big-character posters, in which he urged his compatriots to *“study well the tools the westerners make - how do they look? how are they made?- so that we can copy them”*. Once again, the advancement of China seems to have been his main motivation.⁷⁹²

Sun Gan’s memoirs clearly show us the mental evolution he made. Sun joined up partly out of curiosity and his eagerness to learn was certainly satisfied during the voyage and his stay in Europe: he saw the west, was clearly fascinated by what he saw and he got acquainted with people from other cultures, and in particular the local population in Flanders. But at the same time, rather unexpectedly it seems, he also got acquainted with his fellow-countrymen: the unskilled, illiterate and often ill mannered labourers. He realised their backwardness while at the same time his appreciation of them grew. And it is the confrontation with the West’s (technical) superiority and the ignorance of his fellow-countrymen that enhanced his national feelings and spurred him into action.

Sun not only urged his co-workers to learn, he also worked on self-improvement, borrowing an English-Chinese dictionary from a British supervisor Burnett⁷⁹³ to better his English and to start learning how to write the language. After a while he formed a small society dedicated to learning some English, asked the company interpreter Gong Zhefu to act as their teacher and even compiled a handbook ‘Concise English’ in which

⁷⁹¹ Ibidem, Sections 65-70.

⁷⁹² Ibidem, Sections 101.

⁷⁹³ Maybe staff sergeant/interpreter E. Burnett, ex-Royal Fusiliers (Medal Card: TNA, WO 372/3/187170).

he listed the phonetic signs next to the English letters.⁷⁹⁴ His zeal brought him in close contact with the YMCA when a hut was set up and he eventually became the YMCA's factotum and resident teacher within the 102nd company's YMCA. This also drew him closer to christianity which resulted in his being one of the rare converts.⁷⁹⁵ Already in the recruitment centre back home in Zhoucun Sun Gan had noticed not only that the men were given some drill, but more remarkably that they had been allowed - if they wanted to - to listen "*to the men who promulgated the teachings of Jesus*"⁷⁹⁶. It is once again a poignant reminder that, as with the YMCA and the missionaries serving as officers, the CLC was seen by many as a vehicle for christian proselytism.

Frederick O'Neill, the Irish presbyterian missionary who supervised the YMCA Chinese huts wrote in 1919: "*It can be confidently said that the YMCA has shown the Chinese the spirit of brotherhood. By means of lectures, cinema, literature and religious addresses, thousands of the strangers have received more instruction than ever before in their lives. The outlook of the travelled peasants and artisans will have been widened and the fold of superstition upon them probably lessened. They will have seen Christianity as active service*".⁷⁹⁷ O'Neill might have been somewhat overoptimistic as to the impact of *Christianity as active service* in a war where the Chinese had been witnessing christians killing christians on a massive scale, but he was right about "instruction" and a "widened outlook". Even if they had turned to the YMCA mainly for relaxation and distraction, the labourers would have received some kind of education which they would never have had, had they remained in China. Yet, as seen previously, the success generally claimed by the Y, should perhaps be put in perspective. Some resisted the YMCA, even going so far as to vandalise their hut.⁷⁹⁸

Interpreter Zhang Bangyong from the 64th company was particularly critical of the YMCA: "*In the camp there was specially for us, Chinese labourers, a YMCA, manned by three Chinese studying in America. One was called Zhou Bianming. He had taught me English on the Tsinghua school in Peking. He was a musician. On meetings he always sang English*

⁷⁹⁴ Sun Gan, Section 125 and 139.

⁷⁹⁵ The importance he personally attributed to his acquaintance with the YMCA is clear on the number of sections in his memoirs devoted to the Y: more than 30 on a total number of 258.

⁷⁹⁶ Sun Gan, Section 4.

⁷⁹⁷ O'Neill M. (2012) *Frederick. The Life of My Missionary Grandfather in Manchuria*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing. p. 117.

⁷⁹⁸ Sun Gan, Section 181.

songs. The non-Chinese thought it terrific, but he never let us hear Chinese songs and he didn't teach us Chinese instruments. And then there was Wu Weide, who would later work in a home in Shanghai. He made us learn all kinds of phonetic signs. Once that was done, we were so-called 'graduated', but no one knew what to do with these phonetic signs. But it was done with the lessons. Still another one was Yan Yangchu. He taught us Chinese characters. We, labourers, thought it rather interesting and a few dozen of us have learned quite some words, but that was about all the YMCA yielded. For the rest, one would find with them only foreign flags, but not a single Chinese one. We did a lot of table tennis. There was a biweekly magazine published in Paris by the general youth association of Chinese labourers [= the Huagong Zazhi]. We loved to read that paper, but after some eight issues none followed. The Chinese labourers asked the YMCA if they could teach us Chinese songs, if they could sell us Chinese chess material and musical instruments, if they could teach us how to use the Chinese abacus, if they could tell us the news from China, [...] but nothing came of it. It was told the YMCA was only mainly about proselytism. That could be right, as apart from these three Chinese, there were also two Americans. They travelled between the three large Chinese camps in Calais where they only wanted contact with the Christians and the interpreters. Sometimes the Americans invited us to eat, but in that case a prayer had to be said first."⁷⁹⁹

Zhang's criticism concerns several aspects of which didactic shortcomings is probably the least. He is much more annoyed by the general lack of Chinese (cultural) patriotism. Despite being manned by three fellow countrymen, there was no Chinese music, no Chinese flag and not even news from China, even when this had been requested by the labourers. Of course, a lot depended on the individual YMCA-men: in Sun Gan's 102nd company for instance courses of Chinese martial arts were organised (though the main reason to do so was to attract more labourers than the 100 who usually attended activities).⁸⁰⁰ That the delivery of the Huagong Zazhi was suspended, despite the fact that it was popular, is suspicious and raises the question if the newspaper was maybe considered socially and politically too progressive or just too Chinese for the YMCA. In fact, Zhang unmasks the YMCA in this quote as a western vehicle for Christian proselytism which wasn't as successful as it made appear. Finally, it is

⁷⁹⁹ 张邦永. (1991) 《华工参加第一次世界大战的片段回忆》. In: 戴伊 (ed) 《中国近代史通鉴, 1840-1949》. Beijing: 红旗出版社, 1215-1224., p.1224. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

⁸⁰⁰ Sun Gan, Section 192.

remarkable that interpreter Zhang Bangyong talks about “us, Chinese labourers” and thus identifies entirely with the labourers. Yet, earlier in his recollections he had showed himself quite a class-conscious interpreter who was indignified to receive a registration number or to be assigned space in the hold of the ship just as the ‘common’ labourers. Maybe his identification with these ‘lower’ fellow countrymen only came gradually through sharing the same experiences in Europe?

Earlier, when elaborating on the role Li Jun played as representative of the Chinese government to the Chinese labourers in French service, I noted the apparently total passivity of his equivalent to the British employed labourers, Pan Lianru. This, however, did not impede the CLC-men to petition the Chinese embassy in London directly. Xia Qifeng was an interpreter with the 39th company in Reninghelst and a friend of Gu Xingqing who acted as a spokesman for his colleagues. On 24 January 1919 he wrote a letter to the ambassador in which he conveyed the wish of the interpreters to be granted permission to go to England to pursue studies at no cost.⁸⁰¹ At the same time he pleaded for an increase of the indemnation fee paid to the family of deceased labourers. Xia and his colleague Bai Huapu were received by commander Fei [I presume this is Fairfax, CO of the CLC] but he dismissed this plan of theirs right away: the compensation for families of deceased labourers was contractually determined and as to their wish to be granted scholarships for the UK: wasn't it China's duty to grow its own talent and not England's matter? *“China might have taken part in the war, but in reality it had not made an effort. Getting what one deserved, the pain the workers in France had suffered, the friendship of the nations, [...] it was of no importance”*, Xia wrote bitterly. In his own name he also proposed that the more than 300 interpreters, *“whose love for the Fatherland has exponentially grown”* and who are willing to work for the improvement of China, upon their return be offered posts in the administrations where English was of importance such as the Post Office, the Railway or Customs. *“For in this manner, the government would recognise the Chinese who have really made efforts during the war in Europe”*.⁸⁰² And finally, he also pleaded to encourage the

⁸⁰¹ Shortly after the Armistice, on 20 December 1918, Sun Gan had written a similar request. Though educated and self-taught in English, Sun was still employed as a common labourer then. (Sun Gan, Section 160).

⁸⁰² 陈三井, 吕芳上, 杨翠华, et al. (1997) 《欧战华工史料(一九一二~一九二一)》 - *Ouzhan Huagong Shiliao (1912-1921) [Historic Documents on the Chinese Labour Corps in Europe during the First World War (1912-1921)]*, Taipei: institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica., 621.

returning labourers to settle in the three provinces north of the Great Wall.

A month and a half later, on 3 March 1919, Xia Qifeng wrote again, but this time the letter not only had the form of a set of five demands in more direct wordings but was also co-signed by seven other interpreters, including the aforementioned Zhang Bangyong. Referring to the grateful treatment that befell the veterans of other countries, the interpreters asked the central government in Peking 1) to grant returned labourers wishing to settle in the northern provinces free travel to do so, 2) to give precedence to the returned interpreters who wish to enter customs, salt tax, railway or post administrations, 3) to take care of the labourers as soon as they set foot ashore in Weihaiwei or Qingdao 4) to arrange for all Chinese labourers in France to receive a gold or silver medal, and 5) to take care of the graves of the labourers who died overseas.⁸⁰³ The signatories of this letter clearly wanted to have a say about their future. They demanded that their war service yielded social capital that could be validated in China. And without renouncing their privileges these interpreters assumed the role of spokesmen for the 'common' labourers with whom they identified to a certain degree.

The question now is if the interpreters got what they wanted. On 17 May 1919 the Chinese legation in London mailed the central government that they were sympathetic to the demands. While there was already an agreement that the Chinese graves would be maintained and considered equal to British graves, the negotiations regarding the request to pursue studies in the UK continued (it would be denied) and the demand to pay the travel cost to northern provinces couldn't be granted as not all the railways were under control of the central government. On the other requests, the embassy remained silent. Eventually, all CLC-members would receive the bronze British War Medal, all in all a meagre reward.⁸⁰⁴

In the writings of Sun, Gu and Xia we see a clear evolution towards a sacralisation of labour. If Chinese had capitals, they'd probably written the word thus: Labour. To them work is of the same order as combat: those along the lines of communications, in the docks, in the factories, along the railways, in the dumps,... had equally contributed to the victory. If War can be sacralised, so can Labour. And if labour is eulogised, than those who perform the labour are too. One of the consequences is that even if they acknowledge that among the labourers there are a number of bad

⁸⁰³ Ibidem.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibidem. On the bronze war medal, see James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 686-92.

elements and even if they differentiate between the educated (which include themselves) and the ignorant, there is in their writings always a high degree of identification with the common labourer: “us, labourers”.

Gu dedicated a whole chapter in his memoirs on the patriotism of the Chinese labourers. While the labourers back in China were considered to belong to the lower classes, their patriotism was certainly not less intense than that of the higher educated, so he stated. And he gave three telling examples, all related to 1919

- one labourer once transferred all his savings of two years to Wang Zhengting 王正廷 of the Chinese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in order that China might benefit from it.
- when the British army organised an (otherwise unspecified) international sports event in Belgium to which the Chinese companies were also invited, they noticed upon arrival on the sporting field, that while the flags of all the countries had been hoisted, the Chinese was not. In anger they left and returned to the camp.
- After it became clear that in the Peace Treaty the German rights in Shandong would be passed on to Japan and that China would not get the restoration of sovereignty it had hoped for, a representative of the Chinese labourers wrote the following message to the head of the Chinese delegation, Lou Tseng-tsiang 陸徵祥, enclosing a pistol: *“If you sign and you abide with the Japanese demands, please punish yourself at once with this pistol. Otherwise we will have to carry you to the grave.”*⁸⁰⁵ Lou eventually refused to sign.

Even if the examples given by Gu can't be substantiated by other witnesses, they are not without importance. They do point to the fact that national feelings were enhanced during the labourers's service abroad. This seems to be corroborated by the considerable number of images on which we see CLC-men or CLC-camps sporting the flag of the (1st) Republic of China⁸⁰⁶ while probably many of these men would not have had the slightest idea of what their country's flag looked like before they had left for Europe.

⁸⁰⁵ Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 97-9.

⁸⁰⁶ Some examples are to be found in Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als tolk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 97, 102-3 or on the covers of and illustrations in McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. and McClune B. (2017) *The Dawn of Victory - Thank You China. Star Shell Reflections 1918-1919. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military.

According to Chinese historians Zhang Yan 张岩 and Niu Fangyu 牛方玉 the Chinese labourers national consciousness had indeed awoken during their service in Europe.⁸⁰⁷ And this is what the few accounts we have seem to suggest. Yet, it is also remarkable that among the telegrams received by the Chinese delegation in support of their stand on the Shandong question during the Paris Peace conference, just one had been sent on behalf of a group of Chinese labourers resident in France or Belgium, a meagre result considering the fact that 140,000 of them lived quite closely knit-together in camps.⁸⁰⁸

Apart from the written accounts of CLC-men, material objects can also teach us something about the war experience of the Chinese in Europe, and they are even often complementary to the existing memoirs. In the section on Belgian witness accounts we have mentioned the many photographs of Chinese labourers with local children. Probably the best known of such



pictures is the one taken by photographer René Matton in his studio in Proven of Song Xiufeng 宋秀峰 standing next to his son Maurice Matton. It has been published many times, as besides being a good portrait it also

⁸⁰⁷ 张岩 and 牛方玉. (2011) 《旅欧笔记与一战华工之民族意识》 [Notes on Traveling to Europe and the Rousing of the National Consciousness]. In: 张建国 (ed) 《威海记忆》 *Weihai Jiyi [Weihai Memory]*. Weihai, 56-60.

⁸⁰⁸ Anon. (1919) Telegrams received by the Chinese delegation in support of their stand on the Shantung question. Paris: [Imp. de Vaugirard]. The one telegram was sent on behalf of the Chinese working in the Société Normande de Métallurgie in Caen.

identifies the depicted labourer and, though rather vaguely, the date and place the photo has been taken.⁸⁰⁹ It is also a strong reminder that despite the difficult circumstances and the linguistic and cultural barriers friendly engagements between Chinese and locals occurred. On the photograph in question Song Xiufeng is holding a panel on which has been written in chalk that the picture has been taken on the border between France and Belgium⁸¹⁰, his registration number (18693) and his name. In the right bottom corner the traditional Chinese date has been written with the mention 'republic' (pointing to a date between 23 Jan 1917 and 10 Feb 1918). Young Maurice has another panel resting on his feet and on it is inscribed the at first sight inexplicable and long time untranslatable text "*che pupe now goedze*". Moreover, in front of the boy we see a number of objects that seem to have been deliberately laid down in front of his feet, almost like a ritual offering. This is clearly a carefully staged photograph. But what is the message it conveys? Koen De Ridder has recently developed a theory that not only offers a coherent explanation of the mysterious text and the intriguing mise-en-scène of the photograph but also hints at a rather unexpected background of some of the Chinese workers in France and Belgium. If the words on the bottom left panel are read from right to left - the traditional Chinese way in horizontal script - it might well have been a western transcription of "bupa zhe haizi nao" 不怕这孩子闹 which when translated literally means "Do not be afraid that this child is naughty" . De Ridder sees a link with the cult of the taoist child-god Ne Zha 哪吒. As a god with an immoral, rebellious, martial and independent character, Ne Zha was popular with those in the margins of society such as itinerant merchants, ladies of easy virtue, soldiers, gamblers, actors, thieves and the like. The majority of the CLC-men were indeed poor and underprivileged and by leaving China in order to improve their lot, they had acted contrary to the ancestral piety that was a corner

⁸⁰⁹ The photograph has been issued as a postcard by In Flanders Fields Museum since 1998 and has been published in: Dendooven D and Chielens P. (2008) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*, Tielt: Lannoo. p.148 ; 张建国 and 张军勇. (2009) 《万里赴戎机：第一次世界大战参战华工纪实》 *Over there: the pictorial chronicle of Chinese Laborer Corps in the Great War*, Jinan: 画报出版社 Shandong Huabao chubanshe.; Dendooven D and Vanhaelemeersch P. (2010) *Gu Xingqing: mijn herinneringen als talk voor de Chinese arbeiders in WO I*, Tielt: Lannoo. p. 111 ; O'Neill M. (2014) *The Chinese Labour Corps. The Forgotten Chinese Labourers of the First World War*, Melbourne: Penguin. p. 46 .

⁸¹⁰ The centre of the Belgian village of Proven is about 3 kms from the border - and some 4 kms from the French village Houtkerque where the aforementioned Father Watthé came from.

stone of confucian society. Maybe, argues De Ridder, Song Xiufeng had even belonged to the infamous bandit army of the White Wolf, of which we know that some former members had found their way into the Chinese Labour Corps. Within the White Wolf's army there had been a group of some eight young boys who acted as shamans and whose duty it had been to determine through divination rituals when it was the right time for a particular action. What if some members of the CLC still practiced this kind of pseudo-religious cult and that this photograph is the staging of a bandits' ritual in which the boy figures as some kind of oracle or protective talisman?⁸¹¹ There will probably never be certainty about the significance of the mysterious words and objects on the picture, but still the photograph of Song Xiufeng and Maurice Matton is a reminder not only of friendly engagements between Belgians and Chinese labourers, but also of the less honourable and intriguing past of some among the latter.

A remarkable corpus of Chinese source material is three-dimensional: unlike any other non-western group present at the front the labourers left a considerable amount of so-called trench art which is often of an artistically high quality. Up to date some 70 items have been identified and documented, of which most are to be found in private collections.⁸¹² Though it has been suggested that some shells may actually have been engraved by Chinese soapstone carvers who had been present in France before the war⁸¹³ or by sailors,⁸¹⁴ the documented cases are definitely proof of the presence of quite a number of fine craftsmen among the CLC-men. According to Sun Gan, the labourers in his 102nd company started engraving shell cases after the armistice, following the example of German POWs. The price depended on the size, the originality of the decoration and the quality of the engraving.⁸¹⁵

⁸¹¹ De Ridder K. (2014) Een Ne Zha-cultus in West-Vlaanderen? *Aan de Schreve* 44: 2-8.

⁸¹² Fifty eight items were on show in the exhibition *Toiling for War. Chinese Labourers in the World War 1* at the In Flanders Fields Museum (Ypres) from 24 April to 15 August 2010. They are catalogued in the visitor's guide to the exhibition.

⁸¹³ Remark by Marianne Bastid-Bruguière at the International conference "Chinese Workers in the First World War", 29 May 2010. See also: Bailey PJ. (2009) Chinese Contract Workers in World War I: The Larger Context. In: 张建国 张张 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 / *Zhongguo lao gong yu di yi ci shi jie da zhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社, Jinan Shi : Shandong da xue chu ban she, 3-18. p. 7, note 2 .

⁸¹⁴ Kimball JA. (2004) *Trench Art. An Illustrated History*, Davis: Silverpenny Press. p. 75.

⁸¹⁵ Sun Gan, Section 196.

Shell cases, engraved with Chinese motifs such as dragons, flower vases, mythical lions or Peking Opera figures seem to have become an instant



success with officers, locals and especially early battlefield tourists. A photograph⁸¹⁶ shows us a Chinese selling engraved shell cases to a group of five well-dressed Europeans in the Kortewildestraat in Hollebeke. Four pairs of shells have passed hands and the labourer is counting his money. He looks somewhat uneasy at the camera for the trade was officially illegal, not only because it encouraged non-qualified people to detonate live shells but also because war material left on the battlefield was considered the property of the occupying army, in this case the British (and quite some money could be made out of the recuperation of these brass shell cases).⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁶ In the collection of Philip Woets, Hollebeke.

⁸¹⁷ Sun Gan had an engraved shell case made and given to him by his friend Huang confiscated before the embarkation back home. (Sun Gan, section 222). Yet, some did end up in China and even might potentially have saved their owners lives later on: the grandson of Shandong labourer Jiang Jianqiu 蒋鉴秋 recalled that his grandfather had brought home three pieces of 'handicrafts' which were exchanged for grain during the Great Leap Forward Famine in 1960. 张建国 and 张军勇. (2009) 《万里赴戎机：第一次世界大战参战华工纪实》 *Over there: the pictorial chronicle of Chinese Laborer Corps in the Great War*, Jinan: 画报出版社 Shandong Huabao chubanshe. p. 137.

There is a seeming contradiction in the popularity of Chinese trench art and the relative unpopularity of their makers in 1919: while battlefield guidebooks warned their readers for the Chinese, these very same readers were avid buyers of their handicraft. This, however, is only at first sight so. It was not only nigh impossible to avoid Chinese in the former Ypres Salient in 1919 and the Chinese seller of trench art on the photograph is alone, while his buyers in group, and it would have made a difference if it was the other way round. Moreover, apart from some locals who worked and sold war material, there were very few others from whom to procure an interesting souvenir. And, besides practical, I also see a cultural explanation for its popularity: Chinese porcelain had known a lasting popularity in the West ever since the 17th century and especially the Ming-vases were ubiquitous in Victorian upper class interior decoration. There is not much difference in Chinese motives engraved on a shell case and those to be found on an exquisite vase. And they were also much cheaper, offering the opportunity even to the less well-off to buy an exotic ornament.

But Chinese trench art is more than just a knick-knack. As Nicholas Saunders has demonstrated, they externalise the marginal position the Chinese labourers found themselves in, in a territory that wasn't theirs and in a cultural landscape that wasn't theirs.⁸¹⁸ No wonder, that the imagery they chose to depict more than often referred to traditional Chinese culture rather than to the realities of war or the more 'neutral' flowers so often found on European trench art. They are heavily linked to the individual war experience of the maker and convey his inner feelings. This also explains the occurrence of poetry on not only trench art, but also in the writings of the Chinese labourers (and many other witnesses of the war), as poetry, just like other artistic expressions has the potential to express what seems not expressible in prose.

These 'hidden messages' were illegible to those who bought the shell cases, and only reveal their true meaning when 'read against the grain'. While a shell case engraved with the characters for "*Peace Everywhere*"⁸¹⁹ is quite straight forward, others are less so: a shell case with a dragon and the Chinese inscription "*The Dragon which controls the flood*"⁸²⁰ might, for

⁸¹⁸ Saunders NJ. (2012) Travail et nostalgie sur le front de l'Ouest: l'Art des tranchées chinoises et la Première Guerre mondiale In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 427-442. p. 431.

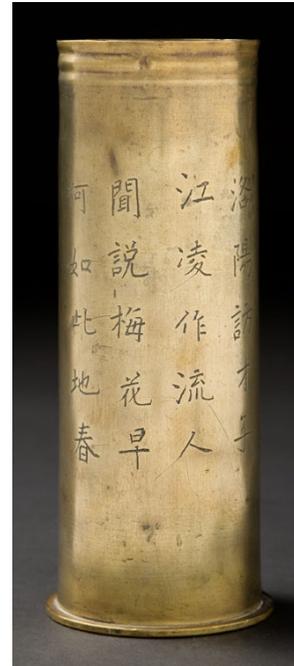
⁸¹⁹ In the collection of Brian Fawcett, Walmer.

⁸²⁰ In Flanders Fields Museum, IFF 001485.

instance, refer to the often occurring river floods in China, something that also concerned the Chinese labourers in Europe who had raised considerable funds to aid flood disaster victims in Zhili in the early months of 1918.⁸²¹ But homesickness or a certain sense of (be)longing in particular is what a great many of these objects equally seem to express, something confirmed by the ones bearing literary texts. One shell case is engraved with: *“First Chapter: Clarification of the Basic Principle and Declaration of the Significance [of the Confucian Book of Filial Piety]: In tears I ask for permission to leave to make my dear mother happy until the end of her days. Loving one’s parents is the most important of virtues”*⁸²² while another features the well-known poem ‘Failing to Meet Yuan the Imperial Censor in Luoyang’ by the Tang-dynasty poet Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689-740):

*“At Luoyang I searched for you,
But find you are exiled to Jiangling.
There..it is said plum blossoms bloom early,
Here..I wonder when Spring will arrive?”*⁸²³

Such items, as well as other trench art objects with a classic text, are strong reminders of the presence of educated men in the Chinese Labour Corps.



⁸²¹ Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate., p. 189 ; Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 141.

⁸²² In Flanders Fields Museum, IFF 001486.02.

⁸²³ Translation by Dongbo 東波 :

http://www.mountainsongs.net/poem_.php?id=176 (accessed 30 December 2017). The shell is one of a pair, the other one enscribed with the poem ‘Climbing White Stork Tower’ by Wang Zhihuan 王之渙 (688-742). Both shell cases are in the collection of Philippe Oosterlinck, Menin.

Yet, besides fathoming for feelings of melancholy we can also see the shell cases and other expressions of Chinese craftsmanship as affirmations of how their makers identified: motifs such as dragons, Peking Opera figures or mythical lions with a paw resting on a ball are instantly recognisable as quintessentially Chinese. And , there is also the shell case with a Chinese man in what could easily be a uniform waving a stick and bearing the characters “local name: man from the overseas land”⁸²⁴: It was indeed a man from overseas (and who was by the Europeans identified as such) who created this work and probably represented himself on this piece of war debris. One item in the corpus of trench art objects really stands out



in this respect, not only because of its rather unusual form and technique (a copper and enamel napkin ring) but also because of the inscriptions and symbolism: on the one hand a cross and the characters for “*May the Lord give me peace in this life*”⁸²⁵ identifying the maker as one of the rare christians in the CLC, but on the other hand in western script

and with the initials in capitals: “Vive Labeur”⁸²⁶.

Apart from these portable souvenirs, the Chinese labourers left us with immovable mementoes of their presence in Europe: an arborglyph depicting a junk⁸²⁷ and a series of inscriptions in the underground quarries near Soissons.⁸²⁸ But arguably the largest example of Chinese trench art⁸²⁹ is to be found on one of the many cemeteries in Northern France, Belgium and the United Kingdom⁸³⁰ where Chinese have been buried.⁸³¹ It

⁸²⁴ Historial de la Grande Guerre, 7 ART 29.13

⁸²⁵ And what seems like a simplified copy of the coat of arms of Jeanne d’Arc (a crowned pointed sword).

⁸²⁶ Collection of Philippe Oosterlinck, Menin.

⁸²⁷ Personal communication and photos by Alain Jacques, Service Archéologique d’Arras.

⁸²⁸ Buttet J. (2012) En creux, en relief et en noir, souvenirs de Chine et d’Extrême-Orient dans le Soissonnais. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 413-426.

⁸²⁹ In the definition of Nicholas J. Saunders “any object made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians, from war matériel or any other material, as long as object and maker are associated in time and space with armed conflict or its consequences” (Saunders N. (2011) *Trench Art: A Brief History and Guide 1914-1939*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 20).

⁸³⁰ For the sake of completeness: there are indeed CLC graves in Colchester (1), Liverpool (5), Plymouth (8) and Shorncliffe (6) near Folkestone, places where during a brief period Chinese labourers sojourned on their way to or from France.

⁸³¹ Despite some debate on the matter, it is now assumed that some 2,000 died in British service, while the number of casualties in French service is estimated to be around 1,500 (including the casualties of the torpedoed Athos). Live Y-S. (2009) *The Contribution*

is a large vertical slab, engraved and erected in December 1919 in the communal cemetery of Saint-Etienne-au-Mont, just south of Boulogne-sur-Mer as a memorial created by the labourers to their comrades who had died in *No. 2 Native Labour General Hospital* and who lie buried in this cemetery.⁸³² It contains a long text in Chinese characters: *"In the third year of the Chinese republic, the world was engulfed by war. Out of respect for humanity and because of justice, in 1917 on several occasions our august Chinese republic sent out Chinese labourers. In dense droves they came to France where they supported the war with their labour."* In fact in these sentences it is explicitly stated that the labourers were much more than just hired labour: they had actually been representing the Republic of China who had decided to support the allied war effort for noble reasons, i.e. respect for humanity and justice. It continues by affirming that their contribution did matter and was instrumental to the final victory: *"Two years later the Allies could call themselves victorious. Praise was there then for the labour of the Chinese. How could the contribution of our more than one hundred thousand labourers not have been of importance? Their life and body, and their labour, they have sacrificed. One after the other died, as a town that is being flooded. Already more than a hundred of them have passed away. Another proof of their efforts. Ah! prosperity. Ah! hardship! Year after year, year after year, you died. On the endless oceans of Earth, in the bustle of the towns and the overpopulation of the rooms you gained diseases and you died an innocent death. Once dead, you were no longer of use for the country and you risked to be forgotten. No man knows your names."*

of Chinese Workers during the First World War in France: Memory of Facts and Occultation of Memory. In: 张建国 (ed) 《中国劳工与第一次世界大战》 *Zhongguo laogong yu diyici shijie dazhan / Chinese Labourers and the First World War*. Jinan: 山东大学出版社 Shandong daxue chubanshe, 46-55. p. 51-2 ; Ma L. (2012) La "Mission Truptil" et les travailleurs chinois en France. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 51-90. p. 82-3.

⁸³² The cemetery is seldom visited but is very interesting from an 'extra-European' point of view. It contains 168 graves: five from members of the South African Native Labour Corps, three from Asian sailors of the Mercantile Marine and all the others from members of the Chinese Labour Corps

After stressing the miseries they endured, and lamenting the dead, the memorial persists that all this had not been in vain: *“But precisely by your death, you have helped our Fatherland and your fame has been established in foreign lands. If the people from the cities ever pass here and their gaze falls upon you, they will speak highly of you and they will say full of praise: “Behold! Look what the Chinese labourers have meant to the war in Europe! (bis). A cause for pride”.* ‘China’ and ‘Labour’ are once again the keywords: with its labour, China had come to the rescue of her European allies. Being a labourer is a cause for pride, so it says literally. The memorial’s text closes with an expression of the wish to commemorate and to do this in stone, the most enduring of natural materials - like an echo to the pledge of ‘Their Names Liveth For Evermore’ found on the Stone of Remembrance in larger commonwealth Cemeteries.⁸³³ And the explicit mention that local people have been involved in the layout of the cemetery, suggests a lasting international friendship: *“Their comrades of the Chinese Labour Corps who accompanied them in great numbers to France thought it their duty to plant the mulberry and the catalpa,⁸³⁴ and out of respect for the manner in which they have given their life for the Fatherland, they have, together with the people from here, gathered trees and tombstones as a commemoration to them, and on each of these stones has been written: your resting place is now this plain of boulders. Your soul travels back home with us”.*⁸³⁵ Erected in one of the very last months of their stay in France, we could see this text in which the labourers give sense to the losses they suffered in a patriotic way as a



⁸³³ Dendooven D. (2004) Lutyens and the Stone of Remembrance. *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*: 24-31.

⁸³⁴ Traditionally the two trees that were planted near the parental abode and by consequence they became to symbolise “home”. Besides, the Chinese word for ‘mulberry’ (桑) has the same pronunciation as the word for ‘mourning’ (喪).

⁸³⁵ Translation by Philip Vanhaelemeersch.

testament, a final statement of the Chinese Labour Corps before returning to China for good.

Experiencing war in Europe and its lasting impact on the Chinese labourers' lives

As we've seen from Sun Gan's writings, many educated men in the Chinese Labour Corps displayed their unease at the often rude behaviour of their uneducated fellow-countrymen. One was a Chinese labourer in French service who wrote to the *Huagong Zazhi* to urge his fellow-countrymen to leave bad customs behind. As this bi-monthly newspaper had a large circulation and was probably read - or read out- in all Chinese labour companies, his recommendations must have reached a large segment of the Labour Corps.

"Dear Editors,

I am a Chinese labourer, and I am deeply concerned about the poor manners of my co-workers. This is why I sincerely appeal to you my fellow labourers:

- (1) Do not wear your hair in a braid and do not shave half your head*
- (2) Eat less raw onion and garlic so your breath no longer stinks and you no longer arouse another person's disgust.*
- (3) Do not spit on the floor of your room, do not pick your nose. Always have a handkerchief close at hand.*
- (4) Never curse [someone else's] father and mother, so as to keep the peace.*
- (5) Do not urinate and defecate just anywhere. Make sure you close the latrine door when you defecate.*

*All the above habits are just as irritating as whoring, gambling, drinking and farting. Correct your bad habits. Persevere if you haven't got any bad habits. Let self-respect be everyone's priority."*⁸³⁶

The keyword in this fragment is arguably "self-respect" with the idea behind it that good manners and self-respect would enhance the respect received from outsiders. National prestige was at stake. Remarkable as well is point (1) which refers to the braid and shaved forehead required under the Qing emperors. Though it might be that French recruits more

⁸³⁶ Zhang Quan, labourer in Vonges, in: *华工杂志* "Ha-Kon-Tsa-Tcheu, Revue Chinoise Populaire, publiée par le Groupe d'Éducation Populaire", No. 16 (25 December 1917) pp. 23-24. Translated by Philip Vanhaelemeersch

often kept the pigtail, labourers in British service usually had their braid clipped upon recruitment, but some obstinately refused to. One interpreter recalled how in France they tried to convince Zhang Yanbin to cut his braid, after having tried in Weihaiwei, but to no avail.⁸³⁷ One (anonymous) western author even wrote that some who had cut off their queues on sailing for France, had begun to let them grow and he saw this as evidence that they had realised that their own Confucian ethics and ideals were better than the form of Christianity they had seen in Europe.⁸³⁸ And Lieutenant Jim Maultsaid noticed how rather sudden in his company all the pigtails were cut, not knowing whether it was an official order or just a fad.⁸³⁹ Anyway, to true modern republicans, the braid was a symbol of imperial subservience and thus inappropriate for men who were supposed to represent the young Republic of China.

The YMCA-counterpart of the *Huagong Zazhi*, the *Huagong Zhoubao* (The Chinese Labourers' Weekly) founded by Yan Yangchu in January 1919 also urged the labourers to see themselves as representatives of China: "*The foreigners will make their judgment on our people as a whole based on the impression you leave. When in our village of birth, some behaved in an undesirable way, he only loses face in the eyes of his family, the Wangs or the Lis. But, here we are abroad. If you do something wrong, these foreigners, who do not know your name, will say 'it's a Chinese' and will attribute all wrongdoings to the Chinese. Dear fellow-countrymen, if you win a military medal in France, all Chinese will be considered heroes. If, on the contrary, a Chinese steals a can of beef on the platform, we will all be thieves, as we are all Chinese.*"⁸⁴⁰ The magazine tried not only to inform the labourers on what was going on in the world but also to provoke debate on (and thus to urge the labourers to think about) problems such as China's national and international position. This, however, became extremely difficult after the decision of the Paris Peace Conference to transfer the German rights in China to Japan causing a wave of protests, both in China and among Chinese worldwide. Being heavily censored by

⁸³⁷ 张邦永. (1991) 《华工参加第一次世界大战的片段回忆》. In: 戴伊 (ed) 《中国近代史通, 1840-1949》. Beijing: 红旗出版社, 1215-1224. p. 1219-1220.

⁸³⁸ Anon. (1919) What the Chinese learned in the war. *Literary Digest* 62: 33-34. p. 33.

⁸³⁹ McClune B. (2016) *War! Hellish War! Star Shell Reflections 1916-1918. The Illustrated Great War Diaries of Jim Maultsaid*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military. p. 176.

⁸⁴⁰ Quoted in Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 137.

the British, the weekly issued a statement that though it had received many reactions, it could not publish these due to its difficult position.⁸⁴¹ Nevertheless, articles in the magazine reflect how to the labourers 'China' - the nation- was no longer an abstract notion, but became intensely linked with their fate. A case in point is the contribution to the *Huagong Zhoubao* of 12 March 1919 with which labourer Fu Shengsan won a competition. Fu wrote how he initially had no idea of the relationship between individuals or families and the nation. But seeing the Europeans and how they defended their country on the battlefield, had awakened patriotic feelings. But there is more, he now intended to work for a better China: *"Previously we appreciated the beauty of women with bound feet. But, seeing in Europe female soldiers and nurses with natural feet, working alongside men, we realise how wrong our old viewpoint was. In the future, when we return to China, we will get rid of these nasty customs of the past and, strengthened by the new thoughts and skills learned from the Europeans, we will apply these to the education of our fellow-countrymen, to the transformation of Chinese society [...]."* In other words: now that he has worked alongside Europeans, Fu understood that they were not necessarily stronger than the Chinese.⁸⁴²

The Chinese labourers had given proof of agency : not only did they identify their interests, but they used a range of techniques and actions to protest against working conditions and their treatment and they acted to improve their lot. By doing so they contradicted the essentialist stereotypes which saw them as mere docile 'coolies' without much individuality or personality. At the same time they were the object of campaigns, led by the YMCA, the Work-Study Movement in France and by delegates of the Chinese government such as Li Jun with the aim to

⁸⁴¹ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 206-8 ; Lee LY and Chen-main Wang P. (2012) Naissance d'un magazine destiné aux travailleurs chinois en Europe - analyse du concept, du contenu et du sens de la Revue hebdomadaire des travailleurs chinois. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 345-366. p. 362.

⁸⁴² Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 153 ; Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 139-140 ; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 233-4; Lee LY and Chen-main Wang P. (2012) Naissance d'un magazine destiné aux travailleurs chinois en Europe - analyse du concept, du contenu et du sens de la Revue hebdomadaire des travailleurs chinois. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 345-366. p. 352 ; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 739.

educate them and to impress them with the idea they were representing China. The result was an enhanced self-consciousness: the Chinese labourers became aware they were part of a larger entity than their family, village, or district. In other words: they had developed a national consciousness, which was often exemplified by such things as cutting a braid, displaying the national flag, giving money to flood aid or referring to the Fatherland in inscriptions and other writings.

Two songs related to the Chinese Labour Corps give an impression of this new idea of the self developed in Europe. The “Song of the Chinese Labourers Overseas” starts with declaring that for three years they have been in Europe now, which dates the song to the end of their stay or even the time of their return home. It then states that toiling so far from home, all is in turmoil: “inside us and outside us, it’s all bending and turning, from up to down”, to continue with an abstract of how the war came about and the stalemate on the European battlefields. But in the third stanza, the tone changes, away from the doubting in the first and the narrative in the second towards a declaration of the self:

*“Brothers,
Fellow countrymen
If you are truly filled by hatred for the foe
do realise
that we
in the name of friendship
were due to the civilised nations of Europe and America
to assist them with soldiers.
There could be no excuse.
But our political and military leaders failed in their patriotism
and had only attention for their personal desires and immediate profit....
With no one to take care of the general interest,
we, labourers, came to meet the danger
over here. [...]
For the well being of the befriended nations,
and for ourselves, Chinese, to whom nothing is more dear than a good
reputation and glory.”⁸⁴³*

⁸⁴³ Zhang J and Zhang J. (2006) *Weihaiwei under British rule*, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House. p. 138. Translation by Philip Vanhaelemeersch. A slightly different translation by Kendrick James can be found in James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 882-3.

Another “Song of the Chinese Labourers” written by Wang Jingqi 王景岐,⁸⁴⁴ had been printed on 5,000 copies and distributed among the Chinese resident in France in 1920. The tone was less political and generally more neutral than the “Song of the Chinese Labourers Overseas” and celebrated the cult of Labour and the love for Peace: “Esteem the farmer and favour the artisan, but never resort to force. [...] All within the four seas are brothers. We are an army of workers devoting ourselves to Labour in order to build peace for you, humanity”.⁸⁴⁵ It is telling that the song allegedly had been issued on gramophone by Pathé with the Chinese national anthem on the flip side.⁸⁴⁶

While at least 2,000 members of the Chinese labour Corps died abroad, mixed fortunes befell those who did return. Besides recording some 3,000 CLC men who came back to China penniless, Ta Chen states many labourers returned fairly prosperous, being able to buy farms ranging from 5 to 20 acres.⁸⁴⁷ And according to American missionary John J. Heeren the \$10 of each man’s wages that was paid back home raised the standard of living considerably and permanently in villages from which many men had gone. From 65 relatives of returned labourers in the villages of Linzi 臨淄, Huantai 桓台, Zhoucun 周村 and Zouping 邹平 in Shandong, Zhang Yan heard how some had built houses or small factories, bought farms or plots of land or started businesses. But there were many others, bound by tradition, that had to give their savings to their parents, or support other relatives, often returning them after a couple of years to their pre-war state of poverty. To the amazement of their families, many returnees had brought along hitherto unknown items from the West such as cameras, phonographs, watches, alarm clocks, fur

⁸⁴⁴ Wang Jingqi 王景岐 (1882-1941) had studied in France and was an advisor to the Chinese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.

⁸⁴⁵ Wang-Kinki. (1920) *Le chant des travailleurs chinois. La Politique de Pékin*: 128. I use the English translation published in Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershen AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 179; Bailey PJ. (2011) 'An army of workers': Chinese indentured labour in First World War France. In: Das S (ed) *Race, empire and First World War writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 35-52. p. 35 and Bailey PJ. (2014) Chinese Labour in World War I France and the Fluctuations of Historical Memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14 362-382. p. 368.

⁸⁴⁶ Unfortunately no copies of the disc seem to have survived.

⁸⁴⁷ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 157.

hats, leather footwear, compasses, blankets and jigsaw puzzles and this favourably disposed them towards westernisation.⁸⁴⁸

The reception that befell the returned labourers in China was mixed, to say the least, and this mixed opinion in China on what the Chinese Labour Corps had signified would persist.⁸⁴⁹ When Sun Gan and his comrades finally set back foot ashore in Qingdao on the 15th day of the 11th lunar month of 1919 (5 Jan 1920), they were in for a shock: they were guarded by soldiers and not allowed to go about freely. No special welcome for them. *“For our country, we were just workers. Our Fatherland reaped the fruits of our labour, while it plainly looked down on us, despised us. How sad, how intensely sad!”*. Sun Gan pursued the idealist educational road he had already chosen amongst the labourers in France and went on to found a girl’s school, a novel concept in China at that time. It was eventually scuppered by the authorities.⁸⁵⁰ We don’t know when he exactly wrote his memoirs and what he intended to do with it, but its purpose is exemplified in the very last two sentences which expressed his enduring commitment: *“We ought to learn everywhere and always, and to go full steam ahead, straight to our target. We are by no means on the level of Europe and America, but it’s up to the generations who come after us.”*⁸⁵¹ While it is extremely difficult to find hard evidence of cases where labourers, like Sun, brought into practice the ideals with which they had returned from Europe, there are indications: in 1924 American Goodrich Carrington met a returned labourer who had carried out mechanical experiments and had developed a machine of rather good quality⁸⁵² and

⁸⁴⁸ Quoted in : James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 730-1 and 736

⁸⁴⁹ Keeping in mind the enhanced self-consciousness of the labourers and the importance that had been attributed to them by politicians and intellectuals in China, it is remarkable that until recently no memorial had ever been erected in their memory. It seems a proposal to collect money for that purpose has been made by returned labourers, but never materialised, and that another attempt in 1935 was rejected by the ministry of foreign affairs as “useless”. Only in 2017 an impressive memorial was realised in Weihai.

⁸⁵⁰ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 740.

⁸⁵¹ Sun Gan, Section 258

⁸⁵² Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 142 ; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 224-5; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 728.

Zhang Yan related how, on his return, Zhang Zongfang of Zhoucun had constructed a pump and machine for sowing seeds.⁸⁵³

The Chinese labourers absorbed western knowledge and put it into practice and at the same time had developed a perception of China as a nation and as a member in the family of nations.⁸⁵⁴ Yet, many other members from the CLC came back from France with more or less contempt for all Westerners for they had seen much of the ugly and seamy side of Western culture and civilisation. This enhanced in northern China in general a very much lowered esteem on the part of the Chinese for Westerners⁸⁵⁵, something that was also reflected in one of the “coolie songs” the linguist A. Neville John Whyment had recorded during his time as a lieutenant in the Chinese Labour Corps:

*“These strange things which barbarians have,
Have devil-bellies which make them go.
But we are a happier people,
Who do not ally ourselves with the devil.”*⁸⁵⁶

Making a new China in the CLC ?

While it can be easily demonstrated that their passage in Europe had a profound influence on the Chinese labourers and the life they led afterwards, the question whether the deployment of the Chinese Labour Corps had an impact on Chinese society is less easily answered. It is true the returned labourers did not receive official support and most dispersed back into their village lives while neither their experience nor their money was eventually put to efficient use.⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵³Zhang Y 张. (2010) 《一战华工的归国境遇及其影响：基于对山东华工后裔（或知情者）口述资料的分析》. 《华侨华人历史研究》 *Overseas Chinese History Studies*: 54-61. p. 59.

⁸⁵⁴Xu G. (2014) China and Empire. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at War 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214-234. p. 229.

⁸⁵⁵Heeren JJ. (1940) *On the Shantung front. A History of the Shantung Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. 1861-1940 in its Historical, Economic, and Political Setting*, New York: The Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. p. 152-3.

⁸⁵⁶Whyment ANJ. (1920) Chinese Coolie Songs. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 1: 145-166. p. 149.

⁸⁵⁷Zhang Yan, geciteerd in James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 740.

China's strategy to enhance its bargaining power at the peace conference through sending labour did not materialise. Despite representing 440 million inhabitants- one fourth of the world's population- and having been present in Europe with thousands of men, the country was considered a minor power and entitled to only two seats in the conference, less than the three of Belgium or Brazil and in sharp contrast with the five seats Japan was entitled to. The important role the Chinese labourers had played on the Western Front was downplayed, even forgotten and this while the very men were still at work at barely some tens of kilometers of the Paris' saloons. Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, stated that China's contribution to the war effort had involved neither "*the expenditure of a single shilling nor the loss of a single life*" and Lloyd George praised the Japanese destroyers that had helped Britain defeat the German submarines, all the while forgetting not only that China broke off diplomatic relations with Germany over this issue, but also that more than 500 Chinese labourers had died when the Athos was torpedoed.⁸⁵⁸ And when China's erstwhile greatest supporter Woodrow Wilson backed down because he absolutely needed Japan's support for his League of Nations, China's hopes for the abolishment of the unequal treaty system and to regain sovereignty over Shandong was shattered. When news broke in China on May 4th 1919, students took to the streets giving an new impetus to what some have considered China's 'long revolution'. Largely due to this opposition, China would be the only state represented at the Paris Peace conference that did not sign the Peace Treaty, something that came as a surprise, even as a shock to many, including Woodrow Wilson. And though the Japanese under US pressure finally returned the rights on Shandong to China at the 1922 Washington Naval Conference, it was too late to reverse the broader consequences : many Chinese now doubted the value of identifying with the west, and the attractiveness of western ideas in China decreased significantly. Many intellectuals would now search for a third way, a way between Western Ideas and Chinese traditional culture. It involved for not a few number including Mao Zedong, a turning away from Wilsonian rhetoric towards Leninist Russia, the only power that seemed sympathetic to their ideas.⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁸ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 146 ; French P. (2014) *Betrayal in Paris. How the Treaty of Versailles Led to China's Long Revolution*, Melbourne: Penguin. p. 55-6.

⁸⁵⁹ Mitter R. (2005) *A bitter revolution : China's struggle with the modern world*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 66 ; Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 267-277; Manela E. (2007) *The Wilsonian moment : self-determination and the*

Not only was China's improvement in international status not realised but it was even doubtful whether China's public image in the west had been strengthened through the deployment of labourers on the Western Front: interpreters and labourers had not been allowed to enter the UK, not even to pursue studies. Both Canada and the USA maintained or passed legislation preventing the immigration of Chinese. And in Belgium and France bad press over the (supposed) behaviour of Chinese labourers in the former front zone was rife and did overshadow more positive news such as the gift in 1919 by the Chinese government of 50,000 francs to their Belgian and French counterparts for the re-establishment of educational and cultural provisions in the symbolical cities of Ypres and Verdun.⁸⁶⁰

The labourers and interpreters brought important new insights back with them to China; something acknowledged by Chi-ting Kwei⁸⁶¹. Upon his return in the USA in 1919 to pursue his studies after having served with the YMCA in France, Kwei wrote on the changes their service in Europe had impressed on the Chinese labourers. Not only had they worn foreign clothes and eaten foreign food, but they had also learned to differentiate between foreigners, no longer seeing them all as "foreign devils" 洋鬼子. They had seen and even worked with "the products of modern civilisation". "Will they not want to introduce them to China?", he wondered. They had been paid well. "Will they be satisfied with the starvation wages which they used to get at home?". Kwei was convinced China would no longer be the same after these men had returned home and talked over their experiences and new ideas with their fellow-villagers. "The Greatness of France lies in her education. Even the old 'madames' read daily papers", so he quoted a labourer to demonstrate the workers' determination to improve themselves. Yet, he too had noticed what he coined "a new national consciousness" among the labourers, and he identified two factors for this: men from different

international origins of anticolonial nationalism, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 180-193, 216; Xu G. (2014) China and Empire. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at War 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214-234. p. 232-4.

⁸⁶⁰ Bailey PJ. (2000) From Shandong to the Somme : Chinese indentured labour in France during World War I In: Kershner AJ (ed) *Language, labour and migration*. Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate. p. 191; Bailey PJ. (2014) Chinese Labour in World War I France and the Fluctuations of Historical Memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14 362-382. p. 370.

⁸⁶¹ Paul Chi-ting Kwei (1895-1961) studied at Yale and Cornell and was later to become president of Wuhan University and one of the foremost physicists in China.

provinces and walks of life being thrown together and the Peace Conference that had shown that they must pull together as a people. Finally, he also stressed “*the importance of the labourers as a class in determining the place which our country is to occupy in the family of nations*” for whom the new China had to be inclusive and hence the mass education movement had to be promoted.⁸⁶² This was a Chinese intellectual that had clearly learned to look with different eyes at his working class fellow-countrymen and who saw them as an important vector to modernise the country, just as people like Mao and Yan Yangchu were beginning to see the people of the countryside as the source of power for the new China. What Kwei wrote, tied in with the ‘New Culture’ promoted by the May 4th movement, whereby China needed to improve through ‘Mister Science and Mister Democracy’ and in the slipstream of which in 1921 the Chinese Communist Party was founded.

Annie Kriegel wondered in 1968 if the returning labourers were more influenced by the protestant moralism they had become acquainted with through the YMCA, or by French syndicalism they might have learned through the *Huagong Zazhi* and contacts with students-compatriots and French labourers (in the case of the French-recruited Chinese).⁸⁶³ It seems, however, that neither had a direct lasting impact. Contrary to the missionaries’ expectations, the number of active christians in Shandong declined rather than increased after the CLC men had returned: from more than 10,000 in 1920 to just over 8,000 in 1923-4. And while some returned labourers played an active part in the 1920’s labour movement and a Returned Labourers’ Union of Shanghai was formed⁸⁶⁴, opinions on its influence is divided. With ‘only’ 1600 adherents, Nicholas Griffin considered it a failure⁸⁶⁵ and Marianne Bastid-Bruguière describes it as a friendly society that did not play a role in the class struggle.⁸⁶⁶ Others on the other hand, stressed not only the fact that it was one of the oldest unions in China, but also that its members adhered to strict moral rules

⁸⁶² Kwei C-t. (1919) The Chinese laborers in France. *Chinese Students's Christian Journal* 6: 15-17.

⁸⁶³ Kriegel A. (1968) Aux origines françaises du communisme chinois. *Preuves* 18: 25-40. p. 31.

⁸⁶⁴ Chen T. (1923) *Chinese migrations, with special reference to labor conditions*, Washington: Government printing Office. p. 158 ; Chesnaux J. (1962) *Le mouvement ouvrier chinois de 1919 à 1927*, Paris; La Haye: Mouton. p. 731.

⁸⁶⁵ Griffin NJ. (1978) Chinese labor and British Christian missionaries in France, 1917-1919. *Journal of Church and State* 20: 287-304. p. 300-3.

⁸⁶⁶ Bastid-Bruguière M. (2012) Conclusion. le retour en Chine des travailleurs chinois de la Grande Guerre: quel héritage? In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 481-519. p. 511.

(no gambling, no consumption of alcohol or opium, no whoring,...) and that returned labourers seemed to have played a role in the emerging labour movement, in particular around Shanghai.⁸⁶⁷ And in this respect British Minister Plenipotentiary Jordan's anxiety that the labourers would be as militant in China as they eventually had been in Europe, was perhaps not entirely unfounded.⁸⁶⁸ This is certainly the case for at least four French employed labourers who had decided to remain in France, joined the communist party and finally returned to China, one to be executed by the nationalists in 1927 and three others to join the CCP at their base in Yan'an in the late 1930s.⁸⁶⁹

While their direct influence might be negligible, the indirect influence of the Chinese Labour Corps was much more far-reaching. In 1920, Chen Duxiu, one year before he would enter history as the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, praised the Chinese labourers of the Great War as a typical example of the diligence and courage of China's labouring classes, stressing their international role as a contribution to opening up the world to China (and vice versa).⁸⁷⁰ One year later, Zhou Enlai, while studying in France, wrote how the Chinese labourers, despite "*being considered as ignorant and without ideals, made savings, learned French and broadened their horizons in a relatively short period. Those who returned were able to share their knowledge with their surroundings... and thus contributed to advantage society*". According to Chinese historian Li Yongchang, the two most popular slogans in China in the years after the First World War: "May Justice triumph over Force" and "Labour is Sacred" - the latter coined by Cai Yuanpei - were born through the Chinese contribution to the war effort and the experience of Chinese labourers in Europe.⁸⁷¹ It is this aspect of Chinese students actually meeting labourers

⁸⁶⁷ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 153 ; Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 141-2 ; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 224.

⁸⁶⁸ TNA, WO 106/33, "The Chinese Labour Corps - recruitment and organization - history of the Corps", Jordan's Report on China, 31 November 1919.

⁸⁶⁹ Bastid-Bruguière M. (2012) Conclusion. le retour en Chine des travailleurs chinois de la Grande Guerre: quel héritage? In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 481-519. p. 506-8.

⁸⁷⁰ Bailey PJ. (2014) Chinese Labour in World War I France and the Fluctuations of Historical Memory. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14 362-382. p. 369.

⁸⁷¹ Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 130-2.

through their work in the YMCA or through the Work-Study Movement that Xu Guoqi considers of the uttermost importance: *“the link between sending Chinese laborers abroad and the reformulation of China’s national identity must be understood as a direct result of Chinese social elites’ involvement in the plan.”*⁸⁷² Under normal circumstances the life trajectories of these students, as members of the elite, would not have crossed those of the labourers. The war provided them with a laboratory in which they could learn, take initiative and develop their leadership skills.

Few were more influenced by the Chinese labourers than former YMCA-man Yan Yangchu. Yan had never associated with labourers before the war and when he got acquainted with them, he realised that *“the only difference between us was that I had had advantages and they hadn’t”* and the main disadvantage was their lack of education. Now aware of the potential of the labourers, his life purpose became to empower them through education. Being a Christian Yan wanted to “save China through education” with the help of what he coined “the three ‘C’s’”: Confucius, Christ and Coolies. Throughout his life he would keep referring to his experiences in France, calling the mass education movement he initiated a “blossom from Flanders Field”.⁸⁷³ The educational experiments conducted in Europe by people like Yan Yangchu or organisations as the Sino-French Education Society not only directly benefited the labourers who had followed their courses, but also strengthened the introduction of standard vernacular Chinese (白话, baihua) understandable to all (in contrast to the previously used classical Chinese (文言文, wenyanywen) and it had showed the possibility of a real mass education movement.⁸⁷⁴ The importance of the popularisation of standard vernacular and of the mass education movement on Chinese culture in the longer term can hardly be overestimated : the number of literate people would grow exponentially, giving the authorities a chance to communicate with the population through education and propaganda, something well understood by the

⁸⁷² Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 204-5.

⁸⁷³ Xu G. (2007) *Convergence de deux civilisations : recherche sur les travailleurs chinois en France pendant la Première Guerre mondiale*, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press. p. 134 ; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 209-212.

⁸⁷⁴ Démurger S, Fournier M and Au-Yeung A. (2012) Assistance et éducation des travailleurs chinois pendant la Grande Guerre - Le rôle du Mouvement Travail-Etudes. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 323-343. p. 337.

CCP.⁸⁷⁵ Yan's views on mass education eventually influenced methods in community development that would be applied in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁷⁶

When the city archives of Weihai set up a large panel exhibition on the Chinese Labour Corps in 2009, their title in English was "*The blood shed by Chinese laborers in Europe contributed to establishment of a Better world, The souls of the deceased ones returned to the motherland to work for China's national salvation*".⁸⁷⁷ It considered the CLC to be "*Chinese messengers to the world*" who "*went to Europe when western civilization was collapsing, and they returned home when China was experiencing dramatic social changes.*" In the opinion of my Chinese colleagues, the returned labourers put their experiences in Europe into practice, establishing factories and hospitals, or became engaged in social reform movements. Through their role in the war, the Chinese Labour Corps had changed the traditional view that existed in China of manual labourers and "*to rely on laborers to save China became an attractive idea to many elite members including Cai Yuanpei, James Yen, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai.*" This might seem an exaggeration enhanced by the People's Republic's official ethos but that does not mean it is untrue. In 1925, Lu Xun, one of the best known Chinese authors in the west and one of the leading lights of the May 4th movement, stressed that while many intellectuals considered China's participation in the Great War a major accomplishment, it was actually "*the illiterate Chinese laborers*" who had made it into a reality.⁸⁷⁸

In the early Twentieth Century, in a very short time, many of the fixed certainties of Chinese life were changed for good: how people worked, what they read and wrote, and how people related to one another: men and women, politicians and citizens, old and young, Chinese and foreign.⁸⁷⁹ It is in this cultural transformation of Chinese society that the Chinese labourers and interpreters of the First World War played their hidden, and in consequence indirect role. After all, as I demonstrated,

⁸⁷⁵ Mitter R and Pieke FN. (2014) *Modern China*, Amsterdam: AUP. p. 136.

⁸⁷⁶ James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 25 & 680.

⁸⁷⁷ In Flanders Fields Museum, Research Centre, 6466 is a copy of the exhibition's 94 panels.

⁸⁷⁸ Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press. p. 213.

⁸⁷⁹ Mitter R. (2005) *A bitter revolution : China's struggle with the modern world*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 69.

they had been personally transformed through their stay in Europe and the acquaintance with westerners, their culture and their society.

Conclusion

The Indians and the Chinese who served on the Western Front in the First World War and its immediate aftermath formed arguably the largest groups of Asians ever to have resided in Europe. Still, soon after they returned home, the memory of them sank into oblivion and this both at home and in their former host countries. Both Indian and Chinese servicemen fell victim to a double *damnatio memoriae*: while standard histories of the war were too eurocentric to include non-European involvement, they were also ignored by their own national histories who preferred to focus on the heroes who had made the contemporary nation (such as nationalist leaders or communist rebels).⁸⁸⁰ Hegemonic nationalism had little use for the experiences of those who came to be characterised as 'mere mercenaries' or 'coolies in imperialist service' after their services had failed to deliver the political concessions the supporters of contributing to the war effort had initially hoped for.⁸⁸¹ The result was that, unlike in the West or in dominant societies, thousands of individual lived experiences of subordinates have all but erased from historical memory. And when they were studied, war experiences and their impact were commonly examined only in the context of their respective national histories, yet they profoundly transcended the national scope. The First World War was not only an international event - understood as an interaction between states- but also a transnational event as actions and interactions took place across borders of states but were not necessarily performed by them. Through their war service, servicemen from subordinate groups realised they were operating within a global context. Because those who wrote history for too long considered the subordinates' war service not worth of much consideration, the impact of their residence in Europe has never been seriously questioned.

It is, however, a difficult exercise to transform traumatic and physical experiences into a text or history. War is primordially about human suffering. By only focusing on a political meta-level, such as polities (or nations), those who lived through it are reified to a certain level. Only by integrating individual experiences we do not run the risk of losing sight of

⁸⁸⁰ Das S. (2008) India and the First World War. In: Howard M (ed) *A Part of History. Aspects of the British Experience of the First World War*. London: Continuum, 63-73., p. 64.

⁸⁸¹ Ahuja R. (2011) Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918. In: Roy F, Liebau H and Ahuja R (eds) *When the war began we heard of several kings : South Asian prisoners in World War I Germany*. New Delhi, Bangalore: Social Science Press, Orient Blackswan, 17-52. p. 26 & 52.

what war is really about and what it does to people. It is an idea follows the Rousseauist adagio that “society must be studied in the individual and the individual in society” and thus that the individual has no meaning except within the context of society, yet society only manifests itself through the individual.⁸⁸² Or adapted to this study: if we want to know what the phenomenon of war is about we need to study individuals in war, and likewise if we want to know why (a group of individuals) acted the way they did, we need to study the social circumstances. Marx saw human beings as conscious active subjects constantly making and remaking the world around them. This process of conscious human activity to transform society was for him the link between the particular and the universal. This book confirms not only that human differences are socially constructed but also that humans possess the ability to work for change. Our identities are not natural givens but social constructs. Human differences are thus not fixed and perennial.⁸⁸³

In this thesis I wanted to stress the commonness of experiences, how much is shared. Social groups define themselves by their history and by how they identify themselves, and this sets them apart from other groups. There is a hierarchy in the social products (class, race, gender,...) with which an individual identifies and this innate hierarchy also makes one’s personality. What happened through war experience is a shift within this personal hierarchy of identifications. Subordinate ex-servicemen were often foremost that: veterans. But while the issue of skin colour before the war might not have been considered that important, it might have become so during the war: non-European veterans were made aware of the fact that this made them different and earned them a different treatment. The confrontation with others who faced the same problems and situations bound men together, sometimes across ethnic boundaries as in the Indian context, while the confrontation with others who were treated differently, drove men apart.

As I argued in the introduction in this book I consider the Western Front and its immediate rear as a zone of contact where, through the interaction with other groups, a translation took place in the sense used by the adherents of postcolonial studies: a way of thinking about how languages, people, and cultures are transformed as they move between

⁸⁸² Malik K. (1996) *The Meaning of Race*, London: Macmillan. p. 267.

⁸⁸³ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

different places, or metaphorically: how an individual or group is transformed by changing their sense of their own place in society.⁸⁸⁴

I looked for similarities and dissimilarities within a well determined theatre of war. The significance of this study is to be found in its unique comparative structure and in the analysis of previously undiscussed aspects related to the service of subordinate groups in the First World War. Studying subordinate groups is important as it demonstrates the First World War was not a war between nations but involving highly complex empires.

The very wording 'zone of contact' assumes some reciprocity. Hence, the importance in this book of the contacts with the local population in Flanders and Northern France. While I demonstrate that for the Asian groups and individuals present on the Western Front this zone of contact was clearly a zone of translation and this not in the least through their acquaintance with Europeans and their lifestyle, I argue this was much less the case for most local inhabitants with whom they met. While the latter's view of the self and of their place in the world might have changed through many other experiences in that war, such as exile, personal loss or material hardships, it was hardly transformed through their engagement with other cultures, even if the First World War had been the first time they ever met or even saw representatives of non-European cultures. Meeting non-European others had been just one of the many war experiences the local population underwent. When the war was over they reverted as far as possible to the lives they had formerly lived, and the long reconstruction of their 'devastated region' was now the main pre-occupation. Having met 'Tsjings' or 'Hindous' was just one of the more exotic memories of that profoundly unsettling war.

Moreover, the Indians and Chinese had been just two of many more 'foreign' groups they had become acquainted with during the war: after all, they had been confronted with a bewildering multitude of more than 60 cultures who served in the imperial armies of France and Britain on the Western Front. While some locals did differentiate, others didn't even bother, as is demonstrated by a telling passage in the diary of the Baroness Ernest de la Grange (Clémentine de Chaumont-Quitry): "*The gardener's wife came to tell me that "a Scotch officer wanted to see me". Expecting to see the traditional kilt, I wondered if I were dreaming when I met Faizullah, General Birdwood's Indian standard-bearer! [...] But I*

⁸⁸⁴ Young RJC. (2003) *Postcolonialism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 29.

*should like to know the association of ideas and the connection between a Sikh and a Scot! When I asked the gardener's wife, she replied: "They're all furriners; it's the same thing!"*⁸⁸⁵ And when proper meeting took place it was more than often superficial – the existing witness accounts by Europeans are generally less reflective and more anecdotal than those from Asians - and seldom devoid of a certain degree of xenophobia. The local inhabitants who met Asians did so in an individual capacity – alone or in a family context- and they were all from rural and through the circumstances of war rather isolated communities, something which prevented exchange of ideas and views on these strange Others whom they had met. Also lacking was a sense of purpose: the locals got acquainted with the Asians purely by coincidence, because an unwanted war had brought them to their land. The Asians, on the other hand, even when meetings with European local folk happened individually (which was far from always the case), were working and living together in closely-knit units of hundreds of men and this enhanced exchanges of views and thus more (common) reflections on the European ways of life. Their residence in Europe was always the consequence of a choice - either directly or indirectly- and was part of a 'bigger plan': fighting the war or just making money. Moreover, for some getting to know the West had even been the main motive to join up.

This does not mean I consider the acquaintances of the locals with Asian or other non-European groups historically insignificant. Studying them is an opportunity to ponder upon phenomena of xenophobia or mythification, and could even offer a historical mirror to today's often heavily contested multicultural societies. The shift in attitudes of the local population towards the Chinese from a rather mildly positive disposition during the war to outspokenly negative opinions in the immediate post-war period including the phenomenon of scapegoating the Chinese during the 1919 crime wave, is a case in point.

Yet, it is on another level I consider the meeting during the war of Belgians and Frenchmen with Indians and Chinese of a greater importance: it was besides their service in a modern industrial and 'western' war, the immersion in European cultures, and not in the least the acquaintance with the "ordinary people" among whom they lived and with whom they engaged, that had transformed the Asian groups and individuals present at the front. The local population formed their most important 'outgroup'. According to social psychology theory the presence of 'outgroups' (the

⁸⁸⁵ de la Grange BE. (1929) *Open House in Flanders : Château de la Motte au Bois*, London: John Murray. p. 214.

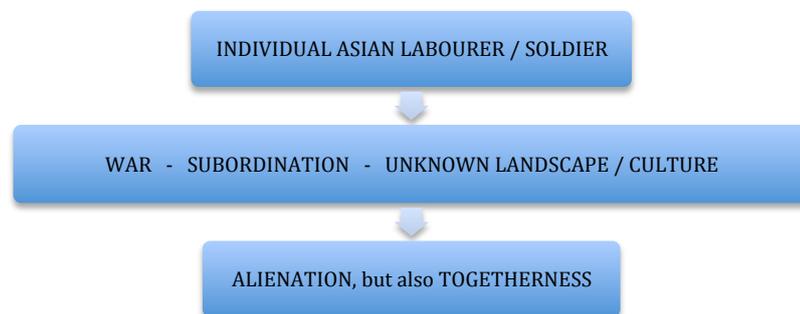
social group to which one does not belong) has an impact on the 'ingroup' (the group to which an individual belongs and with which it identifies). One of the consequences is that the individual self-perception is less articulated in function of his personality but more as a member of his group. One's self-perception shifts from a personal identity (as a unique individual) towards a social identity (as a member of a particular group). One of the results is that members of a particular group will increasingly resemble one another, both in terms of behaviour, and in terms of cognitions and emotions. At the same time inter-group-contact leads to a decreased fear of members of outgroups and a higher level of empathy.⁸⁸⁶ In other words, the cultural encounters with the European Others changed the Chinese and Indians' sense of belonging, their sense of place in society and in the world. It had the potential to challenge imperial power relations, to empower the subordinates and to enhance their political and societal consciousness. After all, as Eric Storm and Ali Al Tuma wrote, the presence of colonial servicemen in Europe had the effect of crossing the cultural boundaries that the colonial powers had tried to maintain between the Europeans and the colonised peoples and therefore implicitly undermined the racialised, hierarchical colonial order.⁸⁸⁷

Crossing the seas was to a large extent a social taboo in both China and India, and hence a traumatic affair for both Asian groups. Even more traumatic was the hard and sudden confrontation with a modern, total and industrialised war to these people who had perhaps only seldom, if ever, witnessed modern machinery, even less such destructive and lethal machinery. The result must have been a sense of being overwhelmed by the circumstances, of having no say in one's own destiny, in other words: of alienation. This sense, not uncommon in many of the European rank and file, was intensified by the subordinate position of the Indians and Chinese, and by the consequently discriminatory treatment to which they were subjected to a greater or lesser extent. Finally, finding themselves in an entirely unfamiliar landscape, often utterly destroyed, and surrounded by a completely different culture with strange habits and where no one spoke their mother tongue can only have made the feeling of alienation total. At the same time, these circumstances of travelling overseas, of being confronted with difficult living conditions in a strange environment bound the group together and their 'otherness' made them stand out

⁸⁸⁶ Van Hiel A. (2013) *Sociale Psychologie*, Gent: Academia Press. p. 393 & 490.

⁸⁸⁷ Storm E and Tuma AA. (2016) *Colonial soldiers in Europe, 1914-1945 : "aliens in uniform" in wartime societies*, New York: Routledge. p. 2.

against the Europeans. Schematically the process they went through could be presented as :



In Europe, and through the confrontation with the local inhabitants, they started seeing themselves in a different light. Through the confrontation with the European 'Other', Chinese and Indians realised much more strongly what they had in common, highlighted more what they shared than what separated them, and we see a development of a certain groupness: across castes and religions with the Indian rank and file, between intellectuals and illiterate labourers in the Chinese Labour Corps. This enhanced groupness had the capacity to devolve in some kind of (proto)nationalism. Members of the Chinese Labour Corps, even if initially they had joined just for the money, saw themselves more and more as representatives of the Chinese Republic while exalting the common value of Labour. Within the Indian groups we see how this development of national feelings could go in different directions with both an identification with a certain idea of India, as well as the emergence of a more regional Naga or Mizo protonationalism. This somewhat prefigures the two opposite political trends that would appear when Indian independence became imminent: on the one hand a pan-Indian view that strove towards a single Indian nation-state, and on the other hand an ethnically or religiously inspired view that sought its national destiny independently.

Besides the development of forms of groupness, being in Europe and meeting Europeans enhanced the self-consciousness of the Asian groups. Personal and common shortcomings were realised, and this led to a wish to learn from Europe. Yet, this was usually not manifested in an uncritical desire to emulate the West: besides shortcomings, personal and common strengths were also realised, as well as those aspects in which the western 'Others' and their society failed humanity in Asian eyes. A case in point is the disapproving attitude of many Indians and Chinese towards western values and religion. Sun Gan made an important remark which might be

considered symptomatic for the Chinese opinion when he observed flares lighting up the battlefield at night: *“Those Europeans are able to understand the logics of matter using the logics of the human spirit and thus are able to transform a pitch dark battlefield in a clear morning sky. Suppose they would try to reach the logics of Heaven through the logics of matter, that would be real civilisation.”*⁸⁸⁸ This understanding ties in with what Partha Chatterjee, a protagonist of the Subaltern Studies and Postcolonialist school, has written on nationalism in the non-European world. Chatterjee identified three stages in the nationalist attitudes viz. the West : departure, manoeuvre and arrival. The moment of departure is the encounter with the framework of knowledge created by rationalist thought and this leads to awareness and acceptance of an essential cultural difference between east and west for modern European culture possesses attributes conducive to power and progress (and the lack of these attributes dooms the cultures of the East to poverty and subjection). According to non-European nationalists this backwardness is not historically immutable and can be overcome by adopting the modern attributes of European culture. Chatterjee distinguishes the material and the spiritual domain: *“The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and the statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain, bearing the ‘essential’ mark of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture”*⁸⁸⁹ It is this phenomenon, this attitude I recognise in the writings of Sun Gan, but also in those of other observers, be they Chinese, Indian or British: on the one end admiration for western technology and what it was capable of, yet on the other end abomination for that part of western culture that instrumentalised this technological lead for death and destruction.

Yet, while the West did not set an example to follow in the field of spirituality, it certainly did so in the field of technology and education. A consequence of the augmented self-awareness on behalf of the Indians and the Chinese was the ambition of self-improvement through studying those aspects of western society that did seem useful, not only for one’s

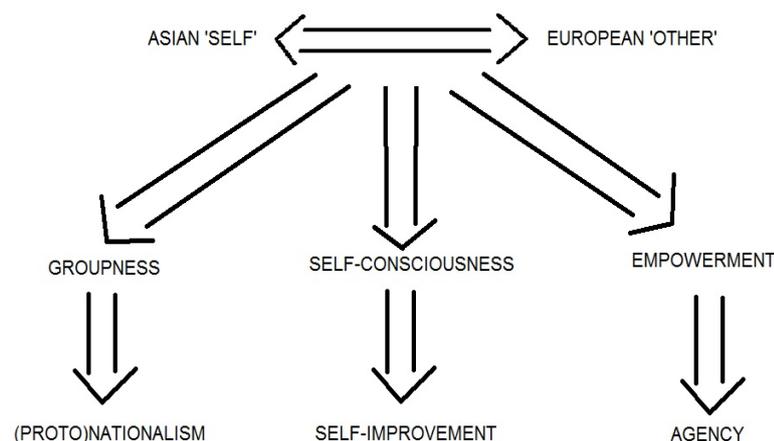
⁸⁸⁸ Sun Gan, Section 118.

⁸⁸⁹ Özkirimli U. (2010) *Theories of Nationalism. A Critical Introduction.*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 183-5.

personal development, but also to one's group and home society. In this respect, this wish for self-improvement, to learn from the West, on behalf of the Asians was clearly linked with their intensified groupness.

And so was their agency. Most scholarly works do consider the deployment of non-European groups as "passive receptacles of Western civilisation",⁸⁹⁰ yet even within the restricted framework of the western front they gave proof of alertness and agency. Subordinates are indeed never entirely devoid of at least a certain level of agency: we have seen how even in the most dire of circumstances Indian prisoners of war gave proof of agency, for instance by elegantly inserting demands or even disguised threats in the statements they pronounced in the recording horns of the Prussian phonographic commission. Yet, the boost in groupist feelings, and thus in standing together was a strong impetus for empowerment, as is demonstrated by the occurrence of strikes and other forms of protest in the Indian and Chinese Labour Corps. Of major significance is the contrast in the way they were treated by their British overlords and the usually more benign attitudes of the French authorities and the local inhabitants, which not only invoked reflection on their imposed subordinate position, but also agitation for the improvement of their lot, for "particularistic self-understandings shape social and political action".⁸⁹¹

The evolution sketched in these paragraphs can be summarised by this diagram:



⁸⁹⁰ Das S. (2011) *Race, Empire and First World Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 15.

⁸⁹¹ Brubaker R and Cooper F. (2000) Beyond "Identity". *Theory and Society* 29: 1-47. p. 9.

In how far were the Asians who served on the Western Front true messengers from West to East? In other words: in how far did they have a real impact in their home societies at large? This remains a difficult question to answer, especially in the political domain. It is impossible at this stage to determine in how far the ideas and insights they had developed in Europe filtered through to their home societies at large. Despite their large numbers, the groups that had served in Europe were probably relatively too small in comparison to the population of their home countries to make a direct impact, except in the case of the tribal communities that made up some of the companies of the Indian Labour Corps. And again with the exception of North East India, no nationwide associations of veterans seem to have formed as was the case in Europe and in the dominions. Moreover, as far as we know in this stage, the veterans' efforts to improve society were limited to local initiatives. Still, they must have acted as transnational middlemen informing upon their return home their fellow countrymen of the things they had observed and learned. The British author Basil Matthews imagined in 1924 how "*The khaki-clad warrior strode back into his village the hero of incredible travels and feats. [...] The villagers listened agape to their stories round the night-fires [...] the debates of the trenches, the whispers of Bolshevik Russia; the murmurs of the world's movements to govern itself. The impact was nationwide and revolutionary. It linked up village India with world-movements and in particular with the wave of nationalistic self-determination.*"⁸⁹² Even if their war experience did not urge them to act, their insights were not lost but oozed out throughout their home societies.

Non-rational factors like frustration, a feeling of humiliation or the need for cultural self-assertion are not quantifiable and thus generally underrated by historians of colonial nationalism.⁸⁹³ Yet, it was precisely such feelings that were rife among non-European ex-servicemen. Even if after the war, they decided to lead a calm life, settled and were not active in political or social agitation, they did carry these feelings along. Through their stories and accounts it filtered through to broader levels within their home societies. The title Captain Kashi Nath gave to the chapter in which

⁸⁹² Mathews B. (1924) *The Clash of Colour. A Study in the Problem of Race*, London: Edinburgh House Press. p. 36.

⁸⁹³ Raychaudhuri T. (1999) India, 1858 to the 1930s. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 214-230. p. 219.

he considered how the war might have affected the Indian labourers, was “The Silent Change”.⁸⁹⁴

Ex-soldiers and labourers acted more as accelerators and catalysts of change than initiators of wholly new conditions (seldom without forgetting their own interests). For in both the Indian and the Chinese case it can be argued that even if their direct impact on their home societies was quite limited, their indirect influence, certainly on a longer term, might have been considerable. We saw, for instance, how in both China and India returning veterans inspired by the example they had seen in Europe, agitated for the dissemination and improvement of education. They opened schools, and in particular schools for girls. It is a legacy that is still with us: some schools in India and Pakistan still bear the plaques stating they were founded by First World War veterans, while the educational reforms instigated and propagated by Yan Yangchu (James Yen) and inspired by his service during that war is generally recognised as being of an importance that far surpasses China’s borders. This investment in educational projects on behalf of ex-servicemen is also politically highly significant. Despite all their differences and despite a recent problematisation of this vision,⁸⁹⁵ one common finding of most scholars of nationalism, is that nation building is a top-down affair dominated by educated individuals. Nationalist texts that popularise grievances are written and read by the educated. They organise movements and the educational systems and other institutions help spread these ideas to the masses. In consequence, reinforcing education is a political act, especially in the context of (semi-)colonial societies with an emerging nationhood.

Though a direct link between war experience and political activism cannot always be drawn, there are clear indications that having served on the Western Front did enhance one’s level of self-confidence and political, national, ethnical or racial awareness. In India, some returned veterans joined the nationalist struggle while others on the contrary became pillars of the colonial order. In China, while there might have been a direct influence on some members of the first generation of communist leaders residing in France, the Chinese Labour Corps certainly did play an important role in the sacralisation of Labour that was so dear to the May 4th Movement.

⁸⁹⁴ Nath K. (1919) *Indian Labourers in France*, Bombay: Oxford University Press. p. 45-8.

⁸⁹⁵ Van Ginderachter M and Beyen M. (2012) *Nationhood from below : Europe in the long nineteenth century*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

In both India and China, as elsewhere in the non-European world, the returning veterans were instrumental in jeopardising the idea that the West was the leading light for intellectuals, and in transforming the way the 'white' man was looked upon. That the image of western civilisation, including the myth of white superiority, had seriously suffered was clear to many, not in the least colonial pundits and missionaries. "*Certainly in the eyes of these non-official representatives of the nations the white race is being stripped of its false glory and supposed Christian civilization and is standing out in a poor light with little to recommend it*", thus was the opinion Dwight W. Edwards, the American YMCA envoy to the CLC in France.⁸⁹⁶ And in 1931, Albert Sarraut⁸⁹⁷ justified his proposals for a renewal of the colonial policy with the following statement: "*In this conflict [the Great War], the repercussions of which were felt in the furthest reaches of our planet, Europe lost both her unity and the moral authority which had allowed her to dominate and rule the universe. In the eyes of the coloured races who, in the past, had seen Europe forget her quarrels and form a united front whenever the interest of the whites races were at stake, she appears today cruelly divided, chaotic, enfeebled and deprived of her former vigour. In the minds of other races the war has dealt a terrible blow to the moral value of civilisation which the Europeans claimed with pride to be superior, yet in the name of which in a period of four years they killed one another with unparalleled ferocity. Europe's prestige, especially in Asia, has been seriously affected.*"⁸⁹⁸ Even more than 40 years after the end of the war, the loss of white prestige was still mourned by western statesmen. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was in 1962 of the opinion that it was the two World Wars that had destroyed the prestige of the white people and he saw a clear link between serving in those wars and the revolt of non-white peoples.⁸⁹⁹

The First World War definitely was an important pivotal point in the development of colonial and semicolonial peoples. The war had led to

⁸⁹⁶ University of Minnesota, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, YMCA International work in China, Box 88, Folder 1: "The Chinese Labourer in France in Relation to the work of the Young Men's Christian Association. Report to the International Committee of Young Men's Christian Association of North America of Special Mission of Dwight W. Edwards in France, April 13 - May 11th [1918].

⁸⁹⁷ Sarraut (Bordeaux, 1872 – Paris, 1962) was a former governor of French Indochina, minister of the Colonies, leading politician of the Parti Radical and soon to become prime minister of France.

⁸⁹⁸ Sarraut A. (1931) *Grandeur et Servitudes coloniales*, Paris: Editions du Sagittaire . p. 18-9.

⁸⁹⁹ Furedi F. (1998) *The silent war : imperialism and the changing perception of race*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. p. 40.

national awareness and by consequence was heralding the decay in power of the European colonial empires. According to Grimal and other authors the decolonisation process originated in the growth of colonial nationalism which was often bred in Western thinking. The distortion between the ideas of freedom, equality and justice proclaimed as the foundations of political morality and ordinary conduct gave rise to a desire for change. At first colonial nationalism was essentially nourished by the idea of inequality and the wish to put an end to it.⁹⁰⁰ Apart from the few intelligentsia from the colonies who had studied in the motherlands before 1914, it is the (semi-)colonial rank and file who had served on the western front who was confronted with this distortion between theory and practice. All Indian and Chinese veterans, regardless of whether they had been soldiers or labourers, had been awarded the Inter-allied Victory Medal. While this proudly proclaimed they had served in ‘The Great War for Civilisation’, the West had shown its non-European (semi-)colonial subordinates what its civilisation was worth.

The way the non-European ‘Other’ had been treated in the First World War put a heavy mortgage on the middle- and long-term on the survival of the British Empire, as well as other empires. In this respect the war experiences of Asian subordinates did play a role in the worldwide contestation of the hegemony of white rule that would emerge after the First World War and which would ultimately lead to decolonisation, though it would ultimately take the Second World War to complete the process of ‘*Selbstentmachtung Europas*’⁹⁰¹ that had begun in the First.

⁹⁰⁰ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 412.

⁹⁰¹ The term was coined by the conservative German and one time nazi historian Erwin Hölzle.



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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Azië in Flanders Fields. Een transnationale geschiedenis van Indiërs en Chinezen op het Westelijk Front, 1914-1920

Vooraf in dienst van de Franse en Britse legers verbleven tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog mensen uit de vijf continenten in Vlaanderen en Noord-Frankrijk. Naast kolonisten van Europese afkomst, ging het daarbij om honderdduizenden autochtonen uit vele kolonies. De twee grootste ondergeschikte groepen die in dienst van de Britse legers in Europa ingezet werden, elk goed voor om en bij de 140.000 manschappen, kwamen beiden uit Azië, resp. uit het Indiase subcontinent en uit China. In deze verhandeling wordt niet alleen nagegaan welke hun motieven waren om dienst te nemen en wat de aard van hun inzet aan het Westelijk Front was, maar vooral hoe deze ondergeschikte groepen het verblijf in een Europa in oorlog beleefd hebben en welke invloed dit verblijf uiteindelijk op hen zelf én op de samenleving waarnaar zij terugkeerden, heeft gehad.

Centraal in het peilen naar hun oorlogservaringen staat de ontmoeting met de Europese 'ander', de plaatselijke bevolking die hen willens nillens te gast had. Er wordt gekeken hoe de Europese bevolking de confrontatie met de niet-Europese gasten aanging, en omgekeerd ook welke indruk de Europeanen, met hun maatschappij en hun cultuur maakten op de Aziatische manschappen. Binnen en buiten het leger werden Indiërs en Chinezen in Europa geconfronteerd met verschillende gradaties van xenofobie, racisme en discriminatie, maar kwam het ook tot meer vriendschappelijke ontmoetingen met Europeanen. Niet zelden leidde dit tot een versterkt zelf- en (proto-)nationaal bewustzijn dat zich kon manifesteren in initiatieven op meerdere gebieden van de menselijke activiteit: politiek, cultuur, onderwijs,

Door het vergelijkend perspectief worden zowel verschillen als gelijkenissen tussen beide Aziatische groepen aan het Westelijke front duidelijk, en kunnen parallellen getrokken worden in hun evolutie naar een versterkt (zelf)bewustzijn en toenemende identificatie met de (proto)natie doorheen hun oorlogservaring in Europa. .

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Appendix 1: Present-day United Nations Member States of whom the presence of ‘inhabitants’ at the front in Flanders or along the lines of communication can be substantiated.

<u>State</u>	<u>which army in the Great War</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Afghanistan	British Empire	British India
Algeria	France	
Antigua and Barbuda	British Empire	British West Indies
Australia	British Empire	
Bahamas	British Empire	British West Indies
Bangladesh	British Empire	in Indian Labour Corps ?
		British India
Barbados	British Empire	British West Indies
Belgium	Belgium	
Belize	British Empire	British Honduras, in British West Indies Regiment
Benin	France	French West Africa
Bhutan	British Empire	in Indian Labour Corps ?
		British India
Botswana	British Empire	in South African Native Labour Corps
		French West Africa
Burkina Faso	France	
Canada	British Empire	
China	British Empire	in Chinese Labour Corps
Denmark	German Empire	from South Jutland, occupied by Prussia
DR Congo	Belgium	
Dominica	British Empire	British West Indies
Egypt	British Empire	in Egyptian Labour Corps
		in Fijian Labour Corps
Fiji	British Empire	
France	France	
Germany	German Empire	
Grenada	British Empire	British West Indies
Guinea	France	French West Africa
Guyana	British Empire	in British West Indies Regiment
India	British Empire	British India
Ireland	British Empire	
Italy	German Empire	POWs as forced labour

Ivory Coast	France	French West Africa
Jamaica	British Empire	British West Indies
Lesotho	British Empire	in South African Native Labour Corps
Luxemburg	France and German Empire	conscripts in German Army, volunteer units in French army
Madagascar	France	
Mali	France	French West Africa
Malta	British Empire	in regular British units
Mauritania	France	French West Africa
Myanmar	British Empire	British India
Morocco	France	
Nepal	British Empire	Gurkhas in British Indian Army
New Zealand	British Empire	
Niger	France	French West Africa
Pakistan	British Empire	British India
Poland	German Empire	Polish minority in German Empire
Portugal	Portugal	
Russian Federation	German Empire	POWs as forced labour
Saint Kitts and Nevis	British Empire	British West Indies
Saint Lucia	British Empire	British West Indies
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	British Empire	British West Indies
Samoa	British Empire	settlers in regular British units
Senegal	France	French West Africa
South Africa	British Empire	
Swaziland	British Empire	in South African Native Labour Corps
Tonga	British Empire	in New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion
Trinidad and Tobago	British Empire	British West Indies
Tunisia	France	
United Kingdom	British Empire	
United States of America	United States of America	
Viet Nam	France	
Zimbabwe	British Empire	Settlers in regular British units

European groups seem to be more differentiated than non-European groups. Hence, the Canadian First Nations are considered a group without further differentiation in linguistic-cultural area (plains, woodland, ...) nor in peoples or 'bands', the British West Indies Regiment is not differentiated as to colony or island and likewise little differentiation is made among the group of the South African Native Labour Corps. Again, relativity is the keyword. When it is relevant, i.e. when it has particular consequences, a certain differentiation needs to be made: without considering all particularities of caste and religion, it is of importance to make distinctions within the Indian Army Corps (where the martial races theory was at play) and between this corps and the Indian Labour Corps (that was mainly recruited from tribal societies).

One could wonder, in the end, what the use then is of such an overview if it can be but subjective and imperfect. Well, one purpose is precisely to point out the relativity of ethnic or cultural categorisation and the imperfections of the available concepts. Secondly, it is only by dressing up an overview of different groups - how faulty their definition might be - that one can understand the sheer diversity of those present on the Western Front. Thirdly, an as-inclusive-as-possible overview is an absolute requirement to overcome boundaries of national or eurocentric historiography. For only when put together and compared, our horizons will be broadened and differences and similarities will appear to be assessed. An important 'national evolution' like the emergence of the 'Flemish movement' during the First World War, will prove to be much less unique and part of a more global phenomenon once put in perspective with similar (or differing) evolutions. And, fourthly: if we want to go 'transnational', meaning that history is also made through the interaction between groups, no groups present in the same geographical context should be excluded.

There, is, however, a fifth reason for this overview, and one that it is entirely practical in the sense that it comes from the realm of 'public history'. The 'public' wants to know "who has been on the Western Front". It is a common occurrence that In Flanders Fields Museum or other First World War protagonist are asked whether this or that group had been represented at the front.⁴ Especially with the (approach of the) centenary this question has been taken up by governments and government representatives. Already in 2008, the Flemish government ordered a study prior to deciding how to commemorate the centenary and which countries to involve which included a similar list.⁵ Later on, embassies and

⁴ For example, it is quite common for the In Flanders Fields Museum to receive a phone call from someone who is due to show a visiting foreign friend or group around the Ypres Salient and asks if and where a grave can be found of someone with whom this friend or group could identify.

⁵ van der Auwera S. (2008) *De herdenking van de Grote Oorlog en Flanders Fields : een beknopt overzicht in 25 staten*, Antwerpen: Vlaams Steunpunt Buitenlands Beleid.

other foreign representatives would follow. As such inclusive overview did not exist, it was something that needed to be done by the museum itself.

When in 1998 In Flanders Fields Museum opened its doors in Ypres, a small display was entitled 'Many Nations'. The idea behind it was to evoke the appearance of troops and labourers from the five continents on the battlefields of Flanders in the First World War. It was presumed then that men (and a handful women) from about 30 different nations had been present on the Western Front. The display combined some headgear, including a rare *chéchia* of a *tirailleur sénégalais* with a few other rather minor objects but it was mainly photographs that had to draw the attention of the visitor: one of a Chinese labourer and one of Bhupinder Singh, maharaja of Patiala, on a visit to the (Belgian) front.⁶ All in all quite meagre but there wasn't much more available then. Later a kukri was added after one had been found by amateur archaeologists north of Ypres. From the outset, it was realised not only how little we had, but also how little we actually knew of some of the groups whose presence on the front was attested through objects, photographs or quotes. Frankly, we had to admit that the presumption of 30 'nations' was just that: a presumption. No one had the slightest idea of which contemporary nationalities or ethnic groups were involved in the epic battles around Ypres, and certainly not with how many they had been. Nor had any thought been given as how to define a highly contested concept as 'nation'.

When preparing the exhibition 'Man-Culture-War. Multicultural Aspects of the First World War'⁷, due for the spring and summer of 2008, the time had come for more precise data. It wasn't too difficult finding rather exact figures or - by lack of them - estimates of how many were recruited by British or French from all corners of their respective empires but that wouldn't solve the answer of who had been on the Flanders' battlefields and its rear. For that was the restriction the museum had set itself: not all those who served, not even all those who were present on the Western Front, but those who had been in Flanders, i.e. the fronts of the Yser and of Ypres and their rear areas. The ultimate proof, so it was realised, was a headstone or a name on a memorial: if he had died here, he surely must have been here. The database of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission⁸ enables not only to search on name, but also on country commemorated in, on unit or on "additional information" which could include the address of the then next-of-kin. Performing queries combining several search terms would allow to uncover among the nearly 200,000 names of British service personnel from the First World War commemorated in Belgium many from ethnic groups whose presence had

⁶ Baert K and others. (1999) *In Flanders Fields. Catalogue of the Objects*, Ypres: In Flanders Fields Museum. p. 60-1.

⁷ Dendooven D and Chielens P. (2008) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tielt: Lannoo.

⁸ www.cwgc.org.

hitherto not been acknowledged. There was also a need to explore the database for those commemorated in France for Ypres is a mere 17 kilometers from the French border and the lines of communication stretched all the way to the channel ports from Dunkirk until the mouth of the river Somme. Indeed, if one wanted to establish who had been present at the front and wanted to be inclusive, one had to take into account a much larger area that included the western part of the French *départements* Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Somme.

Yet finding a grave using the casualties database of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission couldn't solve all the questions. What about those fighting or working for the French and Germans? Both lack casualty databases with as many parameters as the CWGC. The French have on the one hand cemetery registers and on the other hand a database listing those "*Morts pour la France*" giving access to scanned index cards stating among other facts the date, nature and place of death.⁹ However, the former only lists known graves and often with very few details of the individual. Those missing or those repatriated - quite often a large majority - are not included, while in the latter one could and can only search on name, date of birth and *département* of birth. Only quite recently was the option 'country of birth' added though this is somehow an anachronism as most of the countries listed were not yet in existence one hundred years ago. Hence, the only way to find out who had died in Flanders was to go through thousands of index cards in search of the ones killed in Belgium. Pretty much the same restrictions one encounters when researching the German casualties of the First World War. The database of the *Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge* only allows to search on name, eventually with extra data such as place of birth or year of death.¹⁰ More importantly, it only lists those whose graves are in the care of the Volksbund, so again not the many missing nor those whose remains were repatriated during or after the conflict.

And apart from British, French and Germans, there were the other belligerent nations such as Belgians, Portugese, Americans, ... where there was no real need to search casualties databases as their contingents were much smaller, making it easier to establish different ethnic groups present among them. Yet, it seemed astonishing that nearly a century after the First World War there was no inclusive, international ressource enabling to learn how many or who had died in a specific theatre of war. The challenge was later taken up by the museum in an ongoing and long-term project called 'The Name List'¹¹ of which it is the ultimate goal of establishing one single, inclusive register of all those who died in Belgium or following acts of war that took place in Belgium, no matter whether they were civilians or military personnel and irrespective of their

⁹ <http://www.memoiredeshommes.sga.defense.gouv.fr>.

¹⁰ <http://www.volksbund.de/graebersuche.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.inflandersfields.be/en/namelist>.

nationality. As this is a genuinely gigantic project involving hundreds of volunteers and the cooperation of tens of government agencies, organisations or institutions, at the time of writing the list, despite being online, is still far from complete.

The result of hundreds of queries in casualty databases and many visits to tens of war cemeteries was an overview of 'ultimate proofs' in the form of a grave, of a name on a memorial or an index card that a representative of a particular ethnic group had been present in, near or behind the front in Flanders. It was definitely not an exhaustive list: some groups were indeed (too) hard to fit in or impossible to distinguish from other groups. Contingents of British settlers from colonies such as Rhodesia, Fiji or Ceylon served in regular British regiments, such as "Rhodesian" platoons in the King's Royal Rifle Corps.¹² British communities abroad also sent their own contingents, such as British Volunteers from Latin America who sported their own distinctive badge with the letters BVLA but did not serve together in a distinguishable unit.¹³ These men could only be found if the Commonwealth War Graves Commission provided either an address of a 'next of kin' or a statement of origin in the 'additional information'-field of their database. Other groups I considered rather to be a religious denomination than an ethnic one. Jews for instance were to be found within all belligerent nations. Nor did I consider nationals from neutral countries who decided individually to leave home and join the army of one of the warring parties. A case in point is that of the Danish count Ove Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs from Juellinge who served as a private with the 28th Battalion Canadian Infantry (Saskatchewan Regiment), was killed on 15 November 1915 and whose grave on Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery (Row K, Grave 59) sports a Danish epitaph.

A particularly difficult case are non-British immigrants within the dominions who sometimes formed a separate national contingent and sometimes not. Canada alone mobilised close to 30,000 European migrants for service with foreign contingents. Though the men eventually did not serve in separate units but along and among other Canadians in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, they had very often been recruited through organisations closely linked with their nationality. By allowing so the Canadian Department of Militia and Defence had tacitly encouraged the expression of separate national self-identifications amongst migrant communities.¹⁴ Yet, in how far were they to be considered new Canadians, rather than recently emigrated Croats, Ukrainians, Swedes,... ? In the end

¹² MacLaughlin P. (1980) *Ragtime Soldiers : the Rhodesian Experience in the First World War*, Bulawayo: Books of Zimbabwe. p. 49-51.

¹³ Anon. (1920) *Activities of the British Community in Argentina during the Great War 1914-1919*, Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires Herald. p.115 on the distinctive badge, while p.121-198 gives the names of the volunteers, their rank and in which units they served.

¹⁴ Marti S. (2014) Frenemy Aliens. The National and Transnational Considerations of Independent Contingents in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, 1914-1918. *Itinerario* 38: 119 - 138. p.129 & 134.

it is the fluctuating and evolving notion of self-(identification) which is of overriding importance in this respect.

Finally, categorising is a necessary evil. We can simply not do without categories in order to understand or to explain particular situations and processes. But there are boundaries to the categorising. Especially establishing how someone would have identified can prove often difficult. An interesting case in point is that of Newfoundlander John Blake who died on 14 October 1918 and is buried in Duhallow A.D.S. Cemetery (grave reference IV.D.6) at Ypres. His name is definitely British and gives no clue of an eventual non-British ethnic background. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's register details, he was the 'Son of Henry William and Maria Hope Blake, of North West River, Labrador'. In his personal file¹⁵ we learn he was 21 years old when he joined in September 1917 (to reach his battalion at the front in May 1918). He stated to be a fisherman from Grand Village, a place where at least three other serving Newfoundlanders came from but which couldn't be located, not featuring in *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World* nor on Google Maps¹⁶. The most noticeable document in the online personal file is a letter by Lt.-Col. Thomas Nangle, the Newfoundland Regiment's padre during the war and following the war, the Dominion of Newfoundland's *Director of War Graves, Registration, Enquiries and Memorials* and also the dominion's representative on the Imperial War Graves Commission in London. In it he informs the Department of Militia in St. John's in November 1920 that he has selected the following inscription for John Blake's grave: "Here lies an Eskimo from the outposts of Labrador. May he rest in peace". Is this enough to conclude John Blake was an Inuit? Some elements indicate to a positive answer to this question: apart from the statement by Nangle, there is the information wikipedia¹⁷ gives me on his (presumed) birthplace : North West River is an old trading post in mid-Labrador with nowadays some 550 inhabitants. In 2011, the "racial composition" (sic) of North West River's population was 52.7% Inuit, 30.9% White, 13.6% Métis, and 1.8% Innu. Though these figures say little of the population's composition 100 years ago, we can presume the village always had a fairly important First Nation component. As personal files usually don't state the ethnic background of a recruit, the letter by Lt. Col. Nangle and the data regarding his hometown are the main indications of Blake's ethnic background. Yet, other aspects might on the contrary point to a European descendency: his non-indigenous name, the fact that his sister Phoebe according to the correspondence in the file moved from Sherbrooke (near Montreal) to Northern Rhodesia - both locations where one does not expect an Inuit to move to, but above all a photograph of

¹⁵ http://www.rnr.therooms.ca/soldier_files/Blake_John_rnr-1180.pdf (accessed 29 Feb 2016).

¹⁶ Accessed 20 April 2016.

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_West_River (accessed 29 Feb 2016).

John Blake¹⁸, showing a young man with few if no physical traits one generally associates with Inuit. And there is the remarkable fact that his headstone in Duhallow A.D.S. Cemetery after all does not bear the inscription Nangle proposed. One final internet site calls John Blake, somewhat more cautiously, “a volunteer of Inuit descent”¹⁹ though again this is not sure. The questions remain: how should we categorise him? How would he have categorised himself? Or, in other words how would he have identified?

Anyway, the research into casualties finally enabled to state that not “more than 30” but rather at least more than 50 ‘ethnic groups’ hailing from about 60 actual sovereign states were present on or behind the front in Flanders. The latter is indeed a final criterion: this overview is limited to those who have seen service in Flanders and its rear (North Western France). Hence it does include (nearly) all those recruited by the British, but does not take into account ethnic groups who presumably have only seen action further afield along the Western Front, such as the Siamese, the Polish ‘Blue Army’ or the Czech Legion fighting within the French army or French colonial natives from New Caledonia or French Somaliland, nor the French Foreign Legion. They have all been in action on the Western Front during the First World War but never in Flanders, an area I consider to correspond with the old County of Flanders where the inhabitants still nowadays identify with. This historical description coincides with the fronts of the Yser, of Ypres (in Belgium) and of Armentiers (in France) but not Neuve Chapelle and beyond. As noted before, the ‘rear’, i.e. the Lines of Communication of this front extended all the way to the Channel ports.

In the following overview, names found on graves, memorials and archive index cards form the backbone: they are the ultimate proof, the source that substantiate that (representatives of) a particular, distinguishable group had really been present in Flanders and the rear of its front. In some cases these names have been selected at random, others have been notified by visitors, scholars or family, while still others were the result of an intensive cemetery visit during which row after row of headstones were examined. In a few cases, queries were performed on particular names or parts of names, e.g. there is a good chance someone whose family name starts with “van ...” happens to be Dutch or Flemish (or Vietnamese!). Once a name was found, additional information would buttress or nullify this initial presumption.²⁰

¹⁸ http://www.themdays.com/memorial/persons1/Blake_John.html (accessed 29 Feb 2016).

¹⁹ <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/first-world-war/articles/aboriginals-first-world-war.php> (accessed 29 Feb 2016).

²⁰ Similar examples are Swedish names ending on “-son”, the occurrence of the family name Diallo in West-Africa as a typical Fula-name, Gurung and Bahadur as typical Nepalese (Gurkha) names,....

These names as they appear here are accompanied by the additional personal information found either on the headstone, in the cemetery register or on the index card (as retrieved from the aforementioned databases). I have included the epitaph, i.e. a text usually chosen by the family at the bottom of British headstones, if this conveyed something about how the casualty would have been nationally, ethnically or culturally identified. In some cases meta-information was needed to explain the quotes from headstones, registers or card index, e.g. the location of a named village, the ethnical adherence of a particular family name,.... .

Apart from integration in this appendix, these names were also used to establish an overview of present-day United Nation Member States of whom the presence of “inhabitants” at the front in Flanders or along the lines of communication can be substantiated (Appendix 1). This spreadsheet lists not only 59 UN member states but also some constituent parts or dependencies from these polities, identifying the army in which its representatives would have served in, how they would have been classified then, if it concerns a 'subordinate' ethnic category or a dependency, and finally the name of an individual representative of this group with a photograph of his headstone, his name on a memorial or the index card. The point of departure of this list are sovereign states as they exist nowadays. This means that Appendix 1 not only links the present with the past, but also that it is far more 'objective' linking officially recognised entities with the ultimate proof of a headstone or a name on a memorial. On the other hand, though practically useful for commemoration issues, it is also inherently anachronistic as it links individuals killed in the First World War to then non-existent polities such as Pakistan, Myanmar or Belize. Hence, for a historical analysis we have to stick to our 'subjective' and 'relative' overview.

Apart from the names and personal details, additional information on each group such as population figures, recruitment figures etc. were mainly obtained from a set of reference works²¹, supplemented by data from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for what concerns numbers of casualties and a wide range of 'national', regional' or groupist histories for additional content. Not surprisingly, the numbers given in the different reference works and cited monographs are seldom univocal. Hence, the figures are not to be considered absolute and exact, but rather as approximate, as indications of size.

²¹ I used the following set of excellent reference material: Pope S and Wheal E-A. (1995) *The Macmillan Dictionary of the First World War*, London: Macmillan.; Hirschfeld G, Krumeich G and Renz I. (2003) *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh.; Audoin-Rouzeau S and Becker J-J. (2004) *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre*, Paris: Bayard.; Cochet F and Porte R. (2008) *Dictionnaire de la Grande Guerre 1914-1918*, Paris: Robert Laffont.; Horne J. (2010) *A Companion to World War I*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.; For the constituent parts of the British Empire: Lucas CP. (1921-1926) *The Empire at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. is a great resource.

The European armies: no ethno-cultural monoliths

The colonising superpowers dragged virtually the whole world into the Great War. This brought peoples and cultures from all over the world to the battlefields of Europe. In the arguments justifying the deployment of colonial troops it was claimed the mother country was well worth fighting and dying for. That mother country was often represented as a nation-state, i.e. a state in which there was only one dominant 'nation'. This ancient, almost 'natural unity' should just as naturally lead its empire.²²

The European countries had worked hard, especially during the 19th century, to create this self image. They had created a national awareness or had at least developed and intensified it. This was indeed necessary for their cohesion and individuality as not a single European state was monocultural and unilingual. Europe was a patchwork of nations and peoples, of cultures and ethnic groups that sometimes populated their own region but were just as often intermingled. For the European nation-state before and during the First World War it was a matter of finding the middle ground between wiping out 'disturbing' cultural differences within the national borders and exploiting the cultural identity of certain minorities for the benefit of the war efforts.²³

The German Empire

“Julius Weinmann
Soldatenfriedhof Wervicq-Sud, Block 1, Grab 176.
Gefallen am 7.6.1917
Signalmeister, Bayrisches Fernsprech-Abteilung 3”

“Hans Christensen Bonde
Soldatenfriedhof Langemark, Block B, Grab 16864
Gefallen am 27.1.1915 in Vijfwegen
Ersatz-Reservist, 4. Reserve-Ersatz-Regiment, III. Bataillon (12.
Kompagnie)”

²² Gerwarth R and Manela E. (2014) Introduction. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at War, 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-16.,p. 3; Jones H. (2014) The German Empire. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at war : 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 52-72. p. 57

²³ Davies N. (2014) *Europe. A History*, London: The Bodley Head. p. 813-4, 821, 829 ; Mann M. (2013) The role of nationalism in the two world wars. In: Hall JA and Malešević Sa (eds) *Nationalism and War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 172-196. p. 177-180.

Hans Bonde was born in Mommark on the island Als on 9.10.1881. His name also features among the 4140 Danes killed in the First World War listed on the Marselisborg monument in Aarhus.²⁴

The German Empire was one of the youngest countries at war in 1914. Although the notion 'Germany' had existed for centuries and was to a large extent a cultural reality, the German states endured a difficult unification process. It was only in January 1871 that the Prussian King Wilhelm I was grudgingly crowned as the German Emperor. Since then the Empire had mainly handled defence and foreign affairs. In all other matters the federal states had remained sovereign. The German Empire comprised no fewer than 25 such federal states: 4 kingdoms (Prussia, Saxony, Württemberg and Bavaria), six grand duchies, five duchies, seven principalities and the free Hansa cities of Bremen, Hamburg and Lübeck. Alsace-Lorraine, conquered on France in the 1870 war, was governed as an imperial territory. This political mosaic was reflected in the German armed forces of 1914. Almost every federal state had its own regiments and that individuality was expressed in rank insignia, uniform parts, army organisation and military culture. For instance the renowned Prussian militarism was as much a concept for the other German Länder as it was for the allies.²⁵

The German Empire included many minorities and this was reflected in the German Army where they constituted some 10 %.²⁶ The largest section came from what is nowadays Poland: the then Prussian provinces Pomerania, Silesia, Posen and East & West Prussia. Many soldiers from those provinces could therefore be considered ethnic Poles for whom German was the foreign yet official language. They constituted some 6% of total manpower in the German imperial army. In the home of photographer-artist Rafaël Gellynck in Wervik men were billeted from Kattowitz (Katowice) who spoke Polish among themselves and German when on duty.²⁷

In Brandenburg, in the heart of the German Empire, the area around the cities Cottbus and Lausitz was populated then as it is now by Sorbs: a people of Slavic origin with its own language and culture. About 3,000 Sorbs did not return from the battlefields.²⁸

²⁴ In Flanders Fields Museum, Research Centre, map 1508: personal File "Hans Bonde" and ibidem, "Namenlijst Deense oorlogsslachtoffers 1914-1919 in Marselisborg, Aarhus".

²⁵ Jahr C. (2004) De Pruisische officier. Feiten en vermoedens over een mythe. In: Piet Chielens ao (ed) *Rudolf Lange 1874-1918. Oorlogsgeschiedenis*. Brugge: Uitgeverij Van de Wiele, 13-19.

²⁶ Gerwarth R and Manela E. (2014) Introduction. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at War, 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-16. p. 6-7. The figures of percentages of manpower from the minorities are quotations from the same text.

²⁷ Verbeke RV. (2010) Verschillende nationaliteiten in 1914-1919 in Wervik. *1914-1918 Wervik-Geluwe. Cahier 2010*. Wervik: Cultuurdienst van de stad Wervik, 7-14. p. 8.

²⁸ The *Lausitzer Rundschau* made a website on the Sorbs in the Great War: <http://tools.lr-port.de/apps/1wk/index.php> (accessed 6 April 2016).

In 1914 the population of Wervik was surprised to have to provide accommodation for French-speaking German soldiers.²⁹ Some inhabitants of the Imperial Territory of Alsace-Lorraine (good for 3-4 % of the Imperial Army's manpower) that had only been put on an equal footing with the other German federal states in 1911, spoke French, German and/or an Alsatian dialect. At least part of the German-speaking Alsations were in favour of a return to France.

The small Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg, which hardly had an army until 1914, was occupied by German troops on 2 August 1914, but maintained its (internal) self-rule. In spite of this, however, Luxemburgers were subjected to compulsory military service in the German army. They were spread out among all kinds of units.³⁰ However, a number of Luxemburg volunteers fought in the French army.

Some 26,000 'Danish' soldiers from Schleswig found themselves in the same situation.³¹ This duchy had been conquered by Prussia in 1864 with the support of Austria and the German Federation. Many pro-Danish inhabitants, including some who spoke German as a first language, left much against their wishes for a war which many believed was of no concern to them. It is estimated that around 4,000 never returned and today lie buried in German military cemeteries. Only one small Danish cemetery was built after the war in Braine, near the Chemin-des-Dames. Two thousand five hundred other South-Jutland conscripts deserted to neutral Denmark. The allies too were aware of the special situation of these 'German' soldiers and opened special camps in Aurillac and Feltham, where the Danish prisoners of war enjoyed a more favourable regime. In 1920, following a referendum the northern part of the duchy of Schleswig would again become a Danish province under the name South-Jutland. The memory of the First World War was and is kept alive there: there was a thriving association of 'pro-Danish veterans of the Great War' and there are still many war monuments. The main one is the large national monument in Marselisborg that was partly inspired by the Ypres Menin Gate. As with the aforementioned case of count Ove Krag-Juel-Vind-Frijs, some individual Danes fought on the allied side.

Some figures speak volumes about the minorities in the former German Empire: in spite of Bismarck's Kulturkampf of the 56 million German nationals in 1900 – ten years later there would be ten million more – more than 3 million had Polish as their mother tongue, over 200,000 French, 140,000 Danish, 93,000 Sorbic and 80,000 Dutch. Other languages with a

²⁹ Verbeke RV. (2010) Verschillende nationaliteiten in 1914-1919 in Wervik. *1914-1918 Wervik-Geluwe. Cahier 2010*. Wervik: Cultuurdienst van de stad Wervik, 7-14. p. 9.

³⁰ Heal D. (2008) *L'Invasion du Luxembourg*, Louviers: YSEC.

³¹ For this section: Adriansen I and Hansen HS. (2006) *Sønderjyderne og den Store Krig 1914-1918*, Aabenraa: Historisk Samfund For Sønderjylland.; Bundgård Christensen C. (2009) *Danskere på Vestfronten 1914-1918*, København: Gyldendal.; and Bundgård Christensen C. (2012) Fighting for the Kaiser. The Danish Minority in the German Army, 1914-1918. In: Ahlund C (ed) *Scandinavia in the First World War. Studies in the War Experience of the Northern Neutrals*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 267-282.

large number of speakers (over 20,000) were amongst others Masurian, Moravian, Czech, Kashubian, Lithuanian and Frisian.³²

In addition to the ethno-cultural minorities there were also religious minorities. German Jews had only been given civil rights with the creation of the Empire in 1871. Consequently, they were subjected to compulsory military service. It is estimated nearly 100,000 Jews served in the German army during the First World War. At the instigation of anti-semitic politicians a Jewish census was carried out in the German armed forces in order to demonstrate that Jewish citizens failed to fulfill their duty towards the Fatherland. The statistics proved the contrary and the research was never made public. Yet towards the end of the First World War all kinds of deceptive stories were circulating about how the Jews, depicted as war usurers, inferior cowards and international conspirators, had orchestrated the German defeat. This lay a solid foundation for the anti-semitism that prevailed during the interbellum period.³³ In the German cemeteries in France gravestones with the Star of David and Hebrew inscriptions still stand out against the black or grey crosses.

Austria-Hungary

The dual monarchy (Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary) was one of the central powers together with the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) and the German Empire. Austrians (29 %), Hungarians (or Magyars, 18 %), Czechs and Slovaks, Slovenians and Croatians, Bosnians and Serbians, Poles and Ruthenes, Rumanians (5 %) and Italians (1 %) served in its armed forces. Thus 47 % belonged to a Slavonic population group. Of the officers 75 % was Austrian, i.e. German speaking. The armies of the dual monarchy were mainly active on the Eastern Front, in the Balkan and on the Italian border. Very few subjects of the Habsburg emperor were present in Flanders. On the name tables of the Kameradengrab at the German military cemetery in Langemark there are four names of men having served in the Imperial and Royal regiments and eight of them are buried in the German military cemetery in Wervicq-Sud. They are included here solely for the sake of completeness. Apart from this 'hard evidence' of names on headstones, nothing else is known about their presence in the uttermost western part of the European front.

³² Klessmann C. (1984) Nationalitäten im deutschen Nationalstaat. In: Langewiesche D (ed) *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1867/71 bis 1918. Bilanz einer Epoche*. Freiburg: Verlag Ploetz, 127-138.

³³ For this paragraph: Appelbaum PC. (2014) *Loyal Sons : Jews in the German army in the Great War*, London: Valentine Mitchell. Especially chapter 7 on the Judenzählung of 1916. p. 239-283.

The United Kingdom and the Crown Dependencies

“Leonard Ewbank
Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm), Zillebeke, plot I, row L,
grave 13
died on 23 Feb 1916 aged 23
Second Lieutenant, The Border Regiment, 1/5 Battalion”

“Son of the Rev. John and Julia Helen Ewbank, of Routenbeek,
Bassenthwaite Lake, Cockermouth, Cumberland.”

The epitaph on his headstone reads : “An Englishman Brave Honest Loyal”

“Henry Barrie
Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, special memorial 60
died on 5 Nov 1914 aged 33
Piper, The Cameron Highlanders, “D” Company, 1st Battalion”

“Born in Leith, Edinburgh”

“Son of Mrs. Mary Barrie; husband of Mrs. D. Richards (formerly Barrie)
of 13, Maxwell Street, Morningside, Edinburgh”

“Ellis Humphrey Evans
Artillery Wood, Boezinge, plot II, row F, grave 11
Killed in Action on 31 July 1917 aged 30
Private, The Royal Welch Fusiliers, 15th Battalion”

“Son of Evan and Mary Evans, of Trawsfynydd, Caernarfonshire and
Merionethshire.
One of the war poets who wrote poetry under the name ‘Hedd Wyn’ “

The epitaph on his headstone reads: “Y Prifardd Hedd Wyn”

With the Second ‘Act of Union’ Ireland joined the United Kingdom in 1800 and the country became officially known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. As the name suggests it was a unification of different countries: England, Wales that had been united with England for many centuries, Scotland and Ireland. Even though there was no such thing as an Irish or Scottish army (as opposed to Germany with e.g. the Bavarian or Saxon armies), tradition and the geographical organisation of the army had provided for clearly Scottish, Irish and Welsh units. Expressions of the own cultural identity were not only given considerable leeway in the British army but were even encouraged. So the Scots wore their own uniform that consisted of a kilt with the unit tartan and a sporran, and a glengarry or

tarn on their heads. Their battalions included pipers such as Henry Barrie commemorated with a special memorial in Tyne Cot Cemetery.

Nor was English always the first or only mother tongue of the soldiers in the British units. Some spoke Gaelic or Cornish or Welsh like the Welsh poet Hedd Wyn (Ellis Humphrey Evans) who was buried in Artillery Wood Cemetery near Boezinge.³⁴

“Walter McClean Murray
Hooge Crater Cemetery, plot VI, row J, grave 1
died on 30 Sep 1918 aged 21
Private, The Royal Irish Fusiliers, 9th Battalion”

“Son of J. and M. Murray, of Rockcorry, County Monaghan, Ulster”

The epitaph on his headstone reads :

“Religion Church of Ireland. An Irishman Loyal to Death to King and Country”

“Michael Bolger
Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Proven, plot IV, row E, grave 9
died on 12 August 1917
Serjeant, The Royal Irish Regiment, 6th Battalion”

“Born in Clough, County Kilkenny, Ireland”

In the last years before the Great War, Ireland was the main threat to the unity of the British Empire.³⁵ The country’s populace was heavily divided and the situation of the Irish rank and file during the war was consequently complex. In Flanders the (Protestants of the) 36th Ulster Division fought alongside the (Catholics of the) 16th Irish Division. In this last unit there were many moderate nationalists who had answered the call of their charismatic leader John Redmond, and volunteered to serve in the British army that was to be so hated by so many Irishmen. They had been promised that ‘home rule’ would be implemented as soon as the war ended. The law had passed parliament but its implementation was postponed on the outbreak of war. Redmond not only hoped the Irish dominion-to-be would be funded from London’s post-war debt of honour but also that the wartime comradeship between unionists and nationalists and the common sacrifice, would soften the former’s antagonism to home rule.³⁶

³⁴ Dehandschutter L. (1994) *Hedd Wyn : een Welshe tragedie in Vlaanderen - Trasiedi Cymreig yn Fflandrys - A Welsh tragedy in Flanders*, Brussel: Vormingscentrum Lodewijk Dosfel.

³⁵ Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.297.

³⁶ Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.354-6.

Judged racially inferior³⁷, the British military authorities distrusted and even showed antipathy towards the Irish troops, and more particularly towards the Catholic Irish. Historical research shows that in military law cases such as desertion they were more often given the maximum military punishment than their English or Scottish colleagues.³⁸ After the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin and the brutal repression by British troops, public opinion in Ireland became more radical. The moderate nationalists no longer found work and the Catholic Irish soldiers in Flanders who wore the same uniform as the hated repressors, started being considered as traitors by a growing number of Irish and as potential rebels by many in the War Office.³⁹ Redmond, the moderate nationalists and the dream of a united Irish dominion were soon a thing of the past.

Even, until quite recently they were hardly mentioned in Irish history manuals. This is one of the reasons why one of the last 'national' monuments to be erected on the Western Front was the 'Island of Ireland Peace Park', which as its name suggests intends to commemorate all the Irish from both North and South. This Irish Peace Park in Messines was inaugurated on 11 November 1998 by the British Queen Elisabeth II and the Irish President Mary McAleese. Their meeting, allegedly the first for the heads of state of the two countries, added to the symbolical weight. During the war over 200,000 Irish soldiers served in the British forces and up to 35,000 died. The two Irish divisions suffered 60,000 losses (dead, missing and wounded) in Flanders and Northern France.

“Thomas A. Caine MM

Reninghelst New Military cemetery, plot II, row C, grave 22

Killed in Action on 1 June 1917, aged 21

Bombardier, Royal Field Artillery, 86th Army Brigade (D Battery)”

“Son of Arthur and Jessie Caine, of Ramsey, Isle of Man”

In addition to the countries belonging to the United Kingdom some smaller, independent Crown Dependencies also sent their sons to the front. Most volunteers of the Isle of Man served as guards in the internment and prisoner of war camps on their island. Many other Manx soldiers went overseas with one of the two Manx Service Companies that belonged to the Cheshire Regiment, or with a unit of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment. Manx soldiers are also found in other British units.⁴⁰ As there was no single Manx unit, it is hard to pick them out. The absence of a regiment of their own also implies the absence of Manx symbols as the triskelion from headstones and monuments. Some years ago a small pin

³⁷ Ferguson N. (2004) *Empire : how Britain made the modern world*, London: Penguin. p. 252-3.

³⁸ Oram G. (1998) *Worthless men : race, eugenics and the death penalty in the British Army during the First World War*, London Francis Boutle. p. 59.

³⁹ Denman T. (1995) *A Lonely Grave. The Life and Death of William Redmond*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press . p. 97.

⁴⁰ West M. (1986) *Island at War*, Ballaragh: Western Books.

and a piece of decorated shell were found during an excavation near Boezinge, both items carry the triskelion emblem of the Isle of Man, a very rare indication to the presence of Manx at the Western Front.⁴¹

“Henry Alfred de Sainte Croix
Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Proven, plot X, row B, grave 30
Died of Wounds on 21 April 1918, aged 27
Corporal, The Hampshire Regiment, 2nd Battalion”

“Son of Mrs E. de Ste Croix, of 2, Phoenix Place, George Town, Jersey.
Native of St. Heliers, Jersey”

Inhabitants of Jersey can also be found in different British units. The local militia initially formed a Jersey Overseas Contingent that joined the 7/Royal Irish Rifles and later served with the Hampshire Regiment.⁴² In total over 6000 Jersey men served overseas during the Great War in many British units. Almost 700 of them never returned.

“Philip James Guille
Cement House Cemetery, Langemark, plot III, row F, grave 1
died on 14 Oct 1917, aged 25, whilst repairing roads
Private, The Guernsey Light Infantry, 1st Battalion”

“Son of Philip Guille and Ann Mathilda De Carteret Guille of ‘La Tour’,
Isle of Sark”

The situation was somewhat different for troops originating from the Bailiwick of Guernsey, which includes the autonomous islands Sark, Alderney and Guernsey. The law stated that the local militia must not be deployed overseas. Yet Guernsey, like Man and Jersey, formed a contingent that was also annexed to an Irish unit.⁴³ Integration wasn't always smooth as about half the Guernseymen spoke only French or Normandic. In 1916, contrary to the other Crown Dependencies, Guernsey decided to set up its own full-fledged infantry battalion. In October 1917 this Guernsey Light Infantry experienced its baptism of fire during the Third Battle of Ypres. In the spring of 1918 the battalion was also active near Ypres as a section of the 29th division under the command of Guernseyman Henry Beauvoir de Lisle. After the German Spring Offensive the Guernsey Light Infantry was decimated and the unit was ultimately

⁴¹ A photograph of the excavated pin with the Manx triskelion can be found in Dendooven D and Chielens P. (2008) *World War One. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tielt: Lannoo. p. 30.

⁴² Ronayne I. (2009) *'Ours': The Jersey Pals in the First World War*, Stroud: The History Press.

⁴³ For this section: Parks E. (1992) *Diex Aix: God Help Us. The Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, St-Peter-Port: Guernsey Museums & Galleries. p. 1-25. The Channel Islands and the Great War website. <http://www.greatwarci.net> (accessed 7 Feb 2016) also offers a wealth of material.

disbanded. The dreadful experience of the First World War resulted in the Bailiwick of Guernsey refusing to deploy its militia in 1939.

France

In the French Republic, which had called itself officially “une et indivisible » since 1792, centralisation had a greater cultural impact than in most other European states. This was also reflected to a certain extent in the armed forces, where the regiment names hardly include a geographical reference and where the uniform leaves very little room for regional diversity. This diversity could however be expressed in other ways. Thus, for instance many Breton units played the typical *binou* and *bombarde*. For the troops originating from *La France Métropolitaine* French was the only official language but many soldiers spoke their native Occitanian, Breton, Basque, Catalan, Corsican or Flemish among themselves. Obviously, the Foreign Legion included many nationalities. The latter marching regiments were, however, never deployed at the front in Flanders.

“François Gourmelen
Sans sépulture connue
Mort pour la France le 29 Avril 1915 à Nieuport
Matelot, 1er Régiment des Fusiliers Marins”

“Né à Brest le 14 Août 1892, habitant 69, rue Emile Zola à Brest”

As a matter of course the French regiments were for practical reasons mainly recruited on a regional basis. For instance the 49th *Régiment d'Infanterie* was barracked in Bayonne and was therefore essentially a Basque unit. 98% of the *Fusiliers Marins* were Bretons. The nickname of this brigade was ‘Demoiselles au pompon rouge’ because it included many very young boys and because of the red pompom on their caps. The history of the *Fusiliers Marins* during the First World War is closely related to the Yser region. They were deployed as French reinforcements for the Belgian troops during the withdrawal towards the Yser. After the Battle of the Yser in October 1914, they managed to maintain their position along *tirailleurs sénégalais* and Belgian troops until 10 November 1914 in the middle of the heavily besieged Dixmude, the only place on the right bank of the Yser that had not yet fallen into German hands. Three thousand *Fusiliers Marins*, approximately half the men, were eliminated. The brigade never fully recovered from this blow and that is the reason why when the French Navy demanded more personnel at the end of 1915 the brigade was transformed into a battalion. The *Fusiliers Marins* would remain in the French sector near Nieuwpoort in West Flanders until 1917. Their last feat of arms in Flanders was their participation in the Third Battle of Ypres.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Massieu B. (2014) *Les demoiselles aux pompons rouges : la résistance héroïque des fusiliers marins à Dixmude*, Villers-sur-Mer: Editions Pierre de Taillac.

Various Breton units were also among the French territorial troops who fell victim to the first chemical attack on 22 April 1915. This is why the memorial park has a pronounced Breton character: Carrefour des Roses in Boezinge consists of a 16th century Calvary cross from Louargat (near Guincamp), an authentic *dolmen* from Hénansal (near Dinan) and various menhirs, all brought over from Brittany. The First World War would hit Brittany harder than most other French regions: between 1914 and 1918 about 22 % of the mobilised Bretons died on the battlefield or as a consequence thereof, against a figure of 16-17 % for France as a whole!⁴⁵

“Laurent Baldacci
Cimetière Militaire Français, Machelen aan de Leie, sépulture 442
Mort pour la France le 18 Octobre 1918 à Marialoop
Sergent, 298e Régiment d’Infanterie”

“Né le 7 Octobre 1888 à Corte, Haute-Corse”

The 15th *Corps d’Armée* included soldiers from South Eastern France: the Alps, Marseille and Corsica. In addition to the official language French, many men also spoke Corsican, Italian or Occitanian. The 29th Division d’Infanterie that originated from this army corps was deployed in the Nieuwpoort sector in the spring of 1917 and in the bloody Third Battle of Ypres later that same year. Just like Brittany, Corsica also paid a heavy toll during the First World War: of the 45,000 Corsican soldiers 12,000 never returned. That is approximately 25 %, as opposed to the national French average of 16.5 %. Corsica was also the only French Departement in which fathers of more than three children were also mobilised.⁴⁶

“Pujol”
“Necropole Nationale de Saint-Charles de Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 1353”

Pujol is one of the most common Catalan family names. Not less than 8 men with the name Pujol(s) died in Flanders while serving with the 53th Régiment d’Infanterie which was based in Perpignan, capital of French Catalonia. This might be the grave of one of them. Only his last name has been registered. No other details have been recorded.

Catalans from the Roussillon could be found amongst others in the 53rd Régiment d’Infanterie that originated from Perpignan. This Catalan unit fought during the First Battle of Ypres (October-November 1914)⁴⁷. The Catalans could boast of the fact that the French commander-in-chief (until 1917) Joffre, who originated from Rivesaltes, was one of them. For most of

⁴⁵ Le Mer G. (2001) *Les régiments bretons dans la Grande Guerre, 1914-1918*, Plessala: Association Bretagne 14-18.

⁴⁶ Antoine-Toussaint A. (2005) *Ceux du 173e. Les Corses au combat, 1914-1918*, Alata: Colonna Editions. , Cervoni JR. (2011) *La Corse et la Grande Guerre*, Bastia Anima Corsa.

⁴⁷ Anon. (s.d.) *Historique du 53e Régiment d’Infanterie*, Toulouse: Imprimerie ouvrière. p.7-10.

the other soldiers from the neighbouring region of Languedoc the first language was often Occitanian.

“August Léon Asmussen dit “Juttet”
Necropole Nationale de Saint-Charles de Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 593
Mort pour la France le 11 Décembre 1914 à Saint-Julien
Soldat 2ème Classe, 153ème Régiment d’Infanterie”

“Né le 18 Avril 1887 à Metz (Lorraine)”

Among the other ‘ethnic minorities’ in France we must mention the Alsations and Lorrainers, who could mainly be found among the Germans (approximately 380 000), but also among the French. The latter were essentially tens of thousands of ‘*optants*’ or their children, who had chosen the French nationality in 1872 and had left the annexed territory. The pro-French attitude of the Alsations and Lorrainers of the territories reconquered by France in 1914 was first investigated and the most doubtful cases were interned. Most Alsations and Lorrainers could only join the Foreign Legion and mainly served in North Africa.⁴⁸

“Remi Louis Hayaert
Carré militaire français, Woesten, sépulture 121
Mort pour la France, suite de blessures de guerre, le 13 Novembre 1914
Soldat 2ème Classe, 162ème Régiment d’Infanterie”

“Né le 5 Juillet 1892 à Boeschepe”

French-Flemings, few in number, were accommodated in various units. Because of the irony of war some fought in their own region. Jérôme Verdonck from Boeschepe served in the 39th Division d'Infanterie. He had already fought in the First Battle of Ypres, Artois and Verdun until his unit had to leave Compiègne head over heels “pour une destination inconnue” in April 1918.⁴⁹ When he got off the train after travelling during the night he was surprised to be in Poperinge. He would eventually fight at the Battle of Mount Kemmel and man trenches at merely 7 kilometres from his parental home. Jérôme Verdonck survived but his fellow villager Remi Hayaert had already died on 13 November 1914. He was buried in the French military cemetery of Woesten, barely 14 kilometres from his native village, but on the other side of the ‘*Schreve*’ (as the border is commonly referred to in West-Flemish dialect).

Finally, I would like to briefly draw attention to the gypsies. Soldiers from gypsy stock could be found in various armies. However, they are difficult to trace. They were often looked on with suspicion. During the last year of

⁴⁸ Grandhomme J-N. (2002) *La Première Guerre mondiale en France*, Rennes: Editions Ouest-France. p.92.

⁴⁹ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Kemmel: Malegijis, 360. p.231.*

war German military command decided that gypsies should no longer be deployed at the front. The situation of the gypsies was probably the most ironic in France. Because of the official distrust gypsy families were even interned in a few large camps - the largest being at Crest near Valence - sometimes from March 1915 to July 1919, while the fathers fought at the front. Some gypsy soldiers were interned upon their return from the war.⁵⁰

Belgium

Back in 1914 it was already a well-known fact that the Belgian nation consisted mainly of two national communities. The 'Field notes on the Belgian, French and German Armies' published by the British general staff just before war broke out, gives the following description:

*"The Belgian Nation, and Belgian regiments, are composed of two different races – the Walloons, who speak a sort of French, and the Flemings, who speak a sort of Dutch. Many Walloons can only talk French; many Flemings can only talk Flemish. On the outbreak of a Franco-German war public opinion in Walloon districts is likely to be actively pro-French, whilst in Flemish districts, though hardly pro-French, is not likely to be actively pro-German. Both are Belgians first and foremost; Walloons and Flemings only in second place."*⁵¹

The Germans were also very aware of this and noticed even sharper distinctions which they exploited. When camp commander Otto Stiehl made a booklet with portraits of 'Unsere Feinde' (Our Enemies), he typified the two Belgian communities as follows:

*"[...] The Flemings also demonstrated a strong inclination to reservedness and dark introversion: an embittered mood that could be explained by the fact that, in spite of all the resounding words of freedom, these people are greatly oppressed by the ruling pro-French Walloons, they are deprived of higher development because their education is neglected and that consequently they have been unable for a long time to reveal their strengths [...] When imprisoned the Flemings were among the most difficult inhabitants of the camp because of their deep rooted aversion for discipline. Their fellow-countrymen, the Walloons, displayed the same characteristic but that was the only similarity. In all other respects these two communities brought together in an impossible manner to form one state showed the greatest oppositions [...]"*⁵²

⁵⁰ Filhol E. (2004) *Un camp de concentration français : les tsiganes alsaciens-lorrains à Crest, 1915-1919*, Grenoble: Presses universitaires. p.18-22 + email communication by Emmanuel Filhol, dated 2 Feb 2007.

⁵¹ Anon. (1914) *Field Notes on the Belgian, French and German Armies*, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office. p.34.

⁵² Stiehl O. (1916) *Unsere Feinde. Charakterköpfe aus deutschen Kriegsgefangenenlagern*, Stuttgart: Jul. Hoffmann. p.18-19.

“Paul Marie Joseph Corneille, Baron de Béthune
Cimetière Militaire Belge, De Panne, sépulture P - 230 (B - 230)
Mort pour la Belgique le 21 Septembre 1918 à l’Hôpital l’Océan de
Vinkem à une bronchopneumonie suite d’une intoxication d’ypérite
Lieutenant, 3e Régiment de Ligne, 2e Bataillon
Né à Courtrai le 7 mars 1893”

Paul de Béthune, son of a well known Belgian noble family from Courtrai, was a law student in Ghent when war broke out. As belonging to the élite, his headstone is stated in French.

“Jeroom Arthur De Bruyne
Belgische Militaire Begraafplaats, De Panne, graf 3/142”
Killed in Action on 18 March 1918 when a shell burst at Nieuwendamme
“Soldaat, 3de Karabiniers, 1ste bataljon, 1ste compagnie”

“Born 11 Jan 1888 in Oost-Vleteren, farmer”

De Bruyne’s headstone is a Flemish nationalist “Heldenhuldenzerk” (lit.: hero’s tribute headstone), the realisation of a Flemish nationalist initiative which came into being during the war to honour those close to the Flemish movement who died. The letters AVV-VVK stand for “Alles Voor Vlaanderen - Vlaanderen voor Kristus” (“All For Flanders - Flanders For Christ”).

Flemish soldiers were increasingly irritated by the largely unilingual Belgian army. Whereas a vast majority of soldiers were Flemish-speaking, virtually the entire officers’ corps spoke only French. Pro-Flemish intellectuals set up the ‘Front Movement’ as a reaction to this. They advocated Flemish rights but experienced great opposition from army command. It is important to note that Flemish awareness rapidly spread among many Flemish soldiers and officers. Even after the war the Flemish Front Movement would continue to play an important role in Belgian politics.⁵³ The same applies, albeit to a much lesser extent for Wallingantism. During the war the magazines *La Wallonnie* and *L’Opinion Wallonne* spread Wallingantism among Walloon soldiers and refugees.⁵⁴

“Jean-Baptiste Jessy, a.k.a Jean-Baptiste Jem
Belgian Military Cemetery, De Panne, grave A-124
Killed in Action on 17 August 1918 at Nieuport when he was hit in the chest by a shell fragment
Corporal, 5e Chasseurs à Pied, 3e Bataillon, 11e Compagnie”

⁵³ Vanacker D. (2015) *De Frontbeweging : de Vlaamse strijd aan de IJzer*, Brugge: De Klaproos.

⁵⁴ Bolle de Bal M. (1998) *Les survivants du boyau de la mort : lettres de deux jeunes Wallons en 14-18*, Bruxelles: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes.

Born in Palabaka, Belgian Congo on 18 Sep 1897, son of Kaudo and Sunga Mlemba. He came to Antwerp as a manservant (“boy”), was abandoned on the quay and volunteered for the Belgian army.⁵⁵

As opposed to the French and British, the Belgians did not deploy any colonial troops, not on the Yser at any rate. The Congolese *Force Publique* was, however, fairly successfully active in the campaign against German East Africa. Only 32 African soldiers, all full blood Congolese barring two, served in the Belgian Army on the Western Front. Most of them were already living in Belgium in 1914 or had worked on the Congo ships.

Portugal

“David José Antunes
Schoonselhof Antwerpen, Krijgsbegraafplaats, perk 1
died on 6 November 1918
Soldado, Unid. Terr.-Inf. 29
Corpo Expedicionario Português - 4a Brigada da Infanteria”

Portugal, a traditional ally of the British Empire and only a republic since 1910, declared its neutrality at the outbreak of war. In spite of this it entered into conflict with Germany in its African colonies and at sea. Finally, in March 1916 the country declared war on the German Empire. A *Corpo Expeditionario Português* was created and was trained in Portugal as well as in Great Britain. On paper this corps would comprise two divisions, yet it would never reach its full strength. The Portuguese were equipped with French and British material that wasn’t always of the best quality: the helmets they wore had previously been rejected by British army command.⁵⁶

The Portuguese troops started arriving in French-Flanders in May 1917. Their sector was a strip of some 12 to 18 kilometres near the small village Neuve-Chapelle which had been the Indian sector two years before. They were also present from time to time on the Belgian side of the border. On 8 August 1917 Father Van Walleghem encountered Portuguese soldiers in Loker: “*They are dressed in blue like the French, but they wear a different cap*”.⁵⁷ In Ghent a small plaque on the Korenlei commemorates the deployment of the Portuguese troops in Belgium towards the end of the war. The situation of the Portuguese was not an enviable one: although the *Sector Portugues da Flandres* in the Valley of the Lys to the South of Armentières was considered to be a peaceful sector, the flat, cold and very

⁵⁵ Brosens G. (2013) *Congo aan den Yser. De 32 Congolese soldaten van het Belgisch leger in de Eerste Wereldoorlog.*, Antwerpen: Manteau. p.11.

⁵⁶ Research Centre In Flanders Fields Museum, Map 1399 : “Europa”, typoscript by Joe Sweeney: “The Portuguese Expeditionary Force on the Western Front”, 11 p.

⁵⁷ Van Walleghem A. (2017) *1917. The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Walleghem*, Brighton EER. p.197.

damp landscape was not the ideal climate for the Portuguese. The British considered them as second rate soldiers. In addition to having some equipment of inferior quality they never reached full capacity. Moreover, in 1918 Portugal was faced with a major political crisis. President Pais was opposed to the Portuguese participation in the war and prevented the transfer of new troops, equipment and other provisions. He was assassinated later that year.⁵⁸ All this contributed to the low morale of some 40,000 Portuguese.⁵⁹ The British also realised that the Portuguese divisions were a weak link and in anticipation of the imminent German offensive they scheduled their withdrawal on 9 April 1918. That same day at dawn the well-prepared German troops attacked in force which resulted in a complete disaster for the totally surprised Portuguese: 400 were killed and over 6500 were taken prisoner of war, in all about one third of the men in the trenches. The Portuguese Expeditionary Force would not survive this blow. The Portuguese soldiers who remained active in Belgium and France until the Armistice did so behind the front, or as supplementary troops of a British division.

Italian and Russian prisoners of war

“Antonio de Rosa
Belgian Military Cemetery Houthulst”

Originally, Italy had been an ally of the German Empire and of Austria-Hungary. When war broke out the country initially declared its neutrality but in May 1915 it declared war on Austria-Hungary and in August 1916 on Germany. The sequence of the war was fairly catastrophic for Italy. Especially after the Battle of Caporetto, the Italian name for present day Kobarid in Slovenia, in October-November 1917 many Italian prisoners of war fell in German hands. The Germans saw the prisoners of war as a solution for the lack of manpower behind the Western Front, so mainly in 1918 they ‘imported’ Italian prisoners of war on a relatively large scale into occupied Belgium and Northern France. The Italians were lodged in camps in Roeselare, Izegem, Marke, Wervik and other locations at a short distance from the frontline.⁶⁰ The local Belgian population took pity on the miserable Italians. Julie Cattrysse from Aartrijke remembered:

⁵⁸ Ribeiro de Meneses F. (2004) *Portugal 1914-1926 : From the First World War to military dictatorship*, Bristol: HiPLAM.

⁵⁹ On the morale of the Portuguese troops: Ribeiro de Meneses F. (2000) 'All of Us are Looking Forward to Leaving': The Censored Correspondence of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps in France, 1917-18. *European History Quarterly* 30: 333-355.

⁶⁰ Vancoillie J. (2009) Hulptroepen van de genie van het Duitse leger. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 15-110. p. 51-3 ; Verbeke RV. (2010) Verschillende nationaliteiten in 1914-1919 in Wervik. *1914-1918 Wervik-Geluwe. Cahier 2010*. . Wervik: Cultuurdienst van de stad Wervik, 7-14. p.12.

*“They were barely clothed. They had holes in the soles of their shoes, and in their socks. You could see their toes. That was all they had to walk in even when it was freezing or snowing. No clothes, no food.”*⁶¹

The Italian prisoners of war in German hands who died in Belgium were subsequently reburied in Italian military graves, amongst others in the Ghent West cemetery, in the Antwerp Schoonselhof and in the Belgian military cemetery in Houthulst.

“Feodor Tilatoff

Adinkerke Military Cemetery, row F, grave 4

died on 3 April 1919

Russian Army”

The Germans also brought Russian prisoners of war to the Western Front to perform hard labour.⁶² The Flemings showed concern for them as they had done for the Italians. Amongst others in Geluwe the Ter Stock farm was installed as a camp for the Russians in November 1915. Torn and worn uniforms, dirty, untended long beards, emaciated, sick: that was what they looked like. In spite of a prohibition, the inhabitants of Geluwe occasionally tried to give them food or clothing. In exchange the Russians would often give them a figurine, frequently a bird carved in wood.⁶³ In addition to performing hard labour near the front in West Flanders, the Russians were also used to build railways in East Belgium’s Fourons Region and in the Ardennes. For the Russian prisoners of war the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed between the new Bolshevik rulers and the Central Powers brought little change. Even after the Armistice the Russians - some sources speak of over 5,000 men – remained in Belgium. The allies hoped to engage them in the fight against Bolshevism which is why as from February 1919 the former Belgian military camps Tabora and King Albert in Houtem (near Veurne) were made available to them. Lack of leadership and control, uncertainty about their future and the continuous coming and going of soldiers finally led to unrest among the Russians in April 1919. For the Belgian authorities this was the sign to stop the influx of Russian prisoners of war from Germany and to renounce any further militarisation. Eventually, only a small number of genuine volunteers for the White Army – some thirty

⁶¹ Demeester M. (2016) *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog.* Kessel: Malegijis, 360. p.147-8.

⁶² Vancoillie J. (2009) *Hulptroepen van de genie van het Duitse leger.* In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog.* Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 15-110. p.45-50.

⁶³ Decuyper D. (1998) *Het malheur van de keizer : Geluwe 1914-1918,* Geluwe: Dirk Decuyper. p.256-260. In Flanders Fields Museum recently acquired a bird-shaped wooden fan made by Russian P.O.W.s (Inv. IFF002196): Vandewiere F. (2015) Schenkingen. 1 januari 2014 tot en met 31 december 2014. *In Flanders Fields Museum Jaarboek. Yearbook. Annuaire* 3: 133-149. p.140 (translation in English p. 240).

soldiers – were isolated in a camp in Wulpen, also near Veurne. In December 1919 they left this camp for the ‘vagrants’ colony’ in Wortel in the Northern Campine area (Northeast of Antwerp, near the Dutch border). Ultimately very few or no former Russian prisoners of war (organised) from Belgium would join the White Army.⁶⁴

Most graves of Russian prisoners of war or former prisoners of war are lost or can no longer be recognised as such. At least two have been re-buried in the German cemetery in Menen as Germans.⁶⁵ However, distinctive Russian headstones can still be found in the municipal cemeteries of Mons, Tournai and Ghent (West cemetery).

The British Dominions and Colonies at the Front in Flanders

In the beginning of the 20th century the extent and power of the British Empire was unequalled. Great Britain was the world’s policeman and imposed its *Pax Britannica*. In addition to the mother country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the British Empire comprised (crown) colonies, dominions, protectorates and the vast Empire of India. To a large extent dominions enjoyed self-rule, including certain privileges with regard to foreign affairs and defence. The British Empire had five such dominions in 1914: Canada (1867), Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), Newfoundland (1907) and the Union of South Africa (1910). It is pertinent that more than half of the Dominion’s troops enlisted during the first year of the First World War were British-born.⁶⁶ In theory, within the Empire the dominions were equivalent to the United Kingdom. Because of their far-reaching autonomy they had their own army troops during the First World War, which, although they belonged to the British armed forces and were under British command, still had their own specific characteristics and statutes. In the course of the war, the dominion leaders would also become increasingly anxious to have greater influence over the purposes for which the war was being fought. This anxiety would eventually lead to the convention of an ‘Imperial War Conference’ in 1917 and the establishment of an ‘Imperial War Cabinet’⁶⁷

For each dominion the First World War was a major step in the creation of a self-image as a separate nation. Whereas in 1914 their image and self-

⁶⁴ Coudenys W. (2004) *Leven voor de tsaar : Russische ballingen, samenzweerdere en collaborateurs in België*, Leuven: Davidsfonds. p.24-32.

⁶⁵ Verbeke RV. (2010) Verschillende nationaliteiten in 1914-1919 in Wervik. *1914-1918 Wervik-Geluwe. Cahier 2010*. Wervik: Cultuurdienst van de stad Wervik, 7-14. p.12.

⁶⁶ Bayly CA. (1999) The Second British Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54-72. p.58.

⁶⁷ Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p. 287 ; Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.334-335.

image was that of an elevated colony, during and after the war the dominions started being considered as young nations. Consequently, in 1919 they all signed the Peace Treaty of Versailles individually.⁶⁸ In virtually all dominions self-rule mainly applied to white immigrants and their descendants whereas the native and non-white ethnic groups held a subordinate position. This was even more the case in the colonies.

The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF)

Before the First World War, Canada had an extremely small army. However, within a few weeks after war was declared over 30,000 men volunteered to fight in Europe. Father Van Wallegghem of Dikkebus saw the first Canadians, belonging to the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, on 2 March 1915: " You can see that they are of a different type than the English. Their uniform is slightly greener. Many of them speak French".⁶⁹ On 22 April 1915, the 1st Canadian Division occupied the front line to the right of the French 45th Algerian Division when the Germans opened the gas cylinders for the first time. These Canadians launched the first counteroffensive after the gas attack and suffered heavy losses. Later the Canadians would participate in the Battle of Mount Sorrel near Ypres in June 1916, and in the last phase of the Battle of Passchendaele in October-November 1917. Impressive monuments were subsequently erected in Flanders to commemorate each of these battles. The main Canadian First World War site, however, is Vimy Ridge between Lens and Arras, where the Canadian Expeditionary Force gained its most memorable victory in April 1917. In the end some 620,000 Canadians would serve during the First World War of whom 425,000 overseas (13 % of male adults) and this on a total population of little more than 7.5 million.⁷⁰ One tenth of them did not survive the war, and over 14,000, about a quarter of the dead, are remembered in cemeteries or on monuments in Belgian Flanders.⁷¹

In line with the majority of the population of this young country the Canadian Expeditionary Force comprised many recent immigrants. The latter usually originated from the mother country: it is estimated that more than two thirds of the men in the first Canadian contingent of 1915 were born in the United Kingdom and in 1918 this still applied for almost half the CEF.⁷² The largest Canadian minority was the French-speaking Canadians and most of them originated from the Province of Quebec. The Canadian divisions also included fairly large groups of Ukrainians, Russians,

⁶⁸ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p.146-7, 157-9.

⁶⁹ Van Wallegghem A. (2014) *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*, Tiel: Lannoo. p.139.

⁷⁰ Cook T. (2007-8) *Canadians Fighting the Great War*, Toronto: Viking Canada.vol. 2. p.611-612; Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.333.

⁷¹ Chaerle D and others. (2016) *Canada in Flanders*, Ieper: In Flanders Fields Museum. p.3.

⁷² Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.336.

Scandinavians, Belgians, Dutch, French, Americans, Swiss, Chinese and Japanese, in addition to African-Canadians and First Nation Canadians.

“Charles Pierre Loiseau
Elzenwalle Brasserie Cemetery, plot III, row C, grave 3
Died on 30 April 1916
private, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 22nd Battalion (Quebec (Canadiens Français) Regiment)”

According to his attestation paper, Charles Pierre Loiseau was born on 2 September 1874 in Montreal, was married to Rosana Loiseau and lived at 2807, rue St Dominique in Montreal. He noted his trade as “laborer”.⁷³

After the bloody Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, the Canadian Expeditionary Force needed new men; the Canadian government introduced conscription. A large majority of French-speaking Canadians were opposed to it, whereas the English-speaking Canadians were generally in favour of the measure. The opposition against conscription was so great that violent unrest broke out in Quebec City during Easter 1918. The rounded up soldiers started firing into the crowds killing a number of protesters. The commemoration of this *Crise de la conscription* would cast an additional shadow on the already difficult relationship between these two population groups right until the Second World War⁷⁴ (when history would repeat itself with a second *Crise de la conscription*). Canadian conscription would have little effect on the actual course of the war: ultimately ‘barely’ a few tens of thousands of Canadian conscripts would join the army in Europe before the end of the war.⁷⁵ The French-speaking Canadians were indeed far less enthusiastic about the war than the English-speaking Canadians as French-speaking Canadians had less strong ties with Europe. The military establishment was strongly pro-English and little inclined to either set up French-speaking units or promote French-speaking officers. Furthermore, Minister of Defence Sam Hughes had greatly irritated the French-speaking community by sending protestant, English-speaking chaplains to Quebec to lead the recruitment campaigns and by obliging the French-speaking war volunteers to speak English during their training. Yet, some 30,000 French Canadians enlisted.⁷⁶ They could be found in many units. Because of the policy adopted by Sam Hughes French-speaking soldiers were initially intentionally split up and integrated into English-speaking units. Only the 12th battalion and 14th battalion of the first contingent of the CEF included respectively one and two French-speaking companies. Following political pressure from Quebec and public protest actions an

⁷³ <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=536656> (accessed on 31 January 2016).

⁷⁴ Armstrong EH. (1967) *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-18*, New York: AMS Press.

⁷⁵ Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 337.

⁷⁶ Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p.253.

exclusively French-speaking battalion was created, i.e. the 22nd (French Canadian) Infantry Battalion. Because of its number it was given the nick name 'Van Doos', a corruption of the French *vingt-deux* (twenty-two). In September 1915 it reinforced the *Corps Expéditionnaire Canadien* on the Western Front. The Quebecois spent the first year in the trenches near Ypres, amongst others near Kemmel, Sint-Elooi and Zillebeke (Mount Sorrel). Later the 22nd saw action in Passchendaele during the last days of the Third Battle of Ypres, before being virtually decimated near Arras on 27-28 August 1918. The 22nd would be the only French-Canadian battalion to remain at the front throughout the war. The *Van Doos* acquired a cast-iron reputation, in spite of (or because of?) the fact that as the sole French-speaking battalion within the British armed forces they were distrusted or at least were greatly exposed to criticism whenever something went wrong. During the First World War it totaled over 4000 fatalities and injured soldiers, approximately 67 % of its men! Even though 85 % of the men originated from Quebec and more specifically from Montreal, all the Canadian provinces were represented in the 22nd. A surprising number of soldiers in the French Canadian Battalion, some 5 %, originated from abroad, especially from the United States.⁷⁷

“Richard Van Neste
Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge, plot XXII, rij HH, graf 2
Died of Wounds on 10th November 1917, aged 36
private, Canadian Expeditionary Force, 27th Battalion (Manitoba (City of Winnipeg) Regiment)”

“Son of Bruno Van Neste and Marie Verpoort, of 100, McTavisch Street, St Boniface, Manitoba”

According to his attestation papers, he was born in Elsegem (Belgium) on 10 March 1880, was married to Marie Vindevoghel and lived at 16, Aulneau Street, St Boniface. He stated his trade as schoolmaster and gardener.⁷⁸

Next to a large minority of French-speaking Canadians, the Canadian Expeditionary Force included many smaller minority groups and thousands of individual soldiers of 'foreign' origin. They also included some recently emigrated Flemings, like Ostend born Richard Verhaeghe who fell on 30/31 October 1917 and who lies buried at Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele⁷⁹, or William Vangheluwe from Roeselare who died on the same day and is commemorated on the Menin Gate in Ypres. The irony of

⁷⁷ Chaballe J. (1952) *Histoire du 22e bataillon canadien-français 1914-1919*, Saint-Laurent: Editions Chantecler.; Gagnon J-P. (2006) The 22nd (French Canadian) Battalion. *Stand To!* April 2006: 12-17.

⁷⁸ <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/first-world-war/first-world-war-1914-1918-cef/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=290147> (accessed on 31 January 2016).

⁷⁹ Bostyn F and others. (2007) *Passchendaele 1917 : the story of the fallen and Tyne Cot Cemetery*, Roeselare: Roularta. p. 290.

fate is not only that both these Canadian Flemings died in their former homeland but also that the original purpose of the Third Battle of Ypres was to liberate the Belgian ports, including Verhaeghe's native Ostend. It is all the more cynical that William Van Gheluwe died in Passchendaele, less than ten kilometres from the place where his parents lived. These are but two of at least 17 Flemings who died as Canadian soldiers in Flanders during World War One.

In certain battalions of the CEF more volunteers of a specific origin were found than in others due to the adopted geographically-based recruitment policy. The 102nd (North British Columbian) Infantry Battalion originated from the Canadian West Coast and consequently included many Russians who had migrated to Canada via the Pacific Ocean. Some of them had served under the Tsar during the Russo-Japanese war, like George Pavluchuk who now lies buried in Reninghelst New Military Cemetery.⁸⁰

Black Canadians who volunteered to fight in the war were often turned down. Under pressure the army finally agreed to set up a black battalion even though it was a non-fighting labour battalion, i.e. the No. 2 Construction Battalion. In the spring of 1917 the battalion arrived in France where its task was to chop wood for use in the trenches and behind the front.⁸¹ One of their officers was the Reverend William White, at the time, probably one of only two black officers in the British armed forces, the other being Tottenham-Hotspur football star Walter Tull.⁸² In spite of considerable resistance and racism individual black soldiers could sporadically be found in other Canadian units. However, their numbers remained limited.

The most multicultural battalion of the CEF was arguably the fiftieth from Alberta.⁸³ The high level of cultural mix in the unit is already apparent from the 41 names of its missing soldiers on the Menin Gate in Ypres: apart from three USA-born Canadians, we also read the names of the maybe Franco-Albertan Louis Beauchene (which is at least what his name suggests), and just below those of Swiss Canadian Richard Béguin and Swedish Canadian Reynold Björkblad. In the right column we see the name of Danish born Hans Raskesen listed above Amsterdammer Douwe Frederik Puncke. Quite unusual are Japanese Canadian Hikotaro Koyanagi and Mike Foxhead, "son of the late Fox Head and his wife, Mary Many Shots, of Blackfoot Indian Reservation"⁸⁴. Koyanagi was just one of about

⁸⁰ Chaerle D and others. (2016) *Canada in Flanders*, Ieper: In Flanders Fields Museum. p. 32.

⁸¹ Ruck CW. (1987) *The Black Battalion 1916-1920 : Canada's best kept military secret*, Halifax: Nimbus Publishing. p.14.

⁸² Vasili P. (2010) *Walter Tull, 1888-1918, Officer, Footballer : All the guns in France couldn't wake me*, Mitcham: Raw Press.

⁸³ Chaerle D and others. (2016) *Canada in Flanders*, Ieper: In Flanders Fields Museum. p. 31-2.

⁸⁴ Mike Foxhead (or Mike Many Bears as he was also called) was hit by a sniper's bullet when lighting a cigarette between 23 and 26 October 1917, aged 19. People from his

200 Japanese who served in the Canadian army. Fifty-three of them would not survive the war. Most Japanese came from British Columbia on the Canadian West Coast which is why the monument dedicated to them stands in Vancouver. The Japanese Canadian war veterans have an eventful history: they were the only members of their community to be given the right to vote in 1931. During the Second World War, however, like all other 22,000 Japanese Canadians, they were imprisoned in an internment camp as 'hostile aliens'.⁸⁵ Masumi Mitsui for instance, who had fought in the Third Battle of Ypres with the 10th Battalion CEF, had ended the Great War with the rank of sergeant and had been awarded the Military Medal. During the Second World War his successful poultry farm was confiscated. He was separated from his family and lost all his possessions. When they came to take him to the internment camp an irate Mitsui threw his medals to the ground saying: "What good are these!". Mitsui would remain bitter about his Second World War experience until his death in 1987.⁸⁶ In addition to the Japanese Canadians there were also the Chinese Canadians. They were faced with even greater racism and discrimination and the number of Chinese Canadian soldiers does not appear to have been very high during the First World War.

"Sampson Comego

Ridge Wood Military Cemetery, Voormezele, plot I, row O, grave 5

Killed in Action by a rifle grenade on 10 November 1915

Private, Canadian Expeditionary force, 21st Battalion (Eastern Ontario Regiment)"

On attestation Sampson Comego gave his birth year as 1872, but the 1911 Census shows his birth year as 1866. Either he didn't know when he was born or he lied about his age in order to be young enough to serve.

He was a former Chief of the Rice "Lake Hiawathaw Indian Tribe" and served together with his brother Peter (who survived the war).⁸⁷

The situation was quite different for the native inhabitants of Canada, the First Nations (Indians, Inuit and Metis). Despite the fact that they were politically not represented, at least 4000 Canadian aboriginals, approximately one in three native young men, served in the CEF⁸⁸ Not

reserve attributed his death to his failure to seek spiritual protection. See: Dempsey JL. (1999) *Warriors of the King : Prairie Indians in World War I*, Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center. p.48 and 85.

⁸⁵ Ito R. (1984) *We Went To War : The Story of the Japanese Canadians Who Served During the First and Second World Wars*, Stittsville: Canada's Wings. p.72-73, 148.

⁸⁶ Dancocks DG. (1990) *Gallant Canadians : The Story of the Tenth Canadian Infantry Battalion 1914-1919*, Calgary: The Calgary Highlanders Regimental Funds Foundation. p.132.

⁸⁷ http://21stbattalion.ca/tributeac/comego_s.html (accessed 31 January 2016).

⁸⁸ Moses J. (2004) *A Sketch Account of Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Military*. Ottawa: Ministry of National Defence, 85. p. 62; Winegard TC. (2012) *For king and Kanata : Canadian Indians and the First World War*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. p. 6.

every band supported the war effort in the same way, yet some First Nations saw virtually all their young men leave. The tribal council of the Six Nations (Iroquois) opposed young men joining up yet some 300 band members served in the army, more than from any other Indian band in history.⁸⁹ War volunteers also joined up from remote areas like the Yukon or the Northwest Territories.⁹⁰ Others still had to go to a great deal of trouble to serve: William Semia of the Cat Lake Band was 18 years old and a trapper for the Hudson Bay Company when he joined up in September 1916. He did not speak a word of English or French and was unable to write. It was a great culture shock for him and many others to be suddenly confronted with discipline and uniformity, let alone with 'modern life' with steam boats, trucks, etc. Semia finally joined the 52nd Battalion and was seriously injured near Passchendaele at the end of October, beginning of November 1917. When he was finally dismissed from the army he made the long trek to Northwest Ontario's Cat Lake on foot and by canoe.⁹¹

The first Canadian native to have been killed on the battlefield was probably Angus La-Force, a Mohawk of the Caughnawaga Band in Quebec.⁹² He was killed during the first gas attack near Ypres on 22 April 1915 and is remembered today on the Menin Gate. This is also where the Mohawk Cameron Brant, who died two days later, is remembered. Brant had followed an old family tradition when he volunteered: his great-grandfather had already assisted the British in the 18th century during the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution.⁹³ Joseph Standing Buffalo also continued a family tradition: he was the son of the Sioux chief of Fort Qu'Appelle in Saskatchewan, and the grandson of the legendary Sitting Bull. He died of wounds on 3 October 1918, aged 21⁹⁴, and is buried in Bucquoy Road Cemetery, Ficheux (Pas-de-Calais). The best known fighting Canadian aboriginal of the First World War was arguably Francis Pehgamagabow, an Ojibwa of the Parry Island Band who became the most decorated native Canadian of the war. Pehgamagabow was injured during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, but later rejoined his unit to fight in the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917. He survived the war and died in 1952.⁹⁵ Two other famous Canadian Indian soldiers were long distance runners Tom Longboat, marathon world champion in 1909, and Olympic

⁸⁹ Moses J. (2007) *The Return of the Native: Six Nations Veterans and Political Change at the Grand River Reserve, 1917-1924*. In: Lackenbauer PW and Mantle CL (eds) *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives*. Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 117-128. p.121.

⁹⁰ Gaffen F. (1985) *Forgotten soldiers*, Penctiton: Theytus Books. p.20-21.

⁹¹ Summerby J. (2005) *Native Soldiers - Foreign Battlefields*, Ottawa: Veterans Affairs Canada. p.7.

⁹² Gaffen F. (1985) *Forgotten soldiers*, Penctiton: Theytus Books. p.16.

⁹³ Winegard TC. (2012) *For king and Kanata : Canadian Indians and the First World War*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. p.4.

⁹⁴ Dempsey JL. (1999) *Warriors of the King : Prairie Indians in World War I*, Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center. p.93.

⁹⁵ Most books on aboriginal Canadians in the First World War include details on individual soldiers. Pehgamagabow was even the subject of a full biography: Hayes A. (2009) *Pegahmagabow : Life-long-warrior*, Toronto: Blue Butterfly Books.

athlete Alexander Decoteau, who died near Passchendaele on 30 October 1917 and lies buried in Passchendaele New British Cemetery. About half the men in two Canadian battalions, the 114th and 107th, were native war volunteers (400 out of 800).⁹⁶ The fact that, similarly to the American army, the Indians were rated higher than their black fellow countrymen, is also demonstrated by the fact that various officers were of indigenous origin. However, not everything was quite so positive: depending on the unit and recruitment area, e.g. the Yukon, the Indians experienced considerable discrimination, Indian war veterans would wait a long time before they would enjoy the same privileges as their former white comrades and the veterans brought back diseases from Europe to which the native population was more sensitive. These were but a few of the negative effects of the war on the indigenous population. The involvement of native Canadians in the First World War ultimately had few beneficial effects at a political, economic or social level.⁹⁷ At least 300 native Canadians fell on the battlefield and many more died of diseases or injuries incurred in Europe.⁹⁸

The Newfoundland Regiment

“Ambrose George
Dozinghem Military Cemetery, West-Vleteren, plot III, row A, grave 7
Died of Wounds on 6 August 1917
private, 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment”

“Son of Robert and Martha George, of Apsey Brook, Smith’s Sound,
Trinity Bay, Newfoundland”

He was a fisherman at Britannia Cove, Smith’s Sound, Newfoundland.

From 1907 to 1949 Newfoundland was a separate British dominion, after which it became the tenth Canadian province. In spite of its scarce population, about one quarter of a million in 1914, it was a fairly prosperous country. Newfoundland did not have an army, merely a cadet corps which can best be described as a military youth movement. When war broke out a Newfoundland Regiment was set up that would soon be swamped with war volunteers. In total some 6500 men joined this Newfoundland Regiment. Two thousand other Newfoundlanders served in the Royal Navy or in the lumberjack battalions, the so-called ‘forestry battalions’.

The Newfoundland Regiment is mainly known for the enormous losses it suffered on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Of the

⁹⁶ Gaffen F. (1985) *Forgotten soldiers*, Penttton: Theytus Books. p.23.

⁹⁷ See chapter Nine: “Peace and Prejudice” of Winegard TC. (2012) *For king and Kanata : Canadian Indians and the First World War*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

⁹⁸ Winegard TC. (2012) *For king and Kanata : Canadian Indians and the First World War*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. p.5.

800 Newfoundlanders who went into attack on that morning only 68 were able to answer at the next roll call. The others were dead, missing or injured.⁹⁹ The unit would take quite some time to recover. Barely a month after the infamous 1 July what remained of the Newfoundland Regiment was deployed near Ypres to perform chores. Their barracks were located in the casemates under the town's ramparts. After major actions in France, the Newfoundlanders returned to Ypres in the summer and autumn of 1917, when they were deployed near Langemark during the Third Battle, and again in September 1918 to participate in the great final offensive as a part of the 29th Division. For a whole month they helped push back German troops through Dadizele, Ledegem, Bavikhove and Deerlijk to Ingooigem, where their active involvement in the First World War stopped on 27 October 1918. After a short participation in the occupation of the Rhineland the men returned home and the regiment was disbanded. Newfoundland again returned to being a country without an army.¹⁰⁰

From an ethnic point of view Newfoundland was and is fairly homogeneously anglo-saxon. The ethnic minorities found in Canada were also present in Newfoundland, albeit in smaller numbers. This was also reflected in the composition of the Newfoundland Regiment. At least 15 Inuit ('Eskimos') from Labrador served in the Newfoundland Regiment. Amongst them were John Shiwak and Fred Frieda.¹⁰¹ Both joined the regiment after the blood bath of 1 July 1916. John Shiwak, the "best sniper in the regiment", died on 20 November 1917.¹⁰² Fred Frieda, a hunter and trapper before and after the war, remained with the regiment until the war ended and thus not only participated in the Third Battle of Ypres but also in the Final Offensive from Ypres to Ingooigem. He was plagued by nightmares about his war experience until his death in 1970.¹⁰³

The Newfoundland Regiment suffered tremendous losses during the First World War. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission commemorates some 1200 dead of the unit, over 150 of which are buried in Belgium. A further 70 went missing in Belgium and, although they actually fell near Langemark and Poelkappelle in August-October 1917, they are commemorated on the Newfoundland Memorial to the Missing in Beaumont-Hamel (Somme). The monuments commemorating the Newfoundlanders all consist of a monumental bronze Caribou. Only one of them is located in Belgium along the busy Gentssesteenweg between

⁹⁹ Nicholson GWL. (1964) *The fighting Newfoundlander : a history of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment*, s.l.: Government of Newfoundland. p.274.

¹⁰⁰ Nicholson GWL. (1964) *The fighting Newfoundlander : a history of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment*, s.l.: Government of Newfoundland.,p.291-301; 374-400; 475-502.

¹⁰¹ Gaffen F. (1985) *Forgotten soldiers*, Pencitton: Theytus Books. p.28-29.

¹⁰² His digitised personal record is to be found at http://www.rnr.therooms.ca/soldier_files/Shiwak_John_rnr-0263.pdf (accessed 13 March 2016).

¹⁰³ Gaffen F. (1985) *Forgotten soldiers*, Pencitton: Theytus Books. p.29.

Kortrijk and Harelbeke, close to the spot where the Newfoundland Regiment crossed the Lys in 1918.

The Australian Imperial Force (AIF)

In 1914 Australia had almost 5 million white inhabitants who had mainly settled along the coasts, and some 75-80,000 aboriginal Australians who mainly lived inland. Australia had a small professional army that could be supplemented with some 45,000 part-time reserves. Every adult Australian male of a certain age was indeed obliged to follow minimum military training at regular intervals. As soon as war broke out the Australian government decided to provide Great Britain with an Australian Imperial Force of 20,000 men at first but that figure would soon increase.

In total almost 417,000 Australians enlisted voluntarily in the AIF, over 13 per cent of the white male population and about half of those eligible. Over 330,000 of them embarked overseas and 65 per cent of them (about 215,000) became battle casualties (dead, injured, missing, sick, prisoner of war) - of whom 60,000 died.¹⁰⁴ This was the highest rate of casualties of all the forces of the British Empire. Almost 12,750 Australians are buried or commemorated in Belgium.

As opposed to Canada or South Africa almost all white inhabitants originated from Britain and they shared the initial British enthusiasm for the war. This, in combination with some fierce recruitment campaigns, ensured there was no shortage of volunteers, especially in the first stages of the war. In November and December 1914, the first two Australian and New Zealand convoys left for Europe. After the failed landing in Gallipoli and with the rising number of Australian war fatalities the Australian enthusiasm for the war soon faded. To boost the volunteer impulse, 'eligible' men from 18 to 45 had to fill in a card to say whether they were willing to enlist, and, if not, to declare why. Yet, this was not enough and to maintain the recruitment levels the new, pro-British born Prime Minister William Hughes promised to introduce conscription. However, his proposal was twice rejected in a referendum and Australia continued to have voluntary soldiers. The reasons why Australia voted against conscription had little to do with anti-imperial sentiments or disenchantment with the war. It was rather a vote against an open-ended commitment to the war on the Western Front, expressing the fear that the deeper purpose of empire, as conceived in Australia, would be jeopardised by the reckless expenditure of its most valuable resource: white men. The

¹⁰⁴ Scott E. (1936) *Australia during the war*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson., p.1; Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.333.

menace to most Australians did not come from Germany, but from Japan and in a wider sense the immigration of non-white labour.¹⁰⁵

“Joseph Marcus Harwood
Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, plot XXXVI, row E, grave 10
died on 13 October 1917, aged 20
Lance Corporal, 45th Battalion, Australian Infantry, AIF”

“Son of Joseph and Ellen Crawford Harwood, of 41, Cary St., Drummoyne,
New South Wales. Native of Rozelle, New South Wales”

His epitaph reads “AUSTRALIA
WILL HAVE OTHER SONS
BUT NONE MORE HONOURED
THAN THESE”

Until the end of 1917 the five Australian divisions together with the New Zealand troops and some British units formed two Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, or ANZAC. After having trained in Egypt the ANZACs were deployed on the Turkish peninsula of Gallipoli. The day of the landing, 25 April (1915), is deemed so important for the creation of the nations of Australia and New Zealand that it is still a major public holiday and day of commemoration in both countries, or in the words of the Australian official war historian and “brilliant myth-maker”¹⁰⁶ C.E.W. Bean: “It was on the 25th April 1915, that the consciousness of Australian nationhood was born”.¹⁰⁷ In spite of the catastrophic outcome of the Gallipoli campaign, the Australian soldiers acquired a solid reputation as fighters. In the spring of 1916 they were transferred to Northern France, where one division fought in the Battle of Fromelles and four in the Battle of the Somme, all suffering heavy losses. From August to October 1916 Australian troops were present for the first time at the front near Ypres. From a military point of view their presence during the Battle of Messines in June 1917 and during the Third Battle of Ypres a few months later was more important. Whereas the first battle was a success, at ‘Passchendaele’ the Australians suffered some 38,000 dead and injured soldiers. The blood bath resulted in a shortage of men from which the AIF recovered only with great difficulty.

Although the Australian soldiers were reputed to be outstanding soldiers, the British officers were horrified by their disregard for etiquette. This in combination with the fact that they were better paid brought them to the

¹⁰⁵ Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.339-342.

¹⁰⁶ Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p.265.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in : Macintyre S. (1999) Australia and the Empire. In: Winks RW (ed) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume V. Historiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 163-181. p.176.

attention of the Belgian population. The prevailing opinion about Australian soldiers was well formulated by Father Achiel Van Walleghem on 11 October 1917:

“They are courageous fighters, who know no fear. That’s one of the reasons why they are usually put in the worst sector, which they are also proud of. Although when they’ve had a bit to drink and are quarreling with the English, they often bring up against them that they always have to risk their necks while the English choose the best spots. But they are rather wild. Their main [vice] is drunkenness, and the main cause of that is that they are paid so much. [...] So when they are on rest and they come into the village, sometimes after a couple of weeks in an area where there is neither inn nor house, and thus with their pockets full of money, they are eager to go out drinking. And so beer and wine and champagne do their worst. Innkeepers and winemercants make a lot of money [...].”¹⁰⁸

“Rufus Gordon Rigney

Harlebeke New British Cemetery, Harelbeke, plot XI, row D, grave 7

Died of Wounds on 16 October 1917, aged 19

private, 48th Battalion, Australian Infantry, AIF”

“Son of B. J. and Rachel Rigney, of Point McLeay, South Australia. His brother Cyril Spurgeon Rigney also fell.”

Rufus Rigney belonged to the Ngarrindjeri, the Australian Aboriginal people of the lower Murray River, western Fleurieu Peninsula, and the Coorong of southern, central Australia. He had lied about his age when he enlisted, 16 years old. He got wounded in Passchendaele on 12 October 1917 and died four days later in a German field hospital.¹⁰⁹

The Australian Imperial Force was composed of men of British origin and was therefore ethnically fairly homogeneous. Aborigines, of whom there were little more than 75,000 in the early 20th century, approximate 10 % of the estimated number when European settlement began in 1788, were regarded as primitives and were heavily discriminated.¹¹⁰ They were not allowed or at the very least were discouraged from serving in the AIF. As the war progressed the rules were slackened. According to official Australian estimates between 500 and 1000 aboriginals served overseas¹¹¹, and about 160 of them came from New South Wales. Most

¹⁰⁸ Van Walleghem A. (2017) 1917. *The Passchendaele Year. The British Army in Flanders. The Diary of Achiel Van Walleghem*, Brighton EER. p. 245-6.

¹⁰⁹ Kartinyeri D. (1996) *Ngarrindjeri Anzacs*, s.l.: Gillingham Printers. p.34-35.

¹¹⁰ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p.68.

¹¹¹ The Australian War Memorial mentions “Over 1000 Indigenous Australians fought in the First World War” <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/aborigines/indigenous/> (accessed 5 Feb 2016) while the Australian Department of Veteran Affairs is more cautious and talks about: “during World War I approximately 500 Aborigines and a few Torres Strait Islanders managed to enlist” <http://www.dva.gov.au/i-am/aboriginal-and-or-torres-strait-islander/indigenous-australians-war> (accessed 5 Feb 2016). Garton S. (2014) The Dominions, Ireland, and India. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at war* :

were probably of mixed European-aboriginal origin. It is hard to trace aboriginal soldiers because military papers did not mention their ethnic origin and the names do not usually allow to classify someone as aboriginal. Moreover, some pretended to be Pacific Islanders, Maori or Indians. Aboriginal recruits were probably driven by the pay and by the hope for more respect and a better life. Even though in the army they were on an equal footing with their white comrades, the First World War brought them little or no improvement at a political, economic or social level. Whereas white ex-volunteers were allocated plots of land by the government, they were not even entitled to own the land on which they had settled. Some aboriginal veterans were not even allowed to join the local war veterans' association. They would only be granted civil rights in 1967 and they have only recently been included in the commemoration ceremonies. Yet there is no shortage of remarkable stories, like that of the Lovett family from Lake Condah in Victoria. Five of the six sons of this aboriginal family served during the First World War, amongst others in Ypres: Alfred, Edward, Leonard, Frederick and Herbert. In the Second World War they joined up again, except for Alfred who was too old but he was replaced by the youngest brother Samuel. All would survive both world wars. In 2000, the tallest office building in Canberra which also houses the Australian Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet was renamed after them.¹¹² Some aboriginals in the AIF came from relatively prominent families. For instance Daniel Cooper who died on 20 September 1917 near Ypres and lies buried in Perth Cemetery (China Wall) in Zillebeke. His father William Cooper was a well-known aboriginal rights campaigner who kept reminding the politicians of the sacrifices the aboriginals had also made during the First World War.¹¹³

The New Zealand Division

New Zealand, with a total population of approximately 1 million inhabitants in 1914 contributed no fewer than 124,000 soldiers during the First World War, of which nearly 100,000 were deployed overseas, nearly 20 % of the adult male population.¹¹⁴ Approximately 18,000 did not

1911-1923. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 152-177. p.160 is even more cautious and states "over 500 Indigenous Australians eventually fought".

¹¹² <http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/aboriginal-affairs/projects-and-programs/leadership/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll/victorian-aboriginal-honour-roll-2013-inductees/the-lovett-brothers> (accessed 6 April 2016).

¹¹³ Huggonson D. (1989) The dark diggers of the AIF. *The Australian Quarterly* 61: 352-357.

¹¹⁴ Drew HTB. (1923) *The War Effort of New Zealand*, Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs. p.11-13; Darwin J. (2009) *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 333.

survive and 50,000 others were injured, a casualty rate of 59 %. More than 4,600 of them lie buried or are commemorated in Belgian Flanders.

All young New Zealand men had received military training. Since 1911, there had also been a national militia of some 25,000 part-time soldiers. They were among the first New Zealanders to join the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. On 1 August 1916, conscription was introduced initially for whites only. Earlier that year the New Zealand Expeditionary Force had been organised into a division: the New Zealand Division. The New Zealand forces comprised four regiments; each one was named after a military district: Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago. The division was almost always deployed with Australian divisions, with which it formed the (2nd) ANZAC and was therefore present in Flanders and Northern France at the same time as the Australians. In Flanders triumph and blood bath were intermingled for the New Zealanders. On 4 October 1917, during the so-called Battle of Broodseinde, the New Zealand division took over 1,000 German soldiers prisoners of war and together with the Australian units, it successfully pushed the frontline back by more than one and a half kilometres. However, they paid a heavy price for this victory with 450 New Zealand fatalities including David Gallaher, the former captain of the 'All Blacks' national rugby team. One week after this relative victory the Anzac troops had to repeat their daring exploit. This time, however, they were faced with a complete disaster: they failed to reach a single target, in just a few hours 846 New Zealanders were killed and 2000 more were injured. Never in history have more New Zealanders met with a violent death than on 12 October 1917, the 'First Battle of Passchendaele'. The black day also had a highly detrimental effect on morale back in New Zealand. The division would remain in the Ypres area until February 1918.¹¹⁵

Possibly even more so than for the Australians, the First World War played an important role in developing the national spirit of the New Zealanders. Far from home the New Zealand soldiers became conscious of who they were and where they came from. In battle they compared themselves to the other armed forces and from this they gradually derived their own identity. Many soldiers started referring to themselves as 'Kiwis', the remarkable, typical New Zealand flightless bird.

“Nehe Patara

Ramparts Cemetery (Lille Gate), Ypres, row B, grave 6

Killed in Action on 31 December 1917, aged 24

private, New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion

Son of Pukemaire Patara, of Rangitukia, North Island, New Zealand”

¹¹⁵ Harper G. (2007) *Dark Journey. Three key New Zealand battles on the Western Front*, Auckland: HarperCollins. p.13-138.

Generally speaking there were (and are) two population groups in New Zealand: the native Maori and the Europeans, also referred to as Pakeha, who were mainly of British origin. From 100,000 in 1769, the number of Maori had fallen to 42,000 in 1896 but the population slowly recovered after 1900.¹¹⁶ At the beginning of the war New Zealand had also deemed the joining up of the indigenous population undesirable. However, no later than February 1915 a Maori contingent was formed. Indeed, even though they were not treated as equals the discrimination of the Maori was less intense than that of the Australian aboriginals. They had been given full and equal rights as early as 1867 and since 1893 when New Zealand had introduced universal suffrage for both men and women, the first nation in the world to do so, the Maori also had the right to vote. Thus the Maori were recruited at the instigation of the four Maori members of parliament of that day. One of them, Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa), also joined up. These members of parliament were convinced that the involvement in the war would support the Maori demand that they should be treated as equals by the Pakeha and would help eliminate the negative aspects of tribalism, which they believed was a handicap for the future development of the Maori. It would indeed appear that many Pakeha and Maori first got to know one another better during the war. Yet many Maori opposed this involvement in the war, especially as conscription also applied for them as from 1917. Mainly the Taranaki, Ngati Maniapoto and Tainui–Waikato tribes, who had lost their land to the British during the 19th century revolts, resolutely refused to serve. In addition to which, Maori King Te Rata declared that military service was a matter of individual choice and no one could be forced to serve.¹¹⁷

“Kiro Luke Adam

New Irish Farm Cemetery, Ieper, plot V, row A, grave 7

Killed in Action on 7 October 1917

private, New Zealand (Maori) Pioneer Battalion”

“Step-brother of Manuel Luke Awarua, of Awarua, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, South Pacific”

The first Maori contingent was integrated in the fighting troops and was involved in the battles of Gallipoli. During the formation of the New Zealand Division at the beginning of 1916, it was decided to incorporate the Maori in an engineering unit: the Maori Pioneer Battalion. Many Maori soldiers rejected this option and remained in their infantry battalion, arguing amongst others that they were essentially a martial people. However, all new Maori recruits were incorporated in the Maori Pioneer Battalion. They were supplemented with Polynesians from Niue (at least

¹¹⁶ Johnson R. (2003) *British Imperialism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. p.69.

¹¹⁷ Fletcher A. (2014) *Recruitment and Service of Māori Soldiers in World War One.*

Itinerario 38: 59 - 78.; Pugsley C. (1995) *Te hokowhita a tu : the Maori pioneer battalion in the First World War*, Birkenhead: Reed Books., passim.

110), the Cook Islands (at least 150 soldiers from Roratonga, Atiu Areora, ...), Fiji (at least 14), Tonga (idem) and other islands. As German Samoa had been occupied by New Zealand troops since 29 August 1914, a number of volunteers also originated from that island. No soldiers came from further afield to the trenches of Flanders than these inhabitants of the Pacific Ocean!

The battalion was active near Ypres during the whole second half of 1917 where they made new communication trenches and shelters amongst others. The year 1917 ended on a minor note for the Maori Pioneer Battalion. In the early morning of 31 December a shell hit Lieutenant Paku's platoon that was working at the intersection of the Zonnebeke Road and Saville Road (the present day Jan Ypermanstraat) in Ypres. Six Maori were killed outright.¹¹⁸ They were buried in the splendid Ramparts Cemetery on the Ypres ramparts. In total 36 members of the Maori battalion were buried in Belgium. In total, between 2200 and 2700 Maori and between 340 and 460 Pacific Islanders served overseas. 336 died.

Troops from the Union of South Africa in the First World War

It was only in 1910 that the former Boer Republics Transvaal and Orange Free State and the two British colonies Natal and the Cape united to form the Union of South Africa, a self-rule dominion within the British Empire. The South African war, better known as the Boer War, had ended merely eight years before, in 1902. During this war some 28,000 Boer women, children and senior citizens and half that number of black internees had died in British concentration camps.¹¹⁹ Needless to say that there was still considerable animosity in the very young Union of South Africa between the English-speaking minority (within the 'white' population) and the Afrikaner Dutch-speaking colonists. The majority of the population, however, was black, had little civil rights and was disregarded by the State. Not even three years after the creation of the Union, a Native's Land Act had been passed whereby black South African landownership was confined to 10% of the country, a first major step towards apartheid.

Although the majority of the (white) population had little reason to help Great Britain in the battle, General Botha, the Prime Minister of South Africa and a former Boer Commander, had indeed promised assistance. Botha kept his promise and in 1914-1915 the South African Defence Force conquered all German South-West Africa (Namibia). The campaign was interrupted to settle a revolt of pro-German - or rather anti-British - Boers. In April 1915 the British government asked the South African government to supply troops for deployment outside Southern Africa. Three South

¹¹⁸ Cowan J. (2011 (1926)) *Maori in the Great War*, Christchurch: Willson Scott Publishing. p.129.

¹¹⁹ Ferguson N. (2004) *Empire : how Britain made the modern world*, London: Penguin. p.280-1.

African Infantry Brigades were formed. The second and third brigade would fight in German East Africa, whereas the First South African Brigade left for England in November 1915. Obviously, the majority of these soldiers, who had volunteered to be deployed outside Africa, were of British origin and hence spoke English. Afrikaners made up for 10 to 15 % of this expeditionary force. Without exception blacks and coloured people were not allowed to join up.¹²⁰

“Jacobus Johannes Van Niekerk
Perth Cemetery (China Wall), Zillebeke, perceel IV, rij H, graf 12
gestorven op 20 september 1917, ouderdom 20 jaren
burger, 3de Zuid-Afrikaanse Infanterie”

“Son of Jacobus Johannes van Niekerk and Aletta Gertruida van Niekerk,
of East Lynne, Silverton, Pretoria, Transvaal. Born at Engelbrecht,
Transvaal”

Although the men of the First South African Brigade trained in England for deployment on the Western Front, they were initially sent to Egypt and Libya. They first reached France in April 1916. There they were integrated into the 9th Scottish Division, probably because the 4th regiment (4 SAI) comprised the ‘South-African Scottish’, who wore a kilt with the tartan of Atholl in the Scottish Highlands. The other regiments were: Cape Province (1 SAI), Natal and Orange Free State (2 SAI) and Transvaal and Rhodesia (3 SAI). Their ‘trench acclimatisation’ took place at the end of April and beginning of May 1916 in the then relatively quiet trenches near Ploegsteert. Shortly later, in mid-July 1916, in Delville Wood on the Somme, the South Africans were butchered with unparalleled violence. That is the reason why the great national monument of South Africa is located there. After the catastrophe of Delville Wood the South Africans remained in Northern France for another year, where they were deployed amongst others during the Battle of Arras. On 14 September 1917, they arrived in Brandhoek, half-way between Ypres and Poperinge to fight in the Third Battle of Ypres. A few days later, on 20 September 1917, they launched an attack near Zonnebeke. In spite of the enormous losses, this was one of the better prepared and more successful phases of the great British offensive. One of the many South Africans wounded that day was thirteen year old David Ross from Durban. Six months later he would die as one of the youngest casualties of the First World War near Heudecourt.¹²¹ Also in mid-October 1917 – in between two phases of the Third Battle of Ypres - the South African Brigade occupied the front line near Ypres for a few days. It then moved back to France for six months, where it was crushed by the German Spring Offensive at the end of March 1918. A large

¹²⁰ Nasson B. (2007) *Springboks on the Somme : South Africa in the Great War, 1914-1918*, Johannesburg/ New York: Penguin Books. p.3 and 125.

¹²¹ Tony Spagnoly TS. (2001) *Salient Points Three: Flanders and Picardy 1914 -1918*, Barnsley: Leo Cooper. p.1-8.

section of the brigade eventually had to surrender. What remained of the South African troops was again deployed in Belgium in April 1918 to stop the German Spring Offensive near Messines and Kemmel. The fact that a number of these soldiers spoke “some kind of Flemish” is mentioned in a number of memoirs of Belgian soldiers.¹²² Even though the South African infantry had only been deployed twice in Belgium (September-October 1917 and April 1918), outside their ‘trench acclimatisation’, they had always been present during fierce battles. This explains why one fifth of the South Africans who fell on the Western Front are buried or commemorated in Belgium.

“Rakaise Mochonono

Les Baraques Military Cemetery, Sangatte, plot XVI, row A, grave 1

Died on 23 June 1917, aged 50

private, South African Native Labour Corps, 20th Company”

“Son of Mochonono, of Molepolole, Bechuanaland, South Africa.

Husband of Sebopo.”

Molepolole is nowadays a city in Southwest Botswana.

As from October 1916 South African blacks could join the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC). Various prominent black activists of the South African Native National Congress, the precursor of the ANC, were delighted with the creation of this labour unit. One of their respected leaders, Sol Plaatje, was actively involved in the recruitment campaign. The prominent blacks not only saw the SANLC as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty towards the British, but they considered overseas service as an educational opportunity during which France would offer the men a “university of experience”. Last but not least, it would no longer be possible to ignore black South Africans once they had contributed to the war effort.¹²³ The South African government was fearful of this. It insisted that the labourers in the SANLC could only be given a one-year contract after which they would immediately be repatriated to South Africa. In January 1918 the South African government decided to stop recruiting men for the SANLC, in spite of the British demand for more manpower, and by May 1918 most ‘native labourers’ had returned home. In Northern France the South African labourers worked on the supply lines to the front, and even more frequently at the docks in the French Channel Ports. Of all the allied black auxiliary troops they were the least well treated: at the explicit request of their government they were not allowed to have any contact with the local population, they were only allowed to leave their camp if they were accompanied by a white non-commissioned

¹²² Vermeiren J. (2009) *Mijn grote oorlog : belevenissen van een frontsoldaat 1914-1918*, Leuven: Davidsfonds. p. 107-8; Vandewalle G. (2000) *Overleven in een Grote Oorlog : herinneringen van een infanterist 1914-1918*, Erpe: De Krijger. p. 74.

¹²³ Grundlingh A. (1987) *Fighting Their Own War : South African Blacks and the First World War*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press. p. 61.

officer and lived in a virtual prison, surrounded by a high barbed wire fence.¹²⁴

One particular event concerning the SANLC aroused quite some commotion. On 21 February 1917 the Mendi, a ship transporting a contingent of black labourers from Plymouth to Le Havre collided with another vessel and sank. More than 600 members of the South African Native Labour Corps died. This was not only a human tragedy, the ship also carried a number of prominent blacks like Father Isaac Wauchope Dyobha and some chiefs.¹²⁵ For many blacks this event symbolised their position in South Africa, as black lives were being sacrificed for white interests. The commemoration of the sinking of the Mendi would remain a silent political protest for many years.¹²⁶

After the war the South African government decided that its black labourers who had served in Europe should not be awarded the (Interallied) Victory Medal, despite the fact that their comrades from Basutoland, Swaziland and Bechuanaland who served in the same corps were to receive it. The South African blacks were probably alone among the allies not to receive this decoration. Indeed, their involvement was even kept silent: for instance the official history *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918* published in 1924, does not make any reference whatsoever to the SANLC although more than 21,000 men had belonged to it.¹²⁷

In addition to the SANLC there were also the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport Companies, with a total of some 4200 mainly black men. Such a company was established in Dunkirk and Calais. The smaller group of 'coloured people' from the Cape could join the Cape Coloured Labour Regiment, which comprised some 2000 men.¹²⁸

The official languages of the Union of South Africa were English and Dutch, Afrikaans would only replace Dutch later. Consequently, the South African war graves are the only ones to always display a Dutch text. Indeed, in addition to the national Springbok (antelope) emblem you can read: 'Union is strength - Eendracht maakt macht'. The very rare graves of 'Dutch-speaking' South African soldiers are even entirely in Dutch. Some such examples are the grave of Johannes Niekerk in Perth Cemetery (China Wall) in Zillebeke or of Thomas Engela on Nine Elms Cemetery in Poperinge.

¹²⁴ National Archives, Kew, WO 107/37 App. F: "History of the South African Native Labour Corps" and App. G "Appendix to Notes for Officer of Labour Companies. South African Native Labour".

¹²⁵ Uys IS. (1993) *Survivors of Africa's oceans*, Germiston: Fortress Publishers. p. 39-43

¹²⁶ Clothier N. (1987) *Black valour : the South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918, and the sinking of the Mendi*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press. p.174-177

¹²⁷ Anon. (2004 (1924)) *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918 : Official History*, Nashville: The Battery Press.; Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 125.

¹²⁸ Gleeson I. (1994) *The Unknown Force : Black, Indian and Coloured Soldiers Through Two World Wars*, Rivonia: Ashanti publishing. p. 54-55.

It is estimated that more than 40,000 'white' men and more than 25,000 'black and coloured' men served in South African units in Europe. A further 10,000 South African Europeans were active in British units.

More than 4,300 South African soldiers died on the Western Front including 850 in Belgium. No fewer than 560 missing South African soldiers are remembered on the Menin Gate in Ypres, this is quite revealing for the circumstances in which they died.

Approximately 350 of the black labourers and coloured soldiers have a known grave in Northern France, especially at the cemetery of Arques-la-Bataille. In Belgium you can only find two graves of members of the Cape Coloured Labour Battalion at the old municipal cemetery of Kortrijk.

The British West Indies Regiment

“Daniel Joseph
Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge, plot XXI, row H, grave 11
Died on 15 October 1917
private, 8th Battalion, British West Indies Regiment”

“Son of Abraham and Rose Joseph, of Grenada, British West Indies;
husband of Margaret Sybil Joseph, of Plaisance Village, East Coast,
Demerara, British Guiana”

British West India comprised countless islands in the Caribbean region with Jamaica as its largest, as well as British Honduras and British Guiana on respectively the Central and South American continent. As British *colonies* the region was more closely connected to Great Britain than the dominions.

Like elsewhere in the British Empire black men who volunteered for military service were initially turned down, but at the end of 1915 eventually a British West Indies Regiment, which included black war volunteers from the Caribbean, was created. White colonists from the West Indies served in British units. The first black soldiers arrived in Great Britain at the end of 1915 to receive fighting training. The British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) ultimately comprised twelve battalions (of which 11 went overseas) and some 15,000 men. Two thirds originated from Jamaica and contingents of 200 to 1000 men originated from Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados, British Guiana (present day state of Guyana), British Honduras (Belize), Grenada, the Bahamas, St-Lucia, St-Vincent and the Leeward Islands (today the island states Dominica, Antigua, Barbuda, St.Kitts & Nevis and the British Overseas Territories Anguilla, Montserrat and the Virgin Islands).¹²⁹ Many eventually joined up in Panama, then a well established centre of migration from the West Indies, partly due to the Panama Canal works.

¹²⁹ Joseph CL. (1971) The British West Indies Regiment 1914-1918. *Journal of Caribbean history* 2: 94-124. esp. p. 110-112.

Although the BWIR included trained soldiers, they never actually fought, with the exception of the battalions in the Middle East. They were used as workforce, albeit usually quite close to the front. At least seven of the eleven battalions of the BWIR (the 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th) were represented near Ypres between May 1917 and January 1918.¹³⁰

Nearly 1400 men of the BWIR passed away while on service and it is alleged that a large number of them died of illness.¹³¹ However, no fewer than four West Indians were executed by firing squad: two for murder, one for striking a senior officer and one for desertion. The latter was 17 year old Jamaican Herbert Morris who was shot on 20 September 1917 in the courtyard of the town hall of Poperinghe.¹³²

The war ultimately had an important politicising effect on the black West Indian servicemen. The discrimination they had been subject to in France and Flanders and the enhanced prestige attached to the status of veteran with which they returned, urged quite a number of returned servicemen to become politically active, either immediately upon return (when they were involved in a series of riots in the West Indian colonies), or later in life.

British India¹³³

When we speak of Indians in this volume we refer to the inhabitants of the British Indian Empire, or as it is often known, the Raj. As an entire chapter is devoted to a more in depth-study of the Indian Army and Indian Labour at the Western Front, we can suffice here with a short overview of composition, deployment and numbers.

The British Raj was ruled by its own government under the leadership of a Viceroy, representing the British monarch, who used the title of 'Emperor' in this context. In practice the British governed only part of the Indian territories direct. About one third of Indian territory, with some 80 million inhabitants, consisted of about 600 'princely states' which were governed by maharajahs, rajahs, nizams, nawabs and other aristocratic rulers with a variety of titles and prestige. Officially they were independent of Calcutta/Delhi and not under the laws of

¹³⁰ Based on the casualty database of the CWGC. The latter gives also one casualty of the 1st Battalion BWIR but that is most probably a mistake, as this unit was then residing in Egypt.

¹³¹ Joseph CL. (1971) The British West Indies Regiment 1914-1918. *Journal of Caribbean history* 2: 94-124., p.124.

¹³² Putkowski J and Sykes J. (1999) *Shot at dawn : executions in World War One by authority of the British Army act*, London: Leo Cooper. p.195-6; Smith R. (2004) *Jamaican volunteers in the First World War : race, masculinity and the development of national consciousness*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. p.84.

¹³³ This section is generally based on Dendooven D. (2014) Het Indian Army Corps bij Ieper, 1914-15. *Shrapnel* 2014: 22-34.

British India, but the princes accepted paramount authority of the British Crown whose foreign policy they agreed to follow.¹³⁴

British India comprised the present day states Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar). The kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan were independent, but treaties allowed the British to be very influential. The Indian national leaders supported the British with money and manpower.

Of all the colonies in the British, French and German empires in 1914, the contribution of India in terms of manpower was the highest. Up to 1.5 million men from the Indian subcontinent served during the First World War, 850,000 of them in one of the expeditionary forces. About 72-74,000 would not survive the war. Some 7,000 British Indians were killed on the Western Front, virtually all of them during the first year of war. They are remembered in various cemeteries in Flanders, as well as on the Menin Gate and on the Neuve Chapelle Memorial.

The people who lived in the Indian subcontinent had been divided into martial and non-martial ethnic groups by the British in compliance with the racist 'martial races theory' which in itself was partially elaborated on the Indian caste system.¹³⁵ A 'martial race' was considered brave and well built for fighting but also less intelligent. According to the British a non-martial race was unsuitable as a soldier because of his sedentary lifestyle, build or attitude. Soldiers in the British Indian army were recruited among the martial races. The theory offered numerous advantages for the British rulers: it created a competitive spirit among the various ethnic groups that suited their divide-and-rule policy. Moreover, this theory made the intellectuals and those with a higher education look like cowards, whereas the uneducated and less developed were presented as being brave. Ethnic groups from the plains and from East India were generally considered as 'non-martial'. The Sikhs from Punjab (Northern India/Pakistan) were considered to be the prime 'martial race'. The Gurkhas from Nepal and Northern India are also a famous 'fighting race' and still have a Brigade within the British army. Other martial races were the Baloch (from South West Pakistan), the Dogra (from Jammu, Northern India), Garhwalis (from Uttarakhand, in the Himalaya), Jats (from Rajasthan and Punjab), Pathans or Pashtuns (from the border region between Pakistan-Afghanistan: North West

¹³⁴ Grimal H. (1978) *Decolonization. The British, French, Dutch and Belgian Empires 1919-1963*, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 225.

¹³⁵ Bonarjee PD. (1899) *A hand book of the fighting races of India*, Calcutta: Thacker.; Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p.11.

Frontier Province), Rajputs (a community of Hindu fighters in Northern India).¹³⁶

The Indian army reported to the British-Indian government, but on the Western Front the Indian Army Corps and the Indian Labour Corps de facto came under British military authority. The Indian army was organised in a similar way as the British, although there were some significant differences. For instance, it had its own military law. With the exception of a few regiments, each Indian regiment only comprised 1 battalion of some 750 men. An Indian infantry division was composed of three brigades with four battalions, one of which was always British. Ethnically mixed battalions, like the 57th Wilde's Rifles (with Sikhs, Dogras, Pathans and Punjabi Muslims) fought alongside ethnically homogenous battalions, like the 47th Sikhs (Sikhs only).

There were two types of officers: British and Indian. The British always ranked higher than the Indian. The highest ranks had the same name as the British, but they also had a few specific ranks like subadar (similar to a captain) or jemadar (similar to a British lieutenant). The non-commissioned officers (NCOs) held the commission of the Viceroy and hence were known as VCO's. They always used Indian denominations like havildar (sergeant) or naik (corporal). A private was a sepoy (cf. British private). The cavalry had other specific ranks like rissaldar, woordie-major, kot-daffadar, daffadar, etc. A cavalry soldier was a sowar, equivalent to a British 'trooper'.¹³⁷

Although the Indian army of 1914 did not reflect the colourful ethnic mix of the subcontinent, it was nevertheless a melting pot of cultures, peoples and communities, each with its own characteristics and customs.¹³⁸

“Mehr Khan

Bedford House Cemetery, Ieper, Enclosure No.4., Indian plot, row B, grave 6

Died between 28 October 1914 and 1 November 1914

Sepoy, 57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force), Indian Army”

“Son of Mst. Rajbi, of Kurram Khurd, Gujar Khan, Rawalpindi, Punjab”

Mehr Khan was a punjabi muslim and his hometown is nowadays in Pakistan.

¹³⁶ Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p.10-11.

¹³⁷ Omissi D. (2014) *Indian voices of the Great War : soldiers' letters, 1914-18*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking. p. Xxv.

¹³⁸ Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p.31.

An Indian Expeditionary Force A was despatched to Europe early on in the war. Of its combattant units, the Indians contained a total of 85,000 Indian troops under 1,500 British officers, and the British 17,000 officers and men. In direct support there were 26,000 Indian 'camp-followers'. However, it should be stressed that initially they were not deployed as an entity but blended in with the British Expeditionary Force.¹³⁹ On 22 October 1914 the Ferozepore Brigade had to go down into the freshly dug trenches between Hollebeke and Messines. It was the first time Indians were deployed in Europe. The first Indian battalion to be thrown into battle was the 57th Wilde's Rifles in the vicinity of Wijtschate-Oosttaverne. Soldiers belonging to that unit are shown on a photo in front of 't Nieuw Staenyzer inn in Wijtschate. That day the first Indian war casualty fell on the Western Front: nail Laturia, son of Phehu from Hamirpur in the present day North Indian province Himachal Pradesh. His name is mentioned on the Menin Gate.

After some two weeks south of Ypres, the Ferozepore Brigade was transferred from Ypres to join the Jullundur Brigade in the newly established Indian sector between Givenchy and Neuve-Chapelle. On 7 December 1914 the Sirhind Brigade joined them from Egypt, together with reinforcements from India. By mid-November the Indian 1st Cavalry Division had also arrived, they were followed one month later by the Indian 2nd Cavalry Division. These two cavalry divisions would in fact remain on the Western Front after the rest of the Indian Corps had left for Mesopotamia in the autumn of 1915. In December 1914 very heavy fighting took place in the sector of the Indian Corps and on 10 March 1915 the so-called Battle of Neuve-Chapelle was fought and resulted in the unprecedented slaughter of Indian troops. This explains why the splendid Indian Memorial is located in that French municipality. The losses incurred during the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle were so great that the Indian Corps had to be reorganised. From then onwards each brigade consisted of two British and three Indian battalions.

“Kishn Singh
Bedford House Cemetery, Ieper, Enclosure No. 4., Indian plot, row A,
grave 9
Killed in Action on 27 April 1915
Sepoy, 21st Punjabi Regiment, Indian Army”

“Son of Sundar Singh, of Bal Khurd, Oghi, Jullundur, Punjab”

¹³⁹ Morton-Jack G. (2014) *The Indian Army on the Western Front : India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., p. 1

Kishn Singh was a Sikh. Jalandhar is nowadays an important district capital in the Indian state of Punjab.

“Asrup Limbu

Bailleul Town Cemetery Extension, Bailleul (France), plot II, row B, grave 215

Died of Wounds on 28 April 1915

Lance Naik, Burma Military Police, attached to the 4th Gurkha Rifles, Indian Army”

The name Limbu points to a member of the Limbu tribes and clans of the Kirat people who live in the mountainous areas of Eastern Nepal and its bordering regions in India, Tibet, Burma and Bhutan. The use of hindi and the omkar symbol suggests Asrup Limbu was a hindu but he might as well have been an adept of the traditional Mundhum religion of his people.

At 5 pm on 22 April 1915 the Second Battle of Ypres began with the first chemical attack in history. Once again the Indian Army Corps was called on to fill a gap in the line. On 24 April the Lahore Division marched towards the North and on the morning of 25 April the division reached Ouderdom, a hamlet between Reningelst and Vlamertinge. In the afternoon of 26 April the Lahore Division were used a shock troops in an attempt to establish a new allied line of defence north of Ypres. In total the operation made 2 000 casualties in the two attacking British-Indian brigades.

None of the deployed troops had even managed to reach the first enemy line. Similar attacks would be repeated the following days.¹⁴⁰

When on 3 May 1915 the Lahore Division started its return march to the rest of the Indian Corps near Neuve-Chapelle, it had lost 3889 men, about 30 % of the deployed, since 24 April 1915. It was the last time Indian troops were massively deployed in Belgian Flanders, but this does not mean that Indians were not regularly spotted near Ypres. By the end of 1915 almost the infantry divisions of the Indian Army Corps had left Europe. In over fourteen months it had lost more than 34,000 men (dead, wounded and prisoners of war), one third of which originated from the British units in the corps and two thirds from the Indian battalions. Some Indian units, as a few cavalry units and other small groups remained in Europe, including Flanders, until the end of the war.

At the end of the war and in the first years after the war some 48,000 men of the Indian Labour Corps were also active in France and

¹⁴⁰ Doherty S and Donovan T. (2014) *The Indian Corps on the Western Front : a handbook and battlefield guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions. p. 118-121.

Belgium.¹⁴¹ They arrived in the Ypres area in September 1919 to replace the Chinese coolies to the great relief of the returning population among which the Chinese labourers had acquired a bad reputation. The members of the Indian Labour Corps were not soldiers but civilians who performed tasks such as repairing roads, clearing rubble, etc. for the army behind the front. The corps comprised some 10 different ethnic groups, usually members of the 'non-martial races'.¹⁴²

Other British colonial units and colonials

“Alfred Charles Ransdale
Hagle Dump Cemetery, Elverdinge, plot II, row G, grave 6
Killed in Action on 1st September 1918, aged 23
Second Lieutenant, 15th Battalion, The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment”

“Son of A.H. Ransdale. Came from Rosario, Argentine, in order to join.”

His epitaph reads “He came from the Argentine at his Nation’s call”

Once war had broken out in August 1914 white British colonists throughout the world organised contingents of war volunteers like the Trinidad Merchant's and Planter's Contingent and the Barbados Citizens Contingent. These contingents often joined the regular British regiments in batch, like the London Regiment or the Devonshire Regiment. Other colonists travelled individually or in small groups to the mother country or to the nearest dominion to join up. Thus Britishers from all over the world arrived in Flanders and Northern France. They were not exclusively 'colonists'. In neutral Argentina for instance there was a fairly large British community of 28,300 persons, more than in many colonies. At least 4850 Argentinean British joined up and at least 530 of them did not survive the Great War.¹⁴³ Many fell in the Ypres Salient. The Argentinean British war volunteers were present in virtually all units and this made it difficult to identify them as a distinct group. British war volunteers from Chile, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay also travelled to the mother country via Buenos Aires. It was estimated that 10,000 to 12,000 British volunteers from Latin America went to the war.¹⁴⁴

“Charles Wentworth Place

¹⁴¹ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 125.

¹⁴² Singha R. (2015) The Short Career of the Indian Labour Corps in France, 1917-1919. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 27-62.

¹⁴³ Anon. (1920) *Activities of the British Community in Argentina during the Great War 1914-1919*, Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires Herald. p. 118.

¹⁴⁴ Lucas CP. (1921-1926) *The Empire at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. vol. 2. p.482.

White House Cemetery, Sint-Jan, plot I, row B, grave 14
Killed in Action on 2 November 1917, aged 35
Gunner, Bermuda Garrison Artillery”

“Husband of Rachel Place, of Princess Street, Hamilton, Bermuda”

In pocket-sized minute Bermuda - 21,000 inhabitants in 1914 of whom two-thirds non-white - that did not belong to the British West Indies, there were two military units in 1914: the white Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps and the black Bermuda Militia Artillery. Both units sent troops to Europe. The Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps was integrated in the first battalion of the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment and thus fought in the Third Battle of Ypres. The Artillery Militia was integrated in the Royal Garrison Artillery, where it was renamed the Bermuda Garrison Artillery. Two hundred men strong, they arrived in Europe in June 1916.¹⁴⁵ At least once they have been posted near Ypres.

“E. Tomsett
Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Proven, plot III, row B, grave 33
Died on 4 August 1917, aged 26
Gunner, 324th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery”

“Husband of Mrs. Tomsett, of 2, Married Quarters, Detention Barracks, Windmill Hill, Gibraltar”

“Arthur George Orr
Dozinghem military Cemetery, West-Vleteren, plot III, row A, grave 10
Died on 6 August 1917, aged 20
Gunner, 21st Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery”

“Son of William and Theresa Orr, of 28, Strada Botanico, Floriana, Malta. Born Fort Ricasoli, Malta.”

The Royal Garrison Artillery seems to have been very welcoming for war volunteers and military professionals from the colonies as it also included inhabitants of Gibraltar and Malta. Both colonies had ports in the Mediterranean that were of great significance to the British and their inhabitants had previously served in the Navy or in the case of Malta also in labour units in the Dardanelles and Salonika. Because of their strategic importance enlistment was not actively encouraged.¹⁴⁶ Yet names of Gibraltese and Maltese sporadically appear in the cemeteries and on the monuments in Flanders. British subjects from Hong Kong also arrived at

¹⁴⁵ Hacker BC. (2014) *White Man's War, Coloured Man's Labour*. Working for the British Army on the Western Front. *Itinerario* 38: 27-44. p.31.

¹⁴⁶ Lucas CP. (1921-1926) *The Empire at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. vol. V. p.5 and 16.

the front near Ypres and some gave their lives - the occurrence of a "Pilkem Street" in Hong Kong is telling.

"Geoffrey Norman Hodson
Minty Farm Cemetery, Sint-Jan, plot I, row C, grave 4
Killed in Action on 7 October 1917, aged 23
Private, 1st King Edward's Horse, "B" Squadron"

"Son of Albin and Isabella Hodson, of Gowerlands, Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia"

Rhodesia, present day Zimbabwe, was a British colony in Southern Africa inhabited by some 30,000 to 35,000 white settlers and 750,000 indigenous people. Over 5,000 (white) Rhodesians left for war¹⁴⁷, mostly serving in the South African army, amongst others in the Third (Transvaal and Rhodesia) Battalion of the South African Infantry Brigade that fought in Flanders and France and was already mentioned above. However, it is striking that Rhodesians can be found in almost all British regiments. One of the underlying reasons being that the Rhodesian government put off sending Rhodesian contingents to Europe. Many Rhodesians left for the mother country under their own steam. Rhodesians were already involved in the First Battle of Ypres (October-November 1914) as a part of the 2nd battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC). The very severe winter of 1914-1915 greatly challenged the colonists from Southern Africa. One Rhodesian wrote home: "*The cold is frightfully trying. It is snowing and freezing hard tonight, and it makes me yearn to be back on my farm on the Hunyani*".¹⁴⁸ In the 2nd battalion of the KRRC there were soon enough Rhodesians for them to form their own platoon. The Rhodesian soldiers were reputed to be outstanding soldiers, but that did not protect them from disaster. In July 1917 the Rhodesian platoon of 2/KRRC was surprised and encircled during a German raid on their positions in the dunes near Nieuwpoort. Almost the entire unit was killed or taken prisoner.¹⁴⁹

More than 5700 white Rhodesians served during the First World War and 700 did not survive. Black Rhodesians were unable to serve in the British army and consequently were never present in Europe. The Rhodesian Native Regiment, set up in 1916, was only active in East Africa. The contribution made by white Rhodesians to the British war effort during the First World War would subsequently play an important political role: it was explicitly mentioned when the white minority government of Ian Smith

¹⁴⁷ Lucas CP. (1921-1926) *The Empire at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.vol. IV. p.336.

¹⁴⁸ MacLaughlin P. (1980) *Ragtime Soldiers : the Rhodesian Experience in the First World War*, Bulawayo: Books of Zimbabwe. p.55.

¹⁴⁹ MacLaughlin P. (1980) *Ragtime Soldiers : the Rhodesian Experience in the First World War*, Bulawayo: Books of Zimbabwe. p.49-72.

unilaterally declared the independence of Rhodesia in 1965 and signed it... on 11 November at 11 a.m.¹⁵⁰

“Lekima Mua
Les Baraques Military Cemetery, Sangatte, Plot XVI, row A, grave 12
Died on 1 January 1918, aged 26
Private, Fijian Labour Corps”

“Son of Ratu Sakiusa Vakalolo, of Somosomo, Taveuni Island, Fiji; He was married, with one child.”

The First World War also played a particular role in the history of Fiji. Lala Sukuna was an important statesman who paved the way for Fiji's independence. In 1914 he was probably the first native Fijian ever to study in Oxford. He reported for service in the British armed forces but was turned down because of the colour of his skin, after which he joined the French Foreign Legion. There Lala Sukuna proved to be an outstanding soldier and was awarded various medals for bravery. In September 1915 he was injured and repatriated. He received a hero's reception in Fiji. In May 1917 Lala Sukuna returned to Western Europe, this time to serve with the British, i.e. in the Fijian Labour Corps.¹⁵¹ This was a small labour detachment with 100 members recruited among the 87,000 native Fijians who worked at the docks of Calais.¹⁵² Sukuna's status as a war hero and his European experience stood him in good stead during his subsequent political career. Other native Fijians served in Europe with the New Zealand Maori Pioneer Battalion.

As had also been the case in other colonies, the white inhabitants of Fiji sent various contingents to join British army units. Of the first contingent from Fiji, 43 men formed their own platoon within the 4th battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps in April 1915. One month after their arrival, on 8 May 1915, they were slaughtered near Bellewaerde, to the East of Ypres: 9 were killed outright, 31 were injured and only three were uninjured.¹⁵³ In July 1915 a second contingent arrived from Fiji. The 9 Fijian dead of 8 May 1915 are remembered on the Menin Gate in Ypres, as are 19 other white Fijians who served in the Australian Imperial Force. Various others are buried in cemeteries in Flanders and France. Some natives of the Fijian Labour Corps lie buried in France.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Brendon P. (2008) *The decline and fall of the British Empire : 1781-1997*, London: Vintage. p.588-9.

¹⁵¹ Anon. (s.d.) Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. Father of the Modern Fiji. Suva: Ministry of Information, Communications and Media Relations, 4.; Liava'a C. (2009) *Qaravi Na'i Tavi They Did Their Duty : Soldiers from Fiji in the Great War*, Auckland: Polygraphia Ltd. p.73.

¹⁵² Lucas CP. (1921-1926) *The Empire at War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. vol.III. p.394-5.

¹⁵³ Liava'a C. (2009) *Qaravi Na'i Tavi They Did Their Duty : Soldiers from Fiji in the Great War*, Auckland: Polygraphia Ltd. p.32-39.

¹⁵⁴ Liava'a C. (2009) *Qaravi Na'i Tavi They Did Their Duty : Soldiers from Fiji in the Great War*, Auckland: Polygraphia Ltd. passim. Liava'a lists and gives details of all Fijians, both settlers as well as 'natives' who served in the First World War.

Not all British colonies displayed the same enthusiasm for getting involved in the great battle. In Ceylon, present day Sri Lanka, only 1800 native inhabitants joined up (of a total population of 4.2 million) in spite of the major recruitment efforts of the colonial government. Some 1600 white colonists joined or had already joined all kinds of militias like the Ceylon Planters' Rifle Corps and the Ceylon Light Infantry. The first unit was deployed in Gallipoli and Egypt, but at least one member subsequently joined the Grenadier Guards, was killed in Flanders and is now remembered on the Memorial to the Missing in Ploegsteert. Some members of the Ceylon Light Infantry also joined the British units in Flanders and Northern France.

“Sabit Harun Mohamed
Adinkerke Military Cemetery, row A, Near Grave 37
Died on 6 september 1917
Nafar, Egyptian Labour Corps”

Egypt was a special case. Officially, the country was an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, but had been occupied by the British since 1880. In December 1914 it became a British protectorate. As from January 1916 Egyptians were drafted into the Egyptian Labour Corps that would ultimately total between 100,000 and 185,000 members. The majority of them was deployed in Palestine but a few companies were transferred to the French Channel Ports, in total between 10,000¹⁵⁵ and 15,000 men.¹⁵⁶

As in some other Labour Companies, the Egyptians were occasionally treated quite harshly. On 4 September 1917, companies 73 and 74 of the Egyptian Labour Corps went on strike following an air raid on Boulogne-sur-Mer. Their contract stipulated that they would be put to work outside the danger zone. When the Egyptians threatened to break out of their camp two days later, troops were rounded up to encircle them and they promptly opened fire on these unarmed labourers. 23 were killed and many others were injured. A few days later on 11 September 1917, a new strike of company 74 was reported, this time in Calais.¹⁵⁷ On this occasion seven Egyptian labourers were killed and about ten were injured. Twenty-five others were put in prison. Of the total number of 82 Egyptians who

¹⁵⁵ Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p.141.

¹⁵⁶ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p.125.

¹⁵⁷ Descamps F. (2009) Hulptroepen bij de Britse legers. Labour Corps. In: Vancoillie J, Descamps F and Vandeweyer L (eds) *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel : bijdragen over de hulptroepen van de genie van het Belgische, Duitse en Britse leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kuurne: Western Front Association België, 113-219. p.142.

died in Belgium and France in 1917 more than one third was killed by British bullets, a sad record. Only one Egyptian labourer lies buried in Belgium: Sabit Harun Mohamed at the British military cemetery in Adinkerke.

It should be noted that many other territories of the British Empire sent manpower for the war effort but they were not always deployed in Western Europe, instead they were sent to e.g. Mesopotamia or East Africa. Two examples are the Mauritius Labour Battalion which brought about 1000 men from the Crown Colony to Mesopotamia while some 800 inhabitants of the Seychelles formed a Seychelles Labour Corps Battalion, working in Dar-es-Salaam.¹⁵⁸

The Chinese Labour Corps¹⁵⁹

We cannot treat the Chinese Labour Corps with the constituent parts of the British Empire colonies as nominally all Chinese recruits were subject of the sovereign though newly established and weak Chinese Republic. Yet, the members of the Chinese Labour Corps were subject to British military law and China in the first decades of the Twentieth century had many characteristics of a subordinate country. The fact it had no complete voice in matters of sovereignty and territory, that it was to tolerate the presence of foreign concessions on its territory and foreign interference in national and provincial matters, led some to describe it as a semi-colony, as the next swathe of the earth waiting to be scrambled among the major powers. 'Semi-colonial' is perhaps also a good denominator for the Chinese labourers who served the British, French and Americans on the Western Front in the First World War. Certainly in the eyes of the Europeans they were seen as 'native labour' and treated likewise. As an entire chapter focuses extensively on the Chinese Labour Corps, we can limit this paragraph to a general outline with overall figures.

The Chinese Republic, which had been just formed in 1911-2, had a double agenda when it decided to send labourers to the Western Front. By becoming involved in the war effort the Chinese Republic aimed to convince European powers that the country was definitely on its way to

¹⁵⁸ Starling J and Lee I. (2009) *No labour, no battle : military labour during the First World War*, Stroud: Spellmount. p. 81-2 and 236-7.

¹⁵⁹ This section is based on: Hagen G. (1996) Eenen dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog. *sinologie*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 109.; Fawcett B. (2000) The Chinese Labour Corps in France 1917-1921. *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 40: 33-111.; Xu G. (2011) *Strangers on the Western Front : Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press.; Ma L. (2012) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 560.; James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational .

become a modern nation, and that in future it would respect the international playing rules and would be a reliable partner for the Western powers. Furthermore, the Chinese authorities aimed to secure their seat at the post-war peace conference.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, this is where the future of the German concessions in China would be decided. This issue was very urgent as China's rival Japan had immediately invoked its military alliance with the United Kingdom as soon as war broke out in order to occupy the strategically important German concession on the Northern Chinese peninsula Shandong. In spite of Chinese protest the region firmly remained in Japanese hands until the end of the war. During the further course of the war China would contribute to the allied war effort in order to have enough clout at the peace conference to obtain a favourable decision on the Shandong issue.

In June 1915, the Chinese government proposed to the allies to deploy Chinese labourers in Europe. Although the British government immediately dispelled the proposal as not feasible, it would reconsider its decision in the autumn of 1916. Due to the heavy losses incurred near the Somme there was a dire shortage of workforce. The enormous reservoir of manpower in China had now become an appealing option.

Practical considerations led the British to concentrate their recruitment for the *Chinese Labour Corps* (CLC) in Weihaiwei (now Weihai) and later Qingdao, two concessions located in the Northern peninsula Shandong. Because of its very dense population and milder climate Shandong offered the best opportunities to find the most suitable candidates for shipment to Europe. To attract future recruits announcements were posted in tea houses and other public places. When a labourer registered he signed a three-year contract and was allocated an identification number. Conditions were sufficiently appealing to encourage many tens of thousands of mainly poor farmers to embark for a continent most hardly even knew existed. Although the pay the labourers received was modest according to Western standards, it was four times as much as they would have received as labourers in Shandong. In addition to their pay the labourers were given food, clothing, housing and medical care. Part of their pay was sent to their families in China.

“Lu Yu Lan
Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge, Plot XXXIV, row A, grave 2
Died on 25 February 1919
Labourer 41772, 115th Company, Chinese Labour Corps”

“Of Cangzhou, Zhili”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Xu G. (2005) *China and the Great War : China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.98-106.

¹⁶¹ James G. (2006) *Chinese casualties in the Chinese Labour Corps (April 1917-March 1920)*. Kowloon, xvi + 619. p.19.

“Tsingtao”

“Cimetière Militaire Français, Machelen aan de Leie, sépulture 90
Mort pour la France en 1914-1918
119e Cie Chinoise”

There is very little doubt this is the grave of a Chinese labourer who was a member of the 119th Company of the Chinese Labour Corps (and thus worked for the British). It will probably remain an open question why he was buried by the French and with a French headstone. Tsingtao was not his name, but the city where he lived or was enlisted (nowadays usually spelled Qindao).

The first batch of some 1,000 labourers arrived in Europe in April 1917. Under British command their numbers would increase to little more than 95,000 between 1917 and 1920.¹⁶² The French army employed between 36,000 and 44,000 labourers.¹⁶³ The labourers were organised in companies of 300 to 500 men under the command of a British officer, and each company was divided into platoons commanded by British and Chinese non-commissioned officers. In practice they worked eight hours a day, excluding the marching time to and from work and meal times. Through the mediation of the Chinese Ambassador in London the men were entitled to half a day's rest per week or a whole day per fortnight. The British officers also allowed the labourers to celebrate the Chinese festivals and holidays, even though this was not always observed due to misunderstandings.

The labourers were mainly used for construction and demolition work, road construction, digging trenches and clearing battlefields, working on the railways, loading and unloading ships and trains. After the armistice in 1918 their contract continued to run and labourers would be deployed until early 1920 for clearance work in Belgium and France as well as for the construction of war cemeteries. The CLC labourer was generally considered to be a quality worker who could adapt to any type of work.

Though his contract clearly stated that the Chinese labourer was not to be considered a combatant and was not to be put to work in the vicinity of hazardous locations, the labourers were exposed to some major risks. After August 1917, when China declared war on Germany, the labourers were deployed closer to the front line to repair trenches and supply ammunition. Their camps behind the front line offered no guarantee of safety, as was demonstrated by the German shells that killed respectively thirteen and four labourers near Reningelst on 15 November 1917 and 12 April 1918. Today some 2,000 Chinese labourers are buried in Northern

¹⁶² James G. (2013) *The Chinese Labour Corps (1916-1920)*, Hong Kong: Bayview Educational . p. 272.

¹⁶³ Ma L. (2012) La "Mission Trupuil" et les travailleurs chinois en France. In: Ma L (ed) *Les travailleurs chinois en France dans la Première Guerre mondiale*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 51-90. p. 61.

France and in Belgian Flanders, most of them between British, French and occasionally German soldiers.

French Colonial Troops at the Front in Flanders, 1914-1918¹⁶⁴

Nearly 600,000 'native' troops were employed by France in the First World War, to which have to be added the 'Français des colonies', the settlers. Nearly a quarter of a million of the indigenous troops were hailing from French North Africa (140,000 Algerians, nearly 50,000 Tunisians and 25,000 Moroccans), some 165,000 from French West Africa, large contingents from Madagascar, Indochina (45-50,000 each) and the West Indies (25,000) and smaller contingents from Réunion; Somaliland, Oceania and French India. In total 68,000 died. Apart from the rank and file, tens of thousands of non-European labourers were recruited and brought to France.¹⁶⁵

Researching French colonial troops at the front can be a difficult matter. The numbering of regiments is very confusing as often during the war new temporary *régiments mixtes* or *régiments de marche* were formed, sometimes retaining the old numbering and sometimes not. It is also much more complicated to find figures concerning the deployment of colonial troops. Some constituent parts of *La Plus Grande France* have until now received very little if any attention from historians, certainly compared to the state of the art of British Imperial historiography.

Zouaves

Historically the Zouave corps was the first corps to be set up by France in Africa, soon after the incorporation of Algeria into the French Empire. The name of the new corps in the French army originated from *Zouaouas*, a Kabylia tribe from the mountains to the east of Algiers that supplied a major part of the new recruits. Initially the troops were of mixed origin: French and Algerian, but after the corps of *tirailleurs indigènes* was set up (1840-1841), all the soldiers of Algerian origin transferred to these regiments and from then onwards all Zouaves would be of French origin.

“Léon Felix Lévy

¹⁶⁴ This paragraph is based on Chielens P. (2008) French Colonial Troops at the Front in Flanders. In: Dendooven D and Chielens P (eds) *World War 1. Five Continents in Flanders*. . Tielt: Lannoo, 51-87.

¹⁶⁵ Grandhomme J-N. (2002) *La Première Guerre mondiale en France*, Rennes: Editions Ouest-France. p.85-86 ; Fogarty RS. (2008) *Race and war in France : colonial subjects in the French army, 1914-1918*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.27; Fogarty RS. (2014) The French Empire. In: Gerwarth R and Manela E (eds) *Empires at war : 1911-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 109-129. p.120.

Nécropole nationale Saint-Charles de Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 3475
Mort pour la France le 30 Avril 1915
Capitaine, 6e Régiment de Marche Colonial du Maroc”

“Tué à l’ennemi au Nord-Est de Brielen
Né le 21 Mai 1876 à Nemours, Département Oran (Algérie)”

Nemours is nowadays Ghazaouet, a small coastal town in Algeria, near the Moroccan border and then as now cherishing excellent transport links with Spain (Almeria).

When the First World War broke out it appeared that many of them were born in the North African colonies. Therefore the *Zouaves* must not be omitted from an overview of non-European French troops in WW1. Furthermore, some names indicate a Spanish and more specifically a Sephardi connection such as Fernandez, Hernandez, Levy, Lopez, Tobaïlem or Ortega. These North African Jews had already acquired the right to French citizenship in 1870 and thus all belonged to the Zouave regiments or to the *bataillons d’Afrique* and not to the North African *tirailleurs*. During the First World War the corps of Zouaves and of the (native) *tirailleurs* became partly intermingled not only as separate battalions and regiments fighting side by side in the North African divisions but also as mixed units, the RMZTs, *régiments mixtes de zouaves et de tirailleurs*. The Zouave regiments mirror the French colonial world of North Africa to the same extent as the *tirailleur* regiments.

The numbering of the various Zouave units in the First World War is particularly confusing. This was mainly due to the many reorganisations of the French army during the mobilisation and after the first months of the war. Battalions of existing regiments were incorporated in various *régiments de marche*, i.e. regiments ready for action. Others were transferred during reorganisations, others still were absorbed, and new units with other names were created. Meanwhile, the individual registration of many Zouaves continued to mention their original regiment. Thus on 29 October 1914 a *1^{er} Régiment de Zouaves* (1 Z) in the *38^e Division d’Infanterie* (38^e DI) arrived in Veurne. But at the same time a regiment by the same name, which played an important part in the Second Battle of Ypres, was present in the *45^e Division d’Infanterie*. There is similar confusion about the name and origin in the other major North African army group.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Larcade J-L. (2000) *Zouaves & Tirailleurs: les régiments de marche et les régiments mixtes (1914-1918)*, Les Jonquerets de Livet: Editions des Argonautes. p.181-7.

Tirailleurs (indigènes, algériens and tunisiens)

On the eve of the First World War nine regiments of *tirailleurs* from North Africa were formed, some 40 battalions in all. No fewer than 19 of the 40 battalions of *tirailleurs* were established in Morocco, the others in Algeria and Tunisia. When war broke out, 32 battalions left for Europe.¹⁶⁷ Each battalion comprised four companies of approximately 200 to 250 men: in total an army of almost 30,000 infantrymen, supplemented with the necessary staffs. More than three quarters of them were active soldiers, the rest were reserves. All superior officers were French, the Non-Commissioned Officers were both white French and *indigènes*.

On the Western Front these *tirailleurs* were reorganised into ten different marching regiments of *tirailleurs* and two *régiments mixtes*, mixed with *Zouaves*. However, further changes would be made to these newly appointed units in 1914 and 1915.

The multiple changes among the regiments of *tirailleurs* and *Zouaves* in the first year of war are indicative of both big losses and a lack of organisation. The losses incurred during the first year of war were dreadful, not in the least at the front in Flanders. Even today it is very difficult to obtain an accurate figure of these losses. The repatriation of French bodies as from the end of 1920 and the large numbers of missing soldiers who are not remembered by name by the French war graves agency mean that we only know a fraction (estimated at 20%) of all French dead in Flanders but for the North African dead it must run in the many hundreds and probably thousands.

The 38^e *Division d'Infanterie* was the first of the two 'Algerian' divisions to arrive in Flanders at the end of October 1914. They were used to strengthen the Belgian army during the Battle of the Yser. At the front, exhaustion had become noticeable when the winter of 1914 approached. At this stage one of the most dramatic events ever to befall on colonial troops on the Western Front occurred. When on 8 December the 15th Cie of 8^e RTT (4th battalion) was allowed to rest in Fintele (Pollinkhove) after weeks of battles along the Yser Canal, the *tirailleurs* were already recalled after half an hour to rush to the South East of the Ypres Salient to launch a counterattack near *Côte 60* (Hill 60) and *Verbrande Molen* which had just been lost to the enemy. They marched the 25 km to the new front under protest and some men were left behind because of exhaustion. After successive pointless attacks an order was finally disregarded on 13 December.¹⁶⁸ General d'Urbal, commander of the French 8th army in Roesbrugge, was outraged. On 15 December he issued the fatal order to *decimate* the 15th Cie, contrary to every directive, and in spite of the protests of the général de division De Bazelaire:

¹⁶⁷ Larcade J-L. (2000) *Zouaves & Tirailleurs: les régiments de marche et les régiments mixtes (1914-1918)*, Les Jonquerets de Livet: Editions des Argonautes. p. 241-269.

¹⁶⁸ Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, 26 N 844: JMO 1er RMTA, 1er août-31 décembre 1914.

“My orders are that one *tirailleur* in 10 of the company that refused to march be drawn, without prejudice to the instigators of this insubordination, if they become subsequently known, that the *tirailleurs* be marched before the front carrying a notice with the word ‘Coward’ in French and Arabic; they shall be shot immediately afterwards”.¹⁶⁹ There is no trace of the soldiers executed. Colonel d’Anselme, commander of 1 RMT, who had led the counterattacks on Hill 60, kept going until 19 December when he decided that without a proper siege the hill would never again fall into French hands. The British would demonstrate the accuracy of this analysis in the following spring.

“Mohammed ben Belabab Oukkat
Nécropole nationale Saint-Charles de Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 2565
Mort pour la France le 22 Avril 1915
Soldat, 1er Régiment de Marche de Tirailleurs Algériens”

“Tué à l’ennemi à Langemarck le 22 Avril 1915
Né présumé en 1893 à Ouled-Trif, Département d’Alger”

Ouled-Trif is today a small locality in the Algerian province of Médéa. Mohammed ben Belabab Oukkat is one of the casualties of the first large scale chemical attack in world history.

“Ali ben Mohamed ben Said
Nécropole Nationale Saint-Charles-de-Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 2233
Mort pour la France le 27 Avril 1915
Lieutenant, 4^e Régiment de Tirailleurs Tunisiens”

“Mort devant Ypres, suite de blessures sur le champ de bataille
Né à Moknine (Tunisie), présumé en 1868”

Ali ben Mohamed ben Said, with his presumed age of nearly 50, a most senior North African officer, died during the first allied counter-attacks following the German gas attack of 22 April 1915.

The second and last time *tirailleurs* and *Zouaves* would be tested to such an extent on the Flemish front was during the Second Battle of Ypres (22 April – 24 May 1915).¹⁷⁰ The ranks of the *anciens*, the pre-war professional soldiers, have meanwhile been supplemented with many new recruits with little training or with soldiers wounded in 1914 who had recovered. In mid-April 1915 the 45th Algerian division arrived in the Ypres Salient with recovered regiments of *Zouaves* (2 bis, 3 bis, 7 RMZ) and *tirailleurs* (1 RMT)

¹⁶⁹ Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, 16N 194 : VIIIe Armée, Ordres Particuliers, (Dossier N° 3) & 24 N 841: 38e D.I. Ordres d’Opérations (Dossier N°1).

¹⁷⁰ Buffetaut Y. (2003) *Ypres, 22 avril 1915 : la première attaque aux gaz - Bretons, Coloniaux et Normands dans l’enfer des gaz*, Louviers: YSEC.

and with two battalions *d'Infanterie légère d'Afrique* and a squadron of *Spahis*.

Spahis

The *Spahis* were colonial cavalry, like the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*. In the First World War four regiments from Algeria and one from Morocco were deployed on the Western Front, perhaps some 6,000 in total¹⁷¹, but they only played a minor part in trench warfare. By the time the war reached Flanders the cavalry charges were already a thing of the past, or a figment of the imagination of overly optimistic generals who in spite of everything wanted to keep cavalry units on stand-by for the great moment of the breakthrough (which would never happen). In the meantime the desert horsemen waited, carried out communication assignments and with inspired artists of all kind. Due to their exoticism - dressed in white *burnous*, a red cape and a turban, they were every orientalist's wet dream - the colourful *Spahis* are somewhat over-represented in the iconography of the First World War, despite their presence being of minor importance.

Bataillons d'Infanterie légère d'Afrique

Things were quite different for the *Bataillons d'Infanterie légères d'Afrique* (BILA) or *les Bat'Af's* in short. They were not North Africans but French. Just as in the foreign legion many soldiers joined the *Bat'Af's* because they had misbehaved in civilian life. Once the Zouaves and tirailleurs had left for France the BILAs were the actual occupation army in North Africa. After the catastrophic campaign of the first months in terms of casualties it was decided to send some of them to Europe also. At the beginning of October 1914 the order was received to create a 3rd *Bataillon de marche d'infanterie légère d'Afrique* (3 BILA) in the occupation force of Tunisia, that would consist of four companies of 250 men from the 4th and 5th 'organic' battalions. On 27 October 1914 they embarked in Tunis. On 5 November they already bivouacked in Hoogstade, as reinforcement for the seriously weakened 38^e DI. The first four dead fell the following day along the Yser Canal. Although the *joyeux* did not enjoy a particularly good reputation in the army, they did the utmost to prove that their reputation was undeserved at the front.

At the beginning of February 3 BILA was transferred to the 45^e DI, in which 1 BILA had already been incorporated while it was fighting on the Somme. On 15 April 1915 the whole division arrived in the Ypres Salient. The

¹⁷¹ Antier-Renaud C. (2008) *Les soldats des colonies dans la Première guerre mondiale*, Rennes: Éd. Ouest-France. p. 28.

Bataillons d'Infanterie Légère d'Afrique had meanwhile been supplemented with fresh *joyeux* and with groups of *chasseurs d'Afrique*.¹⁷² On 22 April 1915 the North Africans and mixed French/African troops of the 45th D.I. were at the front during the first gas attack, together with the Bretons and Normans of the 87e DIT, and by the end of the Second Battle of Ypres thousands of North African troops had fallen victim to the gas attacks and to the heavy battles during allied counterattacks. More than thousand of them were killed. For the remainder of the war in Flanders North Africans were only deployed outside the Ypres Salient, mainly on the Belgian coast.

Tirailleurs Sénégalais

Created as from 1857 the *Régiments de Tirailleurs Sénégalais* were the largest native group within the French army after the tirailleurs of Algeria, with 1 RTS (stationed in St.Louis), 2 RTS (Kali), 3 RTS (Ivory Coast), 4 RTS (Dakar) and two more battalions in nowadays Mali (Tomboctou, Zinder), with their own cavalry: *les Spahis sénégalais* (St.Louis). *Sénégalais* as such is a misleading term as not all tirailleurs originated from present day Senegal. They also came from Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast and in fact from the entire former AOF, the *Afrique occidentale française* which extended from the West Coast to far inland in actual Benin and Niger. In 1914 some 14,000 *tirailleurs sénégalais* were stationed in West Africa, and 15,000 outside this region with the largest part in Morocco. In North Africa, in addition to tirailleurs and Zouaves and *Bat'Af's* of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, six more *Regiments de Marche d'Infanterie Coloniale* were stationed. Each regiment had three battalions: one white and two native. These native troops included *Tirailleurs sénégalais du Maroc* and *Tirailleurs Sénégalais d'Algérie*.¹⁷³

“Galo-Sail

Nécropole Nationale Saint-Charles-de-Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 3061

Mort pour la France le 10 Novembre 1914

Soldat 1er Classe, 1er Bataillon Sénégalais d'Algérie”

“Disparu au combat à Dixmude”, le 10 Novembre 1914

Né en 1886 à N’Gueye N’Gueye, Sénégal, Cercle de Tivaouane”

There is no certainty on the spelling of his name: Sall Galos or Sali Galo (according to his “Mort-pour-la-France”- index card) or Galo-Sail (according to his grave). The largest ethnic group in the West-Senegalese area he originated from is wolof, but his obviously corroborated name does not allow to link him to a specific ethnicity.

¹⁷² Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, 26 N860 - dossier n° 3: JMO 3 BILA , Oct 1914 -Mars 1915.

¹⁷³ Deroo E and Champeaux A. (2006) *La Force Noire. Gloire et infortunes d'une légende coloniale*, Paris: Editions Tallandier. p. 50.

Ten 'Moroccan' and 'Algerian' Senegalese battalions had come over with the colonial corps and had been deployed in many battles in Rocroi, on the Marne, near Arras in August and September 1914. They were estimated to count about 8,000 men.¹⁷⁴ On 24 October 1914 the remainder was integrated into a mixed group of white and black troops allocated to General d'Urbal in Flanders. No later than 26 October 1914 the various units were split to fill up gaps and to relieve exhausted French units at the front, not unsimilar to the use that was made of Indian troops as an imperial reserve roughly at the same time in Ypres. One battalion (2^e *Bn Sénégalais d'Algérie*) under Commandant Debieuvre was sent to the Yser Canal banks. The two remaining battalions, led by Commandant Pelletier, were the 3^e *Bn Sénégalaise du Maroc* and the 1^e *Bn Sénégalais d'Algérie*. They were placed under the command of Vice-Admiral Ronarc'h of the *fusiliers marins* to help defend Diksmuide. Some days later the tall Wolofs were noticed by the Belgian author Max Deauville (Dr. Duwez) in Kaaskerke:

*"Long, thin, lanky and smiling Senegalese are on their way stepping like storks. They are exceedingly tall and their long neck protruding from a collar carries a small round head wearing a fez. They wear a short ultramarine jacket and baggy pants. They march barefoot and carry their boots in their hand".*¹⁷⁵ Ronarc'h had the three 'types' of units under his command (Belgians, Bretons and Senegalese) organise their relief within their own battalions. On 1 November he already noticed that the Senegalese were finding it difficult to acclimatise to the Northern climate: *"They are already suffering from swollen feet, and relieving them will be a problem. It is quite obvious that the climate and season have become too harsh for black troops."*¹⁷⁶ Doctor Duwez, alias Max Deauville, also noted that: *"In the morning along the destroyed road the Senegalese pass carrying their comrades on their backs. The poor beggars are barefoot. At the end of their thin legs their feet dangle, large like children's heads. Every day dozens of them go past their feet frozen. They suffer dreadfully and thick tears run down their faded cheeks."*¹⁷⁷

By 10 November, when Dixmude fell to the Germans, of the two battalions that had been entrusted to Ronarc'h two weeks earlier only 600 Senegalese soldiers remained, just enough to form one (incomplete) battalion. Other sources report even far fewer survivors. In the 2nd Algerian battalion of Debieuvre along the Ypres-Yser Canal not enough men remained after 10 November 1914 to allow the battalion to continue to exist.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Kamian B. (2001) *Des tranchées de Verdun à l'église Saint-Bernard. 80 000 combattants maliens au secours de la France (1914-18 et 1939-45)*, Paris: Karthala. p. 48.

¹⁷⁵ Deauville M. (1964) *Jusqu'à l'Yser*, Bruxelles: Pierre De Méyère. p.131.

¹⁷⁶ Ronarc'h V-A. (1921) *Les Fusiliers Marins au combat : Souvenirs de la guerre (Août 1914-Septembre 1915)*, Paris: Payot. p.107.

¹⁷⁷ Deauville M. (1964) *Jusqu'à l'Yser*, Bruxelles: Pierre De Méyère. p.136.

¹⁷⁸ Guignard A. (1919) Les troupes noires pendant la guerre. *Revue des Deux Mondes*: 849-879. p.855-6. A lengthy and sympathetic account of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* at

However, in the French military cemeteries of Flanders today, barely fourteen Senegalese graves from this period are to be found!

“Koffi Kodio

Cimetière militaire français, Machelen-aan-de-Leie, sépulture 586

Mort pour la France le 25 Octobre 1918

Soldat 2e Classe, 75e Bataillon de Tirailleurs Sénégalais”

“Disparu à Olsene le 25 Octobre 1918”

“Né en 1891 à Assé Gassako, Cercle de Baoulé, Côte d’Ivoire”

The location of Assé Gassako could not be traced and the name is probably a corruption. Rather than referring to a location, Baoulé refers to a people living in the centre of Ivory Coast, near the city of Yamoussoukro.

Only at the end of the war nearly four years later, tirailleurs sénégalais would again be deployed in Belgium. Three battalions (43^e, 45^e and 75^e BTS) that had recently joined the 132^e DI came to support the Belgian army in its ‘Liberation Offensive’ as from 13 October 1918. The Belgians were exhausted and depleted and the French were once more required to assist. The Senegalese battalions were deployed to capture Marialoop (Meulebeke) and Dentergem. The division advanced towards the Lys and finally the Scheldt (Markegem, Waregem).¹⁷⁹ Today some 25 graves bear witness to this ultimate Senegalese presence in the war in Flanders in the French military cemeteries of Machelen on the Leie, Roeselare and Ypres (Potijze).

Among the *tirailleurs sénégalais* who served and died in Flanders in both 1914 and 1918 I was able to trace men from every constituent part of French West Africa : Senegal, Soudan français (Mali), Côte d’Ivoire, Dahomey (Benin), Haute-Volta (Burkina Faso) and Mauritanie. During the First World War in total 200,000 ‘Sénégalais’ from French West Africa served, of whom 135,000 were sent to Europe. 30,000, being one in five, never to return.¹⁸⁰

Labourers from the French colonies: Madagascar, Annam.

Of over 220,000 men the French recruited as labourers in the colonies, not less than 190,000 of which were deployed in Europe. They represented about 4% of the total workforce in France. In the arms sector their share even increased to 8% and up to 20% in the army.

Dixmude is Bocquet L and Hosten E. (1918) *Un fragment de l' épopée sénégalaise : les tirailleurs noirs sur l' Yser*, Bruxelles: G. Van Oest & Cie.

¹⁷⁹ Develtere F. (2008) *Le combat de Marialoop. Verhalen tussen burgers en soldaten. Eindoffensief Oktober 1918*, Meulebeke: Frank Develtere. p. 80 & 128.

¹⁸⁰ Michel M. (2003) *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre. L'appel à l'Afrique (1914-1918)*, Paris: Karthala. back cover.

“HOAN G.V. Thom.
Cimetière militaire français, Machelen-aan-de-Leie, sépulture 482
Mort pour la France le 11 Novembre 1918
Travailleur Anamite”

This labourer could not be traced in the database of those “Morts pour la France”. The spelling of the name is probably wrong and could have been “Hoang Van ...”

Indochina sent both soldiers and labourers (48,000 soldiers and as many labourers)¹⁸¹. But the *tirailleurs tonkinois* never reached the front in Flanders. Some units of *Travailleurs Annamites*, Vietnamese labourers, did. The vast majority, however, including a certain Nguyen Aî Quoc, - better known as Ho Chi Minh- were employed all over the French territory. In Flanders the exponents of this permanent workforce for the French army was mainly present in the port of Dunkerque and in the hinterland of the front near Nieuwpoort and of the front along the Ypres-Yser Canal. The headquarters of that hinterland was in Roesbrugge. All kinds of labourers worked there, often French soldiers on semi-rest, sometimes German prisoners of war, Belgian refugees, auxiliary troops from North Africa, and in September 1917 there was also a group of labourers from Madagascar.

“Rasamijaly
Cimetière militaire français, Machelen-aan-de-Leie, sépulture 522
107e Régiment d’Artillerie Lourde, 21e Batterie (Dépot des Isolés
Coloniaux)
Mort pour la France le 11 Décembre 1918”

“Mort à Iseghem suite à une maladie contractée en service
Né en 1895 à Tuliare, Madagascar”

Toliara as it is nowadays spelled is a large town on the southwest of the Island.

Besides the 34,000 *Tirailleurs Malgaches* who were present at the front in Europe and who were only deployed in France, there were equally some 5,500 labourers from Madagascar at work behind the frontlines.¹⁸² At least a number of them resided in Roesbrugge, the headquarters of the French troops in Belgian Flanders. They were not only observed by the local priest Brutsaert but a film and a series of photos of these *Travailleurs Malgaches* dancing and cooking their meal in the field along a hedge near Roesbrugge

¹⁸¹ Hill K. (2011) Sacrifices, sex, race: Vietnamese experiences in the First World War. In: Das S (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 53-69. p.53.

¹⁸² Valensky C. (1995) *Le soldat occulté : les malgaches de l'armée Française 1884-1920*, Paris: L'Harmattan. p. 314.

exist.¹⁸³ The headstone in the cemetery in Machelen-aan-de-Leie is so far the only proof we have that Malagasys were also deployed further afield.

Other French colonial troops

“Bertrand Eugène Rinot
Nécropole Nationale Saint-Charles-de-Potyze, Ypres, sépulture 1026
Mort pour la France le 22 Octobre 1918
Soldat 2e Classe, 224e Régiment d’Infanterie, C. Guyane”

“Mort à “Witroye” (Belgique) à l’ambulance 224 suite à des blessures de guerre
Né le 14 septembre 1898 à Sinnamary, Guyane”

I have no idea what could be meant with the handwritten “Witroye” on this man’s index card. The nearest locality which seems to have something in common is Ardooie, then spelled as Ardoye.

It is extremely difficult to trace other French colonial troops or labourers who might have been present in Flanders during the First World War. The cemetery registers are insufficient and at present, the database *Memoire des Hommes* does not allow queries on place of burial nor date of death. This implies that in order to find someone killed in Flanders, one has to browse to hundreds of digitised index cards of those originating from a certain *Département d’Outre-Mer* or former colony to check places of death. The index card does not give the burial place. On the contrary so now and then an index card stating *disparu* can easily be linked to a known grave. Occasionally one comes across a grave marker stating one’s origin, as in the case of a French Guyanese buried at Ypres. Browsing through index cards I also did come across a *zouave* who died at Zuydcoote (just across the border south of De Panne) who was born on the tiny French island territory of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon south of Newfoundland and an infantry soldier killed in action at Locre on 25 April 1918 who was born in Nouméa, Nouvelle Calédonie. Yet, there are no indications that they were more than just ‘the odd ones out’.

The United States : the American Expeditionary Force in Flanders

After the German Empire had announced an unrestricted submarine warfare, the United States declared war against the Central Powers on 6 April 1917. However, the United States had played an important role in the war effort even before this date both internationally, more specifically in

¹⁸³ Dendooven D and Chielens P. (2008) World War One. Five Continents in Flanders. Tielt: Lannoo. p.86-7.

the field of diplomacy, and closer to the front line. As it was the major neutral power both the allies and the central powers tried to get the Americans 'on their side'. For the Germans it was more a matter of trying not to offend the US. The report drafted by James Bryce, former British Ambassador in Washington, on the German atrocities perpetrated in Belgium, and the repeated protests against the brutal occupation uttered by Brand-Whitlock, the American Ambassador in Brussels, had generated considerable sympathy for invaded Belgium in the United States public opinion. This was demonstrated amongst others in the emergency aid which the Americans shipped to Belgium in bulk. The *Commission for Relief in Belgium* effectively ensured that the Belgians living in the occupied region did not starve.¹⁸⁴ Until April 1917 many Americans: journalists, relief workers and diplomats, resided in the occupied country.¹⁸⁵ Americans had also been active on the other side of the front line before 1917. The *American Field Service* was created in 1914, as a voluntary ambulance service that provided services to the allied forces. After the war the organisation evolved to become the well-known cultural exchange programme AFS. The American Red Cross was active in providing aid to refugees and civilians behind the front.¹⁸⁶

“Leland Wingate Fernald
Lijssenthoek Cemetery, Poperinge, plot VI, row C, grave 36A
Died of Wounds on 8 May 1916, aged 28
Driver, 5th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery”

“Son of Frank F. and Emma J. Fernald, of 11, Nelson St., Dover, New Hampshire, U.S.A.”

His epitaph reads “A volunteer from the U.S.A. To avenge the Lusitania murder”

Before the entry of the United States in the war, many individual Americans crossed the Northern border to serve in the Canadian army: some were looking for adventure, others were genuinely committed and indignant.

Eventually, it would be the arrival of the American Expeditionary Force as from June 1917 that tipped the balance in favour of the allied forces towards the middle of 1918. The main American sector was, however, the Meuse-Argonne region in the North East of France. American troops were only present on Belgian territory during the last months of the war. The four American divisions, 40,000 men in all, who fought in Flanders, had

¹⁸⁴ Proctor T. (2010) *Civilians in a world at war, 1914-1918*, New York; London: New York University Press. p.189-192.

¹⁸⁵ Klekowski EJ and Klekowski L. (2014) *Americans in occupied Belgium : 1914-1918 - accounts of the war from journalists, tourists, troops and medical staff*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers.

¹⁸⁶ Van Schaick J. (1922) *The little corner never conquered : the story of the American Red Cross War Work for Belgium*, New York The Macmillan Company.

only arrived in Europe in June and July 1918. The 27th and 30th division had already experienced their baptism of fire in July at the front to the South of Ypres, between the Ypres-Comines railway line and Dikkebus Lake for the 30th, and from Dikkebus Lake to Kemmel for the 27th. The soldiers of the latter division mainly originated from New York State in the East of the United States while the 30th division was made up of Southerners from North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Both divisions remained near Ypres until 4 September 1918. They only faced heavier fighting in the last days when the front line had shifted slightly to the East.

The 37th and 91st division reinforced a French army division on 30 October 1918 between the rivers Lys and Scheldt. One of the last phases of the Final Offensive was launched the following day and the Americans were used as 'shock troops'. They attacked in the direction of the Scheldt between Waregem and Kruishoutem. As fighting took place in a virtually undisturbed landscape between hedges and (inhabited) farms, the defending Germans had many advantages and the Americans suffered heavy losses, particularly in the Spitaalsbossen (Spitaals Woods), not far from the present day American military cemetery *Flanders' Field* in Waregem. After the initial shock German resistance waned and the 91st division was able to liberate Oudenaarde without too many problems on 2 November. The next phase of the offensive was scheduled for 10 November, when they crossed the Scheldt and took up position on the hilgher ground on the other side of the river. There, in the 'Flemish Ardennes', the American 37th and 91st Division experienced their Armistice the next day just as they were preparing for the next 'push'. The 37th division originated from Ohio, the 91st division was also called the Wild West Division as it included men from the Western states California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. In Kemmel and Oudenaarde there are monuments for the American divisions, whereas the *Flanders' Field* Cemetery in Waregem, the smallest American military cemetery in Europe, commemorates their 368 dead and 43 missing soldiers on Belgian territory.¹⁸⁷

“Charles Mangogna

Flanders'Fields American Cemetery, Waregem, Plot D, row 1, grave 23

Date of death: September 2, 1918

Private, 106th Infantry Regiment, 27 Division

Entered Service from New York”

Mangogna was born in New York City in 1891 and conscripted in April 1918. He was hit by machine gun fire near Vierstraat (Kemmel). His comrades hid him in a shell hole but were forced to abandon him due to a German attack. When the spot was reconquered somewhat later Mangogna's body had disappeared. Only in 1923 was the grave of an

¹⁸⁷ Lernout P and Sims C. (2011) *De soldaten van de Amerikaanse militaire begraafplaats Flanders Field*, Kortrijk: Groeninghe. p. 13-59; Anon. (2002) *Memorial Rain. Waregem 1914-1918*, Waregem: Stad Waregem. p. 77-78; 101-109.

anonymous American in Kortrijk identified as being his and were his remains re-interred in Flanders' Fields Cemetery.¹⁸⁸

The American divisions who fought in Flanders were almost exclusively white. The *American Expeditionary Force* had a strict segregation policy with separate units for whites and blacks. The more than 200,000 African American soldiers, one tenth of the total AEF, were not considered able by their superiors: only one fifth of them was actually deployed at the front (as opposed to two thirds of the white soldiers), the others worked behind the front or in the inland ports. The African-Americans who were deployed at the front, mainly served in the 92nd division that remained in France. Another black unit, however, the 370th Infantry Regiment from Illinois, belonged to a French Brigade that fought near the French-Belgian border in November 1918. Thus the small village of Petite Chapelle in the South of the Province Namur is the only Belgian place to have been liberated by black Americans on 10-11 November 1918. It is quite likely that after the Armistice a number of African-American units were temporarily present in Belgium.

Another important group is the American Indians: between 12,000 and 17,000 Native Americans served in the American army during the First World War, almost one third of all adult male American Indians. Between two thousand and four thousand left for Europe with the A.E.F. Virtually all tribes were represented but their involvement varied considerably. The largest group came from the state Oklahoma. As opposed to the African-Americans the American natives were not segregated but were billeted with the white units. Because of the prevailing stereotypes about his assumed combativeness, the Indian was rated higher as a soldier than the African-American, and therefore he experienced less discrimination. American Indians also fought in Belgium, in particular in the 91st Division that originated from the (Mid-)West of the United States.¹⁸⁹

As had been the case in Canada emigrated Flemings also joined the American army. One such remarkable example is the Van den Broeck family from Sint-Niklaas. Of the nine children in the family of clog maker Jan Van den Broeck five boys and two girls emigrated to the United states shortly before the First World War. When war broke out the two boys who had stayed in Belgium, Leon and Frans, were mobilised. Shortly later, probably in September 1914, the brothers Emiel and Jozef left Chicago to return to Europe and become Belgian volunteers. When the United States declared war on the Central Powers on 6 April 1917, the brothers Henri, Charles and August and sister Henriette joined the American army. The latter as a multilingual telephone operator. Thus eight children of a single

¹⁸⁸ Lernout P and Sims C. (2011) *De soldaten van de Amerikaanse militaire begraafplaats Flanders Field*, Kortrijk: Groeninghe. p. 441.

¹⁸⁹ Krouse SA. (2007) *North American Indians in the Great War*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. p.158.

family from Sint-Niklaas served on the Western Front: four as Belgians and four as Americans. And all eight of them survived the war.¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

The enumeration I have presented here can only be incomplete and subjective.¹⁹¹ It is ultimately my selection of groups based on what I considered distinctive. Due to the absolute relativity of the available terminology and concepts, objectivity when establishing an ethnic or cultural categorisation of subordinate groups is a chimera. Still, despite its relativity and subjectivity, such a list is not only useful, it is an absolute requirement to understand the utter diversity present on the Western Front. Furthermore, it allows us to draw some conclusions:

- None of the European belligerents in Flanders - with the exception perhaps of Portugal - answers to the classical definition of a nation-state, i.e. the identification of a people with a political entity ('one nation in one state'). The reality of the composition of their armies clearly belies any assumption that this was the case for all included at least one or another kind of 'minority'. Any idea of a pure nation-state was hence either a figment of the imagination or an ideal to strive for.
- The First World War, even on the Western Front, was clearly a clash of empires. It involved to a large extent imperial troops, hailing from all five continents and the composition of the armies reflected existing groupist divisions and subdivisions within these empires.
- The sheer variety of groups allows us to state that the front in Flanders and, much more so, its rear was de facto a multicultural society where (temporarily) multiple cultural traditions existed within the same geographical circumscription.

However, an inventory as this discloses little on the nature of this multicultural reality: what it meant for the different subordinate groups and individuals to be part of it, nor what the nature or effect of imperial subordination at the front represented.

¹⁹⁰ Anon. (1999) *Kroniek van de familie Van den Broeck-Rombaut*, Sint-Niklaas: Familie Van den Broeck., p.4; 105-106.

¹⁹¹ Much more objective, though probably not exhaustive, is the list in Appendix 1. That overview lists present-day United Nation Member States of whom the presence of 'inhabitants' at the front in Flanders or along the lines of communication can be substantiated with a grave or a name on a memorial. It enumerates 60 sovereign nations, excluding both non-sovereign territories and now fully independent nations whose inhabitants were not deployed in Flanders but further afield in France or on other theatres of war.

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Appendix 3: Order of Battle of the Infantry Divisions of the Indian Army Corps (I.E.F. A)

3rd (Lahore) Infantry Division

In December 1914

GOC: Lieut-Gen H.B.B. Watkis, CB

Ferozepore Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen R.G. Egerton)

1st Bn, Connaught Rangers [British]

9th Bhopal Infantry

57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force)

29th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis

Jullundur Brigade (GOC: Maj-Gen P.M. Carnegy)

1st Bn, Manchester Regiment [British]

4th Bn, Suffolk Regiment (Territorial Force) [British]

- joined from GHQ Reserve 4 December 1914

15th Ludhiana Sikhs

47th Sikhs

59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)

Sirhind Brigade - arrived at Marseilles from Egypt 30 November, joined 9 December 1914 (GOC: Maj-Gen J.M.S. Brunner)

1st Bn. Highland Light Infantry [British]

125th Napier's Rifles

1/1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment)

1/4th Gurkha Rifles

Divisional Troops

Mounted Troops: 15th Lancers (Cureton's Multanis)

Artillery: V Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (RFA) - joined 22 November 1914 from 7th (Meerut) Division (64th, 73rd & 81st Batteries, V Brigade Ammunition Column) [British]

XI Brigade, RFA - joined 22 November 1914 from 7th (Meerut) Division (83rd, 84th & 85th Batteries, XI Brigade Ammunition Column [British]

XVIII Brigade, RFA (59th, 93rd & 94th Batteries, XVIII Brigade Ammunition Column) [British]

109th Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery (4.7-inch guns) + Heavy Battery Ammunition Column [British]

Lahore Divisional Ammunition Column

Engineers: 20th & 21st Companies, 3rd Sappers and Miners

Signals Service: Lahore Signal Company

Pioneers: 34th Sikh Pioneers

Supply & Transport: Lahore Divisional train

Medical Units: 7th & 8th British Field Ambulances [British]
111th, 112th and 113th Indian Field Ambulances

In May 1915

GOC: Maj-Gen H.D'U. Keary

Ferozepore Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen R.G. Egerton)

1st Bn. Connaught Rangers [British]
1/4th Bn. London Regiment (Territorial Force) [British]
9th Bhopal Infantry
57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force)
129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis

Jullundur Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen E.P. Strickland)

1st Bn. Manchester Regiment [British]
1/4th Battalion, Suffolk Regiment (Territorial Force) [British]
1/5th Battalion, Border Regiment (Territorial Force) [British]
40th Pathans
47th Sikhs
59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)

Sirhind Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen W.G. Walker, VC)

1st Bn. Highland Light Infantry [British]
4th Bn. King's (Liverpool Regiment)(Special Reserve) [British]
15th Ludhiana Sikhs
1/1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment)
1/4th Gurkha Rifles

Divisional Troops: As before, with addition of XLIII (Howitzer) Bde (40th & 57th Batteries) [British]

7th (Meerut) Infantry Division

In December 1914

GOC: Lieut-Gen C.A. Anderson, GSO1: Col C.W. Jacob

Dehra Dun Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen C.E. Johnson)

1st Bn. Seaforth Highlanders [British]
6th Jat Light Infantry
2/2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Regiment)
1/9th Gurkha Rifles

Garhwal Brigade (GOC: Maj-Gen H.D'U. Keary)

2nd Bn. Leicestershire Regiment [British]

1/39th Garhwal Rifles
2/39th Garhwal Rifles
2/3rd Gurkha Rifles

Bareilly Brigade (GOC: Maj-Gen F. Macbean)

2nd Bn. Black Watch
41st Dogras
58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force)
2/8th Gurkha Rifles

Divisional Troops

Mounted Troops : 4th Cavalry

Artillery: IV Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (RFA) - replaced V Brigade (transferred to 3rd (Lahore) Division) 17 October 1914 (7th, 14th & 66th Batteries, IV Brigade Ammunition Column) [British]

IX Brigade, RFA (19th, 20th & 28th Batteries, IX Brigade Ammunition Column) [British]

XIII Brigade, RFA - replaced XI Brigade (transferred to 3rd (Lahore) Division 17 October 1914 (2nd, 8th & 44th Batteries, XIII Brigade Ammunition Column) [British]

110th Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery + Heavy Battery Ammunition Column [British]

Meerut Divisional Ammunition Column

Engineers: 3rd & 4th Companies, 1st King George's Own Sappers and Miners

Signals Service : Meerut Signal Company

Divisional Pioneers : 107th Pioneers

Supply & Transport: Meerut Divisional train

Medical Units: 19th & 20th British Field Ambulances [British]

128th, 129th and 130th Indian Field Ambulances

in May 1915

GOC: Lieut-Gen Sir C.A. Anderson, KCB

Dehra Dun Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen Col C.W. Jacob)

1st Bn. Seaforth Highlanders [British]
1/4th Bn. Seaforth Highlanders (Territorial Force) [British]
6th Jat Light Infantry
2/2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Regiment)
1/9th Gurkha Rifles

Garhwal Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen C.G. Blackader)

2nd Bn. Leicestershire Regiment [British]
1/3rd Bn. London Regiment (Territorial Force) [British]
39th Garhwal Rifles
2/3rd Gurkha Rifles

2/8th Gurkha Rifles

Bareilly Brigade (GOC: Brig-Gen W.M. Southey)

2nd Bn. Black Watch [British]

1/4th Bn. Black Watch (Territorial Force) [British]

41st Dogras

58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force)

125th Napier's Rifles

Divisional Troops: as before, with the addition of 30th Battery of XLIII (Howitzer) Bde [British]

Appendix 4: Order of Battle of the Cavalry Divisions of the Indian Army Corps (I.E.F. A)

1st Indian Cavalry Division

2nd (Sialkot) Cavalry Brigade

- 17th (Duke of Cambridge's Own) Lancers
- 6th King Edward's Own Cavalry [British]
- 19th Lancers (Fane's Horse)
- Q Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]
- 10th Machine Gun Squadron (*joined after February 1916*) [British]

3rd (Ambala) Cavalry Brigade (*left on 15 September 1915 for 2nd Indian Cavalry Division*)

- 8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars [British]
- 9th Hodson's Horse
- 30th Lancers (Gordon's Horse)
- A Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

8th (Lucknow) Cavalry Brigade

- 1st King's Dragoon Guards (*left on 7 October 1917*) [British]
- 1/1st Queen's Own Yorkshire Dragoons (*joined on 6 December 1917*) [British]
- 29th Lancers (Deccan Horse)
- 36th Jacob's Horse
- U Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]
- 12th Machine Gun Squadron (*from 29 February 1916*) [British]

5th (Mhow) Cavalry Brigade (*joined on 15 September 1915 from 2nd Indian Cavalry Division*)

- 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons [British]
- 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse)
- 38th King George's Own Central India Horse
- A Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

2nd Indian Cavalry Division

5th (Mhow) Cavalry Brigade (*left on 15 September 1915 for 1st Indian Cavalry Division*)

- 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons [British]
- 2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse)
- 38th King George's Own Central India Horse
- Y Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

7th (Meerut) Cavalry Brigade (*left in June 1916 for Mesopotamia*)

- 13th Hussars [British]
- 3rd Skinner's Horse

18th King George's Own Tiwana Lancers (*transferred in June 1916 to 3rd (Ambala) Cavalry Brigade*)

30th Lancers (Gordon's Horse) (*joined in June 1916 from 3rd (Ambala) Cavalry Brigade*)

V Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

15th Machine Gun Squadron (*joined in February 1916*) [British]

9th (Secunderabad) Cavalry Brigade

7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards [British]

20th Deccan Horse

34th Prince Albert Victor's Own Poona Horse

N Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

13th Machine Gun Squadron (*joined on 29 February 1916*) [British]

3rd (Ambala) Cavalry Brigade (*joined on 15 September 1915 from 1st Indian Cavalry Division*)

8th (King's Royal Irish) Hussars [British]

9th Hodson's Horse

30th Lancers (Gordon's Horse) (*transferred in June 1916 to 7th (Meerut) Cavalry Brigade*)

18th King George's Own Lancers (*joined in June 1916 from 7th (Meerut) Cavalry Brigade*)

X Battery, Royal Horse Artillery [British]

14th Machine Gun Squadron (*joined on 29 February 1916*) [British]

Canadian Cavalry Brigade (*joined on 17 June 1916 from 3rd Cavalry Division*)

Royal Canadian Dragoons [Canadian]

Lord Strathcona's Horse [Canadian]

Fort Garry Horse [Canadian]

Royal Canadian Horse Artillery Brigade (A and B Batteries, RCHA) [Canadian]

Canadian Cavalry Brigade Machine Gun Squadron [Canadian]

Appendix 5: Composition of Indian Regiments Serving in France, 1914-15

(source: David Omissi. *Indian Voices of the Great War*. Gurgaon, Viking, 2014, p. 363-365)

INFANTRY REGIMENTS

Regiment	Regimental Centre	Composition (8 companies)
6th Jat Light Infantry	Meerut	8 Jats
9th Bhopal Infantry	none	2 Sikhs; 2 Rajputs; 2 Brahmans; 2 Muslims
15th Ludhiana Sikhs	Multan	8 Sikhs
34th Sikh Pioneers	Ambala	8 Mazbi and Ramdasia Sikhs
39th Garhwal Rifles	Lansdowne	8 Garhwalis
40th Pathans	Sialkot	2 Orakzais; 1 Afridis; 1 Yusufzais; 2 Dogras; 2 Punjabi Muslims
41st Dogras	Rawalpindi	8 Dogras
47th Sikhs	Rawalpindi	8 Sikhs
57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force)	Dera Ismail Khan	2 Sikhs; 2 Dogras; 2 Punjabi Muslims; 2 Pathans
58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force)	Dera Ismail Khan	3 Sikhs; 1 Dogras; 3 Pathans; 1 Punjabi Muslims
59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)	Kohat	3 Pathans; 2 Sikhs; 1 Punjabi Muslims; 2 Dogras
89th Punjabis	Meiktila	3 Sikhs; 1 Brahmans; 1 Rajputs; 3 Punjabi Muslims
107th Pioneers	Kirkee	2 Pathans; 2 Sikhs; 2 Deccani Mahrattas; 2 Rajputana Muslims
125th Napier's Rifles	Nasirabad	4 Rajputana Jats; 2 Rajputana Rajputs; 2 Punjabi Muslims

129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis	Karachi	2 Punjabi Muslims; 3 Mahsuds; 3 Other Pathans
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CAVALRY REGIMENTS

Regiment	Composition (4 squadrons)
2nd Lancers (Gardner's Horse)	1 Sikhs; 1 Rajputs; 1 Jats; 1 Hindustani Muslims
3rd Skinner's Horse	1 Sikhs; 1 Jats; 1 Rajputs; 1 Muslim Rajputs
4th Cavalry	1 Rajput Muslims; 1 Sikhs; 1 Hindustani Muslims; 1 Jats
6th King Edward's Own Cavalry	1 Jat Sikhs; 1 Jats; 1 non-Jat Sikhs; 1 Hindustani Muslims
9th Hodson's Horse	½ Sikhs; ½ Dogras; 1½ Punjabi Muslims; 1½ Pathans
15th Lancers (Cureton's Multanis)	4 Multani Pathans and Muslims of the Dejarat and Cis-Indus
17th Cavalry	2 Punjabi Muslims; 2 Pathans
18th King George's Own Lancers	3 Punjabi Muslims; 1 Sikhs
19th Lancers (Fane's Horse)	1½ Sikhs; ½ Dogras; 1 Punjabi Muslims; 1 Pathans
20th Deccan Horse	1 Sikhs; 1 Jats; 2 Deccani Muslims
29th Lancers (Deccan Horse)	2 Jats; 1 Sikhs; 1 Deccani Muslims
30th Lancers (Gordon's Horse)	2 Sikhs; 1 Jats; 1 Hindustani Muslims
34th Prince Albert's Own Poona Horse	2 Rathore Rajputs; 1 Kaimkhanis; 1 Punjabi Muslims

36th Jacob's Horse	2 Derajat Muslims and Baluchis; 1 Pathans; 1 Sikhs
38th King George's Own Central India Horse	2 Sikhs; 1 Pathans; 1 Muslim Rajputs
39th King George's Own Central India Horse	2 Sikhs; 1 Muslim Rajputs; 1 Punjabi Muslims

GURKHA REGIMENTS

Regiment	Regimental centre
1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment)	Dharmsala
2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles)	Dehra Dun
4th Gurkha Rifles	Bakloh
8th Gurkha Rifles	Shillong
9th Gurkha Rifles	Dehra Dun

Appendix 6: A Map of the Indian Empire, 1909



Appendix 7: The Indian Labour Corps on the Western Front

Numbering and naming after 20th August 1917 (numbering until that date) - [Corps]¹⁹²

R = order to proceed to Marseilles for repatriation¹⁹³

19th (Burma) Indian Labour Coy	
20th (Bihar) Indian Labour Coy	
21st (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (1)	[23rd (United Provinces) I. L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
22nd (Khasi) Indian Labour Coy (2)	[26th (Khasi) I.L. Corps]
23rd (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (3)	[23rd (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
	R : 10 April 1918
24th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (4)	[23rd (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
25th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (5)	[23rd (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
26th (Lushai) Indian Labour Coy (6)	[27th (Lushai) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
27th (Lushai) Indian Labour Coy (7)	[27th (Lushai) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
28th (Lushai) Indian Labour Coy (8)	[27th (Lushai) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
29th (Lushai) Indian Labour Coy (9)	[27th (Lushai) I.L. Corps]
	R : 10 April 1918
30th (Bihar) Indian Labour Coy (10)	[29th (Bihar) I.L. Corps]
	R : 24 April 1918
31st (Bihar) Indian Labour Coy (11)	[29th (Bihar) I.L. Corps]
	R : 6 May 1918
32nd (Bihar) Indian Labour Coy (12)	[29th (Bihar) I.L. Corps]
	R : 24 April 1918
33th (Bihar/Santhal) Indian Labour Coy (13) ¹⁹⁴	
34th (Khasi) Indian Labour Coy (14)	[26th (Khasi) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918 (half coy)
35th (Naga) Indian Labour Coy (15)	[21st (Naga) I.L. Corps]
	R : 5 April 1918
36th (Naga) Indian Labour Coy (16)	[21st (Naga) I.L. Corps]

¹⁹² Based on: registers CWGC, BL/IOR/L/MIL/7/18307, BL/IOR/L/MIL/7/118759

¹⁹³ Based on: TNA, WO 95/43/9 . War Diary. Branches and Services. Deputy Assistant Adjutant General (3rd Echelon, Indian section)

¹⁹⁴ I've come across both designations in the sources: 33rd (Bihar) Indian Labour Company and 33rd (Santhal) Indian Labour Company. One explanation for this disambiguation might be that quite a number of Santhal people live in Bihar.

37th (Naga) Indian Labour Coy (17)	[21st (Naga) I.L. Corps]
38th (Naga) Indian Labour Coy (18)	[21st (Naga) I.L. Corps]
R : 5 April 1918	
39th (Manipur) Indian Labour Coy (19)	[22nd (Manipur) I.L. Corps]
R : 3 May 1918	
40th (Manipur) Indian Labour Coy (20)	[22nd (Manipur) I.L. Corps]
R : 3 May 1918	
41st (Ranchi) Indian Labour Coy (21)	[30th (Ranchi) I.L. Corps]
R : 6 May 1918	
42th (Ranchi) Indian Labour Coy (22)	[30th (Ranchi) I.L. Corps]
R : 6 May 1918	
43th (Ranchi) Indian Labour Coy (23)	[30th (Ranchi) I.L. Corps]
R : 6 May 1918	
44th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (24)	[31st (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
45th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (25)	[31st (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
46th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (26)	[31st (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
47th (United Provinces) Indian Labour Coy (27)	[31st (United Provinces) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
48th (North-West Frontier Province) Indian L. Coy (28)	[24 (N.W.F.P.) I.L. Corps]
R : 5 April 1918 (partly)	
R : 26 May 1918 (rest)	
49th (North-West Frontier Province) Indian L. Coy (29)	[24 (N.W.F.P.) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
50th (North-West Frontier Province) Indian L. Coy 30)	[24 (N.W.F.P.) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
51th (Ranchi) Indian Labour Coy (31)	[30th (Ranchi) I.L. Corps]
R : 6 May 1918	
52th (Santhal) Indian Labour Coy	[33th (Santhal) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
53rd (Santhal) Indian Labour Coy	[33th (Santhal) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
54th (Santhal) Indian Labour Coy	[33th (Santhal) I.L. Corps]
R : 26 May 1918	
55th (Khasi) Indian Labour Coy	
R : 6 May 1918	
56th (Khasi) Indian Labour Coy	
57th (Oraon) Indian Labour Coy	[34th (Oraon) I.L. Corps]
58th (Oraon) Indian Labour Coy	[34th (Oraon) I.L. Corps]

59th (Burma) Indian Labour Coy [40th (Burma) I.L.Corps]
R : 26 May 1918

60th (Burma) Indian Labour Coy [40th (Burma) I.L.Corps]
R : 26 May 1918

61st (Chin) Indian Labour Coy¹⁹⁵ [40th (Burma) I.L.Corps]
R : 26 May 1918

62nd (Chin) Labour Coy¹⁹⁶ [40th (Burma) I.L.Corps]

63rd (Bengal) Indian Labour Coy
R : 26 May 1918

64th (Bengal) Indian Labour Coy
R : 26 May 1918

65th (Manipur) Indian Labour Coy
R : 3 May 1918

66th (Manipur) Indian Labour Coy
R : 3 May 1918

69th (Garo) Indian Labour Coy
R : 26 May 1918

71st (United Provinces) Indian Labour
coy

73rd (Kumaon) Indian Labour Coy

74th (United Provinces) Indian Labour
Coy

75th (United Provinces) Indian Labour
Coy

76th (Kumaon) Indian Labour Coy

77th (Kumaon) Indian Labour Coy

78th (Burma) Indian Labour Coy
R : 23 Dec 1918

79th (United Provinces) Indian Labour
Coy
R : 23 Oct 1918

80th (Santhal) Indian Labour coy
R : 23 Oct 1918

81st (Santhal) Indian Labour coy
R : 23 Oct 1918

82nd (United Provinces) Indian Labour
Coy
R : 23 Oct 1918

83th (North-West Frontier) Indian
Labour Coy
R : R : 23 Oct 1918

84th (Garo) Indian Labour Coy
R : 23 Oct 1918

85th (Kumaon) Indian Labour Coy
[62 known companies = some 31,000 men]

¹⁹⁵ From 1 Nov 1917 onwards - before : 61 (Burma) Indian Labour Coy

¹⁹⁶ From 1 Nov 1917 onwards - before : 62 (Burma) Indian Labour Coy

Appendix 8: An Anthology of Flemish Witness Accounts on the Chinese Labour Corps

a) Contemporary witness accounts

These quotations come from the diaries of local clergymen Achiel Van Wallegghem in Reninghelst, and Victor Van Staten en Edmundus Joye in Sint-Sixtus, a newspaper column from author from Cyriel Buysse and a warning in a travel guide published by one otherwise unknown A. De Wit. They have been set in chronological order.

Achiel Van Wallegghem, 6 August 1917

“Many Chinese have arrived in the region to work for the English. I do not know from where or how these men arrived here. Many seem very young. They are strange fellows and have very childish manners, no better than our 10-11 year old boys. Their favourite occupation is to gawp at shop windows, preferably those of sweet and fruit shops, and if they see something they like they will enter 10 at a time and start asking the prices of everything and if they do decide to buy something, they are very suspicious of being diddled. However, many shopkeepers are tired of their attitude and sometimes they get mad and then they all run out like sparrows. They are yellow in colour, have a flat nose and slanting eyes, and they almost always have a silly smile and almost constantly look around, so that it is quite astonishing that none have yet been killed on our busy roads. They wear a blue linen outfit and also one in a thicker grey fabric, raincoat and hood, they wear a straw hat or brown skullcap with earflaps yet they are particularly mad about civilian clothes and if they manage to get a civilian cap or hat they will never remove it from their heads. They walk in an ungainly manner and it is obvious they are not used to wearing such heavy shoes.

I also believe they have a lot of company [free time], as one often sees them holding hunting parties. Their sergeants have stripes, their policemen a red armband, and one sees that these are very conscious of their rank. In each company there is an Englishman directing their works. In one of the camps I also saw an interpreter. He looked like an important fellow and was wearing the long Chinese robe.

They are lodged in camps enclosed with barbed wire and live in umbrella tents. They go to their work in groups. They are mostly used to repair roads and dig ditches but more so on the unloading bays. They are not lazy and work at least as hard as our citizens and English soldiers. But what a commotion when a group of these men passes you. They are boisterous and try to outdo one another. I prefer it when they sing a song, their singing is pleasant. They already know a few words of English but virtually none of them can speak the language. For instance, as I was passing them shortly

before noon one day, they kept on saying « Watch, watch? » What time is it? I believe their stomachs were grumbling, because when I showed them there were only five more minutes until midday, they nodded contentedly as they would soon be filling their bellies with their beloved rice. Rice is the order of the day for them: in the morning, in the noon and in the evening, always rice which they eat with their sticks. One of these days I came across a Chinese, wearing a small watch on each arm. How he was proud when he saw I was watching his watches.

In Reninghelst there are several thousands of these men at work and in Poperinghe even more. They are big children and should be treated like children. To keep them in order you must use convincing arguments and this is why their sergeants have a thin iron rod, which occasionally comes into contact with the men's skin; this does not disturb them, they laugh and are again well behaved. They also use other punishments and recently as I was passing along one of their camps I saw one of them wearing a yoke around his neck (a kind of toilet seat) while another had a block and chain around his neck, and they had to dig a ditch ringed in this way.

They are not allowed to visit inns. They probably have little understanding of the war. When they hear a shell they just stand there gawping, and when it explodes they clap their hands and laugh. In Poperinghe some were killed and then the others were twice as shocked. In Reninghelst they have two camps: one on the farm of the Verhaeghe children and one next to the farm of Henri Verdonck. Concerning their religion, I have noticed some catholics among them. Although nearly all are gawping at me, not knowing what my costume signifies, I did meet some pointing at me and from there to the sky. In Hector Dalle's hut there was one who showed me the crucifix, pointed at me (God's man), then to himself, and then pointed a finger towards the sky (God). The Reverend School Director of Poperinghe took the confessions of several of them, using two prints with the Commandments, one in Chinese and one in French. When he asked them to pray the Act of Contrition, the boys started to weep. In Proven I met a Chinese priest, with black soft hat and long jacket, but I ignore his religion."¹⁹⁷

Victor Van Staten, Sint-Sixtus, 5 September 1917

"Today a group of some 25 Chinese have arrived. They were all workers and the sergeant leading them was beating them mercilessly with his stick, as if they were animals."¹⁹⁸

Edmundus Joye, Sint-Sixtus, 5 September 1917

"Today I see the first Chinese in blue linen costume. Many seem like halfwits or half mad. Their face: it is like a female face, nearly without beard."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Van Walleggem, A. (2014). *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*. Tielt, Lannoo. p. 468-9.

¹⁹⁸ Van Staten, V., L.-M. De Cleyn and E. Joye (2001). *De Abdij-Kazerne Sint-Sixtus, 1914-1918 : dagboekantekeningen*. Poperinghe, Kring voor Heemkunde 'Aan de Schreve'. p. 143.

Achiel Van Walleghem, 5 November 1917:

*An order has been issued prohibiting the Chinese from entering into shops. Civilians are no longer entitled to sell them anything. Nobody knows the reason for this. Some claim that in the coffee houses Australian soldiers had poured rum in the coffee of some Chinese and had made them drunk. Others claim that they give too much away to women and children. However, after a while the order was attenuated for them. The Chinese are childish but not stupid. They do know the value of things and you will not be able to deceive them easily. They always look for the best and most beautiful items and will not readily buy trash. They pay but like to haggle about the price. They like the most beautiful shops and that is where they usually do their shopping. I have no idea what they earn but some of them seem to have a great deal of cash on them. They buy many watches and rings. Some shopkeepers have learnt a little Chinese to draw them and keep them as customers, and have found this to be an effective tool.*²⁰⁰

Achiel Van Walleghem, 15 Nov 1917:

*"The Chinese are again allowed to enter the shops, but can not ask coffee".*²⁰¹

Achiel Van Walleghem, 21 Nov 1917:

*"In Poperinghe there is a mutiny in a Chinese camp. An English officer has been mistreated by the Chinese. The English fired into the crowd and three Chinese were killed. So we are told."*²⁰²

Achiel Van Walleghem, 3 Dec 1917:

*"The Chinese in some camps are getting more and more rebellious. Yesterday they stabbed an English captain. Today in Busseboom there were some thirty who refused to work and they laid themselves on the ground to be beaten. They preferred the strokes of the cane to giving in. I walked past the camp of Verhaeghe and see three standing with their arms open tied to the wire. One has his leg tied up. That must be far from pleasant as today it has frozen quite hard."*²⁰³

Achiel Van Walleghem, 25 December 1917:

*"This year's Christmas was particularly noisy. Especially the New Zealanders who drink and pour and sway and shout and scream and dispute and search for troubles with the Chinese. The latter become embittered, conspire, and in the afternoon and evening there was fighting in several places. Such wild fellows!"*²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 143.

²⁰⁰ Van Walleghem, A. (2014). *Oorlogsdagboeken 1914-1918*. Tielt, Lannoo., p. 513-4.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 518.

²⁰² Ibid. p. 520.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 522.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 528.

Achiel Van Walleghem, 26 December 1917:

*"We hear that several Chinese who fought with the New Zealanders yesterday were executed this morning on Zwarteberg. Is it true? It seems so."*²⁰⁵

Achiel Van Walleghem, 30 Dec 1917:

"I see a Chinese being very angry at a schoolboy. I hear the boy had raised his little finger, something that makes them furious. When, on the other hand, one gives the thumbs up, they are extremely well-disposed".²⁰⁶

Achiel Van Walleghem, 6 Jan 1918:

*"What a coincidence ! Some days ago the Durein family here received a letter from their brother Florent²⁰⁷, missionary in China. A Chinese happened to be in the shop, saw the envelope and went off happily to tell this to his comrades. Half an hour later another Chinese enters who maintains to have lived in the village from where the letter had been sent, and to have seen the catholic priest at many occasions. Then he starts to describe the priest, and truly, it is a description of Florent. In order to be absolutely sure, the Dureins get out a pile of portraits of missionaries in China and truly in less than a minute the Chinese shows them the portrait of Florent. How is it possible!"*²⁰⁸

Achiel Van Walleghem, 8 January 1918:

*"Some shopkeepers have started to learn Chinese, in order to attract these men to their shops."*²⁰⁹

Achiel Van Walleghem, 11 Feb 1918:

*"Today the Chinese are celebrating New Year and they have a day off. Well dressed they roam the streets."*²¹⁰

Achiel Van Walleghem, 28 Feb 18:

in Reninghelst, *"a Chinese has been buried under a round mound of earth"*.²¹¹

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 529.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 530.

²⁰⁷ Florent Durein was born in Reninghelst on 9 March 1887 and joined the Scheut missionaries (CICM) in 1907. In 1915 he left for China, to serve in what was called the Apostolic Vicariate of Eastern Mongolia (Northeast China). He died in 1920 and is commemorated on the family tombstone in Reninghelst churchyard and in the China Museum of the Scheut missionaries in Anderlecht. The Vicariate of Eastern Mongolia covered the provinces of Rehe and Inner Mongolia, both northern neighbours of the province of Zhili (now Hebei) from where many of the Chinese labourers were hailing, a fact adding veracity to the story related by Van Walleghem.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 532.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 533.

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 537.

²¹¹ Ibid. p. 540.

Achiel Van Walleghem, 12 March 1918 :

*“The photographer of Westouter has very much work with the Chinese who day-in day-out want to have portrait photographs taken. They ask a school girl to stand beside them and give her a ‘folank’ of pocket money, though are unhappy as they come out dark”.*²¹²

Achiel Van Walleghem, 13 April 1918:

*“We’ve heard that last night a bomb was thrown on the Chinese camp on the farm of the Verhaeghe children. Ten men were killed, and as much as thirty wounded. The others fled, and it seems there were some who had run for two hours, and it took much effort to round them up. The camp was subsequently abandoned and it seems quite a lot of dirt and vermin were found there.”*²¹³

Achiel Van Walleghem, 11 January 1919

*“The Chinese were busy breaking down the window frames of Alouis Borry’s house in order to burn them. They had a large camp on and in front of the meadow of Remi Onraet. It seemed they had no other work to do than breaking down everything that was still standing up in order to burn it with barbarian pleasure. Of the church only two to three pieces were standing up, all the rest was flat. The churchyard was the most destroyed spot of the municipality. I saw no more than two or three crosses, all on the northern side. I learned three families had as far returned to Dickebusch: Jules Ooghe and Henri Saelen back in October, Jules Maerten in December. From Dickebusch to La Clytte. The same sad view. In the stable of the Tivoli we found civilians at home, the first to return. There, we warmed our coffee and ate our sandwiches. I entered the vicarage of La Clytte, heavily shelled but still repairable. What was left of the furniture was spread around, almost everything broken. Two Chinese were playing the broken piano.”*²¹⁴

Achiel Van Walleghem, after 17 May 1919.

*“That was my second church, without window panes and with half a roof, and when I was celebrating mass, the Chinese were popping their heads through the windows to see what was going on.”*²¹⁵

*“It was dangerous: everywhere rubble and wilderness and besides a few tourist parties, I only encountered Chinese and German prisoners of war and some ‘frontcombers’ whom I did not trust.”*²¹⁶

“In July [1919] there were already some 350 men back [in Dickebusch]. They had a hard time, carpenting and ground levelling. Some were able to plant or sow somewhat, but most of the time too late and it didn’t promise too much. Moreover, the area was made unsafe by all kinds of strange

²¹² Ibid. p. 543.

²¹³ Ibid. p. 554.

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 587.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p. 619.

²¹⁶ Ibid. p. 618-9.

people: front wreckers and especially the Chinese. The English officers, of which there were very few now, no longer had any authority on these men. They ran away from their camps and wandered around, armed with easily found grenades and guns. And so, in early June, Jules Bailleul who lived at the Canada, was raided in his house, and while he fled, he was shot, and died some weeks later.”²¹⁷

“In September the Chinese left and they were replaced by Hindus. These were somewhat curious and loved to watch around everywhere, but they were not troublesome.”²¹⁸

A. De Wit, 1919

“Do not travel alone, nor in the evening in Southern West-Flanders, where one still can encounter many Chinese coolies, making this very lonesome area, quite unsafe. When meeting them, do not show fear, nor provocative audacity.”²¹⁹

Cyriel Buysse²²⁰, July 1919, about a village where a solemn religious procession was held for the first time in five years *“the traditional blessing of the fruits of the earth”*: *German prisoners of war in dirty grey uniforms, who are working in the region under the supervision of Belgian and French soldiers; Russian former prisoners of war, which Germany had to release and send here; and then the other foreign creatures, the amber Annamites and Chinese, with their slanting eyes, who are here to clear up the mess.”*

What are they thinking, Buysse wondered: *An inscrutable smile upon their wooden mugs. Are they silently mocking what they are seeing? Are they thinking of their own religious ceremonies in their distant country? Or are they already dreaming of the future, of the future supremacy of their race over that impoverished and run down white human race, that committed suicide after years of madness? Who will tell! They smile mysteriously and enigmatically. They remain silent and wait ...”²²¹*

b) (Much) later recollections

Save two, all following accounts are among the results of three much larger interview projects undertaken in Flanders around 1978, 1999 and 2009. The subjects were each time ‘ordinary people’ mostly living in the villages and towns of the former front region near Ypres. Their interviewers were also mainly local people - speaking the same dialect was

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 619.

²¹⁸ Ibid. p. 622.

²¹⁹ De Wit, A. ([1919]). *Gids door de Vlaamsche slagvelden van Leie - Zee - Yzer*. Berchem.

²²⁰ Buysse (Nevele, 20 Sep 1859 - Afsnee, 25 July 1932) was a Flemish naturalist author and playwright whose works are still popular.

²²¹ Buysse, C. (1980). *Verzameld werk*. Brussel, Manteau., vol. VII. p. 734-5 (originally published as a column *Op wandel in Vlaanderen I* in the Dutch newspaper *Haagse Post*, 19 July 1919), quoted in Van Parys, J. (2007). *Het leven, niets dan het leven. Cyriel Buysse en zijn tijd*. Antwerpen; Amsterdam, Houtekiet; Atlas. p. 557.

quintessential - but never trained historians. They did not follow a particular method adapted by academic practitioners of oral history and the question of the problematic relationship to 'historical truth' was of little concern to them.

Yet, this is in my opinion of minor importance. Today's historian of the Great War should be grateful for the initiatives of these amateurs and the dedication they've shown. Without them there would not have been such an extensive overview of local witness accounts. For France, for instance, I have no knowing of a comparable corpus, rendering the existing three sets of interviews of outstanding historical value.

In the 1970s, young people from the Ypres front region led by Marieke Demeester and Jan Hardeman set up the *Elfnovembergroep* [Eleventh of November Group] and conducted taped and detailed interviews with senior fellow villagers on civilian and military life in Flanders during the First World War.²²² A selection was published in 1978 as *Volksboek Van den Grooten Oorlog* [Chapbook of the Great War]. The book was reissued in 2016, corrected and enlarged after a re-examination of the tapes by Marieke Demeester, one of the original initiators of the project. What the Elfnovembergroep did in 1978 was groundbreaking work: oral history - for as far as the term was already in existence - was not yet *bon ton*. The Imperial War Museum, generally considered as one of the pioneers in this field, had only set up its sound archive in 1972 and Lyn Macdonald's well-known *They called it Passchendaele*, probably the first major First World War book based on interviews, was published in the very same year as the Elfnovembergroep's. Most of the interviewees, when recorded aged 70-90, had been young adults and teenagers during the First World War. Some of the interviews clearly contain hearsay and popular myths which are hardly to be avoided, but in general I consider these respondents not to have suffered too much under external pressures or influences. Not only were they interviewed 'only' 60 years after this important period which they had lived consciously (having been not too young at the time) but in many cases the interview took the form of a spontaneous conversation between fellow villagers, thus avoiding any constraint to provide 'the right answer' to the question asked. Moreover, these interviews took place at a time that little or nothing had been published or broadcasted in Belgium on daily life in the First World War, thus avoiding unconscious external influence radiating from the realm of public history.

A second, more limited, interview project took place towards the end of the 1990s when three local volunteers recorded a total of 29 conversations with senior citizens who had been children during the

²²² Cultural anthropologist Johan Meire dedicated a whole chapter in his PhD thesis on the *Eleventh of November Group* considering their emergence and projects as a turning point in the approach to the Great War in southern West Flanders. Meire, J. (2003). *De stilte van de Salient : de herinnering aan de Eerste Wereldoorlog rond Ieper*. Tielt, Lannoo. p. 239 - 247.

conflict. The results were published in 2001 under the title *Getuigen van de Grote Oorlog* [Witnesses of the Great War]. The respondents were generally younger at the time of the Great War and older when interviewed. Moreover, some memories might have been unconsciously supplemented by information read in books and newspapers, seen in TV-programmes or heard from acquaintances. A case in point is the account of Gabriella Vanpeteghem whose last sentence on the Chinese Labour Corps is almost an echo from that of her late husband Gaston Boudry who had been interviewed in 1978.

A third and definitely final interview project was undertaken between October 2009 and May 2010 by photographer and journalist Philip Vanoutrive, in collaboration with the Flemish public broadcasting corporation VRT - Canvas. He recorded conversations with 43 very elderly citizens who had been (young) children during the Great War. His project resulted in the wonderfully illustrated *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*. Obviously, the remarks regarding the interviews of 2000 can be repeated and even stronger so. The recollections of a 101 year old on the time he was 10 (Acke), of a centenarian on the time he was 9 (De Corte), or of 97 year olds on the time they were 6-7 (Room, Bossaert) will be necessarily patchy, even if the spokesperson is eloquent or seems to possess a remarkably good memory.

It is obvious that the historian using these sources must take caution. He can either be too credulous, when taking every word for the truth, or too incredulous, referring all stories to the realm of myths. These witness accounts remain testimonies of what after all has been the public memory of an entire area. In the context of the history of the Chinese Labour Corps : they are among the little evidence we have on the encounters between Chinese and the local population on the western front during the First World War. Their historical value is beyond question. Leastwise we remain conscious that these words reflect the perception of the Chinese rather than the reality.

The quotations are set in order of publication. As for a better interpretation of the accounts it is useful to know the age of the witness both at the time of the interview and at the time of the events, I have tried to find these²²³ and, if available, added them in footnote. The Flemish dialectic 'tsjing' (pronounced "tching"), from the English derogatory 'chink', is very common in the local accounts. As it seemed to me that the Flemish dialect word had a somewhat less negative and more neutral undertone than the clearly abusive English equivalent - it is for example also used in quotes that are rather positive towards the Chinese- I have decided to use the Flemish word between apostrophes.

²²³ Only *Van den Grooten Oorlog* contains an overview of all witnesses with their places and dates of birth and death.

Ernest Leeuwerck²²⁴, Poperinghe, wrote in *Aan de Schreve*, 1976

"They were profoundly scared during bombardments with shells and airplane bombs. "Boum-boum, no goodala", they said and they ran off. When they were allowed to come to town, it was usually to buy a stock of onions, leek, garlic and oranges which they loved to eat (with consequences for their smell). Shopping was their hobby. Especially torches, watches and 'souvenirs' were heavily wanted. "How mutch follang ?" - how much is it?

Strange types they were, dressed with an English jacket, a cap or old hat on the head, trousers that were too short. They were just naughty schoolboys! But they weren't that stupid, as they were the first to trade in "gold money", they gave 80 francs for a gold piece of 20 francs.

On the market of Poperinghe (this was in 1919) they were dancing on stilts, accompanied by a singing Chinese band. These coolies were working all along the front region: filling trenches, leveling estates, bringin away war material, etc. And all this under the watchful eye of English guards, armed with a strong club.

*The local population was not at ease, as much was stolen and when drunk, they were very truculent. So, it was a real relief when in September 1919 they left for their country."*²²⁵

Interviews conducted in 1978 for *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Volksboek*.²²⁶

Julienne Deweerdt²²⁷, Westouter

*" The 'tsjings', they were Chinese working for the English army. They also liked to drink malaga, but this was forbidden to them. They were not allowed to drink alcohol. Yet, if you gave them some, they covered it with their little hat . And thus no one could see it."*²²⁸

André Houwen²²⁹, Reninghelst

"The Chinese who were here, were most from Hong Kong. I don't think that was a real colony of England, but that it was occupied by the English. We called them 'tsjings'. They had to work and were always accompanied by a couple of English to monitor them. Here in Reninghelst, they built the road to Abeele. As there were so many of them, much work was done.

²²⁴ Poperinghe, 21 August 1905 - 29 November 1990. Leeuwerck was photographer and local historian.

²²⁵ Leeuwerck, E. (1976). ""The Chinese Labour Corps" te Poperinghe, 1917-1919." *Aan de Schreve* 6(4): 7-9. p. 9.

²²⁶ Demeester, M., Ed. (2016). *Van den Grooten Oorlog. Mannen en vrouwen, Belgen, Fransen, Britten en Duitsers vertellen over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Kimmel, Malegijs.

²²⁷ Westouter, 15 March 1901 - Poperinghe, 7 February 1992.

²²⁸ Ibid. p. 120.

²²⁹ Reninghelst, 7 July 1904- Ypres, 5 May 1986.

They were here in a camp surrounded by barbed wire, some two meters high. In 1917 a shell dropped on it. Five were killed. They are now still buried together, at the end of the cemetery. Some of the others ran off, All the way to Poperinghe. They were scared of the shells. And the funeral of these fellows. As you can imagine, we, kids, wanted to be there. They didn't say: 'Go Away', no we were allowed to watch it all. They put such a fellow in a coffin made of sleepers and he was carried on bamboo sticks by six of them. And then they let themselves fall to the ground. Yes, that was their ritual.

My aunt was living in Abeele. So now and then I went there, accompanied by a niece. To watch the aerodrome. The 'tsjings' were working along the Abeele road. I had my dog along, tied to a good leash which we had taken from the cavalry of the English, and the 'tsjings' were challenging the dog. I told the Englishman accompanying them that they had to stop doing that. I didn't trust it. But they kept on teasing the dog. The Englishman said: 'Let it go for once'. I did let it go until the end of the leash and one of 'tsjings' got bitten in his ass. There was no need to say more and upon my return from Abeele, they all kept to the side.

They were strange people. They were illiterate and without much discipline. They were savages.”²³⁰

“My father and I were clearing a house, not far from Zevecote²³¹. There were also Chinese there. One of the Chinese had tamed a sparrow. With a stick. But that was something we didn't know. Often we would hear that fellow whistle and then the sparrow came. After about four days we were used to that. One day, we were loading our material on a cart to leave and all of a sudden the sparrow appeared from the cart. 'Watch out', my father said, but there were no Chinese in sight. When we got to Zevecote, my father said 'That goddamned dirty sparrow', and the bird was easily taken up. 'That's good for nothing', he said and he killed it. But, damned, that wasn't the end of it. When the Chinese noticed his sparrow was killed, he was outraged. And we felt sorry too, but we could not explain this to him. We couldn't understand each other, see. Yes, we regretted that for a long time! If we only had known it was such a tame little animal.... We thought it was an ordinary sparrow. But after a day or three the Chinese returned. With a new sparrow! That could keep them busy throughout the day.”²³²

Georges Deconinck²³³, Reninghelst

“Here in Reninghelst we got Chinese in the year 1917. We called them 'tsjings'. They didn't go to the front. They just had to work. On the roads and all. They were very scared. When they heard shells dropping, they always fled into the fields. They did their shopping in Poperinghe and ate a

²³⁰ Ibid. p. 168-9.

²³¹ A toponym in Reninghelst.

²³² Ibid. p. 299-300.

²³³ Reninghelst, 16 March 1900 - 7 January 1988.

lot of garlic. We could also say some words like the 'tsjings'. 'Mala kapila' but I didn't know what it signified. I do remember, however, that an officer had heard we said 'mala kapila' and he was angry. 'If you would say this in China', he said, 'mum would hit you on the bum. You better say 'tsjo, tsjo' which means 'food' '.

Sometimes they showed up with a pair of shoes for sale. They asked 5 francs and if you said you only wanted to pay 2 francs, they answered: 'Two folang madame molly, five folang madame no molly' ".²³⁴

Camille Castele²³⁵, Kemmel

"I've seen Chinese too. But I ignore what they were doing here. I believe they've never been at the front. If there was a bombardment, they fled."²³⁶

Florent Denuwelaere²³⁷, Reninghelst

"In Reninghelst we've seen all sorts of soldiers. Scottish with skirts, Australians with their large hats, Canadians. Among the Canadians there were Belgians too.... There were 'tsjings' too, but not to fight. They were here to clean someone else's dirt."²³⁸

Georges Decrock²³⁹, De Klijte

On the return to Belgium, March-April 1919

"Then we started to level the land by filling up the shell holes and the trenches. On the courtyard many dead horses were decomposing, still dressed with a saddle. There were many Chinese in the neighbourhood. They had to gather the ammunition that was scattered all over the place. Close to our house there was a shell which still had it's brass case. One of the Chinese put it upright and it exploded and the Chinese was entirely blown to bits. They collected his remains in a bag."²⁴⁰

"When we were living in La Clyte in 1919, there were still Chinese here. They had to help clearing. I think we saw them for another month of three [after arrival]. They engraved flowers in shell cases and traded them. The price was three francs for a pair. I think we bought some 25 pairs. Always with different flowers engraved on it. Sometimes we bought them out of fear. The rumour went that there were many burglaries and even that men had been killed and the Chinese were blamed. If you didn't buy, they would nose about everywhere. If we see the Chinese approaching with their shell cases, we went out on the street to encounter them and to buy a pair of shell cases. A real discourse with them was impossible, save the words 'promenade Poperiche' and 'mademoiselle Poperiche'. I think they called

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 169.

²³⁵ Wijtschaete, 19 January 1886 - Ypres, 30 November 1979.

²³⁶ Ibid. p. 169.

²³⁷ Reninghelst, 24 February 1900 - Dickebusch, 21 March 1989.

²³⁸ Ibid. p. 170.

²³⁹ Wulverghem, 27 January 1909 - Ypres, 13 December 1988.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 297.

Poperinghe Poperiche. And some of them were very friendly. But if you asked them to fill a hole and you showed them how to do it, they said: 'No work'."²⁴¹

Theofiel Boudry²⁴², Reninghelst

*"After the war the Chinese had to collect everything and to break down the railway. The 'tsjings', we said. We had a lot of fun with them. If they had to lift a rail, they were constantly hampering each other. And shouting! And making noise! You could hear them from a quarter of an hour away. They combed the whole region to gather everything they found. At Busseboom there was a large camp of the 'tsjings'. And, goddamn, there was a woman among them. They didn't know. A woman that had come along to be with her husband, perhaps. But eventually they did find her. Yes, that's what we were told, he. It's not the gospel what one is told, but nevertheless, there must be some truth in that".*²⁴³

Gaston Boudry²⁴⁴, Ypres:

"Ypres was then full of 'tsjings', who had to clean the front and clear everything. They weren't doing a lot. They did little else than scavenging. They had to clear the battlefields, but they combed it out. Occasionally they came to look into our hut there"²⁴⁵, but if they saw someone was home, they went away.

The first girl buried in Ypres, after we returned, was a girl shot by 'tsjings' at "the White House"²⁴⁶. She was about sixteen years old. She lived there with her parents in a hut. She had been on the road and had felt pursued by Chinese. She went in and closed the door or shored it. They shot through the door and she was dead. I know where her grave is on the Ypres town cemetery, as my sister also died in 1919 and is buried in Ypres.

*They learned to shoot after the war, these Chinese. They had never shot before, had no rifles, but they found all kinds of things when clearing. They learned how to throw grenades and how to shoot."*²⁴⁷

Emma Beerlandt²⁴⁸, Wulverghem

"They were weird people, these 'tsjings'. They were strangely dressed and looked like Chinese. If you see Chinese nowadays on television, they have brains. But these 'tsjings' had one brick short of a full load, they were crazy. They would rage against everyone. They would even jump through the wire of their camp. The men told us often not to look at them. When we returned to Wulverghem after the war, the 'tsjings' were still here. The English put them to work. They had to gather the corpses. Everywhere little

²⁴¹ Ibid. p. 300.

²⁴² Reninghelst, 12 August 1899 - Poperinghe, 7 October 1988;

²⁴³ Ibid. p. 298.

²⁴⁴ Zillebeke, 31 March 1901 - Ypres, 16 October 1981.

²⁴⁵ On Stationsplaats, now Colaertplein, opposite the railway station..

²⁴⁶ Kemmel Road, just beyond the disused canal Ypres-Comines.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 298-9.

²⁴⁸ Clercken, 6 November 1892 - Wulverghem, 10 November 1981.

crosses were standing, they had to exhume the bodies and put these in a bag. On some spots there were many little crosses. Only the people who knew English, would talk to them occasionally, when they came to ask for some coffee or for an egg or two, three. But, actually, they did no harm to us. They had had to go because it was war, just like those of us.”²⁴⁹

Interview conducted in spring 1993

Laura Lannoote²⁵⁰, Boezinge

“The front was cleared of ammunition by the Chinese under English guardianship. Those ‘jings’ as they were popularly called, instilled more terror than pleasure in the returning population. They were strange guys, strikingly dressed, strange in eating manners and strange in language. The only thing they were not capable of, was work.”²⁵¹

Interviews, conducted in june 1994 and 1995²⁵²

Jeanne Battheu²⁵³, Poperinge

The Chinese often wore rings, sometimes up to four or five on each hand.²⁵⁴

“... on the corner there was someone who traded in beer and of course he also sold lemonade as ‘champie, champie’ to the Chinese...and that was fizzing and squirting and when they opened the bootle it went ‘psssst’ “. The coolies paid for the lemonade the price of expensive champagne. The ‘tsjings’ had a bad reputation regarding drinking as they easily got aggressive when drunk.”²⁵⁵

She played a lot with the Chinese. the ‘tsjings’ loved children and were very friendly. 80 years after date, Jeanne still remembered some words of Chinese: e.g. shua for garlic.

“The Chinese ate garlic as we would eat an apple. And stinking, they did”.

“They knew little or nothing about the war”²⁵⁶

Chinese New Year in the town centre of Poperinge: *“I still see that on TV. Snakes and the Chinese were inside. And so many colours too, that was magnificent”.* For the first time she saw *“men walking on stilts as high as*

²⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 299.

²⁵⁰ Houthem, 1904 - Waasten, 24 Nov 1998.

²⁵¹ Seys, R. and G. Smagghe (1993). Te gast bij Laura Lannoote. *De Boezingenaar*. Boezinge. 20: 68.

²⁵² Interviews for newspaper *De Standaard Magazine*, June 1994 and for an MA thesis by student in sinology Gwynnie Hagen. All quotations are from her MA thesis.

²⁵³ Poperinge 2 Feb 1910-2001.

²⁵⁴ Hagen, G. (1996). *Eenen dwazen glimlach aan het front. Chinese koelies aan het westers front in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. licentiaat in de sinologie, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. p. 79.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 79-80.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 80.

the roof". The kids who saw it all danced and jumped along. Jeanne's father took photographs but none survived. The Chinese were keen on having photographs taken, and Jeanne often stood along when her father made photographs: "... a Chinese, has a yellowish outlook, he? But the photos of the French and English were white... so when they came, they always said: 'plenty washie wash'. They thought the photos had to be washed to be white. But, yes, that's not possible, yellow is yellow and on the photographs they seemed black. That was to their dislike, they paid for it and hence, it should also be 'plenty washie wash'." As she was often around in her father's studio, Jeanne often had to pose with a Chinese. The ganger always asked her father politely: 'madame, madame' and then she had to pose among the Chinese. Jeanne was pretty sure: "I am still hanging somewhere in China". The girls didn't mind to pose. They were paid one franc which was considered quite a sum.²⁵⁷

"In Villa Jeanne, we were playing with postcards showing good looking girls and boys. Sometimes we would put them in the window. One day a Chinese entered, he thought he would find real girls. My grandmother chased him out with a broom".

She calls the Chinese: "those men with a long braid". The British kept the coolies at bay - friendship was impossible and she considered them badly treated. The Chinese were not allowed on the same tram as the English, nor to sit in the same cafés. The local population felt pity with them because of the severity with which they were treated by the British. In the interview Jeanne calls the Chinese "poor souls" because of the hard way they were treated by the British, their illiteracy, the hard work and their displacement.²⁵⁸

"The people learned those poor souls quite some curses, and these Chinese had no idea what it meant".

interviews conducted in the late 1990s-2000 for *Getuigen van de Grote Oorlog*²⁵⁹

Godelieve Ruyssen²⁶⁰, Reninghelst, on remembering a conversation on Chinese burial practices she had with a British officer who used to visit the farm to buy milk and butter. The man worked in a sawmill that had been set up on one of the farm's fields. He explained that apart from duckboards and firesteps, "they also made coffins for the 'tsjings.' We

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁵⁹ Three locals made a series of interviews in homes for the elderly, resulting in Dumoulin, K., S. Vansteenkiste and J. Verdoodt (2001). *Getuigen van de grote oorlog : getuigenissen uit de frontstreek*. Koksijde, De Klaproos.

²⁶⁰ Reninghelst 17 August 1897- Poperinge 8 December 2004. (With my thanks to Noël De Mey for these data - <http://noeldemey.blogspot.be>). Married Albert Cambron with whom she farmed in Reninghelst. (Interviewed on her 107th (!) birthday in 2004 she remarked: "I can easier remember what happened in the Great War than last week". (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 17 augustus 2004).

*asked the officer why they were buried in coffins while the fighting soldiers were buried in blankets. We could not understand what those little, yellow men had more [= why they had a higher standing]. The officer explained it had to do with their beliefs. They were given food and tools in their coffin. He said they were here only to work and thus they would be able to continue their toil over there. Once I noticed that a lot of coffins were being made. Apparently many had been killed near Dickebusch. The 'tsjings' bought their milk and butter from the officer. They were not allowed to get it themselves on the farm."*²⁶¹

Marie-Louise Bocarren²⁶², Proven:

*"In the neighbourhood there was a Chinese camp and these men constantly shouted: "Louche, louche, madam è là". We were afraid and thought they wanted to say: "look, there is a woman there". The Chinese or 'tsjings' were not allowed to drink alcohol. If they did, they became dangerous. So now and then a 'tsjing' came to buy cigarets in our place. One day, when buying a packet of cigarets from my sister Irma, he was boasting about his wives in China - of which he would have seven -, but he didn't want to pay. He was drunk and he punched us both, after which he ran off."*²⁶³

Margareta Santy²⁶⁴, Poperinghe:

*"In the Priesterstraat [in Poperinghe] my friend and I encountered two 'tsjings' carrying on their shoulder a pole with a water kettle. They had to get their water elsewhere. An Englishman had once told us: "You want to say Louche, louche pia", if you see a Chinese. We thought this was the right moment and said: "Louche, louche pia" proudly. The two Chinese, however, dropped the kettle and ran behind us but couldn't get us. We quickly ran home. We were afraid to be scolded there, but at least we would be safe fro the 'tsjings'. From then on I have never spoken these words. And even now I still don't know what it mean..... It was winter and my mother was ill and lay on a mattress next to the hot stove. At a certain moment a tsjing entered; he was a regular visitor. He saw my mother lying there and put his hands to his head saying "Madam ouch ouch madam, madam" and quickly ran away. Mother thought he was scared of becoming ill. But he soon returned with a few bags, in which there were amongst others oranges. Here madam, madam, he said. The tsjing showed compassion towards mother. That must have been in 1917 as it happened when we lived in the Priesterstraat [in Poperinghe]"*²⁶⁵

²⁶¹ Ibid. p. 225.

²⁶² Brielen, 20 July 1898- Ieper, 22 August 1999. Her father was a gardener in Vlamertinghe and mother held café. Somewhere around 1916 they fled to Proven. After the war, Maria Bocarren married Great War-veteran Jules Waeyenberghe.

²⁶³ Ibid. p. 165.

²⁶⁴ Langemark, 31 October 1908- Zonnebeke, 5 September 2008. The Santy family lived in St-Julien but spent most of the war as refugees in Poperinghe.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 21-2.

Elza Neels²⁶⁶, Ypres:

*"In 1919 we settled in Ypres, near Salvation Corner on the Dixmude road. There was also a camp of Chinese there. We called them the 'tsjings'. We lived in a house with a large garden and father cultivated vegetables to sell on the market. When my two eldest sisters went to sleep upstairs, the ladder was always pulled up, out of fear as the angst for the 'tsjings' was profound. The Chinese were not to be trusted. We, however, were also naughty children because when you made a great span with your fingers and you spat on your little finger and thumb, they were infuriated. You had to get the hell out then, as in their eyes this was a bad gesture."*²⁶⁷

Achille Neels²⁶⁸, Ypres:

*"[The Chinese] were good in domesticating sparrows. There was a Chinese guard there who managed to have five to six tame sparrows sitting on his hand. The Chinese made a bow between their fingers and shot little arrows who were brought back by the sparrows. Those Chinese weren't soldiers, but were recruited by the English to clear the front from war material and to pave and level. Personally, I was not afraid of the Chinese, but many other people, and especially the women, were."*²⁶⁹

Gabriella Vanpeteghem²⁷⁰, Dranouter:

*"The Chinese had to clear the front after the war. They stayed in Bailleul in France in the madhouse. All the windows had been closed to prevent them getting out. They arrived in a group of some forty men and were escorted by English soldiers every five meters. They had to clear the corpses and ammunition. Although it was claimed that 'Tsjings' were unable to use weapons, they fired all sorts of rifles and ammunition they found at the front. During the day people were even afraid to go outdoors and they waited until the evening when they had left. The first girl to be buried in Ypres after the war, had been shot by Tsjings on the Kemmel Road."*²⁷¹

Louis Garrein²⁷², Zillebeke:

In January 1920, we returned to Zillebeke. We had to live in a wooden hut. Living there was dreadful and extremely cold in the winter. The food was cooked with water taken from shell holes. Everything had been shot to

²⁶⁶ Elza Neels was born in Vlamertinghe 6 April 1911 and died 19 January 2000. She married farmer Romain Bekaert.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 78-9.

²⁶⁸ Achille Neels, born in Vlamertinghe on 23 May 1908, died in Poperinghe on 2 February 2006. He was married to Joanna Claus in Ypres.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 178.

²⁷⁰ Gabriella Vanpeteghem was born in 1908 into a farming family in Dranouter, a small Belgian village a few kilometers from the French border town of Bailleul. In 1931, she married a farmer from Zillebeke and settled there. She died on 8 June 2002 in Ypres.

²⁷¹ Ibid. p. 143.

²⁷² Zillebeke, 31 December 1906 - 20 December 1999. The son of small farmer in Zillebeke, Louis Garrein fled with his family early in the war, only to return in 1920. Between the wars he set up a thriving local trade in coal, beer and other drinks, becoming a well-known figure in the village.

pieces, there was barbed wire everywhere, shell holes, streets in duckboards, narrow gauge railways, trenches ... Some Chinese were still present here. We called them the 'Tsjings'. There weren't many of them and they didn't stay here for much longer. They were dangerous lads. At night they burgled the people living in the wooden huts. In Houtem, they tried to break into the premises of a tobacco cutter. The latter grasped a rifle and shot through the door. One of the Tsjings died on site, the other was able to escape.²⁷³

interviews conducted in 2009-10 for *De Allerlaatste Getuigen*²⁷⁴

Valère De Corte²⁷⁵, Poperinghe

"In Poperinghe there were many 'tsjings' hanging around after the war. They were used to clear the battelfields of human remains and duds. We were terribly scared of them. When it got dark and there were 'tsjings' in the neighbourhood, father forbade us to leave the house. They were naughty fellows, more often lingering around than working..... The 'tsjings' were cunning tradespeople: copper and iron found on the former battlefield and in the trenches were sold to the highest bidder. Often they worked the brass shell cases and had them engraved with "1914-1918" and elegant motifs to sell them as souvenirs. Here in Poperinghe, 'tsjings' were living near the small chateau in Kerkhofstraat²⁷⁶. You could smell them from a street further, so to speak: so hard they stank. They ate nothing but rice, garlic and onions. That last vegetable, they often stole from the gardens. They tried to rummage about for anything, including clothes. My sister Clara was working in 'The French Soldier', a clothes shop in the Ieperstraat. When Chinese were visiting, she had to take care nothing disappeared. The yellow folk were crazy about western clothes and watches. As decoration, the shop window had a mannequin dressed in the uniform of an English officer. Sometimes 'tsjings' were looking eagerly to the clothes on display in the shop window, their noses pressed against the window panes. But not a second they would lose out of sight the ever motionless 'officer'. Man, man, how they were scared of it. One day again some were gaping through the shop window. Clara had hidden behind the mannequin to keep an eye on them as there were baskets with other merchandise outside the shop. She must have pushed the mannequin as it banged all of a sudden against the shop window. Screaming in terror the

²⁷³ Ibid. p. 121.

²⁷⁴ Vanoutrive, P. (2011). *De allerlaatste getuigen van WO I*. Tielt, Lannoo. These interviewees were obviously both very young at the time of the events and interviewed at a much advanced age.

²⁷⁵ Poperinghe, 24 May 1910 - Ypres, 19 July 2011. Trained as a diamond cutter, De Corte made a career as contractor in electricity works in Poperinghe.

²⁷⁶ Most probably 'Chalet Schabaillie' in the street named Rekhof. This nice house has the outlook of a chateau and is situated in the street leading to the old town cemetery (Kerkhofstraat).

*'tsjings' ran off. That story has been told many times! The 'tsjings' also walked around on stilts in order to peep into the people's bedrooms".*²⁷⁷

André Room²⁷⁸, Heuveland:

*"The 'tsjings' were nasty and dirty. You had to make sure to stay well away from them or the lice would jump on you. They were full of lice, as big as peas, like pigs' lice. We were scared of the 'tsjings'. When we mocked them they chased us. The 'tsjings' were also not liked because they did not do their work properly. During the war they had to dig trenches, only to fill them up again after the Armistice. Whatever they found, they toppled into shell craters, covered these with corrugated iron and threw a layer of earth on top. My father cleared and leveled his land with his own hand, so that at least it would be done well, so he said. Many farmers cursed for years on end when horse or cart foundered in a badly filled hole."*²⁷⁹

Gerard Bossaert²⁸⁰, Poperinghe:

*"Father sometimes swore when working his land. More than once our horse fell down a covered hole. Normally, the land would be leveled by first dumping clay in the holes and trenches and only then covering it with earth for the cultivation furrows. The 'tsjings' did it the other way round, and thus in summer the mature fields showed open patches in many places as the crops couldn't earth. It took years before the growth process was entirely restored. In hindsight, we couldn't blame it all on the Chinese. The British had left them to their fate and they were mistrusted by the local population. Shopkeepers, on the other hand, welcomed the 'tsjings' as they let money roll. So far from home, they must have suffered from homesickness heavily and some 'tsjings' indeed got completely lost."*²⁸¹

Gerard Acke²⁸², Elverdinghe :

"Along the road from Elverdinghe to Zuidschote, farmer Verkint was running two farms : the 'Kleine Pollepel' [the small wooden spoon] and the 'Grote Pollepel' [the large wooden spoon]. Verkint also employed two 'tsjings', that is to say: they were helping the farmer clearing his fields. The farmer was called 'Little Verkint' to distinguish him from his father, notwithstanding the fact that he wasn't little at all: he was 'a bear of a man' [tall and strong]. One day, 'Little Verkint' caught them in the act of stealing something unimportant. He grapped them by their necks, lifted them in the air - each in a hand, let them writhe for a while and then smashed their heads against each other so hard it creaked. It seemed they

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 211-212.

²⁷⁸ Reninghelst, 5 July 1913 - De Klijte, 2 Dec 2011.

²⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 212-3.

²⁸⁰ Poperinge, 6 July 1913 - Nieuwkerke, 19 September 2012.

²⁸¹ Ibid. p. 213.

²⁸² Elverdinghe, 1 Feb 1909 - 30 May 2013. Born in Elverdinghe, Acke's family fled to France during the war, returning to their native village after the armistice. He eventually became the local schoolmaster.

ran off his yard tottering and whining. Little Verkint never saw them again."²⁸³

Hilaire Rigole²⁸⁴, Bissegem

"The Chinese looked sad and hungry. They were dressed in pale blue uniforms and were sitting on their hunkers on the courtyard of the factory. From behind a wire fence we could see them and during unguarded moments we would throw grass over the wire. And immediately they would eat it. Do not ask... We didn't dare to laugh with them, we were afraid of them, and actually we also felt somewhat pity with these 'tsjings'."²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Ibid. p. 212.

²⁸⁴ Bissegem 20 Nov 1910 - 23 March 2015.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 210.

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