

Case Study 1: Belgian Refugees and German Nationals during WWI

(Adapted from [Wales for Peace](#) *hidden history*)

Introduction



Although the causes of WWI had their roots in the rivalries and power struggles of European dynasties, the immediate spark which gave rise to the conflagration was Germany's military invasion of Belgium and France. In Wales, people were urged to identify with a fellow small nation which had been invaded by a bullying super power. If neutral Belgium could be invaded and their sovereignty compromised, could this not happen to other small countries such as Wales itself? Dramatic posters urged people to 'Remember Belgium' and defend their country, and these had a considerable effect on public opinion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the estimated 200,000 Belgian refugees who arrived in the UK received a warm welcome, and Wales was no exception. On 10th October 1914, thousands gathered in Rhyl to welcome Belgian refugees and to process with them through the town from the station. Over 60 boats carrying Belgians from fishing families in Ostend arrived in Milford Haven in late September 1914 and they too, were welcomed. Committees were set up and money raised to arrange for accommodation and furniture.

The situation was not without its tensions. The expectations of some of the Belgian refugees were quite high, in particular those from more affluent backgrounds, and some were felt to be ungrateful and even greedy. Some middle-class families preferred to take in more affluent refugee families, rather than those who were most in need. An example of this rather more selective welcome was the trip to Belgium, funded by David Davies' sisters, Gwendoline and Margaret, to bring back talented Belgian artists who would contribute to the arts in Wales. As a result of this trip, 91 Belgian artists came to settle in Wales, including the musicians Marcel and Nicolas Lavoureux, the sculptor Georges Minne, and the artists Valerius de Saedeleer and Gustave van de Woestijne. This group contributed to the artistic life of Wales during the war, including the famous 'Cadair Ddu' (Black Chair) carved for and awarded posthumously to the poet, Hedd Wyn, who died at the Battle of Paschendaele. The town of Rhyl, on the other hand, welcomed some of the poorest and most destitute refugees.



The situation of German nationals living in Wales was very different. Anti-German propaganda and stories of the atrocities committed by the German military in Belgium and France (some true and some propaganda) whipped up popular opinion into a sort of hysteria. On 20th October 1914 the miners of Lewis Colliery, Merthyr, refused to descend to work until the manager of the electricians in the colliery, a German called Shollback, had been dismissed from his work. Many German nationals were arrested and imprisoned under suspicion of being spies. At the same time internment camps were set up for members of the German military taken in battle, the most notorious being Fron Goch near Bala.

Activity 1: Stories of Refugees and Foreign Nationals:

Divide the class into two groups.

- One group will look at information about the welcome of Belgian Refugees in Rhyl in October 1914 (see: <https://refugeesinrhyl.wordpress.com/rhyl/> and accompanying resource)
- The other group will look at the story of Professor Hermann Ethé, professor of philology at Aberystwyth University (see: <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/disturbing-tale-german-professor-forced-8093480>)

Response activities

Ask the groups to read the stories and to note down their thoughts, feelings and reactions. Discuss how we can explain such extremes of behaviour which happened more or less at the same time? What would have influenced the acts of the crowds in Rhyl and Aberystwyth?

Are such scenes confined to the past or could they happen today?

Follow-up activities:

You are a member of the crowd in Rhyl, welcoming the refugees. Write a blog describing what happened and how you felt.

You are a colleague of Professor Ethé at the university. Write a letter to a fellow academic, expressing regret about his treatment.

Other Resources:

National Library of Wales resource on WWI propaganda:

<https://hwb.gov.wales/search?query=propaganda&popupUri=%2FResource%2F61f45162-7817-4770-a6e7-8771843d8f37>