

# On the Trail of a Spy

From 11 September 2014 to 23 December 2015

What happened in Kortrijk during World War I? Within one day's march of the front, Kortrijk was an important point of supply for the German troops. The city was in the grip of regulations, requisitions and billeting. Fighter pilots and bombers caused havoc from the skies. Privileged and less privileged citizens tell us their story as spies lurked in every corner.

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## *Vredesgezinde Belgen*

### BELGIANS STRIVING TOWARDS PEACE

When Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914, the hastily drafted Belgian army quickly suffered defeat and the German army advanced. Belgium's neutrality was not recognised by Germany. In their eyes, Belgium's attitude was anti-German: by resisting the German army as it entered the country, Belgium prevented Germany from effectively defending itself against France.

Cities such as Leuven, Dendermonde and Namur paid a heavy price for their (alleged) acts of sabotage. During those first months of war, 31 soldiers from Kortrijk died. Expressions of solidarity with brave little Belgium arrived from all over the world.

## *Sporwegen bespieden*

### RAILWAY WATCHING

As soon as the war broke out, railway traffic was thoroughly disturbed. Trains with equipment sped to the forts near Antwerp, while at the same time people tried to get as much rolling stock as possible to safety in order to get it to France.

As the Germans advanced westwards and occupied parts of the country, they confiscated the railway infrastructure, which was to play a very important role throughout the war. Thousands of soldiers travelled between Germany and the front by train every week. The railways therefore revealed a unique view of the movements of the German armed forces, so it is not surprising that the allies primarily recruited railway personnel for their intelligence services.

At Kortrijk station, fresh troops were seen leaving for the front as wounded soldiers returned every day. How many divisions were there and which direction were they headed? What were the losses, how much reinforcement was being sent? Were they experienced soldiers or young recruits? This type of information was crucial.

## *Burgerlijke bravoure en werkmansmiserie*

### CIVIL COURAGE AND THE WORKING MAN'S MISERY

In the autumn of 1914, the Belgian front stalled in the Westhoek region and around Ypres. Kortrijk was taken on 17 October 1914. It was now "Etappengebied", a region to supply and support the front army. All available food went to the German army first, and what remained was rationed. In order to relieve some of the distress this caused, international, national and urban committees were set up. They had their own shops and controlled the prices. US goods reached Kortrijk by ship on the river Leie.

The war, lack of raw materials and German requisitions prevented any successful economic activity. In 1915, 54% of the male population was unemployed. The city council spent almost 3 million Belgian Franks in emergency funding, which was "payable to the city treasury after the war".

Unemployed workers were required to perform hard labour. In 1916, the first 500 "deportees" left Kortrijk for the German front in France.

The residents of Kortrijk responded to the German occupation in different ways. The bourgeoisie were more or less able to rely on their own reserves, as many poor people went hungry and cold. Most people expressed a great sense of patriotism, though.

### *Met ongemene strengheid*

#### RUTHLESS

The Kortrijk city council was replaced by the German commanders or "Etappenkommandanten". The Germans confiscated public buildings, schools, convents and houses and organised their own administration of mandatory passports, permits, billeting, German timetables, etc. They put up posters to force the population to hand over goods such as wine, potatoes, wool, horses, copper, tobacco, bicycles, timber, cattle, leather, wheat, weapons and even paving. The city council was obliged to help enforce and implement the regulations and requisitions.

To improve their control, the Germans introduced new identity cards and passports. Barbed wire barriers surrounded the area where people were allowed to move freely.

Because of their jobs, railway workers, traders and photographers were given a little more space. Some of these people worked as spies, passing on information to the allies through a network and across the borders. If they were caught, they would be shown no mercy by the Germans. Six Kortrijk residents received the worst sentence and were executed by shooting.

### *Een Duitser achter elke deur*

#### A GERMAN BEHIND EVERY DOOR

The German regiments were allowed to rest, freshen up and relax in Kortrijk from time to time. There were regular concerts at the soldiers' mess that was set up at the Ons Huis cinema. The Germans celebrated Christmas there with a decorated Christmas tree, a custom that was adopted by the locals. Many wounded soldiers – both Germans and prisoners of war – had to be cared for here. Places such as the O.L.V-ter Engelen school, the Carmelite Monastery, the Great Halls, Sint-Amands college and Sint-Niklaas institute were converted into temporary hospitals. Onze-Lieve-Vrouw hospital was requisitioned by the Germans.

A small group of Kortrijk residents joined the activists striving for independence for Flanders. In order to achieve this, they sought the cooperation of the German occupiers. This led to political tension in the city.

There were hardly any means of communication. The Germans killed or captured all carrier pigeons in an effort to prevent military information being shared.

### *Ridders van het luchtruim*

#### KNIGHTS OF THE SKY

The recently established air force evolved from reconnaissance tasks (such as aerial photography) to more active combat and bombing assignments. From 1916 and particularly 1917, the Germans had new airfields built in the Kortrijk area: in Marke, Heule and Bissegem, for example. The famous German fighter pilot Manfred von Richthofen was the first to bring together four small combat units



of Jastas in a single, well-organised squadron called the Jagtgeschwader I, operating from Marke and Bissegem.

The pilots were hailed as heroes and praised by German propaganda. Their victories were recorded like scores in a sports competition. It was mostly young daredevils who risked their lives in air combat time and time again. The pilots on both sides had tremendous respect for each other, but once they were up in the air, they fought to the death without mercy. They only received parachutes towards the end of the war.

### *Stad aan flarden*

#### DESTROYED CITY

Kortrijk was attacked more and more from the sky. This new form of warfare claimed many civilian casualties, both poor and rich. As early as November 1914, an air raid resulted in 15 dead and 34 wounded in a single day in Doorniksestraat. At the end of World War I, Kortrijk mourned more civilian deaths than military ones. The frequent bombings petrified the population, the anti-aircraft guns thundered back day and night and here and there concrete bunkers were built as shelters. From May 1917 onwards, the high command of the Fourth German Army stayed in Kortrijk, which meant an even stricter regime for the residents. In the summer of 1917, fighting was fierce and here and there the English gained some ground. This meant that Kortrijk was no longer in "Etappengebiet" to supply and support the Germany army; it was now in "Operationsgebiet". There was a constant flow of wounded coming in. The military hospital on Schouwburgplein had to take in 5,000 wounded in just 5 days in July 1917.

The German airfields nearby were targets for allied air strikes. In July and August 1917, 36 people were killed during air strikes, and in 1918 another 139 Kortrijk civilians would lose their lives in similar circumstances.

### *Het Einde*

#### THE END

In the spring of 1918, the Germans launched their spring offensive. It was Germany's ultimate effort to gain victory in the west. In Kortrijk, things became even more hectic, with equipment arriving by train, billeting of (tired) forces, a constant flow of wounded and prisoners of war and aircraft – with and without bombs - circling overhead. The German emperor stayed in Kortrijk for about a month to encourage his troops in person.

From July 1918, the odds turned completely against the Germans. In late September 1918, the allied final offensive was launched. The English broke through enemy lines and pushed the front further and further back towards Kortrijk. They passed through Moorsele, Ledegem, Gullegem, Heule and Kuurne as the Germans withdrew behind the river Leie. Kortrijk experienced the fiercest combat from 14 to 19 October. With 26 civilian casualties in a single day, 14 October was a very sad day for Kortrijk. The city was shaken to its foundations when the Germans blew up all the bridges across the river Leie.

On 19 October 1918, the 35<sup>th</sup> division of the British Army pushed through and Belgium was liberated. An exuberant crowd welcomed King Albert I and his family in Kortrijk as they travelled through the city on 5 November. A general armistice followed on 11 November 1918.

*Nog een weinig zonneschijn*

A LITTLE SUNSHINE

The armistice did not mean that Evarist De Geyter's worries were over. The spy was only able to travel from Germany to France two weeks later. He was not allowed to go back to Belgium, but persisted and eventually managed to get on a train to Torhout on 8 December. The uncertainty that had been torturing him for months was about to come to an end. How was his wife doing? Did both his sons survive the war?

*Now that we have weathered the biggest storm and have done our duty to the Fatherland as loyal Belgians the way our forefathers have done before us, we live in hope with peace of mind that a little sunshine is in store for us yet.*