

# Fisheries and the First World War

## 'Herring saved our lives'

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For a long time, the supply of food to occupied Belgium and the developments in agriculture were a neglected aspect of historiography of the First World War. Although this has recently changed, it is striking that little or no attention is paid to the fishing industry. Yet fisheries can be complementary to agriculture, particularly in times of imminent food shortage. Nearly the entire Belgian fishing fleet left the country in October 1914. The fishermen who stayed behind succeeded in meeting the local needs under difficult circumstances. For refugee fishermen the war period was anything but wasted. They continued their activities operating from British, French and Dutch ports. In this article we investigate to what degree the First World War was a turning point for sea fisheries. Was herring fishing crucial to the survival of the civilian population, as was the case in the Second World War (in other words: Did herring save our lives)? Were fishermen able to get back to work in Belgium after WWI? And what role did the seaside resort of Ostend play?

### Sea fisheries on the eve of the war

The decade prior to the start of the First World War was a favourable period for the fishing industry. The average purchasing power was increasing in Western Europe and transport to consumption centres was improving noticeably. The growth of the fishing industry was based on a spectacular technical evolution. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the fishing industry underwent rapid development thanks to the use of ice to preserve fish (1874) and the introduction of steam fishing boats (1884). The use of ice extended food life and made longer fishing trips possible. Steam fishing boats were soon adopted in Belgium thanks to the intensive fish trade between Belgium and Britain.

Ostend was the principal fishing port on the Belgian coast. In 1885 the *Société Anonyme des Pêcheries Ostendaises* was established specifically for operating steam trawlers. Wealthy investors from Brussels enabled substantial investments, while the introduction of steam ships opened up new



■ Traditional sailing ships in the Ostend harbour at the end of the 19th century (Private collection)



■ De Panne had a fishing fleet but no harbour. Boats were stranded at low tide during the First World War as well. Picture taken by Belgian Queen Elisabeth on 7 July 1916 (Albert en Elisabeth 1914-1918: albums van de koningin, 1984, cat. N°: S.M. 389, p. 66)

Port	Sailing boats	Sloops	Steam trawlers
Ostend	140	149	29
Blankenberge	60	3	-
Nieuwpoort	28	5	-
Oostduinkerke	16	2	-
Heist	68	-	-
Koksijde	8	1	-
De Panne	88	-	-
Zeebrugge	20	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>428</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>29</b>

perspectives with regard to fleet structure and fishing grounds. The shipbuilding industry adapted to this new situation: steel ships replaced wooden vessels. And the traditional sailing ships that had dominated fishing until 1875 gradually disappeared. This is clearly illustrated by the evolution of trade in the Ostend fish market. In 1890 steamboats accounted for 15% of the total value of landings (worth 3,749,000 Belgian franc or approx 95,000 EUR in today's money). By 1910 this figure had increased to 58% of a total value of 4,396,000 Belgian franc. Thanks to steam boats, Ostend was able to compete with northern French fishing ports such as Dunkirk and Calais. Fishing communities from the Belgian west coast provided crews for French vessels on account of the low wages and their extensive expertise. Besides Ostend, every coastal town had its own small fishing fleet (see table). The boats were sometimes moored on the beach and were operated by a fisherman and his close relatives. Especially those fishermen who did not modernise had a hard time of it. They often supplemented their income from running an inn or a shop.

When the war broke out in August 1914, the Belgian fishing fleet responded in various ways. Most fishermen chose to flee abroad, taking only their relatives and some personal belongings with them. Fishermen who had larger vessels helped with the evacuation of Belgian refugees. Others, especially those in De Panne, chose or were forced to stay at least until 1916-1917.

The German declaration of war affected the food supply straightaway. The Belgian authorities immediately banned the export of foodstuffs. Food prices rose considerably as a result of hoarding by the population. Non-perishable foodstuffs were particularly sought after. By contrast, fish prices declined sharply. Ostend, a major market for the export of fishery products, saw its export

vanish completely so that prices in the fish market dropped systematically. Due to the closure of the borders, entire trainloads even had to return to the Belgian coast in the summer heat. Furthermore, the domestic market was already saturated. The demand for more expensive fish dropped in the first week after the German invasion: the price of turbot declined from 3.5 Belgian franc to 0.2 Belgian franc per kilogramme and the price of sole fell from 200 Belgian franc to 36 Belgian franc per kilogramme.

## Refugee fishermen

All fishermen who had a seaworthy boat fled abroad from the autumn of 1914 onwards. France, England and the Netherlands were the most popular destinations. A few fishermen even went all the way to the Belgian Congo. The refugee fishermen were soon given a fishing licence in their new home port. To protect them during the war, the Marine Affairs Administration created a war-risk insurance fund for fishermen in September 1917. The fund was intended to provide insurance for the Belgian fishing fleet and the families of fishermen in case of accidents or other incidents resulting from the war.

### The Netherlands

Immediately after the start of the war, Zeelandic Flanders was overrun by Belgian refugees. Two boats of the Belgian Telegraaf company, accompanied by numerous mussel boats carrying refugees from Antwerp and Mechelen, arrived in Bruinisse during the first week of September 1914. Fishermen from the Scheldt area, e.g. from Temse and Baasrode, also fled to the Netherlands. Due to the reception problems in Zeelandic Flanders, many Belgians continued to Rotterdam or Amsterdam. Nearly 720,000 Belgian refugees had arrived in the Netherlands by October 1914. This situation did not last long, however. Already in November 1914 large numbers of Belgians returned home. The warring parties had gotten bogged down in a bloody trench war and the Germans threatened to confiscate property.



■ The fishermen from Heist and Zeebrugge fled to Zierikzee in Zeelandic Flanders in the spring of 1915, as did Eugène Vlietinck on H36 (Schot, *Vlaamse vissers als vluchtelingen*, p.75.)



## Ostend and sea fisheries during the First World War

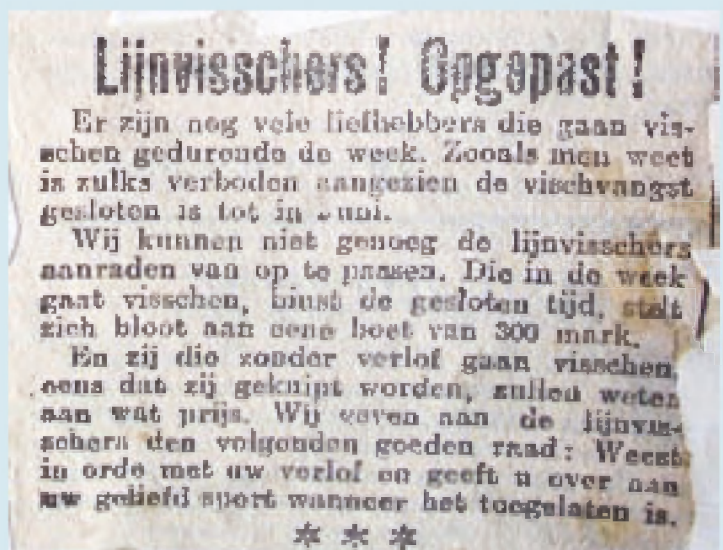
From the end of September 1914 onwards, nearly all Ostend fishermen fled abroad, not just for fear of the German army but also for fear their fishing activities would be severely disrupted. They were right: the Germans banned any form of fishing on 22 October 1914. They were suspicious of fishing vessels that wanted to enter port and opened fire at the slightest pretence. Although many ships and boats had been taken abroad, 33 vessels stayed behind in Ostend. The majority were small shrimpers and sloops that could only be used for inshore fishing. In March 1915 the German authorities ordered all boats to be collected and transferred to a shed. In other words, it did not seem like a lot of fishing would take place during the war.

Yet a few brave Ostend fishermen secretly began to fish in an abandoned dock, since the food shortage caused the demand for fish among consumers to rise. Fishmongers were eager to buy up the fish. Remarkably enough, the Germans tolerated these spontaneous fish sales. Subsequently, Mayor Liebaert successfully entered into negotiations with the *Ortskommandant* to resume inshore fishing. Eventually, fifteen small boats were permitted to fish just outside the harbour channel in May 1915. They had to stay hidden from the French coastal batteries on the front in Nieuwpoort. When the Germans had a fishery protection vessel – an abandoned and converted motorboat – at their disposal, several sloops were allowed to leave port under German surveillance. However, fishermen needed to have a *Schein* (licence) issued by the *Oberkommandantur* (Supreme Command) in Bruges.

The fish caught by Ostend fishermen were a welcome supplement to the inadequate food supply. Potatoes, beans, bacon, rice and bread were the staple foods. The caught fish could only be sold in the fish market. The first official sale during the occupation took place on 21 May 1915. Fish was rationed so that every household got the opportunity to buy some. A family with two children, for instance, was entitled to two large and two small soles. The gross sales were modest: 108 Belgian franc on the first day. Sales in the fish market quickly increased afterwards, so that values of 600 Belgian franc were no exception anymore. To regulate trade in the fish market, the local authorities drew up several decrees. For example, only holders of a municipal bread ration card were allowed to purchase fish. To prevent sale at exorbitant prices, passing on or reselling family bread ration cards to fishmongers was strictly forbidden.



■ Fishermen fled with their families from Bassin d'Echouage, the current Montgomery Dock in Ostend (Freddy Philips, 14/18 op Zee, 2013)



■ Recreational fishing was strictly controlled by the German occupiers. Heavy fines were imposed on fishing without a permit (De Vooruit, 04-07-1915)

Although the fish caught was intended for supplying food to the local population, German officers sometimes tried to get a piece of the pie. In addition to difficulties with the Germans, fishermen also faced common problems such as storms and accidents. Remarkably enough, the German fishery protection vessel often rescued unfortunate fishermen from drowning. After a few incidents, 25 fishing boats were allowed to leave port every day. These small boats were seaworthy in calm weather and as long as they stayed close to the coast. But in foul weather the thirst for money sometimes prevailed over common sense. No less than seven boats sunk and nine fishermen lost their lives off Ostend during the storm of 23 December 1916.

The amount of caught fish steadily grew, as did the daily trade in the fish market. Values of over 1000 Belgian franc were no exception. A peak of 3700 Belgian franc was even reached in December 1916 thanks to the supply of fresh sprat. Of course, inflation also played a role in this. Fishing threatened to become the victim of its own success. A regulation by the *Kommandantur* (commander's office) curbed the exorbitant prices. For instance, the maximum price for sprat was fixed at 0.25 Belgian franc per kilogramme and for shrimp this was 0.90 Belgian franc. Fish market staff saw to it that fish was only sold in the fish market. Such provisions indicate that the fish trade was increasingly regulated. Towards the end of the war, the German occupiers took ever stricter measures such as confiscating all fish caught, since Germany increasingly faced problems with the food supply of their troops. The harbour channel was completely blocked on 6 October 1918. Fishing only became possible again after the armistice of 11 November.



■ *De Roos* – a wooden shrimper built in 1912 – is moored at the pier in Nieuwpoort. This way the ship could leave the harbour quickly. The nets are drying after fishing (Collection of Daniel Moeyaert)

*Belgian fishing boats in British ports in 1917 (ARA, Marine Affairs Administration, N° 7921: Annex to 'Situation de la flotille de pêche belge', 1917).*

Port	Sailing boats	Sloops	Total
Lowestoft	43	8	51
Ramsgate	38	-	38
Rochester	4	-	4
Gravesend	3	-	3
Folkestone	-	14	14
Rye	10	1	11
Brixham	5	-	5
Swansea	4	-	4
Milford Haven	31	-	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>161</b>

In late November 1914, the British-French fleet shelled the ports of Zeebrugge and Heist. A great deal of harbour facilities were hit and destroyed. The inhabitants of these coastal towns were advised to leave their homes and relocate. Fishermen from Heist and Zeebrugge first went to the Dutch towns of Philippine and Cadzand, hoping to be able to fish in the Western Scheldt estuary. In late April 1915, the Germans told them they had to leave the Western Scheldt, whereupon the Heist and Zeebrugge fishermen moved northward to Zierikzee.

No less than 72 Belgian fishing boats arrived in this Zeeland coastal town in April 1915, carrying 325 adults and 173 children. The fishermen lived with their families on their boats for a while. There was a pressing need for housing in Zierikzee. It was not until April 1916 that the first wooden houses were ready for the Belgians. By that time, many fishermen's families were housed in private houses and warehouses. The presence of a large number of fishermen's children made the establishment of a separate school in Zierikzee necessary. Nearly all Belgian fishermen brought their catch on the market in Zierikzee. A few of them also supplied the markets of Breskens and Vlissingen. The most targeted species in 1916 and 1917 were sprat, herring and shrimp. Shrimp peeling plants were founded where fishermen's wives could be employed. Belgian fishermen continued to sail under the Belgian flag and markings for a long time. This was





■ English-language media urged the population not to waste food. Fishermen were depicted as heroes (Canadian War Museum).

dangerous, as they also ventured out of the Dutch territorial waters. For instance, a German submarine sank a Heist fishing boat in August 1915. From then on the Belgian fishing fleet sailed under the Dutch flag and markings.

#### **Britain and France**

After the start of the war, France and England received a lot of Belgian fishermen as well. Due to various circumstances they were not all able to keep on fishing. Ships were commandeered, lost at sea or used for spare parts. Fishing boat crews were sometimes forced to work in shipyards in Scotland. Fishing sloops that moored in Britain were allocated certain fishing grounds by the local maritime authorities. Belgian sailing boats and sloops that were not of military importance were spread over the British ports (see Table p.93). By contrast, steam trawlers operated from the minor ports of Lowestoft, Milford Haven and Fleetwood.

The Belgian boats that were temporarily based at Milford Haven sailed under the Belgian flag and were equipped with guns. Just like the British fishing vessels, the Belgian fishermen needed a licence issued by the British Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. In case of attack, Belgian fishing vessels had to raise the British flag and the crew had to put on the uniform of the British Royal Navy so that they would not be considered *francs-tireurs*. The smooth deployment of Belgian steamboats in British



■ Some Ostend fishermen fled to France during the war (1915) (De Plate 2004, p.169)

offshore fishing is demonstrated by the sales figures for Milford Haven, Swansea and Fleetwood. From September to December 1914, Belgian steam trawlers achieved a turnover of 20,907 pound sterling. In 1915 and 1916 this figure had risen to 148,610 and 258,054 pound sterling respectively. The figures for 1917 are not available, but the turnover for 1918 is estimated at 870,442 pound sterling.

Overall, living conditions for fishermen were better in Britain than in Belgium. Wage growth outpaced the increase in food prices. The proximity of the fishing grounds enabled fishermen to make longer fishing trips as well as to spend more time on shore with their wives and children. Although the Belgian fishermen formed a separate social group in each port, the British government did not leave them to fend for themselves. The local authorities set up a general and vocational education system together with

the Belgians. And it was possible to take exams for captain, lieutenant and mechanic. However, not everything went smoothly. Occasionally there was friction between the English and the Belgians in Milford Haven, since former competitors were now forced to live side by side for a while. The authorities threatened with severe punishment. Fishermen who went too far were sent back to Belgium or, in the worst case, to the front.

The Belgian fishermen who had fled to France were divided into three groups, each supervised by a Belgian maritime commissioner. The first group operated from Calais, Boulogne, Gravelines and Dunkirk, and had about sixty sailing boats. The second zone was located near Dieppe, where approx 90 fishing vessels were spread over the ports of Le Tréport, Dieppe and Fécamp. The third and final group of Belgian fishermen had fled to the Normandy coast. A total of 20 vessels operated from Le Havre,

Belgian fishermen continued to practise their trade in France and Britain. Sometimes they actively took part in the war. Some of them were involved in provisioning the Belgian troops. Occasionally, the fishing boats also performed support tasks such as clearing mines or escorting submarines. Several steam trawlers were even armed. These ships served as coast guard vessels and engaged with German U-boats. Belgian crews rescued shipwrecked British sailors on various occasions, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances. As a token of gratitude, the Belgian rescuers and crews were given an engraved silver cup as well as a monetary remuneration. The Distinguished Service Cross was awarded for exceptional gallantry.

Fishermen who suffered damage, irrespective of their active participation in military operations, could apply for compensation. To this end, the captain of a sunk ship submitted a form with a detailed description of the circumstances. The shipmaster and his (surviving) crew then appeared before a committee that assessed the matter and decided whether the shipmaster was eligible for compensation.

The fishermen who had fled abroad were greatly affected by the war. No less than 74 of them lost their lives. The fleet registered before the war lost 7 steamboats and 125 sailing boats. Over 60% of losses was caused by the enemy: 77 sailing boats were sunk by gunfire or torpedoes, or struck a naval mine. A total of 21 sailing boats sank because of the weather conditions. Thirteen vessels were lost during the occupation of Belgian ports or were towed away by the Germans. Finally, fourteen sailing boats were sunk by the Allies. All stricken steam trawlers sank during combat at sea.

# STAD OOSTENDE

# BERICHT

Er wordt ter kennis der bewoners gebracht dat de H.H. Steen Jans, Hazeend Jans, Donscheer Lieve, Wouter Adriaen, Hazeend Jans, vromerij ter dierverrijdering, die spijten in kerkhof verrijgen, even zeking noch naar Oostende stroom van NOOTELLOOS afgevoerd te worden.

De afwijking en de volgt geschieden, op verzoek van de reedsverreijdering van het Stadsmid Oostende, in de medelinge vromerij.

**Vrijdag 20 December**

van 8	tot 10	uur	af	1 tot 10000
-	500	- 11	-	5000 - 10000
-	11	- 1500	-	5001 - 10000
-	1500	- 2	-	5001 - 10000

**Zaterdag 21 December**

van 8	tot 10	uur	af	5000 tot 10000
-	500	- 15	-	5001 - 10000
-	11	- 1500	-	5001 - 10000
-	1500	- 2	-	5001 - 10000

Oostende, den 18 December 1911.

Het Gemeentebestuur.

Steen Jans, Hazeend Jans, Donscheer Lieve, Wouter Adriaen, Hazeend Jans, vromerij ter dierverrijdering, die spijten in kerkhof verrijgen, even zeking noch naar Oostende stroom van NOOTELLOOS

impoverished. Belgian steam trawlers continued to operate from British ports up to the end of 1919. It was not until 1920 that the Belgian fishing fleet was up to strength again, although its composition was different than in 1914.

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■ NV Oostendsche Reederij was established on 1 October 1921 thanks to investments from socialist circles. O.149 – Emiel Vandervelde was part of the 'Red Fleet' (Daman en Jansoone, *Oostende na 1918*, 63.)

Many fishermen who returned home had changed mentally. During the war, they had not just been promoted to brave warriors, they had also come into contact with the militant British trade unions for fishermen and sailors. They brought these 'revolutionary' ideas with them to Belgium, much to the anger of the large traditional shipowners, who wished to keep on imposing the same working conditions after the war, while fishermen wanted to improve their situation. On 15 June 1920 a general strike broke out that would last until October. The social struggle was especially intense in the socialist bulwark of Ostend: the socialist movement even created the so-called 'red fleet', *NV Oostendsche Reederij*, in 1921. The shipowners eventually made concessions with regard to wages.

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