

## Factsheet

# 14-18 in Close-Up: inspiration for local projects about the Great War

### 2014-2018, the Centenary of the First World War in villages and towns

The war of 14-18 marked the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 100 years later, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the history of the Great War has remained relevant for present-day people and societies. Public interest in the war is impressive. This will become evident in the years 2014 to 2018. Taking into account the many plans and projects that have already been announced, we can expect a large-scale centenary commemoration of WWI in Belgium and many other parts of the world.

Significantly, public interest in the war also manifests itself in full force at the local level, where a wide variety of projects will be set up highlighting the history of villages and towns during the war and the occupation. At the same time, practitioners and project-organizers know themselves confronted with many questions such as: How to set up good public history projects? Which historical topics and themes can be highlighted in these projects? Where are good sources to be found? And can public history also be relevant to today's world?

The Flemish Peace Institute and the Institute for Public History of the University of Ghent have joined forces and set up a research project to answer these kinds of questions. The ambition is to offer **support and inspiration to local actors** such as municipalities, local history groups, cultural heritage cells, and teachers.

### From scholarly to public history

In recent decades the historiography of WWI has witnessed an impressive wave of innovative research. Instead of merely focusing on the classic military and political history of the war, historians have started to also pay attention to social and cultural aspects of war experiences. In Belgium, this trend has for example resulted in an increasing focus on daily life during the occupation. How did the people of 14-18 got by during the war? And how did the conflict become part of their daily lives?

It takes time, however, before the fruits of this innovative research seep through to the general public. One of the objectives of the '14-18 in Close-Up' project therefore was to make the results of recent scholarly research about the occupation of 14-18 available for a wider audience. This way we aim to ensure that local public history projects will **pay adequate attention to historical content**.

### The history of an occupied country

In 2014-2018 many projects will undoubtedly focus on military aspects of WWI and on battlefield experiences of soldiers at the front – and rightly so. At the same time we should not forget that the whole of Belgium was swept up in the war. For four years, Belgium was largely an occupied country, and this had a huge impact on peoples' daily life. Thanks to the many battlefield museums and visitor centres in Flanders, the public history of life at the front is well provided for. With regards to the public history of daily life during the occupation, on the other hand, a lot remains to be done.

In order to support the development of public history projects about occupied Belgium we suggest approaching the local history of WWI from different perspectives, such as the **(socio-economic) struggle for survival, the gendered viewpoints of men and women, the role of national sentiments, religious life, and the reconstruction and commemorative efforts after the war's end.**

## Public history as a step-by-step process

Setting up a local public history project ideally should consist of taking several steps:

- 1) **Reflecting on the basic assumptions and thematic choices:** What stories will be told? Has the project the ambition to also convey a present-day message?
- 2) **Focusing thematic questions and understanding historical context** in order to ensure the historical accuracy of the project: How to understand the events constituting the thematic core of the project? How can we interpret what happened? To bear out the many-voiced character of history projects should look at the wide variety of (sometimes conflicting) local war stories.
- 3) **Finding answers** to the questions lying at the core of the project. In order to present well-researched stories, it is necessary to delve into archives, libraries and private collections to seek out the relevant local sources and testimonies.
- 4) **Presenting the results** of local research to a wider audience. How can historical content be translated into public history projects? A wide diversity of possible project forms exists: books, exhibitions, digital media, historical walks, living history, educational and artistic projects, etc. Each project form has its own possibilities and limitations. Cooperation is important to bring together different types of expertise.

## War history and peace

It is one of the objectives of the centenary commemoration project of the Flemish Government to convey a message of peace. This ambition has strong support in Flanders, and we can expect a good number of local actors wanting to also find ways to commemorate WWI in a peace-oriented manner. In its report 'The Great War Remembered: Commemoration and Peace in Flanders' Fields' the Flemish Peace Institute investigated how peace-minded war commemoration can be set up in a historically well-considered way. We formulated two guidelines:

- Projects about the war should bear out the many-voiced character of history. Instead of writing consensual local histories of 14-18, we advocate allowing the many different and often conflictual voices of the past to be heard.
- For local projects to remain historically accurate and to avoid approaching the past in a one-sided and anachronistic way, we argue that the idea of peace best arises 'from below'. Through learning the many stories about the impact of the war on daily life in villages and towns, people are encouraged to critically reflect on the meaning of war – and of peace.

### More information?

The book '14-18 in Close-Up. An inspirational guide for local projects about the Great War' is published in Dutch by Acco. More information is available from [www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu](http://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu).