



Introduction: Cultural transfer(s) between Belgium and Germany, 1940-1944. Ruptures and Continuities

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This volume deals with the field of Belgian-German cultural relations during the Nazi occupation of Belgium (1940-1944) from the perspective of the cultural transfer paradigm. Considering the highly political charged context of a totalitarian regime, which is, in this case, simultaneously occupying and waging war with its cultural ‘partners’, we are obviously dealing with large asymmetries of power and a censorship system that ‘blocks, manipulates and controls [...] cross-cultural communication’.¹ We can therefore assume that the terms of the cultural ‘dialogue’ were unilaterally determined by the Nazi German censorial institutions for the purposes of both promoting their ideological world views and realizing the foreign policy goals of the regime. The approach of cultural transfer research allows us to differentiate this assumption without relativizing the overtly repressive and destructive nature of Nazi dictatorship. With its focus on individual agency and interactions, it enables us to further analyse the intricacy of the politically dominated cultural exchange. More specifically, it helps to reveal the – often competing – factors that shaped the transfer and transformation of cultural products, while also displaying the marked tension between the highly repressive totalitarian system and the actual agency of cultural agents.

First developed as a method in the 1980s by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in their work on French-German literary and intellectual relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,² cultural transfer research initially set out to challenge a number of assumptions found in traditional comparative literary studies (*comparatisme*). The most central assumption was the idea that cultures were fixed and separate entities and the exchanges between them a static set of ‘influences’ within a strict national framework. By contrast, transfer studies took as their starting point the process of exchange itself, and regarded the space ‘in between’ communities as key.³ It therefore shifted the focus to the mediating role of individuals and institutions which facilitate the exchange between different communities. The approach does not disregard the effects of national interests and borders and the asymmetries of political, economic and cultural power

¹ F. Billiani, ‘Assessing Boundaries – Censorship and Translation. An Introduction’, in *Modes of Censorship and Translation. National Contexts and Diverse Media*, ed. by F. Billiani (Manchester: St Jerome, 2007), p. 3.

² M. Espagne and M. Werner (eds.), *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988).

³ ‘Le comparatisme présuppose des aires culturelles closes pour se donner les possibilités d’en dépasser ultérieurement les spécificités grâce à des catégories abstraites.’ [Comparatism presupposes closed cultural areas in order to be able to overcome their specificities at a later stage through the use of abstract categories.] M. Espagne, ‘Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle’, in *Genèses* 17 (1994). *Les objets et les choses*, ed. by F. Soubiran-Paillet, p. 112. <https://doi.org/10.3406/genes.1994.1266>. Accessed 17 April 2019.

relations. Rather, it seeks to expose the phenomena which run counter to such seemingly immobile certainties.

Since its beginnings in the 1980s, the research field of cultural transfer has considerably expanded and diversified, fuelled by scientific controversy. The concept of cultural transfer now refers to all phenomena of bilateral and multilateral circulation as resolute acts of mediation, transformation and reinterpretation (*resémantisation*) of cultural artefacts and textual goods across, but also within, geo-cultural and geo-political areas. Inspired by the notion of ‘entangled history’ (*histoire croisée / Verflechtungsgeschichte*),⁴ which takes into account the reciprocity and multidirectionality of transfers and re-transfers, recent studies have investigated the intertwining and non-linearity of a broad spectrum of transfer practices, for instance translations.⁵ As a result, we have come to a point where the different modalities of circulation can be assessed and reassessed in the continuum ‘between transfer and comparison’⁶ at the crossroads not only of comparative literature and cultural history, but also of related approaches and concepts like intercultural studies, the sociology of networks, cross-mapping and hybridity.

Despite its obvious advantages, the approach of cultural transfer studies calls for further explanation when applied to historical periods like the 1930s and early 1940s, such as the German occupation of Belgium during the Second World War. As indicated earlier, in this kind of context, political and military dominance obviously interferes with and reinterprets whatever spontaneous cultural interaction there might be, turning culture into an instrument of power controlled by the stronger party. One might, therefore, assume a one-way relationship between occupier (or ‘centre’) and occupied (or ‘periphery’). However, the cultural exchange during this period was far more intricate for a number of reasons. One of them is that, beyond evident political ruptures, we can observe marked continuities between the periods before, during and after both the Nazi regime and the Second World War. Another reason is that the assumed unilateral cultural dominance and the absolute primacy of ideological factors need to be differentiated.

For the period of the First World War, Hubert Van den Berg has recently shown that the cultural exchange between Germany and Belgium, which was initiated by the occupier’s political objectives, was by no means limited to the unilateral dissemination of German culture in occupied and neutral foreign countries, but aimed at bi- and multilateral forms of cultural cooperation.⁷ This observation leads van den Berg to revise Bourdieu’s categories in relation to the heteronomy and autonomy of the cultural field. For Bourdieu,

⁴ M. Werner and B. Zimmerman, ‘Penser l’histoire croisée: entre empirie et réflexivité’, in *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* 58 (Éditions de l’EHESS), 2003, pp. 7-36.

⁵ See for example S. Göpferich, ‘Translation Studies and Transfer Studies. A Plea for Widening the Scope of Translation Studies’, in *Doubts and Directions in Translation Studies*, ed. by Y. Gambier, M. Shlesinger and R. Stolze (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2007), pp. 27-39; L. D’hulst, ‘(Re)locating Translation History: from Assumed Translation to Assumed Transfer’, in *Translation Studies* 5:2 (2012), pp. 139-55.

⁶ This is also the title of the comprehensive volume presenting the results of an international conference in Saarbrücken: C. Solte-Gresser, H.-J. Lüsebrink, and M. Schmeling (eds.), *Zwischen Transfer und Vergleich. Theorien und Methoden der Literatur- und Kulturbeziehungen aus deutsch-französischer Perspektive* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013). See also the recent volume D. Roig-Sanz, and R. Meylaerts (eds.), *Literary Translation and Cultural Mediators in ‘Peripheral’ Cultures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁷ H. van den Berg, ‘The Autonomous Arts as Black Propaganda. On a Secretive Chapter of German “Foreign Cultural Politics” in the Netherlands and Other Neighbouring Neutral Countries During the First World War’, in *The Autonomy*

the literary or artistic field is the site of a confrontation between the two principles of hierarchization, the heteronomous principle, which concerns those who dominate the field economically and politically, and the autonomous principle [...]. The degree of autonomy varies considerably depending on the epoch and the national traditions that determine the overall structure of the field.⁸

Van den Berg nuances the binary notion of foreign and self-determination by demonstrating that – within the heteronomous framework of German cultural policy – the transfer of literature between the occupied and neutral countries and Germany was not exclusively subordinated to political power. He speaks in this respect of ‘the heteronomous character of artistic autonomy’.⁹

Van den Berg’s focus on the interaction rather than the opposition between heteronomy and autonomy is also fruitful for the study of the cultural exchange between Belgium and Germany during the Nazi regime and the Second World War. As Ine Van linthout points out in her contribution, a constant competition between economic considerations and ideological objectives in the literary field allowed publishers – within obvious limits – more latitude and resulted in a more diverse book market during the Nazi regime than is generally assumed. Cases like the francophone Flemish writer Marie Gevers, analysed by Julie Crombois in this issue, or of publishers like Alber/Herder discussed in Theresia Feldmann and Frederike Zindler’s article, illustrate this.

In occupied Belgium, the military regime was less rigid than its civil counterpart in countries like the Netherlands, which gave a certain degree of freedom to Belgian publishers as well.¹⁰ Furthermore, since literary import from countries like the Netherlands was severely restricted during the war, Belgium’s book market flourished during the occupation: never before had there been so many publishing houses active in the segment of high-brow and entertainment literature, both collaborationist and others.¹¹ In the context of the present issue, it should be noted that

of Literature at the Fins de Siècles (1900 and 2000), ed. by G.J. Dorleijn, R. Grüttemeier and L. Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), pp. 71-120.

⁸ J. Jurt, *Das literarische Feld. Das Konzept Pierre Bourdieus in Theorie und Praxis*. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1995), p. 175.

⁹ Van den Berg, *The Autonomous Arts*, pp. 114-5. For a more extensive discussion of the interaction between culture and politics in Germany based on insights from system theory see Pawel Zajas’ recent contribution: P. Zajas, ‘Literatur und auswärtige Kulturpolitik. Thesen zu einem Spannungsverhältnis’, in *Internationales Archiv für die Sozialgeschichte der Literatur* 44:1 (2019), pp. 66-99.

¹⁰ See A. Bruinsma, ‘Het boekbedrijf tijdens de bezetting in Vlaanderen’, in *Inktpatronen. De Tweede Wereldoorlog en het boekbedrijf in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, ed. by H. Renders, L. Kuitert and E. Bruinsma (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2007), pp. 22-38; M. Beyen, ‘Het cultuurleven. Een late terugkeer naar de romantiek’, in *België tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, ed. by M. Van den Wijngaert e.a. (Antwerpen: Standaard Uitgeverij, 2004), pp. 125-42; H. Van de Vijver, *België in de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Deel 8: Het cultureel leven tijdens de bezetting* (Kapellen: DNB/Pelckmans, 1990) and K. Absilis, *Vechten tegen de bierkaai. Over het uitgevershuis van Angèle Manteau (1932-1970)* (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009).

¹¹ For Flemish publishers, see L. Simons, *Het boek in Vlaanderen sinds 1800: Een cultuurgeschiedenis* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2013) and Renders, Kuitert and Bruinsma, *Inktpatronen*; for francophone Belgian publishers, see M. Fincœur, *Contribution à l’histoire de l’édition francophone belge sous l’occupation allemande (1940-1944)*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2006).

Belgian collaborationists and the Nazi German regime did not necessarily share the same vision of Belgium's future. For instance, the idea of a *Groot-Nederland* [Greater Netherlands] as imagined by large parts of the Flemish movement, which was no option for the occupier, compromised several German-friendly proponents of the Flemish movement in the eyes of the occupier, as can be learned from the curious case of Frans Haepers discussed by Simon Richter in this issue.

Against this background, the contributions in this volume investigate the transfer of literary texts between Belgium and Germany during the Second World War, as well as its possible continuities or ruptures with the pre-war period. Due to their cultural and symbolic capital and their intimate connection to a specific community, literary texts enjoy a privileged status in power struggles between nations and become an important instance of what political scientist Joseph Nye has termed 'soft power'.¹² It is clear that the Nazi regime recognized the strategic importance of the literary field. A speaking example is the foundation of the periodical *Europäische Literatur* and the *Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung* [European Writers' Union] in 1941 by the Propaganda Ministry, which was attended by writers from fifteen different nations. Benjamin George Martin argues that this initiative constituted an attempt 'to re-order the international literary field into a European form, designed to help legitimate Nazi Germany's New Order Europe'.¹³ Furthermore, and much against general belief, the book medium in Nazi Germany firmly stood its ground next to the modern mass media film and radio. Its unique set of characteristics such as its cultural symbolic value and long tradition, but also its handy format, low production cost, high accessibility, sustainable character and the wide range of topics and audiences it could address, made the book an important propaganda tool for the Nazi regime.¹⁴ Books of particular strategic interest were literary translations, whose capacity to 'wield enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures'¹⁵ made them a privileged means of cultural transfer. As such, translation was a valuable instrument not only in the hands of Nazi literary institutions, but also in the hands of cultural mediators such as publishers, editors and translators.

The case studies in this special issue analyse literary translations both from and into German in keeping with the insights of transfer studies outlined above. They focus on the selection, translation and reception of the texts, as well as to the role that both individuals (translators, publishers, editors, journalists, etc.) and official institutions in Nazi Germany and occupied Belgium play as cultural mediators. The often-paradoxical relationship between them is tackled and reflected in several contributions.

¹² Originally in J. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). The concept has since been adopted in cultural studies at large; see, for instance, D. Clarke, 'Theorising the role of cultural products in cultural diplomacy from a Cultural Studies perspective', in *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22:2 (2016), pp. 147-63.

¹³ B. G. Martin, "'European Literature' in the Nazi New Order: The Cultural Politics of the European Writers' Union, 1941-3", in *Journal of Contemporary History* 48:3 (2013), p. 486. See also: F.-R. Hausmann, *"Dichte, Dichter, tage nicht!". Die Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung in Weimar 1941-1948* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2004), which considers Dutch, Flemish and Walloon authors.

¹⁴ See I. Van linthout, *Das Buch in der nationalsozialistischen Propagandapolitik* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), especially pp. 37-88.

¹⁵ L. Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 67.

Ine Van linthout's survey, which opens the issue, demonstrates how Flemish translated literature became a staple in German publishing, especially after the proclamation of a general ban on literature from enemy states during the Second World War. As Flemish fiction was claimed to originate from a 'kindred people', it was generally recommended by the Nazi literary controlling apparatus, even if its content – often Catholic in nature – did not conform to Nazi German ideology. The attempts of literary offices to provoke a canon change by steering publishers towards a different selection of source texts did not have the desired result within the twelve years of Nazi dictatorship. Apart from strategic policy choices on the part of the regime, this discrepancy between official discourse and the actual book production points to the agency of publishers, authors and translators themselves.

Next to individual book publications, translation anthologies are a fruitful source for the study of cultural transfer processes. The selection of texts as well as the addition of paratextual information offer interesting insights into the motives of the mediators behind such volumes, as is demonstrated by Theresia Feldmann and Frederike Zindler in their analysis of two anthologies of Flemish prose produced in Germany during the Second World War. A detailed reconstruction of the backgrounds and the explicit policy of the publishing houses (Eugen Diederichs Verlag and Karl Alber Verlag) as well as the editors of the collections (Filip De Pillecijn and Karl Jacobs) reveal two different views on Flemish literature and identify affinities with and deviations from Nazi language conventions and ideological positions.

As Julie Crombois demonstrates in her article, the work of Marie Gevers imported elements into the German literary system of the 'Third Reich' which did not exactly match the official line; indeed, her literature was deemed 'a positive alternative to the so-called Blut-und-Boden literature' by one of her non-aligned German publishers. Propaganda institutions could not fully appropriate this type of literature (nor could it Streuvels' or Timmermans' work) and had to work their way around the author's francophone background. Crombois argues that it was – apart from Gevers' depiction of an idyllic, rural Flanders – especially the image of women developed in her work that made it palpable for the German authorities.

Simon Richter's contribution investigates the somewhat unexpected figure of William of Orange in Flemish collaborationist publications during the Second World War. Not really an icon of the Flemish movement or organizations close to the German occupying forces, William of Orange makes a surprising appearance in the right-wing journal *Volk en Kultuur*, while two German novels dedicated to his life are translated into Dutch. The underlying idea was that of a 'Greater Netherlands' unifying the Low Countries, which was at odds with the official German foreign policy. Rudolf Kremser's *Der stille Sieger* [The Silent Winner] in particular boasts a depiction of William of Orange that hardly fits in with any political vision the Nazis might have had for Flanders or Belgium, or for the Netherlands for that matter. What this case also shows, is how a historical figure can circulate as a symbol or 'meme' between cultures and nations, either to unveil or create common ground, or to emphasize differences and contradictions.

Finally, Hubert Roland casts a fresh look on the wartime activities in occupied Belgium of the fallen figurehead of deconstruction Paul de Man. De Man acquired a solid track record as a cultural mediator up to 1943. Besides writing a host of reviews on German, French and Belgian literature – which included incriminating passages on 'Jewish' literature – he also worked as a translator during the war. As a critic, he broached the differences as well as the exchange between German and French literature and thus showed a keen interest in what would now be called 'intercultural' phenomena, with Belgium acting as an 'in-between' or even a model for a future

Europe under German aegis. As a translator, de Man's choices of source texts and translation strategies might be called erratic, but never explicitly nationalist or collaborationist.

All contributions demonstrate that cultural exchange with Nazi Germany between 1940 and 1944 was not necessarily determined by Nazi German ideological objectives, and that, therefore, neither the motives nor the outcome of Belgian-German cultural transfers can be analysed in simple static schemes. Ideological criteria were side-lined whenever interests of a political, economic, military or other nature were considered more pressing. There was room for individual decisions despite totalitarian control, and there were networks of mediating instances operating under and on the radar without explicitly resisting Nazi politics. While the present issue demonstrates this for literary texts, it would be interesting to expand its approach to other cultural fields, such as film, theatre, music and art, for which some promising studies have already paved the way.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For example R. Vande Winkel, 'Film Distribution in Occupied Belgium (1940-1944): German Film Politics and Its Implementation by the "Corporate" Organisations and the Film Guild', in *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis*, 20:1 (2017), pp. 46-78; C. Brent Murray, V. Dufour and M. Comaz (eds.), 'Musical Life in Belgium during the Second World War', special issue of *Revue belge de musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* LXIX (2016); V. Devillez, *Le retour à l'ordre: art et politique en Belgique 1918-1945* (Brussels: Éditions Labor, 2003).

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