

Research vademecum

Individual files on foreigners opened by the *Sûreté publique* (*Police des étrangers*)

(1835-1943)



Content

- The individual files on foreigners opened by the *Sûreté publique* 3
 - a. The foreigners' file – a test of strength with the central administration..... 3
 - b. The alien (foreigner), an administrative definition evolving over the years 5
 - c. The foreigners' administration from its beginning until today 6
- Preservation and accessibility of the individual files 7
 - a. The shortcomings of the archival fonds 7
 - b. The individual files of the Foreigners' Police transferred to the National Archives of Belgium.... 7
 - c. File access conditions 8
- Information value of the files..... 8
 - a. Document types and research possibilities..... 8
 - b. Research strategies 12
- Related sources 14
- Bibliography 16



In 1948 and 1965, the *Sûreté publique* (Public Safety Office) transferred nearly one million individual aliens' files opened by the *Police des étrangers* (Aliens' Police) between 1835 and 1912 to the National Archives of Belgium (NAB). During the second semester of 2008, a third transfer of the files compiled between 1913 and 1943 further increased this impressive amount of records. At present, over two million files stored on 5025 metres of shelves are preserved at the NAB.

All files – those of the 19th century as well as those of the 20th century – are arranged in chronological order based on their date of opening.

The access key to this unique and essential source for genealogical research and for the history of migration and the settling of foreigners in Belgium is the original system of alphabetical name cards.

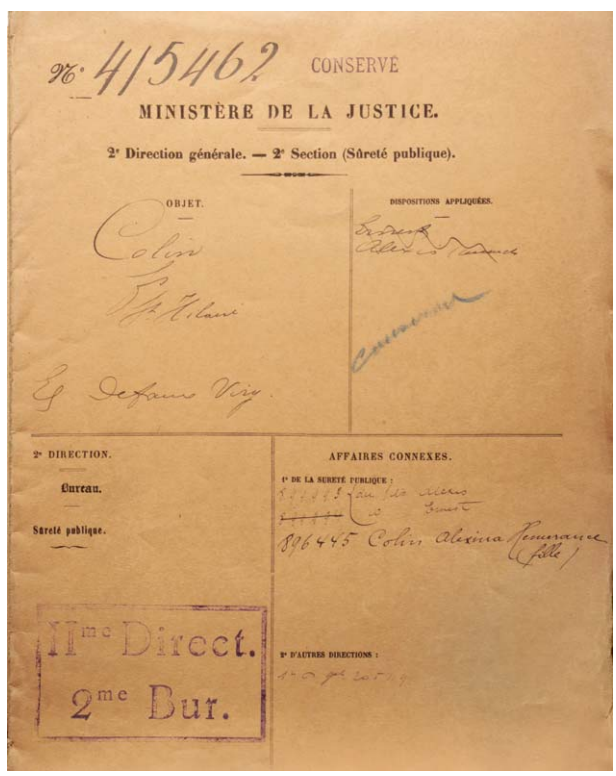
This research vademecum provides reference points so that professional and amateur researchers can get hold of crucial information to successfully carry out their investigations. The following subjects will be laid out: the historical background, the creation, preservation and informational value of the files. Furthermore, indications on research methods and related sources will be given.

1 The individual files on foreigners opened by the *Sûreté publique*

a. The foreigners' file – a test of strength with the central administration

In 1839, the Belgian state authority assigned the surveillance of all foreigners present on the national territory to the *Sûreté publique*, an autonomous body under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. To maintain public order, this administration was charged among others with the expulsion of unwanted foreigners. Carrying out this task efficiently was, however, impossible without the support of all communal administrative services. For this reason, the communal administrations were instructed to immediately inform the *Sûreté* of every inscription of foreigners to the communal ad hoc registers. Upon notification, the *Sûreté* verified if the foreigner indeed had the right to remain on the national territory. If this was the case, the person was nevertheless put under close surveillance during his or her stay in Belgium. For this purpose, the *Sûreté* could count on the collaboration of every authority, including the army and judicial power: they were obliged to transmit a copy of any information they held on foreigners they had been in contact with.

The huge mass of information gathered was centralised in a giant “database avant la lettre” made up of thousands of files. Each file had a S.P. (“*Sûreté Publique*”) or O.V. (“*Openbare Veiligheid*”)



A typical wrapper of an individual file on a foreigner. The series number is inscribed at the top of the document, underneath comes the full name (maybe also alternative spellings or pseudonyms) of the person in question. The lower right case contains the names and file numbers of blood relatives or close acquaintances, allowing researchers to reconstruct parts of the foreigners' social network.

number serving as a sort of registration number by which each migrant could be administratively identified. In general, the files on foreigners who presented themselves spontaneously to the civil status authorities when arriving in the country, comprise at least the information disclosed by the communal administration. In the other case – i.e. when foreigners did not register upon arrival on the national territory – files were opened on the occasion of identity checks carried out by the police or the Gendarmerie, after a contact with a public authority, or after a medical treatment in a hospital. Beside these files opened on foreigners who had indeed set foot on the national territory, the *Sûreté publique* created, as a preventive measure, files about subversive and criminal foreigners who might enter the national territory.

The fear of anarchism at the end of the 19th century among others led to the opening of a large number of files on wanted “terrorists”. Most of these wanted people never set foot on the Belgian territory!

In 1846, the administrative provisions for foreigners present on the Belgian territory were tightened. On the occasion of the first population census, the authorities set up an administrative monitoring of all habitants, regardless of their nationality. Every person who changed his or her place of residence had to notify the competent communal administration. This measure turned out to be very revolutionary and innovative at the time. In other European countries for instance, registration of the inhabitants was not

considered as part of the tasks assigned to the state authority. In France, the inscription of the citizens in the population registers was deemed detrimental to individual liberties. Only in 1888, a first exception was accepted... but only for foreigners. From this date onwards, these people had to present themselves at the town hall when settling in a French commune. In Belgium however, population registers were meticulously held by the authorities as early as the second half of the 19th century in order to trace “interpersonal” mobility – a proceeding that benefited the *Sûreté*.

The fear of anarchism at the end of the 19th century among others led to the opening of a large number of files on wanted “terrorists”

Based on the provisions it had taken, the central administration initially believed that it could have at its disposal a continually updated database of foreign-

ners. However, the ambitious plan to trace every foreigner’s movement turned out to be unrealistic for most of the 19th century. Too many obstacles kept the dream from becoming true. Social autonomy was still strong at the time, as the state authority was not yet developed very much. Classic liberalism, with its core idea of a “watchman state” that reassured the bourgeoisie and the ruling classes, was the predominant ideology at the time. Furthermore, local authorities were not very keen to communicate each and every administrative act regarding a foreigner to the central authorities. They were in fact quite negligent on the matter, especially when it concerned foreigners who came from a good family. The foreigners for their part were not very much in favour of a state qualified as “indiscrete” and considered



The original, alphabetically sorted file system of the Foreigners’ Police. Today, these name cards can be consulted publicly on microfilm. In addition the name and file number of the foreigner, his or her date and place of birth and sometimes even the profession are also recorded.

the obligation of having to present themselves to the communal administration as an intrusion into their private life. Insufficient administrative capacity of the state authority and personnel shortages – at the *Sûreté publique* among others – also help to explain the identified grievances. The numerous circular letters in which the *Sûreté* reiterated the obligation to inform of any contact with foreigners denotes a certain nonchalance towards the whole matter. There can be no doubt that information emanating from the local authorities often did not attain the *Sûreté*. The late registration of many foreigners, who sometimes had spent more than a decade on Belgian territory, indicates – as if proof were needed – that the central administration encountered difficulties in obtaining the desired information.

However, the gradual decline, starting at the end of the 19th century, of the number of files opened on the occasion of a regularisation shows that the grip was being tightened. This more efficient surveillance of foreigners was made possible by reinforcing the social monitoring carried out by the authorities by means of an extension of their administrative capacities. At the same time, clarification of the administrative terminology that emerged in this period brought forward an improvement in the identification of individuals and groups to be registered. Beforehand, the percentage of dossiers mistakenly opened due to the use of vague terminology and the ambiguous use of the concept of “alien” was very high.

b. The alien, an administrative definition evolving over the years

The individual files on foreigners bear proof of the shift in the meaning of the notion foreigner that occurred in the course of the 19th century. Only when the interventionist state saw the light of day at the turn of the 20th century, a first legal definition emerged: the alien was then chiefly a person who did not possess the Belgian nationality. Ironically, this definition did not become accepted among all of our bureaucrats immediately. A revealing fact of this attitude is that the Gendarmerie for a long time (until the mid-19th century) used a standard document that

perfectly exemplifies this hesitating attitude: the document mentions the arrest of a supposed alien (“*un individu qui nous paraissait étranger*” – “an individual who seemed foreign to us”). It was not before the second half of the 19th century that the “*procès-verbal d’arrestation d’un étranger*” (“minutes of the arrest of an alien”) came into being, while the references to the nationality of those arrested only appeared from 1891 onwards. The next step was realised after the First World War when the decision to add a S.P. (“*Sûreté Publique*”) or O.V. (“*Openbare Veiligheid*”) number to the identity cards of foreigners was taken. No more doubt about the citizenship of a person then!

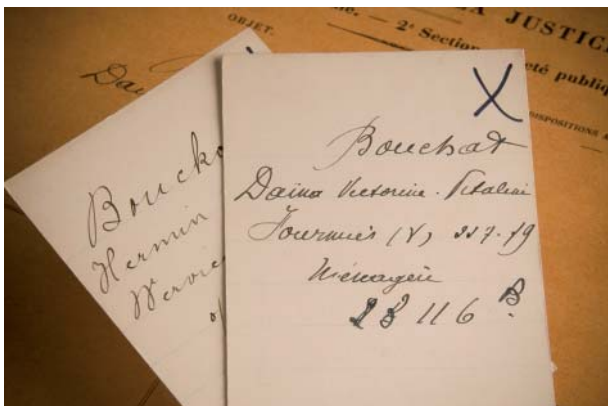


Sample of an identity card for foreigners.

The foreigners of the 19th century are above all unknown persons and newcomers. These foreigners did not always possess a foreign nationality however, and inversely, familiar people did not always have Belgian nationality. Ethnic or “indigenous” Belgians could therefore be considered as foreigners while children of immigrants could, irrespective of their legal status, be considered as Belgians. This situation did not prevent the retroactive opening of files during the 19th century on aliens who had already been residing in the country for a long time. These were for the most part second generation immigrants – descendants of the first wave of immigrants – who did not possess Belgian nationality despite their long stay in the country and who were identified as such (i.e. aliens) when they presented themselves before an administration on the occasion of a marriage or a declaration of birth.

The ambiguous definition of the foreigner also shines through from a sub-series of the series of individual files. Indeed, the sub-series B that starts

with number 69 (the first preserved file) and ends with number 23,174 concerns only Belgians who did not owe their Belgian nationality to a stay in the country **and** to ties of blood. Among the people who did not fulfil these two conditions were the children of Belgian emigrants living abroad. When they presented themselves at a Belgian communal administration upon return to the home country of their parents, the administration considered them as aliens most of the time and erroneously informed the *Sûreté publique*. The sub-series also contains information about women of foreign origin who obtained Belgian nationality through marriage with a Belgian citizen. In general, these files are not very detailed: their content is limited to the birth certificates of the partners and to the marriage certificate. In the case of women who already lived in Belgium before marrying a Belgian citizen, the documents of the initial file were also transferred to sub-series B before the marriage.



Index card of the “b-series” compiled from individual files on Belgian citizens.

c. The foreigners’ administration from its beginning until today

The Aliens’ Police, in French “Police des étrangers” (a division of the *Sûreté publique*), came into being almost simultaneously with the creation of the Belgian state. The first “real” aliens’ file, opened at the end of the 1830s, has the number 24,968. In 1876, the series already counted 300,000 files, then 500,000 in 1889 and 750,000 in 1904. The millionth file was opened in 1912 and in 2000 the number of five million files opened was reached.

The *Sûreté publique* carried out its task of registering foreigners until 1994. At the end of the First World War, it was split into two sections: the first section’s mission was to monitor all subversive elements in society, whereas the second one, known as the “Police des étrangers”, was to manage the stay of all immigrants. From this moment in time, the two bodies separately set up files about aliens; one body collected information of political nature while the other one gathered data about migration and residence. The democratisation of the political decision-making process and the increase of state interventionism in socio-economic life after 1918 allowed the Aliens’ Police to reinforce its administrative control over immigrants. The Aliens’ Police now also took an interest in foreigners as economic actors. Hence, immigration without prior authorisation by the government could be criminalised. During the same period, the first cornerstones of a special statute for political refugees were laid. This statute allowed certain “illegal” immigrants to remain on the national territory. Yet, it was not before the end of the Second World War that an international policy on refugees would be worked out.

On August 26th, 1977, the denomination of the direction “Police des étrangers” was amended and became *Office des étrangers* (Foreigners’ Office). In 1994, the direction was placed under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior (it was under the Ministry of Justice before) and thereby left the institutional sphere of the *Sûreté de l’Etat* (National Security Service).

a. The shortcomings of the archival fonds

The files opened by the *Sûreté publique* during the 19th century are preserved in a very fragmented manner. Many files have been destroyed at the end of the 19th century due to a lack of storage capacity. The *Sûreté* only preserved the files used to document the jurisprudence and its legal competences. The same was the case for the files on foreigners still residing in Belgium (or who possibly had acquired Belgian nationality) at the time of the selection of the records and for the files on foreigners who had been expelled or classified as “dangerous” individuals. Many files on foreigners in transit, having had a short stay in Belgium or having resided only for a little while in Belgium, were destroyed. The numbers speak for themselves: for example, only 300 files out of 1322 opened in 1884 still exist. Fortunately, these shortcomings can be made up for by the analysis of the records of foreigners preserved by the municipal and communal archives services. The City Archives of Antwerp hold 134,900 individual files on foreigners from the period 1842-1910, that is to say all of the records opened during this time. The City Archives of Brussels for their part preserve the records on foreigners opened by the communal administration since 1860.

The central series of individual files on foreigners opened by the *Sûreté publique* is almost complete from 1889 onwards (i.e. more or less from file number 500,000 onwards). Nevertheless, sample checks for the period 1889-1943 indicate that in average 1 to 2% of the files are missing. This can partly be explained by the fact that the *Sûreté publique* from time to time cancelled a file, for instance when a newly arrived foreigner joined his/her wife/husband or his/her family already settled in Belgium. The documents on this newcomer were then integrated into the existing file. This method allowed a better traceability and an improved monitoring of the kinships among foreigners. Also, the files on foreigners living in Belgium under a double identity were merged once this fraud was discovered.

The preservation of almost the whole of the records from the end of the 19th century to today allows researchers to trace the phenomenon of migration in the way it was recorded administratively in its entirety. For the period prior to 1889 however, only questions regarding the residence of the immigrants and the policy on foreigners can be studied.

Only 300 files out of 1322 opened in 1884 still exist

b. The individual files of the Aliens’ Police transferred to the National Archives of Belgium

As already mentioned in the introduction, the vast archival fonds of the individual files of the Aliens’ Police has been transferred to the National Archives of Belgium in several steps:

- 1948 : transfer of the files number 69 to 499,999 (i.e. the files opened between 1835 and December 1889).
- 1965 : transfer of the files number 500,000 to 999,999 (i.e. the files opened between December 1889 and May 1912).
- 2008 :
 - transfer of the files number 1,000,000 to 1,668,399 (i.e. the files opened between May 1912 and December 1930).
 - transfer of the files number A 1 to A 419,999 (i.e. the files opened between December 1930 and June 1943).

c. File access conditions

The archival fonds is chronologically sorted and file numbers get allocated as the records are created. On the other hand, closing a file depends on a series of factors regarding the life of the individuals concerned (see below) and consequently varies from one file to the other. The opening date of a file is thus an objective criterion for determining whether the file is publicly accessible or not. As a general rule, a file becomes accessible to researchers 100 years after its opening date. This means that over 30,000 additional files are opened to research each year. Of course, everyone can access his or her personal file upon presentation of his or her identity card. Persons entitled on the other hand, must prove a paternity with the person to whom the file relates and produce an ad hoc authorisation or proxy. In the case of historical or genealogical research, consultation of the files not yet accessible due to the

restrictions of legal dispositions regarding the protection of personal data can be authorised on the basis of an exemption granted by the National Archivist. Such an exemption mentions the filing of a reasoned request for consultation and a covenant on the non-divulgence of the data related to the private life of the person(s) in question.



The files in the depository of the National Archives.

3 Information value of the files

a. Document types and research possibilities

The historical and scientific value of the individual files on foreigners is partly based on the large number of bodies implied in the foreigner registration and supervision policy that have contributed to the establishment of this invaluable source. As a reminder, each time a foreigner was registered in the population register, the *Sûreté publique* had to be informed; the *Sûreté* also was supposed to receive all administrative acts relating to foreigners from the police services or the judiciary. While most Belgian cities and communes also have opened files on foreigners, the central series produced by the Aliens' Police is certainly the most dense and exhaustive file series because the records are significantly thicker as they are treated on a higher administrative level. Indeed, the central series bears on the immigration of foreigners on the whole Belgian territory, while the communal services only supervised immigration on the territory of the commune. Only the central administration was

able to largely monitor foreigners who changed residence often or lead a vagabond life because this administration was the sole one having all information of the different communes and other public services at its disposal.

Usually, one file was opened per foreigner. There were exceptions however: in case a whole family migrated, underage children and wives were recorded in the same file as the one on the father or husband. Regarding the content, the first document in a typical file is generally a registration declaration issued by the commune. Despite the lack of formal homogeneity, the intelligence sheets handed over by the communes most of the time contain standard entries: marital and professional status of the foreigner, documents in his or her possession upon arrival in the country, period of time he/she intends to spend in the country, etc. Each relocation and change of residence led to the writing of a new notice of registration. These documents offer a snapshot about the dynamic of immigrant households and

provide information on the consecutive changes in their professional and family situation. The communal intelligence sheets constitute an excellent source about the origin and the journey of foreigners.

The files also extensively document the core moments in the lives of the foreigners. The records of the civil status office certify in a very precise way the births, marriages and deaths, and also provide information about the professional and family situation of the immigrant. Together with the declarations of arrival, these birth, marriage and death certificates form the major part of the documents usually found in the individual aliens' files. But let us be clear: before the beginning of the 20th century, these files only rarely contained ID photographs. In this regard, the files of dangerous foreigners are the exception, as they often contain photographs and fingerprints of the person in question, but the use

of this identification method only became widespread after the Second World War. The identification sheets (French: "fiches de signalement") containing information on morphology, shape of the face, hair colour, eye colour, etc. on the other hand became increasingly exhaustive and detailed as the 19th century advanced.

The files furthermore enable to identify social networks. The cover sheet provides, beside last name and forename, the file numbers of family members or related persons (employees, business contacts, etc.).

When doubts about the real identity of a foreigner arose or when he or she represented a potential danger for public order or for the safety of the state, a tightened surveillance was put in place in collaboration with the communal authorities (administrative services and Police). Moreover, the least suspicion of criminal behaviour lead to

MINISTÈRE DE LA JUSTICE
Arrivée d'Étrangers venant d'un autre Pays

2^e Direction Générale
Province de *Hainaut* Arrondissement Administratif de *Seraing*

(Sûreté Publique)
N^o *42266*

COMMUNE de *Draï*
Demouré : *Quai place de la cité N^o 8*

1 ^{er} RENSEIGNEMENTS destinés à établir l'identité de	NOM & PRÉNOMS	LIEU et DATE DE LA NAISSANCE (1)	RÉSIDENCE ACTUELLE	OBSERVATIONS
L'étranger	<i>Colin François</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 4/août 1849</i>	<i>Draï</i>	
Sa femme	<i>Yvonne de Woluwe</i>	<i>Léopold</i>		
Ses enfants	<i>Colin Ernest</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 18 août 1881</i>		
	<i>et Francis</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 43 ans</i>		
	<i>et Andriane</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 33 ans</i>		
	<i>et Albert</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 35 ans</i>		
	<i>et Josephine</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 37 ans</i>		
	<i>et Amélie</i>	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 29 ans</i>		
2 ^o Nationalité	<i>Française</i>			
3 ^o Lieu et date du mariage	<i>Saint-Pol-de-Léon 11/11/1874</i>			
4 ^a) Prénoms, date et lieu de naissance du père du chef de famille	<i>François Marie-Jeanne Sans Nam</i>			
4 ^b) Nom, prénoms, date et lieu de naissance de la mère du chef de famille	<i>Josephine Braquet, S^t-Pol-de-Léon</i>			
5 ^o Profession, occupations ou moyen d'existence réel de l'intéressé	<i>Voyageur de Commerce</i>			
6 ^o Domicile légal à l'étranger (2)	<i>S^t-Pol-de-Léon</i>			
7 ^o Dernière résidence à l'étranger (3)	<i>id</i>			

SURETÉ PUBLIQUE
N^o *415462* le *29/11/1909*

TRANSIS LE
A LE S. PRODUIT DE LETTRE
A LE S. PRODUIT DE LETTRE

1^o Date de l'arrivée en Belgique *18 Septembre 1893*

2^o Résidence antérieure en Belgique (1) *Saint-Pol-de-Léon, Seraing, Courcelles, Tache de Marché, Établissements Sain & Pire*

3^o Date de l'arrivée dans la commune *21.09.1893*

4^o Nature des papiers, leur date, autorités qui les ont délivrés, lieu et date de leur délivrance (2) *Carte Militaire Française et carte d'identité belge.*

5^o Est-il réfugié politique? *Non*

6^o Condamnations antérieures

7^o Déclaration en sujet de la volonté exprimée par l'étranger de résider plus de six mois *Oui*

8^o Situation militaire *Comme*

9^o Observations

Éventuellement, indication des raisons qui, d'après l'administration communale, opposent à l'établissement de l'étranger dans le pays.

Draï le *23 Janvier* 1909

(Signature de l'étranger) *Colin Colin*

Le *Draï* Commissaire de Police, *Marlot*

Impression Administrative du Commerce, BAISACQ-TILMAN, à Lillo

(1) Indiquer la rue, le numéro et l'époque des séjours.
(2) Indiquer les papiers que l'on a eu ou qu'on a eu en possession pendant son séjour en Belgique, avec leur date et leur destination.
N. B. — Les bulletins scolaires ne sont pas à transmettre à M. le Directeur Général de la Sûreté Publique, concernant tout étranger nouvellement arrivé en Belgique.
Les copies des bulletins, pour l'étranger, arrivent d'une autre commune belge. Il en est de même pour le départ d'un étranger qui quitte la Belgique en se dirigeant vers une autre commune belge. (N^o M. Justice en dernier lieu.)

Almost every individual file on a foreigner also contains a communal intelligence sheet. When a foreigner came to Belgium for the first time, administrative information was recorded in this sheet, such as origin, duration of stay, and family and professional situation. When the foreigner moved to another commune, a new form was filled in.

the drafting of reports that inevitably ended up in the file. In case of an arrest, the Gendarmerie transferred the “*procès-verbal d’arrestation d’un étranger*” (minutes of the arrest of a foreigner) to the *Sûreté publique*. This document sometimes contains information about the criminal record of the arrested person and about his or her social network in Belgium. A sentence before a court of law, an imprisonment, or a stay at a vagrants’ colony (French: “*Colonies de bienfaisance de l’Etat*”) paved the way for the opening of new individual intelligence sheets. These documents must of course be analysed with a critical eye because foreigners involved in such deeds were on their guard against the authorities and revealed almost nothing about themselves apart from their administrative identity. The information contained in these documents, except those on arrests and internment, often overlaps with other data recorded in the files.

Politically active foreigners were not very numerous. However, their files usually count many pages. The *Sûreté publique* was informed in detail about the events and gatherings these people attended. The files sometimes contain correspondence, press articles or publications written by those who were observed. It has been estimated that one out of four hundred foreigners (among which such famous names as Karl Marx and

The individual files created by the Foreigners’ Police offer multiple research tracks

Just as its opening, the closure of an individual file on a foreigner can occur in different manners: after a death in Belgium (file terminated by death certificate); after naturalisation (file terminated by royal decree on naturalisation or by a reference number to a naturalisation file); upon voluntary/involuntary and definitive departure from Belgium. However, records indicate that the communal public services were very rarely informed of departures: they left mostly without notifying their departure and this was only regularised later. In the case of a simple expulsion or an expulsion under Gendarmerie escort, relevant documents were of course included in the file.

The individual files by the Aliens’ Police offer multiple research tracks: analysis of individual or collective migration routes and strategies for social promotion, tracking of the changes occurring in certain industrial sectors (diamonds, leather, etc.), study of foreigners’ criminality or of their political or trade union engagement. The files also offer the possibility to better understand the daily way of working of the Aliens’ Police and the reception policy regarding foreigners. Yet, the files on foreigners have to be dealt with prudently and interpreted with a critical eye. The recording of personal (i.e. biographical) data in such a file is not a neutral act. Some aspects of the foreigner’s private life were



Files opened before 1918 rarely contain photographs. Pictures were often used in the fight against criminal foreigners, as in the case of the Russian engineer Jozef Serafin (pictured above, file no. 762.378), perpetrator of the attack on the Russian minister M. Jadowski in Bern in 1894. Serafin has never set foot on Belgian territory: The creation of his file was merely a preventive measure.



Shortly after the turn of the century, the first fingerprints appear in files on criminal foreigners. These documents form an important source for studying the evolution of police investigation techniques.

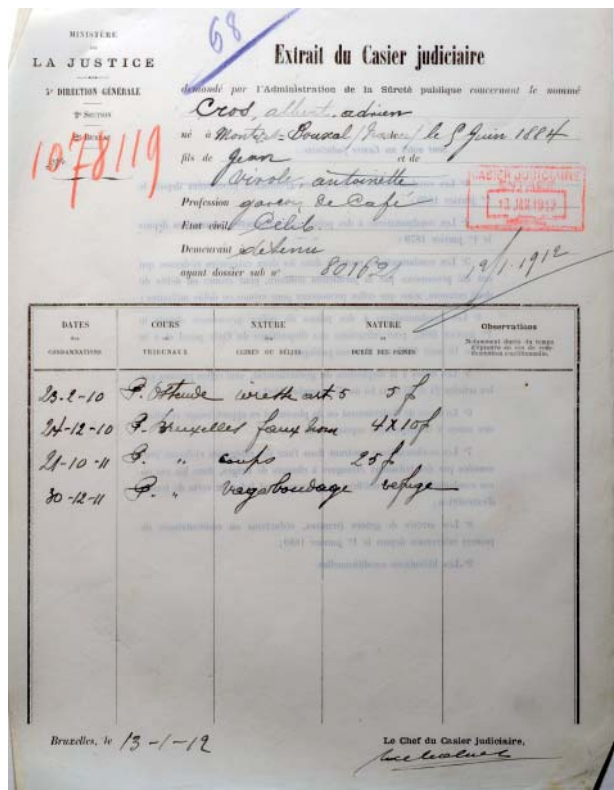
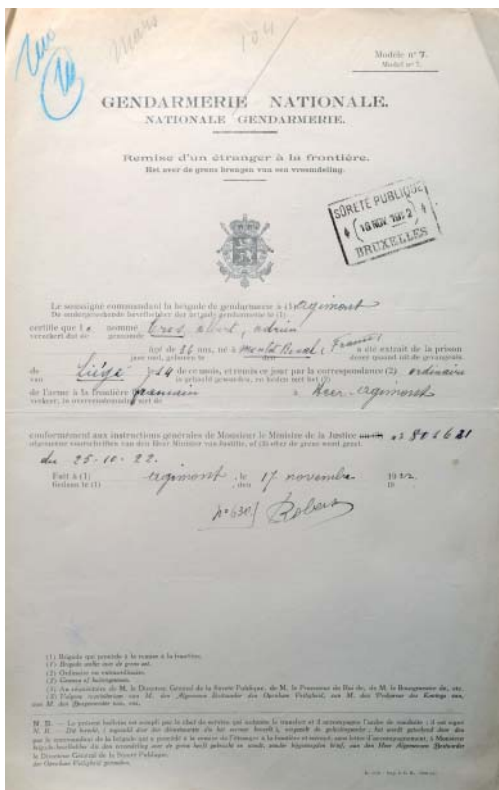
minimised or even ignored while others were overstated. For example, all condemnations of a foreigner during his or her stay in Belgium and all violations of law, as insignificant as they might have been (bilking, brawl in a café, illegal parking, fine for having let a dog run in a park, etc.), were systematically recorded in the files.

Being the result of bureaucratic action, the files on foreigners do not constitute a real biography but rather the trace of an administrative identity that helped meeting the *Sûreté's* desire to protect public order. The *Sûreté* opened the files and determined which documents they ought to contain. Consequently, the foreigner's life before the opening of a file, his or her means and the motives that lead him or her to leave the country of origin remain largely unknown. There is also very few information available about the foreigner's social, economic and cultural integration into Belgian society, unless he or she had been marginalised. Each file reflects in a pathological manner the distrustful eye that the *Sûreté* kept on the foreign population. There is

Being the result of bureaucratic action, the files on foreigners do not constitute a real biography

virtually no possibility for the foreigner to directly act on his or her individual file. For the foreigner to be interrogated and to be able to tell the story of his or her life, exceptional circumstances must arise, such as the threat of an expulsion. The reports are barely objective because they often blend the defence strategy of the foreigner – who tried to accommodate his or her case to the expectations of the *Sûreté* and to the way in which the *Sûreté* pictured a decent immigrant – with the suspicions that the *Sûreté* had.

Until now, the individual files of the Aliens' Police preserved at the National Archives of Belgium have mainly been consulted for biographical research. However, there are a few exceptions, for instance: Jean-Philippe Schreiber (1996) studied the Jewish immigration of the 19th century, Frank Caestecker (2000) worked on the immigration occurring between 1840 and 1940, and Insa Meinen (2005) delved into the deportation of Jews. The large potential of these files for historical research has in a large way still to be explored. Indeed, these traces left



Each breach of the public order by a foreigner is documented. Files on criminal foreigners among others contain excerpts of the criminal record (right hand picture). When a foreigner went too far, he was expelled from the country as documented by the shown protocol of the former National Gendarmerie (left hand picture).

by individual and collective mobility, and shaped by the language and customs of administrations, enable a unique outlook on the daily reality of migration. By means of these files, aspects of social life can also be discovered, especially with regard to social groups that only left few traces in history. And finally, these files are a source that documents in detail the rise of the interventionist state and its grip on social life. Therefore, one must always bear in mind the manner in which this source has been created and organised when consulting it. These traces of the past in the form of individual files exist because the authorities have created them at the time for a particular purpose and left them as heritage for future generations.

b. Research strategies

Access to the individual files of the Aliens' Police can be gained via the alphabetically sorted index cards of names. The original cards were transferred to the State Archives together with the files but they are not available in the reading room. Researchers have, however, free access to the copies of these cards on microfilm and microfiche. The cards are subdivided into three series: the first series bears on the oldest files (roughly until file no. 500,000), the second series concerns the files numbered 500,000 to 1,668,399 and the third series relates to the A-Series (files A 1 – A 419,999). The cards for the family names beginning with the letter K or L are unfortunately missing in the second series. Thus, one has to address to the reading room personnel for research on family names beginning with either of the two letters. The cards of family names beginning with the letters M to Z (second series) and the cards of the A-Series (files opened between December 1930 and June 1943) can be consulted on microfiches at the reading room.

Summary of the modalities for consultation of the files:

- First series – among which sub-series B – (files 69 - ca. 500,000):
 - Letters A to Z: see microfilms number 2997/1 - 2997/44 and related inventory (DEPOORTERE R., BOONE B., *Ministère de*

la Justice, Service de la Police des Etrangers. Inventaire des microfilms du fichier des dossiers individuels, Bruxelles, 1996, 12 p. [Instruments de recherche à tirage limité, 413]).

- Second series (files ca. 500,000 – 1,668,399):
 - Letters A to Kab: see microfilms number 2998/1 - 2998/144.
 - Letters Kac to L: missing name cards (address reading room personnel).
 - Letters M to Z: see microfiches (to request from the reading room personnel).
- Series A (files A 1 - A 419,999):
 - Letters A to Z: see microfiches (to request from the reading room personnel).

Though it is a priori quite easy to search the serial fonds of individual files from the Aliens' Police, the following peculiarities must be taken into consideration:

- The recording of the family names of foreigners arriving in Belgium was a delicate task for the communal public officers (language barrier and alphabetical barrier, spelling of the family name not fixed or not definitive, illiteracy of the migrants, etc.) and they may sometimes have made spelling mistakes, just as the agents of the Aliens' Police may have made. Consequently, the spelling of the names on the index cards may differ from the one used in the files. The spelling may also vary from one family member to another and the researcher may use a spelling that does not correspond to the one recorded in the files. Such erroneous recordings are very commonly the case with foreigners from Eastern Europe and Russia. The family name was indeed often transcribed phonetically. For example, a research regarding the members of the family "Oscherowitz" should take into consideration the spelling variations "Oucherowitch" and "Ucherowitch".
- The alphabetical order of the cards is not always respected. Due to the directives given at the time, for one and the same family name the cards of men sorted alphabetically according to their first name always preceded the

cards of the women of this family. Thus, for the patronymic “Moers” one first finds all the index cards of the male Moers, sorted alphabetically from “Adrien” to “Théodore”, and only then the cards of the female forenames, ranging from “Amanda-Arnolfine” to “Maria”.

- Information on both members of a married couple (and their minor children) is compiled in a single file with individual intelligence sheets for each one of them. This peculiarity is problematic when only the cover of the file remains (as is the case with 10% of the files). Nevertheless, this situation does not entirely compromise research because the cover often shows the references of files on parents or relatives. In case the whole file no longer exists because it has been suppressed, disposed of, mislaid or lost, the nominal index card can still provide some information: name and file number of the foreigner in question or even date and place of birth or/and profession. If the

place of residence of the foreigner is identified by the researcher, the latter can address to the competent communal administration in order to get additional information.

- The files do not only bear on foreigners in the strict and current sense of the term. As mentioned before, the sub-series B (file numbers 69 to 23,174) at the beginning of the archival fonds relates to Belgians. The files of this series, however, only account for a small percentage of the total amount of files and furthermore only concern the 19th century. On the other hand, all documents regarding the handling of the files by the competent authorities and the request, granting or refusing of a naturalisation of a foreigner having asked for Belgian nationality between 1899 and 1935 are in fact contained in the individual files. Consequently, information on Belgians can be obtained indirectly outside the sub series B.

4 Related sources

- Individual files on foreigners opened by the Aliens’ Police after June 1943 are still preserved at the *Office des étrangers* (Foreigners’ Office). In the course of 2009, these 20 kilometres of archives were moved to the World Trade Center II, located chaussée d’Anvers 59B in Brussels. Anyone who wishes to consult these files must produce evidence of kinship with the person looked for (<http://www.dofi.fgov.be>).

- There is no doubt about the high utility of the individual files created and administrated by the communal administrations, in particular those opened before 1880 as they nicely round off the central series of the *Office des étrangers* that is rather fragmentary for this period. Unfortunately, these files have not been preserved in all towns and communes. The two main immigration poles, Antwerp and Brussels, fortunately have preserved a considerable part of their files. The city archives of Antwerp have begun with the digitisation of

the central file holding the names of those foreigners for whom a file had been opened by the city of Antwerp. This file can be accessed online at <http://www.felixarchief.be>.

- Researchers wishing to get a general overview of the Belgian policy with regards to the reception and supervision of aliens during the 19th and 20th centuries are advised to have a close look at the general records of the former Aliens’ Police. These documents are preserved at the National Archives and cover the period 1794-1960. Not only enable they to gain insight into the internal mode of operation of the Aliens’ Police, but they also draw a picture of the political, economic, social and cultural context that influenced the formulation of the course of action regarding the “policy on aliens”. These general records bear on various subjects: supervision of foreign work force and refugees; repression of nomads, vagabonds, religious sects; fight against betting;

illegal carrying of firearms; sexual offences; etc. Some documents sometimes refer to individual files on foreigners.

- The importance of the naturalisation files as a complementary source for the study of the lives and social integration of foreigners goes without saying. The archives of the *Administration de la Législation* (Legislation Administration), the department of the Ministry of Justice in charge of the naturalisation files, are preserved at the National Archives. The naturalisation files from 1840-1898 are accessible via an alphabetical file on the naturalisation applicants. Regarding the period of 1899 to 1935, requests for naturalisation and the related dossiers are kept in the individual files of the Aliens' Police (see above). The files for the period of 1935-1981 remain at the FPS Justice, but the naturalisation file number can also be found via the individual files closed by the Aliens' Police (a "*numéro d'indigénat*" (right of residence number) beginning with the capital letter "N" assigned by the *Service de l'Indigénat* (Department of Native Legislation) within the *Administration de la Législation* is mentioned on the last document of the file). The *Administration de la Législation* was responsible for all issues regarding the acquisition or loss of Belgian nationality.

The individual files regarding the nationality options (1893-1910, included afterwards in the naturalisation files), the loss of nationality (1935-1952) and the settlement permits (1830-1924) are preserved at the National Archives.

- The archives of the department *Séquestre* (Sequestration – Ministry of Finance) may be of interest for studying the history of particular categories of foreigners: after the First and Second World Wars, the Belgian authorities sequestered the goods of "national enemies". The files regarding the First World War are preserved at the National Archives and at the State Archives in Antwerp. They mainly bear on citizens and companies from Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. The archives of the sequestered goods and of the files opened during the Second World War are preserved at the National Archives.

- The archives and documentation service of the *Direction générale des victimes de guerre* (Directorate-General for the War Victims – Federal Public Service Social Security) preserves a major series of files relating to identity control, safety control and to the health assessment of people having been repatriated towards or via Belgium from 1944 onwards (<http://warvictims.fgov.be>).

- The recently inventoried archives of the National Bank of Belgium that are preserved at the National Archives treat the monetary rehabilitation in the post-war period and comprise some hundreds of thousands of individual files on repatriated persons, among which were a large number of foreigners, who were still in possession of Belgian bank notes. Research is possible, among others, via an alphabetically sorted index cards system.

CAESTECKER F., *Ongewenste gasten: Joodse vluchtelingen en migranten in de dertiger jaren in België*, Brussels, VUB Press, 1993, 303 p.

CAESTECKER F., *Alien Policy in Belgium, 1840-1940. The Creation of Guest workers, Refugees and Illegal Aliens*, Oxford, Berghahn, 2000, 330 p.

CAESTECKER F., « De geschiedenis van grensoverschrijdende migraties uit en in Vlaanderen, weinig grensverleggend onderzoek », in VRANKEN J., TIMMERMAN C., VAN DER HEYDEN K. (Eds.), *Komende generaties. Wat weten we (niet) over allochtonen in Vlaanderen?*, Leuven, Acco, 2001, pp. 69-98.

DEPOORTERE R., BOONE B., *Ministère de la Justice, Service de la Police des Etrangers. Inventaire des micro-films du fichier des dossiers individuels*, Brussels, Archives générales du Royaume, 1996, 12 p. (Instruments de recherche à tirage limité, 413).

GILLEN J., *Inventaire des sources pour une histoire de l'immigration : archives communales*, Brussels, 2005, 220 p.

MEINEN I., « Face à la traque. Comment les Juifs furent arrêtés en Belgique (1942-1944) », dans *Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine*, 6, Bruxelles, 2005, pp. 161-203.

MORELLI A. (dir.), *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en Belgique de la préhistoire à nos jours*, 2^e ed., Brussels, 2004, 416 p.

MORELLI A., « Recent onderzoek naar de geschiedenis van de immigranten in België », in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 3-4, Ghent, 2007, p. 281-581.

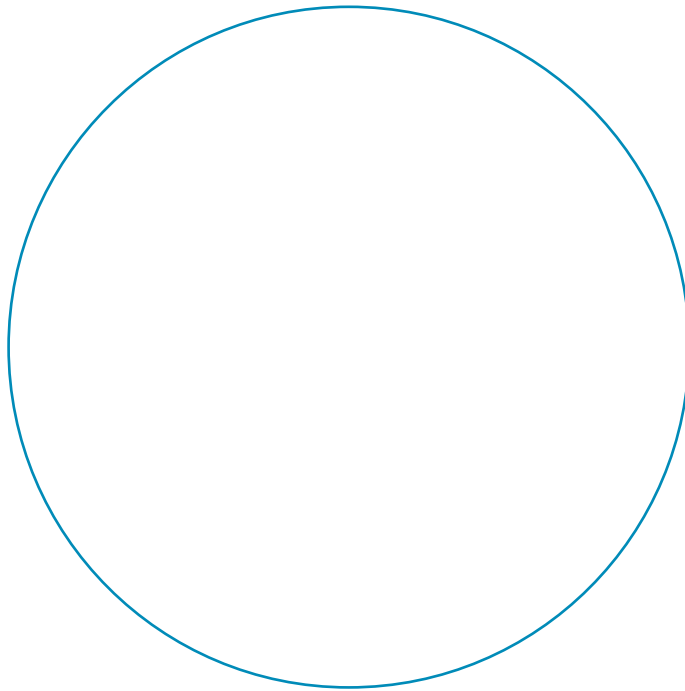
PLISNIER F., *Inventaire des archives du ministère de la Justice. Administration de la Sûreté publique (Police des étrangers). Dossiers généraux: deuxième versement 1930-1960 [1814-1986]*, Brussels, Archives générales du Royaume, 2008, 181 p. (Inventaires, 417).

SCHREIBER J.-P., *L'immigration juive en Belgique du moyen-âge à la première guerre mondiale*, Brussels, Editions de l'université de Bruxelles, 1996, 324 p.

SCHREIBER J.-P., SLACHMUYLDER J.-L., « L'immigration des Juifs en Belgique, 1840-1890. Analyse de données issues des dossiers de la Police des étrangers », in *Anthropologie et Préhistoire*, CVIII, 1997, 108, pp. 43-54.

VERVAECK S., *Inventaire des Archives du Ministère de la Justice, Administration de la Sûreté Publique, (Police des Etrangers), Dossiers généraux (Régime français - 1914)*, Brussels, Archives générales du Royaume, 1968, 96 p. (Inventaires, 160).

VERVAECK S., *Gids voor de sociale geschiedenis. Bronnen voor de studie van immigratie en emigratie. Hedendaagse tijden. Deel I Archiefbronnen bewaard in het Algemeen Rijksarchief*, Brussels, Algemeen Rijksarchief, 1996, 75 p. (Gidsen en overzichten, 26).



Authors

Frank Caestecker (*UGent*), **Filip Strubbe** (*NAB*) & **Pierre-Alain Tallier** (*NAB*)

Contact

Pierre-Alain Tallier, *Head of Section*

National Archives
Rue de Ruysbroeck 2-6
1000 Brussels

Tel: 02 513 76 80
Fax: 02 513 76 81
pierre-alain.tallier@arch.be

Responsible editor

K. Velle - Rue de Ruysbroeck 2, 1000 Brussels
Tel: 02 513 76 80 - www.arch.be

Illustrations

© NAB

This brochure can also be downloaded from our website www.arch.be