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8

The lace industry in France and Belgium during the First World War

Marguerite Coppens

While lace was still being produced manually in France and Belgium during the pre-war period, the practice had lost ground to mechanical production on the eve of the war. Around 1910, handmade lace had to depend on sales to the furniture industry rather than to fashion. The handmade lace industry—which was composed of women working by hand from their homes, in other words, all the economic and social handicaps of the time—was becoming old-fashioned and its survival cast in doubt. The social and moral context of the period played a determinant role in its continued survival during the war. The governments of France, which was *républicaine*, and Belgium, which was governed by the conservative Catholic party since 1884, both attempted various means to support manual production, but these efforts were not enough to keep the industry alive after the war.¹ The two countries adopted different approaches towards mechanical production. While Belgium never managed to develop a significant industry in mechanically produced lace, France did so with success.² In France, efforts were made to avoid casting mechanical production as an unworthy competitor; it was instead seen as a viable alternative, with each method suited to its own purposes.

Another major difference between the two countries can be seen in their respective approaches to compulsory education. In France, school education had been made mandatory in 1882; a consequence of this law was that lacemaking apprenticeships were delayed until the age of 14. As a result, the number of available lace makers was greatly reduced. The state was forced to address the situation, and the Engerand Act was enacted July 5, 1903. It again allowed early apprenticeships in lacemaking, albeit only in regions traditionally associated with the practice. In Belgium, the industry was unwilling to

part with the so-called lacemaking “schools,” which were in effect workshops taking advantage of cheap child labor. Compulsory education was not enacted until after the war.

The promotion of handmade lace in France and Belgium before the war

Proponents of handmade lace in both countries were aware that its benefits, as with most traditional crafts threatened by mechanical production, stemmed from this process of apprenticeship, which valorized the artisan’s *savoir faire*. There was therefore much discussion about how to streamline production in order to train more profitable workers as well as how to train their “taste” so that they could make products that would compete against the machine-made alternatives. The Engerand Act allowed for the study of manual lacemaking in teacher-training colleges in the regions where lacemaking was traditionally practiced. In Belgium, it was through a private association, *Les Amies de la dentelle* (The Friends of Lace), that the study of lacemaking was introduced into teaching colleges.

Convincing buyers to pay the higher price for handmade lace was another challenge for its promoters. Advocates focused on the aesthetic quality of the lace, of course, but also reminded customers of the work involved in its production. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, various consumer leagues were created in France with the goal of helping the consumer understand the ethical implications behind the workers and industries producing their goods. They hoped to convince consumers to buy responsibly. Interest groups devoted to preserving handmaid lace took inspiration: *La Dentelle de France* (French Lace) was created in 1905 and *Les Amies de la dentelle* (Friends of Lace) in Belgium in 1910.³ They fought to maintain employment—primarily in rural regions—and to ensure the “artistic excellence” of a “national” product. Their arguments had a moral component as well: lace making was work practiced by women in their own homes, allowing them to stay close to their children and maintain traditional domestic values. *La Dentelle de France* also encouraged the designers of haute couture to employ handmade lace in the fashion industry.⁴ Both associations refrained from participating in direct commercial activity. The interest group fought on one hand to keep the apprenticeships and on the other to change the mindset of consumers, but avoided the root of the problem.

While these interest groups worked to support the long-standing tradition of apprenticeship, they did little to address another area of concern, which would put them at odds with the manufacturers: workers’ remuneration. In their aim to make handmade lace competitive with machine production, they neglected the reality that the job would only remain viable for workers if wages were increased. The organization *La Dentelle Belge* (Belgian Lace), created in Brussels in 1911, sought salary increases for lace makers while also attempting to eliminate the intermediaries between workers and consumers, drawing the ire of lace production companies. Elisabeth of Bavaria, then Queen of Belgium, appears

to have played a role in establishing the organization, which would resurface after the war under the name *Coopérative dentellière* (Lacemaking Cooperative).⁵ In 1913, the *Secrétariat général des Unions professionnelles féminines chrétiennes de Belgique* (General Secretariat of the Belgian Christian Women's Trade Association) attempted to establish lacemaking unions, but the highly dispersed nature of the profession made the task difficult. The arrival of the war definitively halted their efforts.⁶

Lacemaking belongs to a long tradition of work conducted in the home—a topic that has recently been studied in depth, and which we cannot fully discuss here.⁷ Suffice it to say that this type of work, highly decentralized and offering no legal protections, was especially susceptible to exploitation. The same held true for other sectors of the clothing industry, including lingerie production. Women, usually underpaid compared to their male counterparts, endured miserable conditions. This was a concern during the era, as well. Various studies were conducted on the industry between 1900 and the start of the war to investigate and exhibitions were mounted in order to sensitize the public to the problem as well.

The Belgian Ministry of Industry and Work ordered a series of investigations on work in the home, asking Pierre Verhaegan, of the Catholic Party, to lead the investigation on lace and tulle embroidery.⁸ In 1911, he proposed a law regulating domestic industries. Socialist representative Camille Huysmans had already proposed a similar law in 1910, the same year that the International Congress on Work in the Home was held in Brussels. However, none of these efforts came to fruition. The ruling Catholic Party was unwilling to draft new legislation increasing public involvement in private enterprise. They were not willing to take a stance on the salaries either. They thought the women who wore the products should bear the responsibility for the conditions of fashion workers. While the Socialist Party denounced the abuses in these industries, the plight of female workers were, nevertheless, not a priority.

In addition, work in the home was especially difficult to regulate, as employees were not receiving hourly salaries. Opinions arguing against domestic lace production entirely were rare at the time (nobody wanted to admit that handmade lace could be easily copied by a machine), but Pierre Verhaegan, in his report, remarked that, “machine production is not only cheaper, it is also better . . . we are wrong to believe that hand production achieves results impossible for the machine.”⁹ This position, however, failed to take into account the many women who relied on their income from lacemaking. Generally, lace production was a source of national pride that most were unwilling to challenge.

Belgium at war

In the years preceding the war, discussion of the lace industry had spread throughout the French and Belgian press, often inciting fervent debate on the “*question dentellière*” (lace question).¹⁰ Although it

is sometimes difficult today to fully comprehend how passionate people were about the subject, an understanding of the issue's importance in Belgian society allows us to better contextualize the industry's role during the war. Lace production remained a topic of national concern, even when seemingly more pressing matters were at play.

On August 4, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium, and the entire territory east of the Yser River soon fell under occupation. Unlike other countries, where women could mobilize to replace men in the workplace, Belgium's industrial sphere came to a standstill and the economy was paralyzed. The import of materials was halted, including the thread necessary for lace production. The fate of the Belgian people attracted international solidarity. The privately run relief organization Comité national de secours et d'alimentation (National Committee for Food and Relief) was created in September 1914, but it required international aid in order to appear credible for the German occupant. Neutral countries helped establish the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB, also known as the Belgian Relief), headed by future US President Herbert Hoover, which exported tons of food to be distributed among the famished citizens and helped sensitize Americans to Belgium's plight. In April 1915, the Belgian Relief extended support to parts of France as well. The used flour sacks from aid efforts were recuperated and distributed to fashion schools, where they were either embroidered and sold as souvenirs or transformed into clothing. In a workshop in Charleroi, 30,000 sacks were converted into 15,000 shirts in the month of July 1916 alone.¹¹

In addition to food aid, the Belgian Relief also distributed clothing and fabric. This was a necessity, as the price of fabric had already increased by 300–400 percent in 1915, thoroughly incapacitating the textile industry.¹² Fabric and garments had to be imported. The material was transported from the USA to Rotterdam before being directed towards Brussels. Patterns were cut and readied for assembly; 500 workers grouped them into bails and routed them towards various sub-branches. They would eventually make their way into the homes of workers in every province. A seamstress with children under her charge could expect to receive one bail of material to sew per week. Finished articles were returned to the Belgian Relief, who redistributed them. Thousands of unemployed workers thus were given work for a few days a week in return for a salary; rules capped the salary at 3 francs per week, or 6 francs for the month. Each Monday, women could work on their own clothing; each Tuesday, they repaired clothing brought to them by their village's poor.

The Belgian Wartime lace industry

The lace industry found itself incapacitated after hostilities began. It was unable to import the necessary raw materials or export the finished products. Due to the prestige of their position, however, lace makers received specific attention. The *Amies de la dentelle* were no longer able to operate independently

and had to rely on the disciplined organization of the Comité national de secours et d'alimentation. But the war allowed the *Amies* to retain full control of the production.

Beginning August 8, 1914, only several days after Germany's invasion of Belgium, the Union patriotique des femmes Belges (Patriotic Union of Belgian Women) opened a placement office and a distribution service for home workers.¹³ The Comité national de secours et d'alimentation, in turn, prioritized aid to this organization, granting them funds in support of lace production as early as September 5, 1914. On January 18, 1915, the *Amies de la dentelle*, now also subsidized by the Comité national, was renamed the Comité de la dentelle (Lace Committee). In March 15, the Comité national obliged the Union patriotique des femmes belges and the Comité de la dentelle to merge together under the name Aide et protection aux dentellières (Aid and Protection for Laceworkers). This merger was not without issues; the Union begrudgingly ceded its purview over true lace work, retaining control only over semi-handmade lace work (such as Luxeuil) and other related techniques, such as filet lace.¹⁴ The *Amies*, on the other hand, controlled distribution of materials to workers, choice of designs, and centralization of finished articles of bobbin and needle lace.¹⁵

The lace industry was significant enough that the importation of lace thread—once it became available again in early 1915—was regulated in the same way as food or clothing aid. Through an agreement with the Comité de la dentelle, thread was delivered to Belgium through England. The finished products were sent back to England, who then sold them to neutral countries. By May 1915, lace makers and apprentice workshops were once again in operation: 28,000 lacemakers received payment for their work, and 24 schools were subsidized.

Like the other garment workers subsidized by the Commission, lacemakers were limited to earning 3 francs per week. Before the war, that same worker would have earned an average of 1 franc per day, with no limit to the number of permissible workdays.¹⁶ The allowance, then, was meager; it was acceptable only given the wartime circumstances. Ultimately, wartime lace production had no relation to the real needs of the market. These salary caps suited the prevailing ethos of the Commission, and of the era in general. Aid needed to reach the greatest number of the unemployed, yet it would be unthinkable to grant aid without work performed in return.¹⁷ Labor, therefore, would have to be meted out evenly. We should also note that sewing and lacemaking were some of the few fields allotted to women amongst a broader series of public work programs intended solely for unemployed men.¹⁸

Propaganda efforts helped workers obtain additional funds. In 1916, the Commission arranged for American writer and journalist Charlotte Kellogg to spend 6 months in Belgium in order to testify to the difficulties confronting the Belgian people.¹⁹ Her book *Women of Belgium Turning Tragedy to Triumph* was published in 1917. She would return to Belgium in January 1919, publishing *Bobbins of Belgium* in 1920.²⁰ Her writings, while somewhat intensified in their emotional tenor, give a very precise account of the situation at the time.

The invasion of Belgium had become an issue of international attention, the focal point of the developing war. Lace, in turn, represented the country's identity abroad, and became a useful motif in propaganda campaigns; the image of the lacemaker hunched over her cushion, surrounded by the ruins of her bombarded village, served as a recurring symbol. The *Amies* released these images as postcards, using them to attract buyers (Figure 8.1).

Lace's association with Belgium's martyrdom can also be seen in a number of lace productions that more directly showcase wartime iconography. These "war laces" often depicted symbols associated with the royal family, or banners and other emblems of the allied countries (Figs 8.2 and 8.3). The sales catalogs for the Comité de la dentelle, published beginning in summer 1915, offer parasols, fans, children's clothing, lingerie, and scarfs, all in very traditional styles (Figure 8.4). The prices are steep when compared with the weekly allocation of 3 francs for their creators: a decorative *volant* for the hem of a skirt, with a height of 15 cm, sold for 15 to 35 francs per meter; a 2.5 meter by 60 cm scarf from 75 to 3000 francs; and a fan leaf from 110 to 250 francs.

The *Amies* feared that the craft of lacemaking would be lost during wartime, and were determined to maintain production at any cost, regardless of any realistic assessment of the market. Lace, in truth,

Figure 8.1 Propaganda photo for Amies de la dentelle, c. 1915. Postcard. MA&H, Brussels. Copyright ACL.

Figure 8.2 War Lace depicting the rooster, symbol of France. Volant in Malines lace (10 x 102 cm). MA&H, Brussels. Inv. D.1357.01. Copyright ACL.

Figure 8.3 War Lace depicting allies' banners. Needle-lace fan sheet. Dated and signed, 1915, Fernand Khnopff (24 x 50 cm). MA&H, Brussels, Inv.D.1361. Copyright ACL.

did not fit in with the changes that had already been occurring in fashion since 1910. Proponents of lace believed that these changes were temporary, a mere ebb in the cyclic reordering of trends, and few opposing voices were raised at the time. However, when the US joined the war in 1917, it ceased sending aid to Belgium. The Comité received a credit which they were expected to reimburse through

Figure 8.4 Paul Mussche, *Comité de la dentelle*, 1915, pl. 2. *Catalogue of lace pieces offered for sale*. MA&H, Brussels. Copyright ACL.

the sale of lace products. Unfortunately, sales figures had never matched hopes. The Comité received 10,187,373 francs, of which only 1,200,000 was recovered through sales, a mere 11.8 percent. By the end of the war, the quantity of unsold stock was enormous. In 1918, production was stalled once again due to a complete shortage of thread.²¹

French lace during the war

The war had engendered entirely different circumstances in France, which, save for a select few territories, had not been occupied. The clothing industry never came to a halt, as in Belgium, but rather found itself attending to the demands of the military. As men were mobilized, women took their place in factories. Lacemaking did not attract much attention, being just one among many of the jobs in the clothing industry that could be performed in the home.

Before and during the war, aid for the poor and unemployed in Belgium was seen as a private affair. Even though government institutions did lend some support, the organizations coordinating relief in Belgium were all privately run. Matters were different in France, where the government drafted legislation in order to regulate salaries. The first country to institute a minimum wage for work performed at home had been Australia, in 1896. England's Trade Boards Act followed suit in 1909. Here, the law made no distinction between genders, and covered work performed in one's home or workshop, regulating wages either "hourly or per article."²² It notably included regulations for the hand finishing of mechanically produced lace. France later took inspiration to enact similar measures.²³

The French government's *Bulletin de L'Office du Travail* (Bulletin of the Work Office) commented on the 1902 Belgian investigation of lacemaking conducted by Verhaegen, but did not broach the topic of handmade lace in its own investigations on work performed in the home. Instead, the *Bulletin* mentioned three other investigations on lingerie, artificial flowers, and shoes.²⁴ We can surmise that lacemaking was not one of the Work Office's main preoccupations. Following these investigations, various, unsuccessful, bills were proposed in order to regulate work in the home, including a 1911 bill protecting female workers in the clothing industry. It was not until July 10, 1915 that this same bill became law, bolstered by the exceptional circumstances of the ongoing war. The new regulations remained limited in scope, applying only to women in the garment industry.²⁵ They did, however, extend to the fields of lingerie, hat making, hosiery, glove making, artificial flowers, lace, crochet, and embroidery. That these products—non-vital in times of war—were addressed through legislation shows that fashion remained a sensitive issue in France, even during the conflict. Interestingly, they covered both handmade lace and machine-made lace wherein part of the finishing work was completed in the home.

The law was not restricted by nationality, and it protected immigrants working in France as well as citizens. Significantly, the many Belgian lacemakers fleeing occupied Belgium would have been included. These legal protections also did nothing to limit the many private charitable actions organized for Belgian lacemaker refugees. Ateliers were soon set up for these women, such as that at Angers, where lacemaking tools such as frames and cushions were some of the first items created.

We cannot fully delve into the law's standards for salaries here, but suffice it to say they were detailed with rigor and precision. This made the regulations capable of being enforced, despite their complexity. The 1915 law was supplemented in 1922 and 1926; lacemaking for the furniture industry was added in 1922, as a number of lacemakers worked in both the furniture and clothing industries simultaneously, and it was often difficult to distinguish the labor performed for each.²⁶ The law was only expanded to include men in 1928. In Belgium, a similar law, applicable to both genders, was only issued in 1934, after first being proposed in 1910! After the First World War, however, the number of workers operating from home had declined, and by 1934, the number of lacemakers

working by hand had become trivial.

Conclusion

France and Belgium faced very different circumstances during the war, but ultimately, neither country found a way to preserve the tradition of handmade lace. The war had irreversibly altered the cultural landscape, and the profession was fated to disappear for good. After the armistice, compulsory education was finally instituted in Belgium, putting an end to child labor and any semblance of competitive pricing for handmade lace. Moreover, education disrupted the apprenticeship process, and therefore the trade's method of self-perpetuation. In France, only a select few lacemaking methods that did not require a long apprenticeship survived, and then again only in disadvantaged areas, such as the department of Allier, a region in the center of France. The continued survival of the craft became an indicator of the underdevelopment of a region. Other more profitable careers began to open their doors to women. The lacemaking interest groups disappeared after the war as well. Their moral aim of keeping women in the domestic sphere had lost its potency now that working outside the home had become a necessity and reality during wartime.

As handmade lace disappeared from the fashion industry, machine-made lace took its turn in the spotlight, making its way into various designs in the newly fashionable Art Deco style. The war hastened the completion of a process originating as far back as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Handmade lace was already condemned the moment its machine-made counterpart first emerged, but it would take the turbulence of the First World War to impress the economic reality onto those holding on to tradition.

Notes

- 1 Marguerite Coppens, "Industrialization and the growth and decline of lacemaking from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries: The evidence of the legislation on working from home," paper presented at Hertford College, Oxford, September 29, 2007.
- 2 The history of machine-made lace remains little studied. See Henri Hénon, *L'Industrie des tulles et dentelles mécaniques dans le Pas-de-Calais, 1815–1900* (Paris: Belin Frères, 1900); Léonce Bajart, *L'Industrie des tulles et dentelles en France: Son établissement dans le Cambrésis: L'Essor de Caudry* (Lille: S.I.L.I.C., 1953); Marguerite Coppens, "La Dentelle manuelle—la dentelle mécanique: Collaborations et rivalités," in *Art et Industrie. Les Arts décoratifs en Belgique au XIXe siècle*, Claire Leblanc, ed. (Brussels: MRAH, 2004), 86–93, paper presented at the Royal Museums for Art and History, Brussels, October 23–24, 2003.
- 3 The archives for the *Amies de la dentelle* are held at the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.
- 4 *La Dentelle: Journal artistique, industriel et féminin* (April 1905): 1, (May–July 1905): 31, and (May–July 1906): 6.

- 5 Marguerite Coppens, *Les Dentelles royales* (Brussels: BBL, 1990), exhibition catalogue, 113–14; Edmond Rubens, “La Question dentellière,” *La Femme belge* (1923).
- 6 Jeanne Elschot, “Aperçu sur la situation économique des ouvrières dentellières en Belgique,” *La Femme belge: Revue de questions morales, sociales, littéraire, et artistique* 6/9, February 1923, 797–806.
- 7 See Colette Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile: Le Combat pour un salaire minimum sous la Troisième République* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).
- 8 Pierre Verhaegen, *Les Industries à domicile en Belgique: La Dentelle et la broderie sur tulle*, vols 4 and 5, *Les Industries à domicile en Belgique* (Brussels: Lebègue, 1902); Pierre Verhaegen, *Travail à domicile et Sweating-System* (Brussels: Albert Dewit, 1912).
- 9 Verhaegen, *Travail à domicile et Sweating-System*, 7.
- 10 *La Question dentellière: essai de mise au point* (Brussels, 1912); G. Hector Quignon, *La Dentelle de Chantilly et la question dentellière* (Cayeux-sur-mer: P. Olivier, 1905).
- 11 Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium Turning Tragedy to Triumph* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1917).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Jane Brigode, *Union patriotique des femmes belges*. Brussels: Report presented to the Comité national de secours et d’alimentation, August 8, 1914–February 28, 1915.
- 14 Coppens, *Les Dentelles royales*, 105–55.
- 15 The designs chosen by the *Amies de la dentelle* are conserved nearly in their entirety at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels.
- 16 Charlotte Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1920), 44.
- 17 The allocation given to refugees by the French government without expectation of work in return was a novel and strongly criticized policy. Philippe Nivet, “Les réfugiées de guerre dans la société française (1914–1946),” *Histoire, économie et société* 2 (2004): 250.
- 18 Sophie de Schaepdrijver, “A civilian war effort: The Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation in Occupied Belgium, 1914–1918,” in *Remembering Herbert Hoover and the Commission for Relief in Belgium* (Brussels: Fondation Universitaire, 2007), 24–37.
- 19 Anton Goegebeur, “Charlotte Kellogg: Women of America and Belgium,” (MA thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven), 2014).
- 20 Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium*.
- 21 Belgium, under German occupation, must have known of the German “Spitsen-Zentrale.” See Coppens, “Les Dentelles royales,” 119. This information was found in the Archives du Palais Royal, Albert et Elisabeth, Secrétariat No. 209.
- 22 *Bulletin de l’Office du travail*, vol. 17 (Paris: Office du Travail, 1910), 73; G. Duchene, *Les Progrès de la législation sur le salaire minimum* (Paris: M. Rivière & cie, 1918), 129–43.
- 23 Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile*.
- 24 *Bulletin de l’Office du travail* (1903), 112, (1905), 311, and (1909), 1316–17.
- 25 Men receiving a salary inferior to the minimum amount set for women, while performing the same work, could sue their employer. *Bulletin de l’Office du travail*, (1915), 65.
- 26 Avrane, *Ouvrières à domicile*, 234.

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