

Title: Mapping Foreign Migration to Belgium, Lessons learned from the digitization of the index cards of the Belgian foreigner's police 1840-1914

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In 2015 the Belgian State Archives received funding from the federal research programme 'BRAIN' to digitize its large collection of nineteenth century index cards from the Foreigners Police of the Public Security of the Belgian Ministry of Justice. The digitization was part of the research project "IMMIBEL, outcast or embraced. Clusters of migrants in Belgium (1840-1914)" that took place in collaboration with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the University of Antwerp and the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The project aims to investigate the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of interactions of foreigners with different layers of Belgian society (university partners) and to map the scale, chronology and profiles of foreign migration to nineteenth-century Belgium (State Archives). The project's general hypothesis is that increasing international *mobility* and *circulation* – rather than one-off *migration* – had a profound influence on the economic, political, cultural and social history of nineteenth-century Europe in general, and Belgium in particular. By mapping the migration to Belgium, this project hopes to contribute to a better insight into the 'national' history of Belgium, but will also provide a contribution to international debates in migration history, such as the nature of a so-called 'mobility transition' (Lucassen & Lucassen 2009), the interactions between state policies and migration patterns (Noiriel 1998; Rosental 2011), the role of migration 'chains' and networks (Wegge 1998; Lesger et al. 2002), the international dimensions of the 'knowledge economy' (Black 2013), and the long-term integration of international labour markets (Hatton & Williamson 2006).¹

The 150,000 preserved index cards formed by the nineteenth century Foreigners Police cover a period of seven decades and are a unique source for migration research and genealogy. The cards contain the basic identifiers concerning migrants coming to Belgium during the nineteenth century such as full name, gender, birth place, birth country, birth date and a unique file number referring directly to the more detailed foreigners file. Part of the cards also mention the migrant's occupation, partner(s) and children, and his or her interactions with the justice system. The digitization of the cards was a labour-intensive process and took about 18 months. As the handwritten index cards did not permit for OCR reading, the cards were manually transcribed by State Archives employees and students in Excel tables. The collected data was cleaned with the open access "Open Refine" software, which allowed for semi-automatic

¹ Lucassen, Jan, and Leo Lucassen. 2009. "The Mobility Transition Revisited, 1500-1900: What the Case of Europe Can Offer to Global History." *Journal of Global History* 4 (3): 347-77; Noiriel, Gérard. 1998. *Réfugiés et sans-papiers: La République face au droit d'asile, XIXe-XXe siècle*. Paris: Hachette Littératures; Rosental, Paul-André. 2011. "Migrations, souveraineté, droits sociaux." *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 66 (2): 335-73; Wegge, Simone A. 1998. "Chain Migration and Information Networks: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Hesse-Cassel." *Journal of Economic History* 58 (4): 957-87; Lesger, Clé, Leo Lucassen, and Marlou Schrover. 2002. "Is There Life Outside the Migrant Network? German Immigrants in 19th Century Netherlands and the Need for a More Balanced Migration Typology." *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 29-50. Black, Jeremy. 2013. *The Power of Knowledge. How Information and Technology Made the Modern World*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Hatton, T. J., and Jeffrey G. Williamson. 2006. *Global Migration and the World Economy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

clustering and editing of large quantities of messy data. The end-result is a dataset that contains personal information on 151,863 individuals and provides access to the individual files of immigrants registered in Belgium during the nineteenth century.

A basic version of the dataset was integrated in the search robot of the State Archives in April 2018 and allows for quick searches of individual migrants or specific groups of migrants according to their name, occupation, time of arrival in the country, birth date, etc.² A more detailed version of the dataset, which will be made available to the public with the remodelling of the State Archives search engines in 2019-2020, also allows for (statistical) analyses on the migrant population, migration patterns and professional and social roles. This dataset allows identifying contingents of migrants, the proportion of male and female migrants, occupational groups travelling to Belgium, etc. Several alterations of the digitized data were necessary in order to allow it to answer such research questions. The basic dataset was expanded and enriched with contextual data such as information that was created during the collection process and via linking to other datasets (HISCO, Wikidata).

This paper describes the conception, composition, structure and physiognomies of the two datasets constructed from the index cards. It discusses the new research possibilities and some preliminary analyses made possible by the creation of the datasets and the practical choices and challenges the digitization posed. The numerous advantages of working with Open Refine software (like its low threshold, quick learning curve, open access, detailed history and compatibility with several programming languages) are weighed against the caveats and biases of using new technologies on historical datasets.

² <https://search.arch.be/nl/>