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# A Straightforward Journey? Discovering Belgium's Refugee Policy through Its Central Government Archives (1945–1957)

*Filip Strubbe* \*

**Abstract:** »Eine geradlinige Reise? Die Untersuchung der belgischen Flüchtlingspolitik auf Basis der Zentralregierungs-Archive (1945–1957)«. When looking at the "management" of refugee crises or violence induced mobility in Western Europe since the 1930s, one cannot help but notice that Belgium offers an interesting case study. In the second half of the 1940s, it recruited over 22,000 displaced persons (DPs) from Germany to work as miners, and by early 1954, it had become the first country to delegate its national competence for recognizing refugees on its territory to the representative of an international body – the Belgian delegate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This historical evolution is of course only of interest in as much as it is reflected in the archives which, in the case of Belgium, are well preserved. This contribution uses the records of the Aliens Police and of various Belgian branches of international refugee organizations over the years 1945–1957. The aim is to analyze how their archive production bears the traces of the evolving refugee mobility and Belgium's asylum regime. Interestingly, these archives have a dynamic of their own, which makes them much more than passive witnesses of the policy-making in the past. I will argue that the latter aspect is of crucial importance for a good understanding and efficient use of such archival sources.

**Keywords:** Refugees, displaced persons, Belgium, Aliens Police, archive production, UNHCR.

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## 1. Introduction

Any historical inquiry on Belgium's stance towards refugee crises in Europe since the 1940s is bound to use archival sources produced by the Aliens Police on the one hand, and the various Belgian branches of international refugee organizations on the other. In this paper, I will analyze how their archive production bears the traces of both evolutions in refugee mobility and Belgium's asylum policy.

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As will become clear over the course of the following three sections, these archives have a history of their own. During the postwar period, the “plot started to thicken” with the involvement of organizations such as the Belgian branches of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) and of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The archival and document management policies of such organizations are subject to frequent internal change and restructuring. Moreover, these former services have hardly documented their work procedures. These factors call for a careful, bottom-up analysis of the file series and their indexes in order to uncover past processing methods. Gaining insight into the operations governing archive production is of crucial importance when using such material.

Who better than an archivist to clear the empirical path and make sure that the historian does not go astray? I will begin with an overview of the files produced by the Aliens Police before focusing on the immediate postwar period. A third section will deal with the Belgian reaction to the Hungarian refugee crisis in 1956-1957 – a very interesting chapter in the archive production of both the Belgian branch of the UNHCR and the Aliens Police.

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## 2. Foreigners' Files: A Researcher's Primary Source

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### 2.1 The Long Background of a Huge Series of Files

Shortly after Belgian independence in 1830, the Public Safety Office (*Administration de la Sûreté publique*) was tasked with the surveillance of all foreigners present on the new country's territory. In order to carry out this task efficiently and to maintain public order, the new administration needed the support of, and information from, several authorities, especially the municipal administrative services and the judiciary. Upon notification of a foreigner's arrival, the *Sûreté* verified if a person had the right to remain in the national territory and gathered all incoming information during his or her stay in Belgium in a huge series of files. Each new file was given a unique, sequential number reflecting its opening date, via which any given migrant could be administratively identified. Usually, one file was opened on each foreigner, but in the case that a whole family migrated, underage children (less than 15 years old) and wives were recorded in the same file as their fathers or husbands. All documents in a file were sorted in chronological order, with the oldest documents at the bottom and the most recent documents on top.

Obviously, the files are the result of bureaucratic action and do not constitute an unbiased biography of an individual or a family, but they do reflect the practical surveillance and the reception policy of foreigners. In other words, the files show migration policy as it was actually carried out (Caestecker, Strubbe, and Tallier 2011, 10-1). At the same time, the files bear witness to the evolu-

tion that took place within the administrative service(s) that created the documents they contain. Generally, the volume and number of document types increase the more recently a file has been opened. This evolution runs parallel with the increasing complexity of (Belgian) society, the development of the welfare state, and its bureaucratic underpinnings. Likewise, the internal organization of the Public Safety Office diversified: from 1929 onwards, the administration made room for the Aliens Police, a central service in charge of migration management.<sup>1</sup> Although it is impossible to give an exhaustive list of all types of documents that could figure in a 20th-century foreigners' file, one may distinguish the following categories.

*Documents concerned with migrant registration and identification*

In almost all cases, a foreigner's file documents his or her identity and professional activities, as well as any changes in civil registry status (births, marriages, deaths) during their stay in Belgian territory. The administrative surveillance of foreigners was increased during the 1930s with the introduction of vendor licenses, work permits for laborers, and professional permits for the self-employed, the most relevant information was noted upon a migrant's registration, either in a municipality's population or aliens register.<sup>2</sup> This inscription process was usually actioned via an information sheet (*bulletin de renseignements*) with a standard set of questions relating to a migrant's identity, family status, profession, his/her ID papers, the date of arrival (both in Belgium and in the municipality), and his/her domicile and last residence abroad. Although this standardized document dates back to 1840, it had undergone a number of changes during the early 20th century. Notably, municipal administrations started using photography as a general identification method shortly after World War I, which means that the majority of foreigners' files opened from the early 1920s contain at least one picture of the individual concerned (and where appropriate, his or her spouse).<sup>3</sup> This subsequently became the case for all refugees who arrived in Belgium after the 1920s.

*Documents concerned with the confirmation of a migrant's residence*

In addition to the basic registration documents, most files also contain reports from local police or *Gendarmerie* units, besides correspondence with municipal

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<sup>1</sup> The reorganization was instigated by the Royal Decree of March 16, 1929. *Belgian Official Journal*, March 17, 1929, A4P001, National Archives of Belgium (NAB), Brussels.

<sup>2</sup> The aliens register was introduced in the second half of 1933 (by the Royal Decree of August 14, 1933) in order to record all foreigners with less than ten years residence in Belgium. *Belgian Official Journal*, August 16–17, 1933, A4P001, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>3</sup> The first tests with photography date from the 1880s and were exclusively concerned with "unwanted" migrants such as vagrants or procurers. Only after World War I did photography become a general identification method. See the letter circulated by the Minister of Justice on June 1, 1920. This document can be accessed online via <<http://www.digithemis.be/index.php/ressources/legislation>> (Accessed May 18, 2018).

administrations and forms pertaining to the movement of foreigners in or out of the country, or from one Belgian municipality to another. While most Belgian cities and communes opened files on foreigners, those from the central administration certainly form the densest and most exhaustive series, because they concern the immigration data of foreigners within the entire Belgian territory, while the communal services only supervised immigration within the municipal boundaries. It was only the central administration that had the resources to monitor large numbers of foreigners – especially those who changed residence often – not least because it was supposed to have all of the information generated by the different local and other public services at its disposal. As a result, the central file series has a broad territorial and diachronic scope: even when an immigrant left Belgium and returned many months or years later, documents on his/her second residence in the country were added to the already existing file, which was then reopened.

*Documents concerned with judicial persecution, incarceration, and expulsion*  
When doubts about the real identity of a foreigner arose, or when he or she represented a potential danger to public order or to the safety of the state, enhanced surveillance was put in place in collaboration with the municipal authorities (administrative services and police). Moreover, the least suspicion of criminal behavior led to the drafting of reports that inevitably ended up in a foreigners' file. A variety of documents shed light on the fate of persons who came into contact with law enforcement services: in case of an arrest, the police or *Gendarmerie* transferred the minutes of the proceedings to the Aliens Police. 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 bulletin, or eviction reports also appear to inform outcomes in such cases. Refugees or asylum seekers may also be subject to such enhanced levels of documentation, as were migrants or refugees suspected of human trafficking.

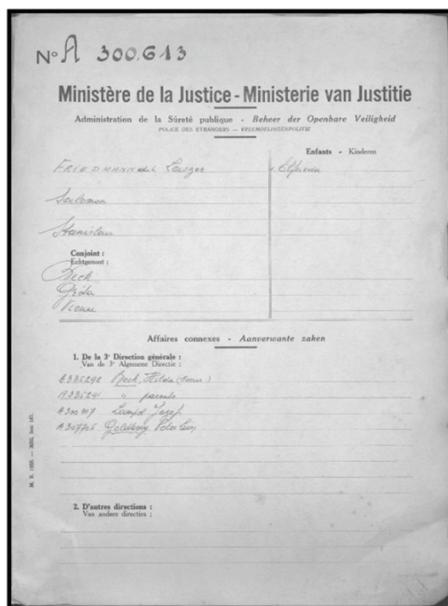
*Documents pertaining to refugees or asylum requests*  
The slow but steady drafting of a refugee status that began in the 1930s and was pursued in the postwar period is evidenced in thousands of files. Such files typically contain questionnaires, correspondence with international organizations, and, in some cases, letters of support from various private organizations.

## 2.2 A Single Source with Different Angles

If these files are taken to be a primary source for an analysis of Belgium's refugee policy since the 1930s, the question arises as to how one might best fine-tune a thematic search on refugees in such a voluminous archive. In this respect, the main strength of the file series also proves to be its weakness: Indeed, how does one look up groups of refugees in a series of millions of

files? The primary search instrument developed by the former Aliens Police is a series of alphabetical file cards, which favor a name-based search structured by the family name, first name, and birth date of each individual immigrant. In other words, a researcher should already possess a list of names in order to look up the corresponding files. In turn, as Figure 1 shows, the file covers may lead to more discoveries, since they contain the names and file numbers of a person's direct family members and acquaintances (business associates or members of an organization), thus revealing (at least part of) a foreigner's social network. However, this approach assumes that a researcher already has a useable name list at the beginning of the search. Although in practice this will hardly ever be the case, over the last decade a number of additional search tools have surfaced that allow for new ways to approach the file series. Obviously, the fact that each instrument has its advantages and shortcomings should not keep a researcher from combining the various sources whenever necessary.

**Figure 1:** The Cover of a Jewish Immigrant's Foreigners' File, Opened in the Late 1930s



Source: National Archives of Belgium. Aliens Police, foreigners' file nr. A300.613.

Recently, a very important register has been discovered in the archives of the Aliens Police. At the beginning of 1938, the administration started to keep a very precise track of the incoming documents and, more importantly, of the foreigners' files that were opened. The reason why this statistical registration was introduced in the late 1930s remains unclear, but the administration con-

tinued to keep track of the daily file production until early 1972. Even though this data resides in two “trivial looking” volumes, the result of the administration’s sustained effort is in fact quite impressive.<sup>4</sup> The first register covers the period between January 1938 and December 1955, and contains five columns: (1) the specific date; (2) the number of documents received by the administration; (3) the first new file number that was opened on the aforementioned date; (4) the last new file number opened on that same day; and (5) the total number of new files produced during this whole working day. In other words, the registers offer an exceptional chronological “snapshot” of the file production process, allowing researchers to pick a date or a precise time period (for example, a week, a month, or a season) and verify the number of new foreigners that were registered over the course of that period.

From a quantitative perspective, the file series functions much like a pulse, reflecting the fluctuations in immigration, enabling researchers to verify peaks and other tendencies in the numbers of arrivals. For instance, when the impact of the *Anschluss* of Austria started to manifest itself in rising numbers of Jewish refugees around June 1938, the oldest register (see Figure 2 for an example) may be used to analyze these migration dynamics on a micro level by selecting a time interval via the opening of file numbers: When exactly did the number of refugees start to go up? Is there any trace of group dynamics (such as immigrants from the same town of origin arriving on the same day)? What was the daily percentage of new files that concerned Austrian refugees?

Of course, there are some drawbacks to this chronological approach based on opening dates: Firstly, it can only take into account the migrants that were actually registered, not the persons who entered the country illegally and thus remained “under the radar.” Secondly, occasionally arrivals did get registered by municipal services (especially in the 1930s), but the information was not properly communicated to the central administration (sometimes with a delay of weeks or a few months). When the central government did open a file on such persons, its number does not accurately reflect the true date of arrival and may thus “pollute” a chronological sample based solely on file numbers.<sup>5</sup> Keeping these restrictions in mind, one can nevertheless presuppose that the dates in the two file registers are 90–95% accurate, which still makes them a very useful new tool for historical analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> Aliens Police. Registers of files opened during 1938–1972, F1700, nos. 1076–1077, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>5</sup> In this case, it suffices to verify the first information bulletin in a file in order to find the original date of arrival in Belgium (as declared by the immigrant), even if this date precedes the opening of the file by several months or years.

**Figure 2: Page from a Register Indicating the Files Opened During October 1939**

Sûreté Publique						
<b>CASIER</b>						
MOIS de		1939.				
DATES		DOSSIERS OUVERTS				
PIÈCES ENTRÉES		N° INITIAL	N° FINAL			
		Sous dossier :				
Mardi	2	945	A 374661	-		
Mardi	3	931	-	A 372606	516	
Mardi	4	928	A 372608	506	846	
Jeudi	5	939	247	46	160	
Mardi	6	138	707	816	480	1246
Samedi	7	1192	A 372887	-		
Samedi	8	1439	-	-		
Mardi	10	817	-	A 372464	518	
Mardi	11	112	A 372605	506	411	
Jeudi	12	915	750	653	151	
Mardi	13	1192	674	192	199	1826
Mardi	14	1120	A 373893	-		
Samedi	16	928	-	A 374176	884	
Mardi	17	1053	A 374177	360	184	
Mardi	18	1505	561	516	456	
Jeudi	19	1783	515	663	157	
Mardi	20	934	659	814	117	948
Mardi	21	1185	A 374838	-		
Samedi	23	938	-	A 372191	507	
Mardi	24	1191	A 372192	506	499	
Mardi	25	872	641	611	174	
Jeudi	26	1028	514	526	146	
Mardi	27	1163	557	606	110	826
Mardi	28	941	A 372193	-		
Samedi	29	992	-	A 375944	202	
Samedi	30	1298	A 375945	B 372579	118	171
TOTALS		38493		4899		

Source: National Archives of Belgium, Provisional Inventory F1700, no. 1076.

Last but not least, the juridical department (*Bureau d'étude*) of the Aliens Police produced more general records – such as thematic files – that document not only the agency's internal mode of operation, but also (and more broadly) Belgium's evolving migration policy over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the context of refugees, the files shed light on Belgium's participation at international meetings and conventions, the interaction between the Aliens Police and the various private or international organizations that supported refugees, as well as policy measures that were developed for refugees from different countries. The archives also include files that document the proceedings of three successive commissions for refugees organized during the 1930s, which are of particular interest for anyone who wants to study the “roots” of Belgium's refugee policy.<sup>6</sup> Although all three commissions only treated a combined total of just over 2,000 cases (the tip of an iceberg, considering the num-

<sup>6</sup> Aliens Police, Proceedings of the refugee commissions, Inventory I417, nos. 927–40, NAB, Brussels.

bers involved), their registers and proceedings can be used as research tools with which to analyze at least part of the refugee flow into Belgium.

The third and final commission was installed in late 1939 as an instrument within a vigorous aliens policy dominated by the executive power. In the immediate run up to Second World War, the subsequent Ministers of Justice and their department had acquired a firm grasp of the legal framework governing immigrants' rights (Caestecker 2000, 237-9; Debruyne 2007, 143-4), however, this newly acquired power was to last a mere six months. The German invasion on May 10, 1940 abruptly ended this dominant position, substantially restricting the power of the Aliens Police. Interestingly, in early 1949, the Minister of Justice raised the question as to whether the 1939 "foreigners' commission" (as the former refugee commission was then called) could be resurrected. An internal note that circulated within the Justice Department admitted that the commission might again prove useful, but also stated that it would need to undergo a number of changes if it was to be reinstalled.<sup>7</sup> It would take several more years before a new commission arose and, already by 1949, the Aliens Police was no longer the only official body that kept track of refugees in Belgium.<sup>8</sup> A decade had passed and times had changed.

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### 3. The Cold War Unfolds (1945-1954)

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#### 3.1 Towards an International Refugee Regime

By May 1945, millions of people in Europe had been displaced by the war. During the summer of 1945, this number was quickly reduced by huge repatriation operations in which two international organizations played a major role. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), created in 1943 for the purpose of remedying the calamities of World War II, operated hundreds of displaced persons (DP) camps throughout Europe in order to relieve the refugee problem. It was supported by the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees (IGCR), created in 1938 to assist with the resettlement of refugees from European countries, yet the mandate of which was extended to the post-World War II period. It soon became clear that the challenge of mass displacement could not be reduced to a mere repatriation problem, since up to 1.5 million DPs bitterly opposed their return to Soviet territory (Gatrell 2015,

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<sup>7</sup> Aliens Police, Proceedings of the second section of the refugee commission created by Royal Decree of August 20, 1939, Inventory I417, no. 939, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>8</sup> In a way, it is also revealing that the secretariat and the proceedings of the second and third commissions were managed by two government officials from within the Justice Department. Aliens Police, File on the commission's installation and the nomination of its staff, Inventory I417, no. 935, NAB, Brussels.

90). These DPs remained in camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy, where they were soon joined by more than 200,000 Jewish refugees who fled from communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Marrus 1985, 335). Several countries within the UN wanted to assure the permanent resettlement of these DPs, which led to the creation of the International Refugee Organization (IRO), a temporary agency which already reflected the tensions of the Cold War, as the Soviet Union did not want to be part of it. The new organization took over the work of the UNRRA and the IGCR, however, unlike its predecessors, its goal was resettlement rather than repatriation. In practice, the IRO would have half a million of prewar refugees as well as more than one million DPs under its mandate (Marrus 1985, 343-4; Gatrell 2015, 107-8). By 1950, many Jewish immigrants had left Europe for the United States or the new state of Israel, while a tighter system of border control in the communist countries prevented most dissidents on the other side of the iron curtain from emigrating. At the end of its mandate in 1951, the IRO had been unable to resettle over 175,000 of so-called “hardcore” DPs – persons whose resettlement claims were rejected, among others, because of their advanced age, adverse physical or mental condition, family composition, or personal problems (Holborn 1956, 481-3; Jacobmeyer 1985, 176-89; Marrus 1985, 345).

To what extent did all of these events affect postwar Belgium and how did its policy makers respond? Although most Belgian territory was liberated in September 1944, it would take a year before the authorities could come to terms with the massive migration flows that were taking place throughout Western Europe. By September 1945, when the bulk of the repatriation movements to and across the Belgian territory had ended, firmer border controls were reinstated (Herremans 1948, 96-7).<sup>9</sup> The government’s policy was tuned to the rebuilding of the Belgian economy and aimed at limiting the number of foreigners in Belgium, not least because of the high levels of government funding for basic economic goods such as foodstuffs and fuel. The authorities therefore invested in those that could work in sectors of industry that, at that time, were experiencing structural labor shortages – notably the coal mining industry (Caestecker and Vanheule 2010, 451-2). To this end, in early 1947, the Belgian authorities recruited 22,000 DPs (half of whom were of Polish origin) in several IRO DP camps in the American occupation zone of Germany (Goddeeris 2005, 141, 151). Conversely, foreigners who were considered unable to contribute to the economic recovery were “invited” to leave the country. This measure also applied to Jewish refugees, meaning all survivors of World War

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<sup>9</sup> By early September 1945, around 280,000 persons had been repatriated to Belgium, whereas over 630,000 foreign nationals had crossed Belgian territory in order to be repatriated. For more detailed information, see: Commissariat belge au Rapatriement, *Rapport sur l’activité du Commissariat Belge du Rapatriement 8 octobre - 25 juillet 1945*, A4M00770, NAB, Brussels.

II who had moved to Belgium after January 1, 1939 as well as those who had fled from Central or Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the war. Most of these were either physically unfit for hard mine labor or lacked the necessary skills to do so. In practice, however, the majority of Jewish refugees could temporarily remain in the country with the help of American financial aid and the support of Jewish organizations (Caestecker and Vanheule 2010, 456).<sup>10</sup> Overall, the Belgian government's halfhearted policy in the second half of the 1940s bears many similarities with its attitude towards refugees during the 1930s: the stay of "undesired immigrants" that slipped through border controls and received support from private organizations was often regularized to allow their permanent resettlement elsewhere. By the early 1950s, this notion of Belgium as a transit-land for refugees proved outdated and unrealistic. After several years of residence in Belgium, many refugees or DPs had no intention to move further afield. Furthermore, the Belgian authorities became increasingly bound by international commitments. On February 5, 1948, Belgium endorsed the IRO Charter, and other agreements soon followed (Caestecker 1992, 75-7).

The creation of a UN High Commissioner for Refugees in December 1950 underlined the need for permanent juridical protection of the DPs or asylum seekers that the IRO sought to resettle (Caestecker 1992, 33). The new body replaced the IRO in January 1952, proving that the refugee challenge had evolved from a mere repatriation problem after World War II to an issue of political and diplomatic significance (Marrus 1985, 345; Gatrell 2015, 117). The work of the UNHCR benefitted greatly from the international legal protection given to refugees by the 1951 Geneva Convention, particularly the first text to use a general definition of a refugee as being a "person with a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR, n.d.). The convention not only incorporated those grounds of persecution that had been lacking in the 1930s, but also formally introduced the notion of the "first country of asylum" as a general principle of burden-sharing between states, no longer criminalizing illegal immigration in the case of refugees. Henceforth, countries would no longer be able to arbitrarily pass on asylum requests to neighboring states (Caestecker 1992, 77-8). However, the convention did not draft a recognition procedure for candidate refugees, instead leaving this matter to national authorities. Belgium was the first country to elaborate such a procedure, and in doing so created a precedent by "outsourcing" its national authority to recognize refugees to an international organization. Although Belgium's

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<sup>10</sup> Between late 1945 and early 1948, Belgian authorities introduced three different quota of Jewish persons whose stay would be tolerated, until the residence of all Jewish refugees who had come to Belgium before the German invasion on May 10, 1940 was eventually regularized in the summer of 1949 (Caestecker 1992, 64-71, 76-7).

1952 law on the Aliens Police<sup>11</sup> had also made the Minister of Justice competent in matters of recognition, the UNHCR were to “draw the longest straw” when the Treaty on the Status of Refugees was ratified by Belgian law in June 1953. Much to the dislike of the Justice Department, the Minister of Foreign Affairs subsequently delegated the recognition procedure to the Belgian representative of the UNHCR (Van den Ende 2010, 80-2).<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 The Aliens Police: A Story of Highs and Lows

The production of foreigners’ files reflects the turbulent decade of the 1940s from the viewpoint of the Aliens Police. The German invasion in May 1940 marked a period in which the administration only played a minor role within the occupier’s policy, and whose anti-Semitic measures relied heavily on the collaboration of municipal services (most notably, through the creation of the Jewish register from November 1940 onward). Although the border control and access to the territory were subject to German authority, the Aliens Police upheld its prerogatives in surveying the residence of foreigners in Belgian territory (Seberechts 2007, 329). Because attempts at expelling unregistered or criminal aliens proved unsuccessful, the administration turned to administrative internment measures in around 100 cases (Meinen and Meyer 2014, 110-1).<sup>13</sup> Obviously, the war-time situation itself helps to explain the sharp decline in (registered) immigration: the average of about 10,000 files opened during each year of the occupation (see Table 1) remains far below the yearly figures of around 40,000-45,000 files opened in the 1930s. However, the low numbers are also due to the fact that certain categories of foreigners were simply not registered at all. This was notably the case for the German occupying forces, citizens of the *Reich*, or Luxembourg nationals, as well as the 8,000 Russian prisoners of war that were used as forced laborers in the Belgian coal mines. While 1945 may be considered a year of transition, the high number of files opened in the period of 1946-1948 shows the impact of the massive recruitment campaigns of foreign migrants for mine labor.

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<sup>11</sup> Until late 1980, the law on the Aliens Police of March 28, 1952 was the basic legal text to define the administrative statute of foreigners in Belgium as well as the competences of the administration in charge of their surveillance.

<sup>12</sup> Belgium’s adoption of the Geneva Convention was ratified by the law of June 26, 1953 (Belgian Official Journal, October 4, 1953, A4P001, NAB, Brussels), whereas the delegation of the recognition competence happened by ministerial decree on February 22, 1954 (Belgian Official Journal, April 18, 1954, A4P001, NAB, Brussels).

<sup>13</sup> Most of the interned persons were transferred to the internment camp of Rekem in 1942. Among them were 48 persons of Jewish origin, who were deported to Auschwitz via Mechelen (Meinen and Meyer 2014, 113).

**Table 1:** Overview of Files Opened by the Aliens Police 1940–1951

Year	Extreme File Numbers	Number of Files
1940	A381.501 – A395.890	14,389
1941	A395.891 – A404.036	8,145
1942	A404.037 – A413.476	9,439
1943	A413.477 – 2.007.187 <sup>14</sup>	13,709
1944	2.007.188 – 2.019.790	12,602
1945	2.019.791 – 2.059.664	39,673
1946	2.059.665 – 2.145.618	85,953
1947	2.145.619 – 2.259.935	114,316
1948	2.259.936 – 2.368.125	108,189
1949	2.368.126 – 2.410.382	42,256
1950	2.410.383 – 2.441.413	31,030
1951	2.441.414 – 2.502.409	60,995

If the quantitative data quickly paints a broad picture of the 1940s, then the contents of the foreigners' files themselves make it harder to discern the different events that took place. During the occupation, in late 1941, some new administrative documents were introduced to the files. The first was a form called "Model C," valid for a period of three months, during which the central administration could verify a person's background and motives for staying in Belgium.<sup>15</sup> The form remained in use until after the liberation, and was withdrawn in the summer of 1948.<sup>16</sup> However, Model C was never given to nomads who, from December 1941 onwards, received a "nomad card" (*carte de nomade*). This identity document, which would not be abolished until January 1975, was designed to allow a better monitoring of nomads during their stay in Belgian territory.<sup>17</sup> Overall, the fate of the larger group of Jewish refugees that arrived in the 1930s is difficult to determine through foreigners' files alone, mainly because the German occupier relied on information from municipal services to coordinate its persecution of Jews (who, by mid-August 1942, had gone into hiding). As a result, the files from the Aliens Police contain very little infor-

<sup>14</sup> Since January 1931, more than 400,000 files had been produced (carrying numbers A1 until A419.399), but on July 1, 1943, the file count was "rebooted," starting from number two million.

<sup>15</sup> Letter circulated by the Secretary-general of Justice, December 30, 1941 (*Belgian Official Journal*, December 14, 1941). This document can be accessed online via <<http://www.digithemis.be/index.php/ressources/legislation>> (Accessed May 24, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Letter circulated by the Minister of Justice, August 4, 1948. This document can be accessed online via <<http://www.digithemis.be/index.php/ressources/legislation>> (Accessed May 24, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Letter circulated by the Secretary-General of Justice, December 12, 1941. This document can be accessed online via <<http://www.digithemis.be/index.php/ressources/legislation>> (Accessed May 24, 2018).

mation added between 1941 and 1944. The most visible trace of the administrative underpinnings of the persecution come in the form of old ID cards carrying the stamp “Jew,” which appear in several thousand files. Such stamps were placed by local administrations from mid-1941 onwards; once a card had expired, it found its way back to the central administration, where it was added to an individual’s file.

In the case of the more than 23,000 persons who were deported and did not survive the ordeal, the files usually end with a notification of departure (*avis de départ*) – a standard document since the 1930s. In the majority of cases, these forms were added between 1946-1948 as a late administrative fix and only rarely do they mention deportation during the occupation as a reason for departure. Understandably, most such forms either do not mention any new destination (city or country) abroad, or simply state that a person or family “left for an unknown destination.” Whether a person survived deportation, but never came back, cannot be told from this information alone, although the extremely low percentage of survivors often leaves little hope. In several hundred cases, however, postwar declarations of death (typically between the years 1949-1956) were issued before the Courts of First Instance and added to the foreigners’ files. Even if such documents may be vague regarding the exact place and time of death, they at least clarify a person’s fate. Those prewar refugees that did survive and returned to Belgium for several years or even permanently are generally the subject of a file that can be easily distinguished just by looking at the cover. Typically, the file cover may not have the standard beige color, but one in white, pink, or light blue, and it may also contain a little white sticker in the upper left corner. Both of these features point to administrative practices that were only introduced from 1949 onwards, thus indicating that a file was still being updated after this date.

The arrival of new refugees in the postwar period is also documented. Typically, the files on several thousand Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, registered by the Belgian delegation of the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees, open with a standard form for temporary residence in Belgium. Identifying immigrants from DP camps in Germany is harder because their files usually do not contain any special registration forms.<sup>18</sup> Rather, one has to scrutinize certain answers to the standard questions on the basic information sheet, such as the last residence abroad and the immigrant’s identity documents. Mostly, these fields will respectively mention a DP camp in Germany as

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<sup>18</sup> Since the UNRRA did not operate in Allied countries such as Belgium, the IGCR engaged with the relief of Jewish refugees on Belgian soil. In August 1945, the Belgian delegation of the IGCR negotiated an agreement with the Aliens Police with regard to 1,400 Jewish transit migrants, who were allowed a temporary residence permit (valid for six months) in view of their emigration. This allowance that was further extended in May 1946 to Polish persons who had fallen victim to Nazi persecution or who had become stateless during the war. Aliens Police, File on residence authorisation, Inventory I417, no. 885, NAB, Brussels.

former residence, and identity documents delivered in the US zone of occupation. Interestingly, the standard information sheets hardly ever mention the term DP. More so, a negative answer was normally noted beside the standard question asking whether a migrant was a political refugee. Only from December 1948 onwards were newly arriving immigrants who declared falling under IRO mandate unequivocally registered as “political refugees.”<sup>19</sup> Samples of individual foreigners’ files show little or no correspondence between the Belgian IRO branch and the Aliens Police. Only by mid-1950, with the end of its activities on the horizon, did the IRO branch propose the creation of a special ID card for refugees under its mandate.<sup>20</sup> Once the Belgian representative of the UNHCR took up office in January 1952, correspondence with the Aliens Police occurred more frequently through easily recognizable letters bearing the UN logo. However, in order to identify these documents one still has to look within individual files, which implies finding the relevant numbers in a series of several hundred thousand files. This identification would be a daunting task, if it was not for other official bodies that appear besides the Aliens Police in the postwar period.

### 3.3 New Player(s) in the Field

As mentioned previously, the post-liberation decade saw a rapidly evolving institutional landscape of organizations involved with refugees and DPs. First, the UNRRA and the IGCR oversaw the resettlement of refugees until they were jointly disbanded on July 1, 1947. The IRO took over until it was itself replaced by the UNHCR in January 1952. Finally, the Belgian representative of the UNHCR was authorized to recognize refugees in accordance with the Geneva Convention in April 1954. At first glance, all of these organizational changes do not appear to have had much impact on the archival process. Each organization opened individual files on refugees which were given a unique identification number and now form part of a single file series dating back to mid-1945.<sup>21</sup> As with the Aliens Police, an alphabetical file-card system was

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<sup>19</sup> Letter circulated by the Minister of Justice, December 10, 1948 (*Belgian Official Journal*, December 18, 1948). This document can be accessed online via <<http://www.digithemis.be/index.php/ressources/legislation>> (Accessed May 23, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Aliens Police, Correspondence on the right of asylum, Inventory I417, no. 909, NAB, Brussels. It seems unlikely that many traces of this IRO ID card remain in either individual foreigners’ or refugees’ files. The measure did, however, lead to the creation of a small series of registers on refugee certificates from January 1951 onwards.

<sup>21</sup> In theory, the number of refugees’ files opened between July 1945 and January 1988 totals 113,243. However, the oldest file carries no. 1,200, and the first file register also starts with this number. It is therefore unclear whether 1,199 more files were opened before July 1945, or not.

created to look up individual names.<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, however, two separate series of registers were also started, allowing us now to see Belgium's refugee policy from a different angle. The first series consists of 23 registers offering a chronological overview of refugees' files that were opened from mid-1945 until January 1988. The data in the registers opened before 1956 is minimal: they contain only the file numbers, a stamp showing their opening dates, and the name of the person(s) subject to each file. Table 2 summarizes the situation for this first postwar decade:

**Table 2:** Overview of Refugees' Files Opened Over the Years 1945-1954

Year	File number range	Number of files
1945	C1,200 – C2,568	1,369
1946	C2,569 – C4,739	2,171
1947	C4,740 – C7,814	3,075
1948	C7,815 – C15,836	8,022
1949	C15,837 – C24,186	8,350
1950	C24,187 – C28,700	4,514
1951	C28,701 – C36,615	7,915
1952	C36,616 – C39,500	2,885
1953	C39,501 – C44,300	4,800
1954	C44,301 – C46,325	2,025

When examining these numbers, one cannot help but notice that they are at odds with the historical reality of the refugee/DP flows to Belgium. For instance, according to the registers only 3,075 files were opened in 1947, whereas the Belgian government concluded an agreement with the IGCR at the beginning of that year, which resulted in the recruitment of around 22,000 DPs from Germany to supplement the work force in the coal mines.<sup>23</sup> This operation alone accounts for half of the files that were opened during the first postwar decade, but is not visible at all in the file registers. Conversely, the first half of the 1950s saw very little refugee migration to Belgium, yet the registers indicate that no less than 7,915 files were supposedly opened in 1951, ranking it third in terms of yearly opening numbers. How could one explain this obvious discrepancy? Clearly, the key to any answer must lie in the archive production process at the time. While it is true that the recruitment of 22,000 DPs took place in the midst of an institutional change (the IGCR being replaced by the IRO), this fact alone is too vague to account for the data discrepancies in the table above. The numbers are misleading across several years, which must be due to a more structural factor in the registry system or classification scheme.

<sup>22</sup> This file-card system is still conserved by the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, which has taken the role of the former Belgian UNHCR branch since February 1988.

<sup>23</sup> The recruitment operation, called "Black Diamond," started in March 1947 and would draw 22,000 DPs from camps in Germany to Belgium, with a further migration of some 12,000 family members. For more information, see Caestecker and Luyckx (2015, 177–96).

In the absence of any more general information on the internal organization and workings of the Belgian branches of the IGCR and IRO, one can only assume that, unlike the earlier founding administration, the services of these national branches did not necessarily open a file on each DP straight away.<sup>24</sup> Basically, two registration forms were used for every person: a two-page registration record with a standard set of twelve questions and a form with information regarding a person's health certificate, screening endorsement by military authorities, and good conduct statement. This limited amount of information was most likely conserved as an alphabetical series of standard forms. However, as more incoming documents on a person became difficult to integrate, an individual file was opened. If not, the forms most often stayed in the basic classification system.

More proof for this classification method can be found in the second series of registers (eight volumes in total), in which the refugee certificates are recorded from January 1951 onwards. The opening year here is not coincidental, as on January 1, 1951, the UN High Commissioner's Office for Refugees was established – an office the mandate of which extended to any person who became a refugee “as a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951” (UNHCR, n.d.). Although the Belgian representative of the UNHCR would only be installed a year later, the national IRO branch already knew it would be dissolved (together with the IRO as such) at the end of 1951 and accordingly adapted its methods to the new framework. The registers that resulted from this operation keep a chronological track of the refugee certificates that were delivered, and contain the following data: (1) the (continuous) numbers of the refugee certificates; (2) the date when these were attributed; (3) the name of the person concerned (from February 1952 onwards, this field is anonymized and only shows the nationality or country of origin); and (4) the corresponding refugees' file number.

Undoubtedly, the Belgian IRO branch also profited from the new registration method, gaining a better overview of its archives. Certain DPs who were given a certificate back in 1951 were already documented in a file opened somewhere in the second half of the 1940s, whereas others did not have a file number yet. Consequently, due to differing circumstances, two individuals who arrived in Belgium simultaneously may have file numbers that exhibit substantial temporal separation. For example, Iwan T. and Alfons I., respectively Ukrainian and Polish DPs, were both recruited as coal mine workers in 1947. Iwan T. arrived in May 1947, yet his file carries number C29.560 (opened in

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, most of the general (thematic) files of the Belgian UNHCR branch moved from Brussels to the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva in the course of the 1990s. We therefore could not verify whether any files on the internal organization and archive classification procedures were conserved. In practice, any researcher interested in the history of the Belgian UNHCR representation will also have to visit two institutes in separate countries.

early 1951), whereas Alfons I. arrived in July 1947, but is subject to file number C6.104 (already opened in July 1947). The difference merely lies in a letter that Alfons I. wrote to the IRO authorities regarding his wife and parents-in-law back in July 1947, which started his file, while Iwan T.'s residence only led to file creation in February 1951, two weeks before his refugee certificate would be registered.

Gradually, a file was created for all DPs under the control of the IRO or refugees who still resided in Belgium. By the time the Belgian branch of the UNHCR took over in January 1952, the backlog of registration forms that needed to be incorporated in the file series had been reduced, although had not yet disappeared completely. It would take another two years before the remaining documents would be classified and correctly filed. Typically, these were forms that had not been re-activated in 1951 because they had become obsolete: either the DPs had already left Belgian territory or, at least in a few cases, they did not want a certificate. Paradoxically, this means that some of the oldest documents can be found in files that were "opened" in 1952-1953, or as late as early 1954.<sup>25</sup> At the very end of the "backlog" of older documents to be classified, one can find over 80 files, opened in early 1954, containing only applications for employment at the IRO by Belgian nationals.<sup>26</sup> It is telling how these documents from 1947, which do not at all concern refugees, were still incorporated in the file series. Clearly, the Belgian UNHCR service very much wanted to file any remaining documents or forms.

This administrative evolution may appear very chaotic and confusing, but it also brings a huge advantage for historians. The first two registers on refugee certificates (an excerpt of which can be seen in Figure 3) contain a very short but interesting note, stating that "certificate numbers 1-5,000 and 14,001-22,000 concern DPs recruited for the coal mines, whereas numbers 5,001-14,000 concern persons who emigrated to Belgium in the context of the IRO's Care and Maintenance Program (CM/1)."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Quite often, the retroactive opening of files happened in "alphabetical chunks," whereby the refugees' names in one or several dozen consecutive file numbers are also in alphabetical order. Apparently, whole groups of registration forms were lifted out of their previous classification system to be incorporated in the file series.

<sup>26</sup> Belgian branches of the IRO and the UNHCR, Files nos. C44.197-44.275, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>27</sup> Belgian branches of the IRO and the UNHCR, Chronological register of refugee certificates, NAB, Brussels.

**Figure 3: Excerpt from the UNHCR's Certificate Register**

10751	80 MAI 1952	310659	"
10758		310659	"
10759		310659	"
30760		37624	ESP.
10761		22375	POL.
10762		14604	"
10763		37230	URSS.
10764		37247	POL
10765		37247	"
10766		37237	URSS.
10767		37248	POL
10768		35065	URSS.
10769		34409	POL
30770		3565	Hong.
10771	4 - JUIN 1952	37246	BULGAR.
10772		30664	C.S.R.
10773		3342	POL
10774		37278	BULGAR.
10775		37291	Yugoslav.
10776		37286	ESPAG.
10777		37296	"
10778	5 - JUIN 1952	37624	"
10779		22594	"
30780		37475	Hong.
10781		37486	URSS.
10782		37486	"

From left to right: the certificate numbers, their date of issue, the corresponding file numbers, and the refugees' nationality/ origin.

At first, this indication may seem puzzling, since the numbers do not appear to add up: the mention of 13,000 DPs in the mining industry is quite a bit below the total of 22,000 DPs who were recruited in 1947. However, the registers were only produced in 1951 and reflect the situation four years after the start of the operation, when over 40% of the recruited DPs had already abandoned the mines and left Belgium for an overseas destination (Caestecker and Luyckx 2015, 182-8). In other words, the certificate registers offer a “freeze frame,” indicating who – of those that arrived in the second half of the 1940s – actually obtained a refugee certificate after 1950. In doing so, they offer a far more reliable diachronic perspective on refugees and IRO DPs in postwar Belgium than the supposedly chronological file registers. From 1947 until early 1954, the latter are fundamentally biased because of the way in which information was classified by the Belgian ICGR and IRO branches. A further analysis of file numbers reveals that the former administrative practices not only applied to DPs in the mining industry, but also to persons who resettled as part of the IRO Care and Maintenance Program. In short, refugees’ files opened during the period between 1947 and early 1954 must be treated with caution, since they mostly reflect the administrative practices of the (former) archivists, instead of the actual migratory movements at the time. Notwithstanding this “anomaly,” before and after these dates, the chronology of the file creation is reliable.

Thus far, we have discussed both the challenges posed and the opportunities afforded by the refugees' files when viewed as a series, but what about the contents of the individual files? When examining a file, it is worth verifying whether the file cover (or the inside cover) contains a handwritten or stamped date with a certificate number, which indicates that a person actually obtained refugee status. Since these references were only applied from 1951 onwards, one can immediately tell the outcome of an asylum application or the length of a residence in Belgium for any file opened before that date. The majority of the files contain a standard registration record of some sort, which lists the asylum applicant's identity, family composition, former residences (since 1937), education and employment history, as well as his or her motivation for emigrating. The IGCR, the IRO, and the UNHCR all had their own standard record format, each containing a varying amount of basic questions centered around the above-mentioned subjects. However, over time the fields of the questionnaires began to leave more room for answers, while the asylum applicant's motivations also gain in importance. The IRO forms already contained a final field for remarks on the applicant's background history and reasons for seeking refuge; a trait that also appears in the UNHCR forms. If the answers to this field may sometimes look a bit repetitive or "standardized" during the 1950s, then the replies become more personalized in the 1960s and 1970s, when refugees' files sometimes contain detailed handwritten statements from the asylum applicants themselves attached to the standard forms. Overall, the registration forms provide more detail on an asylum seeker's prewar life than a foreigners' file, the latter only mentioning an immigrant's last residence and legal domicile abroad, whereas the refugees' files cover a refugee's education and professional career before entering Belgium. For example, the file on an asylum applicant in the late 1950s may list socioeconomic information on his or her past life over several decades before he or she entered Belgium.

A special mention should be made of the oldest files in the series, the subjects of which are postwar refugees of Jewish origin. These files are situated between numbers 1,200 and 5,000, and were opened between July 1945 and early 1947 – just before the chronology of the series became disrupted by the wayward records management of the Belgian IGCR and IRO branches. The first half of this subseries consists of rather thin files, many of which contain just an application form for temporary residence. However, the files numbered 2,700-4,500 are documented more completely thanks to the important role that private aid organizations played in supporting Jewish refugees. By far the most important organization was the *Aide aux Israélites Victimes de la Guerre* (AIVG; the predecessor of the current Jewish Social Service in Belgium), followed by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of America (HIAS), and the American Joint Distribution Committee (*Comité israélite des Réfugiés victimes des lois raciales* [COREF]) among others. The voluminous correspondence in these files provides a detailed account of the familial or societal situation of the

Jewish refugees and their living standards. Occasionally these files also include information on medical needs.

As previously stated, most refugees' files opened before 1954 do not contain a direct reference to a person's corresponding foreigners' file from the Aliens Police, however, it is certainly worthwhile to look up such a counterpart produced from within the Belgian Justice Department. Typically, most refugees' files "run out of steam" once refugee status is accorded. Documents added to a file at a later date tend to be limited to routine correspondence, either about certificates that were lost or renewed, or visa requests to travel abroad. In the case of refugee families, however, files still contain interesting registration forms pertaining to children who were also granted refugee status. The foreigners' files offer a complementary, closer look at how a refugee's familial, societal, and professional situation evolved over time. Importantly, a systematic historical analysis of postwar refugee migration to Belgium based on large numbers of foreigners' and refugees' files has yet to be undertaken. Comparing both series with the hundreds of thousands of digitized IRO files in the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen would certainly constitute a formidable triad of sources for any study.<sup>28</sup> For now, however, we will focus on the Belgian archive production and see how it evolved during the second half of the 1950s. By the middle of the decade, it looked as if the refugee issue had passed its peak, however, events in Eastern Europe would once again put it in the foreground.

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## 4. A Year of Opportunity: 1956

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### 4.1 The UNHCR and the Hungarian Uprising

In October 1956, student protests in Budapest led to a national revolt against Stalinist practices in Hungary. The ensuing Soviet reprisal caused 200,000 Hungarians to seek safety and refuge abroad. The overwhelming majority of these refugees fled to (neighboring) Austria, which called upon the international community to assist in the resettlement process (Caestecker 2016, 22). Initially, the UN were not keen on applying the conditions of the Geneva Convention to the Hungarian refugees, since the events that resulted in their emigration occurred after 1951. However, the Cold-War climate worked to the advantage of the refugees, who were quickly considered as having chosen western liberty above communist dictatorship. Thus, in a bit of a "legal stretch" the UN stated

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history and research possibilities of these Care and Maintenance (CM) files, we refer to Henning Borggräfe's contribution (2020) in this special issue. The CM files themselves have all been digitized and can be consulted online via <<https://digitalcollections.its-arolsen.org/030201>> (Accessed June 20, 2018).

that, although the revolt had taken place after 1951, its roots lay in the rise of the communist government in Hungary shortly after the war. The UNHCR could therefore posit itself as the agency responsible for the legal protection of those who had fled Hungary, the success of which would further legitimize its existence (Gatrell 2015, 113, 117; Evenepoel 2017, 50-2).

Belgium granted asylum to around 7,000 Hungarians, who arrived in two large “waves.” By mid-November 1956, the first 3,000 Hungarians arrived by train from Vienna after the Belgian government had granted its approval for the transit journey. These refugees had not been screened for any labor market requirements and were joined by some 1,000 family members in the weeks that followed. Although the government provided the necessary funds for their resettlement, it was considered to be a humanitarian operation. Consequently, it was coordinated by several refugee organizations, the most important being *Entraide socialiste* and Caritas Catholica (Caestecker 2016, 24). By the summer of 1957, another 2,500 Hungarians had arrived in convoys. Unlike the first wave of asylum seekers in late 1956, these refugees came from camps in Yugoslavia and were selected to join the workforce of primary industries and/or the coal mines – the result of an agreement between the Belgian and Yugoslavian authorities (Caestecker 2016, 27). Up until late 1957, a few hundred Hungarians also arrived on their own initiative, despite the fact that, as for many of their countrymen, Belgium was not the destination of choice. Indeed, already in 1957, several hundred Hungarians had decided to return to their home country. Many others would decide to emigrate to overseas destinations such as Canada, the United States, Sweden, or Australia. From 1966 onwards, a large proportion of the remaining Hungarians became gradually naturalized (Caestecker 2016, 34-5).<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.2 The Belgian UNHCR Branch: Evolving Practices

The upsurge of refugees from Hungary in late 1956 would greatly boost the number of files opened by the services of the Belgian representative of the UNHCR. By the end of the year, a record 8,775 files were created, followed by another 5,325 files in 1957 – a figure well above the yearly average for the 1950s and the decades to come. Despite these high numbers, the file production process itself did not undergo any significant alterations, nor were asylum requests handled any differently than in the previous years. However, this period saw a small yet fundamental innovation in the way in which data were recorded in the refugee registers. In the preceding section, we described how the Belgian services of the IRO and UNHCR created two types of chronological registers: one series listing all refugee certificates that were handed out from January 1951 onwards, while the other kept track of the files that were

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<sup>29</sup> At the time, naturalization required a minimum of ten years residence in Belgium.

opened in the course of time. Up until 1956, it can be argued that the certificate registers contain the most interesting information for researchers, since they offer two considerable advantages. Firstly, because they were created in 1951, they highlight those postwar refugees or DPs who arrived in the 1940s, but remained in Belgium until 1951 – something that the file registers cannot tell. Secondly, from February 1952 onwards, the certificate registers start to mention a person's nationality, rather than his or her name – an anonymization that turns them into an ideal tool for taking samples from refugee populations of specific countries. By (late) 1956, however, the balance of interest starts to tip in favor of the file registers because they are given a new set of highly interesting metadata. As of May 1956, the service added a column on the right, indicating the amount of people subject to a file. This could be a single person, a married couple, or a larger family. By late 1956, more changes would follow.

Figure 4: Excerpt from a UNHCR File Register, Late October 1956

			127
		octobre	
14/126	KUSNAREV Sergey Rumjantsev	11 00 1	
ENTRAIDE SOCIALE AU RICHE JAN 1956 FEDERATION AP			
127	LASTABEGA Peter u	9 1 00 1	
128	PODGORECKI Kladimir	12 5 92 1	
AP			
129	ZIMA Abram	9 04 11 00 1	
AP			

The left column in Figure 4 constitutes the largest difference in format. In short, this new field indicates *how* a refugee came to Belgium. Several handwritten notes and codes serve as indicators. (1) If several refugees arrived in Belgium together – as a group or convoy – then their names were braced (in red ink) and a record is made of their collective date of arrival, as well as of the organization that coordinated their resettlement. In other words, this piece of information shows the private organizations that directed various refugee contingents.<sup>30</sup> (2) From early 1958 onwards, almost every name is accompanied either by the code "AP" or "PO." In order to decrypt these writings, one has to realize that Belgian government administrations in the 1950s were still predom-

<sup>30</sup> Strictly speaking, the administration actually *reintroduced* the practice of mentioning private organizations, since they had already done so in the very first file register (July 1945–June 1946), where they also noted the names of internment centers in case a migrant was detained. However, this practice was abandoned after only one year (2,800 file references), even though similar files would continue to be opened until early 1947.

inantly French-speaking, and that the codes are thus French abbreviations for “*Autre Pays*” (Other Country) and “*Pays d’Origine*” (Country of Origin) respectively. These two precious abbreviations document the way in which a refugee arrived in Belgium – specifically, did a person come directly to Belgium after fleeing his or her home country, or did he or she first reside elsewhere? This distinction was undoubtedly based on the principle of the “first country of asylum,” making it important to check whether the Belgian branch of the UNHCR would be in charge of an incoming asylum request or not. (3) Both the “AP” and “PO” abbreviations are followed by the name of a country, which either indicates the “intermediate country” or the asylum seeker’s country of origin.

One might wonder why the new references start to sporadically appear from October 1956 onwards, reaching full effect by late 1957. The most likely reason is that by adding these data to the registers, the Belgian services of the UNHCR echoed a newly evolving pattern in the migratory flows of refugees. Up until the early 1950s, many refugees and DPs arrived in Belgium in large contingents as a result of international or bilateral agreements. Most immigrants were transported from DP camps, and under those circumstances the question concerning someone’s previous trajectory did not really matter. After the summer of 1957, smaller refugee contingents were still organized, although these were overshadowed by larger numbers of “uncontrolled” individual asylum requests that needed verification. In this respect, the Hungarian refugee crisis – with both its spontaneous emigration and its refugee quotas – marks somewhat of a symbolic tipping point. Of course, the Belgian UNHCR service may simply have decided to include more information in its file registers around this period, regardless of the Hungarian refugee issue. If so, the administration was quite hesitant to pursue this line of action, since it took over a year before the new annotations were systematically used. In any case, the matter of the new metadata just goes to show how an administration can make its own decisions, even if these are only gradually implemented. Bearing this in mind, it is tempting to explore whether the Aliens Police – the UNHCR’s “big brother” – had similar measures in store.

#### 4.3 Fast Forward: The Late 1950s through the Lens of a 1970s Experiment

Anyone examining the foreigners’ files numbered between 2.7 and 2.8 million – the files that were opened between October 1956 and November 1958 – will be in for a surprise. Less than 20 out of 100 files appear to have survived. Why are the majority of these paper files missing? In addition, how can tens of thousands of files, spanning several hundred meters of shelving, be unaccounted for in the first place? The answer comes from the general files or records that were produced by the Aliens Police’s juridical department, or *Bureau d’Etude*. These

files also document the internal workings of the organization, including information on its archival management. One file contains a service note dating from 1978, which states that the majority of the files between numbers 2.7 and 2.8 million were microfilmed.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the Immigration Service (the new name of the Aliens Police since 1977) replaced tens of thousands of files. The process entailed microfilming around one million original paper documents, which were destroyed afterwards.<sup>32</sup>

Bearing this in mind, another relevant question arises: Why was it decided to launch a lengthy operation on 100,000 files between numbers 2.7 and 2.8 million? Why not apply the substitution experiment to other files, like between 2.5 and 2.6 million, or 2.8 and 2.9 million? The answer probably lies in the heightened intensity of archive production in 1956 and 1957. Statistics in the archives of the former Aliens Police clearly attest to how the number of received and produced documents rose sharply around 1957 – a peak to which the Hungarian refugee crisis undoubtedly contributed.<sup>33</sup> It may very well have been the reason why series 2.7 million was targeted for microfilming back in 1978: if the aim was to gain storage capacity, then its above-average volume made it a good “testing ground” for any such project.

However, the final result is quite amazing: only 15,919 of the 100,000 files escaped microfilming. Clearly, the Immigration Service only had those files microfilmed that were supposedly closed, whereas case files still active by the late 1970s were left untouched. Further, because the 15,919 units also include several hundred empty file covers, it is possible to narrow the total amount of paper files down to about 15,000 (or 15% of the subseries). This percentage represents the files of immigrants who remained in Belgium for a long time as foreigners – that is, without being naturalized. Therefore, the remaining paper files allow researchers to “leap-frog” in time, a bit like the 1951 certificate registers from the Belgian IRO branch. Yet, whereas the latter may be considered a “reboot” within the archive production of the former IRO branch, the Immigration Service’s decision occurred several decades after the actual production of most of the files. The example given in Table 3 provides an illustration of the research potential of these files.

The example of fifteen files presented in Table 3 concerns the (collective) arrival and resettlement of a group of Hungarian refugees coordinated by a humanitarian relief organization – the Belgian branch of the International Rescue Committee Inc. Interestingly, nine out of the fifteen files were microfilmed because these Hungarian migrants’ files had by the late 1970s been long since

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<sup>31</sup> Aliens Police, Service note on the microfilming, F1700, no. 607, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>32</sup> Aliens Police, File on the organization of the Aliens Police, F1700, no. 1062, NAB, Brussels.

<sup>33</sup> Aliens Police, Register of files that were opened, F1700, no. 1077, NAB, Brussels.

closed.<sup>34</sup> In practice, this can mean only two things: either these Hungarians had been naturalized (after 1966), or they had left Belgium after a relatively short residence of a couple of months or years. By analyzing the file series in this way, the researcher can make some fundamental distinctions between individual migrants' or refugees' mobility before even looking into a single file.

**Table 3:** Sample of Foreigners' Files of Refugees Opened on March 6, 1957

File number	Subject	File format/support
2,722,550	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,551	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,552	Hungarian refugee	Paper file
2,722,553	Hungarian refugee	Paper file
2,722,554	Hungarian refugee	Paper file
2,722,555	Hungarian refugee	Paper file
2,722,556	Hungarian refugee	Paper file
2,722,557	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,558	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,559	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,560	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,561	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,562	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,563	Hungarian refugee	Microfiche
2,722,564	Hungarian refugee	Paper file

While the microfilming presents fascinating prospects for researchers, it remains unclear if the Immigration Service was entirely convinced of the operation's results, since a similar experiment was never launched again. An inevitable nuisance the administration had to cope with was the creation of so-called "hybrid files" when, against expectations, a microfilmed file had to be reopened in the 1980s or 1990s. By our estimates, this is the case for about 15% of the 15,000 files that exist in paper form. In turn, a small minority of these hybrid files (part microfiche, part paper) were even supplemented with digital documents (both those originally digital in nature and later digitized records) once the Immigration Service moved to digital file production in October 2002. As such, a few hundred files run across three different media – the fascinating result of a decision taken back in 1978 to reduce the mass of paperwork brought about by the Hungarian migration of 1956-1957. Could one possibly find a more tangible testimony of how the impact of a refugee crisis slowly unfolded and receded over the course of half a century?

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<sup>34</sup> Based on our findings, we can say that this specific ratio (60% of the files microfilmed; 40% remaining in paper form) is also a good global average for all files of Hungarian refugees who arrived by convoy.

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## 5. Conclusion: The Invisible Hand(s) Behind Archive Production

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Any historical overview of the Belgian refugee and migration policy from the 1930s to the 1950s will discern a central conflict at the heart of the matter. As in many other Western European countries, its evolving political and juridical conception of refugees can be described as the difficult birth of an internationally anchored refugee regime. This is the result of two conflicting phenomena: the inevitability of large-scale displacement during much of this period versus the protection of national interests as voiced through governments and their administrations. At first sight, it looks as if the archive-producing bodies during this period seamlessly follow this evolution. Three refugee commissions with limited capacities during the 1930s were succeeded by local branches of international refugee organizations in the postwar period, which would eventually develop into the Belgian arm of the UNHCR, which was entrusted with the competence to handle asylum requests on behalf of the Belgian state.

What goes mostly unnoticed in this overview are the internal changes in the process of archive production itself. Since archives are the product of organizations that are themselves subject to change or (internal) decision-making, both share an intricate relation on three different levels. Firstly, one has to take into account the number of “key-actors in the field” when it comes to archive production on refugees. Back in the 1930s, the government bodies were few in number. From 1933 until 1940, three successive commissions were installed to help the executive power determine a refugee’s status and rights, however, these could only treat a limited number of cases. Furthermore, their archive production was itself handled by agents of the main government body for migration management, namely, the Aliens Police. Researchers therefore depend on search instruments developed by the latter. Besides the registers and proceedings of the three commissions, only an individual, name-based search or sampling by means of chronological registers on the file production are possible. A separate file series focusing exclusively on refugees was not implemented until (the Belgian arms of) international refugee organizations appeared in the postwar period. Secondly, archive production within one and the same organization is often susceptible to slight, albeit important changes in terms of how file series are produced or metadata are conceived. Some fine examples of this are the refugee certificate registers created in 1951 by the Belgian IRO branch, which list the refugees or DPs who arrived in the 1940s, but still resided in the country after 1950, and the metadata added to the UNHCR file registers from 1956 onwards. Finally, one should bear in mind that archive production is by its very nature a lengthy process that does not unfold overnight. Sometimes, administrations or services still treat documents or files many years after their original creation date. Such a retroactive operation happened when

the Belgian services of the UNHCR reclassified old IGCR and IRO registration records of former DPs in its file series. The Aliens Police (or Immigration Service) went even further when it had over 80,000 files opened in 1956-1958, substituted by microfilming in the late 1970s.

Mastering these multi-leveled processes of archive production means mastering the richness of archives and the full scope of their research potential. Archives as traces of past activities cannot be merely taken at face value, but clearly have a history of their own, which is often reflected, among others, in the use of particular metadata. Before any research commences, an archivist needs to shed light on past administrative practices to make them feel “present” again for the sake of future research. Paradoxical as this approach may seem, it is the only way to show the “invisible hand” of an archive-producing body throughout its archives, and is a feat that cannot be accomplished merely by examining an individual file or a document’s content, or by simply digitizing them. What is at stake here is not just a matter of finding archives or improving their digital accessibility, but first and foremost understanding how they were structured and used over time. An integrated approach to archives and archive production will avoid sidestepping essential information and form a crossroads between the institutional, political, and legal history of migration on the one hand, and the narratives of individual migrants on the other. As the Belgian case shows, central government archives on migration increasingly lend themselves to a meso-level analysis that offers a larger picture of a migratory flow or pattern, the dynamics of which can also be translated into a refugee’s or DP’s individual trajectory and settlement history. Last but not least, this case study also hints at the fact that the profession of the archivist can be further fine-tuned to meet the needs of the 21st-century research community.

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