

Diaspora, Women and Leisure in the Northeast during the First World War

Diasporic Communities in the Northeast

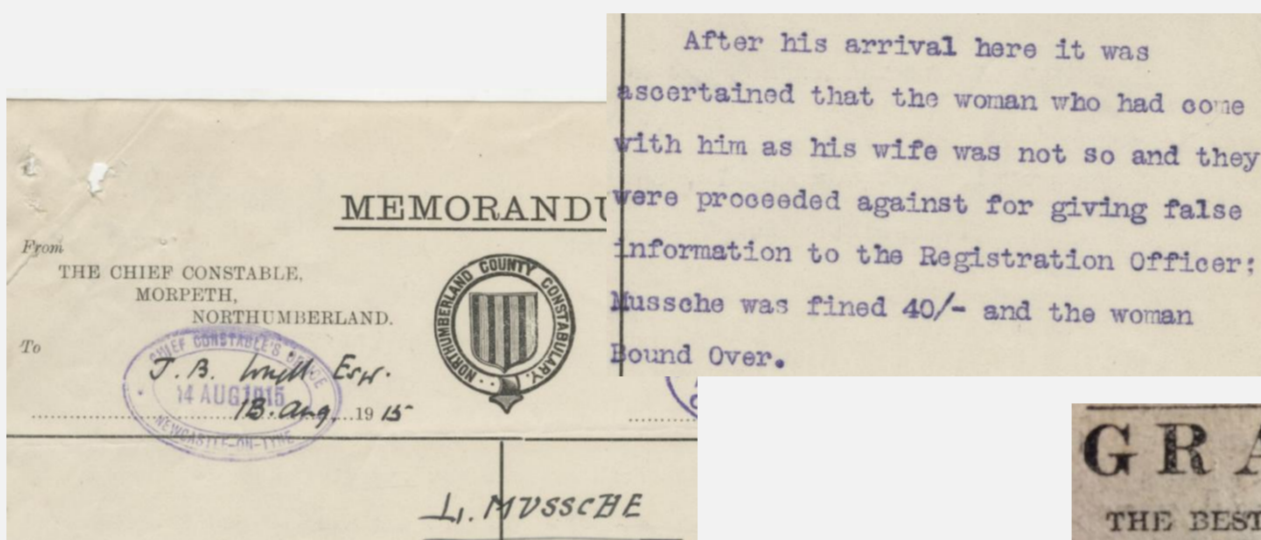
Diasporic communities, or immigrant populations, have a long history of settlement in the Northeast. During the First World War, diasporic communities contributed to British society in a number of ways, yet little attention has been paid to the part played by the women among them. This project considers how Belgian, Italian and Chinese women in the Northeast helped with keeping up the spirits of their local communities during the war. Before the war, some Belgians, Italians and Chinese were already present in the Northeast, though not in very large numbers. The 1911 Census of England & Wales shows that the Italians were the most numerous of these three groups. Many Italians were political or economic migrants. One of their legacies visible today is the ubiquitous Italian ice cream (Fig. 3). When German troops invaded Belgium in 1914, large numbers of Belgian refugees began arriving in Britain. In addition to the common reception welcoming Belgians into British homes and lodgings, a self-contained Belgian village, 'Elisabethville', was erected in Birtley to accommodate wounded Belgian soldiers who worked in the National Projectile Factory along with their families. The Chinese diasporic community was much smaller in number, and most of them were seamen or engineering students. They were low in numbers and largely all-male, constituting a transient population before and during the war. It was not until the late 1940s did they start to appear in large numbers and Chinese women became more visible.

Leisure Activities

The Birtley Belgians had canteens which were also used as dining halls for special occasions, which were sometimes used for staging plays, a licensed bar, and outdoor leisure facilities. They set up societies, clubs, and bands which held regular and one-off events, and printed their own newspaper, the *Birtley Echo*. Although the majority of the members were male, quite a few women performed in galas, art evenings, concerts, and plays (Fig. 1). Some women also enjoyed watching football games. The Belgian Independence Day celebrations and religious parades were partly organised by women as well. Making embroideries while sitting in their own gardens was a welcomed diversion. Those outside Elisabethville liked visiting the seaside, shopping in places like Newcastle, and taking holidays abroad. On one occasion, a racy story of a Belgian man, L. Mussche, living with a woman who pretended to be his wife was accidentally discovered (Fig. 2). Italian women, especially those working in low-income trades, were often too busy with the family business for recreation. For some girls, driving around in dad's ice cream car was fun and travelling on top of tram cars was a great treat. Marriages within the Italian communities were also occasions for celebration (Fig. 4). Information about Chinese women during this period is almost nonexistent. Some Chinese men married British women and some were described as 'wandering in town' at night. A Chinese engineering student played tennis every week – rather different from the stereotype of Chinese frequently lurking in opium dens (Fig. 6).



1) Members of a comedy society in Elisabethville, the 'Cercle Drolatique'. Beamish the Living Museum of the North, Ref No. 43191.



2) Parts of a letter concerning a Belgian man living with a woman who was not his wife, 18 Aug, 1915. Northumberland Archives, Files of Alien Registration, NC/3/46/1/24.



3) An ice cream cart of A. Risi. & Son., 1910. Hugh Shankland, *Out of Italy: The Story of Italians in North East England* (Kibworth Beauchamp: Troubador Publishing, 2014), p. 130.

Background image on the left: a study of a Belgian girl in King Albert's Book. This is a gift book sold during the 1914 Christmas, designed to raise funds for the Belgians.



4) An Italian wedding in Hartlepool, 1903. *Out of Italy*, p. 145.

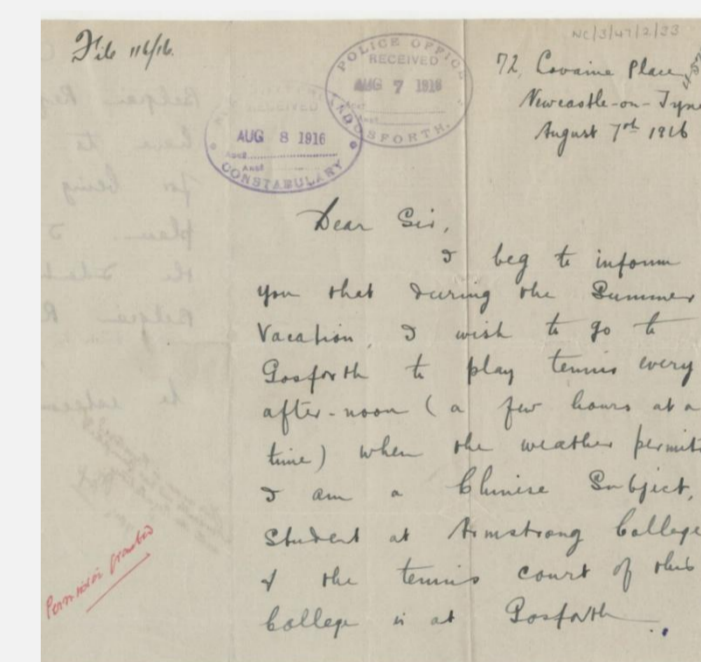
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Connections with the British People

The plight of the Belgians, especially their women's, aroused a great deal of interest in the British public and resulted in a large number of fundraising activities. Concerts and whist drives were very popular. New theatre programmes were inspired by their stories (Fig. 5). For the 'humbler class' of the Italians, street organ-grinding and ice cream selling were among the major occupations. Sometimes, the wife would follow her husband out to help or work in their ice cream parlour, as would daughters. In certain instances, husband and wife worked in music hall and toured around. These activities continued throughout the war, offering entertainment to the British people. Local newspapers and politicians often referred to the quaintness of 'John Chinaman' for humorous effect.



5) A performance inspired by the Belgian experience during the war. *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 9 Nov 1914, p.1



6) A Chinese student, B. Ou, who was also a Belgian refugee, wrote a letter to the police asking for permission to go to Gosforth (within the prohibited area) to play tennis, 7 Aug 1916. Northumberland Archives, Registration of Aliens Files, NC/3/47/2/33.

Restrictions on Leisure Activities

The Belgians were under strict surveillance by the British government, second only to that on the Germans. Elisabethville was administered by a rigid military discipline, and a pass was required for its entry and exit. This lack of freedom was one of the root causes of their 1916 riot against the village gendarmes. Besides subject to the 1914 Alien Registration Act ordering aliens to register all their movements at the police office, the Belgians were also not allowed to go to the 'prohibited areas' for fear of compromising military secrets. As can be expected, permitted travels were also closely watched over. Italians were able to move more freely, as were the Chinese, although they were still the object of some suspicion by both the government and the general public. Fear of the non-British subject was rampant during the First World War, and was most manifest in the pervasive 'spy fever'.

Acknowledgments

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