

POSTWAREX

The ultimate punishment: military justice and the executions of death penalties for collaborators after the Second World War in Belgium (1944-1950)

DURATION
15/12/2019– 15/3/2022

BUDGET
293.351 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The punishment of collaboration after the Second World War was one of the biggest judicial operations in Belgium's history and it still has an impact on present-day Belgian society, as demonstrated by the success of the recent television series on children of the collaboration and the numerous books addressing this topic. One element of this punishment for collaboration was the execution of 242 people who had been sentenced to death between 1944 and 1950. It was the largest execution operation in Belgium's legal history, far outnumbering earlier executions by the Belgian justice system, which amounted to 79 between 1830 and 1940, meaning that in six years, four times more people were executed than in the 110 years before the Second World War. It is clear that these 242 executions were an historic exception in the evolution of the Belgian justice system, even more so because, after 1950, not a single execution took place. If only for this reason, this exceptional period in the history of the Belgian justice system deserves to be the object of in depth-research. These executions were the most dramatic type post-war punishment for collaboration. The 242 executions sparked intense societal debates which have lasted for decades as well as having been used to construct myths and to question the legitimacy of the way the Belgian military justice system dealt with collaboration. Some aspects of this group of 242 have already been studied, using limited sources available at the time. However, the recent transfer of the archives of the military justice system to the State Archives now makes it possible to research the cases of those who were executed in a more comprehensive way, dealing with new aspects combining different types of sources produced by the military justice system. By contextualising these cases and by analysing in depth the decision-making processes in the military justice system, new light will be shed on: the criminal investigation; the trials and court decisions; the chief military prosecutor's recommendations to the minister of justice as part of the pardon procedure that could have avoided the implementation of the death penalty; and the executions themselves. All these aspects are documented in detail in the archives of the military justice system. This project further builds on new research concerned with the application of the death penalty by Belgian military justice during the First World War, after a long period when capital punishment was not enforced.

As this project aims to challenge and deconstruct facile myths surrounding these executions, a tool will be developed in the digital platform Belgium World War II (www.belgiumwwii.be) to explain to the general public, using selected sources, how decisions were arrived at when it came to the execution of the death penalty, including all relevant contextual elements and explaining how the judicial system actually worked, integrating historical, legal, criminological and sociological approaches.

Moreover, the project will contribute to a better understanding of the organisation of the archives of the military justice system by making explicit links between the different archival components produced by the military justice system. By the end of the project, the State Archives will dispose for this symbolically important group, of an overview of all the archival components relating to it, which can serve as a pilot for future studies concerned with people executed for collaboration. As such the project also takes an approach that clearly aims to broaden our understanding of archivist practice and facilitate access to archival material.



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The output of the project consists of: a workshop on sources; a database with basic information on all death sentences pronounced; a scientific monograph (peer-reviewed) on the military justice system and the death penalty during the repression of the post-war collaboration; an English article for an A-1 journal summarizing the results of the research; an article for an archival journal on the organisation of the archives of the military justice system and a digital tool for the website Belgium World War II to present the results of the results to the general public.

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LINKS

<https://www.cegesoma.be/en/project/brain-project-postwarex-started-2020-2022>