

Ellen Debackere, *Welkom in Antwerpen? Het Antwerpse vreemdelingenbeleid, 1830-1880* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2020, 280 pp., ISBN 9789462702141).

Nineteenth-century local migration policy is still much of a research desideratum. Whereas early modernists naturally consider municipal governments as the main actors in migration control, historians of the nineteenth century have predominantly focused on the nation state's role for the making and implementation of migration policy. Yet, recent research indicates that even at the supposed heyday of the nation state in the late nineteenth century, cities had their share in the shaping of migration policy. Ellen Debackere's PhD dissertation about Antwerp's alien policy between 1830 and 1880 is a valuable complement to this research trend. The book emphasises the fractions and tensions between the national level of law- and policymaking and the urban context of implementation. As Debackere convincingly shows, the local execution of legal rules and governmental directives contained potential for conflict and entailed practices of selectivity and adaptation. By carving out these divergences, the book adds to the growing research corpus that focuses on administrative practices rather than on migration lawmaking.

Like other port cities, Antwerp played a prominent role for the intensifying migration movements in the nineteenth century, as it was well integrated into shipping and railway networks and offered plenty of work opportunities, especially in its expanding port. Several factors shaped the city's distinct migration policy. Firstly, its particular features were in part the result of the traditionally strong local autonomy in the Southern Netherlands. Secondly, it was influenced by the conflicting interests between the trade-oriented port city, where a liberal cosmopolitan elite was pressing for a permissive migration policy, and the security-seeking capital, where the governmental body Public Security (*Sûrete Publique*) endeavoured to keep control over foreign nationals. Finally, the Belgian aliens' law from 1835 left the city's officials a relatively large room for interpretation, which the Antwerp authorities mainly used to align their alien policy with the economic conjuncture.

Debackere argues that it is debatable to what extent the nineteenth-century administrative staff interpreted nationality as an organising principle for their migration policy. Nonetheless, she contends that with the Belgian independence of 1830, that is with the implementation of national borders and the building of nation-statehood, authorities' attention shifted from inner-Belgian migrants to foreign nationals

residing and arriving on Belgian territory as exemplified by the issuing of the alien law in 1835. Unlike migration policy (*migratiebeleid*), which was mainly directed at people who recently entered the city, alien policy (*vreemdelingenbeleid*) also concerned foreign nationals who had been living in Antwerp for a long time.

*Welkom in Antwerpen* contains six chapters. After the introduction, Debackere demonstrates how Antwerp's harbour played a decisive role in the city's population development, its economic and professional structure, and its migration history. The port made Antwerp a destination for Belgian and international (labour) migrants as well as for transit migrants who planned, but were not always able to realise, a journey to the Americas. The next four chapters deal with the main topics of alien policy as identified by previous research: the registration of arriving migrants, the use of legitimation papers, the support of impoverished aliens and the expulsion of unwanted migrants. With the help of quantitative and qualitative methods, Debackere analyses the source corpus which is mainly composed of the Antwerp *vreemdelingendossiers* (alien files) and registration and expulsion files. Accumulated data transformed into graphs and tables give insight into developments over time and structural conditions, while analyses of individual pieces of documents place individual migrant experiences in their context. This mixed approach gives detailed insight into the connections and correlations between the national legal framework, the national and local socio-economic context, Antwerp's administrative practices and the agency of migrants themselves, which together determined the city's alien policy.

Foreign nationals with sufficient means of subsistence and without any criminal record were, in principle, entitled to reside in Belgium. Yet, the national *Sûreté Publique* wanted to know about their presence and asked newcomers to register with the local police. Despite the *Sûreté Publique's* ambition since 1835 to centralise migration policy, and despite its repeated exhorting of the Antwerp police to follow the central rules more diligently, local authorities kept and used their space for manoeuvre, not least possible because of the *Sûreté's* limited resources. Debackere explains that it was toward 1880, as newcomers' numbers rose sharply in particular because of massive emigration from Eastern Europe, that local authorities acted most independently when deciding whether to allow a migrant to stay in Antwerp. In this context of increasing migration, city authorities sharpened their identification policy, as the fourth chapter illustrates. From a nearly discretionary manner, obliging only 'suspicious people' to show their papers, the practice developed toward a more systematic requirement of identification papers – although the legal obligation to possess a passport when traveling was abolished in 1860. Debackere's study demonstrates thereby that local processes, in this case the movement toward a more systematic approach toward identification, did not necessarily correspond with developments on the national level.

Since 1845, impoverished foreign nationals were legally entitled to receive support, albeit not from the municipalities, but from the central state. At the same time, the aliens' law still stipulated that aliens without means of subsistence were to be expelled. In chapter 5, Debackere analyses how the Antwerp *Bureel van Weldadigheid* (Charity Department), which was responsible for providing support to the poor living at home, dealt with this legal contradiction and identifies certain patterns of selectivity. To determine if a foreign national deserved support, officials took into consideration criteria of belonging – Dutch nationals received aid most often – and of the 'deserving poor', that is, poor people who were considered to be 'useful'. In any event, when asking for support, foreign nationals ran the risk of being expelled. In the last chapter, Debackere demonstrates to what extent the general profile of the expelled contrasted with that of the aided aliens. Expelled migrants mostly originated from far-away countries, had arrived in Antwerp more recently and were lacking a social network. However, the author points out the complexity and local anchoring of the expulsion practice by discussing the role played by the sheer visibility of foreign nationals and by the tolerance for deviant behaviour in the different city quarters where the police arrested the vagrants. According to Debackere, arrests were more frequent in the bourgeois housing quarters where vagrants were more visible and less tolerated than in socially mixed city areas. The author points out that arrests increased in the context of the 1880s economic crisis as tolerance for vagrant people generally diminished.

*Welkom in Antwerpen* is a thoroughly researched and convincingly argued social-history of Antwerp's nineteenth-century alien policy. Duly adapted to the respective topic, Debackere studies sample years so to make well-grounded statements about the administrative practice at a particular moment in time as well as about its evolution from 1830 to 1880. Graphic representations, tables, pictures, maps and examples help the reader follow the argumentation, while the author diligently explains her methods and evaluates the scope of her findings. Yet, at times, the reader might experience this methodological transparency as an obstacle to the book's readability and narrative strength. Instead, more frequent references to the 'bigger picture' of Antwerp's position within nineteenth century migration phenomena or to the particularity of it being a port city may have enhanced the book's narrative structure and given its important findings even more weight.

Another minor critique concerns the book's timeframe. The 1880s, as the author agrees, saw important changes because a significantly increasing number of socially more diverse migrants travelled to Antwerp over longer distances. On the other hand, with the Belgian alien law becoming effective in 1835, the book rarely refers to the 1830s. Hence, the timeframe 1840-1890/1900 might have been more appropriate to study the development of Antwerp's alien policy. Notwithstanding these minor points of critique, Debackere's meticulous and well-substantiated study is highly recommended,

not only for port city historians or specialists of migration history, but for all readers interested in Antwerp's and other cities' past as a destination for people looking for a better life.

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