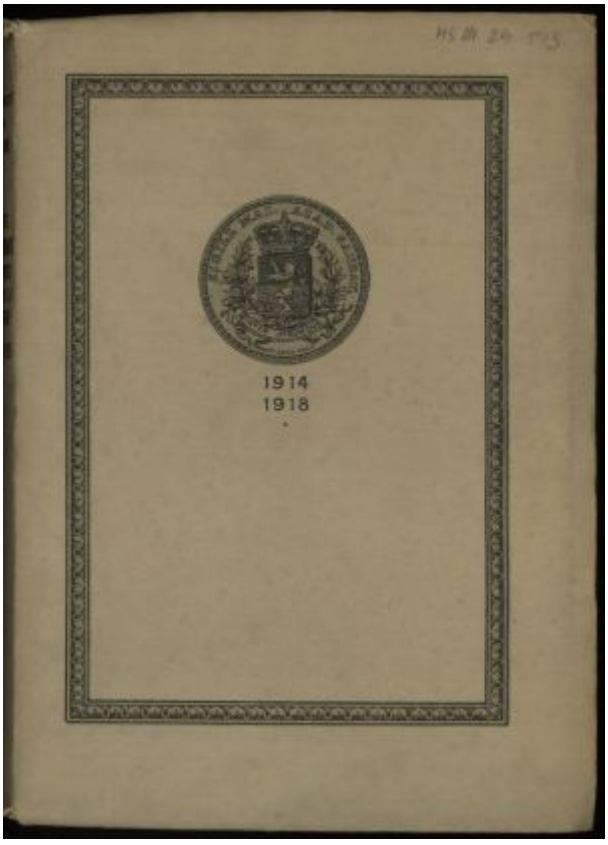
# Traces of memorial practices in remembrance of law faculty academics who died during the Great War: Brussels, Leuven, Liège

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https://expo-grande-guerre-biu-cujas.univ-paris1.fr/en/traces-of-memorial-practices-in-remembrance-of-law-faculty-academics-who-died-during-the-great-war-brussels-leuven-liege/




Those who gave their lives for an ideal of justice, those who died for the law, have left the survivors a legacy that must not be made up solely of contempt and hatred.

*Paul Héger, Academic opening session of the Free University of Brussels, January 21, 1919.*

Confronted with the magnitude and violence of the mass death caused by the Great War, the deep trauma that ensued drove society towards an irrepressible need to mourn and remember those lost. Mourning is an intrinsic part of the war experience. It is present from the outset of combat and continuing after the war, and is a bond that unites combatants and non-combatants in the loss of a son, husband, brother, or “comrade”. Its expression is multifaceted: it tends to be expressed collectively, most often through the construction of monuments to the dead or patriotic gatherings in memory of the fallen, but it is also expressed through more intimate, personal grief, which is more often than not overshadowed by the former and internalized by individuals. As expressed, collective mourning could be described as an “exhibition”, as it is ostensibly shown already during the conflict and in the immediate post-war period. Furthermore, this remembrance of the war dead focuses almost exclusively on the combat experience, to the detriment of its other components, such as civilian victims, victims of occupation, the wounded, and war prisoners.

The academic world is not immune to this need to express gratitude and mourn the loss of its community members. One should remember, however, that remembrance practices in universities are at the crossroads of collective and individual mourning. Indeed, as a social structure, they organize commemorative events, build monuments, and write guest books. The tribute they pay is collective, but the recipient is not anonymized in the crowd of those who have died for their country, as individual lives are recounted before a more or less restricted assembly. Compared with certain other faculties of their universities (medicine and polytechnics) or certain French law faculties, Belgian law faculties do not seem to have chosen to pay tribute directly to their members but rather have left it up to the universities. We will attempt to sketch out the contours of memorial practices in the few examples we have gathered of academics who have passed through the law faculties of the universities of Brussels, Liège, and Louvain, both collectively and individually.

## Those who died for their fatherland

Over the four years of the war, the three universities in question saw over 4,300 of their students and alumni mobilized (Louvain: 2,053; Liège: 1,270; Brussels: around 900). If

we rely on the various university reports and directories, which themselves warn of potential miscalculations, the number of people mobilized in the Belgian and Allied armed forces from the law faculties during the war amounts to 401 in Louvain, 225 in Brussels and 176 in Liège. At the end of the war, the Catholic University of Louvain suffered 381 casualties, i.e. 18% of all those who had spent at least one year studying there. Its law faculty claimed 72 casualties, i.e. 17% of the lawyers and trainee lawyers mobilized. The State University of Liège lost 188 people or 14.3% of those mobilized. Its law faculty recorded 27 fatalities or 15.3%. The Free University of Brussels counted 67 students dead, representing 22.3% of all Brussels students who fought. Moreover, its law faculty suffered 15 casualties, representing 6.6% of its students and alumni.

## The Death Announcement

The death announcement remains one of the classic and ostentatious elements in the announcement of a death. It is a private and spontaneous initiative. For the family of Robert Allard, a law student at the Free University of Brussels and soldier in the 5th Regiment de Ligne killed in action near Louvain, the end of summer of 1914 sounded like a double sorrow: the loss of a son, but also his body. In fact, in its retreat, the Belgian army had to abandon the bodies of many soldiers in the occupied zone. With burial by the family impossible for at least some time, the only option is to publish a death announcement – a reminder of the customs of a bygone peacetime. This is a typical element of individual mourning. It enables the first “circle of mourners” – the family – to announce the painful news to others, more distant circles of mourners. It allows the veteran’s loved ones to express their grief, but also their desire to remember their loved one. For some family members, it can even become a relic, being the only material trace of the event if the body has not been repatriated. In the case of Robert Allard, his family managed to smuggle his body back during the Occupation and bury it in the family vault, enabling him to pay his respects after months of waiting. Although a singular case in this respect, this example bears witness to a widespread practice that affected many families during the conflict, and although a minor trace, it was sometimes the only way to pay tribute to their victims during four years of war.

## Early tributes and *Liber Memorialis*

The first funeral tributes to academics in their own right were made after the war, generally using lists in official university publications. The term “academic” should be understood here in its broadest sense, i.e. all persons of Belgian or allied nationality who belonged or had belonged to a university community, whether as scientific or administrative staff, or as students. If we look closely at the administrative yearbooks published by universities each year, we can see that they take advantage of these publications to pay tribute to their dead. At times, these publications may be coupled with a *Liber Memorialis*, or guest book, honoring not only the fallen but also the members of the university community who survived the conflict. These works are usually printed in the months following the end of the war. They are a means of mediating mourning, created by an institution that played a part in the training of the dead, and rewarding them with recognition for their devotion to the common cause, sometimes through a presentation of their record of service, their final moments and the meaning given to their death.

For its part, the Free University of Brussels opted for two publications. The first was quite rapid, listing the names of students killed in action. From the very first pages of its 1919 yearbook, we find a black-bordered list of the names of those who “fell on the field of honor”, followed by a speech by Rector Léon Leclère setting out the losses by faculty. Later, the Rector chose to publish a short *Liber Memorialis*, listing in alphabetical order all members of the university community who had taken part in the fighting. In one line, he mentions the faculty of origin, rank, service weapon, and date of death, where applicable. By “inconsistent”, we mean that the publication’s authors have not followed a strict format for listing those who took part in the conflict, particularly when it comes to the abbreviations used to save space. As a result, some have all their information quoted completely in the line, while others are simply mentioned by abbreviations. The faculties of medicine and polytechnics stand out by writing additional text to analyze the casualty statistics and feats of arms of their members. In contrast to the above-mentioned neglected work, the university has a commemorative medal struck by name and awarded to Brussels academics who took part in the conflict.

For its part, the Catholic University of Leuven chose to take more time to collect names and produced more meticulous entries for its yearbook covering the years 1915?1918, which was not published until 1923. This work takes more the form of an obituary of students and former students who died during the conflict, extending over more than

150 pages. Each student is given a detailed account of his or her studies, feats of arms, and decorations. The 72 killed in the law school are mixed in with the other students to form a uniform group.

The most elaborate example of a *Liber Memorialis*, however, is the one made by the State University of Liège. Later renamed the *Livre d'Or des universitaires liégeois 1914 ?1918*, its design was launched in 1919 by Rector Eugène Hubert, at the same time as the monument to Liège academics who had died for their country and was completed in 1923. These four years bear witness to the meticulousness of the commission in charge of its drafting. From the outset, the intention was to include in the book all students who had taken part in the hostilities in one way or another. Thus, instead of 188 entries, corresponding to those who died for their country, the guestbook includes 1,270, classified by faculty. Compared with other universities, it initially chose to publish a provisional list in 1920, before beginning the work of gathering information and writing up the entries. This was a lengthy process, in which she chose to include a photo of the deceased in the entry.

## Monuments to the dead

Closely linked to a *Liber Memorialis*, monuments to the dead are often the logical extension. Indeed, once the list of dead student soldiers has been collected, it is easier to create a monument bearing their names. These are designed to be placed in a symbolic place of passage, sometimes shared by new and old students alike. These places become places for the expression of both individual and collective grief, where the rituals of annual commemorations accompany the process of mourning. The Catholic University of Leuven chose to place a plaque in the staircase of the library burnt down at the start of the conflict. At the Free University of Brussels, the monument is placed in the marble hall of the brand-new building built with funds from the CRB Educational Foundation. The State University of Liège installed its own in the entrance hall of the university's academic hall. In general, the monuments were built in the 1920s, after enough money had been raised for their construction.

The Liège monument is particularly interesting because it is particularly well documented. Following a proposal made by Rector Eugène Hubert to the Academic Council on April 12, 1919, a commission was set up to draft a *Liber Memorialis* and erect a memorial to the students. The commission was made up of representatives from

each faculty, as well as student representatives. From the onset of the project, a patronage committee was formed, which included the royal couple, and various notables from Liège and elsewhere, including several members of the province's judicial institutions, the two chambers, and the army. The project was financed by the Ministry of Science and the Arts, the City of Liège, and individuals who had responded to subscription lists widely reported in the press. After gathering a list of students who had taken part in the conflict, an adjoining committee was set up to organize and judge a competition for the creation of the monument. In 1920, the sculptor Jean Berchmans, a university alumnus and veteran of the war, was chosen to create the memorial, with Paul Comblen assisting with the architectural aspects. The construction of the monument was not without its problems. In early 1922, the *Fédération Nationale des Combattants* took offense at the fact that the project was being carried out by an architect who had not fought, while so many others around him had. The university retorted that the architect, one of the masters of his discipline, had two sons who had enlisted in the Belgian army.

Once construction was complete, the inauguration was prepared by Rector Charles Dejace. It took place on June 18, 1922, in the presence of a large gathering of officials, including King Albert the First and Prime Minister Theunis. After a few speeches to the families of the deceased and the university's veterans, the names of the dead students were listed faculty by faculty. Despite the university's best efforts to ensure that as many people as possible attended the ceremony, several guests were absent, either for lack of time or for more reasons that are personal. This was the case, for example, of the mother of Robert Van Langenhove, a student at the faculty of Law and soldier in the 5th Line Regiment killed on September 12, 1914, at Rotselaar. In her letter to Charles Dejace, she expressed her regret of not being able to attend the tribute due to her advanced age and fear of being plunged back into her painful memories. However, she asks that the list of academics who died alongside her son be passed on to her as a final remembrance of him.

## Pilgrimages in Liège

To conclude this overview of the few traces of memorial practices in honor of academics who participated in the Great War, it seems worthwhile to turn our attention to a gathering in which the State University of Liège and its students participated during

the interwar period: the “*pèlerinage liégeois*” to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Brussels. The first pilgrimage took place on May 13, 1923, under the aegis of the Liège municipal administration. The event brought together the various components of civil, religious, and academic society in Liège. Departures were made in groups from the Liège train station in the early hours of the morning, to be able to parade at the symbolic hour of 11:00 a.m. before the tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Congress column. The parade was followed by a laying of flowers on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the various authorities present.

In 1927, a second “*pèlerinage liégeois*” was organized on November 6. This year’s pilgrimage had an extra dimension compared to its first edition. An additional stop was made at the brand new memorial to the Unknown French Soldier who had fallen on Belgian soil, inaugurated a few months earlier at Laeken. Given the close ties between the city of Liège and France, it is hardly surprising that this organization chose to stop at this monument to French soldiers on this day. Students and alumni of the State University of Liège play an important role in these events. They are undoubtedly patriotic ceremonies attended by students from the Faculty of Law in memory of their “university brothers” who left too soon.

These pilgrimages ended with the introduction of a major patriotic ceremony in Liège every November 11, starting in 1927. This annual ceremony is the occasion for a huge procession that travels through the city, passing in front of the university in particular, to visit the graves of the city’s largest necropolis at Robermont, where several law students were also laid to rest. It should be noted that the other cemeteries in the area have not been forgotten. These are visited by a smaller delegation of local councilors just before the main procession takes place. At these events, great importance is attached to the presence of the younger generations, including primary, secondary, and higher education students. In less than ten years, we have seen a fundamental shift in people’s perception of the Armistice. While the Armistice was seen as a celebration of victory at the end of the conflict, it was quickly overtaken by the individual and collective memorial dimension of pilgrimages; mourning was placed at the heart of the event and then evolved into larger-scale patriotic ceremonies where the values of the nation were put forward to bind the population together and educate younger people who had not experienced these events.

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