

## 7 “So worthy an example to Ireland”.

### The subsistence and industrial crisis of 1845–1850 in Flanders

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#### I. A dynamic peasant economy

Up until the nineteenth century, the agriculture of Flanders was that of a peasant economy.<sup>1</sup> After the disappearance of serfdom in the High Middle Ages, most holdings in the Flemish countryside were small household farms characterised by peasant survival strategies (Verhulst, 1990; Thoen, 2001, 2004). In addition, an extensive rural flax industry developed in the heart of this region, reaching its zenith at the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Figure 7.2).

This type of agriculture, called ‘Flemish husbandry’, was based on equilibrium within the holding, within the village economy and in the regional context. To begin with, all holdings, large and small, were mixed farms. The combination of arable farming and the breeding of small stock and, when possible, cattle, was the key to success in peasant agriculture. Above all, the arable land had to produce grain (wheat, rye, maslin, spelt, also buckwheat) and, from the eighteenth century on, more and more potatoes, these together being the main ingredients of the human diet. In addition, some land was cultivated for grass and hay, industrial crops (such as flax, hop and coleseed), fodder crops (turnips, peas, spurrey, clover, etc.) and certain fruit and vegetables. The cattle supplied meat, dairy products and provided traction power and manure. Because of extremely high labour input, rotation systems were elaborated and agricultural productivity was high. Typically, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Flemish smallholdings were often less than 0.5 hectare, often tilled by spade. Almost all of these smallholdings cultivated rye and potatoes. About 60% also grew vegetables, 40% fruit and 30% coleseed. Five out of every ten of these tiny holdings grew a second crop such as turnips. In holdings between 0.5 and 2 hectares (still too small to be self-sufficient), 50% of the land was used for grain, 15% for potatoes, 10 to 15% for clover and 10 to 15% for flax. These holdings often kept one or two cows (but not horses) (Thoen and Vanhaute, 1999).

These small family holdings were deeply embedded in the local village economies but also participated in regional and national economies, through local markets and larger farms, and even in the international economy, via linen export. Large farms and smallholdings were linked to each other via complex dependence relationships and credit systems in the form of labour, goods, services and sometimes money. Smallholders exchanged their labour surplus for the capital and goods surplus (such as horsepower)

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<sup>1</sup> Vanhaute and Van Molle, 2004. This overview focuses on the sand and sand-loam region of Inner-Flanders, situated in the Belgian provinces of East- and West-Flanders, excluding the coastal region and the river polders (Figure 7.1).

I am grateful to Cormac Ó Gráda for his suggestions and corrections.

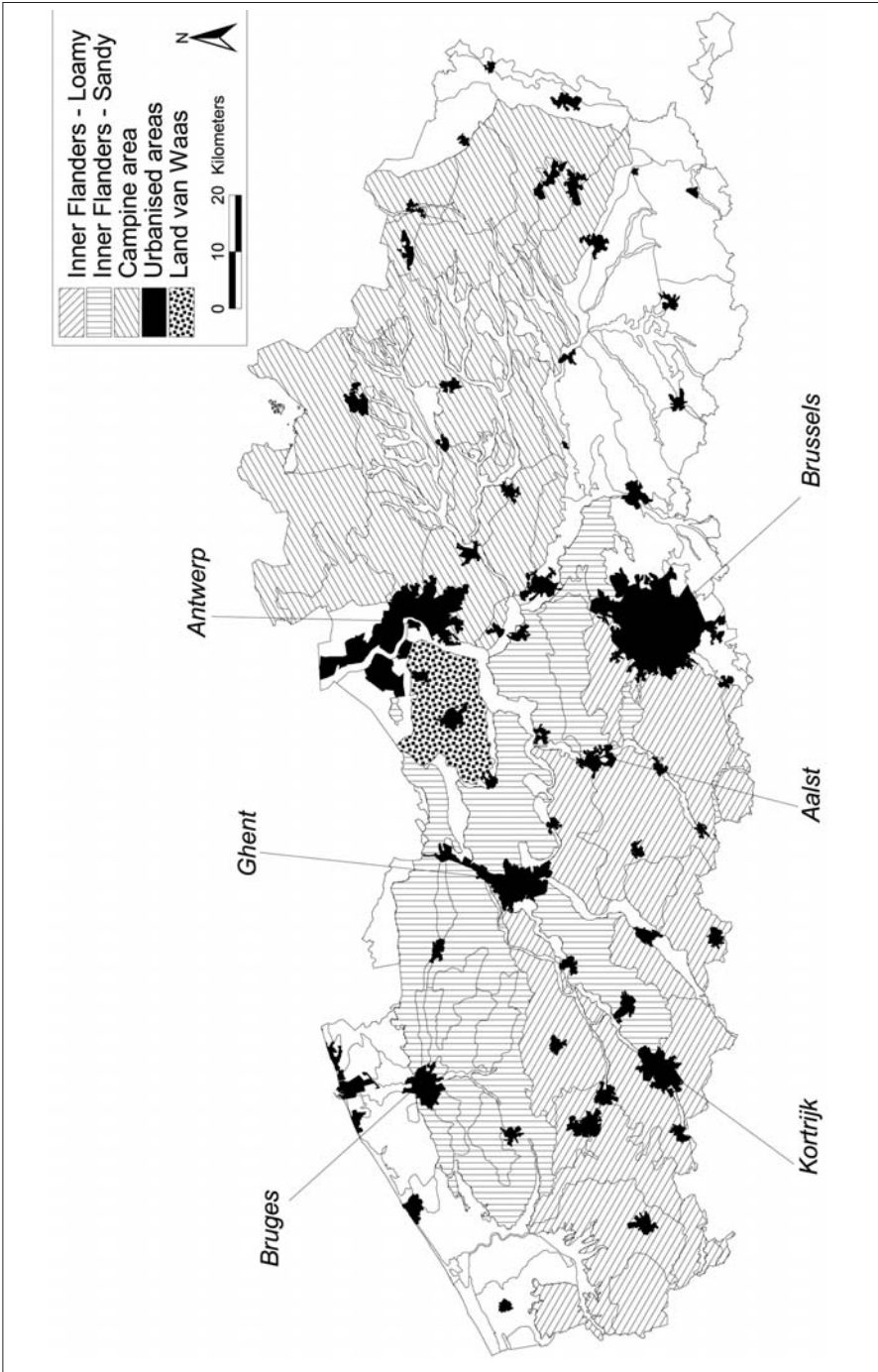


Figure 7.1 Map of agricultural regions in Flanders

of the larger farmers. These local credit networks linked subsistence farming to the external markets.

Moreover, the mixed holding had to maintain a balance between producing enough to live on and still have sufficient left to exchange on the local and regional market circuits. The small family farm, with its typical intensive mixed agriculture, could only survive thanks to self-sufficiency supplemented with income from the sale of some arable farming produce (e.g. industrial crops and fruit), and meat and dairy produce (e.g. butter and eggs), and, especially, from (proto-)industrial flax processing. Regions such as the (coastal and Scheldt) polders and the surrounding clay soil areas that supported larger holdings, generated additional exchange relationships through demand for agrarian labour and the sale of agricultural produce.

All these factors determined the particular character of the Flemish commercial peasant economy (Vanhaute and Van Molle, 2004; Lambrecht, 2002; Thoen, 2001, 2004). For centuries, mixed agriculture guaranteed the survival of the large majority of families in Flanders. In addition, until the nineteenth century, this system of household farming was the most important driving force behind regional and national economic growth and the biggest source of regional wealth. The last period of accelerated growth started in the middle of the eighteenth century, resulting in levels of agricultural yield in the middle of the nineteenth century that were the highest until then. The increased productivity of land and livestock was the result of further refinements of the mixed holding type of agriculture and an increasingly higher labour input in small to very small holdings.

## **II. High profits and high costs**

Between 1750 and 1850, the population of the whole of Belgium almost doubled. In the already densely populated Flemish area, population grew by 75%. After 1800, the population increased with annual growth rates of 0.7 to 1%. In 1846, the two Flemish provinces had 400,000 more inhabitants than in 1801, a growth of 40% (from 1.02 million to 1.43 million inhabitants). This increase was an entirely rural phenomenon, related to the success of the ‘traditional’ agrarian society. Permanent long-distance emigration hardly occurred. In 1850, population density in Flanders had increased to 233 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, one of the highest at that time. The region only had one centre of urban growth: the industrial city of Ghent.

The demographic and financial pressures (see below) on husbandry had a favourable effect on yields. In the eighteenth century, the agriculture of the Southern Netherlands was strikingly productive (Vandenbroeke, 1975: 621–626). It was able to feed a rapidly increasing population. In addition, approximately 5% of the grain harvest could be exported as surplus. Only through a permanent pursuit of improving physical yields in arable farming could a structural food shortage be avoided.

The increase in total agricultural output was due in large part to diversification and further improvement of the existing production methods. Rising food production was the combined result of the increase in yields as a consequence of a more intensive soil cultivation in arable farming, the spread and differentiation of crop rotation (without fallow), the introduction and spread of new crops (potato), and longer, often permanent stabling of livestock.

**Table 7.1 Population and agricultural output in Belgium, 1760-1850 (growth per annum)**

	Population growth	Output agriculture	Output arable farming	Output livestock farming
1760–1810	+0.53%	+0.35%	+0.62%	–0.11%
1810–1850	+0.97%	+0.93%	+0.93%	+0.94%

Source: Dejongh, 1999.

**Table 7.2 Agricultural land in Belgium, 1760–1850**

	c. 1760	c. 1810	c. 1850
<i>Agricultural land (mio hectare)</i>			
Arable land (plus fallow)	1.37		1.46
Pasture land	0.33		0.35
Woodland	0.59		0.55
Heath land	0.43		0.35
	c. 1760	c. 1810	c. 1850
<i>Subdivision arable land* (%)</i>			
Total hectares (mio)	1.13	1.21	1.32
Grains	83.1%	71.7%	67.4%
Potatoes	1.7%	6.1%	9.1%
Industrial crops	4.2%	6.8%	5.1%
Fodder crops	11.0%	15.4%	18.4%

\* exclusive fallow, horticulture and after crops

Source: based on Dejongh, 1999.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, tension was building between population increase, farm structure and production volume. In spite of yield increases, the agricultural sector in the Southern Netherlands could not keep pace with population growth. Whereas agricultural production grew at average annual rate of 0.58% between 1760 and 1850, population grew at a rate of 0.69% in the same period. However, in spite of occasional supply crises, this imminent problem did not result in a structural hunger crisis. This is related to the fact that the Southern Netherlands shifted from being a bread grain exporter to a grain importer (10 to 15% of needs in the mid-nineteenth century). Moreover, as a consequence of the enormous success of the potato, arable farming was able to keep pace with population growth (with an annual output increase of 0.74% between 1760 and 1850, against 0.30% for the livestock sector).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, soil yields rose to levels never seen before. In the middle of the nineteenth century, average bread-grain yields (also oats and barley) per hectare were 40 to 50% higher than a century before and potatoes, although a young

**Table 7.3 Average arable yields in Flanders and Belgium, 1760–1850**

	kg/hectare c. 1760	index c. 1760	c. 1810	c. 1850
<i>East- and West-Flanders</i>				
Wheat	1100	100	121	143
Rye	1050	100	123	146
Potatoes	8700	100	119	161
	kg/hectare c. 1760	index c. 1760	c. 1810	c. 1850
<i>Belgium</i>				
Wheat	940	100	115	144
Rye	930	100	123	141
Potatoes	7300	100	132	177

\* Yields in a ‘normal’ year. Conversion of 1 hectolitre in kilograms: wheat 78 kg, rye 71 kg, potatoes 66 kg.

*Source:* based on Dejongh and Vanhaute, 1999.

crop increased even more. Thanks to this and the expansion of cultivated acreage – an additional 17% between 1760 and 1850 as a result of land reclamations and further reduction of fallow – a structural food shortage could be avoided.

Animal husbandry played a considerably smaller role in maintaining food supply. The equilibrium between animal husbandry and arable farming, the central axis in mixed farming, came under severe pressure. Because total livestock hardly increased between 1750 and 1850 (+ 3%), occupation of heads of livestock per hectare of farmland dropped from 2.4 to 2.1. Demographic growth strengthened the role of agriculture as producer of the staples: bread grains and potatoes.

However, the physical yield increase had its limits. Expressed in yield ratios (the ratio sowing seed/harvest), productivity growth in grain and potato cultivation was rather modest. A greater output was achieved by denser sowing and planting. The key to physical yield increase was a higher labour input. Labour intensification on the field – digging, manuring, weeding, etc. – explains the survival of the rural way of life up until the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Average labour input per hectare in Belgium increased by almost 50% between 1760 and 1850 (Dejongh, 1999: 256). Most likely, the physical growth of Flemish agriculture went hand in hand with a stagnating or even decreasing labour productivity. For good reason, foreign observers, surprised by the intensive cultivation of small plots of land spoke of the Flemish ‘horticulture’.

It can be seen that the success of arable farming averted a structural supply crisis in Belgium in the first half of the nineteenth century. This can be related to the success of the potato crop from the middle of the eighteenth century. Because of this tuberous plant’s high yields, in comparison to bread grains, the same plot of land could support twice the number of people. It is true that growing potatoes was more labour-intensive and required more fertilizer but because of the easy access to labour this was no problem.

Cultivation of the potato expanded, particularly in areas with many smallholdings and low incomes, as was the case in Flanders. The growth of potato cultivation had both a positive and negative effect: it increased the calorie yield of the land and could thus feed more people but at the same time, food became more monotonous and the fragmentation of smallholdings further increased.

**Table 7.4 Potato culture in Belgium and Flanders, first half 19th century**

		c. 1810	c. 1840
potato cultivation (% arable land)	Belgium	6%	14%
	Flanders	9%	16%
yields potatoes (kg /ha)	Belgium	10000	14000
	Flanders	11200	15000
production breadgrains per capita		195 kg	175 kg
production potatoes per capita		110 kg	300 kg

Notes: 1) 'normal' (pre-crisis) years (decrease of potato land 1840–1850 –17%); 2) production without import and export

Source: based on Goossens, 1993 and Gadisseur, 1990.

Around 1760, potatoes represented hardly 3% of total arable output (in production value), whereas by 1840, this had increased to almost 20%. This also meant that in terms of daily calorie consumption, from 1760 up until the potato crisis the bread grain to potato ratio shifted from 9: 1 to 6: 4 respectively. Average potato consumption of a Belgian adult round 1840 was 1 to 1.5 kg per day. In many Flemish villages, it was more.<sup>2</sup>

In Belgium, the number of people employed in agriculture reached an all-time high in the mid-nineteenth century. Between 1750 and 1850, the agricultural population (those who worked in agriculture on a full-time or part-time basis) increased by two thirds, to over 1.2 million (Segers, 2003: 14–17). This was the consequence of a further recourse to small-scale subsistence agriculture related to the lack of alternative means to make a living. Nevertheless, this increase was smaller than general population growth, so that the proportion of the population employed in agriculture (full-time or mainly) fell from approximately 65% to 55% in this period. Taking into account part-time labour, this still meant that in the middle of the nineteenth century, two thirds of all Belgian families (urban families included) depended to a greater or lesser extent on an agricultural income. However, hardly one in three families (20 to 25% of total population) could live on agriculture. The other households were forced to supplement their agricultural income with other earnings.

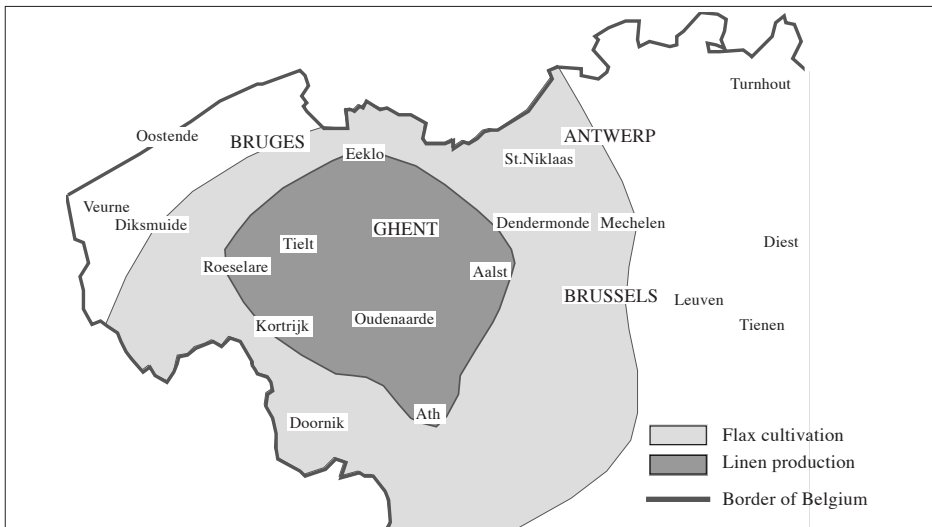
<sup>2</sup> According to Gadisseur's calculations (1990: 670–682), in the 1840s only half of the total potato production was meant for human consumption, which would mean average daily human consumption was about 0.4–0.5 kg per person (total Belgian population). In these calculations a large part of the harvest (up to 50%) was used as pig feed (about 4 kg per day per adult pig). We estimate per capita consumption at 0.6–0.7 kg per person per day. Consumption figures in Flanders were 50% higher than average for humans and 100% higher for pigs. See also *Exposé de la Situation du Royaume. Titre IV*: 56–58.

These developments meant that Belgian rural society became characterised by increasing differentiation and polarization. In the most densely populated regions of the country, Flanders and the western part of Brabant, 40 to 50% of the farms were less than one hectare, and 80 to 85% less than five hectares. Typical holding size fluctuated between one and two hectares (Vanhaute, 2001). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, land fragmentation increased, due to the combination of partible inheritance, increasing debt among peasants, severe population pressure and the introduction of the potato. As a consequence, the need for income from other sources increased further.

In addition, land and farms increasingly had to be rented. In Inner Flanders in the second half of the eighteenth century, two out of three farms were cultivated on lease. Increasing land competition increased the rents. Whereas in the mid-eighteenth century the annual rent of a hectare of arable land was the equivalent of thirty times the daily wage, by the turn of the century this price had doubled and by 1850 it had tripled.

Higher rents became the major cause of mounting debts within the peasant population. Increases in productivity were skimmed off by landowners. It is no accident that the prices increased the most in regions where farm-fragmentation was greatest, leasing was dominant, and cottage industry was widespread. These areas also saw accelerated commercialization of rural life (many small and regional markets) and the revival of small and medium-sized cities. However, these changes were not just the consequence of rural society’s internal dynamics. Another reason was that there was a growing (sub)urban bourgeoisie that profited from rising flows of money from the productive countryside. Landowners, the bourgeoisie of big and medium-sized cities, but also traders and artisans in villages, saw their fortunes grow. This was also thanks to the increasing demand for credit, so part of the rents was ploughed back into agriculture in the form of loans. Farmers contracted huge debts in their struggle for a piece of arable or pastureland of

**Figure 7.2 Areas of flax cultivation and linen weaving in eighteenth century Flanders**



Source: Thoen, 2001: 120.



their own. Proto-industrial expansion probably increased the demand for credit in the villages. Creditors used their position to appropriate properties under debt.

The Flemish peasants responded to this increased financial pressure by working even harder on the land, and augmenting their income at the spinning wheel and the loom. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a quarter to half of the population of Inner Flanders worked in the rural flax and linen industry. Until the 1840s, 300,000 to 400,000 villagers earned extra income in this proto-industrial labour. Decreasing yarn and cloth prices from the 1820s, however, increased pressure on the Flemish peasants' income. By the 1830s, one out of every five Flemish families was registered as indigent.

Because of the (unequal) labour, credit and lease relationships, the greatest part of the surpluses produced by household farming were drained away. The Flemish peasant economy was thus responsible for a large part of the 'national' economic growth. However, a high social price was paid for this growth and by the middle of the nineteenth century, the impoverishment of the countryside was clearly apparent. The village economies were unable to support the population growth that occurred from 1750 on, and eventually the agricultural system reached its limits in the middle of the nineteenth century.

### **III. The subsistence crisis of 1845–1850**

#### **III.1. An agricultural crisis**

The direct cause of the mid-19th century subsistence crisis in Europe was the failure of potato harvests in the years 1845–1850. Compared to other countries, the Belgian potato fields were affected much earlier (from mid-July 1845) by the potato blight, *phytophthora infestans* (Bourke, 1964; Solar, 1997). The potato blight meant that 87% of harvests were lost and in Flanders, the epicentre of the potato disease, losses mounted up to 95% of the crop. To make matters worse, more potatoes than normal had been planted to make up for the disappointing yield of winter crops such as wheat and colesseed that had been affected by the severe winter of 1844–1845. Over the following years, harvests were also poor because fewer potato seedlings were planted. In the years from 1846 until 1850 (with the exception of 1849), the harvests were only 40 to 60% of what they 'normally' were. It was not until the second half of the 1850s that pre-crisis yields were achieved again. In the provinces of East and West Flanders, the situation was even more distressing. In 1846, the acreage under potatoes was reduced by 30% and this was still 23% in 1850. It was not until the 1860s that pre-crisis acreage was reached again. Physical yields remained well below normal until the second half of the 1850s. In Flanders between 1846 and 1850 barely a third of the 'normal' potato harvest could be gathered in.

The food situation became very precarious late 1846 and in the first half of 1847, because of poor bread-grain harvests. Due to bad weather conditions in 1846, the rye harvest fell by more than half (the most important bread grain by far), although the losses for wheat and maslin were smaller (10%). Calculated in grain equivalents, the combined loss of bread-grain and potato harvests in 1846 was 66% (calculation according to contemporaries: Jacquemyns, 1929: 258–259). This meant that there were only 125 litres of grain equivalents (bread grains and potatoes) available per head, compared to



**Table 7.5 Average yields and acreage of potatoes in Belgium and Flanders, 1840–1854**

	Yields – kg/hectare		Acreage – hectare	
	Belgium	Flanders	Belgium	Flanders
‘normal year’ (1840–1844)	14,000	15,000	164,000	56,200
1845	600–1,300	600–1,200		
1846	10,700	6,000–8,000	123,000	38,800
1847	10,700	6,500	126,000	39,900
1848	7,600	5,000–6,500	130,000	41,100
1849	13,800	9,500	134,000	42,200
1850	6,800	5,500–7,000	137,000	43,400
1851–1854	7,000–10,000	7,000–12,000		

*Source:* based on Gadisseur, 1990: 292, 406, 536; Jacquemyns: 1929: 255.

375 litres in previous years. Because all harvests in that year were affected (half the bean and pea harvests were lost too), the threat of famine loomed. Luckily, the bumper grain harvests of 1847 and the reasonable harvests in subsequent years reduced the threat of famine.

Soon after the potato disease broke out, the national government stopped food exports. In addition bread grains, and to a limited extent, potatoes were imported. Bread grain imports increased from 25.8 kg per capita in 1845 to 38.4 kg in 1846 and 32.4 kg in 1847 (Degrève, 1982).<sup>3</sup> Imports of (seed) potato and other vegetables (8 kg per person per year in 1846–1847), rice (3 kg per person per year) and various types of flour (1.5 kg per person per year) were much more limited. These imports made up for approximately one third of the grain deficit.

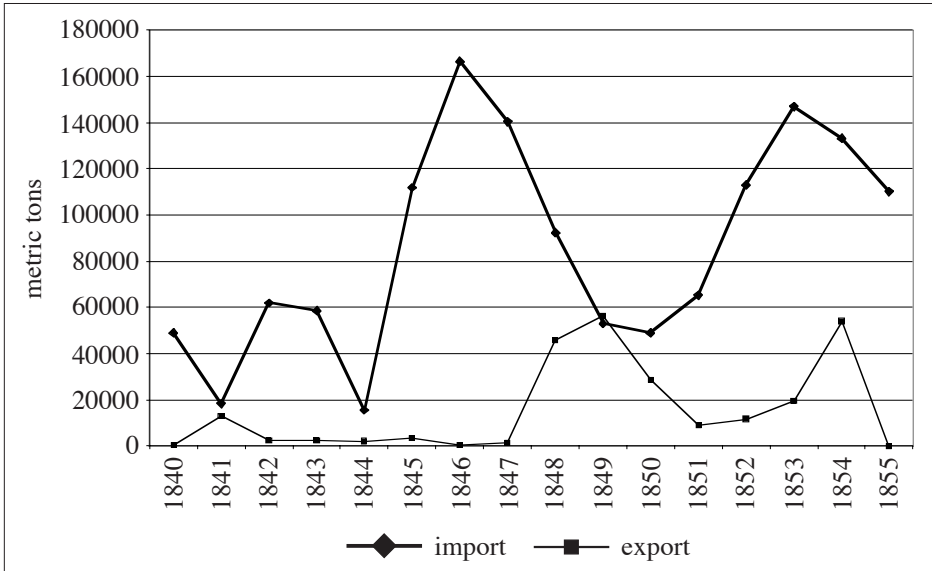
The insidious impoverishment process meant that the average Belgian’s diet fell from about 2850 Kcal per day around 1800 to about 2450 Kcal in the 1840s.<sup>4</sup> The differences between rich and poor also increased markedly. About the middle of the century, labourers in the cities and the countryside had hardly 2000 Kcal a day to live on. Their diet was based mainly on potatoes (average 0.8 to 1 kg per day), bread grains (0.5 to 0.7 kg per day) and buttermilk (0.75 litres per day).

This diet was impoverished even further by the poor harvests in the years 1845–1847, although people tried to supplement this with turnips and carrots. Scarcity inflated market prices as can be seen in Figure 7.4 which shows average annual market prices in

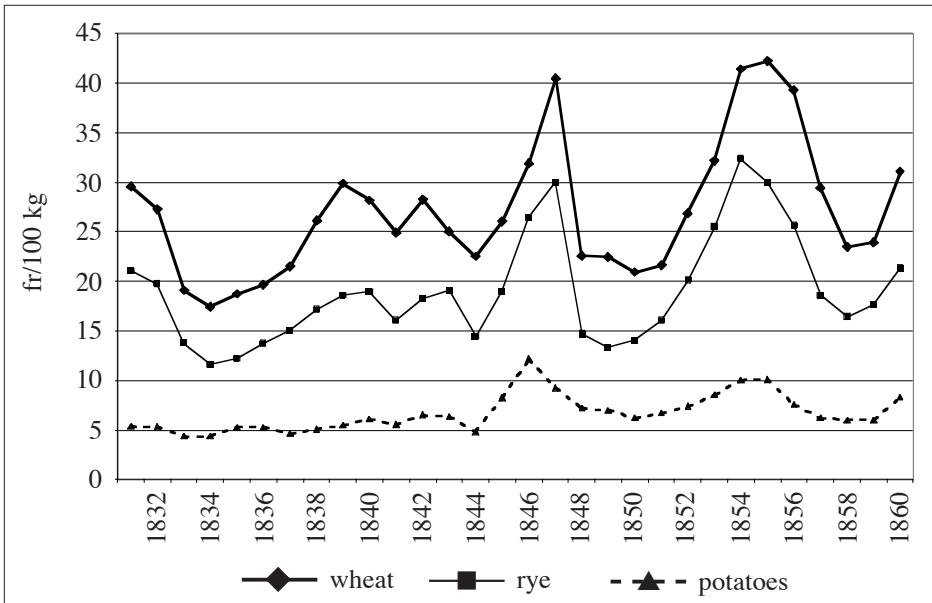
<sup>3</sup> Total amount of food imports in Belgium increased from 90.46 million Belgian Francs in 1841–1845 to 104.89 million Belgian Francs in 1846–1850. Imports from France grew fastest in these crisis years. Imports from the Netherlands, Prussia and the United States grew also considerably (*Exposé de la Situation du Royaume, Titre IV: 157–158*).

<sup>4</sup> Segers, 2003: 255–273. National consumption data, derived from estimates of production, import, export etc. (figures for 1800 based on Vandenbroeke, 1975: 593). The diet includes bread, potatoes, buckwheat, meat, butter, fish, vegetables, sugar, buttermilk, beer etc.

**Figure 7.3 Import and export of breadgrains, Belgium 1840–1855 (metric tons)**



**Figure 7.4 Market prices of wheat, rye and potatoes, Belgium 1831–1860 (Belgian francs/100 kg)**



Belgium in 1831–1860 (Gadisseur, 1990: 756–760). Prices reached a peak in the spring of 1847, after the partial failure of grain harvests. In the spring of 1847, potatoes were sold at 3.5 times the 1844 level. Rye cost 2.4 times as much as in 1844 and wheat cost twice as much. Rice was 3 times as expensive while peas and beans were 1.8 times as expensive as in 1844. Prices for meat and dairy produce increased far less over the same period: butter by 1.5, pork by 1.3 and beef by 1.1 times (Sabbe, 1975: 493).

The increase in livestock numbers slowed down after the crisis years, and sometimes halted completely. Between 1846 and 1856, in Belgium cattle rose by 4%, but the number of horses (–6%) and pigs (–8%) dropped. In 1856, in Flanders there were 13% fewer pigs. This was probably directly related to the lack of fodder caused by the potato blight. A striking feature is the increase in the number of goats (30% in the same period). Goats have been considered as the ‘poor people’s cows’.

### III.2. A proto-industrial crisis

A crisis in the rural flax industry coincided with the subsistence crisis of 1845–1847. Up until then, this industry had provided tens of thousands Flemish families with crucial additional income. Labour participation in the Flemish linen industry was still rising during the first decades of the nineteenth century, and reached more than 300,000 women and men. In the Inner Flanders’ textile regions, at least half of the labour force worked part-time (Gubin, 1983). Flemish flax processing lost the commercial battle against mechanized cotton and linen production. The most important destination of Flemish linen was the foreign market but export levels fell from 4.5 million kg in 1835 to less than 2 million kg in 1848 and later, even though the price of linen cloth was halved (Jacquemyns, 1929: 14, 163).

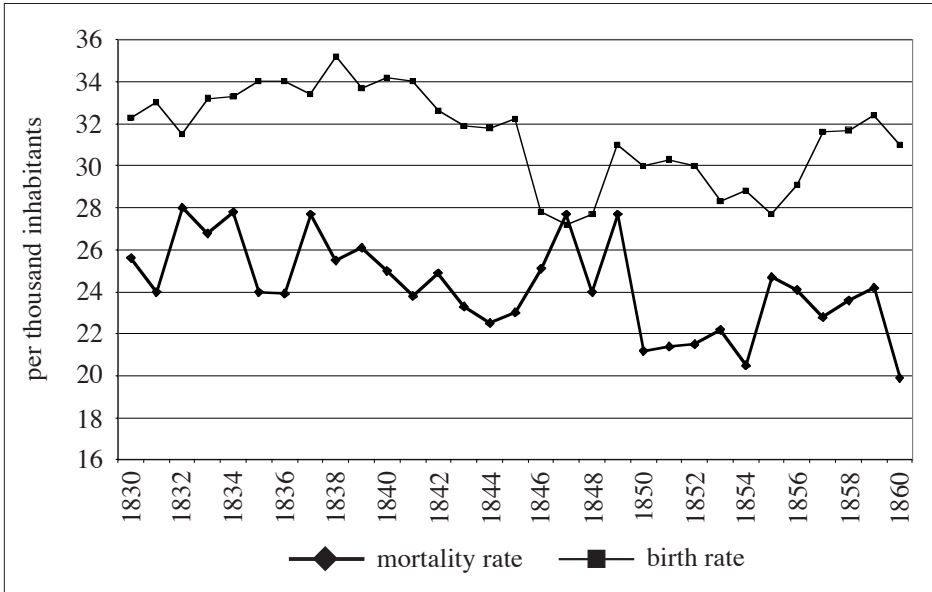
The only way merchant-entrepreneurs could reduce their losses was to cut wages and reduce the quality of their goods. In consequence, the real income of spinners and weavers went into free fall. By 1850, a weaver’s daily wage would buy him less than 3.5 kilograms of rye, whereas in 1750 the daily wage was worth four times this amount.

The national government tried to help the ailing flax industry by an active customs policy, promoting trade treaties, giving subsidies to *comités industriels* and by organizing model ateliers. In the 1840s, about 2.5 million Belgian Francs were spent on subsidizing and promoting the rural flax industry. These initiatives could not prevent prices (and wages) and the demand for handmade cloth going down even further. Provincial and local governments supported the same initiatives. Eventually, by about 1850, people began to acknowledge that the traditional cottage industry based on flax processing no longer had a future and entrepreneurs and governments gave up their efforts.

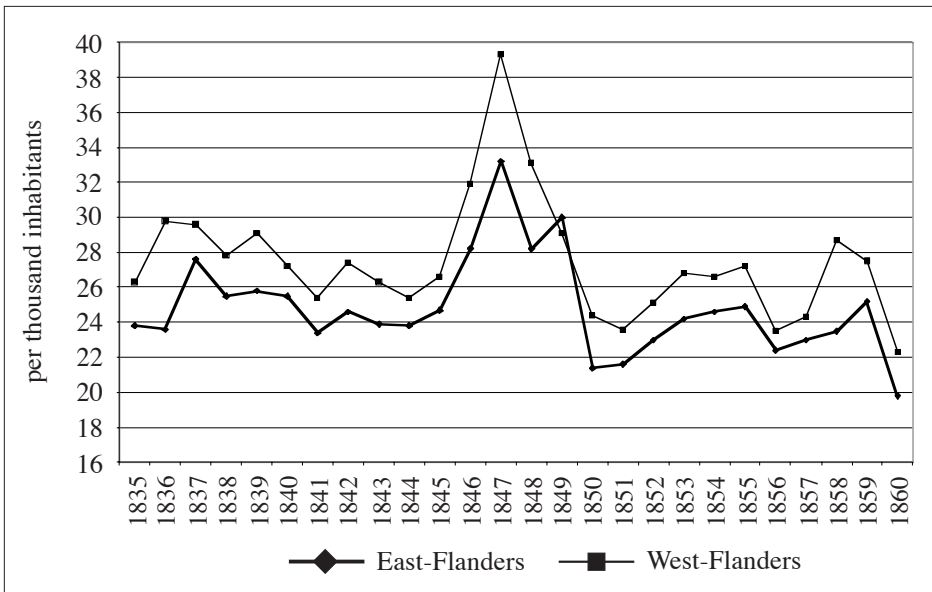
### III.3. Disease and death

Figure 7.5 clearly highlights the crisis years of 1845–1847. It shows increased mortality and declining birth rates that resulted in negative population growth in 1847 (Devos, 2003, vol. 2: 10–11, 125). Compared to the reference years of 1841–1845, 1847 had a surplus mortality of 23,000 (+30%), and the period of three years from 1846 to 1848 had a surplus mortality of 44,000 (+15%). The number of births decreased by 47,000 during the same years (–12%). There were 17% fewer marriages.

**Figure 7.5 Birth and mortality rates, Belgium 1830–1860 (promille)**



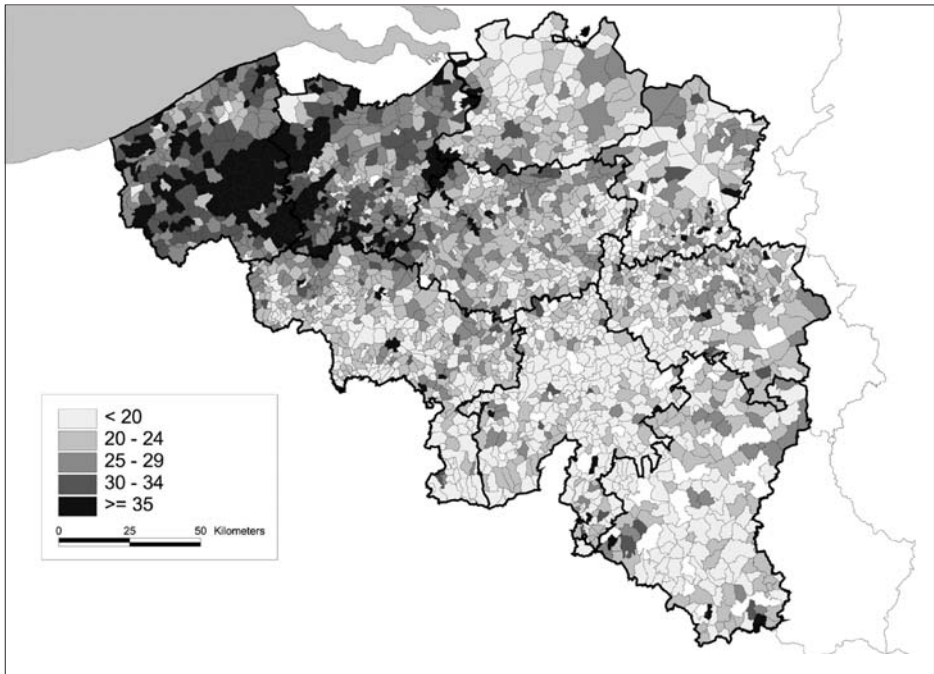
**Figure 7.6 Mortality rates, East- and West-Flanders 1835–1860 (promille)**



As indicated in the charts and maps of Figures 7.6 and 7.7, high mortality in 1846–1847 was limited to the geographical area of Inner-Flanders. The highest rates were found in West-Flanders in the districts of Roeselare and Tielt (47 to 53 per thousand in 1847) and the cities of Bruges (40 per thousand) and Tielt (52 per thousand). In 1847, some villages in these regions had mortality rates of higher than 80 per thousand. Total excess mortality in the two Flemish provinces was 15,000 (+40%) in 1847 and 29,500 in 1846–1848 (+27%). In the Tielt region, mortality rates of more than 100% increase were seen (Jacquemyns, 1929: 352–362). Life expectancy at birth in the Flemish regions decreased: a 32 to 35 years average in 1841–1850, against 37 years in Brabant and more than 39–40 years in the other Belgian provinces (Devos, 2003, vol. 1: 154). In the crisis years in Flanders, 18% fewer births than normal and 30% fewer marriages were registered. In the linen district, the declines were 30% and 40%, respectively.

Most deaths were a consequence of nutrition-related diseases, such as dysentery and typhus. In 1846–1848, typhus was registered in half of the Flemish municipalities (46,000

**Figure 7.7 Mortality rates in Belgian communities, 1846–1847 (promille)**



Source: *Population. Mouvement de l'état civil 1841–1850* (Mortality figures 1846 and 1847); *Recensement général de la population de 15 octobre 1846* (Population figures 1846).

registered sick persons and 10,000 registered deaths). From 1848 through to 1849, a cholera epidemic took hold resulting in 5,900 registered deaths in Flanders (in Belgium 22,400 deaths). Striking differences in local mortality rates were seen, reflecting the impact of local outbreaks of dysentery or typhus. Mortality increases in the years 1846–1847 were mainly seen in the adult population. The share of the 16–65 year age-group in rural mortality in East- and West-Flanders increased from 33% to 37% in 1845–1846 to 42% to 46% in 1847–1848. In the autumn of 1847, half of all deaths were in this age-group (whereas it would have been normal if this was a third: Devos, 2002, vol. 1: 84 and vol. 2: 198–203). Moreover, excess mortality affected more men than women (proportion of 54 to 46 respectively in the spring of 1847).

The general health of the population can be assessed by looking at how tall people are. In the crisis years 1845–1847, more than a quarter of male army recruits were shorter than 1.57 metres whereas after 1850 this was less than a fifth. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the average height of men was 1.66 metres but after the crisis years, in 1850, this had dropped to 1.62 metres. In Southwest-Flanders, men were on average another 3 to 4 cm shorter (Devos, 2003: 160–164, 171).

A huge surge of emigration failed to materialize. According to official statistics at the time, nearly 14,000 Flemish citizens left to go to foreign countries in the period between 1845–1850. Internal migration was also minimal and there was no massive flight from the rural areas to the city. Villages in East- and West-Flanders lost on balance approximately 20,000 inhabitants during these years. The only industrial city, Ghent, grew by just under 9,000 inhabitants. In total, the provinces of West- and East-Flanders lost, respectively, 1.3% and 4.5% of their population in the years 1844–1848. In the linen producing districts, this was 4% to 9%.

### III.4. Criminality and unrest

Criminal statistics for the 1845–1850 crisis years show some remarkable tendencies.<sup>5</sup> First of all, the number of cases and charges appearing before the criminal court (*Tribunaux correctionnels*) strongly increased. In the period from 1840 to 1844, approximately 17,000 to 19,000 cases involving an average of 26,500 suspects were handled per year. By 1847, this had increased to 32,894 cases involving 38,235 suspects, i.e. an increase of almost 50%. The biggest increase in charges concerned mendicancy (9 times higher in 1847, compared to 1840–1841) and vagrancy (3 times higher), petty theft (3 times higher), trespassing on public woods and land (2.5 times higher) and pillage (*et autres délits ruraux*) (3.5 times higher). On the other hand, the number of cases of physical violence decreased. The profile of suspects also changed. At the beginning of the 1840s, 19% of suspects were female, and 11% were under sixteen. In the years from 1846 to 1848, a quarter of the suspects were female and 20% at least were under sixteen. Women and children were mainly charged for mendicancy (31% of suspects were women, 22% were children under sixteen), entering public woods and lands (28% women), insulting behaviour (33% women), petty theft (25% to 30% women, 13% children) and stealing crops at night (50% women, 20% children).<sup>6</sup> The total number of children in Belgian confined in prisons and *dépôts de mendicité* rose from 4,400 in 1845, through 8,800 in

<sup>5</sup> All statistics are taken from *Exposé de la situation du Royaume, Titre 3*.

<sup>6</sup> Averages for 1841–1849; no yearly figures are available.

1846 to 13,000 in 1847. In Belgium, over the years from 1845 to 1847, some 26,000 children were temporarily interned.

In addition, the number of convictions increased. At the beginning of the 1840s, an average of 78% of suspects was actually sentenced (of which 48% were imprisoned), but by the period from 1846 to 1849 this had risen to 85% (two thirds actually went to prison). Mendicancy (91% sentences, compared to 77% in 1840), theft (82% against 71%) and pillage (69% against 41%) were more severely dealt with. The number of people sentenced to prison remained around 10,000 before the crisis years. This increased to 20,787 in 1846 and 28,348 in 1847, and then fell again.

The number of cases and charges before police courts (*Tribunaux de simple police*) also rose, from 14,400 in 1840–1841 until almost 23,500 in 1847. Remarkable was the rise in cases against common prostitutes or ‘*filles publiques*’ (7 times higher than in 1840), and against those who grazed their livestock on other people’s land and blocked public roads (2 times higher).

All this information seems to indicate that governments and possibly ordinary citizens were less tolerant in this period. This view is supported by an increase in the number of police by-laws, rising from approximately 200 per year before 1844 up to 1,116 in 1846 and 1,374 in 1847. Police statistics also show a striking increase in the number of fires and deaths by drowning during the 1846–1847s.

Finally, the number of Crown Court cases (*Cours d’assises*) increased from approximately 375 per year in 1840–1845 to 616 in 1846 and 579 in 1847. This was a consequence of twice as many cases of nocturnal theft (with aggravating circumstances) and damage to property.

In East- and West-Flanders, the number of arrested and convicted persons rose by 160% and 250%, respectively, between 1841 and 1847 (Jacquemyns, 1929: 331). Most of them were arrested for minor offences, and detained only for a short period. The population of the prisons (*les maisons centrales*) rose by 25% between the early 1840s and 1847 while in the local arrest houses (*maisons de sureté et d’arrêt*) the number of prisoners doubled.

There was also a sharp increase in the numbers of beggars who often ‘worked’ in groups. In the winter of 1846–1847, the Bruges police arrested 6,000 beggars. They were mostly sent back to their own villages but some were confined in the *dépôts de mendicité*.<sup>7</sup> In the five years from 1845 to 1850, all rural villages set up their own safety measures such as night patrols and field watches. We could only find scattered evidence of collective food riots in the spring of 1847, mostly in cities (Bruges, Kortrijk, Ronse, Ghent). There is one record of a grain ship being looted near Ghent. Plans for a hunger march in April 1846 were aborted prematurely.

### III.5. National and local authorities

In 1834, Belgian Parliament approved a system of sliding import duties on grains. The lower the internal prices, the higher import duty would be and the higher the internal prices, the lower the import duty. Emphasis was on protection of the own markets and

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1840s, Belgium had *dépôts* which had the capacity to provide 4,000 to 5,000 people with relief from poverty. In the 1830s, these institutions helped a little under 2,000 people. This increased to 3,000–4,000 at the beginning of the 1840s and to 10,000 in 1847. By 1850, the number went down again to 4,500.



on controlling the price level of basic foodstuffs. The reaction of the central government to the harvest failures of 1845 and 1846 completely fits in with this 'traditional' policy.

The government reacted quickly. In September of 1845, the Belgian government already proclaimed the import of grains, potatoes and other foodstuffs would be duty free and at the same time prohibited the export of, for example, bread or biscuits. These laws were extended until the beginning of 1850. Moreover, the government bought food from foreign countries. For example, in the spring of 1846, a 100,000 Belgian Francs credit was used to buy 5.5 million kg of seed potatoes. As stated earlier, these measures had a favourable effect on imports. Another policy was to support local governments financially, e.g. to support the rural flax industry. In the years 1845–1847, national government allotted 4.8 million Belgian Francs to this. Most of it went to the two Flemish provinces (approximately 3 million Belgian Francs). In addition, the creation of industrial aid committees and working schools was supported.

In the third place, funds were allotted to subsidize public works (in co-operation with the town councils on a 50/50 basis). In the 1840s, various government bodies (including town councils) spent 14.7 million Belgian Francs on public works in the two Flemish provinces, compared to 3.9 million Belgian Francs during the previous decade. According to their own calculations, central government spent 8 million Belgian Francs to alleviate problems during the crisis of the 1845–1850s.<sup>8</sup> Finally, projects for land reclamation and drainage were stimulated. The reclamation law of March 1847 forced all the municipalities to sell their uncultivated land and reintroduced tax exemption for newly cultivated land. However, this did not have any effect in the short term. Other initiatives such as colonization came to nothing and the same went for plans to stimulate overseas emigration.

The shocks of the complex societal crisis were mostly absorbed within the village communities themselves. As soon as it became clear that the harvest was going to fail, these village communities responded immediately. They increased poor relief and financed initiatives to create additional jobs (public works, purchase and sales offices for flax, linen yarn and cloth, work-houses, lace-ateliers) and the local elites organised food handouts. Order became an issue and local patrols and night watches maintained the 'social' peace and tried to stop the itinerant poor from entering the village.

The main policy instruments were the local institutions of poor relief. In Belgium, relief policy was locally co-ordinated. The logic of the relief system was to provide assistance as much and as long as possible within the (official) municipality of domicile. Each municipality had, as made compulsory by Communal Law, its own local relief institution (*bureaux de bienfaisance*, in bigger cities also *hôpitaux*). The poor relief institutions were administered by a council, which was made up of the local elite.

These poor relief institutions were financed by their own resources (movable and immovable possessions) and, increasingly by municipal authorities. Municipalities had

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<sup>8</sup> That is about 1.8 Belgian Francs per inhabitant. Total expenses of the central government in the 1840s ran up to 120–130 million Belgian Francs per year. In the period from 1845 to 1847 central accounting registered a deficit of 27 million Belgian Francs, resulting especially from decrease in income (*Exposé de la situation du Royaume, Titre III: 679. 'Dépenses résultant des mesures prises à l'égard de la crise alimentaire de 1846–1848 et de la crise industrielle des Flandres'*).

the right to (and did) collect separate taxes intended for poor relief administration (cities: *octrois*). The institutions rarely received (as in the 1846–1847s) financial support from the national government. There was only one central workhouse for the two provinces of Flanders (located in Bruges). The maximum capacity was about 500 to 600 persons. In the period between 1845 and 1849, some 10,800 men, women and children were given assistance.

The city of Bruges is a good example of the central role of the local *bureau de bien-faisance*. In the winter of 1846–1847, 247,000 litres of soup, 250,000 kg of coal, 64,000 Belgian Francs worth of bread coupons (for cheap bread) and 40,000 Belgian Francs of direct financial support were distributed among the registered poor. In 1847, 142,500 Belgian Francs were spent to support 21,532 inhabitants, which constituted nearly half of the population. The city of Ghent spent about the same amount on bread coupons and subsidizing grain prices.

**Table 7.6 Number of registered poor, supported by local poor institutions, 1844–1850 (% of total population)**

	East-Flanders	West-Flanders
1844	14.5%	26.7%
1845	21.6%	32.5%
1846	28.2%	35.4%
1847	29.5%	36.8%
1848	26.9%	34.1%
1849	25.5%	31.2%
1850	23.4%	27.3%

Source: Vermeersch, 2003: 126-127.

The number of registered poor in Flanders, already high, rose sharply in the crisis years. In 1847, some linen-producing regions and some cities (Bruges, Kortrijk), 40% of the population was registered poor. The assistance given to the poor was not consistent. Only 14% received support all year round, 22% were supported for more than half of the year, but the rest only for less than half a year. In West-Flanders, total expenditure by municipal relief institutions in 1846–1849 ran up to 9.15 million Belgian Francs, more than the total relief sum of the central government. Only a minor part of these huge costs could be paid for from the institutions’ own resources. The remainder came from additional support from the local community and, to a much lesser extent, central government, from the sale of properties and from fund raising actions. In the crisis years the poor institutions were virtually bankrupt and were only able to keep running because of massive subsidies and private initiatives organised by the local elites and the Church. A local private committee in support of the poor relief of Bruges managed to raise 130,000 Belgian Francs in 1847, of which 50,000 outside Flanders. A begging trip from the curate of Tielt to the industrial city of Liège brought in 15,498 Francs for the local poor fund. Nonetheless, it seems that local traditions of raising funds for the poor came under pressure in the crisis years. The shortfall was compensated for through more forceful fund raising by local authorities (e.g. higher local taxes) and the Catholic Church.

### **III.6. After the crisis**

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, 'traditional' Belgian agriculture reached the limit of its capacity. The combination of population growth, land fragmentation and high rent debts demanded higher physical yields and greater income differentiation. This entailed increase in labour input, the refinement of crop rotation schemes, the introduction of new crops like potatoes, and sufficient spreading of economic risks. To this we should add the combination of production for private consumption and for the market, of agricultural income and income from non-agrarian activities, of independent labour in the own holding and labour exchange with bigger farms in and outside the village.

The double crisis of the 1840s (subsistence and industrial) demonstrates that the balance within the rural survival model was lost. Already precarious family incomes were threatened even further and community relations in Flemish villages came under pressure. A massive social crisis was averted in the 1845–1847 hunger years because of a combination of four elements:

- the partial alleviation of food shortages and the speedy restoration of grain supply after the summer of 1847;
- the use of land even if small and under lease at a gradually increasing price;
- the resilient village society, with local elites who were able to relieve the most urgent distress of the poor;
- support from central, provincial and especially local governments, which not only provided concrete help but in doing so acknowledged the seriousness of the crisis.

Although the crisis was averted, Flemish agriculture ended up in a dead-end situation by the middle of the nineteenth century. This was the result of an unfortunate combination of a further parcelling out of agricultural land and farms, a further fragmentation of landownership, an increasing amount of (small to very small) leasehold farms and ever-increasing rents. This negative spiral had agriculture in its hold for several more decades. The double land competition between tenants and between landowners further increased purchase and lease prices of rural property. It became clear that this rural survival model was doomed. Age-old processes of land fragmentation and loss of property on the countryside were brought to a climax after 1850. The rapid growth of registered agricultural holdings mainly made up of the category of micro-holdings: i.e. smaller than one hectare. Micro-holdings more than doubled between 1846 and 1880. By 1880, 51% of all holdings were even less than half a hectare, compared to 43% in 1850.

#### **IV. Why Flanders did not starve: a comparison with Ireland**<sup>9</sup>

‘No country on the face of the earth presents so worthy an example to Ireland as Belgium.(...) Like Belgium we have the small farming system to a great extent, with an abundance of hands to cultivate minutely; but we are ignorant, indolent, and careless, idle and poor.’ (Thomas Skilling, *The Science and Practice of Agriculture*, Dublin, 1846: 39).

1. Both regions were characterized by a dominant rural/agrarian peasant economy, based on small to very small holdings (both in Flanders and Ireland the big majority – two thirds to three quarters – of the holdings were smaller than two hectares). In both societies, agriculture was based on a high labour input on small plots of land, together with a low, and even decreasing labour productivity.

The significant growth acceleration within these economies after 1750 went hand in hand with a rapid population increase. Between 1800 and 1845, the population increased by 60% in Ireland and by 40% in Flanders, almost exclusively in the countryside. Both regions were marked by a high population density (certainly per hectare of arable land) and by an extreme fragmentation of the holdings. In spite of the impressive economic and demographic growth rates, both regions were very much impoverished at the beginning of the 1840s, mainly because of the deteriorating income position of both tenant farmers and wage labourers. This generated a rapid polarisation in both societies, and a growing group that was very vulnerable to (periodical) food shortages.

So, both regions were in a structural decline since the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In both regions, more families than ever depended on different and uncertain forms of wage labour (Flanders: cottage industry, Ireland: farm labour, migrant labour; proto-industrial activities in Ireland disappeared already in the early nineteenth century). Already in the 1830s, about one third of the Irish population was evaluated as poor (Poor Inquiry 1835). In Flanders, about one-fifth received some kind of poor relief. From the 1830s, the downward trend of both nominal and real wages intensified.

It seems that the vulnerability of rural society was lower in Flanders. Here, economic growth after 1750 was based on the increasing intensification of the ‘Flemish husbandry’, in combination with the vast expansion of rural flax and linen industry. Growth within the Irish rural economy was much more export-dependent, less embedded in a village economy (Ireland provided 80% of the total British grain imports in the 1830s). This is illustrated by the massive Irish emigration movement, which started already decades before the Famine (about 1.5 million people in 1801–1845). In the words of Donnelly: ‘Altogether, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that though Ireland was certainly not careering towards economic and social disaster in the decades before 1845, about half of the population were victims of some degree of immiseration and stood dangerously exposed to a foreign and devastating plant disease’ (Donnelly, 2001: 11).

2. Both regions can be considered as ‘peripheral’ within the context of the own nation-state. The big difference is that Flanders was, also literally, closer to the centre of political (state) power. Flemish (elite-conservative) interests were defended more successfully in Brussels. These interests aimed at the survival of the Flemish village economy, and its

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<sup>9</sup> Information on Ireland is based on Ó Gráda (1999), Donnelly (2001), Vermeersch (2003), the articles of Ó Gráda and Daly in this volume, and the literature mentioned in these publications.

built-in power relations. Examples are the support of the rural linen industries until 1850 and the respect for local autonomy. Within the Belgian quasi-democracy, regional and even local elites were able to find their way to defend their interests (representation on municipality, province or state level). All tendencies in favour of centralisation could be resisted.

In London, Irish interests were severely underrepresented (in 1805, after The Act of Union, Ireland was appointed 105 seats of a total of 658 in the British House of Commons, although it had about 40% of the total population of the Union). The Irish representatives mainly came from the class of Anglo-Irish landlords, largely disconnected from the former Irish village economy. Although some efforts were made to restructure the Irish society before 1845, in the eyes of the authorities in London, the Irish famine was predominantly a local problem. This was 'undeniably the source of the problem: the refusal of the British government to treat Ireland as part of the United Kingdom and its famine as an imperial responsibility' (Donnelly, 2001: 25).

3. In contrast with Ireland, the Belgian administrative structure was based on small municipalities (communes). They had a high degree of local autonomy, and their own elected or appointed councils (municipality, poor relief, Church). This guaranteed a strong power position of the local elites, protected by an elitarian ballot system. Three levels of intermediary administrative structures (cantons, arrondissements, provinces) streamlined the links between the municipality and the national state. Around 1850, the two provinces of Flanders counted 515 municipalities, with an average of 2785 inhabitants (cities included).

Nineteenth-century Ireland under British rule was marked by a further tendency towards centralisation (e.g. police force, poor relief, education). The administrative structure was based on counties (with an average population number of 265,000) and, from 1838 in the case of poor relief, poor law unions. These institutions controlled administration, police, public works, poor relief, etc.

4. In the first half of the nineteenth century, both Irish and Flemish rural societies strongly depended on the potato. The success of the potato in both regions was related to population increase, further fragmentation of smallholdings, and increasing poverty and social polarisation. But, there were also big differences between the social agrosystems. As explained earlier, the Flemish farming system was successful in two ways: a high agricultural productivity and high rents. This yielded the paradox of a rich agriculture and poor farmers. This was an extremely resilient farming system, with a high degree of crop variation, even on the smallest plots of land, and with high (physical) yields. Nevertheless, the population increase entailed the increasing cultivation and consumption of potatoes. Still, the dependence on the potato was significantly lower than in Ireland. Grain consumption was still high, and alternatives as vegetables, carrots, and turnips were available. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, a tradition of importing grain was built up. Grain imports rose almost tenfold in the 1840s. In general, Flemish agriculture was considered as more efficient and more productive than Irish farming. In the 1850s, the Belgian agronomist De Laveleye claimed that 1,000 farmers in East Flanders could feed more than 4,000 people, whereas the Irish figure was only 1,000 to 1,500. This probably exaggerates the gap between the two agricultures. On the eve of the famine, Irish agriculture was rather successful. It could feed about 10 million people, of which 8 to 8.5 in Ireland and the remainder via exports in Britain.

Above all, potato cultivation was extremely successful in Ireland. Only 50% of the harvest was destined for human consumption, 30% for animal consumption. Nevertheless, about one-third of the population relied predominantly (and more than half heavily) on the potato. Consumption figures were extremely high: up to 5 to 6 kg a day per adult worker in the lowest classes and 3 kg per capita a day in the lower middle classes. Market (grain) agriculture was oriented towards export to Britain. Commercial farmers were dependent on external markets and prices.

5. Obviously, the crisis of 1845–1850 hit the Irish society much harder than the Flemish. In Ireland, the first attack of *phytophthora infestans* in 1845 was much weaker than in Flanders. Then potato production fell back from 68% (of a normal, pre-crisis harvest) in 1845 to 20% in 1846 and 14% in 1847. After 1845, the Irish potato harvests met only one-third of the minimum standard for human consumption. Prices went up as from the winter of 1845–1846. Substitute foods (grain, maize) were insufficient to prevent a large part of the population from starvation. In Ireland, mortality rates rose by 330% between 1844 and 1847, whereas in Flanders the rise was only 40% on average. The extreme excess mortality continued from 1847 to 1850. The total excess death rate is estimated at 1 million, the number of averted births at about 0.5 million.

According to Peter Solar’s calculations, domestic food supply fell back by 38% during the crisis years. Thanks to rising imports, total consumption in Ireland in the years 1846–1850 was only 12% less than in 1840–1845 (Solar, 1989). Mass starvation was mainly triggered by the unequal availability of food, the lack of purchasing power and the devastating effects of epidemic diseases (typhus, relapsing fever, dysentery and, also, smallpox and cholera).

The Famine prompted mass emigration to Great Britain, United States, Canada and Australia. Between 1845 and 1855, about 2.1 million Irish men, women and children left the island (of which 1.5 million to the United States). Only a small portion (5%) of this mass movement consisted of assisted migration (paid by government or private funds). In 1851, 6.5 million Irish lived in Ireland, about 2 million Irish abroad.

Harvest failures in Flanders were severe in 1845 (potatoes) and 1846 (potatoes and bread grains). In 1846, the shortage of bread grains and potatoes is calculated to be 50% (harvest failures minus imports). From the summer of 1847 onwards, the situation improved, but potato harvests remained uncertain until well into the 1850s. Some abundant grain harvests after 1846 and a (temporary) increased import of grain secured the markets for bread cereals. Hunger or food uncertainty was no longer an issue in Belgium after the summer of 1847. Mass migration was never a realistic option in Belgium/Flanders (although the Belgian government supported some experiments).

6. The Belgian and the British state had a different response to the food crisis, partly explained by the different impact of the famine (see also Gray, 1997 and Gray, this volume). As told, the Belgian government had a rather quick and differentiated reaction to the outbreak of the potato blight. She regulated import and export and adjusted customs policy, subsidised local authorities, poor administrations, industrial committees and public works, and organised or stimulated repression when local networks failed (workhouses, prisons).

The British response to the Irish crisis was very diverse and very incoherent. At the outset, it relied on the initiatives of local relief committees, the promotion of food imports

(maize) and the distribution of food through specially created depots. Later on in late 1846 and early 1847, the main emphasis switched to massive public works (with a maximum of 700,000 people involved) and, after this experiment was aborted, on soup kitchens. In June and July 1847, a maximum of more than three million persons per day were provided with relief. The soup kitchen scheme was terminated in September 1847. After that, the government relied mainly on the poor law system based on centralised workhouses. Besides, an adaptation of the poor law drastically reduced the relief entitlements of rural smallholders.

The total sum of British relief expenditure in the years 1845–1850 was £8.1 million (204 million Belgian Francs), of which £4.5 million were loans, to be paid back by Irish taxpayers. So, aid was designed to place the heaviest burden on the local, i.e. Irish, taxpayers. Due to deferred and cancelled payments, the total effort of British treasury can be evaluated at £7 million (177 million Belgian Francs; about 6.4 Belgian Francs per inhabitant). British authorities put the responsibility of the famine on Irish landlords, who should bear the consequences. At the same time, they saw the crisis as an opportunity to restructure rural Ireland in the image of the English countryside.

The overall opinion is that British policy was characterized by a complete misjudgement of the nature and the extension of the crisis. An active food provision policy (imports, distribution, soup kitchens) was not maintained in the worst years. Public works were organised in extreme bad working and weather conditions. The workhouses were heavily overcrowded. Perforce, outside relief (soup kitchens) was re-introduced in 1848, serving meagre meals to more than 800,000 people. All by all, the impact of the disaster was too overwhelming, the ideology of the free market too deeply rooted in the London elite and the financial basis too weak (workhouses went even bankrupt), to have a public initiative that could do more than work in the margins. Peter Gray evaluated this policy as a ‘culpable neglect of the consequences of policies leading to mass starvation’ (Gray, 1999).

7. As stated before, the main shocks of the Flemish food and industrial crisis were absorbed by existing local economic and social networks. We pointed to the active policy of the different local and regional administrations, to the wide discretion left to local administrators (adjusting poor relief policy and control systems to local needs), to the local controls on petty criminality (e.g. local night patrols, locally organised police forces), migration and mobility, beggars and strangers, and the effects of epidemic diseases.

This local autonomy was actively supported and controlled by an energetic provincial administration (run by representatives of the local communities). The main lever in this decentralised policy were the institutions of poor relief, dominated by the local elites and Church representatives, and key element in the control system within village society.

Since the reform of 1838, the Irish Poor Law was based on the British system of workhouses. The New Poor Law of 1847 further centralised the relief system. Ireland with its more than eight million inhabitants was subdivided in 130 Poor Law Unions, containing an average of over 60,000 persons. The logic of the relief system was institutionalised indoor relief. Aid distribution outside the workhouses for non-structural poor (able to work) was abolished. The initial capacity of the workhouses (places for 100,000 people or 1.25% of the population) was increased during the crisis, but the system was never adequate to sustain 3 to 4 million poor.



8. Local and regional elites in Flanders still had large interests in the functioning (and profits) of the rural society (property, trade, subcontracting). In the middle of the nineteenth century, they were still powerful enough (although only for a short time to come) to redirect national policies towards their interests. In general, political disputes (catholic/liberal) were not fought on the back of the rural society. The Catholic Church was still hegemonic in Belgian society and as such more a binding, than a dividing factor.

In Ireland, the gap between the (mainly Anglo-Irish) landlords, some of whom owned vast estates, and the villagers was much wider. Nor did these local/regional landlords have much influence on the London government and administration. Much of the land was owned by often passive or ‘absentee’ landlords, who did not resist an increasing land fragmentation that brought them rising rents. When the crisis struck, they sought to undo the damage through mass evictions (about 100,000 families in the crisis years).

The survival of the village economy was not a motive in the strategies of the Irish elites. They were first of all concerned about their own survival, being also beset by the British government. Catholic and Anglican clergymen were much more active. Catholic priests acted also as ‘bell-ringers’, or communicators about the situation in the provinces. The Catholic Church organised international relief actions. Also, some private initiatives, such as the soup kitchens organised by The Society of Friends (Quakers), were – in relative terms – impressive. However, this did not trigger co-ordinated protest against British politics.

## **V. Conclusion**

In a pioneering article, Peter Solar states that the impact of the blight in Ireland and in the rest of Europe ‘needs to be seen through the prism of local economic and social structures’ (Solar, 1997: 123). The two factors he stressed are the structures of land ownership, income and occupation, and the impact of (the crisis in) domestic manufacturing (mainly linen industry). He added two other elements: public and private relief policies and the impact of the cereal crop failures of 1846. Although several authors have stressed the differences in national public welfare and relief measures (e.g. Ó Gráda, 1999; Gray, 1997 and Gray, this volume), a more integrated analytical model as suggested by Solar is still lacking. This comparative research has to start from the regional and even local level, stressing the differences in impact of the crisis (see also Daly, this volume).

The 1840s crisis in Flanders is characterised by at least three dimensions:

1. Flanders faced a very severe subsistence crisis in the years 1845–1847. After an almost complete loss of the potato harvest in 1845 and a very poor grain harvest in 1846, the situation at the beginning of 1847 turned out to be very uncertain. Bread grain yields returned to their normal level in 1847 and potato yields stabilized to around 50% of the level of the pre-crisis years for some time to come. This, together with higher grain imports, relieved the immediate pressure on the food supply.

2. The 1840s witnessed the final collapse of the proto-industrial linen industry. Around 1840, about 150,000 Flemish rural families earned some (minimal) income from flax processing, spinning, and weaving. Ten years later, almost 90% of this industry

had disappeared.

3. The tensions within the age-old agro-rural society based on a 'commercial peasant economy' brought the system at the edge during these crisis years. The system cracked, burst, was pushed to and, eventually, over its limits. In the next decades, the system further disintegrated. It became crystal-clear that it lacked the remaining power to sustain a majority of the rural population (stabilisation of the physical productivity, smaller holdings, ever higher land rents, diminishing possibilities to combine incomes etc.).

The crisis of the 1840s was and is a decisive turning point in the history of the Flemish agro-rural society. Nevertheless, even then, the social effects of the crisis were endured mostly by the disintegrating village economy.

1. The existing peasant economy (high crop yields on extremely small holdings, as much variation in crops as possible, exchange relations within the villages and on local and regional markets) was able to guarantee a minimal and basic food supply and income for the majority of the rural population (except for one or two years).

2. The strong position of local institutions, combined with an active interest of the local elites, guaranteed the survival of the basic social safety nets (not without severe difficulties). Their active role did avert a total breakdown of the rural society during the crisis years, but could not prevent the dissolution of the Flemish peasant society in the next decades.

'Famine is both event and structure' (Murton, 2000; Arnold 1988). Both event and structure explain the different effects of the famine of the 1840s in Flanders and Ireland. The potato disease struck Ireland later, but much harder than Flanders. On the other hand, the combined crisis in Belgium (agricultural and industrial) struck at the heart of Flemish rural society. The political response differed in both countries, but it is unlikely the nineteenth century state apparatus could do more than take care of the wounds. Most emphasis must be laid on differences in the local and regional structure of society. It is clear that the Flemish commercialised village economy, even though severely weakened after a century of increasing stress, was much more capable of absorbing the shocks of the crisis of the 1840s than the uprooted Irish society.

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