

Saving oneself by caring for others? The case of the nurse Julia Lahaye (1886-1978)

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SUMMARY: 1.—Introduction. 2.—Madame Perdomo: lights. 2.1.—Organizing transfusion services in Barcelona in the 1930s. 2.2.—Mediating on behalf of the ICRC to preserve the lives of prisoners held at Montjuïc Castle in January 1939. 3.—Madame Perdomo: shadows. 3.1.—Belgium, a hotbed of espionage. 3.2.—Julia Lahaye, spy for the German Reich in occupied Belgium during the Great War. 4.—Concluding remarks.

ABSTRACT: Julia Lahaye (1886-1978), a Belgian nurse who worked for the Barcelona Red Cross during the Spanish Civil War, was considered by peers and patients as one of the most outstanding figures of local society for her sense of sacrifice, her spirit of organization, and her humanitarian work. But that is only one part of her life story. In 1921, Lahaye had been convicted *in absentia* of spying for the German Reich during World War I and fled to Spain. Her story illustrates the complexity of human character and makes us ponder the question of whether humanitarian action can be motivated by repentance and the desire to atone for the crimes of the past. It also helps to deconstruct gender stereotypes of women nurses who have been traditionally depicted as “angels of mercy” and to rethink how the experiences of care receivers can shape the identity of caregivers.

KEYWORDS: humanitarian action, caregiving, repentance, women nurses, gender stereotypes.

1. Introduction (*)

We first became interested in the figure of the Belgian nurse Julia Lahaye whilst researching into the history of the Barcelona Red Cross during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the bloodiest conflict that Western Europe had witnessed since the end of World War I (WWI). During the Spanish Civil War, which triggered broad international interest, Julia Lahaye undertook humanitarian work as a nurse. According to sources from the Barcelona Red Cross, she was much appreciated inside and outside this institution, to the point of being depicted by her contemporaries as “a dove messenger of mercy that comes to the aid of human suffering, (...) one of those exceptional women who make their sacrifice fruitful by devoting their lives to the poor sick and wounded”¹. We first explore this dimension of her life.

However, this was only a small part of her story. Further research in Belgian archives has revealed that Lahaye escaped from her home country in 1915 and ended up settling in Spain in the 1920s after having been accused of spying for the German Reich during World War I. As a result of her denunciations, several Belgian resistance fighters were arrested and shot dead by the German Army. This previous life chapter is discussed in the second part of this work.

Motivations behind individual humanitarian action and caregiving can vary greatly. Compassion and empathy are frequently evoked as drivers of altruistic behaviour, but these are not the only triggers. For instance, Liisa Malkki has argued that, amongst the reasons why some people undertake humanitarian work, apart from their compassion for others and their desire to do good, there may be more prosaic motives, such as boredom and the need for personal and professional development, challenging the usually romanticized depictions of humanitarian workers². Focusing on the figure of nurse Lahaye we might wonder whether the action of “caring about,” “caring

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1. Mario A. Domènech de Rico, “Madame Perdomo”, *Boletín de la Brigada de Barcelona de Cruz Roja española* 9(220), mayo 1938: 23-25. At the time, Colonel Domènech de Rico was the director of this newsletter as well as the head of the Barcelona Red Cross brigade.
2. Liisa Malkki. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.

for” and “caregiving”, to use Tronto’s terms³, be born out of a need to hide a criminal record, and/or of the desire to atone for the crimes of the past. Would that make the humanitarian action less valuable? Might working to alleviate others’ suffering amend one’s misdeeds? What place can repentance have as motivation to care?

The case of Julia Lahaye (better known in Spain as Madame Perdomo), while exemplifying a singular pattern of humanitarian nursing, may also illustrate the many nooks and crannies of the human soul and the dimension of the human condition in both its greatness and its misery —in other words, with lights and shadows. Also, her life journey may be representative of how gender stereotypes could hide the motivations of humanitarian women for helping distant others. We have explored her biography through a prosopographical approach using a wide range of archival and periodical sources⁴.

2. Madame Perdomo: lights

Julia Louise Célestine Mathilde Lahaye Jonckheer was born in 1886 in Laken, a residential district in the north-west of Brussels, into a wealthy family involved in philanthropic initiatives. She was the second of the four children of Marie-Charlotte-Amélie-Constance Jonckheer (1857-1912) and Jules-Marie-Joseph-Célestin Lahaye (1858-1921). The latter, agricultural engineer, horse trader, and Freemason, was the owner of the first automobile to be driven in the Belgian town of Jette-Saint Pierre, where the family lived. During WWI, Jules-Marie Lahaye organised a local system of distribution of American and Spanish food to the neediest. This initiative led Jette city-council to dedicate a street to him⁵. Julia’s younger sister Marthe (1895-1924) was awarded the Queen Elisabeth Medal, a humanitarian decoration created by Royal Decree

3. Joan C. Tronto. “Du care”, *Revue du MAUSS* 32 (2008): 243-265.

4. The main archives consulted for this research have been the Historical Archive of Barcelona city, the Documentation Centre of the Spanish Red Cross (Madrid), the archive of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Geneva), the Belgian State Archives (National Archives and Joseph Cuvelier repository, Brussels), the digital portal BelgicaPress, the digital library of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the CCI métropolitaine Aix-Marseille-Provence (CCIAMP) and the Virtual Library of Spanish Historical Newspapers.

5. “Jules Lahayestraat”. “Origine du nom: de Jules Lahaye, géomètre et marchand de chevaux, qui distribuait, pendant la première guerre mondiale, les vivres de provenance américaine et espagnole”: <http://www.ebru.be/Streets/streets1090/bruxelles-1090-rue-jules-lahaye.html>

in 1915 to recognise outstanding service in caring for the sick and wounded during WWI in Belgium.

In 1907, Julia Lahaye married Gustave Marie van den Bril, the son of a local doctor in Jette-Saint Pierre. At the outbreak of WWI, the couple lived there and had two daughters; Julia was listed as a housewife and Gustave was mobilised as a “civic guard”. This is the only information we could gather, at the beginning of our research, about her Belgian past.

From 1933 onwards, she was involved in organising the first group of blood donors in a private clinic in Barcelona. However, Lahaye is better known for her activities in this city during the Spanish Civil War years (1936-1939), when she became known as “Madame Perdomo” or “Vda. de Perdomo” (Perdomo’s widow).

From August 1937 onwards, she was the organiser of blood transfusion services for the Barcelona Red Cross, and she intervened on behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to ensure the physical safety of war prisoners in Montjuïc Castle on the eve of the entry of Franco’s troops into Barcelona in early 1939. During the war, she also carried out other tasks such as caring for tuberculosis patients, helping the wounded, assisting in the evacuation of the sick, the elderly and children, and organising fund-raising for the Red Cross⁶. According to Julia’s own testimony at the time, she had become a nurse in the Belgian Red Cross, served as such during WWI, and been awarded with the Medal of Honour for Epidemics in 1916 for her work. However, her name does not appear in any list of Belgian Red Cross nurses, nor is there any archival trace of her award. Indeed, only a former soldier attested that she had been briefly enrolled as a nurse in the cycling battalion of the Brussels civic guard⁷.

2.1. Organising transfusion services in Barcelona in the 1930s

Perdomo’s dedication to blood transfusion services in Barcelona dates back to the first half of the 1930s. During this time, she organised the first group of blood donors in the city from her office at the Institut Policlínic, a private

6. Domènech de Rico, “Madame Perdomo”.

7. Archives générales du Royaume 2 (AGR2) - dépôt Joseph Cuvelier. Fonds Moscou (fonds non inventorié). Dossier n.º 357 (Julia Lahaye). Déposition de témoin (Georges Adelin Henri Pittoors) au Juge d’instruction de l’arrondissement de Bruxelles, 03/05/1921.

hospital better known as Clínica Platón. It formed part of the Haematology service led by Jordi Guasch Sagrera (1903-1988), a pioneer of haematology and haemotherapy in Catalonia. After this experience, Madame Perdomo was appointed secretary of the Transfusion Service of the Barcelona Red Cross⁸ in July 1937⁹. This service, with its headquarters in Carrer Roger de Lauria street, was headed by Manuel Miserachs Rigalt (1906-1980) and was formally inaugurated on 27 August 1937. A year later, it already had 600 donors, and the Belgian nurse set a good example by having donated her own blood on twenty-five occasions¹⁰.

In May 1938, Madame Perdomo received the Silver Medal of the Central Committee of the Spanish Red Cross (SRC)¹¹, from its president, Josep Martí Fedec (1901-1982). She was then tributed for “her 22 years of uninterrupted service in the Institution” and, as the General Inspector of Red Cross ambulances in Catalonia underlined, for her being a “valuable element of the Red Cross” and “a living example of sacrifice and love for the unfortunate” to be imitated by the “new nurses”¹². In addition to being the secretary of the Transfusion Service (which she carried out on a voluntary basis since its inauguration in August 1937), Madame Perdomo took on the responsibility of acting director of the Service during six months, from the removal of its first director, in June 1938, to the appointment of the new one¹³ in November that year. She achieved all this without ever being able to occupy a remunerated post, apparently because of her status as a foreigner.

The terms in which she was depicted in the official newsletter of the Barcelona Red Cross (*Boletín de la Brigada de Barcelona de la Cruz Roja española*) were always extremely complimentary, demonstrating the admiration

8. The failed coup d'état led by General Franco in July 1936 against the Second Republican Government triggered the Spanish Civil War. Shortly after the outbreak of the conflict, the Spanish Red Cross was split in two, namely, the Republican Red Cross in the Republican-controlled territory, and the “Nationalist” Red Cross in the territory under the control of the rebel army.

9. *Libro de Actas del Comité Local de Cruz Roja de Barcelona 1934-1939*. Acta del 4 de marzo de 1938: 289. (Centro de Documentación de Cruz Roja, signatura APCREB, Digital-25).

10. Aldonza Lorenzo. “Los Servicios de Transfusión de Sangre en Barcelona. Madame Perdomo y sus pequeños. Los ‘místicos’ del Socorro Internacional”, *Boletín de la Brigada de Barcelona de Cruz Roja española*, agosto 1938; 19 (223): 39-43.

11. *Libro de Actas del Comité Local de Cruz Roja de Barcelona 1934-1939*. Acta del 7 de mayo de 1938.

12. “La Cruz Roja española en Cataluña”, *El Diluvio*, 02/08/1938, 7.

13. Francesc García Guardiola (1908-19?).

of many people for Madame Perdomo¹⁴ whose voluntary activities during the Civil War included not only those described above, but also driving patients in her car, and delivering vaccines and other medicines¹⁵.

2.2. Mediating on behalf of the ICRC to preserve the lives of the prisoners held at Montjuïc Castle in January 1939

On 25 January 1939, the day before Franco's troops entered Barcelona and amid artillery bombardment, Madame Perdomo went to Montjuïc Castle to safeguard the prisoners' lives. She was assigned for this purpose as a representative of the International Red Cross by the ICRC delegates in Barcelona, Marcel Junod (1904-1961) and Roland Marti (1909-1978), who

14. "Madame Julia Lahaye, widow of Perdomo, of Belgian nationality, is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding elements of our Institution for her sense of sacrifice, her spirit of organisation and her humanitarian work close to the needy. Her activities are many and vast; many are also the acts of self-sacrifice carried out by this woman who embodies the symbol of charity; the whole weeks she has spent at the bedside of the tuberculosis patients; the poor patient treated at the Clinic established in Plato Street, whose operation, clothes and living expenses were paid out of her own pocket; the countless people who have received moral and material help from her. (...) She is carved from the same wood of the great nurses of the Red Cross, of those nurses worthy of all commendation, who follow the armies in campaign, who act in the Blood Hospitals and everywhere where pain and misfortune prevail; of those women angels of Charity, who solicitously go with selfless will wherever they are called, without fear of contagion and without fear of the moral and material sufferings which their altruism imposes on them. (...) Madame Perdomo [is] a person of natural elegance and distinction, of easy, kind and discreet speech, of great virtue and beauty, who knew how to capture the admiration of friends and strangers alike, being the consolation and love for everything and everyone the work that she sows everywhere." [Authors' translation] (Domènech de Rico, "Madame Perdomo", pp. 23-25).

"Someone, with recognised prestige, has stamped, in block letters, this statement: 'To say Madame Perdomo is to say everything in the Red Cross of Barcelona.' (...) [S]he seems to us, a little bit, the mother of all, because for her everybody is her "little ones" and as such she treats and pampers them. Needless to say, the task weighs no one down and that the praise for "Madame" fills corridors and offices. From Colonel Domènech, the first head of the Brigade, down to the last stretcher-bearer, have words of praise to offer for the self-sacrificing collaboration of this woman, who has been able to understand Spain's pain and shared it. (...) Madame Perdomo has long been devoted to bestowing caresses and comforts to all those who suffer. She is young, beautiful, rich, marvellous conditions to lead a carefree life, but, ardently driven by her vocation, she thinks only of those who are unfortunate." [Authors' translation] (Lorenzo, "Los Servicios de Transfusión de Sangre en Barcelona", p. 39).

15. "Actuación ejemplar", *Boletín Oficial de la Brigada de Barcelona de Cruz Roja Española*, 19 (224): 41.

were extremely concerned about the physical safety of the thousands of prisoners held in Barcelona's "jails and chekas", at a time when the Republican army and assault guards (*guardias de asalto*) were withdrawing from the city. Junod and Marti took care of all the prisons in the city, with the help of a handful of people¹⁶. Madame Perdomo was commissioned to "do everything humanly possible and even the impossible" to ensure the physical integrity of the hundreds of prisoners held in Montjuïc, preventing them from being victims of reprisals by both their custodians and the assault guards who were repeatedly climbing the castle that day in attempts to abduct them.

At Madame Perdomo's request, the governor of the castle first agreed to release the imprisoned anti-fascists (members of the Trotskyist POUM and anarchists); and, in the early hours of 26 January, under heavy Francoist artillery fire, formally handed over command of the castle to her and to Colonel Villamide¹⁷. The Belgian nurse first ordered the white flag to be raised to stop the bombing. Then, in response to the protest of a Republican officer, she replaced it with two Red Cross flags which she had hastily made by sewing red strips of cloth onto white cloth¹⁸. At midday, Madame Perdomo left the castle to inform ICRC delegates of what had happened, returning to the castle in the late afternoon. The fortress was occupied by the 105th Division of General Yagüe's Moroccan Army Corps, while the rest of Franco's troops were deployed in the city. According to Junod's memoirs, in the early afternoon of 26 January, the first tank of the victorious army—which was occupied by German soldiers—appeared in Lauria Street and made a stop in front of the ICRC headquarters¹⁹. The fall of Barcelona precipitated the defeat of the Second Spanish Republic.

On 2 February, the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* (LV) published a list of some three hundred prisoners (plus another fifty of those evacuated on the night of 26 January) under the title "Los resucitados de Montjuich" ["The resurrected of Montjuich"] and the headlines "First list of the people who were detained in the Red Jails in Barcelona and released thanks to the rapid manoeuvre ordered by the *Generalísimo* to enter the Catalan capital".

16. Marcel Junod, *Warrior without Weapons* [1951]. 2nd ed., Geneva, ICRC, 1982.

17. Jorge A. Villamide Salinero, military commander who shortly afterwards would preside over the "National Tribunal of Political Responsibilities" set up in Barcelona by the new regime to confiscate the properties of the Republicans.

18. Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*: 133.

19. Junod, *Warrior without Weapons*; Pierre Marqués, *La Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre d'Espagne (1936-1939): les missionnaires de l'humanitaire*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000: 327.

Six days later —on 8 February— a Barcelona journalist called J. Juliá Gayá published the report “Las últimas horas de dominación marxista en el castillo de Montjuich” [“The last hours of Marxist domination in Montjuich Castle”] to recount his own experiences of these events as a prisoner there²⁰.

Annoyed by the disparity between this account and her own experience, as well as by the fact that the newspaper deliberately ignored the ICRC’s crucial involvement in the successful development of events, Madame Perdomo wrote an open letter to LV’s new editor, which he did not publish²¹. In that letter, she pointed out that the account in LV had “strayed somewhat from the reality of the events that took place”. In other words, she gave her version as a leading protagonist of those events, “not only for the sake of truth, but also in order to pay due tribute to the protective work of the Red Cross regarding the rescue of those who spent such bitter hours on Montjuich”²². In contrast to the version disseminated through the press by the propaganda services of the new regime, Perdomo stated categorically that hers was the “accurate version” of what had happened. She suggested to appeal to the testimonies of the prisoners, if necessary, “to make justice to the International Red Cross and to the elements of the National Red Cross who [had] cooperated with me in a work which, although full of dangers as it was, [had been] carried out without hesitation, doubt or fainting, like all those undertaken by these institutions”²³.

Additionally, Perdomo took the opportunity to signal her complicity with the new Francoist authorities by pointing out that “in those last hours of Marxist domination, the “desired end” of preserving the lives of the prisoners in that “fateful” castle had pushed her “to pleading, to trickery, to often false arguments that weighed heavily on the minds of those who, realising that the final moment of the struggle was approaching, could not but weigh and measure their responsibility”²⁴. According to her testimony, “the prisoners freed at the end of their torments” expressed her “their gratitude and

20. “Los resucitados de Montjuich”, *La Vanguardia Española*, 02/02/1939: 6; J. Juliá, “Las últimas horas de dominación marxista en el castillo de Montjuich”, *La Vanguardia Española*, 08/02/1939: 5.

21. Lahaye, *Rapport de Madame PERDOMO, Infirmière française [sic] sur la libération des prisonniers de Montjuich*, 16 février 1939 (Centro de Documentación de Cruz Roja Española, signatura C ESCI-019. The original document is at the archive of the ICRC).

22. Lahaye, *Rapport*: 1.

23. Lahaye, *Rapport*: 5.

24. Lahaye, *Rapport*: 2.

happiness”, and she thanked them for having obeyed and trusted her “as they trusted in God, in the Red Cross, and in the *Caudillo* of the new Spain”²⁵.

After her remarkable intervention in Montjuïc, all trace of her in Spain is lost, except for the report that in 1971 “Julia Lahague, Vda. de Perdomo-Barcelona” was awarded a Spanish Red Cross Gold Medal issued for services as a blood donor. The next news we have of her is the publication of her obituary in *La Vanguardia* (May 3, 1978)²⁶. Lahaye’s death certificate, obtained through Barcelona’s Civil Registry Office, stated that her last residence had been a retirement home and that she had died of “advanced cardiosclerosis” on April 26 that year in a local clinic. Even more intriguing was the fact that the nationality box on this certificate indicated: “stateless” (*apátrida*)²⁷. She is buried at the cemetery of Collserola (Barcelona)²⁸. As we will see in the following section, Julia Lahaye had lost her citizenship because of her actions during WWI.

3. Madame Perdomo: shadows

3.1. *Belgium, a hotbed of espionage*

At the end of July 1914, WWI broke out and the Belgian government declared that this country would maintain its neutrality. In spite of that, Germany invaded it on 4 August 1914, and the Belgian army, after holding up the German army’s offensive for nearly a month, retreated behind the Yser River (West Flanders), retaining this position until 1918. The occupied territories on the WWI Western Front (Belgium, Luxembourg and north-eastern France), where civilians lived alongside the German army, became a hotbed of espionage. Many locals were recruited as spies by both belligerent sides.

25. Lahaye, *Rapport*: 5.

26. “Madame Julia Lahaye, widow of Perdomo, died a Christian death in Barcelona on 26 April 1978. The funeral took place in the strictest intimacy. The family shares this painful loss with her friends and acquaintances.”

27. “Certificado de defunción de Julia Lahaye Jonckheer”, Registro Civil de Barcelona, Sección 3.ª, tomo 00328: 203. The postal address of this retirement home corresponds to one run by Carmelite nuns; that of the clinic, to the Clínica Platón.

28. According to written communication from the Barcelona Cemeteries Communication directorate, Julia Lahaye’s grave is located in the Barcelona Collserola Cemetery, Group 11, niche 31552, 2nd floor.

Academic research has paid increasing attention to the history of military intelligence during WWI²⁹ despite difficulties in accessing primary sources, as the intelligence agencies were still in an embryonic state, and many documents were destroyed by the agencies themselves or during the battles³⁰. Most studies have focused on examining Allied espionage networks, although more recently there has been some interest in investigating espionage on the German side³¹.

Women accounted for 25% of Belgian resistance agents³². The biggest network of this resistance was the so-called “La Dame Blanche” which included a thousand agents. 30% of its members were women, a policy that had been developed in order to maintain operations in the case that male agents would be called to arms³³. The most celebrated female resistance agents working in Belgium during the Great War were the British nurse Edith Cavell (1865-1915)³⁴ and the Belgian Gabrielle Petit (1893-1916)³⁵. They were both arrested, tried and executed by German firing squads. Edith Cavell took care of wounded soldiers from both sides and helped Allied soldiers to escape from occupied Belgium. The German government accused her of espionage,

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29. For an overview of the scholarship about secret services during the First World War, see Daniel Larsen, “Intelligence in the First World War: The State of the Field”, *Intelligence and National Security*, 2014, 29 (2): 282-302. For a gendered analysis of intelligence work, see Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*. New York: NYU Press, 2003.
 30. Élise Rezsöhazy, “Faire l’histoire du renseignement militaire de la Première Guerre Mondiale: les territoires occupés comme enjeu stratégique”, *Contemporanea*, 2017, 39: 1-3.
 31. Élise Rezsöhazy’s PhD thesis (2020), that will be published as a book in the near future, studies in depth the German secret polices established in occupied Belgium and France during the First World War. It briefly mentions Julia Lahaye. Élise Rezsöhazy, *De la protection du secret militaire à l’occupation des populations civiles. Les polices secrètes allemandes derrière le Front Ouest (1914-1918)*. Louvain: Université de Louvain, 2020.
 32. Laurence van Ypersele, Emmanuel Debruyne, and Stéphanie Claisse, *De la guerre de l’ombre aux ombres de la guerre: L’espionnage en Belgique durant la Guerre 1914-1918: Histoire et Mémoire*. Bruxelles: Labor, 2004.
 33. Pauline Bock, “The Untold Stories of Belgium’s Female resistance during World War I.” *The Brussels Times*, 25/02/2020. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/96952/the-untold-stories-of-belgiums-female-resistance-during-world-war-i>.
 34. Katie Pickles, “Cavell, Edith Louisa”, *1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)*. Edited by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin – Bayerische Staat Bibliothek, 2014. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/cavell_edith_louisa (24/01/2017; accessed 11/07/2023).
 35. Sophie de Schaepdrijver, “Petit, Gabrielle”, *1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1)*, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/petit_gabrielle (08/10/2014; accessed 11/07/2023).

a claim that the British authorities vehemently denied. Cavell's execution in 1915 sparked international condemnation and was widely publicised by the Allies to galvanise public opinion against Germany and to boost military recruitment. Cavell was depicted by the Allies as an innocent martyr, while the Germans publicised her story to discourage resistance. The nurse was honored in 1920 with a memorial statue in London that bears the inscriptions "Humanity", "Devotion", "Fortitude", and "Sacrifice"³⁶. She is even recognised by the Church of England in the Calendar of Saints with a Memorial Day on 12 October³⁷. Gabrielle Petit was a Belgian woman who served with the Belgian Red Cross and spied for the British Secret Service during World War I. She was executed in 1916 and became a Belgian national heroine after the war's end. A statue of her erected in 1923 in Brussels depicts Petit standing bold upright to her executors. Her final words are engraved on the pedestal: "I will show them that a Belgian woman knows how to die." Throughout the 1920s, 1930s and WWII years, Petit was eulogized as a symbol of self-sacrifice and resistance against the occupation³⁸.

In contrast, Belgians recruited by German intelligence services aroused the hatred of the press and the Belgian population³⁹. Their trial in postwar Belgium received enormous press coverage and the public reaction was particularly virulent towards the Belgians who had denounced their compatriots⁴⁰. An estimated 200 civilians were prosecuted for espionage or for malicious denunciation, first by the military courts, and after the end of the state of war in 1919 by the Public Prosecutor's Office⁴¹. Women who had sexual relationships with Germans, whether they were spies or not, were also

36. Edith Cavell Statue. *London Remembers*. <https://www.londonremembers.com/memorials/edith-cavell-statue>

37. The Calendar. *The Church of England*. <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/churchs-year/calendar>

38. Sophie de Schaepdrijver, "Introduction", in *Gabrielle Petit: The Death and Life of a Female Spy in the First World War*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015: 1-10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474248884.0007> (Accessed 23/06/2023).

39. Laurence van Ypersele, "Au nom de la Patrie! A mort les traîtres". La répression des inciviques belges de 1914 à 1918", *Histoire@Politique*, 2007, 3 (3): 3. <https://doi.org/10.3917/hp.003.0003>.

40. Ypersele, Debruyne, and Claisse, *De la guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre*.

41. Mélanie Bost, Xavier Rousseaux, and Stanislas Horvat, "Les espions civils au service de l'ennemi, au prisme de la Justice militaire belge. L'autre versant de la guerre de l'ombre (1914-1920)", *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, 2014, 10.

rejected by their community, sometimes violently, and pejoratively referred to as “femmes à Boches” (“Kraut Women”)⁴².

3.2. *Julia Lahaye, spy for the German Reich in occupied Belgium during the Great War*

After the Armistice (11 November 1918), Julia Lahaye was prosecuted for espionage on behalf of the Germans. According to her case file⁴³, she had passed on information about the Belgian military intelligence services to the occupying army, and denounced several members of the resistance, at least two of whom were tried and executed by the German Reich’s army. In her espionage activities Lahaye used her husband’s surname (Van den Bril, also abbreviated to Van den Br.) as well as the pseudonyms “Comtesse de Meeus”, “Ginette” and “Madame de Kervijn”. In January 1922, a Belgian court sentenced her to life imprisonment. By then, she had managed to flee Belgium, live for a while in France, where she engaged in a relationship with Alfredo Perdomo (1853-1925), Venezuelan consul in Marseille, and find refuge in Spain with him. While we have no record that they ever married (Perdomo had spouse and children in Marseille; Lahaye was divorced⁴⁴), in Spain people used to refer to her as “Madame Perdomo”, even though Lahaye never hid her maiden name.

42. “Boche” in French and “Kraut” in English are contemptuous terms used to refer to a German, especially a German soldier during World War I or II. Emmanuel Debruyne, “Les ‘femmes à Boches’ en Belgique et en France occupée (1914-1918)”, *Revue du Nord*, 2014, 404-405 (1-2): 157-185. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdn.404.0157>.

43. Archives générales du Royaume 2 (AGR2) - dépôt Joseph Cuvelier. Fonds Moscou (fonds non inventorié). Dossier n.º 357 (Julia Lahaye); and BRUSSELS, State Archives, Hof van Assisen Brabant. Dossiers Incivieken 1919-1926/Cours d’Appel Bruxelles, nr. 49 Lahaye Julie. Lahaye’s judicial file consists of 442 digitalised pages: her interrogation by an inspector of the Belgian military security on 13 July 1916, the statements of over twenty witnesses—in French and/or Flemish—, warrants for Lahaye’s arrest, correspondence between military and civilian judges, communications between judicial authorities and the Belgian and French intelligence military services, reports from both of these services, the handwritten letters that the Belgian resistant Joseph Joppart clandestinely sent to his family from his captivity, and Lahaye’s sentence to life imprisonment by the Brabant Assize Court on 26 January 1922.

44. Although Gustave Van den Bril and Julia Lahaye had been living separately since October 1914, the divorce was not officially pronounced until December 1920, with Julia Lahaye *in absentia* (AGR2. Dossier n.º 357. Communication from the Court Clerk to the Belgian Attorney General on July 8, 1921).

This judicial file provides many details of her espionage activities, obtained from various testimonies. On the pretext of going to join her husband while he was on duty, Lahaye “left the marital home and went to Ghent, as soon as the German Reich troops entered the city⁴⁵, to meet a German officer named Karl Dreckmann, whom she had met seven months earlier on the train between Brussels and Antwerp, and who was attached to the *Kommandantur* in Ghent”⁴⁶. They “lived maritally until the day Dreckmann was sent to the front” in a rented room in the house of the couple De Brichy-Hobbels. Moreover, Julia rented a second room in the house of a photographer named Mathys. The German soldiers themselves took care of Lahaye’s moving, and she even had a German orderly in her employ “who did her shopping and carried her parcels”.

Lahaye travelled “unusually often”, especially to the Netherlands, and was absent for several days. At the De Brichy-Hobbels’ house, she was visited by numerous German officers and secret police, and had shown her landlady a letter from the German secret police, issued by the *Kommandantur*, authorising her to travel wherever she wished, day and night, and to call on the help of German soldiers⁴⁷. She enjoyed “surprising facilities for crossing the Dutch-Belgian border”, being not only exempted from any searches, but also “subjected to all kinds of special attentions by the officers and soldiers at the border post”. This was attested to by Charlotte Schandevael, a Belgian traveller having happened to meet her at a border crossing:

[C.S.] was struck by the reception the Germans gave the accused on her arrival at the Belgian border station; she observed her from that moment discreetly and noted that Lahaye was eavesdropping on the boat from Terneuzen on the conversations of the passengers; she mingled with the groups of travellers and seemed very displeased when Charlotte Schandevael addressed her and demanded her attention⁴⁸.

Allegedly, Lahaye’s mission consisted of “spying on services passing recruits to the front and transporting documents of Belgian or Allied military intelligence services”, mainly between Ghent in northern Belgium, and

45. The German Reich Army entered Ghent on October 12, 1914 and withdrew on November 10, 1918.

46. AGR2. Dossier n.º 357. Lahaye’s Indictment, Dic. 3 1921, p. 1.

47. Lahaye’s Indictment, Dic. 3 1921, pp. 1-2.

48. Lahaye’s Indictment Dic. 3 1921, p. 2.

Terneuzen and Vlissingen in the southern Netherlands, by taking advantage of the neutrality of this country, which the German army respected during WWI. The resentment⁴⁹ against Germany provoked in Belgium by the violence of the invasion and the harshness of the occupation meant that the German Reich's intelligence services had to act in isolation for they were "unable to rely on the recruitment of a vast network of observers, or on a fast and regular transmission system for the collected information". Moreover, the strategic geographical position of the Netherlands between Germany, Belgium and the North Sea made that country a privileged rear base where the espionage networks of all the contenders converged and the collected military information (intelligence and counter-intelligence) was transmitted. Hence, the most spectacular barrier built then by the German army was an electric fence isolating occupied Belgium from the neutral Netherlands along the entire length of the common border⁵⁰.

This added even more value to the espionage work of Julia Lahaye who —among other war crimes— was accused of having denounced Joseph Joppart and Ferdinand Lenoir, two very active members of the intelligence services of the Belgian resistance who were condemned to death and killed by firing squad. They were among the 277 (including ten women) who were executed by the German Reich's army, mainly for espionage during the war⁵¹.

The judicial account of Joppart's case gives us an insight into Julia Lahaye's *modus operandi*. Joseph Joppart (1890-1915) was a courier for a large military intelligence service carrying documents of the utmost importance to both the Belgian General Staff and the British General Staff. On 22 February 1915, he had left Brussels with two other Belgian escorts, a soldier and a civilian who was leaving to enlist. A day later, the three of them crossed the border at Overslag, a hamlet of Terneuzen. On 24 February, while waiting at the Terneuzen pier for the boat that was to take them to Vlissingen, Lahaye struck up a conversation with them. She introduced herself to them as Ginette, divorced, originally from Brussels or its environs, mentioning the names of

49. See, on resentment: Dolores Martín Moruno, "Introduction. On resentment: past and present of an emotion", in Bernardino Fantini, Dolores Martín Moruno and Javier Moscoso (eds.), *On resentment: past and present*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. pp. 1-16.

50. Emmanuel Debruyne, "Espionage", in *1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War* <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/espionage> (08/10/2014; accessed 11/07/2023).

51. Debruyne, "Espionage".

many people in Brussels and telling them that she had been a nurse in the cycling battalion of the civic guard. Apparently on the return journey from the Netherlands, Lahaye denounced Joppart as a spy when he crossed the border, and the German soldiers arrested him. In a note that Joppart had managed to leak to a relative from captivity, additional details are provided:

I will tell you how I was taken prisoner: in the big hotel in Vlissingen there was a lady whom my friends had introduced to me. It gave me even more confidence that this person had been an ambulance driver in the service of the Belgian army. I had been asked to accompany her to Ghent, as she had gone to the Netherlands to see her children and was returning to Belgium on her own business. I confidently, as usual, took charge of her and when we reached the border she could think of nothing better than to go to the German authorities and tell them that I had letters and that I was spying. I do not know everything she said, but these gentlemen will easily see that it is false. Her name is Mme. Van den Bril Lahaye, her father has a chateau in Jette-St. Pierre. I beg you to remember her name carefully, for she is a traitor who has sold her country for a few francs⁵².

After a long captivity, Joppart was shot on 22 October 1915 in Cologne. In the judicial file, Julia Lahaye was also held responsible for having spied on and denounced to the Germans Ferdinand Lenoir (1861-1915), a civil servant in the Belgian Ministry of Railways. A resident of Jette, in October 1914 Lenoir had joined the VDB intelligence service⁵³ of the Belgian Grand Quartier général (GQG), of which Joppart was also a member, to become one of its organisers. Lenoir was arrested in Brussels on 3 March 1915, sentenced to death and executed in Ghent a month and a half later (14 April)⁵⁴. He is considered the first Belgian and the first resistance fighter to be executed by the Germans⁵⁵.

52. Lahaye's Indictment Dic, 3 1921, p. 4.

53. An acronym corresponding to the pseudonym of Arthur Dubois (Van den Bosch), one of his most important agents. Jan van der Fraeren, *Voor het Duitse vuurpeloton. Executies in bezet België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog: tussen realiteit en mythe*, Universiteit Gent, Bachelor's Thesis, 2004-2005, 2 vols.: vol. II, p. 9. This thesis is the basis for the book by Jan Van der Fraenen, *Voor den kop geschoten. Executies van Belgische spionnen door de Duitse bezetter (1914-1918)*. Roeselare: Roularta Books, 2009.

54. In 1920, his body was exhumed from Ghent's Tir communal and solemnly buried in Jette's cemetery, where a funerary monument was erected in his honour by popular subscription (<https://be-monumen.be/patrimoine-belge/monument-a-ferdinand-lenoir-cimetiere-jette/>). A street in Jette bears his name.

55. Rezsöhazi, *De la protection du secret militaire à l'occupation des populations civiles*: 336, 524.

In August 1915, using her German passport, Julia Lahaye left Belgium by train, with the help of German soldiers who “carried her luggage from photographer Methys’ house to the station” in Ghent. Via Switzerland, she fled to France where, according to her judicial file, she “frequented in particular the officers of the Belgian and French armies”. While in France, she was subjected to surveillance by the French police, who could not find proof to blame her of being still engaged in espionage on behalf of the Germans. According to the French investigation, Lahaye resided in several locations in France, undertaking a number of different jobs: secretary to a doctor on the Boulevard St-Michel in Paris, governess for Mme Clément-Bayard’s grandson at the Château de St-Georges sur-Cher (Loir-et-Cher department), and employee at the Louvre department store. Allegedly, “the various professions seem only to be intended to mask the gallant intrigues from which she drew her main resources”⁵⁶.

On 13 July 1916, Lahaye was interrogated by the Military Security Inspector of the Belgian Army. According to her declaration, not wanting to remain in Jette because of violent disagreements with her family, who reproached her for having had an extramarital affair at the beginning of the war, in October 1914 she had travelled to Ghent with one of her daughters. At the *Kommandatur*, where she went to obtain a residence permit, she encountered by chance Karl Dreckmann, whom she had met six months before. They became lovers. In January 1915, her husband removed her from custody of their daughters. She claimed to have tried to put an end to the relationship with Dreckmann on several occasions and to get out of the country “to put some ground between themselves”, but that they always ended up getting back together, until she finally managed to get a safe conduct to Switzerland, from where she travelled to Paris on 24 August 1915.

By coming to France, I wanted to make amends for my past sins by breaking off this relationship. I had been expecting to be questioned about my guilty relationship with an enemy officer ever since I entered this country, but in my eyes, by breaking off with him and running the risk of being condemned, perhaps to death, by the Allies, I was rehabilitating myself. Until now I have lived from my work, but my lover is Captain Van Berwaer of the 14th line regiment of the Belgian Army⁵⁷.

56. AGR2. Dossier n.º 357. Ministère de la Guerre de la République Française. Note de l’État-Major de l’Armée pour la Mission Belge. 17/01/1919.

57. AGR2. Dossier n.º 357. Julia Lahaye’s Declaration, 13/07/1916.

Lahaye denied having travelled to Jette on the date Lenoir was denounced, despite the fact that several witnesses testified to having seen her there; she also denied having spoken to Dreckmann about Lenoir. She admitted meeting Joppard on the boat to Flessingen and travelling with him by car back to the vicinity of the Belgian border, where, according to her, they said goodbye to each other and she crossed into Belgium with the help of a Dutch smuggler. She stated that she did not know whether Dreckmann was engaged in espionage activities and denied any further contact with him after she arrived in Paris.

Always according to the French investigation, while in France Lahaye followed nursing courses at the Beaujon Hospital at Clichy (Hauts-de-Seine). She was also appointed as military nurse at the Hôpital de la Rose in Marseille, where she worked from the last months of 1916 until August 1917. Her “indiscretions aroused suspicion” and she left the hospital just as she was about to be dismissed. In the meantime, she had met Alfredo Perdomo Esteva, a wealthy merchant, consul of Venezuela in that city, with whom she lived from then on in La Tourtele, in the commune of Aubagne (Bouches du Rhône), until they moved to Barcelona at an indeterminate date⁵⁸. In any case, according to an official communication from the French justice authorities, in January 1920 the couple was already settled in Barcelona, Alfredo Perdomo being the consul of Venezuela in Barcelona⁵⁹.

After the Armistice, the Belgian courts repeatedly and unsuccessfully summoned her to appear. After being declared “fugitive et latitante”, in January 1922 Julia Lahaye, who appears in the court records as the “divorced wife” of Gustave Van den Bril, was declared *in absentia* and sentenced to “life imprisonment” with the accessory penalties of suspension of the exercise of her rights of citizenship and seizure of her properties⁶⁰.

58. Alfredo Perdomo's father, José Trinidad Perdomo, had been the consul of Venezuela in Marseille since at least 1865 and of the Dominican Republic since 1877. Alfredo was the consul of Venezuela in Marseille from at least 1888 until his death in January 1925 (since June 1918 as honorary consul), while his son Luis Perdomo became in February 1921 the vice-consul of Venezuela in Marseille. Alfredo and Julia had every reason to move from Marseille to Barcelona: she could not feel safe in France due to her dark past during the WWI, and her sentimental partner and protector would have abandoned there his family (wife and children, according to his obituary in *El Noticiero Universal* [Barcelona], 14 January 1925 and *Le Petit Marseillais* [Marseille], 18 January 1925) for her.

59. AGR2. Dossier n.º 357. Lettre de Mommaerts à l'Officier de police Steurbaut, 11/01/1920.

60. Archives générales du Royaume 2, Cour d'assises du Brabant, Dossiers inciviques (1919-1926), n.º 49 (Julie Lahaye), Acte d'accusation, Bruxelles, 3 décembre 1921; Cause fixée, Bruxelles, 26 janvier 1922).

While Gabrielle Petit was depicted by her contemporaries as a brave patriot, paragon of virtue, and Edith Cavell as symbolising the bravery of a nurse who put her patients' lives before her own⁶¹, Julia Lahaye was represented as their antithesis: the amoral spy, the shameful traitor who, having no profession or means of her own, decided to put her needs first and did what she did for survival. Having been shunned by her family for her extramarital affair, rejected by society for intimate relations with the enemy, and declared stateless for betraying her country, Lahaye must have seen in neutral Spain a country of second chances to rewrite her own story and regain the esteem denied at home.

4. Concluding remarks

With the information we have obtained so far, it is difficult to assess whether Lahaye's dedication to humanitarian action and to the Red Cross during the Spanish Civil War constituted a sort of atonement for her dark past or whether it was a cover for additional espionage activities. Unfortunately, no diary or any other egodocument of hers has been found. Therefore, whether Madame Perdomo's life choices in Spain were driven by regret, remains a matter of conjecture.

Was her rejection of the luxuries she was used to in Belgium (Figure 1), and her new devotion to care for the sick in Spain (Figure 2), a way of chasing away her old self, or a hideaway instead? Did her regrets about her turbulent past make her more empathetic and lead her acquire a caring disposition towards others? Or was it again survival instinct that made her play the role of a selfless nurse? Did she truly embrace this new identity?⁶² Did she live in

61. Cavell's story is more complicated and nuanced than depicted by Allied propaganda. In 2015, upon the centenary of Cavell's death, Stella Rimington, Director General of MI5 —the United Kingdom's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency— from 1992 to 1996, revealed evidence that Cavell's organisation not only helped allied soldiers escape, but was also actively engaged in espionage to smuggle secret information to British Intelligence Services (Secrets and Spies: The Untold Story of Edith Cavell. *BBC Radio 4*. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b069wth6>). Had this information come to light in the war years, it would have ruined Allied propaganda, that was based on the portrayal of Cavell as an innocent victim, devoted to the care of others, who nursed both Allied and German troops alike.

62. Certainly, Lahaye's espionage activities could obey to other reasons (e.g. blackmailing by her German lover). On the other hand, humanitarianism could constitute an appealing umbrella that would allow a range of different actions not allowed to a woman in other scenarios.



Figure 1. Photograph of Julia Lahaye contained in her judicial file. Date unknown, but not after 1916. Her clothes reflect her high social standing: she wears a fur stole, an elegant, well-cut coat, leather gloves, a chain with a pendant and a feather headdress, her hair neatly tied back. She looks at the photographer, without looking directly into the camera.



Figure 2. Julia Lahaye portrayed in the article: Domènech de Rico, Mario. "Madame Perdomo". *Boletín Oficial de la Brigada de Barcelona*. Cruz Roja Española. Mayo 1938; 19 (220): 23-25. She wears a sober nurse's uniform, which contrasts with her attire in Fig. 1. She smiles at the camera with a confident and relaxed pose.

dread that someone would discover her past? More generally, can a negatively valenced emotion like remorse be a potential motivator of humanitarian

However, the strength of the judicial file and Lahaye's life trajectory after the war crimes for which she was sentenced *in absentia* in 1922 lead us today to defend our hypothesis about repentance as the most feasible one.

action?⁶³ Whatever the ultimate motivation of this “infamous spy” may have been, humanitarianism seems to be linked to Lahaye/Perdomo survival⁶⁴. The first-hand accounts of the people who “received care” from her, praising her work in the Red Cross’ newsletter, attest that she was also capable of good deeds. This suggests that the experiences of the “cared-for” can shape the identities of those who care for them and build an image of a person inseparable from her work as a caregiver.

The use of wives’ and even widows’ names, which has so often anonymised women to the great regret of historians, seems to be strategic, almost performative, in the case of Julia Lahaye/Madame Perdomo, allowing her to elaborate a new identity at every time. In Belgium she sometimes used her married name “Van den Bril” and mentioned some real facts of her life (for instance, that she belonged to a well-off family and that she had two children). At other times, however, she used the pseudonyms “Comtesse de Meeus” and “Madame de Kervijn” and affirmed that she belonged to the Belgian intelligence service. In Spain, where she constructed her identity as a humanitarian, she did not hide her maiden name, Lahaye, but people used to refer to her as “Madame Perdomo” (with the French denomination “Madame” instead of the Spanish “Señora” (“Mrs.”)).

Regardless of the pseudonyms and nicknames she seems to have used in her espionage activities during WWI, Belgian and Spanish sources of information about Lahaye/Perdomo provide two very different pictures of the same woman. On the one hand, the description of Lahaye’s alleged betrayal of her Belgian homeland and the sexual transgressions reported in her judicial file depict her as a traitor given to debauchery, an uncaring wife and mother with no emotions. On the other hand, the accounts of Perdomo’s good deeds in the newsletter of

63. This is also the question overflying every page of *In full flight: a story of Africa and atonement* (John Heminway, 2018), a biography of Dr. Anne Spoerry (1918-1999). Spoerry, a French-Swiss physician, spent the last five decades of her life in Kenya, working in remote areas to provide much-needed health care. She became a national hero and was affectionately known as “Mama Daktari” (“Mother Doctor”). After Spoerry’s demise, her nephew discovered a cache of personal papers revealing that she had been imprisoned in the Nazi Ravensbrück concentration camp from 1943 to 1945 for having joined the French resistance; and that in Ravensbrück, under the influence of the block elder Carmen Mory (1906-1947), Spoerry took part in the torture and killing of prisoners. After the end of World War II, she was tried for war crimes and expelled from France for 25 years. With the help of her family’s connections, Spoerry fled to Africa.

64. So far, we lack precise information on the sources of Madame Perdomo’s economic survival in Barcelona until her death in 1978. In these circumstances, we are inclined to think that she was able to live a comfortable life by drawing on Monsieur Perdomo’s inheritance.

the Barcelona Red Cross portray her as a compassionate humanitarian nurse who devoutly volunteered her time to care for others, both in health settings and in safeguarding the lives of prisoners. Both starkly contrasting images are rooted in gender stereotypes about “care”, that remind us that no source is a neutral record of history and that we need to historicise sources.

Last but not least, expressions of praise such as “angel of charity”, “dove messenger of mercy”, who consecrated her life to the “fruitful sacrifice” of coming to the “aid of human suffering” attending to “the poor sick and the wounded”, which the head of the Red Cross brigade in Barcelona dedicated to Madame Perdomo, and his emphasis on her highest “sense of sacrifice, ... spirit of organisation and ... humanitarian work close to the needy” show the relevance of religious discourse in the crystallisation of her figure as a humanitarian, her canonisation in its official newsletter being the result of this process⁶⁵. These descriptions are coincident with the stereotype most often used to depict nurses at the time as “white angels”, that emphasised their vocational character instead of their technical skills and knowledge.

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65. Domènech de Rico, “Madame Perdomo”, pp. 23-25. A relatively early indication of Perdomo’s Catholic faith profile can be found in her address “The political organisation of women” to a meeting of the Assembly of Belgian Catholics in Madrid in May 1922, calling for women to politically organise themselves and to vote (“Asamblea de los católicos belgas”, *El Debate* [Madrid], 9 May 1923, p. 3). This association had been formed in Mechelen (Belgium) fifty years earlier (October 1870) in protest “against the usurpation of the Papal States and the sacrilegious attack on the freedom of the Holy See and the rights of the Pope [Pius IX]”. At least in its origins, this Catholic association had a clear integrist character (“Bélgica. Asamblea de Católicos Belgas en Malinas”, *Altar y Trono* [Madrid], 20 October 1870, 71: 428-429).

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