

Alexander Sawicki
M.A. Candidate, Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies
Carleton University

Summer 2022 University of Antwerp Visiting Research Scholar Testimonial

I had the privilege of spending ten weeks as a visiting research scholar at the University of Antwerp in Belgium, under the tutelage of Dr. Dirk De Bièvre. It was an exceedingly valuable cultural and academic exchange experience which I wholeheartedly thank the Jean-Monnet Network for organizing and partially financing this initiative in concert with counterparts from the University of Antwerp. I would also like to extend thanks to the colleagues whom I had the pleasure of meeting during my stay, who very generously and patiently opened their minds to me and my seemingly non-stop questioning about their research and their experiences living in Belgium.

Shortly before my return to Canada, a colleague from Carleton University asked me what I thought was the most valuable aspect of this exchange program. I answered honestly and without hesitation: the chance to get out of my own “comfort zone” and expose myself to something entirely new, in a place that was entirely unfamiliar to me, and among people who came from an entirely different cultural and academic upbringing. Having just come out of nearly two-years of self-imposed isolation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I understood the value of getting away from the same four-walls which, although safe, did not allow for much innovation when it came to daily routines or patterns of thinking. It was easy to feel “stuck” in place for much of the pandemic, as often focusing on one’s work and basic survival within the very same space leaves little room to differentiate one from the other. By contrast, having dedicated office space at the University of Antwerp gave me impetus to take advantage of the time I had, and breathed new life into my old patterns of thinking and working.

I also saw my time in Antwerp as an opportunity to engage in cultural exchange. Dirk and his colleagues at the University were exceedingly welcoming, and always open to chat during lunch or coffee breaks. I was invited to a number of round-table working groups, an activity that I was entirely unfamiliar with before my arrival, so that I could be exposed to new academic methods of collaboration and constructive critique. As well, I was invited to a number of social events organized by the University, and some by colleagues within the department, which proved to be excellent networking opportunities. As it relates to my academic goals, I was put in touch with and met privately a number of experts with whom I could discuss my thesis project on conspiracy theories and how they influence political outcomes in Poland. These meetings were critically important to the development of my project because of the advice, suggestions, and multiple perspectives I was offered with regards to how I ought to proceed with the project in the future. As well, I was exposed to a variety of works which I had not yet consulted by the time my research proposal was approved, and as such have been able to add more depth to my research base.

Finally, in my off time I took it upon myself to see as much of Belgium as I reasonably could. Antwerp itself is a beautiful city, in my opinion the perfect size (in terms of walk-ability and live-ability), and the port, the train station, and the zoo next door are world-class sights to

behold. I also spent some time visiting Brussels, Gent, and Ypres, the latter of which served as a complement to my rather lengthy undergraduate education which examined the events of the First World War. I went on an extended battlefield tour of the Ypres Salient which really put into perspective just how flat the battlefields were, and the plethora of cemeteries (British, French, Canadian, and German alike) scattered throughout the region highlighted the senselessness of so much of this loss; the fact that human remains are still being found and identified in the present day also underscores this point.

In summary, my experience in Antwerp in particular, and Belgium in general, was one of the best that I have ever had in my life. I had never considered Belgium seriously as a place to visit (it is not really mentioned in day-to-day life), but my time there has shown me that it is a profoundly underrated destination. The landscape was beautiful, the cities were clean and accessible, and the climate was very agreeable to me. Of course, the people (especially at the University) were warm and welcoming, and the food (and beer!) was absolutely delicious; I've learned that the Belgians take their mayonnaise very seriously (there are *dozens* of flavours) and they like sandwiches almost as much as I do. Almost. As a result of this and other reasons, I am genuinely interested in returning to Antwerp (perhaps as a PhD student) and possibly living there indefinitely if I am able.