



# Belgium's Diverging Memories. Is this so? If so, why? And is it a problem?

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# Foreword

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Nations share (the idea of) a common past. What about Belgium? Does state reform goes along with diverging memories about the Belgian past? Is this a part of the “Belgian problem”? Or is it a wider phenomenon of the falling apart of collective national identities in a globalizing world? Must we care about a common national memory?

According to the French historian Pierre Nora we are witnessing a world-wide upsurge in memory. Belgium is no exception. New museums are being built; Heritage and Open Monuments days are a huge success; heritage sites and living history events even more so; every day a new digital source collection is presented; political commissions seek the truth about events that happened long ago (Patrice Lumumba, Julien Lahaut); Belgian authorities offer apologies for their responsibilities in past crimes (the mayor of Antwerp to the Jewish community, the Belgian Prime Minister to the Rwandese Tutsi's).

This “memorialism” finds its deeper reason in the search for a sense of belonging and a collective consciousness. Because of the rapid and continuous changing of the present – what Nora calls the “acceleration of history” – and the growing feelings of uncertainty about the future, people are seeking comfort in the past. Traditions, customs, landscapes, “terroir”, monuments etc. – “les lieux de mémoires” in Nora’s words –, realms of memory, offer access to the past.

How does this general and world-wide pattern fits in with the actual Belgian state of affairs? The future of the Belgian nation-state has become very uncertain. Does this provoke memorialist activities concerning the Belgian past? Not at first sight. On the contrary, the Walloon, Brussels and Flemish regions and communities develop their own memorialist activities. This can be seen for instances in the commemoration of the centenary of WWI. Does this provoke diverging memories? If so, are these diverging memories part of the crisis of Belgian identity? These questions are raised in the contributions by Nico Wouters and Laurence van Ypersele on the present WWO-commemorations in Belgium.

Recent research on the way collective memories are constructed points at the importance of “memory makers”. As long as memory has not been organized by opinion makers it contains little more than atmosphere, feelings or another form of suggestion. It is therefore essential that the dynamic processes that lend a collective memory form, content and resonance, both top-down and bottom-up, should get a more structural interpretation. Memories only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented and used in a social setting. Maarten Van Ginderachter argues that in the last four decades the Flemish nationalist memory has become dominant in Flanders. Its central tenet is victimisation and discrimination by Belgium. In his contribution he puts this into the historical perspective of the making of identities in Belgium on the one hand and the process of

globalisation on the other. He concludes that diverging memories in Belgium are both a symptom and a cause of the drifting apart of communities in the country, but they are not the result of the challenges globalisation supposedly poses to national identities.

Anne Roekens and Axel Tixhon argue that these observations are related to the economic history of Belgium with the ups and downs in Flanders and Wallonia. This diverging history has led to popular images of a “poor Flanders” that struggled itself up to become a rich and prosperous region on the one hand and a “rich Wallonia” that went down into poverty and misery on the other hand. These images are very present in today’s political and societal debates in Belgium. But are the memories of this economic evolution the same in the various parts and communities of the country?

The apparent weakness of the Belgian federal state, especially in matters of culture (and thus in the field of history and memory) could well be one of the causes of the diverging memories on the Belgian past. That Belgium was once a strong nation-state finds no relevance in today’s society and is therefore forgotten or transformed into nostalgia without connection with the present and without relevance for the future.

# Contributions

# Belgium: too many pasts, too many memories?

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There is a broad consensus among historians that what we today call nations are fairly recent historical creations from the eighteenth century at the earliest.<sup>1</sup> And this in spite of nationalist claims that Flanders rose in 1302, that France goes back to Vercingetorix or that the Scots pranced around in kilts in the middle ages.<sup>2</sup> The nationalist balancing act between present and past has been cleverly summarised in the phrase: “Nationalism has a short history, but a long memory.” And memory is the topic of this essay, which consists of two main parts: 1) the role of memory in the so-called Belgian problem; 2) the question whether what is happening in Belgium is a symptom of the falling apart of collective national identities in a globalizing world.

## 1. The role of memory in Belgium

Memory, nationalism and national identity are intimately linked. Scholars usually define nations as collectivities held together by a sense of national identity that is constructed by nationalist means. I use the term “constructed” deliberately. There is a broad academic consensus that national identities are not based on objective qualities, but on subjective feelings.<sup>3</sup> Nations are “imagined communities” – communities of people who share a sense of collective belonging, but who do not know each other face to face – on a par with other group identities whether they are based on religion or class for instance. In this (constructivist) sense, the present-day idea of the hard-working, self-reliant Fleming is a flattering self-description, not a reality.

In the construction of national identity, the past plays an important role. Or at least the memory of that past. And this memory is equally constructed. It is no objective reflection of what has “really” happened, but a subjective selection that reflects present-day political, economic or ideological interests. A clear example of this is the current notion that Belgium did not stand a chance from the

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<sup>1</sup> The debate between the so called perennialists (who claim that nations and nationalism are a much older phenomenon going back to the Middle Ages or even Antiquity) and the modernists has not been completely resolved, but a majority of scholars follow the latter.

<sup>2</sup> Jo Tollebeek, “De Gulden sporenslag. De cultus van 1302 en de Vlaamse strijd”, in Anne Morelli (ed.) *De grote mythen uit de geschiedenis van België, Vlaanderen en Wallonië* (Berchem, 1996), pp. 191-202; Hugh Trevor Roper, “The invention of tradition. The Highland tradition of Scotland”, in E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1994 [1983]), pp. 15-41.

<sup>3</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1994 [1983]). Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, 1995 [1990]). Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford, 1993 [1983]).

very start, being an unnatural juxtaposition of Flemings and Walloons doomed to fail. A number of contemporaries indeed echoed this idea. The French historian Jules Michelet wrote in his *Histoire de la révolution française* (1847–53) that the country was "une invention anglaise. Il n'y a jamais eu de Belgique et il n'y [en] aura jamais [...]"<sup>4</sup> Even king Leopold I was pessimistic about his own kingdom: "La Belgique n'a pas de nationalité et vu le caractère de ses habitants ne pourra jamais en avoir."<sup>5</sup> Ever since 1830 these ominous predictions surfaced. This discourse was not so much a reflection of the real state of the kingdom, rather than of its geopolitical importance. Every European power would have loved to annex Belgium and consequently depicted the Belgians as lacking a national identity.

The idea that Belgium was from the start an unnatural amalgamation of two separate peoples is inaccurate for three reasons. First, it was the Belgian context that created Flemings and Walloons. Flanders in its modern meaning of the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium is a direct offshoot of the Belgian nation-state of 1830. Prior to that date it exclusively referred to the ancien régime county of Flanders (roughly the present-day provinces of East- and West-Flanders). After the foundation of the independent Belgian state, in which French was the sole official language, linguistic difference became a more relevant marker of group identity and "Flanders" gradually received its new, modern meaning. However, before the First World War (and even afterwards) the older meaning (Flanders the county) was still being used by *flamingants* – as the supporters of the Flemish movement were known.<sup>6</sup> In the 1890s, for instance, the priest Hugo Verriest wrote that francophone people lived "in Flanders and in Flemish Belgium".<sup>7</sup>

An important pivotal moment in the evolution of the concept "Flanders", was the emergence of "Wallonia" in its modern sense as the French-speaking south of the country - a development which ran parallel to the rise of the Walloon movement. The adjective Walloon had been in use since the Middle Ages and originally referred to the speakers of Romance dialects within the Low Countries. After Belgian independence, Walloon received the additional meaning of all speakers of French in Belgium wherever they lived. "Wallonia" was coined *ex nihilo* by the poet Joseph Grandgagnage in 1844. For the next three decades the term Wallonia never went beyond the circles of philologists, historians and folklorists. From the middle of the 1870s on, the term was popularised in the wake of the first linguistic laws. Like "Walloon", "Wallonia" had a double meaning: a territorial one referring to the south of Belgium, and a collective one embracing all speakers of French in Belgium.<sup>8</sup> Only after the First World War, Walloon and Wallonia were increasingly used to refer to the southern half of Belgium exclusively, especially after the 1930s. At that time wallingant politicians gave up their defense of francophones in Flanders out of fear that a form of reciprocal legislation would introduce Dutch in Wallonia.

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<sup>4</sup> Michelet quoted by Jean Stengers, "La Belgique de 1830, une 'nationalité de convention'?", in Hervé Hasquin (ed.) *Histoire et historiens depuis 1830 en Belgique* (Revue de l' Université de Bruxelles, 1981, 1-2) (Bruxelles, 1981), pp. 7-19, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Leopold I quoted by *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Reginald De Schryver, "Geschiedenis van Vlaanderen", in Reginald De Schryver, et al. (eds.), *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* (Tielt, 1998), pp. 18-34, 32; Reginald De Schryver, "Vlaams bewustzijn en interpretatie van het Belgisch verleden. Vragen rond wederzijdse beïnvloeding", in *Handelingen der Koninklijke Zuidnederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, 42 (1988), pp. 73-92, 74-79; Maurits Gysseling, "Vlaanderen: Etymologie en betekensevolutie", in Reginald De Schryver, et al. (eds.), *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* (Tielt, 1998), pp. 3491-3496, 3495-3496.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Leo Picard, *Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse en Groot-Nederlandsche beweging. Dl. 2* (Antwerpen, 1959), p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pol Hiernaux, "Wallonie (histoire du mot)", in *Encyclopédie du Mouvement wallon. Vol. 3* (Charleroi, 2001).



The second reason why Belgium cannot simply be considered as an unnatural invention of international diplomacy has to do with what has been termed proto-state formation in the Southern Netherlands. This is to some extent comparable to centralisation and modernisation processes in countries that are considered to be age-old nations like France, England and the Netherlands. The quintessential Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) claimed that the unification of the Belgian provinces under Burgundian rule in the fifteenth century was a consequence (and not a cause) of an already existing “Belgian civilisation”. This extreme “perennialist” position has since lost all scholarly credentials, but the two most influential historians of Belgian national identity of the past half century, Lode Wils and Jean Stengers, have argued that state formation, first under the Burgundians and later under the Spanish and Austrian Hapsburgs, created the foundation for modern Belgian nationhood.<sup>9</sup> Wils, for instance, calls the Southern Netherlands of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a “Roman-Catholic federated state”.<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, there is some truth to the argument that Belgium is a nineteenth century invention, but in this sense it does not stray from the (Western-)European experience. Where was the German nation? The Italian nation? The French nation? The process of modern nation-building only started in the nineteenth century as states began to “mould” their citizens through education and the army. Or as the American historian Eugen Weber pithily described this process for France: *peasants into Frenchmen*.<sup>11</sup> There is a relatively broad consensus among historians that all modern nations are “unnatural” products of history or accidents that only seem logical in hindsight. The only difference is that some nationalist movements are more successful than others in making people believe that their nations are in fact age-old. Even a supposedly millennial nation such as France is in its current incarnation no direct descendant of medieval France. The modernist and constructivist paradigm in nationalism research convincingly argues that the eighteenth century is a watershed separating pre-modern societies from modern nations. More specifically, three elements were absent in the Ancien Regime that are crucial to our modern understanding of nations and nationalism:

1) territoriality – or the complete coinciding in nationalists' minds of territory-nation-language-culture-state as opposed to the muddled and imprecise territorial and cultural boundaries of pre-modern times.<sup>12</sup> Anthony D. Smith, for one, claims that “a clearly delimited territory or ‘homeland’” is one of the core differences between the Ancien Regime and the modern period.<sup>13</sup> In France the idea of territorial sovereignty was hardly developed until the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> The weak pre-modern link between territory and nation is also evident in the fact that whole regions could change hands as a result of dynastic marriages without causing “identity problems”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Stengers, *Les racines de la Belgique jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830. Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918. Tome 1* (Bruxelles, 2000). Lode Wils, *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo: de lange weg van de naties in de Lage Landen* (Leuven, 2005 [1992]).

<sup>10</sup> Lode Wils, *Van Clovis tot Happart: de lange weg van de naties in de Lage Landen* (Leuven, 1992), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870-1914* (London, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Jan Penrose, “Nations, states and homelands: territory and territoriality in nationalist thought”, in *Nations and nationalism*, 8 (2002), pp. 277-297.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism* (London, 1998), p. 196.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Sahlins, “National frontiers revisited: France's boundaries since the seventeenth century”, in *American historical review*, 95 (1990), pp. 1423-1451.

<sup>15</sup> Patrik Hall, *The social construction of nationalism: Sweden as an example* (Lund, 1998), p. 125.

2) the horizontal imagining of the nation "because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship"<sup>16</sup> as opposed to the vertical division of ancient regime societies in separate estates.

3) a radical popular bottom-up conception of power. According to Joep Leerssen, Rousseau was the first to develop this idea. "Earlier thinkers had all started with an *a priori* top down distribution of power: power comes from On High, and works its way downwards. Locke had argued for a control mechanism in the downward distribution of power, involving the "consent of the governed"; Montesquieu had argued for an institutional separation and "checks and balances" system, regulated by a rule of law that was itself not subject to the king's authority. Both Locke and Montesquieu continued to accept the top-down notion of power. Rousseau, however, came with a new concept of power which totally opposed the former system." For Rousseau, power emanated from the people in a bottom-up fashion.<sup>17</sup>

Not only the idea of an "artificial" Belgium as opposed to a "natural" Flanders exemplifies the peculiar way in which memory is constructed. Another example concerns the history of the social struggle, which in Flanders is basically limited to the linguistic conflict, to the history of the Flemish movement in other words. Other important social issues like the fight for general suffrage or against the exploitation of workers can be summarised in one word: Daens. Adolf Daens, however, is an (admittedly interesting) aside in the social history of Flanders and Belgium. The fact that Belgian social-democracy was founded in late nineteenth-century Flanders (in Ghent and Brussels), not in Wallonia, and that linguistic discrimination was merely one of several, sometimes harsher discriminations is rather unknown to the general public.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1885 and 1914 dozens of workers, strikers and protesters were killed by law enforcement forces. In March 1886, for instance, the army killed 24 protesters throughout Wallonia. During the general strike of 1893 the police shot 12 people, 5 of which in Borgerhout. In 1902 the same happened in Leuven. The result: 5 people dead. The Flemish movement was never subjected to the same level of state repression as the socialist labour movement. And yet, Flemish collective memory knows of the many injustices towards the *flamingants*, but not towards the workers. This no coincidence of course. The Flemish roots of social-democracy and the hard struggle for social rights do not fit the present-day image of a Flanders whose "grondstroom" (mainstream) is supposedly right-wing and conservative. We only remember from history what we want to remember. The French philosopher Ernest Renan already said in 1881 that national memory is not only about remembering, but also - and perhaps to a greater extent - about forgetting.<sup>19</sup>

Now, let me address the divergence of collective memories in Belgium. First of all, there is never one collective memory within a given society. Memories are elastic. They can diverge to some extent without endangering the sense of unity among people. For instance, nineteenth century liberals and Catholics had totally different views on the Belgian past, but this did not undermine their sense of belonging to the same Belgian fatherland. Freedom for instance took second place in the Catholic master narrative after Religion as the guiding principle in the Belgian past. While Liberals regarded the protestant revolt of the sixteenth century as a fight against tyranny, to Catholics it was a pernicious

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> Joep Leerssen, *National thought in Europe. A cultural history* (Amsterdam, 2006), p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Guy Vanschoenbeek, *Novecento in Gent: de wortels van de sociaal-democratie in Vlaanderen* (Antwerpen, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882* (Paris, 1882).

rising against the true faith of the nation.<sup>20</sup> The Catholics' favourite historical époque was the middle ages with its urban splendour and homogeneously Catholic and corporatist society. Other episodes from the past were equally contested and differently interpreted by the opposing ideologies, but this did not challenge their underlying belief in the one Belgian fatherland.

Memories are elastic, but they are not indefinitely stretchable. What has happened in the Belgian case is that different strands of a common Belgian memory have been stretched to such an extent that they snapped and began to constitute separate memories that underpinned separate identities. Up to the First World War, the Flemish movement's conception of the past adhered closely to the what we might call the official Belgian narrative. This should come as no surprise because originally the Flemish movement was Belgian nationalist, intent on strengthening the Belgian fatherland. The *flamingants* believed that the country needed a healthy Flemish population to protect it from French annexation. They could easily buy into official Belgian history because it emphasised the Germanic element in Belgium and attributed a central role to the county of Flanders and the duchy of Brabant as a kind of microcosm of the whole of Belgium.<sup>21</sup>

Near the end of the nineteenth century the Flemish movement's Belgian nationalist enthusiasm began to grow thinner because of the slow development of linguistic legislation. However, the language issue was not yet sufficiently politicised to spawn a separatist form of Flemish nationalism. That only happened because of the First World War and it sprang from two sources. The first were collaborators in occupied Belgium who responded favourably to the *Flamenpolitik*, a German policy giving Flemings a preferential treatment. The occupiers' ultimate aim was to create discord so as to try to break up Belgium from within. The second source was the so-called Front Movement which was founded in the trenches of the Belgian army in response to the discrimination of Flemish soldiers by francophone officers. These two currents coincided after the war to create a Flemish separatist nationalism and ditto memory.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, this Flemish nationalist memory was very Belgian. It borrowed heavily from Belgian history, most importantly the idea of the country as the battlefield of Europe. For centuries, so it was believed, "foreigners" had fought their "foreign" wars in Belgium. The country's history was conceived as a dramatic succession of peaceful periods and eras of violent conflict and revolution - in which the Belgians tried to regain freedom from their foreign oppressors.<sup>23</sup> In the Flemish nationalist narrative, Belgium was simply ranked along with the Spanish, the Austrians and the French in the long list of foreign oppressors abusing Flanders. Belgium, which had been the victim of foreign oppression in the Belgian nationalist narrative, became the victimiser in Flemish nationalist memory.<sup>24</sup> The Flemish-nationalist appropriation of the Belgian past was relatively easy because ever since 1830 patriotic historians had emphasised the Germanic element in Belgium to counter the

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<sup>20</sup> Johannes Koll, "Die Reformation in der Kontroverse. Nation und Protestantismus bei belgischen Katholiken und Liberalen in 19. Jahrhundert", in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Dieter Langewiesche (eds.), *Nation und Religion in Europa: mehrkonfessionelle Gesellschaften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), pp. 99-134.

<sup>21</sup> Jo Tollebeek, "Enthousiasme en evidentie. De negentiende-eeuwse Belgisch-nationale geschiedschrijving", in Jo Tollebeek (ed.) *De ijkmeesters. Opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 57-74, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Wils, *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo*.

<sup>23</sup> Jo Tollebeek, "Enthousiasme en evidentie. De negentiende-eeuwse Belgisch-nationale geschiedschrijving", in Jo Tollebeek (ed.) *De ijkmeesters : opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 57-74, 64-67.

<sup>24</sup> Bruno De Wever, "Van wierook tot gaslucht. De beeldvorming over de Vlaams-nationalistische collaboratie tijdens de Tweede wereldoorlog in de Vlaamse historiografie", in Jan Art and Luc François (eds.), *Docendo discimus, Liber amicorum Romain Van Eenoo* (Gent, 1999), pp. 607-614.

overbearing influence of France. In Henry Pirenne's story, the county of Flanders was the cradle of the *Belgian civilisation*.<sup>25</sup>

In the last three to four decades (coinciding with the devolution process), the Flemish nationalist memory has become dominant in Flanders. Its central tenet is victimisation and discrimination by Belgium. And this interpretation of the past infuses the present. It explains why some Flemish politicians keep claiming that a prosperous region like Flanders - whose standard of living is among the highest in the world - is still oppressed by Belgian and Walloon profiteers. Or that the Flemish are still treated as second-tier citizens in Belgium.

## 2. Nationalism and globalisation

It has been suggested that the divergence of memories in Belgium is part of a wider phenomenon, namely the falling apart of collective national identities in a globalizing world. The rise of the “global village” – to use Marshall McLuhan’s famed 50 year old line<sup>26</sup> – has led some observers to speculate that new transnational identities are structurally undermining more traditional, territorially based forms of belonging like national identity. Are nationalism and national identities in decline as globalisation progresses inevitably and relentlessly? Some scholars have claimed that national identity is losing its psychological significance. They claim that everyday life is less and less framed within a national experience, and increasingly within a global setting due to innovations in mass communication and transport. As of 2011, for instance, there were 2.4 billion internet users in the world.<sup>27</sup> As people are progressively exposed to global information flows, as they consume international products from all over the world, as they travel the continents, as their social networks are no longer limited by geographical factors, as they participate in a global civil society - the most recent example of which is the occupy movement - , as people experience all these globalising effects, their “imagined community” exceeds the boundaries of the nation and they develop “global” or “cosmopolitan” rather than national identities. Or so the globalisation discourse goes.

To my mind, globalisation is one of the most overrated phenomena in terms of its effect on identification. In spite of categorical claims to the contrary, local and national identities are not falling apart in our “global village”. Let me offer 4 remarks to this frequently heard proposition.

First of all, the end of the nation has been proclaimed time and again since the early nineteenth century. But time and again the corpse survived. The cosmopolitan idea that new transport and information technologies (like trains, steam ships, telegrams and telephones) would create one world was a key element of nineteenth century liberal nationalism. US president Ulysses S. Grant, for instance, paid homage to this idea in his second Inaugural Address in 1873. He addressed the fears that some Americans had about the westward expansion of the US diluting American national identity:

"I say here, however, that I do not share in the apprehension held by many as to the danger of governments becoming weakened and destroyed by reason of their extension of territory. Commerce, education, and rapid transit of thought and matter by telegraph and steam have changed all this.

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<sup>25</sup> Tollebeek, 'Enthousiasme en evidentie', 64.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (New York, 1964).

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>. Last accessed 31 October 2013

Rather do I believe that our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required."<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, access to a globalised world culture is very unequal. The current 2.4 billion internet users amount to 32% of the world's population. But while in Europe, North America and Australia more than 60% of the population use the internet, this number is only 27.5% in Asia and 15.6% in Africa.<sup>29</sup> So, the effects of globalisation are uneven across the globe.

Thirdly, there is in fact little hard evidence that globalisation undermines feelings of national belonging.<sup>30</sup> Data from large-scale surveys asking people how proud they are of their nationality do not provide conclusive evidence for this claim. Some have not shown a significant decrease since 1980.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, globalisation may in fact strengthen ideas of national distinctiveness in a number of ways. So-called "global" experiences – travelling abroad, consuming foreign media, buying foreign products through the internet, having international facebook friends – may actually reinforce national boundaries as people are increasingly confronted with what they perceive to be meaningful national cultural differences. This attests to the strength of what Michael Billig has termed "banal nationalism"<sup>32</sup>, meaning a national identity so ingrained that it becomes the lense through which all other realities are focused. Globalisation may also foster nationalism because its perceived cultural homogenisation tends to create strong local counter currents. It may also make diaspora nationalisms more viable. The Internet, for instance, "far from being a 'disembedding' technology" may in fact be a powerful "re-embedding' technology. It can easily be used to strengthen identities which might, in an earlier era of slower and more cumbersome communication [...] have been forgotten or changed beyond recognition by the third or fourth generation."<sup>33</sup>

Fourthly, the fact that people increasingly identify as world citizens does not imply the disappearance of national identity. Identification is no zero-sum game where one identity simply supplants the other. The British historian Linda Colley famously summarised this view in the sartorial metaphor: 'Identities are not like hats.'<sup>34</sup> People can and do wear more than one at a time. Or as Eric Hobsbawm has put it: "Men and women [do] not choose collective identification as they chose shoes, knowing that one [can] only put on one pair at a time."<sup>35</sup> There is no inherent contradiction between nationalism and globalisation, but the debate is often confused because it tends to conflate two phenomena. We need to distinguish between, on the one hand, globalisation as a structural process that increases, intensifies and accelerates communication over a progressively wider range of the globe and, on the other hand, the content that is conveyed over that structure. Or to put it bluntly, the difference between the medium and the message. The content being channelled through the global network is and has always been multiple. But since the Second World War, a global culture – or rather an American Westernised version of global culture – has developed in tandem with increasing globalisation and there is a strong tendency to equate globalisation with this global culture.

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<sup>28</sup> The Avalon project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/grant2.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/grant2.asp). Last accessed 4 November 2013.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>. Last accessed 31 October 2013

<sup>30</sup> See Jai Kwan Jung, "Growing supranational identities in a globalising world? A multilevel analysis of the World Values Surveys", in *European Journal of Political Research*, 47 (2008), pp. 578-609.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, The European Value Survey (EVS) and the World Value Survey (WVS). Question G006.- How proud of nationality <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSIIntegratedEVS/WVSvariables.jsp?Idioma=1>

<sup>32</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism* (London, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> T.H. Eriksen, "Nationalism and the internet", in *Nations and Nationalism*, 13 (2007), pp. 1-17, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*, p. 123.

The ubiquitous Coca-Cola bottle has become the icon of cultural globalisation or coca-colonisation. This image has become so pervasive that it has overshadowed all other cultural notions that have spread over the globe through increased global communication since the end of the eighteenth century. Not only global or cosmopolitan culture, but also Enlightenment ideas, democratic values, individualism, nationalist concepts, communism, fascism, welfare state notions, religious philosophies, youth cultures, etc. etc., all have travelled the global communication networks.

The idea that our current web of communication is global rather than national and that this clearly differentiates our contemporary world from the past, is from a historical point of view debatable. The rise of local, national, continental and global communication networks has always gone hand in hand. Information technology and means of communication have hardly ever been restricted to narrow local or national boundaries. What content was channelled through these networks is a different matter. Globalisation media not only carry cosmopolitan or global identities, but also identities of class, gender, race, region, nation, religion, etc. Which of these identities is adapted, appropriated, resisted or rejected at the local level depends on an almost insurveyable complex of variables. At times and in certain places and milieus national identity may indeed be weakened by the global spread of other competing identity models, but this is by no means a necessary outcome of globalisation, because globalisation can be the conduit of any number of identifications. That being said, the idea of national belonging, nationalism in short, is still one of the most powerful ideas communicated through globalising communication vessels.

In conclusion, diverging memories are both a symptom and a cause of the drifting apart of communities in Belgium, but they are not the result of the challenges globalisation supposedly poses to national identities.

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# “Poor Flanders – Rich Wallonia” (or vice versa)

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Still now, the French-speaking media, when publishing results of a survey, seems surprised by the contrast between the responses of Belgium’s Dutch and French speakers<sup>36</sup>. The existence of a regional or community issue does not yet fully resonate with the French-speaking side of the country even though it has been a reality for nearly half a century. This is partly explained by the relative weakness of the Walloon identity in comparison with the Flemish identity. The Flemish identity is not only more deeply rooted in the Flemish population, but it has also expressed itself more forcefully.

However, Flanders’ historic depth is not significantly different from that of Wallonia. Before Belgium became independent, both Flanders and Wallonia barely existed as distinct territorial entities. They are, of course, rooted in different languages as well as specific economic realities. Within Belgium, the domination of a part of the population over the other has been most often measured in linguistic and/or economic terms.

The evolution of the Walloon movement evidences that both factors – language and economy – are indeed tightly connected. Like the Flemish movement, the Walloon movement does not represent the whole Walloon population but is a sort of “concentrate” of it. Its message has often been visionary and its influence has been determinant for the evolution of the Belgian political institutions, long term.

Walloon associations in a large sense were created and multiplied at the junction between the 19th and 20th centuries. They were contemporaneous with the first laws regarding linguistic equality in Flanders. Deeply patriotic, the Walloon movement expressed its attachment to French-speaking

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<sup>36</sup> The authors would like to warmly thank Marie Hustinx and Lisa Lacroix for their help in the translation of this text.

Belgium. As a general rule, the expression of a Walloon identity arose from the perception of a threat and/or from the nostalgic feeling of loss<sup>37</sup>.

The context of the 1930's led to the emergence of a new Walloon movement. Once again, its renewal can be explained by a turning point in the Belgian linguistic political situation. In 1932, the Parliament definitively opted for the principle of regional unilingualism (Dutch in Flanders, French in Wallonia) and put an end to the hegemony of the French language in Belgium. At the same time Belgium's industries were dealing with the effects of the Great Depression. Four years later, Belgian diplomacy declared the end of its special alliance with France and the restoration of its neutrality status. In Wallonia some people perceived a triple threat:

- the crisis put the social achievements that had been obtained after the war into question,
- the Flemish claims were being heard, and
- Belgium's natural ally was pushed away while the German threat was resurfacing.

The Walloon movement then drifted towards anti-fascist, anti-Flemish or even anti-Belgium ideology, but generally in favor of social progress.

The Walloon movement became even more radical following World War II and the history of the Resistance. During the 1950's economic growth was stagnant in Belgium. It picked up as of the early sixties but that recovery occurred more quickly in Brussels and in Flanders. In 1966, for the first time since Belgium's Independence, Flanders' gross domestic product per capita exceeded that of Wallonia. On top of that, Flanders's demographic expansion was also larger at the time. In 1967, Walloons represented only a little more than 32% of the national population.

After World War II, Wallonia's industrial reconversion failed. As of the fifties coalmines closed one after another. In 1969 only thirty of them were still active. These closures had a direct effect on Walloon employment as thousands of workers were unemployed. They also impacted the other industries in the Southern part of the country indirectly, as those industries had to import large quantities of raw materials.

In the opinion of the leaders of the Walloon movement, this mixed economic trend was partly due to the indifference of the Belgian state towards Wallonia's industrial decline and to the systematic favoring of Flanders. Since the coal crisis of the 1950's, the Belgian financial world was accused of abandoning Wallonia to its fate in order to invest in the Northern part of the country. Due to the Government's and especially Flanders' indifference towards Wallonia's economic decline, a portion of the labor force turned to Walloon nationalistic leaders.

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<sup>37</sup> Chantal Kesteloot, *Au nom de la Wallonie et de Bruxelles français. Les origines du FDF* (Bruxelles, 2004).



It is therefore in that context of economic and demographic decline that the Walloon federalist message is directly rooted. Regionalism seemed to be the only way to address the threat to the Walloons' well-being, or even existence. Its institutions that were officially created in the 1980's appear to be intrinsically related to an industrial past that was, already then, history.

In order to explore the genesis of the stereotypes about « Poor Flanders – Rich Wallonia », we have chosen to analyse some audiovisual programs not only in their context of production but also in their context of reception. Media undoubtedly qualifies as a powerful « agent of memory » in our society.<sup>38</sup> This is true for several reasons:

- First, some authors are of the opinion that media, in particular cinema, is the expression of the mentality of a society.
- Second, as other researchers point out, and this seems most important to us, audiovisual media depends on economic or institutional factors but is nevertheless linked to the society which produces and consumes it. Since the 1960's, television channels and public grants awarded to production of (fiction) films have been split between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities, which makes the role of media institutions in Belgium all the more critical. The independence of both public service broadcasting companies - the RTB (Radio-Télévision Belge) and the BRT (Belgische Radio en Televisie) - occurred ten years before the official creation of the three Communities and Regions<sup>39</sup>. Since the end of the seventies, Belgian public television channels have no longer been linked to the Belgian State, but to the governments of the federalized entities. In our country, the financial parameter has also become more and more important given the multiplication of community institutions (such as het Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds ou Le Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles), and actors who choose to invest into productions of their own region.
- Moreover, several institutions seek to promote Belgian, Walloon or Flemish cultural products and thus to create a “brand image” of the Belgian, Flemish or Walloon identity through the promotion of common culture and history. For instance, the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking versions of the promotional clips of Cinevox (whose purpose is to promote Belgian cinema) show no productions in common.
- As regards reception, media contributes to creating “imagined communities”, as Benedict Anderson defines them, which means that members of such communities know about each other's existence without knowing all their members individually<sup>40</sup>. Given that the distribution is different in both parts of the country, Flemish or French-speaking people constitute two “communities of spectators” that are becoming more and more different, since

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris, 1997 [1950]).

<sup>39</sup> Anne Roekens, “Et des télévisions siamoises naquirent au royaume de Belgique”, in *Médiatiques, Récit et Société*, n°33 (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003), pp. 3-6.

<sup>40</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983).

they watch different movies and programs, which can be Belgian or not. One of the strongest links between media and collective identities is therefore played out in the movie theaters or in front of the television.

- Finally, the analysis of memories linked to the media seems to be relevant in the framework of this session because it allows historians to have a concrete approach regarding collective memories, which, as such, remain elusive, because they are beyond any set description and any forced generalization<sup>41</sup>.

We will focus on the audiovisual memory of the social and economic past of our country. We will talk in particular about the image of a “poor Wallonia” which has been conveyed, for several decades, by a number of movies and television broadcasts in the French-speaking part of Belgium and which has become a kind of “identity card” for Wallonia. What are the events or the pictures which can be considered as “memory imprints” (“lieux de mémoire”) for the construction of a Walloon identity? How and why do these media memories evolve or not evolve? Why are these stereotypes so strong nowadays? Today we will present two examples of treatment by the media that we feel help to answer these questions. First we will study the emblematic movie “Misère au Borinage” released in 1933 by Henri Storck and Joris Ivens. Secondly we will consider television programs related to the great strike of the winter of 1960-1961 by looking at the programs of both French-speaking and Dutch speaking networks.

## **1. Borinage of Henri Storck : from the Manifesto to the Icon<sup>42</sup>**

Henri Storck (1907-1999) was born in Ostend as was James Ensor. Storck was very influenced by Ensor, including at the beginning of his career. In August 1933, he was contacted by two left-of-center cinema enthusiasts from Brussels who were eager to denounce the social impact of the economic crisis in Borinage. Borinage is an area in the Walloon province of Hainaut where the economy was founded on coal mining. To address their request, Storck joined forces with Joris Ivens, a Dutch film-maker and communist activist, who specifically came back from USSR for this venture.

From the beginning, the goal was not to make a descriptive documentary film. The directorial team sought to build a Manifesto against capitalist society, the victims of which were the workers in Borinage. They were looking for poverty. They didn't find it in Borinage households but in the area of Mons. They were deeply moved by the workers' struggles, by the revolutionary fervour and by the ardent opposition to capitalist forces. In Borinage, they only saw weak signs of this agitation. The

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<sup>41</sup> Sophie Moirand, *Les discours de la presse quotidienne. Observer, analyser, comprendre* (Paris, 2008) pp.149.

<sup>42</sup> Anne Roekens et Axel Tixhon (éd.), *Cinéma et crise(s) économique(s). Esquisse d'une cinématographie wallonne* (Namur, 2011).

team consisted of 100% communist activists and did its utmost to (re)create the revolution in Borinage by piecing together scenes of workers' revolts in Mons. Inspired by works of Zola, Marx, Van Gogh and Ensor whom they fervently admired, they carried out their myth of Borinage. They didn't make a realistic movie but a true work of fiction. The atmosphere of the film itself suggests some revolutionary action that seems to take place in secret and even under threat of physical violence by the police. Storck and Ivens frequently confessed their excitement during the shooting, their impression to be doing something more than a simple film, to shake up habits and norms.

When the film was released, reactions varied based on newspaper editorial tendencies<sup>43</sup>. However, except for some belatedly complimentary articles from communist newspapers, the critics were rather unanimous in condemning the roughness of the documentary style and especially the too apparent influence of Marxist ideology.

Moreover, *Borinage* never enjoyed true commercial distribution. Storck and Ivens blamed this failure on possible censorship. The fact that the film was strongly ideological and the film-makers' esthetic choices probably serve as a better explanation for the poor impact of the film when it was first released. The audience, including people from the working classes, were rather willing to enjoy Hollywood's movies and especially to see « talking films », that were becoming more accessible.

Until the end of the fifties the film was relatively unknown. However, thereafter several film-makers were struck by how topical Storck's film was in light of the decline of the Walloon industry. Paul Meyer (*Déjà s'envole la fleur maigre*, 1960) and Frans Buyens (*Combattre pour nos droits*, 1961) expressly asserted the advent of a « social cinema » created by Ivens and Storck's film<sup>44</sup>. Storck took on this paternity and made a new version of *Borinage* by editing the film slightly and more importantly, by adding a commentary written by Jean Fonteyne and read by André Thirifays. In 1963 the film could then enjoy a second birth with a new identity, *Poverty in Borinage (Misère au Borinage)* from Henri Storck.

While historians were becoming interested in the advent of the Belgian cinema, the “documentary” film *Misère au Borinage* was unanimously held up as the first stone of this cultural edifice, and Henri Storck as the spiritual father of the Belgian moviemakers. As of the 1970's onwards, there have been a growing number of tributes and references to his work.

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<sup>43</sup> Laura Vichi, *Henri Storck. De l'avant-garde au documentaire social* (Crisnée, 2002), p. 64-65.

<sup>44</sup> Chantal Van Den Heuvel, “Itinéraires du cinéma de Belgique des origines à nos jours” in *Revue belge du cinéma*, n°2, 1982, p. 23.

*Misère au Borinage* has become the symbol of the industrial past of a whole area, of the suffering of several generations of Walloons and of their capacity to endure their misfortunes and to carry on the struggle. This evolution is a remarkable reversal of the situation. The film from 1933 presented Borinage as a true communist bastion and as hell on earth. For the public and critics this representation did not correspond to reality, it proposed a vision that was too partial, and presented images of a reality « that could not exist in Belgium ». Half a century later the film had acquired the status of a « social documentary », of « reality cinema ». It then seemed faithful to the situation of a dying and abandoned Wallonia. During the past fifty years a number of documentaries have proposed new interpretations of the film and yearned to « rediscover » Storck's Borinage. On the other hand, a generation of Walloon film-makers continues to proclaim the heritage of a reality social cinema that they necessarily connect to the Walloon industrial venue. A mental décor continuously updated...

## 2. Diverging televisual memories about the great strike ?

The great strike of the winter of 1960-1961 is a relatively complex event within Belgium's modern history. At its origin, its purpose was to protest against the austerity legislation referred to as "unique law", which was an initiative from the Eyskens government in a period of manufacturing recession and of economic trouble in the aftermath of Congo's hasty independence. On December 20th, 1960, while the unique law bill was being discussed at the Parliament, Walloon and Flemish public workers and employees started a spontaneous strike that quickly spread to the industrial areas of Liège, Charleroi and to the port of Antwerp. Socialist and Christian trade unions lost control of their base and did not issue any order to strike. Three days later, the Walloon segment of the socialist trade union led by André Renard created a « coordination committee of the Walloon segment of the Belgian General Federation of Labour (ABVV-FGTB) » that would take charge of the strike and would demand not only the withdrawal of the unique law but also a greater regional autonomy in terms of economic policy. The cumulative effect of the federalist and social claims, and the tensions between a more contentious Walloon movement and a more moderate Flemish tendency make it a symbolic development in the evolution of the Belgian politics and institutions.<sup>45</sup>

It is true that the issue of the television treatment of the events of the winter of 1960-1961 was already real at the time when those took place. This is especially the case as the great strike broke out a few months after the official split of the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian televisions. From that moment on, both focused on their own region. However we will consider subsequent treatment by

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<sup>45</sup> About the great strike of the winter of 1960-1961, see : Paul Delforge, *Grève contre la loi unique (hiver '60-'61) et mouvement wallon*, in Paul Delforge, Philippe Destatte, Micheline Libon, *Encyclopédie du mouvement wallon*, t. II (Liège, 2000) pp.755-759. Valmy Féaux, *Cinq semaines de lutte sociale* (Bruxelles, 1963). Jean Neuville, Jacques Yerna, *Le choc de l'hiver '60-'61. Les grèves contre la Loi unique* (Bruxelles, 1990), p.108-112.

the media with a view to tackle the subject of televisual memory of that event. The question is then to know when and why television programs bring up the memory of the winter of 1960-1961 and to ask ourselves about possible “diverging media memories” between the two main public television networks in the country. Giving an unequivocal response to these questions is not easy. This is true in part because researching television programs is very difficult for historians who, currently, don’t have a way to be certain that the summary of the mentions of an event in a network’s programming is complete. Also, the circumstances in which the memory of the great strike has been brought up vary tremendously and it is very delicate to compare a broadcast that was fully devoted to the events with a news report that only cites the event or shows some archival extract of a few seconds. Nevertheless, review of sixty plus televisual programs allow us at least to perceive tendencies and to open up analysis.

With regard to the divergences between the programming policies of the French-speaking RTBF and the Dutch-speaking VRT, the RTBF demonstrated its special interest for this event by devoting several entire broadcasts to the event, including for the 40<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the event. The VRT on the other hand, twice distributed programs intended to provide a retrospective of the political career of Gaston Eyskens who was prime minister during the winter of 1960-1961. The point of view adopted by these two Flemish programs (in 1974 and in 1998) appears to be marginal compared to all the programs we reviewed. They presented the great strike as a personal challenge in Gaston Eyskens’ life and they underscored his strength and determination when he refused, according to his own terms, to have “democracy settled in the street rather than in the parliament”.

If this corroborates the hypothesis of a certain memorial divergence between both public television networks, it should still be noted that the VRT and the RTBF have interpreted this historic event generally in the same way. Here we have, on the one hand, historic broadcasts relating to a wide range of topics (such as the evolution of socialism, of unions, of television, of the police or the life of King Baudouin), and on the other hand, programs that are specifically devoted to Walloon identity or to Walloon struggle. These main two messages conveyed quite different visions of the event:

- A first tendency has consisted of presenting the great strike first and foremost as a social movement, and accessorially as a Walloon battle, or even to oppose or get rid of the notion that it could be a Walloon battle.
- In contrast, the other great tendency has been to rank the events of the winter of 1960-1961 among the Walloon «memory imprints» (*lieux de mémoire*) and to confer a strong regional flavor to events. Whether this second attitude has been shown by the RTBF or the VRT, the great strike has then been presented as a « birth certificate of the Walloon movement » and André Renard, as the figurehead of the Walloon battle.

It makes sense that Flemish and French-speaking media messages have posited themselves differently within each of these tendencies: in the first case, union representatives or socialist leaders have had a comparable, positive vision of this important mobilization of workers and, on both sides of the

linguistic border, tended to identify themselves with this federative historic event. Several Flemish programs have thus watered down the Walloon character of the general strike. As concerns the second tendency however, in which the strike was presented as a pivotal moment in Walloon affirmation, Flemish programs have taken a much more distant view than certain Walloon positions conveyed by the French-speaking network. At the end of the day, the variation in approach with regard to the memory of the great strike depends as much on the community point of view of the channel as on the set of themes chosen by a program and above all upon the ideological and political positions of the journalists and people interviewed. In other words, while there have been memorial divergences regarding the level of evocation of the great strike in Flanders and in Wallonia, these divergences have not followed exclusively or automatically the linguistic border. There have also been other divides, among which are the critical tensions between left and right.<sup>46</sup>

As a conclusion to this presentation relating to a media construction of the image of a « poor Wallonia », this stereotype or memory imprint, created and fed by cinema and television, is still particularly strong in both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking media. To the point that, when journalists need to transmit positive indicators about Walloon economy, they often can't refrain from pointing out how surprising and unexpected such information is.

From a historic point of view, it is noteworthy that this image which has first been exploited by the Walloon movement to increase awareness regarding a « specifically Walloon issue » has now become a sort of burden that Wallonia cannot truly get rid of, even if it no longer totally fits regional realities. The message is only very little concerned about the reality of its object. Whether it regards the vision of Borinage in 1933 or that of the Great Strike of 1960-61, the stake is to give substance to a fragile identity. Long term, the Walloon identity has built itself against threats coming mostly from Flanders. At the same time, the Flemish identity was also building itself vis-à-vis a French-speaking oppression. The divergent images thus meet to present either Belgian region in a similar way: a perpetual victim of its nearby neighbor, a little brother continuously abused by his older sibling, a fragile spouse tortured by her brutal husband ... The vagaries of economic history and the authors of messages determine which of the Walloon, the Flemish or the Bruxellois is on the winning side!

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<sup>46</sup> Anne Roekens, *La grande grève sur petit écran : quand, pourquoi et comment les programmes de la RTB(F) évoquent-ils l'hiver 1960-1961 (1960-2010) ?*, in Luc Courtois, Bernard Francq and Pierre Tilly, *Mémoire de la Grande grève (hiver 1960-61 en Belgique)* (Bruxelles, 2012), pp. 312-324.

# Peace is good, war is bad.

## Reflections on Belgian commemorations and politics of memory

Nico Wouters  
Cegesoma

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The impressive amount of political, cultural and financial power which is being mobilized in 2014-18 to commemorate the First World War in Belgium, will make this a game changer event for the way politics of memory are conducted in this country. It also offers interesting reflections on European politics of memory in general; their impact and the way they might be analyzed. In this text, I will tackle three interrelated subjects in three separate parts: 1) assess current Belgian WWI-commemorations, 2) reflect on Belgian politics of memory and 3) use Belgium to open up a general reflection on politics of memory in Europe.

### 1. Belgian WWI-commemorations<sup>47</sup>

Flanders was the first region internationally to present itself on the map of the commemoration of WWI. It did so, clearly because it recognised both the political and the commercial potential of branding Flemish identity based on the notion of international peace and human rights. The francophone community was quick to follow, mostly as a reaction to Flanders, from a strong feeling of competition. Its commemoration programme also found its main inspiration in current societal values: solidarity, democratic citizenship, individual freedom etc. The Brussels Capital-Region and the Belgian federal state have since then followed suit with their own commemoration programmes (and a politics of visibility), probably from the exact same competitive strategy. So 2014 has created an interesting situation of truly competing politics of memory in Belgium around the same large scale event.

The political-institutional reality being what it is, these three competing politics of memory develop in different contexts and have different angles, focal points and accents. However, are they truly that different in terms of values and underlying goals?

The Flemish model seems characterised by a neo-liberal approach both in terms of their managerial approach to its project frameworks as well as the dominance of commercial tourist interests. One of the reasons for this is probably that the political father of the commemoration programme is the Flemish nationalist politician Geert Bourgeois, who was vice-president of the Flemish government

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<sup>47</sup> This contribution is mostly based on: Nico Wouters, "Poor Little Belgium?" Flemish- and French-language politics of memory (2014-2018)" in *Journal of Belgian History*, 42 (2012), 4, pp. 192-199 (also published in Dutch in *BTNG/RBHC*, 42 (2012), 2-3, pp. 198-205).

when the programme was being conceived. He also holds ministerial responsibility over Tourism and Heritage Policy and lives in the *Westhoek*, conspicuously located in the heartland of WWI-tourism. One might argue that finally, WWI has now come to fill the gap left by WWII in Flanders. The apologetic reading of Flemish nationalist collaboration during WWII and the legacy of occupation - dominant for many decades – has lost its political usability. Now, the ‘other war’ fills the gap. WWI offers more usable angels to legitimate current Flemish nation-building than pro Nazi collaboration during WWII.

In Francophone Belgium, there is an entirely different policy context. The legal and political groundwork for commemoration policies is the *décret mémoire*. This essential memorial legislation takes the ‘duty to remember’ as its ideological point of reference. There is no Flemish equivalent of this decree as such. The Belgian state also lacks a clear ideological reference point other than to try and present itself as the overlapping national framework. It avoids any explicit opposition to both “regional” politics of memory, but rather tries to embrace both in order to create the image of national synergy. This, by the way, might be a rather intelligent strategy on the longer term.

Despite these political and institutional differences, the underlying similarities prevail. I would argue that these differences in politics of memory are superficial and a question of political semantics. In stark contrast to the debates on the legacy of WWII in Belgium, current Flemish and Francophone memory constructions around WWI do not have any real intellectual content. Debates on the legacy of WWII were actually about something. They dealt with fundamental different interpretations of the past: about how to evaluate pro Nazi collaboration, post-war repression, the politics of the lesser evil by indigenous elite (their role played in the Jewish persecution for example), the implementation of neo-corporatism after 1945 etc.

Unfortunately, such issues are frankly completely absent when it concerns WWI. Current commemorations are not about fundamental differences in interpretations of war and its longer term impact. In fact, everybody agrees on what seems to be the only important basic interpretation of WWI: that it was a pointless war in which many people died for no good reason and we would do better to avoid such a thing in the future. The political and cultural narratives of the different Belgian communities are completely interchangeable. Both commemorations are regional exponents of global memorial regimes. They are pendants of three global trends 1) the transnational human rights culture, 2) the preference for an emotional take to history rather than an intellectual one (the idea we have “to experience the past” to truly bridge the gap between present and past) and 3) a symbiotic cooperation between a tourist industry and political agendas.

This creates a brand-approach to history. Safe and usable messages are turned into consensual identities on which we can all agree. All in all, international peace and democratic citizenship are the basic underlying narratives for the different commemoration programmes in Belgium.

This creates at least one blatant contradiction. Flanders and Wallonia both try to use WWI for purpose of nation-building: to construct or consolidate specific national identities. It is remarkable they chose to ground this national identity in one of the most non-specific global messages imaginable: international peace and democratic citizenship. One could argue that the remarkably strong attempts at using WWI to create this Flemish or Francophone brand-identity in fact proves the exact opposite: a lack of insight on how to define one’s own political community and set it apart from the other one.



## 2. Belgian politics of memory after 1918: the chicken or the egg

The context of WWI-commemorations revitalizes old debates on the disintegration of the Belgian state and the failure of the Belgian nation. Belgium is, in fact, a particularly useful case to study politics of memory and draw conclusions on success or failure of such policies on a more general, European level.

The lack of a cohesive collective memory-based identity is considered as a consistent problem for the Belgium nation and state. A commonly held view is that the failure to create such an identity during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the causes for Belgium's slow disintegration after the 1960s. There is some obvious truth in this (one simply has to look at the current state of Belgium).

However, the debate is ongoing where the root causes are concerned. This remains a difficult debate.<sup>48</sup> One of the factors that add to the complexity, is the consistent confusion on cause and effect, which in turn is partly caused by a terminological confusion. Belgium the “weak capacity state” and Belgium “the weak nation” are still often equated with each other or even used as synonyms. However: we would do well to separate both. Did the Belgian politics of memory fail because of the weak groundwork of nationhood? Or was it the other way around: did the Belgian nation fail because of the weak capacity state institutions? At first glance, this might seem a moot question, similar to the proverbial issue of the chicken-or-the-egg. However, its answer is crucial because it can help us understand why exactly it is nations and states fail while others persevere.

The “politics of memory” is a broad concept which contains a large repertoire of tropes and power relations between the many different actors in state systems. However, it mainly refers to institutional memory, the “(...) elite constructions of memory” that shape the memories of groups and individuals, the “(...) efforts by political elites, their supporters, and their opponents to construct meanings of the past and propagate them more widely or impose them on other members of society”.<sup>49</sup> As such, they are somewhat opposed to local memories and specific memory communities.

Politics of memory are especially pertinent when it concerns war, occupation and dictatorship, because “(...) the state remains relevant both as the carrier of the brunt of warfare (...) and as a major producer and choreographer of commemoration”.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, wars/dictatorships have been the strongest incentives for states to develop strong politics of memories. After wars/dictatorships damaged nationhoods are always in need of repair while state institutions have often used these periods to enhance their grip on different instruments (propaganda, media, education, cultural policies etc).

The first decade after the First World War is probably the most interesting period to study when it comes to Belgian politics of memory. Theoretically, WWI created the ideal starting point to institutionalize Belgian patriotism or even nationalism, through a state sponsored politics of memory. Through its fundamental political and social reform after 1918, the Belgian nation could have made an essential restart as well. The international context also favored this. And indeed, the Belgian state

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<sup>48</sup> Bruno De Wever and Chantal Kesteloot, ‘When was the end of Belgium: explanations of the past’, in *Journal of Belgian History*, 42 (2012), 4, pp. 218-234

<sup>49</sup>, R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner and C. Fogu, *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (London, 2006), pp. 10-13.

<sup>50</sup> Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 38.

was able to launch an impressive memorial cult, of which the iconic Soldier-King Albert I was just one building block.<sup>51</sup>

However, paradoxically, WWI in reality marked the beginning of the end of the Belgian state. The failure to pacify anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism would quickly become the single most important cause for the disintegration of Belgium decades later. What exactly does this imply for the patriotic politics of memory conducted by the Belgian state after 1919? Historians Benvindo and Majerus paint a picture of a weak state-sponsored Belgian politics of memory during the 1920s. Despite powerful elements and tropes – the cult of the Unknown Soldier and the soldier-King Albert I – a strong central politics of memory failed to launch. Quickly, the focal point of memorial activity was placed on the local level, and with specific memory communities (not Belgian soldiers but Flemish martyrs for example). Both historians even see “a true separation” (“*un véritable divorce*”) between official national memory and local memories after 1925, the signing of the Locarno pact.<sup>52</sup> As Benvindo and Majerus write: “On a more structural level, the “laissez-faire” of the Belgian state on the domain of commemoration and the openings this created for initiatives from below would allow a Flemish counter war -memory to emerge”.<sup>53</sup> It remains unclear whether this was a conscious political strategy from the Belgian side, or simply an acknowledgement of a lack of organizational capacity. In their seminal work on Belgian war-memories, historians Benvindo and Peeters suggest that this failure to create national unity based on the collective trauma of WWI foreshadowed the failure to create one homogeneous national memory around the legacy of the Second World War after 1945. When post-1945 memories of WWII were superimposed on an already existing, pre-established WWI-landscape of memory, the proverbial cracks were already present in the commemorative metal.<sup>54</sup> In another article, both historians argue that the fragmentation of war-memories that emerged after 1951 was characteristic for the Belgian pacification model of state consensus. Delegating certain responsibilities and regulating powers to certain subservient segments of society is typical in socio-economic sectors, and it seems applicable to cultural and memorial policies as well. The Belgian state withdrew from memorial organization after 1945, leaving the domain largely to for self-organizing memory communities.<sup>55</sup>

This sounds perfectly logic, but when tackling the root causes for this gradual failure after 1925 (which was then confirmed after 1945) we are confronted with one of the essential problem underlying the entire field of memory studies: the fundamental lack of methodological tools to measure the *impact* of politics of memory.<sup>56</sup> When scholars study *national* politics of memory they by necessity mostly look at the surface first: the monuments, the publications, the honorary medals, the schoolbooks, the commemorative rituals etc. These approaches primarily measure state efforts: elite-agency, the top-down capacities and the power relations that cause certain memories to become

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<sup>51</sup> Laurence van Ypersele, « Héros, martyrs et traîtres : les fractures de la Belgique libérée », in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau et Christophe Prochasson (dir.), *Sortir de la Grande Guerre : le monde et l'après-1918* (Paris, 2008), pp. 213-236

<sup>52</sup> Bruno Benvindo and Benoit Majerus, *Histories and memories: narrating the Great War in Belgium, 1914-2014*, in C. Cornelißen and A. Weinrich (eds.), *Writing War History. Hundred Years of Historiography on the First World War* (New York, to be published).

<sup>53</sup> «Plus durablement, le ‘laissez-faire’ de l’État belge en matière de commémoration et la place qu’il laisse aux initiatives ‘d’en bas’ vont permettre l’émergence d’une contro-mémoire flamme de la guerre». Ibidem.

<sup>54</sup> Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Les décombres de la guerre : Mémoires belges en conflit, 1945-2010*, (Waterloo, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> They further elaborate this in their introduction: Benvindo Bruno and Peeters Evert, ‘La mémoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale comme régulation sociale: une perspective belge’, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 42 (2012) 2/3, pp. 10-20.

<sup>56</sup> ‘(...) it is notoriously difficult to determine the actual effects of attempts to influence public opinion even in micro cases’. R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner and C. Fogu, *The Politics of Memory*, 10.

dominant in the public sphere. There is a real analytical danger of taking public visibility and dominant presence at face value. Such analysis might very well become a closed circle analysis wherein “(...) the anecdote is presented as proof of reception”.<sup>57</sup> The fact elites were able to place certain memories or remembrances dominantly present in the public sphere, does not necessarily mean that these memories and related identities were in any way “successfully received”. What does massive turnout during the 1920s at national commemorative rituals actually mean? Does it tell us something about the way “Belgian identity” was interiorized by the local citizens or does it tell us something about the elite capacity to organize state-sponsored rituals?

### 3. Final general reflection: do strong nations need strong states?

Current WWI commemorations have to be regarded in the longer term perspective of the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century politics of memory. All European states were confronted with war, occupation and/or dictatorship during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and had to develop strategies to repair collective traumas and damaged nationhoods. Belgium is an interesting case exactly because it seems to be a textbook case of a weak state with a failed national politics of memory.<sup>58</sup> It is especially interesting to compare it to those European states which are often considered to have succeeded in a strong politics of memory after 1945.<sup>59</sup>

How and why did these states succeed where Belgium failed? Textbook 1945 examples are the Netherlands and France, while Spain after 1974 – and to a lesser extent Hungary and Poland after 1989 – might also be considered later examples. Despite all the differences, these states did succeed in what could call a successful politics of memory. The essential differences between these cases make it difficult to come up with general, universal mechanisms of a “successful politics of memory”. The latter needs to be clearly defined, because it largely depends on what specific aims states set for themselves. To me, in general terms, a state-sponsored politics of memory is successful when it is able to create a memory regime with a durable resilience against dissident group-specific narratives. Such dissident (local or group-specific) memories do exist of course, but they lack the capacity to transcend the confounds of their own local or group-specific borders. They can erupt to cause a brief societal debate, but fail to threaten the dominant national memorial consensus. Such dissident narratives simply seem to drop dead after a certain amount of time.<sup>60</sup>

Some basic prerequisites are necessary for such a successful national politics of memory. There needs to be a broad and durable political consensus around one unifying narrative. This unifying narrative needs to be inclusive and therefore ignore the specificities of separate victim groups (simply because the entire nation as a separate entity needs to be martyred for example). Also, there is always the (implicit or explicit) political goal to draw a clear line between present and past. This means an organized politics of silence around large parts of the traumatic history in question is often more essential than any memorial activity. The myths of the self-liberating France (ignoring the French

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<sup>57</sup> Alon Confino, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method’, in *The American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), 5, p. 1396.

<sup>58</sup> Admittedly, my analysis rests primarily on post-1945 cases. These cases are ideal in many ways, because the contrast between Belgium and other countries becomes particularly clear. Nico Wouters (ed.), *Transitional Justice and Memory in Europa (1945-2013)* (Antwerp/Oxford), 2014.

<sup>59</sup> The classic, seminal work remains: Lagrou Pieter, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> Nico Wouters (ed.), *Transitional Justice and Memory*, pp. 369-413.

civil war of 1944) or that of the Dutch nation of resisters (ignoring the politics of presence by Dutch elites) are clear examples. Spain is an example from another context. The negotiated transition to democracy after 1974 was based on a political consensus around one unifying narrative. This narrative was aimed at national unification and normalization, meaning the Spanish nation in all its ideological diversity had to prove its capacity to create unity (and reconciliation) through democratic consensus building. A clear break with the dictatorial past (and the civil war) was needed. This is why a politics of silence went hand in hand with a general amnesty for perpetrators. The politics of memory of the new Spanish democratic state were careful and strategic; slowly replacing the Francoist national memory sites and tropes. Yet again in an entirely different context, Polish transition after 1989 also went hand in hand with the clear attempt at unifying and reconciling the Polish nation. A prudent series of court cases went hand in hand with a careful politics of memory to create a rupture with the communist past. As Tadeusz Mazowiecki (the first democratically elected Polish president after 1989) said before Polish parliament, he wanted to draw a "(...) thick line between today and the past". This was really not that different from Gaullism, which also meant the French nation opted to pretend the French civil war of 1943-44 had never taken place.

Successful politics of memory were therefore much more politics of forgetting. They were meant to create a stable groundwork for future societies rather than addressing the past. The key to success was always the political consensus with the major national parties around a founding myth. The left and the right of the political spectrum needed to recognise their separate interests in the preservation of such memorial regime. This, of course, was what was completely lacking in Belgium in 1945. From the moment one political group starts to question the consensus however, and starts using the legacy of war/dictatorship to settle current political scores, the nation quickly becomes a battlefield of competing memories.

What these cases clearly show is that even a successful politics of memory did not neutralize dissident memories. On the contrary, fragmentation was there right under the surface. It is remarkable to see how many occupation-related memory incidents and public debates erupted during the 1950s in France and the Netherlands. In fact, such a strong consensus never seems to last for longer than 30 years. Once certain factors converge, a memorial regime – even a seemingly strong one – can quickly crumble. The most important factors which need to converge are: 1) a generational shift in which the elite groups that are still connected with the war/dictatorial past are on the verge of being replaced, 2) a well-organized network of civil society agency (of victim-groups for example), and 3) a heated political struggle (mostly between the left and the right).

After the death of De Gaulle, the memorial regime associated with his name quickly crumbled. What followed, was an elongated phase of continued memory irruptions<sup>61</sup> and gradually, new initiatives in many fields: public history, remembrances, and even new trials (in France, the most notorious are certainly the trials against Milice member Paul Touvier in 1994 and the trial of Maurice Papon in 1997). These new trials were as much about creating new memorial paradigms than about creating legal truth.

What this perhaps shows us, is that the bodged Belgian politics of memory after 1918 and 1945 were not really the great exception on the long run. They are simply the most explicit and early example of

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<sup>61</sup> A term coined from: A. WILDE, 'Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile's Transition to Democracy' in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 31 (2000), 2, pp. 473-500.

a European pattern. The question why Belgian politics of memory after 1945 failed where French succeeded, might make us blind for the much bigger similarities over the long run.

The deeper scholarly problem related to institutional memory is that of the relationship between state and institutional capacity to construct memory on the one hand, and a bottom up socio-cultural processes on the other. Indeed, I would like to stress that top-down collective memory construction in a liberal parliamentary democracy should not be overestimated. Powerful as this national institutional memory might be, it is clearly far from all-controlling. Politics of memory in a democratic, liberal culture can not create “effective mental shackles”.<sup>62</sup> It follows social and political dynamics and can sometimes put them to good use, but it is not the most active force in shaping them.<sup>63</sup> This means that rather than considering the weakness of the Belgian state I believe it is much more viable to look at underlying social and political issues already emerging in 19<sup>th</sup> century to explain the disintegration of the Belgian nation-state after 1945.

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<sup>62</sup>, T R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner and C. Fogu *The Politics of Memory*, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> It might, in this regard, also be interesting to look at the failure of a true European politics of memory, certainly now with regard to WWI.

# WWI a new battlefield?

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Is the preparation of the commemorations for the centenary of the Great War a new trench war, this time of the communities, as present-day journalists like to say ? I doubt it. Conversely, it is perhaps a new battlefield between historians for whom their social role is interpreted in a divergent way.

When a government, such as the Flemish government, starts to prepare the commemorations without historians from the academic world, criticisms pour in from all sides, the press is indignant and scientists denounce the politicians and their wish to exploit the past, etc. But when a government, such as the Walloon government, entrusts the preparation of the commemorations to a steering group half of which consists of scientists and half of scholastics and representatives from civil society, the scientists are criticised, mostly by their peers. The question of the historian's social role with regard to the commemorations of the centenary of 1914-1918 is important and is the subject of debate.

For some, the historian has to keep a critical distance vis-à-vis his subject. His role is therefore to analyse the commemorations, the political choices that were made and the implementation of these choices. It is also about querying the players in these commemorations, the power games, the financing, the pursued aims, and the impact on the various audiences which are addressed. In short, the historian does not intervene, but deciphers what happens.

For others the historian has to become involved so that memory is not left to its own devices, to record the memory, and to transmit a message that is in line with present historical knowledge. But this means that the historian takes the risk of himself being exploited by politics. For in the end it is precisely the political world which takes the decisions and releases the budgets.

I do not know who is right. Undoubtedly we should wait for the end of the commemorations to perform a profound analysis of what will have happened. Nevertheless, up to now the historians who have been involved alongside the Walloon political world have not been under any pressure. Of course the decisions taken, especially on the budget front, are not those the scientists dreamt of. And naturally how the commemorations unfold will not be exactly according to their wishes. The fact remains that the much-feared exploitation does not seem to have occurred. The more so since scientists always have the possibility of resigning without being affected by it.

Since commemorations which have not taken place yet cannot be analysed, let us trace the preparations as they occurred in Francophone Belgium.

In December 2010, Prime Minister Rudi Demotte expressed the desire that a work group would tackle the commemorations of World War I in French-speaking Belgium (Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation). This group, established in March 2011, consisted of scientists, cabinet members concerned and representatives of the social world. It had to be chaired by a historian. Professor L. van Ypersele was appointed to chair this group, which had to submit a report in the month of June. In three months the work group brought out the major values that should underpin the commemorations, the desired supporting keynotes, and the types of projects to be highlighted.

The first question addressed was to ascertain whether it concerned an official commemoration. The historians called to mind that commemorating is remembering past events together, as they create an identity, a “being together” and a connection to the world. Not everything and not anything whatsoever is commemorated. As regards the official memory, there is well and truly a choice of the past that implies memory politics: by recalling the past, values for the present are asserted. However, this political choice cannot be arbitrary nor in contradiction with present historical knowledge. Memory can in fact be used and abused. Therefore there is a real need to record memory, against the abuses of memory left to its own devices. Incidentally, from this point of view the Prime Minister wanted the significant presence of scientists in this work group. Also from this viewpoint the historians in question decided to be involved in the commemorative process in the service of society. For them it really meant ensuring the historicity of what politics would choose to commemorate. It was also a matter of making public the choices made by politicians.

The second question, which followed on from the first one, was to single out the values one wanted to bring to the fore and which are testified to by Belgium’s historical past in 1914-1918. Straightaway a paradox had to be noted: World War I is an event that involved all of Belgium, at the time a unitarian state. It was precisely Belgian neutrality which had been violated; it was Walloon and Flemish towns and villages that underwent the massacres of civilians, it was the Belgian army that defended the country at the Yser, it was virtually the entire territory that experienced the occupation. Therefore French-speaking Belgium does not have any particular experience vis-à-vis Flanders. And thus it is this national past that has to be commemorated. Subsequently the major themes concerning us were studied: the great battles of August 1914 (Liège, Namur, Mons and Charleroi), the small part of the front at Comines-Ploegsteert (where Churchill was to look for redemption after the Dardanelles failure, from the end of December 1915 to May 1916), the martyr towns (Visé, Dinant, Tamines, Andenne, southern Luxembourg, etc.) and in the first place the occupation (with its food problems, the international aid, the resistance, the deportations). It appeared that this aspect was to be the focus of the Francophone commemorations, for in many respects this experience of the occupation presaged the violence against civilians which were to characterise the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These thematic differences are the bearers of values which are now still claimed, because they are still at the heart of Belgian Francophone identity: attachment to the country and to independence, the attachment to fundamental freedoms, respect for human rights and international law, solidarity in times of shortage, resistance to oppression. In other words, the notion of “peace”, which is the core of the commemorations in Flanders, is not taken over as such in Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

But even on the Francophone side, peace will be an underlying value to the various commemorations. Nevertheless the Great War mainly invites thinking about the content of the peace

that one wants to celebrate. Peace is in fact a very consensual and politically correct value: the whole world wants peace, individually (leave me alone) and collectively (let us live in peace). But this value has been used falsely and throughout, by democracies as well as by totalitarian regimes. Hitler himself claimed to want peace in Europe and just think of the peace provided by Ben Ali or Gaddafi. Even during the Great War the front soldiers as well as their families actually only dreamt of peace, but a victorious peace (especially from 1917 on, when the sacrifices made at Verdun or at the Somme could no longer result in a simple peace of *statu quo ante bellum*). At the end of the war the dominant feeling was that of a bereaved victory, and support for the glorification of the heroes who died so that the homeland would live on and for the stigmatisation of Germany as the cause of all the misfortunes. Only with the Locarno Treaties of 1925 in the context of international detente the vision of the war was to change slightly and pacifism developed. From then on, it was the war as such that was singled out. Thus the myth of the absurd war which victimised the whole world took off and peace became an absolute value. Yet from the second half of the 1930s the pacifist movements became increasingly problematic: how to fight for peace and against fascism at the same time? At the Munich Conference in 1938, the desire to make the Great War into “the war to end all wars” remained present: the democracies wanted to save the peace at all cost and finally accepted all of Hitler’s demands. But peace was not saved... And World War II was to be even more total than World War I. The steering committee assessed that this very bleak 20<sup>th</sup> century could not be ignored. It is not a question of learning from history, but to use history to think about the content of a desirable peace. Peace is a supreme and not an absolute value: in the sense that peace is a value that has to be underpinned by other fundamental values without which it is not desirable. The commemorations of 1914-1918 would have to be the occasion for this reflection.

From the Francophone side, it therefore concerned organising and instilling a certain coherence in the multiple initiatives that came from the grass roots (provinces, towns and various associations). It also involved ensuring a real historical context of the memory by means of the presence of historians specialised in the Great War and/or memory. The pursued goals were, as in Flanders and elsewhere, heritage enhancement (inventory, restoration, creation of interpretation centres), transmission of the memory and the values underpinning it vis-à-vis young people (education) and the public at large (RTBF, exhibitions), developing memory tourism (route, interpretation centres, etc.) and international awareness of Francophone Belgium (Liège and Namur and Charleroi for France, Mons and Ploegsteert for the *Commonwealth*: event organisation).

Currently a whole series of projects are supported by Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

There are general projects intended for the general public:

- A series of three 90-minute broadcasts by the RTBF on “Belgium in World War I”
- Two extensive exhibitions on the same subject, one in Brussels, the other in Liège
- A publication by IPW [Institut du Patrimoine wallon] on the memorial heritage of the Great War in Wallonia (just out)
- A sculpture competition, with the three best entries placed on public exhibition

There are also general projects intended for schools:

- Creation of educational files for primary and secondary schools on the origins of the conflict, the war of movement, the massacres of civilians, life at the front, occupied Belgium, and the consequences of the war.



- A photo competition resulting in the exhibition of the best entries in January 2014.

We will add a great fundamental research project on “the impact of World War I on the development of International Law: the case of Belgian lawyers” which involved three doctoral candidates (ULB, ULg and FUSL-UCL)

A series of special projects is supported as a result of two calls for projects.

- Twenty-three projects originating from all over Wallonia and Brussels are supported by primary and secondary schools and non-profit organisations. It concerns visits to the symbolic places such as Loncin or Dinant, the interpretation centre in Ploegsteert or the Saint Symphorien cemetery in Mons, but also the appropriation of the local past through rediscovery of the local memorial heritage (monuments, plaques, street names) or via documentary research on former pupils of the school or inhabitants of the village who experienced the 1914-1918 war. These projects led to the creation of pedestrian routes such as in Visé and Brussels, exhibitions or short films. In addition, a theatre show on the life of a Belgian soldier will be presented to schools, as well as an exhibition about Belgian women in the Great War. Other projects concern upgrading of local heritage. In Gembloux a digitisation project of private documents also resulted in an exhibition: “Gembloux dans la tourmente” [Tormented Gembloux]. A web documentary on the panorama of the “battle of the Meuse” by Alfred Bastien and two 90 minutes’ documentaries on the memory of the massacres of civilians (in Dinant and southern Luxembourg) will be created.
- Eighteen projects originating from the provinces and municipalities will also be supported by Wallonia. These projects, which come from all over Wallonia, are extremely varied, since they concern enhancement of Walloon heritage, the organisation of events (ceremonies, sound and light, etc.), exhibitions (historical, artistic, didactic, etc.), films, memorial routes, etc.

In summary, even if the French-speaking scientists spared no pains to lend their assistance, it is obvious that in the first place the real players in the commemorations are the politicians, the local actors, the schools and the media; each with their own motivation. The years to come will enable gauging the impact of these commemorations on the public at large and on young people in particular, in terms of collective identity, knowledge and reflection on the phenomenon of war.

# Abstracts

## **Maarten Van Ginderachter, Belgium: too many pasts, too many memories?**

Although national identities are a recent historical phenomenon they have a “long memory”. In the nineteenth century, historians rooted Belgian identity in the middle ages. The same goes for Flemish identity and its ensuing memory, which became antagonistic to Belgium in the course of the twentieth century. In recent decades a Flemish nationalist memory that sees Flanders as the victim of Belgium, has become dominant. It is far from clear that the process of globalisation will reduce nationalist antagonisms. Globalisation and nationalism are not mutually exclusive.

## **Ann Roekens & Axel Tixhon, “Poor Flanders – Rich Wallonia” (or vice versa)**

Since the coal crisis of the 1950's, the Walloon (media) identity has been built around the image of a “poor Wallonia” against the “rich Flanders”. In order to understand the importance of this image in both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking media, this article focuses on two types of audiovisual discourses in their contexts of production and reception. The analysis is based on the film of Henri Storck and Joris Ivens, *Misère au Borinage* (1933) and on the television treatment of the great strike of the winter 1960-1961. Our aim is to highlight some events and pictures that have contributed to the construction of this identity and to study how these stereotypes could evolve

## **Nico Wouters, Peace is good, war is bad. Reflections on Belgian commemorations and politics of memory**

The various governments in the federal state of Belgium give different shapes to the centenary commemorations of the First World War. The regional governments are rather explicit in using these commemorations to promote the distinctive “brands” of Flanders and Wallonia-Brussels. Paradoxically, they attempt to create this distinctive identity with highly similar messages: an emotional rejection of war and a message of international peace. Belgium as a brand was initially rather absent in these commemorations and still plays the second violin, although the topic of the First World War provided the national government with ideal narratives to revitalise a strong Belgian politics of memory. A strong central Belgian politics of memory was already lacking during the interwar years. This raises the question on the relationship between successful state sponsored politics of memory and societal consensus. International comparison shows that attempts at forced top-down politics of memory seldom achieve durable success. In that regard, Belgium is no exception.

## **Laurence van Ypersele, WWI a new battlefield?**

There is an ongoing debate on which role a historian should play: engaged citizen or critical observer and analyst of society. This article contributes to this discussion by tracing the objectives, initiatives and meaning of the preparations of the centennial of WWI in francophone Belgium.

## Résumés

### **Maarten Van Ginderachter, La Belgique: trop de passés, trop de mémoires ?**

Même si les identités nationales constituent un phénomène récent sur le plan historique, elles s'appuient sur une "mémoire longue". Au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle, l'identité belge se projetait jusqu'au Moyen Âge. La même règle s'appliquait à une identité flamande, qui est cependant devenue antagoniste de l'identité belge dans le courant du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle et qui a donc également engendré une mémoire flamande distincte qui n'était plus compatible avec la mémoire belge. Au cours de la dernière décennie, la mémoire nationaliste flamande a acquis une position dominante, dépeignant la Flandre comme victime de la Belgique. Il n'est absolument pas certain que le processus de mondialisation tende à diminuer ces antagonismes nationalistes. La mondialisation et le nationalisme ne s'excluent pas réciproquement.

### **Ann Roekens & Axel Tixhon, Pauvre Flandre - Riche Wallonie (ou vice versa)**

Depuis la crise charbonnière des années 1950, l'identité (médiatique) wallonne s'est construite autour de l'image d'une « Wallonie pauvre » face à une « Flandre riche ». Afin de comprendre la prégnance de cette image dans les médias actuels tant francophones que néerlandophones, cet article se penche sur deux types de discours audiovisuels dans leurs contextes de production et de réception. À travers l'analyse, d'une part, du film de Henri Storck et Joris Ivens, *Misère au Borinage* (1933) et, d'autre part, du traitement télévisuel de la grande grève de l'hiver 1960-1961, il met en évidence quelques événements et images qui ont agi dans la construction de cette identité et la manière dont ces stéréotypes ont évolué.

### **Nico Wouters, La paix est bonne, la guerre mauvaise. Réflexions sur les commémorations belges et sur la politique de la mémoire**

En Belgique, les différentes entités fédérées organisent chacune les commémorations du centenaire de la Grande Guerre. La mémoire de guerre est utilisée pour valoriser la « marque » Flandre ou celle de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles. Paradoxalement, les messages sont très similaires : un rejet émotionnel de la guerre et un plaidoyer pour la paix internationale. La "marque" Belgique, initialement absente des commémorations, demeure à l'arrière-plan, alors même que la thématique de la Première Guerre offre tous les éléments nécessaires à une revitalisation de la nationalité belge. L'absence d'une politique mémorielle forte se faisait déjà sentir en Belgique dans l'entre-deux-guerres. Ceci pose la question du rapport entre la politique mémorielle d'un Etat et le consensus sociétal relatif au passé. Une perspective internationale comparée avec d'autres démocraties parlementaires européennes démontre que les tentatives d'imposer une mémoire nationale d'en haut sont rarement couronnées de succès sur le long terme. La Belgique n'est pas une exception à cet égard.

### **Laurence van Ypersele, La première guerre mondiale, nouveau champ de bataille ?**

Entre les tenants du rôle citoyen de l'historien et ceux du rôle d'analyste de la société, les débats font rage. Pour alimenter cette réflexion, cette contribution entend retracer les préparatifs des commémorations du centenaire de la Grande Guerre du côté belge francophone, avec ses objectifs, ses valeurs et ses initiatives.

# Samenvattingen

## **Maarten Van Ginderachter, België: te veel verleden(s), te veel herinneringen?**

Hoewel nationale identiteiten een recent fenomeen zijn in de geschiedenis hebben ze een “lang geheugen”. De Belgische identiteit werd in de 19de eeuw geprojecteerd tot in de Middeleeuwen. Hetzelfde gold voor een Vlaamse identiteit die in de loop van de 20ste eeuw antagonistisch werd met de Belgische en dus ook een eigen Vlaams geheugen genereerde dat niet meer compatibel was met het Belgische. In de laatste decennia is een Vlaams-nationalistisch geheugen dominant geworden waarin Vlaanderen als een slachtoffer van België wordt voorgesteld. Het is helemaal niet zeker dat het proces van globalisering deze nationalistische antagonismen zal doen verminderen. Globalisering en nationalisme sluiten elkaar immers niet uit.

## **Ann Roekens & Axel Tixhon, “Arm Vlaanderen – Rijk Wallonië” (of vice versa)**

Sedert de steenkoolcrisis van de jaren 1950 werd de Waalse identiteit in de media opgebouwd met beelden van een “arm Wallonië” versus een “rijk Vlaanderen”. Om het belang van deze beeldvorming te begrijpen, focust dit artikel op twee types van audiovisueel discours in de context van hun productie en hun receptie. De analyse is gebaseerd op de film van Henri Storck en Joris Ivens, *Misère au Borinage* (1933) enerzijds en de televisiebehandeling van de grote stakingen in de winter van 1960-1961 anderzijds. Ze maakt duidelijk hoe bepaalde gebeurtenissen en beelden een rol hebben gespeeld in de creatie van een identiteit en hoe deze stereotypen zijn geëvolueerd.

## **Nico Wouters, Vrede is goed, oorlog slecht. Reflecties over Belgische herdenkingen en herinneringspolitiek**

De actuele herdenkingen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog worden op een verschillende manier vorm gegeven door de diverse overheden in het federale België. Zij grijpen de oorlogsherdenking aan om de “merken” Vlaanderen en de Federatie Wallonië-Brussel in de etalage te zetten. Maar ze doen dit paradoxaal met boodschappen die sterk gelijkend zijn: een emotionele afwijzing van oorlog en een pleidooi voor internationale vrede. Het “merk” België was aanvankelijk afwezig in de herdenking en blijft wat op de achtergrond, dit terwijl de Eerste Wereldoorlog alle kansen biedt en bood om de Belgische nationaliteit te vitaliseren. Al in het interbellum ontbrak het aan een sterke Belgische herinneringspolitiek. Dit werpt de vraag op naar de relatie tussen de herinneringspolitiek van een staat en maatschappelijke consensus rond het verleden. Een internationaal vergelijkend perspectief met andere Europese parlementaire democratieën toont aan dat pogingen om een nationale herinnering top down op te leggen zelden duurzaam succes opleveren. België is op dat punt helemaal geen uitzondering.

## **Laurence van Ypersele, Wereldoorlog I, een nieuw slagveld?**

De rol van de historicus als maatschappelijk geëngageerde burger of als afstandelijke maatschappelijk observator geeft aanleiding tot debat. Deze bijdrage voedt de discussie door de doelstellingen, initiatieven en betekenissen van de voorbereidingen tot de honderdjarige herdenking van de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Franstalig België te schetsen.

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