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## 7. Reconstructions of the Past in Belgium and Flanders

In the eyes of some observers, the forces of nationalism are causing such far-reaching social and political change in Belgium that they threaten the cohesion of the nation-state, and may perhaps lead to secession. Since Belgian independence in 1831 there have been such radical shifts in national identity – in fact here we could speak rather of overlapping and/or competing identities – that the political authorities have responded by changing the political structures of the Belgian state along federalist lines. The federal government, the Dutch-speaking Flemish community in the north of Belgium and the French-speaking community – both in the southern Walloon region and in the metropolitan area of Brussels – all have their own governments and institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The various actors in this federal framework each have their own conceptions of how to take the state-building process further, underpinned by specific views on Belgian national identity and on the identities of the different regions and communities. In this chapter, the shifts in the national self-image that have taken place in Belgium during its history and the present configurations of national identities and sub-state nationalism will be described. Central to this chapter is the question whether historians have contributed to the legitimization of this evolving consciousness, and if so, how. It will be demonstrated that the way in which the practice of historiography reflects the process of nation- and state-building has undergone profound changes since the beginnings of a national historiography. We will first focus on the links between the process of nation- and state-building in Belgium after independence, and its legitimization by historiography in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, the impact of the emergence of the Flemish and Walloon Movements (which perceived themselves primarily as movements for cultural and political emancipation) on the conception of the nation adopted in historiography will be analysed. Thirdly, attention will be paid to the institutional setting in which scientific work such as the practice of history has been taking place since the federalization of Belgium. In this case too, the process of state-building has affected the way historians review the past.

## The Legitimization of the Belgian Nation

Although Belgium as a nation-state did not come into existence until 1830, its establishment was not the beginning, but rather the culmination, of a process of nation-building. The Netherlands were split up as a result of the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule in the sixteenth century and the resulting war, which formally ended in 1648. Consequently in the territory under Habsburg rule – roughly the area of modern-day Belgium, with the exception of the prince-bishopric of Liège, which remained an independent and sovereign state until the French revolution – a distinct Southern Netherlandic identity developed. It was based on a common culture within which a role was played by the Catholic counter-reformation, historically developed institutions and the political allegiances of a land that functioned in the ensuing period as a buffer zone between the great powers.<sup>2</sup>

This 'identity' grew into modern nationalism during the so-called Brabant revolution in 1789. The revolution was directed against the enlightened but authoritarian rule of the Habsburg emperor Joseph II. It resulted in the setting up of an independent Belgian state. However, this state was to survive for only one year before falling to Austrian troops. Shortly afterwards the French armies conquered the Southern Netherlands, and in 1795 France annexed the territories, which it incorporated as *départements* and which – together with the former prince-bishopric of Liège – were completely integrated into the French state, first by the French republicans, and later by Napoleon.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 created the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a conglomeration of lands which are now the Benelux states. Its king, William I, tried to weld North and South together but failed to create a new nation. His state survived for only 15 years. Belgian Catholics and liberals, seeing this new dispensation as domination by Holland, united under the banner of freedom. Dissatisfaction led in the summer of 1830 to a rebellion, which in turn developed into a national revolution, in which liberty was declared to be the highest value. Out of this revolution came a modern nation state – constitutional, liberal, democratic and centralized. Its constitution vested sovereignty in the Belgian people. Once the revolution had succeeded and independence was established, many patriots committed themselves to building a national identity.

A common interpretation of Belgium's national past, propagated by a new national historical school, served as the cornerstone for this national identity. As Jo Tollebeek has emphasized in his analysis of the interpretation made by this school, which had strong romantic overtones:

'These earliest national histories were meant as a contribution to the formation, consolidation and confirmation of a national identity.

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Their writers had to lend unity, specificity and continuity to the national past. Their work was less a matter of reconstruction than of construction'.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Belgium, whose emergence as a nation preceded its political independence, there already existed a 'Belgian' national historiography before 1830. It evolved within the framework of the Austrian Netherlands, and gained momentum from 1780 onwards. Already under French occupation, and within the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, books providing a synthesis of national history were published. It was self-evident that the patriotic and romantic atmosphere following independence stimulated writers, artists and – above all – historians to make their contribution to the national culture. These contributions aimed to provide an historical foundation for the right of the new nation – Belgium – to exist. What they sought above all was:

'to strip the freedom they had won of its revolutionary character. The élite wanted to be liberal, not revolutionary. Therefore they did not call the Revolution of 1830 a revolution, but a restoration, or rather a renaissance. In 1830 the "hour of awakening" of the Belgian people had come, and nothing more, the nation was not created then, but only wakened from a deep "sleep of the spirit" (...) or to use another metaphor (...) the old Belgium had risen like a phoenix from its ashes. The country was young, but old as well'.<sup>4</sup>

There were of course some problems to be solved in the interpretation of history. The two major obstacles were on the one hand the geographical diversity of pre-independence Belgium (autonomous principalities, and an entirely separate prince-bishopric of Liège), and on the other the lack of a narrative and chronological continuity in Belgian history.<sup>5</sup> The problem of geographical diversity was solved by choosing a particular principality as the heart of the Belgian Fatherland. Several principalities have been selected for this purpose over the years – Flanders has been chosen several times, and was presented as the core of what later became Belgium. This was the case for instance in Conscience's *History of Belgium* (1845), in which the Flemish medieval cities – prosperous, patriotic and powerful – were presented as the cradle of Belgian nationality.

The lack of unity in Belgian history, due to the constant changes of regime and dynastic rule, was addressed in various ways. Some historians chose a supra-historical and a-prioristic solution by invoking (or inventing) a 'national genius', a *Volksgeist* as Herder called it, or *une âme belge*, a Belgian soul. It would later serve as one of the major sources for Belgian nationalist ideologies, especially when linked with a defence of the French language or bilingualism. A variation

on this 'national genius' solution was to emphasise the history of the common people: the historian could use their customs, way of life and attitudes as the more constant mainstream of an *histoire de longue durée* (history of long-term developments) embedding the – so variable and eventful – political history. Other historians opted for a less a-prioristic solution. They found a way out of the problem presented by the lack of political unity by searching for recurring themes in the national history. These themes then served as a backbone for national identity over time. One solution here was to depict Belgium as the battlefield of Europe. Another – more widespread – option was to describe the Belgians as an ancient people, oppressed for centuries by foreign rule. This approach was even officially dignified in 1860 when a new text was accepted for the national anthem, beginning with the words: 'Après des siècles d'esclavage, Le Belge sortant du tombeau...' ('After centuries of slavery, The Belgian, rising from the grave...'). The problem with such solutions, however, was that they did not cover the whole history of Belgium. To make this history of conquerors and conquered more dynamic, in his history of Belgium (1840) the historian Theodore Juste introduced a dramatic conception of Belgian history as 'a succession of periods of struggle for freedom and periods of prosperity and cultural bloom warranted by a righteous royal government (...). In 1830 the two streams which had permeated Belgian history (...) had indeed reached their end point'.<sup>6</sup> The question of whether 1830 had really marked the 'end of history' still remained, i.e., whether the evolution towards a 'national identity' had reached its final and complete form, or whether this was only the start of a new historical epoch. It became clear in the second half of the century, with the emergence of new social, ideological and linguistic conflicts, that the Belgian construct had not yet been completed.

The new national historiography of the first two decades of the independent Belgium formed only one part of a much broader historical culture, aimed at presenting the national past to the general public. Side by side with the historians, painters, sculptors and writers were also active in raising national consciousness.<sup>7</sup> This was achieved through the publication of numerous historical novels (Hendrik Conscience, Pieter Geiregat), through book illustrations,<sup>8</sup> the organization of historical processions and the erection (in large numbers between 1830 and 1850) of statues of historical heroes. The visual representation of appealing episodes in national history was the result of teamwork by a 'Belgian School of Painting', (Gustave Wappers, Louis Gaillet and Ferdinand de Braeckeleer) which presented itself as both old and new at one and the same time. It was old in the sense that it followed the tradition of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century artists Rubens and Van Dyck, but also new, because its major concern was the use of a 'national colour', painting a glorious past, and creating a national iconography.<sup>9</sup> In literature, Francophone and Flemish writers pursued the same goal, and between 1830 and

1850 they created a Belgian literature with national authors, literary journals in both French and Dutch, and literary criticism. But because the political and cultural élite spoke French, they could only appreciate the French literature, leaving the literature written in Dutch – or rather in ‘Nederduytsch’ (Flemish Dutch), as opposed to ‘Hollandic’ – to the Flemish middle class.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Flemish literature – which was initially perceived as merely Belgian – eventually led this middle class to an increasing awareness of its Flemish identity. This was especially encouraged by the romantic work of Hendrik Conscience. He was the first to create an important *oeuvre* in Dutch, in which ‘the anti-French element assumed a central position (...) from then onwards, Flemish literature would be inextricably associated with the development of the Flemish Movement whose anti-French support it would continue to inspire’.<sup>11</sup>

The Francophone writers who wanted to respond to the demand for a national culture after independence faced a double difficulty. First of all, ‘the idea underlying the notion of *Volksgeist* crucially relied on the unity of language and culture’.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence some Belgian Francophone writers campaigned for a Belgian variant of the French language, as did Charles Decoster in his *La légende d’Ulenspiegel* (1867). Decoster deliberately interspersed his text with literal translations of Flemish words.<sup>13</sup> A second strategy for solving this problem of a Belgian *Volksgeist* was to dissociate language and culture. Decoster – and other Belgian writers, who preferred to write standard French – were fascinated by the symbolism of the Flemish cultural past, which they presented as highlights of Belgian history. In their effort to create a Francophone literature distinct from that in France, they fell back on Belgian themes that were essentially Flemish.

## From Belgian Cultural Nationalism to Flemish Sub-Nationalism

The marginalization of the Flemish language constituted a basic problem in the attempt by these romantic cultural nationalists to build a national Belgian culture. They wanted to bring about the moral renaissance of the Belgian people, to give them their own national history, their own art and their own literature, but were confronted by a language problem which made such a reconstruction extremely problematic. Throughout Belgium, the upper classes spoke French, even in areas where Dutch was the mother tongue of the majority of the population. Shortly after independence, French had been declared the official language of the Belgian state, of its parliament, higher courts, central administration and army. It was felt that using just one language would strengthen state centralization. Despite the fact that Flemish was the vernacular of the vast majority of the population in the northern part of the country, it was then used only in primary

education, in the lower courts of justice, and in the councils of smaller municipalities. Flemish-minded writers and intellectuals deplored this situation and proposed an alternative view of Belgian culture. As they saw it, Belgium would be the poorer if all that was Flemish was to be reduced to a second-class culture. They strove for the official recognition of two national languages, believing that the interaction of the Germanic and Romance traditions within Belgium would lead to a new cultural synthesis. They regarded Belgium as a nation 'with one soul but two voices'.

These intellectuals became the founding fathers of the Flemish Movement. They initiated the constitution of various cultural organizations and societies, whose aims were largely political. The Movement's active membership comprised students, priests and intellectuals from the Flemish middle class.<sup>14</sup> It evolved into a new type of national movement, in which the middle classes closed ranks against the ruling class. It remained, however, within the Belgian constitutional framework and without any anti-Belgian sentiments (without *anti-belgicisme*, as it is called in Flanders). The revolutionary wave of 1848 in various European countries provided the Flemish Movement with a democratic impetus. At the time, it did not wish to divide the country into monolingual language areas, but pleaded for bilingualism, at least in Flanders. In the 1870s it succeeded in obtaining some facilities for non-French speakers from Flanders in the administration and in the courts, and a limited bilingual regime in secondary education.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a Flemish ethnic and national identity began to manifest itself, as a sub-nation within the greater Belgian nation. This indicated an important shift in national identity since the start of Belgian independence. In 1830 there was merely a Belgian nation. At that time, a 'Flemish' community or sub-nation simply did not exist. But over almost five decades the constant references by writers and intellectuals to the right to speak one's own language worked as a mobilizing tool. Gradually, the idea of 'a language of one's own' gave way to the idea of 'the language of one's own people'. Around the turn of the century, the idea that language formed the basis of a distinct ethnic group, a people, the 'Flemish people' – as a sub-nation of the Belgian nation – became accepted as referring to an existing reality. This idea was first adopted by some Flemish intellectuals, and gained increasing popular support in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Flemish Identity Revisited

The Flemish Movement did not appear at the forefront of Belgian politics for the whole of the nineteenth century. The major antagonism in political life was

then between Catholics and liberals, who had been fighting bitterly for power since the 1840s. In the 1880s, a working-class movement with strong socialist overtones also came to the fore. Against this background, the enthusiasm of the first decades for the Belgian national idea had waned. Moreover in the 1890s historiography was gradually gaining scientific recognition. Writing history became an academic profession. It was Henri Pirenne, a professor of history at the State University of Ghent – then still a Francophone institution – who marked this step from a mainly politically-inspired history of the Belgian nation towards a scientific view of national history. In 1900 he published the first volume of his four-volume *Histoire de Belgique*.<sup>15</sup>

Pirenne covered the history of Belgium from Roman times up to the beginning of the Great War. It was a masterpiece of historical synthesis, an attempt to explain the emergence of the Belgian nation and its national identity by a careful reconstruction of its different economic, cultural and political steps in the past. He considered the geo-political and geo-cultural position of the later 'Belgian' territories in Europe – on the edge of the Romance and Germanic parts, acting as a link between Germany and France, even resembling a microcosm of European civilization – to be a primary factor in the specific nature of this Belgian nation. As second factor he emphasized that the Belgian people had constituted a national unit even before political unity was established through Belgian independence. As the third and last factor, he referred to the existence of the *pax belgica*, the peaceful coexistence and cohabitation of different ethnic groups, Flemings and Walloons, in one national cultural space.<sup>16</sup> In his book, Belgium was no longer simply a 'battlefield' of Europe, or the plaything of the great European powers, but a genuine community rightfully aiming to put a political roof over its national identity, and representing a specific form of the greater European civilization. Nor was Belgian independence the 'artificial' creation of international diplomacy. It was the outcome of a lengthy process which had started in the Middle Ages when the principalities of the Low Countries developed mutual economic and political connections, on the basis of common interests. These interests merged with those of the Burgundian dukes, and so was created the Burgundian state, which was later to be more developed institutionally, by the Habsburg dynasty, into a distinct political entity, which went under the name of 'the 17 Provinces'. It comprised the territory of modern-day Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, with the prince-bishopric of Liège still left out.

Pirenne's work was published in a period of heightened conflicts between various interpretations of the national identity. These conflicts took place primarily on the political level. Flemish people were increasingly aggrieved at the secondary position of their language, which contrasted with the modernization of Flanders. The growth of the tertiary sector in Belgium, for instance, was particularly impressive, and this also affected Flanders. Around 1900, about thirty percent of

the Belgian professional population was employed in the administration, trade or the public services. This was the highest percentage in continental Europe, and was as high as in Britain or the USA.<sup>17</sup> This expansion of services and administration was to the advantage of the French-speakers, since French was used as the working language in the service sector in Flanders. It was in this particular context that the Flemish middle classes increased their support for the language demands of the Flemish Movement, and the basis for support for that movement grew. From that time on, the social dimension of the Flemish language struggle became more apparent.

The Czech historian Miroslav Hroch has distinguished three stages in the national movements that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century among national minorities, 'awakening' in opposition to older, official national identities. He describes a phase A of 'scholarly interest' in which intellectuals (re)discover the cultural content of the new national identity. Then comes phase B of patriotic agitation, in which students and intelligentsia try to convince 'the people' of the importance of their own national identity, followed by phase C in which the movement gains 'mass support'. He links these stages to major periods of modernization: industrial revolution, 'bourgeois revolution' and the formation of a nation<sup>18</sup>. Each period in the development of Flemish nationalism also corresponds to one of these stages.<sup>19</sup> Phase A of scholarly interest can be identified in Flanders up to 1840. Phase B of patriotic agitation took place in Flanders between 1840 and 1890. During that time – starting in the 1870s – the first language laws were passed in parliament, granting the non-Francophones in Flanders some possibility of using Dutch in approaching the authorities, before the courts and in secondary schools. But the legislation was so limited that dissatisfaction among Dutch-speakers grew throughout the century to become a mass movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century: the beginning of phase C, the final phase. The support for this mass movement came mainly from christian-democratic organizations representing the interests of farmers, workers and the middle class, and which were fully organized on a national scale by the turn of the century. Their commitment to the Flemish Movement was the main catalyst for growing popular support.<sup>20</sup> Notwithstanding this merging of Flemish and christian-democrat demands, there were also some groups of non-Catholic Flemish activists in the Flemish Movement. Mass support led also to a broadening of the agenda of the Movement. Instead of simply demanding equal rights for their language, the Flemish activists wanted to create a Flemish-Belgian culture, which would make its own unique contribution to European civilization.

In this last decade of the century, the success of the Flemish Movement led to a whole series of language laws that put the use of Dutch in Flanders on an equal footing with French. A symbolic highlight was when – at the end of the century,



in 1898 – Dutch was recognized as an official language of the Belgian nation alongside French, which had already been given that status in 1831. But despite these gains on the legal front, the linguistic programme of the Movement became more radical. By the end of the nineteenth century it had become obvious even to moderate Flemish activists that the French-speaking citizens would never accept bilingualism in Brussels and Wallonia, so that in everyday life Dutch would never be on a par with French. The only way to achieve that would be to have two monolingual areas: a French one in Wallonia and a Dutch one in Flanders, with bilingualism in the centre of the country. So the Flemish activists progressed to wanting territorial (Dutch) monolingualism in the public sphere, hoping that as a result Flanders would become a Flemish homeland in Belgium – not with any anti-Belgian intention, but as a sub-nation.

The existence of a sub-nation clearly manifested itself through several cultural signs. There was the change of the meaning of the term 'Flanders'/'Flemish': this no longer referred to the historical county of Flanders, along the coast of the Low Countries of the *ancien régime*, but to the five provinces of Northern Belgium – from east to west – and its Dutch-speaking population. There was also the appropriation of medieval history by the Flemish, and the dwindling of any Belgian connotation. The new sub-national identity also manifested itself through the creation of several new institutions, labelled 'Flemish', and the increasing significance of – still mainly unofficial – Flemish symbols, such as a Flemish national holiday (11 July), a Flemish national anthem and a Flemish national standard (a black lion in a yellow field). The peculiar thing about this sub-nation was that, according to the self-image of the Flemish, it was still smoothly embedded within the Belgian nation. Anti-Belgianism did not exist before the first world war.

The growing antagonism within the Belgian community, and the diverging concepts of the nation, proved convincingly that to describe 1830 as the end of history – as was done by some patriotically inspired historians shortly after the Belgian revolution – was an illusion. At the same time this antagonism also affected the credibility of the type of Belgian scientific synthesis created by Pirenne. At that period, the activities of the professional historians in academia can be characterized as rather uncommitted in their research of 'national' themes. They were not openly involved in political debates on the Belgian national idea. Journalists and politicians, however, borrowed heavily from academic literature, transforming the historians' views into intellectual weapons for their own visions of the nation. This happened especially on the Francophone side, partly because their position as French-speakers came under incessant pressure from the Flemish Movement.

Many of the Francophones in Flanders, who belonged mostly to the upper class, were unwilling to yield. As a reaction against the spate of language laws in

the 1890s, which improved the position of Dutch in the public sphere, a Francophone counter-movement sprang up in the last decade of the nineteenth century. This so-called 'Walloon' Movement aimed to maintain the 'status quo' on the linguistic level, meaning the maintenance of bilingualism in Flanders and French monolingualism in Brussels and Wallonia. It received initial support not so much from Wallonia but from the French-speaking upper class in Flanders and Brussels. In fact, it was more of a 'Francophone' than a 'Walloon' Movement. Regarding the principle of freedom of language, it refused to countenance the Flemish people's demand for linguistic homogeneity within their territory. It wanted official bilingual status for Flanders to be maintained, i.e., it wanted every citizen to be able to use French always, at all official levels, in Flanders as elsewhere in Belgium. But now – unlike decades earlier when they had accepted bilingualism – the Flemings saw this position as protecting the privileges of an élite.<sup>21</sup> They rejected it, not only on the cultural grounds of Flemish sub-nationality, but also – and even more – on the social grounds that it would mean discrimination against the non-Francophone lower classes.

After the turn of the century the centre of gravity of the Walloon Movement shifted towards Wallonia proper. It then included in its programme (alongside the political/linguistic goals) the defence and appreciation of the Walloon heritage, and Walloon interests in general. As had happened earlier in Flanders, at the eve of the first world war Walloon activists chose an emblem (a red cock on a yellow field), a motto ('*Wallonie toujours*') and a Walloon national day (the last Sunday of September, in commemoration of the Belgian revolution of 1830). This shift from a defence of the interests of the French-speaking minority in Flanders to a defence of Walloon interests was not complete. Its ultimate aim in fact remained the defence of both the regional development of Wallonia and personal linguistic freedom for Francophones to speak their language everywhere in Belgium, irrespective of regional boundaries.<sup>22</sup>

In 1897, the lawyer and socialist politician Edmond Picard coined the term '*âme belge*' (Belgian soul). Picard believed that Belgium, despite its two ethnic groups and two languages, had one national soul, characterized by a mixture of elements from the two ethnic and linguistic groups, which had merged through history to produce something specifically Belgian. He accepted bilingualism, including in Flanders, and opposed the establishment of monolingual territories which, in his view, would inevitably lead to secession. This theory was immediately used and abused by a militant Belgian nationalism in Francophone clothing which, at the eve of the first world war, gained major support among the intellectuals, and particularly lawyers, around the weekly *Journal des Tribunaux*, in Brussels. It became a second force opposing the Flemish Movement. As it was used as an argument against the Flemish demand for monolingualism, it was rejected by the Flemish Movement.

The idea of an *âme belge* was in fact a return to one of the solutions developed by the first generation of historians after Belgian independence. For Belgian nationalists at the turn of the century, however, it was less an ordering principle for the interpretation of the past than a weapon with which to defend Belgian unity against all that was regarded as inimical to it. As such it was a blow to the vision of Pirenne, whose ideas and position were reduced to a caricature, not only by the defenders of Belgian unity grouped around the *Journal des Tribunaux*, but also by the militants of the Flemish Movement who, in addition, regarded him as a mere Belgian nationalist and no longer respected him as the honest and great historian he actually was.<sup>23</sup>

There was also a more moderate type of defence of Belgian unity, represented by the official Belgian establishment. This view of the nation referred mainly to two themes in national history: on the one hand, the medieval 'Belgian liberties' as a core element of the 'Belgian character', and on the other, the oppression of those liberties for centuries by neighbouring imperialist powers. When Germany attacked Belgium in August 1914, King Albert I referred to a number of historical events, which were adapted to the obvious duality of the two sub-nations existing at the time. The King asked the Flemings to remember the battle of the Golden Spurs (in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Flanders) against French domination. At the same time, he asked Walloons to bear in mind the 600 inhabitants of the municipality of Franchimont in Liège, who had attempted to stop the invading troops of the Duke of Burgundy (15<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>24</sup> There was a new wave of Belgian nationalism during the first weeks of the War. The thesis of a national unity based on the historical and cultural diversity of the Belgians – sometimes referred to with the saying 'Fleming' and 'Walloon' are merely first names, our family name is 'Belgian' – was not, however, to last very long.

## Belgium versus Flanders

Everything changed with the Great War.<sup>25</sup> Nationalism lost its previous innocence. A radical minority of Flemish activists had been growing impatient with the lack of significant progress in transforming Flanders into a monolingual Dutch-speaking area, the so-called 'Dutchification' of Flanders. Now the war was offering them new political opportunities, as the Germans were actively seeking allies among the Flemish population. Activists living in occupied territory were enticed by the German call and agreed to reform and even split the occupied Belgian State with 'German help'. Fuelled to a large extent by the 'Flamenpolitik' of the German occupier, the radical activists developed a Flemish nationalism which was blatantly anti-Belgian. Of course their reforms were reversed after the war. They themselves were put on trial and condemned as 'trai-

tors' by the Belgian courts. But their anti-Belgian Flemish ideology was kept alive by many of them who fled the country, to the Netherlands or Germany, from where they prepared the 'revenge' that was to come during the second world war, in 1940-1945.

Throughout the war years, and especially in the 1920s, Belgian nationalism became more radical, and outspokenly anti-Flemish. Under the influence of the concept of integral nationalism as developed by the French nationalist Charles Maurras, according to which the benefit of the nation was the first and only touchstone for human behaviour, Belgian nationalism became a fully-fledged, overtly right-wing ideology. It constituted a platform against those who were regarded as a threat to the strength of the Belgian nation. Threats were seen in a Flemish Movement demanding language rights, in Catholics and socialists dividing the Belgian community ideologically and along class lines, in Jews and foreigners, who should be mistrusted, and in the neighbouring states that were allegedly cherishing imperialistic dreams to the detriment of Belgium.

On the other hand, for the more radical members of the Flemish Movement, 'anti-Belgianism' was the touchstone of real Flemish nationalism. They wanted to dissolve the Belgian political framework, if necessary by overthrowing the parliamentary system, and in the 1930s linked their nationalism to fascism. Their blueprint for a new order was based on the idea of pure ethnic origin. Language was not a sufficient criterion for membership of the national community. This type of Flemish nationalism was exclusive and ethnocentric. It emphasized the differences between 'our own people' and 'outsiders', and as a result turned against both French-speakers and Jews on Flemish territory. It provided a breeding-ground for National Socialism and for collaboration with the Nazi occupiers in the second world war.<sup>26</sup>

The radicalization of many Flemish activists during the first world war resulted in a split in the Flemish National Movement which was never to be fully healed. The Movement was divided into two factions: one remaining loyal to Belgium, the other taking an anti-Belgian stance. The first position attracted the majority of the Flemish Movement, who hoped that their loyalty would be rewarded with monolingual status for Flanders. A minority of the Flemish Movement chose to support Germany, in the hope that the occupiers would immediately address all pre-war Flemish grievances. This faction ended up taking an anti-Belgian position, as its choice was, naturally, condemned by the Belgian government, which was now in exile in France but from there continued the struggle against Germany. Among Flemish soldiers fighting in the trenches of Flanders fields – such as Hendrik Borginon, Adiel Debeuckelaere, Joris Van Severen and Frans Daels – Flemish nationalism was strengthened by the humiliation of Dutch-speaking privates by their Francophone officers. They were not yet anti-Belgian, however, and risked their lives for the fatherland every day;

some of them became more radicalized during the war, partly owing to the disciplinary repression against Flemish study-groups, which the authorities viewed as a breeding-ground for insubordination. In the diaries they wrote at the front, some of them demanded home rule for Flanders once the war was over.

After the first world war, it was not the radical activists – who were condemned for treason and collaboration with the enemy – but the loyal faction of the Flemish Movement that became the leading one. It focused on cultural and linguistic issues. The majority of its members developed a kind of dual national consciousness. They were supporters of the Flemish national cause, and also loyal Belgians. They wanted to stick to the language laws as an instrument for complete ‘Dutchification’ of Flanders. That could be achieved, they thought, within the confines of the existing Belgian state and with full respect for the democratic institutions. Eventually, after two decades of political struggle, they succeeded in establishing a monolingual Dutch public life in Flanders. This process of ‘Dutchification’ was almost completed by the eve of the second world war.

Officially, Belgian nationalism in the inter-war period tried to be impartial as far as language was concerned, in order to be accepted everywhere in the country. It used both French and Dutch as a means of expression, and the many patriotic celebrations commemorating the heroes and victims of the war were held in both languages. But for the members of the Flemish Movement, both moderate and radical, Belgium had lost its soul. Flemish culture was emancipating itself. An increasing number of Flemish intellectuals exclusively used the Flemish language. Publications, songs, festivals, meetings and celebrations by non-official organizations referred only to Flanders, the Flemish people and the Flemish soul. Catholic student and youth movements idealized Flanders and Flemish culture in a romantic way. All kinds of group activities, such as theatre festivals, were organized by Catholic student associations, who tried to mould the personality and character of their members in a Flemish and Christian atmosphere. They also strove to bring their message of a renaissance of the Flemish culture home to the local population. This mission was supported by Catholic mass organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. One could say that cultural nationalism, entwined with a concern for the preservation of Catholicism, affected a large part of the Catholic population in Flanders.

New perspectives on history corresponded to these shifts in national identity. Gradually, a vision of the past without Belgium – which could be labelled *a*-Belgianism – emerged, including among the more moderate members of the Flemish Movement. The type of historical approach put forward by Henri Pirenne was rejected as being ‘Belgian nationalist’. It was then substituted by Flemish or Great-Netherlandic interpretations of the national history. The first step in this direction was made in the 1920s by moderate Flemish nationalists such as Lodewijk Dosfel, who did not consider themselves to be anti-Belgian. Shortly

afterwards, this view was also adopted by radical Flemish nationalists. In 1924, one of them published a handbook on Flemish national history with the propagandistic purpose of educating students in the 'correct anti-Belgian line'.<sup>27</sup> 1930 was the year of the Belgian centennial, which was presented by historians such as Hendrik Elias as a commemoration of a century of Flemish oppression by Belgium. That same year he published a book entitled 'Onze wording tot natie' ('Our Development into a Nation').<sup>28</sup> In it, he stated that there existed only a Dutch national identity, and that there had never been a Southern-Netherlandic or Belgian one. Belgium had to be fought against in order to establish an independent Flanders. In 1932 Elias became a member of parliament for the Flemish nationalist party 'Het Vlaamsche Front', which was transformed in 1933 into a fascist Flemish nationalist party (VNV, Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond, or Flemish National Union). In World War II, the party opted for collaboration with the Nazis and in 1942 Elias became its 'Leader'. This would cost him ten years of imprisonment after the war, a time he used for writing a four-volume book on the history of Flemish nationalism.<sup>29</sup>

By the inter-war period Elias and many other Flemish intellectuals had already been deeply influenced by the publications of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl. Geyl was at that time professor of Dutch history at University College London, and, as a Dutch civil servant, official consultant of the Dutch Government on matters concerning Britain. In the 1920s and 1930s he became one of the most important figures of the Great-Netherlandic Movement, a group of Dutch and Flemish nationalists who dreamed of the unification of the Netherlands and Belgium in one Great-Netherlandic state. His writings on the history of the Low Countries exerted a deep influence on Flemish intellectuals. Geyl tried to prove that Belgium was not a real nation, and that it had only emerged as a result of international power-politics. In his eyes, a real Southern-Netherlandic or Belgian identity had never existed. Their 'regional peculiarities' were to be regarded as the result of the splitting of the Low Countries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and of the (united) Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830. Both events were to be seen as unfortunate historical accidents, whereas the touchstone of national identity in the Low Countries was language. The Dutch-speakers were the core of the national community. From his first historical publication on this issue in 1925 until the final volume of his history of the Netherlandic nation in 1959 – and in fact also in other essays published up until his death in 1966 – Geyl claimed to offer a less partisan and more scientifically valuable synthesis than Pirenne.<sup>30</sup> In the inter-war period he was deeply involved in the radical Great-Netherlandic and Flemish nationalist movement, and this commitment only ended with his appointment in 1937 as professor of history at the State University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. Geyl's publications had major political significance. They provided a scientific basis for the anti-Belgianism of the radical

Flemish nationalists who – as historians in the previous century had done to defend Belgian nationalism – were adopting the framework of foreign rule, in order to defend their anti-Belgian stance. The Flemish nation had been under the yoke of the Romans, the Spanish, the Austrians and the French, but not of the Dutch. It was now time for Flanders to liberate itself from the Belgian yoke and to unify with the Netherlands.

In the 1930s, the young historian Robrecht van Roosbroeck started editing a history of Flanders.<sup>31</sup> The first of six volumes appeared in 1936, the year in which Pirenne died, and the last volume would only be published in 1949. Van Roosbroeck was a convinced anti-Belgianist and a member of the Flemish nationalist party. During the second world war he was – as a reliable collaborator – appointed professor of history at the State University of Ghent by the German occupiers. Nevertheless, throughout the whole period of his editorial work, he was able to find collaborators in broad circles, and both anti-Belgian and pro-Belgian historians wrote chapters in the book, which proved that it was possible to combine different views and interpretations of national history within the one book. Its most important political effect, however, was the fact that now Flanders too, after Belgium, finally had an ‘official’ history of its own.<sup>32</sup>

In 1938, several famous professors from all the Belgian universities joined Pieter Geyl on the editorial board of a new scientific journal that was devoted to the history of the Low Countries as a whole, the ‘*Nederlandsche Historiebladen*’.<sup>33</sup> This new journal was of course a scientific endeavour, but at the same time it also had a political flavour as it seemed to favour Geyl’s Great-Netherlandic vision. This, however, was more appearance than reality. Since 1937, Geyl no longer emphasized a linguistic community as the starting-point for defining the nation. He had silently shifted to the 17 provinces of the Burgundian era. This was to a large extent the same position as that adopted earlier by Pirenne. Geyl was able to make this silent shift easily and almost unnoticed because, at the same time, his Flemish colleagues from Leuven and Ghent, the professors Leo Van der Essen and Hans Van Werveke also slightly adapted Pirenne’s vision. They based their concept of Belgian history on Pirenne, but at the same time declared that they embraced a pan-Netherlandic approach. What they left out was language as the core element in the history of the Low Countries – the view hitherto propagated by Geyl. As Geyl was no longer insisting on language as a criterion, it looked as if both Flemish historians were now adopting Geyl’s former Great-Netherlandic paradigm, which in fact they were not. All three now agreed upon a new ‘pan-Netherlandic’ approach that was actually based upon Pirenne’s vision.<sup>34</sup>

Between the two world wars, Flemish identity underwent a transformation from being a kind of by-product of Belgian identity to a more a genuine and independent national identity. It ceased to be a sub-nationalism and became a

sub-state nationalism. The creation of a monolingual Flemish territory played a key role in this transformation. A shift in national consciousness also took place in the Walloon Movement which, at the end of the thirties, started to focus exclusively on the defence of Walloon territorial interests, leaving aside the defence of bilingualism in Belgium. Its influence remained rather limited, compared to the impact of the Flemish Movement.

Before the second world war, Belgium defended a foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment, which was strongly supported by King Leopold III. This led to a reinterpretation of the Belgian national idea. In a speech on American radio in October 1939, King Leopold III emphasized 'the distinguished place that Belgium has held throughout the history of the Western world' as 'a fountain-head of Christian civilization' and as 'the very incarnation of individual liberty'.<sup>35</sup> In the same month the Belgian Prime Minister, Pierlot, asked several well-known historians and journalists to write articles of an historical nature to explain and defend the policy of neutrality. Historians such as Charles Terlinden from Leuven University and Louis de Lichtervelde replied favourably, contributing to a reconstruction of the Belgian past in which the core elements were the constitution of 1830 and political liberties.<sup>36</sup>

During the second world war there was a left-wing-inspired revival of Walloon consciousness, which set itself against possible fascist and Catholic Flemish domination in Belgium.<sup>37</sup> But on the whole the Walloon Movement tended to align itself with the Belgian resistance. In the underground press the idea of a 'Walloon people' seems to have been widely accepted. During the war, the fascist leader Léon Degrelle first legitimized the collaboration of its Walloon Rex movement as an attempt to recreate the Burgundian Netherlands – with German help – as a sort of Greater Belgium. Later he dropped this fantasy and aimed directly at the incorporation of the territory of Belgium into the German Reich. At the same time, anti-Belgian Flemish nationalists collaborated with Germany, in an attempt to destroy Belgium and take over political power in Flanders. The policy followed by the occupying German authorities certainly nurtured a Flemish nationalist striving for power. But this had strong Great-Netherlandic overtones, and its anti-Belgianism was counterproductive to the political and economic goals of the German authorities. In its efforts to achieve legitimacy, the German military command in Brussels gradually adopted more and more elements of traditional Belgian rhetoric, in which – once again – Belgium was depicted as the meeting-place of the Romance and Germanic cultures. This led to the paradoxical situation where, for strategic reasons, the German authorities were protecting Belgian national identity against the anti-Belgian and Flemish nationalist forces which they had themselves lured into collaboration.<sup>38</sup>

Among the majority of the Flemish people, who would have nothing to do with collaboration, there was renewed respect for the Belgian nation. In the



world of Belgian academic history, little changed. The majority of professional historians continued their research as if there were no occupation or fascist regime at all. Marnix Beyen describes the atmosphere in the period 1938-1947 as 'the historiography of common sense'. Belgian historians simply did not commit themselves to any great national cause. For most of them, their professional code was more important than political considerations. Even outspoken 'Belgian' historians did not refuse to write articles for books that tended to favour 'Flemish' history.<sup>39</sup>

## Linguistic Borders and Federalization

The situation on the academic level hardly changed in the first few years after the second world war. A politically uncommitted scientific approach remained the normal attitude of Belgian historians – this despite the fact that one of the major scientific enterprises was the writing of a 'General History of the Low Countries', which was first drafted in 1942 and was published, in 12 volumes, between 1949 and 1958. To a certain extent this enterprise seemed to represent the triumph of the Great-Netherlandic approach as it had been introduced by Geyl in the 1920s, but this was only partly the case. Many collaborators disagreed with the Great-Netherlandic idea. In several parts of the book, in fact, there was more of a juxtaposition of chapters, dealing with the North and the South respectively, than an integrated narrative in which developments in the two countries were presented in a cohesive way. It remained a patchwork of contributions, in which not only the different historical traditions of Belgium and the Netherlands led to different approaches, but where – apart from a few exceptions – the two national histories were presented as if they were almost completely different stories. And above all: as we explained earlier, the Great-Netherlandic concept had itself changed dramatically, mainly on the initiative of Van der Essen, but with the de facto consent of Geyl. Instead of a model in which the language as such was the determining factor, it had become a paradigm in which the historical reality of the 17 Burgundian provinces formed the core element. As Beyen has pointed out, the period immediately after the second world war was characterized by a situation in which the Belgian national framework was not regarded as an untouchable dogma by Belgian historians – Flemings or Francophones. The Flemings zoomed in to take a Flemish position, or out in order to gain an overall Dutch perspective. The Francophones moved from a Belgian to a Walloon position, remaining, however, more loyal to the Belgian blueprint. The long-term effect of this phenomenon was that two strands, Flemish and Francophone, gradually developed within Belgian historiography.<sup>40</sup>

This development on the academic level only partly matched the evolution in Belgian public opinion. Opposition to the collaboration by the anti-Belgian Flemish nationalists prompted a new Belgian nationalism during and immediately after the war. At the same time, the majority in the Flemish Movement remained loyal to Belgium. It developed a Belgian-Flemish stance, in favour of protecting the Dutch language in Belgium, but not aimed at the dismantling of the Belgian State. For a time it even abandoned the concept of Flemish political autonomy, because striving for this would have reminded Belgian public opinion too much of the policy of the pre-war fascist VNV. Such an association might have jeopardized its ultimate goal of a flourishing Flemish culture in the Flemish-Belgian sub-nation. This abandonment implied a return to the programme put forward by the Flemish Movement in the years prior to World War I.

However, this pro-Belgian stance was not to last. It was undermined by a widespread Flemish perception that the repression of Flemish collaborators after the war had been unfair. A large section of public opinion in Flanders was convinced that the motives of these Flemish intellectuals had been purely idealistic and this, in their view, diminished their guilt. There were also differences in the attitudes of public opinion of Flanders and Wallonia to the role of King Leopold III during the second world war. The King had refused to join the Belgian government in exile and had decided to remain in occupied Belgium. A majority of public opinion in Flanders and Wallonia condemned this attitude, but this criticism was far stronger in Wallonia. A referendum was held and it showed a different majority in Flanders, which voted in favour of the King, from that in Wallonia, which opposed him. Most of the votes nation-wide supported the King, but he preferred to resign in favour of his son, Baudhuin. This referendum was particularly important in the history of Belgium, as it indicated for the first time that Flanders and Wallonia could take opposing political positions.

For younger generations of Flemish intellectuals the credibility of the Belgian nation was further undermined by what they perceived as a wave of 'Frenchification' engulfing the country. Catholic youth movements especially were developing an exclusive loyalty to Flanders. From the 1950s onwards, an indifference to the Belgian national idea, or even anti-Belgian feelings, developed, even among Flemish supporters who years earlier had seen themselves as loyal Belgians. The Flemish political front underwent a certain amount of radicalization in the 1960s. The *Volksunie*, a new Flemish national party, then enjoyed electoral success. This party propagated the idea of a federal state with greater autonomy for Flanders. It was also an 'anti-repression' party, campaigning for amnesty for the condemned collaborators. It drew much of its support from among the younger generation that had been brought up in the Flemish cultural nationalism of youth movements.

In the meantime, a Walloon identity was developed south of the language border, based on the concept of its 'own territory'.<sup>41</sup> Unlike in the period after the first world war, when the Walloon Movement was still Belgium-oriented and linked with the Francophone communities in Brussels and Flanders, since the end of the 1930s it had progressively affirmed a more pronounced territorial character. A distinctive pattern of social economic development – notably the decline of the coal and steel industries – further encouraged this stronger focus on the Walloon region. Economic and social issues, rather than cultural ones, thus helped to create a new sense of Walloon identity. It gained momentum in the winter of 1960-61, when a general strike, which was led by the socialist trade unions and affected the whole country, was supported particularly strongly in Wallonia. This strike marked the beginning of a popular Walloon Movement, which drew up a programme of anti-capitalist structural reform, in which socialist and Walloon forces merged.

The government, alarmed by the revival of both Flemish nationalism and Walloon regionalism, wanted to bring about linguistic pacification. Its aim was to create single-language areas as far as possible, and so to push the language question into the background. Language borders were drawn in the early 1960s. Brussels became officially bilingual, and in some municipalities in Flanders and Wallonia close to Brussels, or adjacent to the language border, special arrangements were introduced for the other language group. But the government failed to push the language question into the background. The new language laws only served to highlight the differences between the two language communities. They encouraged the Flemish to strive harder to make their country completely monolingual, at the same time paving the way for the breakthrough of fully-fledged political Flemish nationalism among the Flemish people. The discussion about the Catholic University of Leuven in the 1960s served as a catalyst for this. The university was divided into two different sections, where Dutch and French were spoken, respectively, but it was situated in the Flemish area, just beyond the language border. The Flemish Movement – and particularly Flemish student organizations – saw the presence of such a large French-speaking group as a threat to the monolingual character of the Flemish territory, and demanded the expulsion of the Francophones under the motto 'Walen buiten!' (Walloons go home!). Flemish student revolts in 1966 and 1968 led to the fall of the government and finally to the splitting of the university. The French-speaking part (the Université Catholique de Louvain) was transferred to Wallonia (in Louvain-la-Neuve), with the Flemish university (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) remaining in Leuven.

The forced expulsion of the French-language section from Leuven increased anti-Flemish feelings in Wallonia and had the same impact on the Walloon Catholics as the 1960-61 strike had had on the Walloon socialists. Both events

provided the Walloon Movement with a basis for mass appeal. It also increased the attractiveness of the regional and language parties. These changes of attitude in Flanders and Wallonia led to the splitting, along linguistic lines, of all the political parties that were still operating on a Belgian scale (christian democrats, liberals and socialists). In addition to the nationalist parties, these newly formed monolingual parties in turn became the mouthpieces of their own linguistic communities and regions. The state structures were also to change in response to the changing perceptions of national identity. The reform of the Constitution in 1970 transformed Belgium into a federal state, with three Communities (French-, Dutch- and German-speaking), and three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels). Responsibility for cultural affairs was transferred from the federal level to the newly established community councils, while regional economic development came under the jurisdiction of newly created regional bodies. Further constitutional reforms, however, also had to be implemented. This made it necessary to include the language parties in government, including the Flemish nationalist party, *Volksunie*. Its willingness to compromise caused a major internal party crisis and led to a split. In 1977 the extreme-right and strongly anti-Belgian current broke with the *Volksunie* and formed a new party, the *Vlaams Blok*. This party has enjoyed uninterrupted electoral success since 1978, particularly because of its anti-migrant position, which it shares with the extreme right-wing political parties elsewhere in Europe. In 1980, 1988 and 1993 further constitutional reforms led to greater autonomy for the regions and communities. Today Belgium comprises – apart from the federal institutions – five councils or parliaments and as many governments, but in an asymmetric form: on the Flemish side there is only one government and parliament for both Region and Community. The German and French Communities have their own bodies, as do the Walloon and Brussels Regions.<sup>42</sup>

## Historiography in a Federalized Institutional Setting

The increasing importance of the regional and linguistic aspects of the nation- and state-building process went hand in hand with a reorganization of scientific activities. This also affected the teaching of the past. In the textbooks for secondary schools and in the teaching materials for universities, traditional national Belgian history – the History of the Fatherland – disappeared, after being under fire from two directions, above and below. The 12-volume *General History of the Netherlands* which was published after the war was followed by the launching of scientific reviews with a mixed Belgian-Dutch editorial board, and by the organization of Belgian-Dutch historical conferences.<sup>43</sup> This co-operation gradually evolved into a monolingual Flemish-Dutch connection, from which Francophone

Belgian historians were excluded. Since the 1970s, most of the Flemish universities have replaced the course entitled 'History of Belgium' by a 'History of the Low Countries', while the Francophone universities have continued to teach the 'History of Belgium'. The tradition of writing 'national histories' in the narrow sense did not disappear, however.<sup>44</sup>

A new edition of the *General History of the Netherlands* was published between 1978 and 1985 in 15 volumes,<sup>45</sup> and was far more than simply a re-edition of the previous one. Again, the majority of contributors were Dutch-speakers, and although it appeared to sanction the 'Great-Netherlandic' approach, it only did so in relation to the geographical boundaries of its subject matter. Where perspective was concerned, there was no underlying common concept that could be described as 'Great-Netherlandic', or any other 'national' character, to be found in it. Even then, the new 'standard work' received a good deal of criticism for its complicated structure, its lack of coherence, and its ambivalence about whether it was aimed at a general educated public or a specialist one. One critic even labelled the book an 'ornamental tomb' for historiography in Dutch on the Low Countries, instead of its 'monumental highlight'.<sup>46</sup>

The ideal of a general history of the Low Countries was gradually replaced by the concept of a comparative approach to the parallel and different developments in Belgium and the Netherlands. In 1976, Ernst H. Kossmann of the University of Groningen published a comparison between the histories of Belgium and the Netherlands since 1780.<sup>47</sup> It was a purely scientific endeavour, without any political or ideological purpose, and at some points it even 'deconstructed' the 'national past'. In 1993 a small team of professors from Belgian and Dutch universities wrote a single-volume history of the Low Countries in Dutch. J.C.H. Blom and Emiel Lamberts edited this publication.<sup>48</sup> It became a widely used textbook for university students of history, in both Flanders and the Netherlands.<sup>49</sup> Such a comparative approach has become more and more fashionable, in particular in research projects begun during the last few decades.<sup>50</sup>

The 'Belgian' historical approach was not only undermined by the top-down 'general Netherlandic' or 'comparative' approach – it also found itself sidelined by the greater degree of interest shown in the history of the communities and regions – so from a bottom-up direction. Since the 1970s there has been a growing scientific historiography dealing specifically with the linguistic communities. The history of the Flemish Movement was the first to acquire academic recognition. This happened as early as the 1950s. In the early 1970s, research on the Flemish Movement began to be organized at the Flemish universities on a regular basis. This coincided with the restructuring of the Belgian State along federal lines. An Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement was published in two volumes in 1973-75<sup>51</sup> – this contained some scientific articles without a strong political bias, but also many contributions of a rather propagandistic nature. In

the 1970s and 1980s several histories of Flanders and Wallonia were also published. There was obviously a need for a historical legitimization of the now officially recognized communities and regions.

In the 1990s, Flemish intellectuals distanced themselves somewhat from the process of nation-building in Flanders. The new encyclopaedia on the Flemish Movement, which was published in three volumes in 1998,<sup>52</sup> was more critical of the Movement than its predecessor in the 1970s. The majority of the contributions were no longer written by Flemish political activists, but by professional historians. All the contributions were very carefully reviewed by an editorial board, which comprised academics from all the Flemish universities. The publication of this new encyclopaedia may indicate that partisan history for propagandistic purposes is a thing of the past. A further sign of increased professionalism in the historiography of the Flemish Movement has been the publication, since 1980, of a scientific journal which is exclusively devoted to its history and has become the forum for discussion on that subject among historians.<sup>53</sup>

Walloon historiography in the 1990s is in some respects comparable to the Flemish publications of the 1970s. Books on Walloon identity and history more often have an overtly partisan bias than is at present the case in Flanders. This may reflect the fact that Wallonia is still in search of its own identity. It is grappling with questions such as the exact relationship between the Walloon region and the Belgian Francophone community as a whole.<sup>54</sup> One can expect, though, that here too the less partisan historiography will gradually become the dominant one.<sup>55</sup>

While professionalism in the historiography of the national past – in all meanings of the word – is apparently increasing, a new phenomenon is coming to the fore. Research and publication projects are receiving more financial support from the different governmental authorities on the federal, regional and community levels. This may be interpreted as a growing attempt at an official appropriation of the past.

In Flanders, both processes – the increasing professionalism of historiography and the official appropriation of the past – are leading to a certain alienation of the Flemish Movement from its historical memory. The historiography on the Flemish Movement, which is less anti-Belgian, less indignant about past oppression, and less moralistic, is also less committed to 'the cause'. Its usefulness for mobilization is decreasing. The radical militants do not like it any more.

Changes in the social basis and political character of the Flemish Movement have taken place in parallel with federal reforms. Since the end of the 1970s, Flemish nationalism has ceased to be a grassroots movement. It is no longer fuelled by teachers and youth movements, but has become, just like Belgian nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an 'official' reality. The Flemish national Movement has attained a degree of fulfilment with the creation of Flemish institutions

that are conceived as a manifestation of the Flemish national identity. Like 'Belgian' nationalism, 'Flemish' nationalism has become 'banal nationalism', to use the term coined by Michael Billig – an almost unnoticed official reiteration in everyday life, not recognized as nationalism but at the same time constantly flagged in the media through routine symbols and habits of language.<sup>56</sup> Besides this 'banal nationalism', its other face, the militant voluntary, intentional nationalism of the movement and their activists, is of course also still very much alive.

Very few young intellectuals feel attracted to Flemish nationalism. They have never experienced any form of 'oppression' by French-speakers and have never felt like second-class citizens in their own state. Moreover during their time at school they were never steered towards a commitment to the Flemish national cause, as was the case for previous generations. The new generation of Flemings often has the impression that their so-called Flemish identity is something invented and imposed upon them by the Flemish authorities and politicians. Some of them again embrace a Belgian national identity, because they think it has less ethnic content and carries more guarantees for the building of a democratic and open society. This shift must also be interpreted against a broader cultural background. A non-ideological postmodernism has become the predominant fashion in intellectual life, affecting approaches to history. Flemish historians are more eager to deconstruct the national identity than to make a contribution to it. Some go so far as to deny that the 'invented' concept of national identity and community refers to anything real.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the waning of ideology in these 'post-modern' times, and despite the fact that historiography is now abandoning an overtly partisan nationalistic approach, there is still an official use of the national past by authorities. The 'banal nationalism' they produce on the level of regions and language communities, in order to legitimize their political identity, is reminiscent of the closeness of the Belgian authorities to writers, artists and historians in the decades following Belgian independence.

The legitimacy of the new Flemish and Walloon authorities cannot be based on the concept of a Belgian nation as defended by Belgian patriots after 1830. For these new authorities, the 'Belgian revolution' of 1830 was merely 'a new historical regime' in a long succession of regimes which has led to the present form of federalization. Both Flemings and Walloons still voice their historical grievances against each other. The Flemings refer to the lack of respect Francophones have shown in the past for the Dutch language. The Walloons refer to an intolerant ethnic Flemish nationalism that showed its undemocratic face during World

War II. They also blame the oppressive Belgian state, as it is dominated by a Flemish majority (*l'Etat belgo-flamand*), and consequently discriminates deliberately against the Walloon region.

The way in which the practice of historiography reflects the process of nation- and state-building has, however, also undergone profound changes during the transformation of Belgium from a unitary state, as established in 1830, into the present federal framework. Flemish and Walloon identities emerged as sub-nationalisms in a unitary state, but then transformed themselves into sub-state nationalisms, which were to be integrated into a federal framework. These transformations have led to corresponding changes in how the Belgian identity has been conceived. All of these modifications were accompanied by a radical rethinking in historiography, even though such reinterpretations were not merely a reflection of changing attitudes on the part of political élites or public opinion. Individual historians have often defended their own political views on the future of Belgium. The history profession has protected itself against political intrusion through the use of its own professional standards. The institutional setting in which historiography has been put into practice in Belgium has been radically transformed since the time when all Belgian universities used French exclusively. Since the transformation of Ghent into a Dutch-speaking university in 1930, the 'Dutchification' of scientific life in Flanders has been followed by the federalization of scientific institutions. This reform of scientific policy has led to a mutual estrangement of Flemish and Francophone historians. Flemish historians are more intensively involved in co-operation projects with their Dutch than with their Francophone colleagues. Further reforms in the Belgian state and further shifts in national identities may be expected. Among the possible alternatives in a reform of the state, full secession cannot be ruled out. But any of the changes that come may be expected to find expression in new reconstructions of the Belgian past.

Discussions among Belgian historians are currently focusing on the correct method for linking collective memory to historical representation, and on how national identity should be fitted into historical narrative. Such debates are taking place on both the public and academic levels. As has been demonstrated above, historians in Belgium have now become far more cautious than their predecessors when it comes to legitimizing any kind of nationalism.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a better understanding of this whole situation it may be useful to clarify some terms and facts. The term 'Flanders' refers to the Dutch-speaking area north of the linguistic border which runs from east to west, 'Wallonia' refers to the French-speaking area south of that line,



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and 'Brussels' to the 19 municipalities forming the Brussels region: a bilingual island surrounded by Flemish territory. Today there are 5.5 million inhabitants in Flanders, 3.1 million in Wallonia and 1 million in Brussels. In Flanders the language is Dutch, like in the Netherlands; in Wallonia it is French, like in France. 'Flemish' refers to the region and the community, not to the language. The small German-speaking community in the eastern part of Belgium (now a part of the Walloon Region) is the result of territorial war gains made after World War I, and comprises less than 1% of the Belgian population, with approx. 70,000 people.

- <sup>2</sup> For more historical background see Louis Vos, 'Shifting Nationalism: Belgians, Flemings and Walloons', in Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter (eds), *The National Question in Europe in Historical Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 128-147, with a critical bibliography on the subject, and also Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (eds), *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting Identities 1780-1995*, London, Macmillan, 1998. An edition of important original texts (cornerstones of the Flemish movement), translated into English, is Theo Hermans (ed.), Louis Vos & Lode Wils (co-eds), *The Flemish Movement. A Documentary History. 1780-1990*, London, Athlone Press, 1992, with a bibliography of studies in English. See also: Lode Wils, *Van Clovis tot Happart. De lange weg van de naties in de lage landen*, Leuven, Garant, 1992, and Lode Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland. Mythe en geschiedenis*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> In this and the following paragraphs we have closely followed the important article (in English) by our colleague at the KU Leuven, Professor Jo Tollebeek, 'Historical Representation and the Nation-State in Romantic Belgium (1830-1850)', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 59, 1998, pp. 329-353. Quotation p. 330.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 334-335, referring to an article by Lode Wils, 'Het beroep op "de oude Belgische vrijheden" in het midden van de 19de eeuw', *Standen en Landen*, Vol. 32, 1964, pp. 113-22.
- <sup>5</sup> For what follows also: Jo Tollebeek, 'Historical Representation and the Nation-State in Romantic Belgium (1830-1850)', *op. cit.*, pp. 338-345, and also Jean Stengers, 'Belgian National Sentiments', in : Arend Lijphart (ed.), *Conflict and Coexistence in Belgium. The Dynamics of a Culturally Divided Society*, Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, 1981, pp. 46-60.
- <sup>6</sup> Tollebeek, 'Historical Representation and the Nation-State in Romantic Belgium (1830-1850)', *op. cit.*, p. 348.
- <sup>7</sup> Jo Tollebeek, *De ijkmeesters*, Amsterdam, Bakker, 1994, p. 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Tom Verschaffel, *Beeld en geschiedenis. Het Belgische en Vlaamse verleden in de romantische boekillustraties*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1987.
- <sup>9</sup> Lut Pil, 'Painting at the Service of the New Nation-State', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-50.
- <sup>10</sup> Piet Couttenier, 'National Imagery in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Flemish Literature', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-60.
- <sup>11</sup> Philippe Raxhon, 'Henri Conscience and the French Revolution', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-80.
- <sup>12</sup> Christian Berg, 'The Symbolic Deficit. French Literature in Belgium and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century National Sentiment', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-71.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 65, referring to Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Style et archaïsme dans la légende d'Ulenspiegel*, Brussels, 1973; Marnix Beyen, *Held voor alle werk. De vele gedaanten van Tijl Uilenspiegel*, Antwerp, Houtekiet, 1998.
- <sup>14</sup> Lieve Gevers, *Bewogen jeugd. Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de katholieke Vlaamse studentenbeweging. 1830-1894*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1987. Lode Wils, *Honderd jaar Vlaamse beweging, geschiedenis van het Davidsfonds*, 3 vols, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1977-1985-1989.

- <sup>15</sup> Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, Bruxelles, 7 vols, 1900-1932. See also: Bryce Lyon, *Henri Pirenne. A Biographical and Intellectual Study*, Ghent, Story-Scientia, 1974, with a complete bibliography of Pirenne's work, and Lode Wils, 'De Grootnederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, Vol. 61, 1983, pp. 322-366.
- <sup>16</sup> Jo Tollebeek, 'Historical Representation and the Nation-State in Romantic Belgium (1830-1850)', *op. cit.*, and *idem*, *De ijkmeesters*, *op. cit.* pp. 70-74.
- <sup>17</sup> Aristide R. Zolberg, 'The Making of the Flemings and Walloons: Belgium, 1830-1914', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1974, pp. 179-235.
- <sup>18</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Social Conditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- <sup>19</sup> Although in his book Hroch also deals with the Flemish Movement, he mainly confines himself to a description of the social background of the supporters of that Movement. The application of his 'phases' model to the Belgian situation has been worked out mainly by Lode Wils and the author of this article.
- <sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Gerard, 'The Christian Workers' Movement as a Mass Foundation of the Flemish Movement', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-138.
- <sup>21</sup> Chantal Kesteloot, 'Mouvement Wallon et identité nationale', *Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP*, No. 1392, 1993.
- <sup>22</sup> Chantal Kesteloot, 'The Growth of the Walloon Movement', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-161.
- <sup>23</sup> Lode Wils, 'De Grootnederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 1983, pp. 322-366; Louis Vos, 'Een kritische analyse van de Grootnederlandse geschiedschrijving', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1983, pp. 176-192.
- <sup>24</sup> Anne Morelli (ed.), *De grote mythen uit de geschiedenis van België, Vlaanderen en Wallonië*, Antwerpen, EPO, 1996. In this book see especially: Jo Tollebeek, 'De guldensporenslag. De cultus van 1302 en de Vlaamse strijd', pp. 191-202; and Sophie Rottiers, 'De eer van de zeshonderd Franchimontezen', *op. cit.*, pp. 65-75.
- <sup>25</sup> Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en aktivisme*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1974.
- <sup>26</sup> Bruno De Wever, *Staf de Clercq*, Brussel, Grammens, 1989; Bruno De Wever, *De greep naar de macht. Vlaams-nationalisme en nieuwe orde. Het VNV 1933-1945*, Tielt-Gent, Lannoo, 1994. Louis Vos, *Bloei en ondergang van het AKVS. Geschiedenis van de katholieke Vlaamse studentenbeweging. 1914-1935*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1982.
- <sup>27</sup> L. Deman (= Leo Dumoulin). *Handboek der Vlaamsch-nationale Geschiedenis*, Tielt, Lannoo, undated (probably published in 1924).
- <sup>28</sup> Hendrik J. Elias, *Onze wording tot natie*, Kortrijk, Steenlandt, 1932.
- <sup>29</sup> Hendrik J. Elias, *Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse Gedachte*, Antwerpen, Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1963-1965.
- <sup>30</sup> Pieter Geyl, *De Grootnederlandsche Gedachte*, 2 vols, Haarlem, Tjeenk Willink, 1925-1930; Pieter Geyl, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche Stam*, 4 vols, Amsterdam, Wereldbibliotheek, 1930-1959.
- <sup>31</sup> Robrecht van Roosbroeck (ed.), *Geschiedenis van Vlaanderen*, 6 vols, Brussel/Antwerpen, Standaard, 1936-1949.
- <sup>32</sup> Marnix Beyen, *Een bewoonbare geschiedenis. De omgang met het nationale verleden in België en Nederland, 1938-1947*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of History, KU Leuven 1999, pp. 592-595.
- <sup>33</sup> Lode Wils, *Vlaanderen, België, Grootnederland. Mythe en geschiedenis*, Leuven, 1994, p. 385.
- <sup>34</sup> Marnix Beyen, *op. cit.*, pp. 595-597.

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- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-45.
- <sup>37</sup> Wils, *Van Clovis tot Happart. De lange weg van de naties in de lage landen*, *op. cit.*, especially important for the postwar developments.
- <sup>38</sup> Beyen, *Een bewoonbare geschiedenis*, *op. cit.*, pp. 352-354.
- <sup>39</sup> This was the case for example with the publication of a book entitled *100 Great Flemings* see Marnix Beyen, 'Een werk waarop ieder Vlaming fier kan zijn. Het boek *100 Groote Vlamingen* (1941) als praal façade van het Vlaams-nationale geschiedenisbouwwerk', in Jo Tollebeek, Georgi Verbeeck en Tom Verschaffel, *De lectuur van het Verleden. Opstellen over de geschiedenis van de geschiedschrijving aangeboden aan Reginald de Schryver*, Leuven, Universitaire Pers, 1998, pp. 411-440.
- <sup>40</sup> Beyen, *Een bewoonbare geschiedenis*, *op. cit.*, p. 612.
- <sup>41</sup> Kesteloot, 'Mouvement Wallon et identité nationale', *op. cit.* and *idem*, 'The growth of the Walloon Movement', in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-138.
- <sup>42</sup> Jos Bouveroux, *Het Sint-Michielsakkoord. Naar een federaal België*, Antwerpen, Standaard Uitgeverij, 1993. Rolf Falter, *Tweedracht maakt macht. Wegwijs in het federale België*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1994.
- <sup>43</sup> The two most important and leading reviews are: *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* and *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*. For the history of the Belgian-Dutch (now Flemish-Dutch) historical conferences see: F.W.N. Hugenholtz, 'De Nederlands-Belgische historische congressen sinds 1939', *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1992, pp. 186-203. They are still organized every year: twice in the Netherlands, the third year in Flanders.
- <sup>44</sup> Lode Wils' *Histoire des nations belges* is subtitled (in the French edition of 1996): '*Belgique, Flandre, Wallonie: quinze siècles de passé commun*'. Political histories of the period since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, dealing with Belgium alone, have always existed. Classics among them are: the book by Theo Luykx, *Politieke geschiedenis van België van 1789 tot heden*, Brussel, Elsevier, 1964, and the one by Jan Craeybeckx and Els Witte, *Politieke geschiedenis van België*, Brussel, VUB-uitgaven, 1978, both many times amended, expanded and reprinted.
- <sup>45</sup> *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 15 vols, Haarlem, Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1977-1983.
- <sup>46</sup> Wim Verrelst, 'Een praalgraf voor de nederlandstalige geschiedschrijving' *Digō*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1982, p. 180.
- <sup>47</sup> Ernst Heinrich Kossmann, *De Lage landen. Anderhalve eeuw België en Nederland. 1780-1940*, Amsterdam/Brussel, Elsevier, 1976. Also published in English as *The Low Countries. 1780-1940*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978. Later expanded to: *De Lage Landen 1780/1980. Twee eeuwen België en Nederland*, Amsterdam/Brussel, Elsevier, 1986.
- <sup>48</sup> Recently this book was also published in English: J.C.H. Blom and Emiel Lamberts (eds), *History of the Low Countries*, Oxford, Berghahn, 1999.
- <sup>49</sup> The Dutch students, however, unlike the Flemish ones, do not have to read the chapters dealing with the Southern Netherlands – or Belgium – from the sixteenth century on.
- <sup>50</sup> A recent example is the book by the Flemish historian Raoul Bauer, *De Lage Landen, een geschiedenis in de spiegel van Europa*. Tielt, Lannoo, 1994. Some years ago, the Dutch and Flemish governments set up a framework for comparative research in the Netherlands and Flanders providing money for projects carried out by a team of two researchers, one Fleming and one Dutch, and normally lasting for four years.
- <sup>51</sup> *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, 2 vols, Tielt, Lannoo, 1973-1975.
- <sup>52</sup> *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, 3 vols, Tielt, Lannoo, 1998.

- <sup>53</sup> *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen op het gebied van de geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, 4 issues a year.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, Philippe Destatte 'Present-day Wallonia. The Search for an Identity without Nationalist Mania', and José Fontaine 'Four Definitions of Culture in Francophone Belgium', both in Deprez and Vos, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-228 and pp. 153-161 respectively.
- <sup>55</sup> So, inter alia, the publications by Chantal Kesteloot, a bilingual researcher at the Ceges (Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines) in Brussels, who is preparing a PhD on the Walloon Movement at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. See for example Chantal Kesteloot, *The Growth of the Walloon Movement*, *op. cit.*
- <sup>56</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage, 1995.
- <sup>57</sup> See for example the underlying tone in many of the contributions to the book by Raymond Detrez and Jan Blommaert, *Nationalisme. Kritische opstellen*, Antwerpen/Berchem, EPO, 1994.