

THE END(S) OF MEMORY

*Memories of the Second World War in Belgium **

- Martin Conway -

The memory of the Second World War in Belgium is now at an end. This does not mean that the war, and the conflicts to which it gave rise, have been forgotten, or will be any time soon. On the contrary, fed by a diet of political crises, linguistic and regional disputes, issues of dynastic succession and the conflicts inherent to a multi-racial society, the war appears destined to remain a central historical reference point. There is, however, an essential difference between memory – the contested space in which public discourses and private experiences (direct or indirect) overlap – and the use of historical reference points for the purposes of contemporary political, intellectual and social debates. Like all such distinctions, this one is messy, and initially indistinct. But, as the seventieth anniversary of the German invasion of Belgium in 2010 well demonstrated, a watershed has now been reached. The era of memory of the Second World War has come to an end, and has been replaced by the quarrying of the war, and more especially of the choices made during the Occupation, by essentially present-day causes seeking political legitimization and moral force for their arguments.

Historians should not regret change. Memory wars do not last for ever, and the long half-century stretching from 1944 to the various disputes surrounding Belgium's wartime past which characterised the 1990s can now be seen as a distinct period, which had its obvious beginning, its various and evolving dynamics but, also, its terminus. The reasons that it came to an end are undoubtedly multiple. They include, not surprisingly, the ineluctable process of generational change as well as the apparently interminable crises of the Belgian nation-state, which has rendered ever more contested the notion of any Belgian national memory. But the case of Belgium is, of course, not unique. The dynamics of memory have changed profoundly in contemporary European societies. The erosion of the social and institutional frameworks within which memory was formerly constructed and transmitted have created societies which, as Richard Lowenthal forcefully argued some thirty years ago, possess remarkably little by way of inherent memory¹. Thus, if despite everything which has happened since (1968, 1989, 2001) the Second World War and its associated conflicts remains the central historical reference point of most European societies, that period in history appears to have lost its coherence as a site of historical memory. Instead, encouraged by the acceleration in democratic access to the past generated by electronic mass

communication, the war has become an ever more chaotic space where exploration of the past often takes second place to a variety of contemporary political agendas². Whether this instrumentalisation of the wartime past marks in some way 'the end of History' – the loss of an organic interconnection of past and present – must remain uncertain. Perhaps it reflects no more than the end of a particular era of modern memory which might be said to have come into existence after the First World War, and which has structured explicitly or implicitly how historians identify and analyse memory across the twentieth century³. In Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, this particular model of modern memory had essentially four pillars : individual memory (be it direct or, especially important in Belgium, transferred through the long-term stability of family structures); state action, and those of the associations and political movements of civil society; collective memories, as constructed around particular events or sites (such as, most obviously, the Western front, or the Jewish genocide); and, finally the debates of public intellectuals and historians, whose prominence in debates about the Second World War owed not a little to the perceived pedagogic importance of the war as 'a warning from history', to borrow the title of an influential BBC series about the Nazi regime.

* I am grateful for the comments of Nico Wouters as well as the valuable advice of Dirk Martin.

1. See RICHARD LOWENTHAL, *Social Change and Cultural Crisis*, New York, 1984, p. 39. **2.** Regarding the transition away from memory to the instrumentalisation of the past, see MAUD BRACKE, "From Politics to Nostalgia : The Transformation of War Memories in France during the 1960s-70s", in *European History Quarterly*, vol. 41, 2011, p. 5-24. **3.** The issue of modern memory has been discussed by many, but see in particular the interesting observations of MONA SIEGEL, "'History is the Opposite of Forgetting' : The Limits of Memory and the Lessons of History in Interwar France", in *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 74, 2002, p. 772-775.

Historians are inevitably tempted to regret, as citizens but also more obviously as professionals, this end of the era of memory. In particular, it has devalued their role as privileged interlocutors who, as was very strikingly the case in Belgium between the early 1970s and the end of the 1990s, were able to intervene on the public stage on the basis of their specialist expertise of the "onverwerkt verleden" of the war⁴. Nevertheless, the end of these memory wars also brings with it an undoubted liberation. Historians of Belgium are no longer actors in debates about the memory of the Second World War, but can instead become historians of that memory, approached as a historical phenomenon rather similar to, say, the memory of the French Revolution of 1789 in nineteenth-century France. That indeed has already begun to take place, as indicated by the way in which much of the historical writing in Flanders by Bruno De Wever and others has moved from debating the reality or otherwise

of Flemish nationalist engagement with the Nazi New Order to analysing the way in which a particular discourse of Flemish wartime experience was established and propagated in post-war Flanders⁵. There remains, however, indisputably much to be done. The 'cultural turn' in much recent historical writing has led to much interest among historians of other eras in the phenomenon of 'social memory'⁶, and studies of memory of the war in other European states have multiplied in recent years⁷. There is, in short, a need for historians of twentieth-century Belgium to catch up.

Two aspects of that memory appear from the essays in this collection, and serve to highlight the way in which the memory of the war in Belgium assumed a distinctive shape in the half-century following the end of the German Occupation in 1944. First and foremost, memory of the Second World War was never a stand-alone phenomenon. This was different to the situation in France, where,

4. LUC HUYSE & STEVEN DHONDT, *Onverwerkt verleden. Collaboratie en repressie in België 1942-1952*, Leuven, 1991. The point de départ of this phenomenon was undoubtedly the controversy provoked by the publication in 1971 of JULES GÉRARD-LIBOIS & JOSÉ GOTOVITCH, *Lan 40*, Bruxelles, 1971. Its terminus might be detected in the *Jours de guerre* and *Jours de paix* television series of the 1990s. **5.** BRUNO DE WEVER, "La collaboration en Flandre", in José GOTOVITCH & CHANTAL KESTELOOT, *Collaboration, répression, un passé qui résiste*, Bruxelles, 2002, p. 39-48. **6.** JAMES FENTRESS & CHRIS WICKHAM, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992; ROBERT GILDEA, *The Past in French History*, London/New Haven, 1994; CELIA APPLEGATE, *A Nation of Provincials : the German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley/Oxford, 1990; GUY BEINER, *Remembering the year of the French : Irish folk history and social memory*, Madison WI, 2007. For a survey of much recent historical writing on forms of social memory, see PETER FRITZSCHE, "The Case of Modern Memory", in *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, 2001, p. 87-117. **7.** See, for prominent examples : SARAH FARMER, *Martyred Village : commemorating the 1944 massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane*, Berkeley/London, 1999; ROBERT MOELLER, *War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berkeley, 2001; CATHERINE MERRIDALE, *Night of stone : death and memory in Russia*, London, 2001; JAMES MARK, "Remembering Rape : Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary, 1944-1945", in *Past and Present*, No. 188, 2005, p. 133-161. See also the stimulating essay by TONY JUDT, "The Past is Another Country. Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe", in *Daedalus*, No. 121, 1992, p. 83-118.

as traced famously by Henri Rousso, memory of the German Occupation and of the Vichy Regime became a particular ‘syndrome’, seemingly possessed of its own logics and dynamics, albeit ones that contained echoes of previous eras in French history⁸. This was never the case in Belgium, where memory of the Second World War was from the outset inseparable from wider disputes about the nature of the Belgian political community and nation. This, moreover, was a debate that had begun even before the war began. Rather than marking a rupture, memory of the Second World War was inserted into a continuum of pre-existing ideological and political debate. One reason why that was so was that invasion was not a new phenomenon for many of those who experienced it. This was the *second occupation*, and memories of the Occupation of 1940-44 were structured by experiences and discourses that had been initially constructed in response to the first German Occupation of 1914-18. As Laurence van Ypersele, Sophie De Schaepdrijver and others have demonstrated, the First World War was in many respects the founding myth of the modern Belgian nation-state, and unsurprisingly it provided many of the narratives, images and forms of rhetoric through which the Second World War was experienced and subsequently remembered⁹.

More generally, however, the memory of the war and of the German Occupation became, from the very moment that the Allied troops arrived in September 1944, part of wider societal and political debates. Historians who study the Belgian case in a comparative context alongside that of other European states are often surprised that there was no dominant discourse of national patriotism in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Thus, as Fabrice Maerten has recently stated, “depuis l’été 1945 une mémoire plutôt patriotique de la Seconde Guerre mondiale est devenue une impossibilité politique”¹⁰. Instead, the memory of the war became enveloped in the summer of 1945 by the political and social passions generated by the controversy which surrounded King Leopold III. The King’s wartime actions provided the focus for these disputes, but the *question royale* was anything but an accident. Indeed, a major reason why it acquired (and retained, both in politics and memory) such prominence was that it followed the familiar fault-lines long established in pre-war Belgian society and political life between Catholics and Socialists, between Flemish and francophones, and between exponents of a new political order and the defenders of the parliamentary regime¹¹. Thus, although the *question royale* was most obviously a dispute about the King’s wartime choices, it was not at

8. HENRY ROUSSO, *Le syndrome de Vichy*, Paris, 1987. **9.** SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, *De Grote Oorlog. Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, 1997; LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, *Le Roi Albert. Histoire d’un mythe*, Ottignies, 1995. **10.** FABRICE MAERTEN, “L’historiographie de la Résistance belge. À la recherche de la patrie perdue”, in LAURENT DOZOU, *Faire l’histoire de la Résistance*, Rennes, 2010, p. 259. **11.** The absence of a large-scale historical study of the *question royale* is one of the more flagrant gaps in the contemporary historiography of Belgium. See, for some insights into the memory of the controversy, JEAN STENGERS, “Une enquête d’histoire orale sur la question royale”, in *Acta Historica Bruxellensis*, vol. 4, 1981, p. 445-471.



*The resistance apprehends members of collaborationist movements on 4 September 1944
in the Antwerp Pelikaanstraat. (Photo CEGES/SOMA No. 28403)*

heart a dispute about the war. It was a debate about the nature of Belgium itself. In Belgium, more than elsewhere in Europe, memory of the period between 1940 and 1944 did not possess its own agency. If, as Mary Nolan has suggested with reference to the case of Germany, memory of the war exists in "the interaction of the politics of memory and the politics of the present moment", in Belgium it was almost always the latter force that triumphed¹².

This was most obviously true in the case of the Resistance groups. The rapid Allied advance through Belgium in the first week of September 1944 had denied the Resistance a decisive role in the military liberation of their country. The *coitus interruptus* of battle serves to explain the consequent bitterness with which the various Resistance groups (of the right as well as of the left) asserted their right to play a role in the making of the post-war political order. Memory was a central weapon in that struggle. Confronted by the determined efforts of the Belgian and Allied authorities to marginalise their military and political power within liberated (but Allied-occupied) Belgium, Resistance groups sought to use the memory of their patriotic actions during the Occupation to force themselves, as during the events of November 1944, onto the Belgian

post-war political stage¹³. In this domain, as in so many others, they were unsuccessful. Divided between themselves and without significant support from the state or from the principal political forces, the Resistance forces largely failed to insert themselves into the post-war pantheon.

In part, this may have owed something to the nature of the Resistance itself. Its intense internal divisions – and the durable post-war conflicts to which this gave rise as to who had been the "true" Resistance – made it difficult for the Resistance to act as a symbol of Belgian patriotism. Moreover, the urban and clandestine nature of much Belgian resistance, such as intelligence-gathering for the Allied forces and the escape lines for Allied airmen, deprived it of the emotional appeal of the Italian or French *maquis*. The Belgian Resistance lacked a *lieu de mémoire* equivalent to the Vercors in France; indeed, in many respects its only places of memory were places of defeat : the prisons used by the German forces, such as the citadelle of Huy or of course, the fort of Breendonk¹⁴. But the post-war marginalisation of the memory of the Resistance movements was also, emphatically, a political assassination. Post-war political figures, such as Achille Van Acker, made occasional rather perfunctory

12. MARY NOLAN, "Germans as Victims during the Second World War : Air Wars, Memory Wars", in *Central European History*, vol. 38, 2005, p. 8. **13.** Regarding events of November 1944, see JOSE GOTOVITCH, *Du rouge au tricolore. Les Communistes belges de 1939 à 1944*, Bruxelles, 1992, p. 429-41; GEOFFREY WARNER, "Allies, Government and Resistance : The Belgian Political Crisis of November 1944", in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series vol. 28, 1978, p. 45-60. **14.** GILLES VERGNON, "La construction de la mémoire du maquis de Vercors. Commémoration et historiographie", in *Vingtième Siècle*, No. 49, 1996, p. 82-97. Regarding Breendonk, see BRUNO BENVINDO, "Les autorités du passé. Mémoires (in) disciplinées du camp de Breendonk, 1944-2010" in this collection.

references to the heroism of the Resistance¹⁵; however, neither the Socialist Party nor the Catholics of the CVP-PSC had any incentive to glorify Resistance groups, who were retrospectively associated with causes, such as Communism or Leopoldist patriotism which they regarded as their political opponents¹⁶. Thus, in the months following the liberation, the Resistance movements were pushed rather firmly to the political margins. The efforts of the left-wing resistance grouping, the *Front de l'Indépendance* (FI), to relaunch itself by holding a self-proclaimed *États-Généraux de la Résistance* in February 1945 was widely perceived as a Communist manipulation¹⁷, and the government sought to draw the Resistance groups away from the political stage and into discussions about the privileges and distinctions which their former members should receive. The crisis provoked in May and June 1945 by the release of the King briefly appeared to offer the possibility of some form of political renaissance for the Resistance; but the subsequent re-capture of the political initiative by the Socialist Party once again safely confined the *question royale* within the domain of party-political dispute¹⁸. Thus the Resistance groups were left to fulminate on the political margins, prompting the FI newspaper in Liège, *Le Perron*, to proclaim that "La Résistance est

outragée impunément. Les meilleurs de ses fils sont salis. On crache sur la tombe des héros. On souille leur mémoire"¹⁹.

None of this was unique to Belgium. Everywhere in post-war Europe, rulers were reluctant to glorify the actions of these civilian soldiers, whose wartime actions appeared to demonstrate the moral imperative of insurrection. But what was different in Belgium was the *invisibility* of the Resistance groups. While in Italy a glorification of the partisans was able to develop in the 1950s within the political sub-culture of the left²⁰, there was no such protective sub-culture in Belgium. The memory of the wartime Resistance movements therefore withered quickly, and was replaced instead by a more inclusive and less politically divisive memory of Belgium as a society of Resistance. Thus, the memory of individual Resistance groups – and more especially of the noisy and disruptive armed bands of the Liberation – was transformed into the memory of anonymous and disciplined Belgian patriots, who through their quiet and essentially apolitical heroism (most notably their assistance to Allied pilots and intelligence networks) came to symbolise across the post-war decades "*l'authentique Résistance*" of the Belgian people²¹.

15. Undated speech of Van Acker at Ciney (RIJKSARCHIEF BRUGGE, *Van Acker Papers*, 428).

16. JOSÉ GOTOVITCH, "La résistance après-guerre en Belgique : héritage glorieux ou fardeau encombrant ?", in *Les courants politiques et la Résistance : Continuités ou ruptures ?*, Luxembourg, 2003, p. 504-18; FABRICE MAERTEN, "L'historiographie de la Résistance...", p. 259-276. 17. *Front 14.1.45*, p. 1-2, and 25.2.45, p. 2; *La Cité Nouvelle*, 20.2.45, p. 1. 18. MARTIN CONWAY, *The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction 1944-47*, Oxford, 2012, p. 153-175. 19. *Le Perron*, 9.2.46, p. 1. 20. STEPHEN GUNDEL, "The 'civic religion' of the Resistance in post-war Italy", in *Modern Italy*, vol. 5, 2000, p. 117-126. 21. *Forces Nouvelles*, 17.2.45, p. 2, and 24.2.45, p. 4-5. See also the emphasis placed on female figures in the Resistance, as symbols of a true Belgian patriotism : e.g. FRANÇOISE VAN VYVE, *Une belge contre la Gestapo : Andrée De Jongh et le réseau Comète*, Bruxelles, 1986.

The entanglement of wartime memory in the disputes and conflicts of the post-war era serves to explain why, in contrast to many other European states, there was no dominant discourse of memory, controlled by the state or by powerful social actors. It has become commonplace in recent decades for historians of memory to emphasise how the opportunities to remember were closed down after the Second World War. In place of being allowed to construct their own memory of the war, the citizens of post-war Europe were conscripted, part willingly and part obligatorily, into a state-led patriotic myth-making which was often at odds with private memory²². There are elements of that account which could be applied to Belgium. In Flanders, in particular, the de-legitimising of a separatist Flemish nationalism after 1944 obliged that minority which had broadly supported wartime collaboration (though not necessarily its violent and extremist acts) to maintain a semi-clandestine memory of their wartime experiences, in which the repression carried out by the Belgian authorities after September 1944 served to legitimise retrospectively their wartime choices²³. But that experience, it must be emphasised, was exceptional. In contrast to the neighbouring

European states, Belgian forms of post-war memory were always irreducibly plural.

This plurality constitutes the second dominant feature of Belgian memory of the war. In part, it was the consequence of the way in which the post-war reconstruction of Belgium served to reconstruct and entrench the pre-existing pillarised divisions between Catholic, Socialist and Liberal milieux²⁴. Memory, like so much else, was shaped by these internal fault-lines, leading to the development of a plurality of divided memories, each with their own discourses and *lieux de mémoire*²⁵. These sectional memories, however, were more than the consequences of societal pillarisation. They were also the expression of the radical diversity of war memories, which more than in other European societies possessed few common points of anchorage, beyond the fact of the German Occupation. These memories were in some respects conflictual; creating the sense of an enduring "after war", in which divergent accounts of the war – imprisoned within what Benvindo and Peeters have termed "communautés mémorielles" – competed in a somewhat Darwinian conflict for supremacy²⁶. But, in other respects, they were simply diverse, reflecting the long tendency in

22. This was perhaps most obviously the case in the two post-war German states (RUDY KOSHAR, *From monuments to traces : artifacts of German memory, 1870-1990*, Berkeley/London, 2000; ROBERT MOELLER, *War stories; Josie McLellan, Antifascism and memory in East Germany : remembering the International Brigades, 1945-1989*, Oxford, 2004). **23.** BART DE WEVER, "Het Vlaams-Nationalisme na de tweede wereldoorlog", in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, vol. 3, 1997, p. 277-290. **24.** On post-war repillarisation, see notably DIRK LUYTEN, *Sociaal-economisch overleg in België sedert 1918*, Brussel, 1995, p. 123-56, and MARTIN CONWAY, "Belgium's Mid-Twentieth Century Crisis : Crisis of a Nation-State?", in *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, vol. 35, 2005, p. 580-582 and 588. **25.** The concept of divided memory has frequently been applied to the case of Italy. See JOHN FOOT, *Italy's Divided Memory*, New York/Basingstoke, 2009. **26.** BRUNO BENVINDO & EVERT PEETERS, *Les décombres de la guerre. Mémoires belges en conflit*, Waterloo, 2012, p. 14 and 19.

Belgium of distinct communities to co-exist in a form of “patchwork mémorial belge” within a common space²⁷.

This was reinforced by the obstinate localism that proved to be such a durable feature of Belgium's twentieth-century social and political culture. The absence of a top-down policy of memory left communities free to construct, in what at times seems a rather *ad hoc* manner, their own commemoration of the war. Chantal Kesteloot, writing in this collection, traces in telling detail the way in which each commune within Brussels set about commemorating the war and the Occupation in its own way²⁸. Many of the differences between the communes were indicative of broader divisions : thus, some communes chose to honour the left-wing Resistance and even the Soviet Union, while others held tight to a patriotic and royalist image of the war. Such differences were, however, less significant than the wider reality of which they were the expression : memory in Belgium was almost always local. This was a memory which in the case of street signs (or indeed war memorials and religious statues) was constructed quite literally *au coin de la rue*, and one rooted in the rich associational and communal structures of mid-twentieth-century Belgian life. It also had an improvised or amateur character, in which a wide range

of local organisations – ex-combatants and former Resistance groups of different political hues, Catholic and Socialist social organisations, and local history groups – each sought to articulate and disseminate their own accounts of what happened in Belgium during the Second World War²⁹.

This was therefore a memory in which state structures and institutions played a secondary role. In contrast to the determining role that states elsewhere in Europe, both west and more especially east, played in the construction of memory, state policy in Belgium was hesitant and uncertain³⁰. This reflected the broader nature of the post-war state, which after the Second World War succeeded in establishing itself as the arbitrator but not as the governor of Belgian society : in a plural society, the state ruled by consent, or more exactly by compromises with the principal social and economic institutions. Consequently, in the domain of memory as in many other fields, the state rarely initiated, acting instead in response to complex processes of lobbying and negotiation by others. Thus, although the resources of the state such as access to medals and pensions, as well as the less tangible power of the state to structure memory of the war through its policies of commemoration and education, all played a role in post-war memory, the state lacked the power to impose

27. See BRUNO BENVINDO, “Les autorités du passé” in this collection. **28.** CHANTAL KESTELOOT, “Toponymie et mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Les noms de rues à Bruxelles”, in this collection. **29.** The localism of liberation celebrations also emerges prominently from PETER SCHRIJVERS, *Liberators. The Allies and Belgian Society, 1944-1945*, Cambridge, 2009. Representations of the war years in film place a similarly strong emphasis on place, see PHILIP MOSLEY, “Anxiety, Memory and Place in Belgian Cinema”, in *Yale French Studies*, No. 102, 2002, p. 161-162. **30.** BRUNO BENVINDO & EVERET PEETERS, *Les décombres de la guerre...*, p. 20-22.



The Flemish lion and the Walloon rooster are united in a meeting of the National Confederation of Political Prisoners and Rightful Claimants during the time of the Question Royale. (Photo CEGES/SOMA No. 92029)

its memory of the war or to de-legitimise the memories of others³¹.

This pluralism does not mean that all memory was equal. Indeed, in many respects the central challenge for historians studying the memory of the Second World War in Belgium is to track the ways in which particular memories of the war waxed and waned over the course of the post-war decades. Thus, to take one of the most striking examples, a royalist and Leopoldist memory of the war was omnipresent during the immediate post-liberation decade : the powerful visual icon of the King as a prisoner sharing the collective suffering of his people drew on the deep reserves of monarchist patriotism in mid-twentieth-century Belgium, and constituted a central element of how many Belgians remembered the war in the later 1940s³². And yet that memory waned markedly from the mid-1950s onwards. Some of the reasons why that should have been so are perhaps obvious : the abdication of Leopold III in 1951 removed

its central figure and led to the construction of a modern and a-historical image of the Belgian monarchy around Baudhuin, the central attribute of whose public image throughout the early years of his reign was his youth and engagement with modernity, and therefore (and not accidentally) his separateness from the memory of the war and the actions of his father³³. Memories, however, do not simply obey such external changes. The waning of a monarchist and Leopoldist memory of the war was also related to the way in which the content of that image – its paternalist image of the monarch as the father of the people, the emphasis it placed on Leopold as the commander of the Belgian armed forces, and also its Catholic symbolism – no longer “worked” to the same degree in the Belgium of the 1950s and 1960s. It had, rather suddenly, become somewhat old-fashioned, even among those social groups (always more bourgeois than popular, and more Flemish than francophone) who had formerly constituted its emotional heartlands.

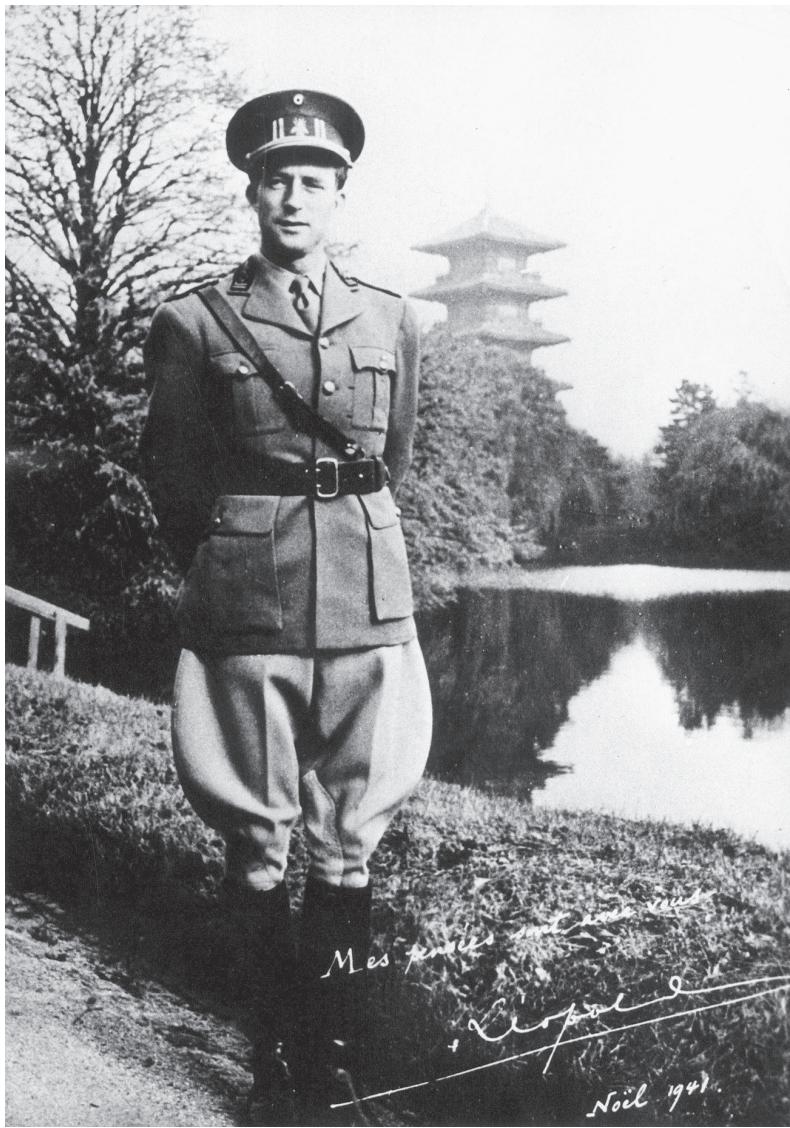
31. This is in many respects the central conclusion to emerge from Lagrou's comparative analysis of memory in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. See PIETER LAGROU, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation : Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, Cambridge/New York, 2000. See also *Id.*, “Victims of Genocide and National Memory : Belgium, France and the Netherlands, 1945-1965”, in *Past and Present*, No. 154, 1997, p. 181-222, and *Id.*, “The nationalisation of victimhood. Selective violence and national grief in Western Europe, 1940-1960”, in RICHARD BESSEL & DIRK SCHUMANN, *Life after Death. Approaches to a Social and Cultural History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, Washington DC/Cambridge, 2003, p. 243-257. **32.** The close association of this memory with the personality of the King also explains the energy with which the King's opponents sought to undermine (through releasing details of the King's wartime lifestyle) the impression of a prisoner-king. See, for example, Van Acker's speech in Parliament at the height of the controversy surrounding the King in the summer of 1945 : *Annales Parlementaires. Chambre des Représentants*, 20.7.1945, p. 531-537. **33.** Regarding Baudhuin, see notably CHRISTIAN KONINCKX & PATRICK LEFEVRE, *Boudewijn. Een koning en zijn tijd*, Brussel/Tielt, 1998. The modernity of Baudhuin merged with the cult of the Expo of 1958 in Brussels as a symbol of Belgium as a modern nation-state oriented towards the future. See notably CHLOÉ DELIGNE & SERGE JAUMAIN, *L'Expo 58, un tournant dans l'histoire de Bruxelles*, Bruxelles, 2009.

This is not the only such case. One can find other memories of the war which somehow failed to stay the course. A philo-Communist, almost republican, memory of the war, can be traced in the memories of some industrial localities of Wallonia. This emphasised the wartime struggles of Belgian working people, who had been abandoned by the ruling elites during the exode of 1940 and their subsequent accommodation with the German authorities, justified by the catch-all logic of the *politique du moindre mal*. But this largely disappeared from the wider national consciousness. Most strikingly, in Flanders the memory of the Resistance became restricted over the course of the post-war decades to former Resistance activists and to certain limited milieux of patriotic organisations and left-wing groups. Once again, wider political factors played a defining role in this process. The development of Flemish regionalist sentiment over the 1950s and 1960s privileged a vision of the Flemish people as the particular victims of the war years and, more especially, of the post-war repression by the Belgian authorities of those "idealist" Flemish intellectuals who had been drawn towards the Third Reich because of their long-standing marginalisation within the Belgian nation-state. Conversely, those Flemish people who had been active in Resistance organisations, motivated by pro-Belgian or in some cases pro-Communist sentiments, found their own war experience questioned as not having been 'truly' Flemish.

In Flanders, therefore, memory of defeat became more powerful than that of victory, largely occluding the substantial levels of support enjoyed by Resistance groups in Flanders during the final years of the German Occupation. These political realignments were reinforced by wider social changes, and more especially by the way in which the rapid pace of social and economic modernisation in Flanders from the 1960s onwards created a new Dutch-speaking Flemish bourgeoisie, unattached to the pro-Belgian mentality of their predecessors, and eager to take ownership of a specific history of the gradual emancipation of a Dutch-speaking Flanders from francophone dominance³⁴.

This regionalisation of memory followed the changing contours of political power. The political fracturing of the Belgian state, and indeed of the Belgian national community, that has occurred over the last half-century encouraged the development of forms of memory which stood separate from, or in their more radical form in opposition to, that of Belgium. The resources of the nascent regional institutions, of the educational systems, and of regional forms of commemoration, all gave a powerful impetus to the way in which the recent past has been perceived and consumed in Flanders and Wallonia. Thus, a Flemish history of the road to quasi-nationhood, through the suffering of the two world

34. MARTIN CONWAY, "Problems of Digestion. The Memory of the Second World War in Flanders", in *The Low Countries*, No. 13, 2005, p. 110-19; JOSÉ GOTOVITCH, "Flandre, Belgique : des mauvais Belges aux bons patriotes, et inversement...", in CHRISTIAN BOUGEARD, *Bretagne et identités régionales pendant la seconde guerre mondiale*, Brest, 2002, p. 369-378.



King Leopold III, who in May 1940 decided to stay by the side of his soldiers, resided in Laken during the occupation as a prisoner of war. On the background one can see the Japanese tower on the edge of the Royal Palace Domain.

(Photo CEGES/SOMA No. 32286)

wars, has been complemented by a Walloon account of the Second World War, in which the Resistance is interpreted as the expression of a local desire for liberation from not merely the German Occupiers but also from their Flemish New Order allies³⁵.

That regionalisation should have eroded the public space for a national memory of the wartime past is hardly surprising. Indeed, it has become conventional in recent decades to use contemporary political divisions to prove the ‘impossibility’ of any common Belgian memory of the wartime past, or indeed of any form of Belgian national community³⁶. Viewed in simply political terms, this is undoubtedly correct. Any attempt, for example, by the federal state over recent decades to construct a national narrative of the war years (as indeed of many other episodes in Belgian history) would undoubtedly have been destined to fail³⁷. But that is to ignore the extent to which, as post-war politics became increasingly fractured along linguistic and regional fault-lines, memory of the war became from around the end of the 1960s onwards a way of recapturing a sense of the place that once was Belgium. In face of the multiple crises of the

Belgian nation-state, the war years became a refuge, indeed almost a sanctuary, for a certain nostalgia for a Belgium united by a common patriotism and unanimous in its rejection of a foreign invader.

The association between Belgium and the memory of the war therefore deepened over the final decades of the twentieth century. More so than in other European states, the Second World War became a form of patriotic expression, one of the places where, as Jo Tollebeek has perceptively explored, *la Belgique de papa* could survive amidst the rapidly changing and fragmenting post-war landscape of Belgium³⁸. This was especially so for the particularly numerous cohort of Belgians who were born in the decade following the First World War and for whom the events of the second German Occupation marked a decisive coming of age, but who felt alienated by the subsequent cultural changes of the 1960s. For them, the war had been “a world of their own making” and remained *their* Belgium³⁹. And yet to see the memory of the war as having been indelibly marked, almost from its beginnings, by a nostalgia for a world that was disappearing would perhaps

35. CHANTAL KESTELOOT, “La résistance : ciment d’une identité en Wallonie ?”, in *La Résistance et les Européens du Nord*, Bruxelles, 1994, p. 406-418. **36.** This is also sometimes used to explain (or denounce) the perceived failure of Belgians to confront other “dark zones of Belgian memory”, such as the Congo Free State. See notably ANTOON VAN DEN BRAEMBUSSCHE, “The Silence of Belgium. Trauma and Taboo in Belgian Memory”, in *Yale French Studies*, No. 102, 2002, p. 35-52. **37.** The difficulties of a Belgian national history are reflected on in – and illustrated by – ANNE MORELLI, *Les grands mythes de l’histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*, Bruxelles, 1995. **38.** JO TOLLEBEEK, “Vaut le voyage : De Belgische plaatsen van herinnering”, in *Id. et al., België, een parcours van herinnering*, Vol. I, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 13-25. **39.** PETER FRITZSCHE, “The Case...”, p. 111.

be to risk underestimating the strength of a cultural Belgian patriotism. Patriotism was, after all, itself one of the principal beneficiaries of the war. Anti-Belgian voices were drowned out in 1944 by an outpouring of a patriotic euphoria which had its different social and regional accents but which was also emphatically inclusive⁴⁰. No longer tied to what one might term an Albertian formula of loyalty to the uniforms of dynasty and army, Belgian patriotism emerged from the Second World War with a more civilian, popular and democratic ethos. This was evident in the emphasis placed in post-war rhetoric on the celebration of the collective identity of the Belgian *people*: fiercely individualist and localist, the Belgians had nevertheless united during the German Occupation, as they had done repeatedly in past centuries, to reject the alien influence of a foreign invader⁴¹. This self-image of the Belgians provided a flexible definition of the Belgian nation during the two decades following the Second World War. Rather than seeking to impose a patriotic uniformity, it celebrated the localism and diversity of the people of Belgium; and, by avoiding the national political conflicts generated by the war, it focused attention instead on the efforts made by ordinary Belgians to counter, to frustrate, and by a linguistic elision to resist, the German Occupier

within their daily lives. This was an inclusive account of resistance (no initial capital or membership card required, women present and welcome) where, with the exception of the small minority of *mauvais belges* who had sided largely for reasons of opportunism or immorality with the German Occupier, all Belgians had come together in defence of their community. As such, this memory of the war also served to marry patriotism with the recognition of a democratic plurality. Belgians might speak different languages, have different social origins and belong to different social classes, but they were united by a shared understanding of Belgian values of independence and freedom.

The silences in this patriotic memory of the war were at least as notable as what was said. By denouncing the actions of small and unrepresentative collaborationist minorities, it largely avoided the more problematic issues of the complicity of economic elites and local government, but also of 'ordinary' Belgians with the German Occupier⁴². It was also strangely a memory with few victims. Perhaps predictably, there was little space for ethnic diversity, as manifested by the way in which a distinctive Jewish memory of the war was largely absent from the post-war narrative⁴³. But, more strikingly, it paid limited attention

40. See the comments of Chantal Kesteloot in CHANTAL KESTELOOT, "Belgique, Wallonie, France : les identités déchirées du mouvement wallon", in CHRISTIAN BOUGEARD, *Bretagne et identités...*, p. 353-368. **41.** MARTIN CONWAY, "Belgium's Mid-Twentieth Century Crisis...", p. 576-578. **42.** Such issues of complicity have begun to come to the fore in recent years. See LIEVEN SAERENS, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad. Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn joodse bevolking (1880-1944)*, Tielt, 2000; RUDI VAN DOORSLAER (DIR.), EMMANUEL DEBRUYNE, FRANK SEBERECHTS, NICO WOUTERS & avec la coll. de LIEVEN SAERENS, *La Belgique docile : les autorités belges et la persécution des Juifs en Belgique durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, Bruxelles, 2007. **43.** See VEERLE VANDEN DAELEN, "Het leven moet doorgaan. De joden in Antwerpen na de bevrijding, 1944-1945", in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, vol. 13-14, 2004, p. 141-186.

to the traumas and sufferings that the war brought about. Belgium did indeed have its war victims, as symbolised by the emotions released by the return of the political prisoners from the concentration camps in Germany in the summer of 1945⁴⁴. In addition, the names of those who died in the military campaign of May 1940 were dutifully added to the war memorials that had been constructed in almost every Belgian commune in the aftermath of the First World War⁴⁵. The victims of the second conflict were, however, on the whole too heterogeneous and, in the case of those who died while fighting for the Resistance or in German military units, too contested, to enable the dead to acquire the same centrality as had the fallen of 1914-18. Belgium, it seemed, was no longer remembered as a cause for which individuals had given their lives.

Instead, the collective memory of the Second World War was of lower-grade forms of suffering and material deprivation. The years of the Occupation were remembered, in family stories and the many published and unpublished individual accounts, as a time of hunger, of material danger (notably from the German police and Allied bombing) and of separation from family members,

as a consequence of the detention of francophone prisoners of war in Germany or the deportation of young men to work in the wartime Reich; but rarely as a time of death, bereavement, fear and ruined lives. Especially in comparison with what followed, the war was recalled as having been an exceptional time : of adventures and of bizarre incidents, when the normal patterns of daily life had been disrupted by the invasion of events and people from the wider conflict⁴⁶. Humour, laced with anti-heroic misadventures, formed a way of remembering the war which also served to reinforce a national self-image of resilience in adversity, of resourcefulness and of a patriotically legitimised culture of fraud and evasion. Memory of the war in Belgium was in this respect quite literally less traumatic than that in many other European states. Thus, in Germany, for example, the memory of the war became enveloped in the dominant framework of a nation of victims : of Nazism, of wartime military campaigns (above all, in the east), of Allied bombing, and of the post-war expulsions of ethnic Germans from the eastern territories⁴⁷. In Belgium, in contrast, the memory was of those who survived essentially unharmed, as was evident too in the way in which, in contrast to most other European states, the Belgian authorities did

44. MARTIN CONWAY, "Justice in post-war Belgium : Popular Pressures and Political Realities", in ISTVÁN DEÁK, JAN GROSS & TONY JUDT, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe*, Princeton, 2000, p. 133-156. **45.** Regarding war memorials, see notably AXEL TIXHON & LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, "Du sang et des pierres. Les monuments de la guerre 1914-1918 en Wallonie", in *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, vol. 7, 2000, p. 83-126. **46.** See, for characteristic examples DÉSIRÉ DENUIT, *Le village dans la guerre*, Bruxelles, 1980, and RENÉ HENOUMONT, *Au bonheur des Belges*, Monaco, 1992, or the large collection of personal accounts preserved in the JP section of the archives of the CEGES-SOMA. **47.** ROBERT G. MOELLER, "Sinking Ships, the Lost *Heimat* and Broken Taboos : Günter Grass and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany", in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 12, 2003, p. 147-181.

not recognise a specific medical category of war trauma⁴⁸.

This selective patriotic memory of the war proved to be a resilient but also an evolving emotional reference point, which responded to wider cultural changes across the post-war decades. Thus, it gradually shed much of the military imagery associated with the campaign of May 1940, which became, especially in comparison with the *fête populaire* of the liberation of 1944, something of a forgotten military conflict. It also incorporated perceptions derived from elsewhere, as in the way in which the increased attention paid to the Jewish genocide was retrospectively interpreted to demonstrate how the opposition engaged in by the Belgian authorities and more especially by civil society was a manifestation of Belgian attitudes of tolerance and social solidarity. In these ways, the memory of the war became more international while remaining distinctively Belgian. Despite the real and substantial shift that took place in popular loyalties in Flanders and subsequently in Wallonia away from Belgium and towards new linguistic and regional identities, the *patrie* of the war years remained for the large majority of the population obstinately Belgium. Indeed, it is tempting to see in the tensions between the demands for regional autonomy and self-government and the resilience of a patriotic memory of the war something of the emotional complexity of the

political and constitutional crises of the final decades of the twentieth century. The crises of the Belgian nation-state have been – certain radical minorities aside – more complex than simply the collapse of a sense of Belgian patriotism. Instead, the memory of the war shows how the emergence of a greater sense of linguistic or regional identity (coupled in some cases with a real antipathy to the Belgian state) has co-existed alongside more local loyalties as well as a sentimental identification with the Belgian national community.

The persistence of Belgium as ‘a memory nation’ even as many of the structures of the Belgian nation-state have been dismantled suggests something of the complexity presented by the study of memory⁴⁹. Memories are rarely entirely logical, and respond to psychological and cultural shifts in values that historians struggle to recapture. This is perhaps especially so in the case of a society such as Belgium, where the overlapping levels of personal, family, community, regional, ideological and national identities invested memories of the Second World War with an inevitably kaleidoscopic character. Thus, rather than seeking to reduce the memory of the war to some essential core, it would seem more appropriate to regard the memories generated by the war as an inherently plural phenomenon. Different forms of memory co-existed, sometimes in conflict but perhaps more often in a spirit of rough tolerance, not merely

48. SONJA VAN 'T HOF, “A Kaleidoscope of Victimhood : Belgian Experiences of World War II”, in JOLANDE WITHUIS & ANNET MOOIJ, *The Politics of War Trauma. The aftermath of World War II in eleven European countries*, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 76-77. **49.** The phrase ‘memory nation’ is derived from Pierre Nora's analysis of France. See PIERRE NORA, “General Introduction : Between Memory and History”, in Id., *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French National Past*, vol. I, New York/Chichester, 1996, p. 5-6.

within social groups and communities, but also within individuals. Though undoubtedly worked upon by post-war developments and disputes, these memories also possessed their own power as sites of memory outside of contemporary events. And it is perhaps this dual character – as a memory of the past but also as a reflection of an evolving present – which best explains why the memory of the war lasted so long and mattered so much to so many people.

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