

## CURRENT ISSUES IN BELGIAN HISTORY

### When was the end of Belgium? Explanations from the past

Bruno De Wever & Chantal Kesteloot

Since the formation of the last federal government which dragged on for 541 days and with which Belgium allegedly achieved a by no means enviable record, it has been known all over the world that there are serious political problems in the Kingdom as a result of tensions between the two language communities. The survival of the country has even been called into question.

Historians specialised in Belgian history searched for the origin of the current crisis. Their analyses are divergent, both in defining the moment at which things started to go wrong and in the reasons for the disintegration of the two language communities.

#### The sorrows of Belgium

Some months ago the British historian and great *connoisseur* of Belgium, Martin Conway, published a work entitled *The Sorrows of Belgium*. It was clear that the political context of the crisis the country was going through at the time when he finalised this book clearly made him re-interpret certain issues in his story<sup>1</sup>.

Conway's book deals with the years 1944-1947. The title of his book is a reference to the well-known autobiographical novel by Hugo Claus (1929-2008) about the Catholic anti-Belgian Flemish-nationalist environment in which he grew up during and immediately after World War II. The Oxford historian gives

it another meaning. According to him, the successful and rapid restoration of Belgian society in the post-war years was also the basis for "the failure of Belgium as a nation-state and as a political community"<sup>2</sup>. Here he obviously refers to the current crisis in Belgium, a process that according to him started in the 1970s, but therefore also had roots in the period he studied. "Unlike in France, Germany, or Italy, a change of regime did not take place after the Second World War. The absence of any renewal of the constitutional and political framework did have measurable consequences in terms of the increasing divorce between the institutions of the Belgian state and the rapidly changing social landscapes of the country. Regionalist sentiments and the political movements which sought to give expression to them (...) gained strength because they became the political languages through which were articulated the grievances felt by significant sections of the population towards the politics and structures of the Belgian state which emerged from the process of post-war reconstruction"<sup>3</sup>. The question of what exactly those renewals should or could have involved, he says he himself is unable to answer.

But he is without doubt the only one to situate the causes of the Belgian 'trouble' or 'problem' at such a late stage. Most authors go back to the 19th century, focusing their analyses on the development of the political system – democratisation and its consequences – or on the players and their confirmed or underlying identities or even the demographic evolution. The French-speaking Belgian state, created in 1830, could not be maintained as such.

1. See "Preface" and the final chapter "The death of Belgium", MARTIN CONWAY, *The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947*, Oxford, 2012. 2. *Idem*, p.2.

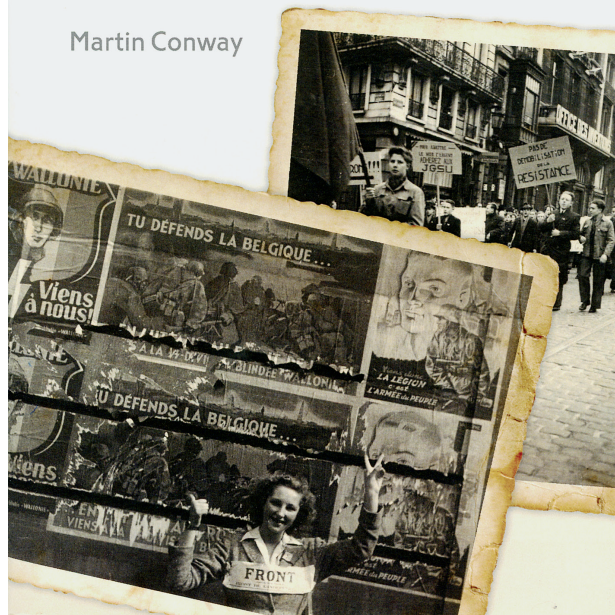
3. *Idem*, p. 370.

OXFORD

# THE SORROWS OF BELGIUM

Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947

Martin Conway



**Marnix Beyen**  
**Philippe Destatte**

**La Belgique va-t-elle disparaître ?**  
Itinéraire d'une nation européenne



***l'urgence de comprendre***

**l'aube**

### Should we blame democracy?

The Antwerp historian Herman Van Goethem is of the opinion that the introduction of the General Multiple Voting Right (1893) caused the rupture in Belgium. It was a 'critical juncture' (p. 254 : "With the democratisation of the right to vote Belgium took a new course which in the long term was to end in a division of the country")<sup>4</sup>. In a country in which the French language domineered in all areas of public life, where a majority of the elite did not speak Dutch and almost half the population did not know any French, this led to insurmountable political problems, in particular also because recognition of Dutch had become interwoven with a Flemish-national sentiment. The political democratisation resulted in a rapidly spreading Flemish-national sentiment : "the conviction that on Flemish territory, across all walks of life and classes, a Flemish people lived that was one coherent group and distinguished itself from 'the others'". This people demanded respect for its language. This might be achieved through recognising the equivalence of the two languages by implementing bilingualism in Belgium, but that was impossible because of the explicit reluctance of the Walloon population to learn Dutch. As a rebound effect, among the Dutch-speaking Flemish resistance to their own Frenchified elites increased and even before World War I the demand for complete Dutchification of Flanders and

therefore territorialisation of the official use of language was heard. The Flemish space gained socio-economic significance as well because Flemish intellectuals advocated a Flemish economy headed by Flemish elite. This economic Flemish nationalism preceded the development of a Flemish economic space.

Philippe Destatte, director of the *Institut Jules Destrée*, did not say any different when he wrote "(...) what radically changed everything was the transition from census suffrage to universal suffrage tempered by the plural voting right, while until then the power had been concentrated in the hands of a Walloon, Brussels and Flemish bourgeoisie – that of Ghent and Antwerp, who are called '*fransquillons*' ('those who spoke French')"<sup>5</sup>.

The democratisation of the right to vote therefore marks the end of a particular Belgium, for which the French language constituted the only reference language. Moreover, the question that could be raised is finding out whether all the changes introduced to firstly transform the linguistic profile and then the political profile of this state comprised pacification mechanisms – i.e. the thesis particularly upheld by Witte and Van Velthoven<sup>6</sup> – or if these same mechanisms generated a kind of runaway process (of which was not known where the end would

4. HERMAN VAN GOETHEM, *Belgium and the Monarchy. From National Independence to National Disintegration*, Brussels, 2011 (and in particular chapter 3 : "The First Cracks in the Façade of National Unity"); ELS WITTE ELS & HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN, *Languages in Contact and in Conflict. The Belgian Case*, Kapellen, 2011; HERMAN VAN GOETHEM, *What Can History Teach Us About the Current Impasse and Crisis in Belgium?* Full text consulted online on 2 December 2012 on : <http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu/rebel-initiative-ebooks/ebook-6-history-and-future-of-belgium-institutions>. 5. MARNIX BEYEN & PHILIPPE DESTATTE, *La Belgique va-t-elle disparaître? Itinéraire d'une nation européenne*. Débat animé par Luc Hossepied, 2011, p. 40-41. 6. ELS WITTE ELS & HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN, *Languages in Contact and in Conflict*.

be)<sup>7</sup>. In this sense Vincent Dujardin brings up the illusion of the final point from the French-speaking part while recalling the weakness of the Belgian national sentiment in the 19th century<sup>8</sup>.

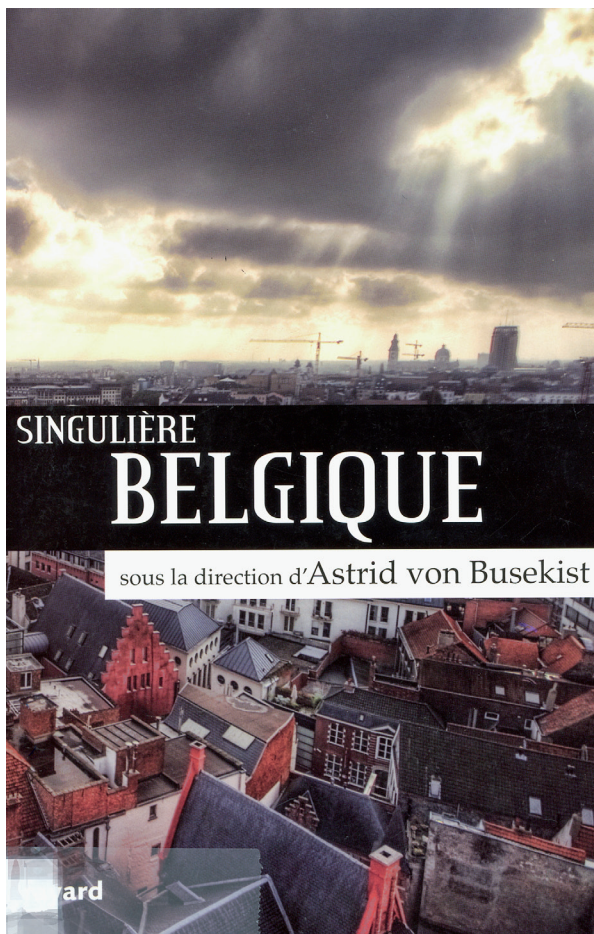
Van Goethem is not the only Flemish historian to investigate the causes of the rupture or dysfunctioning of the Belgian state at this end of the 19th century. In his overview of the historiography of the Flemish movement, Marnix Beyen points out the radicalisation of part of the Flemish movement and the anti-Belgicist elements present since the end of the 19th century<sup>9</sup>. Maarten Van Ginderachter also drew attention to the fundamentally different views that were to have inspired the Ghent POB federation on the one hand and the Borinage federation on the other<sup>10</sup>. While some underlined the weakness of the Belgian national feeling in the 19th century, French-speaking historians on their part focused much more on the watersheds that were the two world wars, emphasising the paradox that it

was precisely with the Great War that Belgian nationalism triumphed, whereas it seemed to mark a rupture in Flemish identity. The latter approach is clearly in the wake of both Jean Stengers<sup>11</sup> and Lode Wils<sup>12</sup>. The former particularly pointed out the apogee of Belgian nationality that World War I constituted – with the paradox that it also established the first attacks on it – while the latter emphasised the role played by the ‘*Flamenpolitik*’ in the break-down process of the Belgian state.

### Or King Albert I?

However, the fact that even before World War I Flemish nationalism had nestled in the heads and hearts of many Flemish-minded people is not denied by the Leuven historian Lode Wils, who devoted most of his voluminous work to the history of the Flemish movement<sup>13</sup>. In the five-part biography of Frans Van Cauwelaert he calls the Catholic Flemish-minded leader a Flemish nationalist in the sense that the Flemish people took precedence<sup>14</sup>. Van Cauwelaert only accepted

7. ASTRID VON BUSEKIST (ED.), *Singulière Belgique*, Paris, 2012, p. 229 and following. 8. VINCENT DUJARDIN, *The New Challenges of Belgian Federalism : a Historical Approach*, Full text consulted on 2 December 2012; <http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu/rebel-initiative-ebooks/ebook-6-history-and-future-of-belgium-institutions>. 9. MARNIX BEYEN, “Een uitdijend verhaal. De historiografie van de Vlaamse beweging, 1995-2005”, in *National movements and historiography. Proceedings of the symposium on the historiography of the Flemish movement and other national movements in Europe*, Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen, LXIV, 2005, p. 18-34. 10. MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgisch socialisme voor WOI*, Tiel, 2005. 11. JEAN STENGERS & ELIANE GUBIN, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge. De 1830 à 1918, Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Bruxelles, 2002. 12. This point of view was developed in numerous publications by Lode Wils. It was formulated for the first time in his work *Flamenpolitik en Activisme* (Leuven, Davidsfond, 1974). This was to lead to numerous debates among Flemish historians. 13. For a survey of his collected works see: LIEVE GEVERS & LOUIS VOS, “Lode Wils historicus en hoogleraar”, in LODE WILS, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland : Mythe en Geschiedenis*, Leuven, 1994. 14. LODE WILS, *De Messias van Vlaanderen. Frans Van Cauwelaert 1880-1910*, Antwerpen/Baarn, 1998; *Frans Van Cauwelaert en de barst van België 1910-1918*, Antwerpen/Baarn, 2000; *Frans Van Cauwelaert afgewezen door koning Albert I. Een tijdbom onder België*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2003; *Burgemeester Van Cauwelaert 1922-1932. Schepper van een Nederlandstalig Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2005; *Frans Van Cauwelaert 1932-1961. Triomf, val & wederopstanding*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2009.



the Belgian state to the extent that it recognised the Flemish people and to the extent that the Flemish population accepted the Belgian state. His 'Minimum Programme', the demand for full equality between the Flemish and the Walloons that was put in writing during World War I, comprised too many reforms (splitting up of army units, monolingualism in education, administration, reform of the central administrations) to call him a Flemish nationalist. In the historiography the latter term is generally reserved for the anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism that also developed in World War I in the bosom of Flemish nationalist collaborators (the so-called 'activists') in the occupied country and the Front Movement of Flemish-nationalist soldiers at the *IJzer* front who demanded Home Rule. The difference between Van Cauwelaert and this movement is anti-Belgicism. Van Cauwelaert wanted to realise his demands by means of the parliamentary route in a Belgian context. From the outset, the anti-Belgian Flemish nationalists were on a revolutionary path and wanted to destroy Belgium. According to Wils, the German occupier was the instigator of this in an attempt to bring the Belgian territory into the German sphere of influence. But he also considered Van Cauwelaert as responsible for the radicalisation of Flemish nationalism because he consistently refused to accomplish the breach with the activist collaborators who he actually deemed to be victims of Belgian political immobilism. He did this because he was driven by a Flemish-national consciousness that he put above a Belgian consciousness. It brought him the reproach

from French speakers that he was a puppet of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism. This and the fact that King Albert I did not want to give up the idea of a bilingual Flanders explains why the so-called 'Minimum Programme' remained unexecuted after the war. This fact was a 'point of no return'. According to Wils, a decisive blow was thus delivered to the enthusiastic attachment of the Dutch-speaking population to unitarian Belgium. After the Flemish supplied 70% of those killed in action, equality was refused. This also gave the activists the opportunity to transfer their anti-Belgian hatred to the Front Party on the one hand and on the other hand "the moral detachment of the Flemish soul towards the Belgian state unity" as Van Cauwelaert said, came about in a much wider circle<sup>15</sup>. The title of the third part of the biography leaves little to the imagination : *Frans Van Cauwelaert rejected by King Albert I : a time bomb under Belgium*. Van Goethem thought that Wils had Albert I take the blame for immobilism on a linguistic level, which in the first place was due to the political dissension on the Flemish side, also among Catholics<sup>16</sup>. Wils replied that Van Goethem, just like Van Cauwelaert himself, had the wool pulled over his eyes by Albert I<sup>17</sup>. Together with the French-minded members of the government, the latter thought that those concessions were not necessary since the population loathed activism. According to Wils, Van Cauwelaert had a better assessment of the situation. He realised that Flemish opinion would not tolerate the preservation of the pre-war situation.

15. *Idem*, 2003, p. 127 & 163-165. 16. HERMAN VAN GOETHEM, *Belgium*, p. 138-142. 17. "Controverse onder historici. Een triptiek", in *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen op het gebied van de geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, LXVIII (2009), 1, p. 6-62. With contributions of Lode Wils, Herman Van Goethem and Harry Van Velthoven.

The analyses of Van Goethem and Wils are not irreconcilable. In the case of the former it involves an almost unavoidable process that coincided with democratisation and which the political players underwent. Conversely, Wils ascribed greater potency to the political lead players and therefore indicated 'those responsible' for the 'rupture in Belgium' in a far more decisive way.

We can find the same conditional acceptance of Belgium on the Walloon side. The electoral defeat of the liberal-socialist coalition as well as the strengthening of the absolute majority of the Catholic Party in 1912 instigated a first phase of radicalization by the Walloon Movement, described by Philippe Destatte<sup>18</sup>. Yet the idea of administrative separation was not developed and this entire episode did not yield any concrete results. In any case, it did not feed any kind of anti-Belgian sentiments similar to the ones developed on the Flemish side. The First World War marked a rupture and it (temporarily) reconciled the Walloon Movement with the unitary Belgian state. One has to wait for the Second World War really, before this process of distancing oneself from Belgium would rear its head again. The sentiment would surface again during the *national* Walloon Conference in 1945, when the Walloon Movement voted in large numbers in favour of annexation of Wallonia to France.

### Revision of history

The events of World War II seemed to be overlapping World War I. In short it could be said that altogether the rupture

was consolidated. On this basis, distinct memories of the war took root and, in the long run, the entire history of Belgium was revisited. In other words, there were elements that until then might have seemed to be of insignificant, marginal or even unconvincing consequence; the anti-Belgicism within the Flemish movement, the identification of the Catholic Party or of certain socialist federations with Flanders. However, these elements took on another perspective because they were included in a long-term view, and hence they were looked upon as an early warning sign of phenomena with a much wider scope. Nevertheless one could ask questions about the actual weight in the context under consideration. Is it not only in light of the subsequent developments that they are going to make full sense more than at the time of their occurrence? In other words, the impact of anti-Belgicism would not be what it is if there had not been the subsequent evolution of Flemish nationalism; would the 'Letter to the King' by Destrée appear to be the founding document of the Walloon movement if there had not been the later radicalism, the struggle against neutrality in the 1930s to the federalism of André Renard, erasing by the same token the Belgian nationalism of its authors at the end of the Great War?

The founding elements can only be contemplated in the long term, pushing other facts into the background or even into oblivion. Philippe Destatte, in his dialogue with Marnix Beyen, recalled : "Gradually

18. PHILIPPE DESTATTE, *L'identité wallonne. Essai sur l'affirmation politique de la Wallonie (XIX-XX èmes siècles)*, Charleroi, 1997, p. 78 and following.

therefore, from the beginning of the 1960s, panic took hold on the Walloon side. The Walloons very obviously realised that in the national Parliament a Flemish majority was being formed around a cohesion of the Flemish political parties. As a matter of fact this cohesion arose before World War I (...)<sup>19</sup>.

### **Languages in contact and in conflict**

In *Languages in Contact and in Conflict*, the best analysis of the Belgian language conflict available in English, the Brussels historians Els Witte and Harry Van Velthoven mark no decisive turning points in the demise of the Belgian nation-state<sup>20</sup>. They focus mainly on the power processes that lurked behind the compromises that attempted to solve the language problem.

As a result of political democratisation (1893; 1919-1921) and socio-economic developments, maintaining French as the dominant language was no longer an option so that the illusion of a nation-state with French as the standard language had to be abandoned as well. The compromise consisted of the formation of legally monolingual regions and a monolingual administrative context with the language laws of the 1930s.

Without explicitly saying so, here however the authors indicate a decisive turning point of the Belgian nation-state : "In particular when monolingualism extends to both the public and the private sector, sub-nation building movements can easily develop within the language areas which seek a political expres-

sion in federalisation, confederalisation or separatist movements"<sup>21</sup>.

The authors emphasise the importance of the connection between language and linguistic politics on the one hand and the socio-linguistic analysis of linguistic behaviour on the other. More precisely they very particularly pointed out three aspects explaining the failure of this 'Belgian plan' : to begin with, the resistance of the Flemish movement to the existence of one single official language, the refusal of general bilingualism on the basis of the principle of the personality of the laws, an option rejected by the Walloon movement, and finally the rejection of bilingualism in Brussels. This statement deserves further reflection since it permits going back to a sensitive question : why was bilingualism not introduced in Belgium and, implicitly, to what extent can monolingualism be considered as one of the causes for the failure of the formation of a Belgian identity? It should be noted that the strategies developed from the introduction of the first language laws to those of 1932 devoted to monolingualism of the regions. At that time, which is considered to be a key period in the development of the Belgian state, for various reasons neither the Flemish movement nor the Walloon movement really asked for this bilingualism. For reasons connected with the respective status of the two languages, the Flemish movement could not allow the co-existence of French and Dutch on Flemish territory. Even if it had long acknowledged a dual strategy – the principle of personality in Flanders and territoriality in Wallonia – the Walloon

19. MARNIX BEYEN & PHILIPPE DESTATTE, *La Belgique va-t-elle disparaître?*, p. 43. 20. ELS WITTE & HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN, *Languages in Contact and in Conflict*. 21. *Idem*, p.20.

HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN



"Les évidences des  
uns sont rarement les  
évidences des autres"

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movement was against giving it up to avoid having to allow a place for Dutch in Wallonia. This left Brussels and the central state : for the Flemish movement bilingualism had to be the rule there. For the Walloon movement, the exception had to remain the rule<sup>22</sup>. On this level the two movements were opponents, but not in the general principles that had to govern Flanders on the one hand and Wallonia on the other.

In his most recent book, Harry Van Velthoven calls the language laws of the 1930s a “historical tipping point”<sup>23</sup>. The principle of territoriality was further achieved with the establishment of the language border (1962), the division of the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* and the transfer of the French part to Wallonia, the Flemish decree on the use of language in companies (1973), the division of the province of Brabant (1994), and finally the division of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde district (2012). According to Van Velthoven, a second point of no return was the division of the national parties (1968-1978) which eliminated the internal compromise formation<sup>24</sup>. Increasingly the negotiations occurred from community to community. It led to the image of the existence of ‘two democracies’. This was also promoted by the direct election of the regional parliaments (1993) which was like a third point of no return, says Van Velthoven. According to Herman Van

Goethem it was the state reform of 1970 that started a ‘state abolition process’, which since that time increasingly accelerates through internal dynamism. The dynamism was boosted by the disappearance of national political parties and by the duality of Belgian federalism that unavoidably leads to unbridgeable contrast. Finally the separate media landscape also plays an undermining role. Mainly the fact that the audiovisual media are completely embedded in the two language communities results in the formation of two public opinions, whereby the media also cultivate mutually strengthening stereotype imaging<sup>25</sup>.

#### A different country

On the occasion of 175 years of Belgium in 2005, a series of historians, both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking, initiated a new history of Belgium. The first two volumes – published in 2005 and in 2006 respectively – had the simple title of *New History of Belgium*. In contrast, the two following volumes – admittedly brought out by another publisher – have resolutely more interpretative titles : *Does unity always mean strength* for the first one and *A different country* for the second, which appeared in 2008 and in 2009 respectively. The choice of a title is indeed part of a commercial process, but nonetheless it often reveals more profound underlying aspects.

22. CHANTAL KESTELOOT, *Au nom de la Wallonie et de Bruxelles français. Les origines du FDF*, Bruxelles, 2004. 23. HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN, *Waarheen met België? Van taalstrijd tot communautaire conflicten*, Brussel, 2011, p. 320. 24. *Idem*, p. 254. 25. HERMAN VAN GOETHEM, *Belgium and the Monarchy. From National Independence to National Disintegration*, Brussels, 2011, p. 264-265.

NOUVELLE HISTOIRE DE BELGIQUE

1950 - 1970

Vincent Dujardin & Michel Dumoulin

## L'union fait-elle toujours la force ?



LE CRI  
HISTOIRE

NOUVELLE HISTOIRE DE BELGIQUE

1970 - 2000

Marnix Beyen & Philippe Destatte

## Un autre Pays



LE CRI  
HISTOIRE

Although the first two volumes are signed by French-speaking and Dutch-speaking historians, the contributions – with the exception of the part entitled *Belgium without a King*<sup>26</sup> – are in fact clearly separate and there is no common conclusion in either of the volumes. Therefore it is difficult to confirm (or refute) that the words of one person are also borne out by the others. For this reason it is far more interesting to focus on the last volume, which is the fruit of an unexpected duo, the director of the *Institut Jules Destrée*, Philippe Destatte, and the professor at the University of Antwerp, Marnix Beyen. With a view to the period under consideration, 1970-2000, the time has passed for analysing the facts of which the importance can only be seen in the light of the subsequent evolution. In fact, the existence of Flemish, Walloon and Brussels people can no longer be denied – and this is an element in full development – the same can be concluded regarding the loss of national supremacy in favour of transnational structures and bodies. The work appeared in the midst of full-blown political crisis (2009) and the authors emphasise the differences that from then on separate Flemish, Walloon and Brussels people who could “give the old unitarian Belgium the final blow”. Since then it is not about writing a national history, but rather a history of the Belgian nations, an approach which follows in the wake of Lode Wils, while adding Brussels, an element lacking in the title of the Leuven historian<sup>27</sup>.

Furthermore, the work of Beyen and Destatte especially emphasises the peculiarity of Brussels. The capital city increasingly fails to find its place in the ‘national’ projects of Flanders and Wallonia and, more than the rest of the country, it clearly seems to be simultaneously the relic of the old Belgian nation while also being its most international showcase. More than others, this work fits in the post-unitarian perspective in the form of an essay which is not about at the same time erasing the differences in approach or sensitivity in the historical view of each of the authors, but also about their respective specialities and institutional memberships. It is interesting that beyond the Flemish and Walloon claims, the authors register the Belgian identity as “the weakening of Belgium”. Here again the reasons are simultaneously upstream and downstream : increasing internationalisation with the emergence of a transnational identity on the one hand and the build-up – via the media landscape – of Flemish, Walloon and/or French-speaking identities on the other. From then on the actual Belgian identity is found to be deprived of backing but also of anchorage at the same time : reality and representations become intertwined. The elements that could epitomise this Belgian identity have become objects of division – history, memory – or of conflict : monarchy no longer as an institution but as a symbol of cohesion, ‘the notion of us’. But the authors also bring to the fore other symbols which, according to them, cease

26. In fact, the first two volumes each consist of three clearly distinct sections and in addition the numbering restarts at each section. Only the section *La Belgique sans Roi 1940-1950* was co-written by Mark Van den Wijngaert and Vincent Dujardin, but in fact the former wrote the section “War and Occupation” and the latter “The Regency 1944-1950. The keys to a new Belgium”. Nevertheless there is a conclusion about the entire period under consideration, i.e. 1939-1951. 27. First published in Dutch : *Van Clovis tot Happart. De lange weg van de naties in de Lage Landen* (Low countries) (Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1992) while the French version was entitled *Histoire des nations belges. Belgique, Flandre, Wallonie : quinze siècles de passé commun*, Quorum, Ottignies, 1996.

to be the incarnation of a certain Belgium : social security – since it is read differently – or furthermore immigration – since it entails overly multiform projects and/or perceived as disruptive by certain sections of the population. However, if these elements have ceased to be the driving forces of Belgian identity, Beyen and Destatte nevertheless underline that alternative nations do not yet have a clear view of their future : regional or community logics, federalism with two, with three, with four...

#### ... with different collective memories

An essential question is whether the failure of Belgium of 1830 can be explained in the light of current collective identities. It goes without saying that this question is allocated to others. How do you measure the success of a collective project? To us, cross-interrogation of the role of the state seems significant. Various recent investigations have precisely pointed out this weakness of the state, the lack of intervention, and the fact that the national authorities have been incapable of creating a collective Belgian memory. We can enjoy the absence of an imposed discourse but at the same time wonder to what extent the many recollections have generated irreconcilable plural memories. Is this weakness or absence of a collective Belgian memory connected with the strength of competing memories or should the causes be sought in the very

conditions as such of the birth of the Belgian state or Catholic or liberal conditions already bearing distinct national projects? In other words, is the constitutional weakness of the Belgian state consequently transferred to other spheres? It is for example significant to conclude that certain elements that could have been used at first to consolidate Belgian identity could ultimately be used again to serve as a springboard for Flemish identity<sup>28</sup>, for Walloon identity<sup>29</sup>. In other words, the weakness of the Belgian discourse led simultaneously to it serving as the basis for reinterpretations but also to the development of other discourses. Clearly the movement gained momentum after World War I simultaneously in a context of increasing democratisation – universal male suffrage – but also to the rise in power of Flemish nationalism that for the first time was going to incarnate the distinct political forces which were rooted in what can be described as the myth of the Flemish nationalism<sup>30</sup>.

The notion of this deficiency of a national discourse is not shared by everybody. Els Witte and Harry Van Velthoven highlight “the invested means and the grand patriotic feasts after the two World Wars” while establishing that the linguistic issue ruined “the formation of Belgian identity and the Belgian soul”<sup>31</sup>. In the eyes of these historians, it was therefore not the weakness of the state that would be

28. See : JO TOLLEBEEK , “La bataille des Eperons d’Or. Le culte de 1302 et la lutte flamande”, in ANNE MORELLI (ed.), *Les grands mythes de l’Histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*, Bruxelles, 1995, p. 205-218. 29. See : PHILIPPE CARLER, “La Wallonie à la recherche d’une fête nationale. Un épisode du mouvement wallon à l’aube du XXe siècle”, in *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 68, 1990, p. 902-921. 30. BRUNO DE WEVER, *Creep naar de macht. Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde. Het VNV, 1939-1945*, Tielt/Gent, 1994. 31. ELS WITTE & HARRY VAN VELTHOVEN, *Les querelles linguistiques en Belgique. Le point de vue historique*, Bruxelles, 2011, p. 29.

Sous la direction d'Olivier Luminet

# BELGIQUE-BELGIË

## UN ÉTAT, DEUX MÉMOIRES COLLECTIVES?



MARDAGA

involved, but rather the linguistic issue and the incapacity of the Belgian state to generate a discourse acceptable to all. This weakness of the state as an explanatory factor is, however, one of the elements put forward by Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters to explain the plurality of the reading of the past of the war<sup>32</sup>. Much more than a national memory, the two authors use the notion of memory communities. More than elsewhere in Europe, the memory of the war seemed to be a dialogue of the deaf which as such is rooted in an old already fragmented landscape. These fragmented memories – incarnated by specific places – have been a major obstacle in every reconciliation process and have therefore not ceased to nurture the antagonisms that always make a common view more impossible : not one memory but memories.

The obvious lack of a Belgian collective memory is the starting point of a book edited by UCL psychologist Olivier Luminet : *België-Belgique : one state, two collective memories?*<sup>33</sup>. Psychologists, political scientists, literature theorists, philosophers and historians from the two language communities took part in the discussion. They attempted to answer the question of how the recollections of the Belgians of their national past affect the current crisis in the country. The last chapter was written by the American psychologists William Hirst and Ioana Apetroaia Fineberg. They concluded that Belgium is an ideal study object for researchers who concentrate on collective

memory. They define collective memory as “shared individual memories that have an impact on the collective identity”<sup>34</sup>. The various language communities perceive ‘Belgium’ in a complex and sometimes antagonistic way. There is regionalisation of the so-called national past. On the basis of the contributions of Marnix Beyen on the one hand and Valerie Rosoux and Laurence van Ypersele on the other, on the respective Flemish nationalist and Belgian-nationalist commemorative practices and discourses on World War I, they conclude that mainly Flemish nationalism was particularly active in creating and maintaining a collective memory by creating literary works, the erection of monuments and the organisation of manifestations such as the *IJzer* pilgrimages. Moreover, Flemish nationalism had a message that was consistent with value patterns established in Flanders such as Catholicism and the traditional rural society. Conversely, there was a Belgian government that did not send out a consistent message and also undertook little to counter the competing Flemish nationalist message. The ULB social psychologist Olivier Klein is investigating stereotypes and collective memories with a number of co-workers in the light of the Belgian language barrier<sup>35</sup>. They conclude that contemporary contrasts have an influence on the collective memories because topical concerns on language politics and political autonomy of the regions and communities are projected on

32. BRUNO BENVINDO & EVERT PEETERS, *Les décombres de la guerre. Mémoires belges en conflit, 1945-2010*, Bruxelles, 2012 (also published in Dutch : *Scherven van de oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan WO II, 1945-2010*, Antwerpen, 2012. See also no. 2-3 (2012) of *Journal of Belgian History*. 33. OLIVIER LUMINET (ed.), *Belgique – België : un État, deux mémoires collectives*, Wavre, 2012. First published in English in *Memory Studies*, January 2012. (We refer to the French version). 34. *Idem*, p. 140-141. 35. *Idem*, p. 33-56.

the past. This reinforces stereotypes since they are presented as anchored in a long gone past. In this way the illusion is nurtured that the ideological choices are based on objective historical facts. The question is of course whether in that Belgian past traces can actually be found of a breach between the two language communities. For this reason it is a pity that the authors do not have a dialogue with the historians mentioned above.

#### **... and a flourishing national historiography**

Nobody will deny that the future of the Belgian state remains uncertain. The transformation process undertaken around forty years ago seems to be far from finished. The languages, the political identities and the memory representations seem like so many elements originating from the past that weigh and will still weigh heavily on the future. In addition to the elements put forward, sometimes in their uniqueness and sometimes in an attempt at causality by the various authors quoted, it may be concluded that there is clearly a view of encasement and superposition : the diversity of the languages leads to identification mechanisms that largely exceed the linguistic sphere. The situation in which the Dutch language found itself for a long time (long qualified as 'Flemish') indisputably encouraged a complex process of victimisation, while from the French-speaking part the fact that they were speakers of an internationally prestigious language nurtured for a long time the notion of 'being on the right side'. Demographic elements were added to

these linguistic elements, which in turn on the French-speaking part fed the image of political diminishment and on the Flemish part the complex of the trampled majority. At the time when the Flemish militants and Walloon militants felt misunderstood by the Belgian state, the only alternative was nurturing competitive projects that would not allow for maintaining a Belgian project. This national or regional construction appeared as all the more obvious as the Belgian project was weak. Gradually the Walloon and Flemish movements also used their legitimacy in other readings of the past, readings inspired by facts but also by specific representations. However, to understand their roots, historians found out to what extent the history of these movements as such could not suffice. Therefore it is significant that the majority of the works mentioned cling to Belgian society as a whole in trying to pinpoint the moments of rupture, the evolution of the power relationships. The national history seems to be a source of inspiration again and, in view of the wealth found, this is good news for historiography.

