

AN UNLIKELY MINORITY ?

The Development and Use of “Minority Rhetoric” among the Francophones of Flanders, 1918-1932

- David J. Hensley¹ -

Why did many Francophones of Flanders, a group which had traditionally enjoyed wealth and influence out of proportion to its small share of the national population, refer to themselves as members of a “minority” in the decade and a half following World War I ? In this article, I propose that the self-identification of some Francophones of Flanders as a “minority” was a response to the social and political changes of the interwar years that they feared would threaten their position in Belgian society. The status of “minority”, then, is not an objective one ascribed by population count or possession of given “ethnic” traits, but rather a contingent and relational identity, the strength of which waxes and wanes with its usefulness as a way for a particular group to make claims on the state and society.

Between the end of World War I and the passing of the language laws of 1932, French-speakers in Flanders – sometimes known by the pejorative term “*fransquillons*” (little Frenchies) – made claims on the linguistic policy of the Belgian state on the grounds that they were a minority². In doing so, they appropriated a term which had been seen as more applicable to places like the Habsburg Empire and its successor states rather than the supposedly more stable and homogeneous countries of Western Europe.

The adoption of the “minority” label by some representatives of the French-speaking class in Flanders challenges the popular understanding of the term. Those in Flanders who spoke French as their mother tongue were a minority in the mathematical sense of the term, never constituting more than 10 percent or so of the population in any given city. However, the term “minority” often carries with it connotations of subalternity or even oppression. For much of the Belgium’s history, these concepts were not applicable to the French-speakers of Flanders, as French was the dominant language in the Belgian state and in Flanders itself, where French-speakers had long held a near-monopoly on key positions in government, education, and business. Indeed, Flemings who spoke Dutch – the major-

ity of the inhabitants of Belgium, and the overwhelming majority of the population of Flanders – might have constituted “the only oppressed majority in Europe”³.

In this article, I argue that the Francophones of Flanders’ turn to “minority rhetoric” – which I use in this article to mean *asserting that one belongs to a group that is a linguistic, ethnic, or national minority and using that status as a justification for certain political programs and policies* – demonstrates the plasticity of the concept of “minority” and how it is contingent on social and political circumstances. Indeed, we do not see Francophones in Flanders making use of this label until after 1918, in the face of massive social changes. As I will detail below, while those Francophones of Flanders who claimed the label of “minority” understood it in a variety of ways, they all held that their minority status reflected an authentic identity and social reality, in recognition of which the Belgian state should ensure them access to French-language education and public services. This use of minority rhetoric affirms Rogers Brubaker’s argument that “‘National minority’... designates a political stance, not an ethnodemographic fact”, and that the term “national minority” is “a loose and imperfect designation for a field of competing stances, and that the ‘stakes’ of the

1. I would like to thank Cegesoma, the Belgian American Educational Foundation, the Pennsylvania State University Institute for the Arts and Humanities, and the Pennsylvania State University Department of History for the funding and support they have provided in the course of my research and writing. 2. I use the term Flanders to mean the northern, Dutch-speaking section of the Belgian state, alongside bilingual Brussels and French-speaking Wallonia in the south. These terms are anachronistic – they were not officially used by the Belgian state in such a manner until after World War II – but I use them because many writers of the time did, and present-day non-specialist readers will be more likely to understand them. 3. PETER H. NELDE, “Le conflit linguistique”, in PETER H. NELDE (ed.), *Conflit(c)t*, – ABLA Papers 14, Bruxelles, 1990, p. 137 : “la seule majorité opprimée d’Europe”.

competition concern not only *what* stance to adopt as a national minority but *whether* the 'group'... should understand and represent itself as a national minority"⁴.

Because I am primarily concerned with the way that references to "minority" status undergirded a series of social and political claims, I draw my sources mainly from texts intended for public consumption : the periodical press, electoral material, brochures, and other such polemical publications⁵. The creators of these materials came from the classes in Flanders that tended to be the most "Francophone" in their composition : the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie. These groups were often identified with the "liberal" pillar of society, whether or not they were members of the actual Liberal Party; likewise, the Liberal Party was perceived as the most strident defender of the Francophones of Flanders⁶. Nevertheless, despite the received wisdom that the interwar Catholic Party was

a stronghold of the "*flamingants*" (supporters of the Flemish Movement, a term which often has negative connotations), staunchly Catholic Francophones from Flanders played an important role in the conservative wing of the Catholic Party. Francophones of Flanders of both Liberal and Catholic sympathies used "minority rhetoric" to frame their demands for linguistic rights. Geographically, a plurality of my sources come specifically from the Ghent bourgeoisie. This predominance is due in part to the large symbolic role that the question of the University of Ghent played in the debate over French-language rights in Flanders, and in part to the simple fact that Ghent had one of the largest populations of French-speakers in Flanders. Finally, while I study the ways in which Francophones of Flanders used "minority rhetoric" to bolster support for French-language rights, not all Francophones of Flanders used or even approved of this use. Some Francophones were wary of "minority rights" and, in line with prewar arguments

4. ROGERS BRUBAKER, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge/New York, 1996, p. 5, 62. 5. For reasons of space, alas, I cannot incorporate all of the material on this matter into this article. In terms of the periodical press, I examined the Catholic-leaning *Revue générale* and the Liberal-leaning *Flambeau*, both of which were monthly publications that catered to an educated, well-to-do readership and were privileged spaces in which Francophones of Flanders could present their arguments. I looked at the entire run of each magazine between 1918 and 1932. The extensive newspaper clippings collection of the *Archief en Museum voor het Vlaamse Cultuurleven* in Antwerp was also a valuable resource. The library and brochure collections at the Cegesoma in Brussels (Anderlecht), as well as the brochure collections of the *Fonds d'Histoire du Mouvement Wallon* in Liège, contain numerous interesting tracts on the question of the status of the Francophones of Flanders. The *Fonds congrès et réunions* of the *Centre Jean Gol* in Brussels (Saint-Gilles) proved invaluable in tracing the Liberal Party's use of – and debates over – "minority rhetoric" during this crucial period. Finally, Jacques Pirenne left his personal records relating to his activity in favor of Belgian unity, which included the protection of Francophones' "minority rights", to the State Archives of Belgium, along with the materials he gathered on the Council of Flanders, the Flemish Activist body of 1917-1918 : State Archives in Belgium, WO 1. *Raad van Vlaanderen*, nrs. 5570-5590. 6. TOM DE GRAEVE, *Vlaamse liberalen en Liberale Partij tegenover de Vlaamse Beweging (1918-1940)*, Licentiate thesis, Universiteit Gent, 1985; MYRIAM MERTENS, *Een liberale zuil in Gent ? Aspecten van het Gentse (georganiseerde) liberalisme tijdens het Interbellum*, –Verhandelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent 23, Gent, 2008, p. 76-113.



This (Francophone) magazine cover from before the war shows the Catholic Frans Van Cauwelaert, the Liberal Louis Franck, and the Socialist Camille Huysmans – the so-called “three crowing roosters” who represented the Flemish Movement in each of the major parties – as heads of “the flamingant hydra”. Each of them expressed reservations about the extension of “minority rights” to the Francophones of Flanders. (Fantasia, 26 March 1911)

on language, wished to defend the use of French by appealing to the “free choice of language” of individuals, regardless of their “ethnicity” or “mother tongue”. Conversely, some Francophones of Flanders advocated (re)assimilation into Dutch-speaking Flemish society, and shunned the idea that they formed a group apart.

This article is divided into five sections. The first lays out the domestic and international context in which the language laws were debated and passed. The second looks at the transformation of the Francophones of Flanders’ arguments in favor of French from a rhetoric of “freedom of choice of language” to one of “minority rights”. The third examines the way in which the Francophones of Flanders tried to reconcile their use of “minority rights” with their historic status as an elite. The fourth outlines the Flemish Movement’s opposition to the Francophones’ minority rhetoric on the grounds that the Francophones were “really” an asocial ruling caste, and not a “legitimate” minority. I conclude with a brief discussion of the failure of Francophones’ minority rhetoric to achieve its aims in terms of Belgian language legislation, and address the question of whether or not the Francophones of Flanders were “really” a minority.

I. Domestic and International Context

During World War I, most of Belgium was occupied by the Germans, who tried to use the language question to their advantage and

curry favor with the Flemings, by (among other policies) transforming the French-language university in Ghent into a Dutch-language institution (there had been no Dutch-language university in prewar Flanders) and separating Belgium into two monolingual regions, Flanders and Wallonia, in order to ensure linguistic homogeneity and prevent further “Frenchification”. A small number of Flemings, the so-called “Activists”, worked with the Germans, hoping to improve the place of Dutch in Flanders and pursue new career opportunities in education and administration. These changes were undone upon liberation⁷.

After the war, two opposing visions of language use emerged, each of which used references to the war to legitimate itself. Those who favored the continued use of French in Flanders framed it as a question of right and liberty; by supporting the “free choice” of languages in Flanders, these individuals explicitly rejected what they saw as the Germans’ attempt to divide and conquer the Belgians along linguistic lines. Many in the Belgian “establishment” who subscribed to this point of view were reluctant to grant any “concessions” which might harm the status of French as a language of national unity. The Flemish Movement, meanwhile, accused the French-speaking elite of Flanders having turned its back on the Flemish people, and held that Flemish soldiers’ sacrifice in the war surely merited from their own state what had been “given” to them by the enemy. The Flemish Movement coalesced around the “Minimum Program” formulated in the last

7. See SOPHIE DE SCHAEPPRIJVER, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Bruxelles *et al.*, 2004.

year of the war by Flemish politicians in exile who were loyal to the Belgian government, which called for equality in law and in deed between both languages on a national scale, and the exclusive use of Dutch in education, bureaucracy, the courts, and the military within Flanders⁸.

In 1919, the Belgian government eliminated the system of plural voting, adopting the principle of “one man [but no women], one vote”. This drastically decreased the relative power of the French-speaking elite in Flanders, many of whom had previously qualified for supplemental votes on economic or educational grounds and could “temper” the influx of monolingual Flemings into the electorate. This change allowed the Flemish Movement to become a more powerful force in Belgian politics.

The most contentious, and certainly the most symbolically charged, issue was the transformation of the University of Ghent into a Dutch-medium institution⁹. As the university was one of two state universities in Belgium – the other, in Liège in Wallonia, also taught in French – the Flemish Movement appealed to fairness, calling for one to teach in Dutch to help create a Dutch-speaking professional

class. The French-speakers in Flanders, as well as in Wallonia and Brussels, evoked the specter of the hated German occupier, labeling any call to transform the University to Ghent as a return to the wartime German-founded university and an attack on “French culture” in Flanders.

Indeed, many in the Flemish Movement argued not only *for* a Dutch-language university in Ghent, but *against* the continued existence of the French-language university, as this disappearance would weaken the ability of the French-speakers of Flanders to “reproduce” themselves. The majority of the Flemish Movement also argued against establishing a new, separate Flemish University elsewhere in Ghent or in Antwerp while keeping the French-language one on pragmatic grounds. They argued that the cost of creating a new university from scratch would not be justified; the relatively small number of students in Belgium barely provided adequate enrolment in the already-existing institutions¹⁰.

Pierre Nolf, the Minister of Arts and Sciences who himself came from a French-speaking family in West Flanders, put forth a compromise in 1923 whereby Dutch became

8. REGINALD DE SCHRYVER, “Minimumprogramma”, in *NEVB*. 9. On which see KAREL DE CLERCK (ed.), *Kroniek van de strijd voor de vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit*, Beveren, 1980; GITA DENECKERE, “Turbulentie rond de vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit na de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Analyse van een besluitvormingsproces”, in *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 48, 1994, p. 201-231; KAREL DE CLERCK, “Onderwijs : Hoger Onderwijs in Gent”, in *NEVB*; ANNE-MARIE SIMON-VAN DER MEERSCH & ELIENNE LANGENDRIES, “De vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit”, in GITA DENECKERE *et al.* (ed.), *Vlamingen komt in massa. De Vlaamse beweging als massabeweging*, Gent, 1999, p. 121-146. 10. In the 1920-1921 academic year, there were 8,435 Belgian students (alongside 894 international students) in Belgium’s four complete universities, 0.11% of the Belgian population of 7,465,782 as enumerated in the census of 1920 [MINISTÈRE DE L’INTÉRIEUR ET DE L’HYGIÈNE, *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo belge* (1920-1921), Bruxelles, 1923, p. xv, xlvii].



Jacques Pirenne (1891-1972), seen here in a caricature from the Flemish nationalist publication Pallieter (30 November 1924) was a son of the famed University of Ghent historian Henri Pirenne, as well as a historian in his own right. During the 1920s, he was one of the leaders of the defense of Francophones' "minority rights" in Flanders, as a founder of the Ligue nationale pour l'unité belge and of the École des Hautes Études in Ghent. He was prepared to accept bilingualism in Wallonia in order to safeguard bilingualism in Flanders. (University of Ghent Archives)

the official administrative language of the university; students could choose to follow a mostly-French curriculum with one-third of the coursework in Dutch, or vice versa. A handful of individuals approved of this choice. Some who considered themselves “Belgian patriots” applauded the fact that graduates would know both national languages; some in the Flemish Movement who had wanted a fully “Flemish” university saw this solution as better than having no Flemish university at all, as well as a potential stepping stone to a fully Dutch-language university.

On the whole, neither supporters of the (formerly) fully French university nor those of a fully Flemish university found this solution acceptable. Supporters of the old status quo argued that the requirement to take even a portion of one’s coursework in Dutch would bar Walloons and foreigners from studying at Ghent, drive out faculty who could or would not teach in Dutch, and turn a former international center of learning into a provincial backwater. Supporters of the Flemish option saw the “half and half” university as a tacit acceptance of the continued predominance of French in Belgian (and Flemish) society, as the requirement for coursework in French seemed to imply that a solely Dutch education would not prepare students for their professional careers.

An unexpected political event added urgency to the language question. In a by-election to replace a recently-deceased MP from

Antwerp in 1928, the Flemish nationalist candidate August Borms won by a nearly 2-to-1 margin. Borms was not legally eligible, as he was serving a life sentence in prison – his death sentence having been commuted – for his work as one of the leading Activists during World War I. The (in)famous “Borms election” was seen as Flemings venting their frustrations at the Belgian establishment, which they thought was dragging its feet in implementing real reforms in line with the Flemish Movement’s demands. In the following year, both Christian Democrats and Socialists released programs which called for the institution of regional monolingualism in administration and education – French in Wallonia, Dutch in Flanders, and a bilingual Brussels – in an effort to calm the growing tensions between the language communities in Belgium¹¹.

Such a system would deprive the Francophones of Flanders of access to French-language schooling. In 1930, the government promised to implement measures for the “protection” of the Francophone minority’s access to primary and secondary schools as a measure of compromise in order to secure Liberal Party support for the transformation of the University of Ghent into a fully Dutch-language institution¹². The Chamber of Representatives voted for the change on 5 March 1930 and the Senate followed suit on 5 April. Shortly afterward, the compromise regarding French schooling in Flanders fell through. In 1932, new laws enshrined the principle of regional

11. LODE WILS, “Bormsverkiezing en Compromis des Belges. Het aandeel van regerings- en oppositiepartijen in de taalwetgevingen tussen beide wereldoorlogen”, in *Id.*, *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland. Mythe en geschiedenis*, Leuven, 1994, p. 321-383. 12. ARTHUR EDWARD CURTIS, *New Perspectives on the History of the Language Problem in Belgium*, PhD dissertation, University of Oregon, 1971, p. 321.

monolingualism in public administration and made Dutch the sole acceptable language for public primary education in Flanders, allowing for “transmutation” classes to aid French-speakers in adapting to the use of Dutch. In 1935, regional monolingualism was extended to the courts¹³. The “Minimum Program” was – on paper – a *fait accompli*.

Belgium’s standing in the international community also informed the language question. As a victor of World War I, the Belgian state was disinclined to brook international interference in the language question, which would be perceived as an intrusion on Belgian sovereignty. As the Francophones of Flanders typically identified with an idealized vision of the victorious Belgian state, of which they had long been among the most prominent citizens, they did not, unlike other “national minorities”, seek international aid regarding the language question. This refusal on the part of the Francophones may also be seen as a rejection of both the Flemish Activists’ appeal to the German invader *during* the war as well as of the attempt by a handful of members of the Flemish Movement to internationalize the language question *after* the war¹⁴.

In this, Belgium was not alone. Many Western European political leaders conceived of “minorities” as a problem exclusive to the supposedly backward regions of Eastern Europe – essentially, the losers of the Great War¹⁵. Tara Zahra has recently argued that in the aftermath of World War I, the League of Nations regime of protections for ethnolinguistic minorities was expressly limited to those states for which minority treaties had been drafted, all of which were successor states to the multilingual empires of Central and Eastern Europe. So, for example, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were required to grant certain rights to minorities within their states, which Western European states like France refused to do¹⁶.

Finally, it is interesting to note that while two neighboring states, the Netherlands and France, shared the languages contested within Flanders itself, the governments of these states never intervened in internal Belgian language debates¹⁷. There was no French or Dutch equivalent to the phenomenon of governments supporting minorities of their “kin” living in neighboring states, as seen in Weimar Republic’s interest in *Volksdeutsche* in Eastern

13. P. MAROY, “L’évolution de la législation linguistique belge”, in *Revue du droit public et de la science politique en France et à l’étranger* 82, 1966 (3), p. 460-74. 14. See for example, *Pro Flandria Servanda. Flanders’ Right and Claim for Autonomy, Formulated, Explained, Justified*, [The Hague], 1919, published by a group of Activists in exile in the Netherlands. The tract was part of their attempt to raise the “Flemish question” at the Paris Peace Conference.

15. JENNIFER JACKSON PREECE, “Minority Rights in Europe. From Westphalia to Helsinki”, in *Review of International Studies* 23, 1997 (1), p. 80, 82. 16. TARA ZAHRA, “The ‘Minority Problem’ and National Classification in the French and Czechoslovak Borderlands”, in *Contemporary European History* 17, 2008 (2), p. 137-165. 17. Some individuals from each of these states did. For French interest in the language question in interwar Flanders, see RENÉ GILLOUIN, *De l’Alsace à la Flandre. Le mysticisme linguistique*, Paris, 1930 and MARIA DE WAELE, “De strijd om de citadel : Frankrijk en de vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit, 1918-1930”, in *Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine* 32, 2002 (1-2), p. 153-193. In the interwar Netherlands, “pan-Netherlandic” historian Pieter Geyl was one of the most prominent figures who showed interest in the “South-Netherlanders” (the Flemish). See his *Noord en Zuid. Eenheid en tweedheid in de Lage Landen*, Utrecht/Antwerpen, 1960.

This advertisement for the 28 January 1923 demonstration in favor of the French-language University of Ghent, organized by the Ligue nationale pour la défense de l'Université de Gand et de la liberté des langues, appeared in the popular French-language magazine *Pourquoi Pas ?* (26 January 1923). It portrays the defense of the French-language university – and French-language rights in Flanders in general – as an act of Belgian patriotism, honoring the memory of the soldiers who “died for a united and free Belgium” and making sure that “their sacrifice would not [be] in vain”. Elsewhere on the page, *Pourquoi Pas ?* suggests a song to sing at the demonstrations :
 “Get out, get out, flamingant!
 You’ve bothered us for too long!
 Get out, get out, flamingant!
 And long live the University of Ghent !”

PATRIOTES !


A la manifestation patriotique du dimanche 28, que ce refrain, qui résume notre état d'âme, s'échappe de vos lèvres, sur l'air bien wallon de " BON-JOUR, MARIE CLAPCHABOT ,, :

Va-t-en, va-t-en, Flamingant !
 Voilà trop longtemps que tu nous embêtes !
 Va-t-en, va-t-en, Flamingant !
 Et vive l'Université de Gand !

LIGUE NATIONALE POUR LA DÉFENSE DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE GAND ET LA LIBERTÉ DES LANGUES

Secrétariat Général 25 rue Lesbroussart - Bruxelles
 Secrétariat de Gand 44 rue Savvnen
 Secrétariat de Liège 22 rue des Dominicains
 Secrétariat d'Anvers 49 rue du Jordaan - Arbalétriers

Le soldat inconnu: *Au nom de nos 40.000 frères tombés pour une Belgique unie et libre faites que leur sacrifice ne devienne pas vain !.*



BELGES. PARTICIPEZ TOUS À LA MANIFESTATION POUR LA DÉFENSE DE L'UNITÉ NATIONALE LE 28 JANVIER À BRUXELLES

Le Secrétaire J. PIRENNE
 Charge de cours à l'Université de Bruxelles

Le Président E. EEMAN
 Recteur de l'Université de Gand

Imp. Bénard S.A. Liège

Europe, Hungary's support of Magyars in Romania and Slovakia, or Russia's concern for Russian-speakers in the post-1991 Baltic states¹⁸.

II. Free Choice of Language and Minority Rights : Changing Identities and Rhetorical Strategies

The concept of free choice of language was deeply ingrained in the mentality of the French-speaking elite of Flanders, who cited Article 23 of the Belgian constitution of 1831 to support their position : "The use of the languages spoken in Belgium is optional. This may be regulated only by law and only for acts of public authority and for judicial proceedings"¹⁹. "Freedom" in language matters was seen as an important heritage of Belgium's struggle for independence from the Netherlands; for the traditional elite, "Article 23 had been written mainly as a reaction against [Dutch King] William I's attempts to require Belgian civil servants to learn Dutch, and was therefore a sort of historic contract to use French"²⁰. The Francophone elite, especially before World War I, argued that framing language as a matter of personal choice rather than one of heredity reaffirmed the primacy of individual rights over group rights.

This raises the question : can one *choose* one's membership in a linguistic minority ? Many defenders of French in Flanders argued for the "freedom of the head of the household" (who was universally understood to be the father) to choose the language in which his children would be educated. This rhetoric stems from nineteenth-century domestic Belgian debates on the right of fathers to choose confessional schooling for their children, yet also echoes the provisions of the "Minority Treaty" signed with Poland after World War I, in which "the importance of the father as head of the family in decisions affecting members of a minority was established as a basic feature in minority protection"²¹. This did not sit well with the Poles, who feared that people who were "really" Polish would be "Germanized" by parents seeking advantages for their children or who felt pressure from German-language political groups. In the mid-1920s, the Polish state removed thousands of children from German-language minority schools in Silesia as an investigation showed that their families did not speak German at home. Representatives of the German minority organization contested this decision, claiming that being a member of a minority was a matter of personal choice. (The Permanent Court of International Justice of the League of Nations found in favor of the German minority²².)

18. CAROLE FINK, "Defender of Minorities. Germany in the League of Nations, 1926-1933", in *Central European History* 5, 1972 (4), p. 330-357; ROGERS BRUBAKER, *Nationalism Reframed...*

19. Translation in JOHN MARTIN VINCENT & ADA S. VINCENT, "Constitution of the Kingdom of Belgium", in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 7, 1896 (supplement nr. 11), p. 19]. 20. ARTHUR EDWARD CURTIS, *New Perspectives on the History of the Language Problem in Belgium...*, p. 243-244. 21. ANTHONY ALCOCK, *A History of the Protection of Regional Cultural Minorities in Europe. From the Edict of Nantes to the Present Day*, New York, 2000, p. 48. 22. CAROLE FINK, "Minority Rights as an International Question", in *Contemporary European History* 9, 2000 (3), p. 392-393.

This conflict between two visions – language as a matter of personal choice vs. language as an innate quality that needs protection – illustrates Québécois political scientist J. A. Laponce's assertion that in linguistically mixed territories, "the dominant language preaches liberty and equality; the subordinate language talks of borders, security, exclusivity, privileges"²³. In Flanders, while the Francophones celebrated "free choice of language", the Flemings spoke of "protecting" Dutch. Indeed, for many in the Flemish Movement, the "free choice of language" left open the possibility that, for reasons of economic or social gain, individual Flemings would "choose" French and so be "lost" to the Flemish community.

The use of French on the part of those whom I call for convenience the "French-speakers of Flanders" was not (originally) an ethnic marker but rather a class and status marker *within* "Flemish" society. As such, it should not be surprising that there was essentially no effort in these Francophone circles in Flanders to fashion an identity as an ethnic group before World War I. The groups which sought a protection or even expansion of French in Flanders often did so in the name of Flanders or the Flemish people, as in the case of the *Association flamande pour la vulgarisation de la langue française*, founded in Ghent in 1898, and argued in favor of French in Flanders citing its social utility and the "free choice of language". Claiming a Francophone "minority" identity would be

counterproductive in this frame of mind: rather than using the language "assigned" to them by ancestry or birthplace, these individuals were exercising freedoms long cherished as part of Flemish history, and were as "Flemish" as any Dutch-speaker. In emphasizing their "Flemishness", they stressed that they were *not* outsiders, and thus had the same right to use their "own" language as any other Fleming.

Such discourses were becoming untenable in the face of a growing Flemish Movement which equated Flemishness with speaking Dutch, and assigned Francophones the status of "non-Fleming" or "traitor"²⁴. "Freedom of language" also came to be understood as a luxury unavailable to the common Fleming. For Catholic Flemish MP Alfons van de Perre, the so-called freedom of language "was for the Flemings what liberty is for the worker who is given freedom to be oppressed"²⁵. Calls for "free choice of language" could now be interpreted as snobbery on the part of a social elite with the time and resources to learn the elite language, or even "treason" toward the Flemish people. In these circumstances, more Francophones in Flanders would come to represent themselves as a "minority" when making claims for language rights.

The complex relationship between the discourses of "free choice" and "minority rights" can be seen in the writings of Daniel Ryelandt, a Francophone Catholic from Bruges. In July

23. J. A. LAPONCE, *Languages and Their Territories*, Toronto/Buffalo, 1987, p. 41. 24. CÉLINE PRÉAUX, "Les francophones de Flandre. Une identité errant entre l'ethnique et le civique", in *FrancoFonie : Revue du Centre d'Étude des Francophones en Flandre* 3, 2011, p. 33-34. 25. ALFONS VAN DE PERRE, *The Language Question in Belgium*, London, 1919, p. 145.



A demonstration against the transformation of the University of Ghent into a Dutch-language institution, Brussels, 28 January 1923, organized by the Ligue nationale pour la défense de l'Université de Gand et de la liberté des langues. The Ligue, which would later change its name to the Ligue nationale pour l'unité belge, appealed to the "free choice of language", Belgian patriotism, and minority rights in its defense of the Francophones of Flanders. (Cegesoma, Photo nr. 77077)

1929, he argued that “the French-language minority of Flanders will not resign itself to disappear” should the Flemish majority impose a monolingual status for Flanders²⁶. Several months later, however, Ryelandt attacked comparisons of the situation in Flanders to that of Eastern Europe, where racially and linguistically distinct groups live intermingled with one another. In Flanders, however, “there exist... a certain number of families, perfectly autochthonous, whose mother tongue is French”. Ryelandt argued against comparing the Francophones of Flanders to other minorities, even in an attempt to help them : “it is posing the problem quite badly to ask if it is suitable to ‘protect French-language minorities’... To protect a minority is to isolate it... ‘protecting the French minority’ in the Flemish lands would be to remove the families whose mother tongue is French from Flemish life, to make of them a small, closed caste, living in the margins of society”²⁷.

Moreover, “these families *do not form a group*” in opposition to Flemish-speakers, nor are they a “closed group”, as some families have been French-speaking since the Middle Ages while others “Frenchified” only a generation or two ago. Finally, the question of French in Flanders concerns much more than those Flemings who speak French at home;

it extends to thousands more who use it as a second language for culture, education, or business²⁸.

Ryelandt thus argued that the “Francophones of Flanders” were *not* a separate group : that is, the line between “Flemings” and “Francophones” was porous, and a (Dutch-speaking) Fleming may opt to *become* a Francophone. Ryelandt made this argument in order to differentiate the situation in Flanders from the Eastern European context, in which “inherently” different ethnolinguistic groups live next to one another in varying degrees of (dis)harmony. Recent historiography has questioned the supposedly stark division between nationalities in Eastern Europe, however. Jeremy King has demonstrated that in the Czech lands, there was *not* a hard-and-fast division between “Czechs” and “Germans” until recently, and that to the extent that individuals accepted these labels, many moved between the two over the course of their lives, for a myriad of personal or social reasons²⁹. We may say that the difference between the situation in Flanders and those of Eastern Europe (in regard to “interethnic” relations) was not as wide as Ryelandt claimed... as many places in Eastern Europe, as in Flanders, had *not* had a history of drawing thick lines between various linguistic groups.

26. DANIEL RYELANDT, “Peut-on résoudre la question flamande ?”, in *Revue générale*, July 1929, p. 65, 67 : “La minorité de langue française en Flandre ne se résignera pas à disparaître”. Emphasis added. 27. Id., “Y a-t-il en Flandre un ‘problème des minorités’ ?”, in *Le Flambeau*, December 1929, p. 329-332, 338 : “un certain nombre de familles, parfaitement autochtones, dont la langue maternelle est le français”; “c’est bien mal poser le problème que de se demander si oui ou non il convient de ‘protéger les minorités de langue française’... Protéger une minorité, c’est l’isoler... ‘protéger la minorité française’ en pays flamand, ce serait rayer de la vie flamande les familles dont la langue maternelle est le français, en faire une petite caste fermée, vivant en marge de la société”. 28. Idem, p. 329-332 : “ces familles ne forment pas un groupe”. Emphasis added. 29. JEREMY KING, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*, Princeton, NJ, 2002.

As for Ryelandt's assertion that the French-speakers of Flanders "do not form a group", it is true that those individuals were geographically spread out across various cities in Flanders, and not located in one compact area (like the Basques in Spain or the Welsh in Britain). However, as Nancy Wingfield wrote regarding the development of "Sudeten German" identity in interwar Czechoslovakia :

"The collapsing of the disparate identities of Bohemian, Moravian, and Silesian Germans into a single, overarching Sudeten Germanism was as artificial a construct as the majority Czechoslovak identity of the state"³⁰.

Putting this in a Belgian context, we may say that a "Francophone of Flanders" identity embracing scattered groups from cities like Ghent, Antwerp, Bruges, and Leuven was as historically contingent as the creation of a unified "Flemish" identity encompassing both speakers of West Flemish and Limburgish, or a unified "Walloon" identity applicable to both inhabitants of the former Episcopal Principality of Liège and the former French city of Tournai.

The perceived threat to the French language may have actually contributed to the cohesion of the disparate French-language groups

in Flanders. Flemish nationalist historian H. J. Elias claims that in the first decades of independent Belgium's existence, before the breakthrough of the Flemish Movement, "these French-speaking minorities found their weapons and their organization in the state. It was not necessary for them to set up leagues, found associations, or to embrace [any] form of organization or resistance"³¹. Indeed, as Gary Cohen argues in his history of the Germans of Prague before 1914, "upper-strata groups generally develop conscious ethnic identities only after being provoked by direct challenges from formerly subordinate groups or adverse changes in political structures"³².

With the legislative victories of the Flemish Movement and the expansions of suffrage in 1893 and 1919, the Francophones of Flanders faced both of these challenges. French-speakers themselves often remarked that their movements were constructed in opposition to the ("excesses" of the) Flemish Movement. Maurice Vauthier, a liberal Brussels politician, argued that "obligation" to know Dutch would cause French-speakers in Flanders to disdain it, and that they would instead pride themselves on being "champions of 'French culture'"³³. For Jacques Pirenne, defender of French in Flanders and son of the famous (French-speaking) historian

30. NANCY M. WINGFIELD, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints. How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech*, Cambridge, MA/London, 2007, p. 231-232. See also WINSON CHU, *The German Minority in Interwar Poland*, Cambridge/New York, 2012 for a similar example of the unification of disparate minority populations. **31.** HENDRIK JOZEF ELIAS, *25 jaar Vlaamse Beweging 1914/1939*, vol. 1, *De eerste wereldoorlog en zijn onmiddellijke nasleep. Augustus 1914/November 1919*, Antwerpen, p. 203-210, citation at 203 : "Deze franstalige minderheden vonden tot in 1883 hun wapen en hun organisatie in de staat. Het was voor hen niet nodig bonden op te richten, verenigingen te stichten of tot een of andere vorm van organisatie of verzet over te gaan".

32. GARY B. COHEN, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*, West Lafayette, IN, 2006, p. 201-210. **33.** MAURICE VAUTHIER, "La Flamandisation de l'Université de Gand", in *Le Flambeau*, December 1922, p. 390-391 : "champions de la 'culture française'".



This 1923 poster from the Algemeen Vlaamsch Hoogstudenten-Verbond (Flemish Students' Union) calls for a boycott of the bilingual University of Ghent as organized by Pierre Nolf. It accuses Jacques Pirenne and Eugène Eeman (a Francophone of Ghent and former rector of the university) as well as other members of the Ligue nationale pour la défense de l'Université de Gand et de la liberté des langues of trying to prevent the naming of "Flemish-minded" professors to the Dutch-language teaching staff. (University of Ghent Archives)

from the University of Ghent, Henri Pirenne, the imposition of Dutch in Flanders led to the creation of “two new movements... one for the defense of the population of French expression in Flanders, the other, Walloon separatism”³⁴.

The partial move from calls for the “free choice of language” to calls for protection of an “ethnic minority” was in part a shift in strategy, fashioning a discourse that would be more palatable to both domestic and international opinion. The desirability of “free choice of language” was no longer self-evident in a time when state intervention in social and economic questions was more acceptable. The concept of “minority rights”, on the other hand, evoking vague and lofty ideals of support for the disadvantaged, garnered support in word, if not always in deed, from the international community.

III. “A Minority of Millionaires” : Reconciling the “Elite” and “Minority” Identities of the Francophones of Flanders

Francophones of Flanders from various ideological traditions used the term “minority” to describe themselves, often in connection with calls for protecting their rights

to use French in education and public administration. The 15 October 1929 issue of *L'Étudiant Catholique*, the publication of the French-speaking *Association royale générale des étudiants catholiques de Gand* at the University of Ghent, carried an advertisement for *Le Bien Public*, a French-speaking Ghent newspaper with Catholic sympathies, emphasizing its support for “Catholic Life / Liberty of Education / Defense of Linguistic Minorities”³⁵. A tract on the “National Unity and the Linguistic Question” argued that the language legislation of the 1930s brought about “the linguistic oppression of the minorities of the upper classes by the popular masses”³⁶. While not explicitly using the term “minority,” in protesting the transformation of the University of Ghent, the liberal periodical *Le Flambeau* claimed to speak for those young Flemings who recognized the value of education in an international language as well as “all the Flemings for whom an essentially French culture is *hereditary*”, implying that the French-speakers formed a natural, authentic “group”³⁷.

French-speakers of Flanders’ portrayal of themselves as a minority seems intellectually problematic, given their historically privileged position. As Liliana Riga and James Kennedy have argued, in post-World War I Eastern Europe, the definition of cultural or linguistic

34. JACQUES PIRENNE, *Il faut doter le pays d'un statut linguistique*, Bruxelles, 1929, p. 13 (Cegesoma, BB B 38/1) : “deux mouvements nouveaux... l'un pour la défense de la population d'expression française en Flandre, l'autre, le séparatisme wallon”. 35. Advertisement for *Le Bien public* in *L'Étudiant catholique*, 15 October 1929, p. 7a, found in University of Ghent Archives : “Vie catholique / Liberté d'enseignement / Défense des minorités linguistiques”.

36. CHARLES DE BURLET, *L'unité nationale et la question linguistique dans l'histoire de Belgique*, Bruxelles, 1935, p. 190 : “l'oppression linguistique des minorités des classes supérieures par les masses populaires”. 37. GANDAVUS (pseud.), “Pour l'université française de Gand”, in *Le Flambeau*, March 1922, p. 378 : “tous les Flamands pour lesquels une culture essentiellement française est héréditaire”. Emphasis added.

“minorities” along solely quantitative lines did not acknowledge the socioeconomic aspects of interethnic relations in the new states. Thus, groups which had previously had majority status, such as the Germans in Austria-Hungary, underwent an “ethnic reversal” whereby they became a minority in new states such as Czechoslovakia; this “minority” status did not reflect the fact that they had long held the levers of power and did not necessarily face the same challenges as other “minority” groups. While elites from “low culture” minority groups typically wanted to assimilate by learning the majority language, minorities from “high culture” groups were less willing to adapt to the (new) ruling “low culture”³⁸.

While the Francophones of Flanders did not face an “ethnic reversal” due to changing borders, the introduction of simple universal male suffrage shifted the “balance of power” away from them. The discourse of the French-speakers of Flanders came to reflect a fear of the (Dutch-speaking) Flemings’ “monopoly” on power, as well as reticence to learn (or use more frequently) the lower-status Dutch language in order to adapt to the new arrangement. Under these circumstances, many Francophones of Flanders adopted minority rhetoric. The case of the Francophones of Flanders certainly fits that of “a minority with a *favoured* position which is threatened by pressures toward predominance by the majority”, similar to that of “the Swedes of Finland [or] the Germans of Bohemia”, as

described by Ronald Inglehart and Margaret Woodward. While their position is thus somewhat different than that of a traditionally subaltern minority pressing for its rights, “in both cases ... the threatened individuals must react as a group [because they] are either blocked or threatened in their social status as a group”³⁹.

This identification as a “minority” often accompanied a (seemingly) paradoxical identification with the Flemish population at large. We can see this marriage of minority and indigenous discourses in a tract against the Flemishification of the University of Ghent by Pierre Verhaegen⁴⁰. A French-speaking aristocrat from Ghent, he had been a prisoner of the Germans during World War I for distributing clandestine publications; his father, also imprisoned, had died in 1917, weakened by his experiences. After the war, he participated in several Belgian patriotic organizations. He claimed that in defending the French-language University of Ghent, he was “exercis[ing his] right as a Fleming”. When *flamingants* argued that the French-speakers of Flanders constituted “a tiny minority... which does not deserved the privileged situation which it enjoys”, Verhaegen countered that French-speakers in Flanders – amongst whom he included those who spoke French as a second language – were a much larger percentage of the Flemish population than *flamingants* claimed. He maintained that neither their minority status

38. LILIANA RIGA & JAMES KENNEDY, “Tolerant Majorities, Loyal Minorities and ‘Ethnic Reversals’. Constructing Minority Rights at Versailles 1919”, in *Nations and Nationalism* 15, 2009 (3), p. 461-482. 39. RONALD F. INGLEHART & MARGARET WOODWARD, “Language Conflicts and Political Community”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, 1967 (1), p. 39. Second emphasis added. 40. [PIERRE] BARON VERHAEGEN, *Contre la flamandisation de l’Université de Gand*, Bruxelles, 1922. (FHMW, Brochures, Mouvement flamand).



A priest tells a (Flemish) peasant: "Believe me, my friend, for Flanders and for Christ, it is necessary that the French University of Ghent, the *Prava Mater* ["wicked mother", as opposed to *Alma Mater*], be closed down". Many proponents of the French-language University of Ghent argued that questions about university education were necessarily limited to the elite and no concern for rural or working-class people. Thus, the Flemish Movement's campaign against the French-language university was cynical electioneering in favor of Flemish nationalist or Catholic parties. While popular stereotypes equated political Catholicism with the Flemish Movement, many French-speakers of Flanders were conservative Catholics, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Flanders was, in turn, heavily Francophone. (*Pourquoi Pas ?*, 26 January 1923)

nor their relative privilege allowed the state to deprive them of their fundamental rights : “A minority, even composed of millionaires, has the same need as the majority to be taught in its [own] language”. Indeed, as the *flamingants* were fighting for the right to receive education in their own language, how could they deny it to “Flemings whose mother tongue is French” ? : “The right of the minority [to receive an education in its own language] is imprescriptible, and any system that would neglect it would merit but one name, that of tyranny. Sacrificing the rights of Flemings who express themselves in French for the reason that they are a minority, and a well-off minority, would be, truthfully, the most monstrous of inequalities”⁴¹.

We see in this pamphlet an interesting interplay of identities. Verhaegen used minority rhetoric to frame his argument, portraying the French-speakers of Flanders in the position of a group whose access to fundamental rights is in danger of attack by the “Dietsch” (Flemish-speaking) majority. At the same time, Verhaegen also made claims as a *Fleming*, attempting to establish a commonality with the majority in Flanders. Verhaegen’s reference to the “tyranny” of forcing a group to renounce education in its own language harkens to his experience as a prisoner of war, evoking the

specter of the German (and Activist) tyranny during the occupation.

Another Francophone of Ghent, Jean Halleux, a philosopher at the university from the Bruges bourgeoisie, used some of the language of “minority rights” while at the same time demonstrating a profound attachment to earlier, non-“ethnic” justifications for French-language rights in Flanders. Halleux attacked the “*flamingants*” for presenting French as a language foreign to Flanders and neglecting the centuries-long history of the French language there. The French-speakers of Flanders, though a “minority”, have “rights [that] are sacrosanct... as much as those of the majority”⁴².

His evocation of the French language’s “natural” place in Flanders and the rights of minorities fit the pattern of “minority rhetoric” quite well, yet elsewhere in this text Halleux used arguments based on the older ideal of “free choice of language” and reflecting a frankly elitist perspective. For example, he claimed that the question of the language of the University of Ghent concerned only a small, educated class and should thus be exempt from control by “majority rule” and that the (historic) use of French was not an expression of any “ethnic” difference but instead reflected “the *desire* of the Flemish

41. *Idem*, p. 6, 10-13 : “j’exerce mon droit de Flamand”; “Minorité infime... qui ne mérite pas la situation privilégiée dont elle jouit”; “une minorité, même composée de millionnaires, a le même besoin que la majorité d’être enseignée dans sa langue”; “Flamands dont la langue maternelle est le français”; “Le droit de la minorité, en cette question, est imprescriptible, et tout système qui en ferait litière ne mériterait qu’un seul nom, celui de tyrannie. Sacrifier les droits des Flamands d’expression française pour la raison qu’ils sont minorité, et minorité fortunée, serait, en vérité, la plus monstrueuse des inégalités”. 42. JEAN HALLEUX, *L’erreur flamingante*, Saint-Bavon, 1920, p. 3, 3n1. (Cegesoma, BA 18190) : “droits [qui] sont inviolables... aussi bien... que ceux de la majorité”.

bourgeoisie", who know that they cannot function without an international language⁴³. Halleux criticized *flamingants* whose "persecution complex" lead them to think that they are an oppressed *people* like the Polish or Irish had been. While some of the Flemish Movement's demands would be justified "if the Flemings formed a people" of their own, they were but a "constitutive element" of the Belgian people and their calls for Flemish homogeneity were "ahistorical and anti-national"⁴⁴. It now seems that Halleux *rejected* – at least for Dutch-speakers – using membership in an "ethnic" subgroup as a basis for claiming linguistic rights.

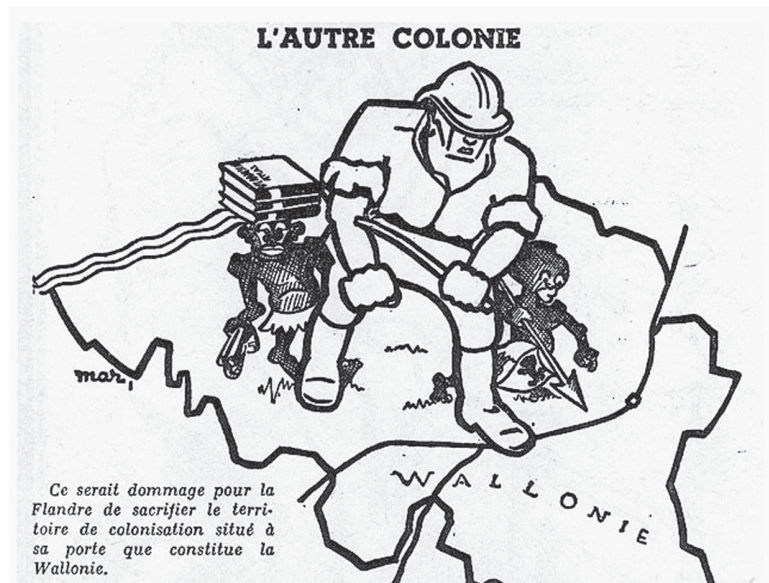
In 1929, a group of conservative Francophone Catholics from Ghent issued a statement on "the Defense of Minorities", which combined appeals to minority rights with evocations of the older ideal of free choice of language and Belgian patriotism. They freely used the term "minority" to refer to the population of native French-speakers in Flanders, though defining this minority in terms which differ from the stereotypical image of a marginalized group. The French-speaking minority was the "cement of [Belgian] national unity" which had managed to keep Flanders and Wallonia together not only through the use of a common language but also through business

and marital relations with Wallonia. Indeed, "in defending not only the individual, but also the collective rights of the *Flemish minority* [of French-speakers]" they claimed to be "good servants of the Fatherland"⁴⁵.

A more straightforward identification of the Francophones of Flanders as an autochthonous group is found in a circular from the *Union patriotique féminine flamande*, associated with conservative, Francophone Ghent Catholics. For both French- and Flemish-speaking Flemings, said one article, "our mother tongue is the direct heritage of our parents, who give it to us along with our life". Any attempt by legislators to "destroy this privilege" (that is, the mother tongue), will be met with resistance from the "mothers [who] are the powerful depositories and guardians of it... [and] will be able to conserve and defend it"⁴⁶. This argument draws on the multiple meanings of "mother tongue", staking a claim to the *inborn* quality of some Flemings' use of French and tying it to the emotionally resonant image of a mother talking to her infant.

The previous two examples came from the conservative and well-to-do Catholic bourgeoisie of Ghent, but the Catholic Party in interwar Belgium drew much of its support from "Flemish-minded" voters, and such

43. *Idem*, p. 3, 5, 8 : "*désir de la bourgeoisie flamande*". Emphasis added. 44. *Idem*, p. 5, 11-12 : "*manie de persécution*"; "*si les Flamands formaient un peuple à part*"; "*élément constitutif*"; "*anti-historique et anti-national*". 45. JEAN DE HEMPTINNE et al., "Les Catholiques gantois et la Défense des Minorités", in *Le Flambeau*, November 1929, p. 269-270 : "*ciment de l'unité nationale*"; "*En défendant les droits non seulement individuels, mais collectifs de la minorité flamande nous sommes, pensons-nous, de bons serviteurs de la Patrie*". Emphasis added. 46. Bulletin issued by the *Union patriotique féminine flamande* / *Vaderlandsche Vlaamsche Vrouwenbeweging*, [1930], p. 8 (FHMW, Brochures, *Belgique unitaire*) : "*Notre langue maternelle est l'héritage direct de nos parents, ils nous la donnent avec la vie*"; "*détruire ce privilège*"; "*Les mères en sont les dépositaires et les gardiennes puissantes. Elles sauront le conserver et le défendre*".



During the 1920s and early 1930s, many Flemish politicians typically made recognition of Francophones' minority rights in Flanders contingent on reciprocal Flemish minority rights in Wallonia. The Walloon Movement was concerned that Flemish agricultural and political interests would create "inassimilable" pockets of Flemish influence in Wallonia. This cartoon evokes the fear of Wallonia being "colonized" by the Flemings as the Belgians colonized the Congo. The Walloon Movement ultimately dropped its support for the Francophones of Flanders rather than compromise the "linguistic integrity" of Wallonia. (Drawing by Marcel Antoine published in *L'Action wallonne*, 15 March 1933, Institut Jules Destrée Archives)

Francophone voices were a distinct minority (no pun intended) in the within the party. As mentioned previously, the Liberals were the party most dedicated to protecting the Francophones of Flanders during this period. In late 1930, the Liberal Party withdrew its support from the coalition government precisely because they feared that their Catholic coalition partners would not respect the rights of Francophones in Flanders to have French primary and secondary schools (a concession the Liberals had exacted in return for their support of the linguistic transformation of the University of Ghent). This was the first time a Belgian government fell solely because of the language question⁴⁷.

Shortly thereafter, the liberal-leaning magazine *Le Flambeau* published a small satirical vignette entitled “Why We [the Liberals] Overturned the Ministry”. In it, the character representing *Le Flambeau*’s editorial staff skewers Belgian Catholic politicians who supported the rights of Catholic minorities in predominantly secular Wallonia and German minorities in Eastern Europe, but who turned a blind eye to – or even openly called for the assimilation of – Francophone minorities in Flanders. Another character, representing international public opinion, specifically argues that minority rights should not be limited to “successor states of the Dual Monarchy” and that Belgium should learn from Finland’s respect for its Swedish-language minority and Czechoslovakia’s

decision to maintain a German university in Prague⁴⁸.

Once again, we see how “minority rights” are tied to specific policy demands : in this case, *Le Flambeau* is implicitly criticizing the Belgian state for its sanctions against the French-language *École des Hautes Études*, a university-level institution founded in Ghent after the transformation of the University of Ghent into a fully-Dutch institution. Francophones viewed the *École* as necessary for filling a gap in French-language education in Flanders, while the Flemings saw the *École* as unfair competition which drained away prestige and students from the newly-transformed University of Ghent. Ultimately, the Ministry of Arts and Sciences forbade professors at the University from teaching at the *École* as well, a decision which led several (Francophone) members of the University’s faculty to resign or lose their positions⁴⁹.

IV. Flemish Objections to Francophones’ Call for Minority Rights

During the interwar period, the figure of the “denationalized” *fransquillion* was the principal object of the Flemish Movement’s animosity⁵⁰. The Francophones’ appeal to minority rhetoric was perhaps an attempt to soften this feeling; it was not very successful in

47. CARL-HENRIK HÖJER, *Le régime parlementaire belge de 1918 à 1940*, Uppsala/Stockholm, 1946, p. 188-189. 48. FAX (pseud.), “Pourquoi nous avons renversé le ministère”, in *Le Flambeau*, December 1930, p. 401-416 : “États successeurs de la Double Monarchie”.

49. JACQUES PIRENNE, “Chronique du mois”, in *Le Flambeau*, November 1930, p. 285-288; VINDEX (pseud.), “Les Matines gantoises”, in *Le Flambeau*, November 1931, p. 510-512. 50. HENDRIK JOZEF ELIAS, *25 jaar Vlaamse Beweging 1914/1939...*, vol. 1, p. 202-203.

this regard. This antipathy to the Francophones of Flanders, which led the majority of the Flemish Movement to reject the extension of minority rights to them, was partly rooted in an understanding of these French-speakers as *Flemings*, who by choosing to speak a “foreign” language in order to distinguish themselves from the common people, had become a kind of hereditary caste of “traitors”⁵¹.

One Walloon historian sympathetic to the Flemish Movement argued in 1931 that “by systematically ignoring the language of the people, [the Flemish elite] completely failed in their duties for at least seventy-five years. This is too often forgotten today when a point is made of defending ‘the right’ of this class to continue to receive instruction in French”⁵². Indeed, many of the arguments advanced against granting minority rights to the French-speakers of Flanders hinged on the idea that they had neglected their social obligations.

In one pamphlet, written for a Catholic readership, an author writing under the pseudonym “*Actio Charitatis*”, identified as a devout Catholic of Flemish background raised in French (to his regret), argues that Catholic morality demands that French *not* be used as a home language in Flanders⁵³. He rejects the

liberty of the head of the household in the matter of children’s education. Those Flemings who choose a French education for their children are committing an act against natural law, “a sin graver than voluntary mutilation”. “Freedom”, linguistic or otherwise, must be tempered by moral considerations, lest it become libertinism. He cites an (apocryphal ?) example of a young man from a Flemish town who defends the “right of minorities” yet is unable to “visit widows and orphans [and] console them in their tribulations” as he does not know Flemish, and so spends his time at a social club where French is spoken. Only by speaking Flemish *at home* can individuals have enough knowledge of the language to become fully active members of the community. French-speaking Flemings’ invocation of the so-called “right of minorities” is unacceptable, no matter how long ago their family had been Frenchified : “Whatever the utilitarian reasons, the status quo, and the number of generations deformed by the initial deviation, [the existence of a French-speaking class] is a grave error which it is important to denounce”. “*Actio Charitatis*” goes on to compare those who speak Flemish to Jesus, who spoke Aramaic to the common folk, and the Francophones to the Roman invaders and local snobs, who spoke Latin and Greek to distinguish themselves from the commoners⁵⁴.

51. CÉLINE PRÉAUX, “Les francophones de Flandre...”, p. 34-38. 52. HENRI LAURENT, “The Language War in Belgium”, *Current History* 34, 1931 (6), p. 835. 53. The author uses masculine forms to refer to himself. “*ACTIO CHARITATIS*” (pseud.), *Le choix d’une langue familiale et ses rapports avec la moralité chrétienne*, [Bruxelles], [after 1921], p. 25 (FHMW, Brochures, *Mouvement Flamand*). Other Francophones of Flanders also promoted “reintegration” into Flemish society by appealing to Catholic values. See LUC SCHOLLER, “Pour franchir la barrière linguistique. Les devoirs des Flamands d’expression française”, in *La Cité chrétienne*, February 1929, p. 325-328. 54. *Idem*, p. 11, 14-15, 25, 28-29, 35, 38-39 : “une faute plus grave que la mutilation volontaire”; “visiter les veuves et les orphelins... les consoler dans leurs tribulations”; “Quelles que soient les raisons utilitaires, les situations acquises et le nombre de générations déformées à la faveur de l’égarement initial, c’est une grave erreur qu’il importe de dénoncer”.

The Flemish Liberal Louis Franck, a supporter of the transformation of the University of Ghent, stated that while the upper classes of Flanders spoke French during the *Ancien Régime*, they “never considered themselves linguistic minorities”. He was reproaching those French-speakers in Flanders who identified themselves as a “minority” but who – he argued – *knew* Dutch but who disdained *using* it⁵⁵. Likewise, Camille Huysmans, a prominent Flemish Socialist, likened ethnically-Flemish “*fransquillons*” who disdained the Dutch language to self-hating Jews⁵⁶.

Many Flemings who criticized the conception of the Francophones of Flanders as a minority because the latter had abdicated their social duties worried that official protections for the French-speaking class would allow for the continued Frenchification of Flanders. The prominent Catholic Flemish leader Frans Van Cauwelaert stated that “we [Flemings] deny any right to existence to language minorities in Flanders. We do not want them to continue to support unhealthy [language] relations in our lands as islands of Frenchification”⁵⁷. Some Flemish figures had no theoretical objection to extending minority rights to the

Francophones of Flanders, but feared that any attempt to do so would be used as a form of leverage by the “*fransquillons*” to Frenchify Flanders⁵⁸.

V. Conclusion : A Contingent Minority

The years between the end of World War I and the consecration of regional monolingualism in Belgian law in 1932-1935 witnessed the development of an explicit “minority” identity, which played a major role in their rhetoric in favor of language rights, among the French-speaking population(s) in Flanders. Even if such arguments made headway among Flemish political figures, the latter argued that any concessions to *Francophones*’ minority rights in Flanders needed to include reciprocal allowances for *Flemings* in Wallonia.

At first, both Walloons and Francophones of Flanders countered that the Francophones of Flanders were an “indigenous” minority, while the Flemings in Wallonia were migrants who had *chosen* to relocate⁵⁹. Thus, a convention of the Liberal Party held in 1920 could hold

55. LOUIS FRANCK, *La nationalité belge et le mouvement flamand*, Bruxelles, 1931, p. 9, 42 (Cegesoma, BA 24667) : “mais jamais ces classes ne se considèrent comme des minorités linguistiques”. 56. CAMILLE HUYSMANS [sic, read : HUYSMANS], “The Flemish Question”, in *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 9, 1930 (5), p. 682. 57. Frans Van Cauwelaert at the Congress of the Katholieke Vlaamse Landbond in Tongeren, 4 Aug. 1929, cited in JAN CLEMENT, *Taalvrijheid, bestuurstaal en minderheidsrechten. Het Belgisch model. Een constitutionele zoektocht naar de oorsprong van het territorialiteitsbeginsel en de minderheidsrechten in de bestuurstaalwetgeving*, Antwerpen et al., 2003, p. 325 : “ontzeggen wij elk bestaansrecht aan taalminderheden in Vlaanderen. Wij willen niet dat zij als eilanden van verfransing de ongezonde verhoudingen in ons land blijven bestendigen”. 58. LUC MONTEYNE, “Een stem uit de Fransche Taalminderheid in Vlaanderen”, in *De Vlaamsche Gids* 18, 1930 (7), p. 290, 296. 59. MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, *Le chant du coq. Nation et nationalisme en Wallonie depuis 1880*, Gent, 2005, p. 47-49; Bulletin of the *Union patriotique féminine flamande*, p. 9. For a contemporary discussion on differential treatment of “native” and “migrant” minorities, see WILL KYMLICKA, *Multicultural Citizenship. A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford/New York, 1995, p. vii, 14, 19-21, 25, 63-64, 101.

that it would be prudent to “give satisfaction... to the demands of linguistic minorities existing in the Flemish part of the country”, while at the same time “condemn[ing] any measure tending to introduce bilingualism in the Walloon part of the country”⁶⁰. Nevertheless, some Francophones of Flanders came to accept such reciprocity as the price of legal protections for their language. Jacques Pirenne argued in 1929 that while, historically, Wallonia had indeed been monolingual and Flanders bilingual, “if it is legitimate to recognize the right of the French-language population in Flanders to open French schools, it is just as legitimate to recognize the rights of the Flemish minorities in Wallonia to open Flemish schools”⁶¹.

Such conciliatory attitudes ultimately counted for naught in the face of the Walloon Movement’s intransigence. The Walloon Movement – overwhelmingly Liberal and Socialist in its membership – claimed that extending language rights to Flemings in Wallonia would harm the region’s “cultural homogeneity” and worried about the growth of (Flemish) Catholic political power in Wallonia and a potential dearth of civil service jobs for the mostly-monolingual Walloons. MPs sympathetic to the Walloon Movement offered little opposition to the laws that enshrined the principle of regional monolingualism into

Belgian law, even at the cost of “sacrificing” their fellow French-speakers in Flanders⁶².

After the laws of 1932-1935, the Francophones of Flanders’ use of minority rhetoric subsided : the political debate on language rights for Francophones in Flanders seemed to be at an end, and claiming a minority identity would thus have little discernible utility in their lives. Does this mean that the Francophones of Flanders were “no longer” a minority ? That they had never “really” been one ? Certainly, before World War I, when they neither understood themselves as a minority nor faced any real challenge to their power, we cannot call them a minority, despite their small numbers. During the period examined in this paper, while several prominent Francophones of Flanders took up the “minority” label, they often did so while at the same time holding on to their “Flemish” identity. The older ideal of “free choice of language” – which, on its surface, seemed to contradict the Francophones’ status as an “authentic” ethnic minority – played a much smaller role in their defense of their language rights, but did not disappear entirely.

Examining the ways in which the “minority identity” of the Francophones of Flanders went hand-in-hand with attempts to achieve specific social and political goals, it is temp-

60. CONSEIL NATIONAL DU PARTI LIBÉRAL, *Le programme libéral. Résolutions votées par le Congrès libéral des 16, 17 et 18 octobre 1920*, Bruxelles, 1921, p. 15 (CJG, Fonds “Congrès et réunions”) : “donner satisfaction... aux desiderata des minorités linguistiques existant dans la partie flamande du pays”; “condamne toute mesure tendant à introduire le bilinguisme dans la partie wallonne du pays”. 61. JACQUES PIRENNE, *Il faut doter le pays d’un statut linguistique...*, p. 23 : “s’il est légitime de reconnaître à la population de langue française en Flandre le droit d’ouvrir des écoles françaises, il est tout aussi légitime de reconnaître aux minorités flamandes en pays wallon le droit d’y ouvrir des écoles flamandes”. 62. CHANTAL KESTELOOT, “Alliés ou ennemis ? La place des francophones de Flandre dans les combats du mouvement wallon”, in *FrancoFonie. Revue du Centre d’Étude des Francophones en Flandre* 3, 2011, p. 48-63.

ting to argue that all their talk of minority identity was “just” a tactic employed by the Francophones of Flanders for their own benefit. Indeed, in her analysis of the English-speakers of Québec, another group which began to adopt a minority identity in the face of contestation from the speakers of the majority (though subaltern) language, political scientist Josée Legault claimed that these Anglophones “invented” this identity in order to maintain their dominance within Québec⁶³.

However, an entire generation of studies on national and ethnic identities has emphasized the way in which they are *all* socially constructed – “imagined”, if you will – in response to social and political pressures⁶⁴. I maintain that the flourishing of “minority rhetoric” among the Francophones of Flanders represents *both* a discursive strategy *and* a real change in (some) Francophones’ identity in response to the developments of the decade and half following the end of the Great War, which confronted many Francophones with the possibility that their position in Flemish society would change quite drastically. As they were “excluded” from the Flemish imagined community, they began to imagine one of their own. When, however, the legislation of the 1930s seemed to put the language question to rest, many Francophones of Flanders felt that a continued use of minority rhetoric would be futile, and that they would be better served by “accepting” the *status quo* – especially when

their relative wealth and influence allowed them to maintain a thriving French-language (private) school system and social sphere.

Indeed, it was only when these remaining “refuges” for the Francophones of Flanders came under attack that there was a brief resurgence of “minority rhetoric”. In 1963, new legislation forbade the subsidizing of private schools in Flanders that taught in French and removed the legal standing of their diplomas; it also phased out the “transmutation classes” in Flanders. In response, several groups of Francophones of Flanders petitioned the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, claiming that their rights as a “minority” were in danger. The court ruled in favor of the Belgian state, holding that favoring one language in educational policy was not a violation of “minority rights”, side-stepping the question of whether or not the Francophones of Flanders were “really” a minority⁶⁵.

Minority identity, like all collective identities, is a contingent one. The current state of Belgian politics makes it unlikely that there will be rights for the French language in government service or education in Flanders in the foreseeable future, regardless of which discourses are used to demand them. Indeed, the historical use of “minority rhetoric” as a way for the Francophones of Flanders to make claims on the Belgian state has led many contemporary Flemish scholars and politicians

63. JOSÉE LEGAULT, *L'invention d'une minorité. Les Anglo-Québécois*, Montréal, 1992. 64. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London/New York, 2006. 65. ROBERT PELLOUX, “L'arrêt de la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme dans l'affaire linguistique belge (fond),” in *Annuaire français de droit international*, 1968, p. 201-216; ANDREAS KHOL, “Zur Diskriminierung im Erziehungswesen. Das Sachurteil des Europäischen Gerichtshofes für Menschenrechte vom 23. Juli 1968 in den belgischen Sprachenfällen”, in *Zeitschrift für ausländisches öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht (Heidelberg Journal of International Law)*, 30, 1970, p. 263-320.

to caution the Belgian government against ratifying the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities without significant reservations, lest French-speakers in Flanders try to advance such claims again⁶⁶. As such, the question of whether or not the Francophones of Flanders are "really" a minority is moot.

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Abbreviations

Cegesoma	Centre for Historical Documentation and Research on War and Contemporary Society, Brussels (Anderlecht)
CJG	Centre Jean Gol, Brussels (Saint-Gilles)
FHMW	Fonds d'Histoire du Mouvement Wallon, Liège
MP	Member of Parliament (<i>député/volksvertegenwoordiger</i>)
NEVB	<i>Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging</i> , Tielt, 1998 (CD-ROM)

66. THEO VAN SANTEN, *Het taalprobleem in België. (G)een oplossing mogelijk(?)*, Brugge, 2002, p. 115-129; ANDRÉ ALEN, "Deux rapporteurs suisses sur les minorités nationales belges", in PETER HÄNNI (éd.), *L'homme et l'État. Mélanges offerts par la Faculté de droit de l'Université de Fribourg pour Thomas Fleiner à l'occasion de son 65^e anniversaire*, Fribourg, 2003, p. 239-257; WILFRIED SWENDEN, "Personality vs. Territoriality. Belgium and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities", in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues* 2, 2003 (3), p. 331-356.