

PORTRAITS OF THE NATION

Imagery on Belgian Postage Stamps, 1914-1945 ¹

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THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF STAMPS HAS SO FAR BEEN LARGELY NEGLECTED. IN THIS ARTICLE I TRY TO ARGUE THAT STAMPS SHOULD BE SEEN AS IMPORTANT *LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE* ² AND THAT, COMBINED WITH THE WRITTEN SOURCES DIRECTLY RELATED TO THEM, THEY OFFER AN IDEAL WAY OF STUDYING THE INTERRELATED TOPICS OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY ³. IN FACT THE IMAGERY DISPLAYED ON STAMPS ALLOWS BEST FOR A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF VARIOUS DISCOURSES ABOUT ANY COUNTRY'S IDENTITY. IN CONTRAST TO NATIONAL ARCHITECTURE, FOR EXAMPLE, STAMPS HAVE THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING MORE EASILY AND FREQUENTLY ADAPTABLE TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES AND - SINCE THEY CIRCULATE NOT ONLY WITHIN THE NATION BUT ALSO CARRY AN IMAGE OF THE COUNTRY TO THE ENTIRE WORLD - OF REPRESENTING THE COUNTRY ABROAD. THEY THEREFORE DULY DESERVE TO BE CALLED "PORTRAITS OF THE NATION".

I. The stamp editions

In the period 1914-1945 the Belgian Post Office issued 135 stamp series containing over 600 different postage stamps ⁴. I shall first look at the reasons why these stamps were created and then I shall look at the meaning attached to their imagery ⁵.

There were three major reasons for new stamp editions. First, there was practical necessity. After the death of a King or due to changes in postal rates new ordinary stamps were issued, normally showing a portrait of the monarch or the Belgian heraldic lion. Secondly, there were stamps issued for fund-raising purposes. First issued in 1910 for the universal exhibition in Brussels, and annually from 1918 onwards, fund-raising stamps were stamps sold with an additional charge in favour of charitable or other, non-profit-making organisations ⁶. Usually, the organisations asked the Post Office to grant them a

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2 Pierre Nora's monumental study, for example, completely neglects stamps, as well as coins and banknotes. See PIERRE NORA (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, 1986.

3 See JOHN R. GILLIS, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship", in JOHN R. GILLIS (ed.), *Commemorations*, Princeton, 1994. Apart from the classics BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1991; ERNEST GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, 1990 and ERIC HOBBSBAWM, TERENCE RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983. Other useful books in this context include: CELIA APPLEGATE, *A Nation of Provincials, The German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley, 1990; JAMES FENTRESS, CHRIS WICKHAM. *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992; MIROSLAV HROCH, "Das Erwachen kleiner Nationen als Problem der komparativen Forschung", in HEINRICH A. WINKLER (ed.), *Nationalismus*, Königstein, 1985, p. 155-172.

4 See CHAMBRE PROFESSIONNELLE BELGE DES NÉGOCIANTS EN TIMBRES-POSTE (ed.), *Catalogue officiel de timbres-poste*, 1991, Bruxelles, 1991.

5 All primary sources used for this article are in the archive of the *Musée de la Poste* (= MP) in Brussels.

6 The additional charge went to the Croix-Rouge belge (1914, 15, 18, 39), invalids of war (1920, 22, 23), the *Comité national belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, an association of three anti-tuberculosis charities (annually from 1925 onwards), the reconstruction of the abbey of Orval (1928, 33, 39, 41, 43) and the *Secours d'Hiver* (1940, 41, 42, 43, 44), to name only the most important.

special series for fund-raising purposes. By 1926 the number of organisations or even individuals asking for the edition of fund-raising stamps had increased considerably⁷. The director general of the Post Office argued against both too many stamp series, since this decreased their philatelic value, and against the attribution of an unfair monopoly over fund-raising stamps to a single charity. He thus proposed to split the profit “... *au prorata de l'importance des oeuvres philanthropiques intéressées* ...”⁸. This proposal was implemented and the *Comité national belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose* normally received 80 % of the profit of the annual “*antituberculeux*” series.

In autumn 1940 the *Secours d'Hiver* charity was set up on the model of the Nazi *Winterhilfswerk*. The German authorities declared the 1940 antituberculosis stamps to be “*unerwünscht*” and instead proposed to issue stamps in favour of the new charity⁹. When antituberculosis stamps were permitted again in 1942, *Secours d'Hiver* claimed half of its profits¹⁰. Throughout the occupation it had to be consulted for any proposal for fund-raising stamps while its exaggerated demands concerning its own stamps met with a rather reluctant postal administration¹¹.

Thirdly, there were a number of commemoration and propaganda stamps issued without fund-raising purposes. These can be divided into three main groups: commemorations of historical events¹², advertisements for exhibitions¹³ and national propaganda¹⁴. In the case of commemoration stamps, the idea of creating them often originated in the administration, the government or the general public. A good example of this is the 1919 liberation series. The postal ministry asked the postal administration to investigate the possibility of commemorating “*par le timbre-poste, le souvenir de la guerre*”¹⁵. Within the postal administration the idea of creating a stamp showing King Albert in military

7 *Député suppléant* Simon of Trazegnies demanded a fund-raising stamp for the reconstruction of Trazegnies castle, see Note, *Directeur général*, 10 Feb. 1926 (MP, 1926/27 Antituberculeux).

8 Note, *Directeur général* to *Ministre*, 28 Oct. 1926 (*Idem*).

9 See letter *Armeefeldpostmeister* to *Generaldirektor*, 5 Nov. 1940, (MP: 1940-2).

10 See report by *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, no date (1942) (MP, 1943-2).

11 See letter *Generaldirektor* to *Armeefeldpostmeister* demanding permission for a series of Red Cross stamps “*Nachdem das Winterhilfswerk diese Ausgabe im Prinzip genehmigt hat...*”, 10 Jan. 1944 (MP, 1944-2) and letter *Directeur général* to *Secours d'Hiver* complaining about the impossibility of the charity's demands, Aug. 1942 (MP, 1942-4).

12 1915: Important buildings destroyed by German troops and key scenes of Belgian history; 1919: Liberation; 1919: Liège included in 1915 series; 1920: Termonde included in 1915 series; 1925: 75th anniversary of first Belgian stamp; 1930: Centenary of Belgian independence; 1932: stratospheric flights of Prof. Piccard; 1934: Commemoration of King Albert; 1944/45: Liberation.

13 1930: International exhibitions of Antwerp and Liège; 1934 : *Exposition universelle, Bruxelles*; 1938 : *Exposition de l'Eau, Liège*.

14 1919: stamps for Belgian occupied Germany; 1920: stamps for Eupen-Malmédy.

15 Letter *Ministère* to *Directeur d'administration*, 30 Nov. 1917. The postal stamp has the date 11. Dec. 1918, thus the original has either taken over a year to arrive, or the first stamp is wrong by a year, which is more likely (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Roi casqué”, 1920*).

dress for that purpose had been proposed both by the director general and the stamp director. The stamp director wanted for Belgium: “*la satisfaction de glorifier devant le monde entier son héroïque Roi-soldat et sa vaillante armée*”¹⁶. The director general wrote to the minister: “*Il serait regrettable ... de manquer l’occasion qui nous est offerte de populariser une image qui s’adapte si bien à notre situation actuelle, correspond au sentiment général et rappelle, dans la personne du Roi, les circonstances glorieuses qui ont valu à notre pays sa libération*”¹⁷. A newspaper article further encouraged the stamp director in his views¹⁸. *Le National* expressed the desire that: “*Albert Ier, casqué de fer, casqué de tranchée, casqué du petit soldat de l’Yser. ... entre[r] dans l’Histoire*”¹⁹. Another paper had even specifically suggested the idea of issuing postal stamps with Albert in military dress²⁰. The series known as “*Roi casqué*” appeared in 1919 (fig. 3).

Stamps announcing exhibitions appeared in the 1930s. In this case, the space on stamps was simply used for advertising purposes. The idea for such stamps came from the organisers of the fairs who applied to the postal administration for such means of propaganda. They stressed the national importance of the exhibitions and the ideal advertisement aspects of stamps²¹.

Finally, there were two stamp series which were issued for political reasons, in 1919 for Belgian-occupied Germany and in 1920 for the annexed territories of Eupen and Malmédy. Although the postal ministry had been informed on the matter of occupation stamps by Maréchal Foch that: “*L’émission de timbres-poste belges serait contraire à ce principe [of maintenance of local legislation] et à l’article 5 de la Convention d’Armistice*”²². The war ministry nevertheless agreed with the postal ministry on the need to issue such stamps²³. The press both in Belgium and abroad saw this move positively, mainly because of the First World War precedent of German stamps in occupied Belgium. *Het Vaderland* wrote: “*De geschiedenis wreekt zich zelfs bij middel van postzegels*”²⁴, and *L’Indépendance*

16 Directeur du timbre to Directeur général, 13 Oct. 1918 (*Idem*).

17 Directeur général to Ministre, 6 Dec. 1918 (*Idem*).

18 Directeur du timbre to Directeur général, 26 Nov. 1918 (*Idem*).

19 *Le National*, 24 Nov. 1918 (*Idem*).

20 *La Cote libre*, 5 Dec. 1918 (*Idem*).

21 See for example letter *Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles 1935* to *Ministre des Postes*, 29 July 1933 (MP, 1934 *Exposition universelle de Bruxelles 1935*).

22 Letter *Chef de section, Etat-Major* to *Ministre des Postes*, 15 March 1919 reports Foch’s reply (MP, 1921 *Timbre avec surcharge “Allemagne-Duitsland”*).

23 See letter *Ministère de la Guerre* to *Ministre des Postes*, 21 June 1919 (MP : 1921 *Timbre avec surcharge “Allemagne-Duitsland”*). A press release on the stamps dates from 14 July 1919, see notice, 14 July 1919 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Roi casqué”*).

24 *Het Vaderland*, 5 Oct. 1919 (MP, 1921 *Timbre avec surcharge “Allemagne-Duitsland”*).

belge told its readers of an article in the *Daily Telegraph* which called this “a mild retaliation !”²⁵

The creation of stamps for the annexed territories of Eupen and Malmédy were part of the official plan to integrate these “*territoires réunis à la Belgique*”²⁶. In a detailed report the postal administration learned that the Belgian military commanders insisted on a rapid administrative take-over in order to “*enlever toute illusion à ceux qui ne paraissent pas encore bien convaincus de la réalité de la situation et qui seraient tentés de faire usage de la faculté que le traité de paix laisse aux habitants d’exprimer par écrit ... leur désir de voir tout ou partie des dits territoires maintenu sous la souveraineté allemande*”²⁷. Based on this report the director general insisted on the “*question très urgente*” of stamps for the annexed territories²⁸. These stamps circulated from the beginning of the Belgian administration of Eupen and Malmédy in January 1920²⁹. Thus, in this case stamps were more than a mild retaliation but one of the ways in which the Belgian government manifested its determination to keep Eupen and Malmédy for ever³⁰.

We can therefore see that the decision-making process for the creation of new stamps varied depending to a large extent on the kind of stamp concerned. In the case of ordinary stamps, most decisions were taken at an administrative level. Whether or not a fund-raising or advertisement stamp was created depended on the amount of success the interested lobbies had in convincing the administration of their high “*prorata d’importance*” with respect to their competitors. Royal patronage seems to have been one of the more promising ways of achieving this. The uneven distribution of the profits of the anti-tuberculosis stamps might be explained by the following statement by the *Palais royal*: “*la Reine porte grand intérêt au développement de la lutte contre la tuberculose qui semble trouver de nouvelles armes dans la constitution récente du Comité national belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*”³¹.

While the stamp issues for Belgian-occupied Germany and Eupen and Malmédy had predominantly political motives, commemoration stamps for historical events were

25 *L’Indépendance belge*, 4 Aug. 1919 (*Idem*).

26 *Séance du 31 Juillet 1919, Projet de loi concernant le gouvernement des territoires réunis à la Belgique en vertu du Traité de Versailles du 28 Juin 1919*, in *Chambre des Représentants, Documents, Session de 1918-1919*, p. 902-904. (MP, 1921 *Timbre avec surcharge “Eupen-Malmédy”*).

27 Note by *Inspecteur de direction to Directeur général*, 3 July 1919 (*Idem*).

28 Note *Directeur général to Directions P, E. et C.*, 7 July 1919 (*Idem*).

29 See *Décret du 29 Janvier 1920 - Création de timbres surchargés “Eupen et Malmédy”*, in *ADMINISTRATION DES POSTES* (ed.), *Recueil chronologique des lois et des arrêtés concernant la Poste*, Bruxelles, 1964.

30 Only twenty years later rather similar stamps celebrated the reunification of the territories with Germany. See : KARL HEINZ KRÜGER, *Deutschlands Geschichte im Spiegelbild seiner Briefmarken*, Marburg 1993, p. 167.

31 *Secrétaire du Palais de Bruxelles to Ministre*, 5 March 1928 (MP, 1928-29 *Timbres Antituberculeux “Cathédrales”*).

issued because of the national importance of the commemoration. The case of the *Roi casqué* suggests that the idea for commemorations could have various origins including the administration, the government and the press. In other words, commemoration stamps could be the result of a more or less broad consensus within society about the necessity of the commemoration. However, we have also seen that the implementors of the propaganda stamps, the administration and the government, were clearly aware of the educational and doctrinal potential of the images they ‘popularised’, as they put it.

II. Portraits of the Nation

Let us now turn to the portraits themselves, the interpretation of the imagery and their significance as means of national identification between 1914 and 1945. Proposals for the imagery had two main origins. In the case of fund-raising and advertisement stamps, the organisations involved usually proposed certain images to the Post Office while in the case of ordinary stamps decisions were usually taken on an administrative level. The imagery of commemoration stamps could be suggested by the government, the administration or the public. From 1928 onwards, a so-called *Commission philatélique*, composed of the director general of the Post Office and 4 philatelists chosen by the postal minister, gave advice on all philatelic matters³². Only very few documents of this commission survive - possibly most reunions did without a written protocol. The existing documents seem to indicate that the commission often agreed with its president, the director general³³. The minister or, in the case of a royal portrait, the King, gave the final approval of all imagery.

The experience of the First World War was crucial in providing Belgium with means of presenting itself to the world and itself. It added a whole new set of iconographical themes to Belgian self-representation on stamps, in addition to the previously employed royal portraits, heraldic lions and legendary scenes on early fund-raising stamps³⁴.

In 1915 a series of new ordinary stamps was created because large numbers of the previous series had been stolen³⁵. The imagery displayed on these stamps had strong war propaganda objectives. For a 1919 stamp exhibition in Tokyo the postal administration explained their significance. The three city views, it reported, represented monuments in

32 See *Arrêté royal*, 1 Oct. 1928, in ADMINISTRATION DES POSTES (ed.), *Recueil chronologique des lois et des arrêtés concernant la Poste*, Bruxelles 1964.

33 See for example letter *Directeur général* to *Ministre*, 13 Feb. 1929 (MP, 1930 *Timbres-poste et carte postale* “Centenaire indépendance nationale”).

34 Coats of arms of Antwerp, 1894, St. Michael and the dragon in front of Brussels monuments, 1896; adaptation of a painting of St. Martin by Van Dyck, 1910, 1911.

35 See *Arrêté royal*, 16 Sept. 1915 (MP, 1915 *Emission timbre-poste à l’effigie du Roi - vues de villes*).

Ypres (*halles*), Dinant (*vue de la collegiale*) and Louvain (*bibliothèque*) all “détruit[s] par les allemands.” The port of Antwerp was meant to: “commémorer le plus important évènement économique survenu en Belgique: l’affranchissement de l’Escaut,” while the colonial scene was meant to serve as a reminder of the annexation of the Congo “l’évènement le plus remarquable de la politique extérieure belge”. The restitution of the Belgian flag to the troops by King Albert in Furnes was a “symbole de guerre” and the final theme was: “la devise nationale: ‘L’union fait la force’ personnifiée par les trois premiers rois de la Belgique libre et indépendante”³⁶.

While in Japan such detailed information was necessary, in neighbouring France the images were easily decipherable. During a 1917 discussion about new French stamps the Chambre des Députés heard of the example of: “l’héroïque Belgique [qui célèbre] ses trois souverains, les vues des villes martyrisées par l’Allemand: Louvain, Ypres, Furnes, Dinant”³⁷.

After the war, two stamps were added to the 1915 series. In December 1918 the *Ligue wallonne de Liège* praised the idea of the series but complained to the postal minister that “si Anvers est représenté ... Liège, elle qui subit le premier choc, elle qui se défendit si glorieusement que la France lui décerna la Croix de la Légion d’Honneur, que ne reçut aucune autre ville belge, Liège wallonne et loyale est exclue de la répartition”³⁸. Similarly, the member of the *Chambre des Représentants* Vermeersch complained that Termonde “qui a le plus souffert de l’invasion allemande n’a jamais eu le mérite d’être reconnue comme l’une des villes martyres”. He therefore demanded a stamp for his city, especially after the precedent of Liège “qui n’a guère souffert”³⁹.

Both complaints were successful, though the choice of the appropriate image proved difficult in the case of Liège. While the destroyed city hall of Termonde was an ideal theme, the director general told the minister that, after having consulted a series of postcards of Liège, “je n’ai rien trouvé qui vaille vraiment la peine de retenir l’attention.” The only possible exception was the *Perron liégeois* but: “il ferait, je pense, assez piètre figure, à côté des superbes monuments qui ont été choisis pour la partie flamande du pays”. In his embarrassment the director even proposed to ask the *Ligue wallonne* for a characteristic view of the town⁴⁰. The minister, however, decided in favour of the *Perron*⁴¹ (fig. 2).

36 Letter Belgian embassy in Tokyo to Foreign ministry, 10 Jan. 1919 and annexe, no date (MP, 1915 *Emission timbre-poste à l’effigie du Roi - vues de villes*).

37 See *Chambre des Députés, Proposition de Résolution*, 14 Dec. 1917 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Roi casqué”*).

38 Letter *Ligue wallonne de Liège* to *Ministre des Postes*, 6 Dec. 1918 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Perron liégeois”*).

39 Letter Vermeersch to *Ministre des Postes*, 26 July 1919 (MP, 1919 *Timbre Termonde*).

40 Letter *Directeur général* to *Ministre des Postes*, 7 Jan. 1919 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Perron liégeois”*).

41 See *Note Chef du Cabinet* to *Administration des Postes*, 16 Jan. 1919 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Perron liégeois”*).

The experience of the war also affected the perception and representation of the Belgian Monarchy⁴². Before the war, the first series of ordinary stamps of King Albert (1912) were frequently criticised as being rather ugly (fig. 1). The technical director at that time wrote to the director general that “*les nouveaux timbres-poste ne sont pas beaux, mais ils ne pourraient l’être ... à défaut d’une tête caractéristique et d’une vignette réellement artistique*”⁴³. While these remarks were later crossed out, they nevertheless show that at the beginning of Albert’s reign his prestige was not particularly high; he seemed to lack character, at least in terms of his visual appearance.

This perception changed radically as a consequence of the First World War. The royal couple became veritable heroes and almost all subsequent images make reference to the events of 1914-1918. The most striking example was the 1919 “*Roi casqué*” series (fig. 3). We have seen above that the idea of portraying Albert in this way was widespread before the creation of the series and it became very popular indeed. This can be seen by the reactions following its abolition in 1922. The Antwerp newspaper *De Schelde* thought that the replacement stamps were: “*erbarmelijk leelijk en slecht uitgevoerd*”⁴⁴; the *Gazette de Liège* wrote: “*Il est réellement impardonnable de propager un portrait du Roi qui le ridiculise à ce point!*” and *L’Echo d’Ostende* asked “*pour quel motif on n’a pas maintenu l’effigie ‘Roi casqué’?*”. There were also less serious comments like that in *Le Rappel* of Charleroi which saw everybody, including Tarzan, on the new stamps, but could not find the King⁴⁵ (fig. 4).

Subsequent ordinary stamp series showed Albert still in uniform but the imagery referred not in the same explicit way to the First World War. However, on the 1925 anniversary issue for the first Belgian stamp and on the 1930 stamp commemorating the centenary of Belgian independence, Albert again appeared wearing a coat, clearly referring to the trenches of the First World War. Finally, in 1938 the image of the “*Roi casqué*” was taken up again for two fund-raising stamps, one representing the Albert canal on an advertisement stamp for the 1939 *Exposition de l’Eau* in Liège and one in favour of the Yser memorial. This latter stamp was an extraordinary financial success. While the charity had expected to raise 700.000 francs, it rose more than twice as much⁴⁶. The organisation *Monument au Roi Albert à l’Yser* stated that this was mainly due to

42 On King Albert see LAURENCE VAN YPERSEELE, *Le Roi Albert. Histoire d’un mythe*, Ottignies, 1995 and MARIE-ROSE THIELMANS, “Albert 1er et sa légende”, in ANNE MORELLI (ed.), *Les grands mythes de l’histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*, Bruxelles, 1995, p.175-188.

43 *Direction technique* to *Direction générale*, Feb. 1913 (MP, 1912 *Création timbres-poste à 5 Frs*).

44 *De Schelde*, 1 Aug. 1922 (MP, 1921 : *Timbre type Houyoux*).

45 *Gazette de Liège*, 28 July 1922, *L’Echo d’Ostende*, 30 July 1922, *Le Rappel*, 3 June 1922 (*Idem*).

46 See letter *Directeur général des Postes* to *Secrétaire du cabinet*, 21 Feb. 1938 (MP, 1937/3 *Emission Fondation musicale Reine Elisabeth* 1937).

veterans, both organised and private. The *Front unique* of St. Josse, for instance, bought stamps for 9.000 Francs⁴⁷.

While Albert was the military hero, his wife Elisabeth became the heroine of charity. The first stamp she appeared on was still composed of traditional imagery. Wearing a crown she appeared next to her husband on a 1926 stamp in favour of people with tuberculosis caused by the war (fig. 5). She was the first Queen and, after a 1925 allegorical nurse, the second woman to appear on a Belgian stamp. In 1931, Elisabeth appeared for the first time alone on an antituberculosis stamp (fig. 7). An article in the *Revue Postale* gave very detailed official analysis and interpretation of the imagery. The article first praised her patriotic actions during the war: “*Aux côtés du Roi, elle demeure, belle comme la douleur, douce comme la patience, tranquille comme la confiance, rayonnante comme la victoire. Il est le chef, mais elle est l’âme.*” Elisabeth was: “*la Reine de l’Yser.*” The interpretation of the Queen’s head-dress is very revealing: “*Sur les cheveux, cette coiffure que l’image a popularisée et dont on ne sait si c’est le bandeau de l’infirmière de la Croix-Rouge ou le bandeau royal ou probablement les deux ensemble.*” Intentionally ambiguous, Elisabeth was at the same time a Red Cross nurse and the Queen of the Belgians. The article ends with: “*C’est le portrait de Celle qui incarna, aux heures suprêmes, l’âme de l’immortelle Belgique.*” Thus here the memory of the First World War combined with the cult of a member of the dynasty resulted in the soul, or in other words the national identity, of eternal Belgium⁴⁸. This positive myth around Elisabeth is all the more remarkable because she, *née* princess of Bavaria, was originally from Germany. Elisabeth herself seemed to have had few problems about her Belgian symbolic significance on this particular stamp. On the contrary: “*(La Reine) S’est montrée extrêmement satisfaite*”, the Post Office told the artist who had created the stamp⁴⁹.

Throughout the inter-war period, the First World War remained a dominant point of reference for Belgian self-representation on stamps. While the theme was often combined with the cult of a member of the royal family, there were numerous other stamps carrying non-royal images referring to the First World War. Stamps were issued in favour of war invalids (1920, 22, 23, 31), “*pro tuberculatis belli*” (1925, 26) and the British war memorial of Ypres and the allied memorial in Liège appeared on Belgian stamps (1929, 1938). Even the stamps issued in favour of the *Basilique nationale* at Koekelberg (1938) were connected to the memory of the War, the church “*sera dédiée au Sacré-Coeur en reconnaissance de la libération de la Belgique et en mémoire des Belges tombés pour la*

47 See letter *Comité du monument au Roi Albert à l’Yser* to *Ministre des Postes*, 14 March 1938 (MP, 1938/1 *IJzergedenkteken aan Koning Albert*).

48 VICTOR GUISSIERE, “Le Timbre de Charité belge”, in *Extrait de la Revue postale*, Dec. 1931 (MP, 1931/32 *Timbres “Antituberculeux Reine Elisabeth”*).

49 Letter *Directeur Général* to Jean de Bast, artist, 24 Nov. 1931 (*Idem*).

défense de la Patrie"⁵⁰. Cardinal Mercier and the Belgian Infantry even received double commemorations in form of fund-raising stamps in favour of the subsequent erection of *lieux de mémoire* in stone (both 1932)⁵¹.

Parallel to this dominant theme of the memory of the war, there were further means of identification used on Belgian stamps. One of them was the cultural patrimony of Belgium. In 1922 *Le Métropole* of Antwerp published a proposal of the *Touring Club de Belgique*. Complaining about the ugly new stamps it proposed to issue stamps figuring landmarks such as "*les hôtels de ville de Bruxelles et de Bruges, les cathédrales d'Anvers et de Tournai, le beffroi de Gand, la cascade de Coö, l'abbaye d'Orval, la citadelle de Namur, etc...*". The *Club* insisted on an appropriate artistic execution of the proposals "*qui ne soient pas un défi aux traditions d'art qui sont celles de notre peuple*" in order to receive stamps "*réellement dignes du pays*"⁵². Almost all these themes eventually figured on stamps. The Post Office issued series dedicated to the abbey of Orval, cathedrals, city views, sights, castles and bell towers. While part of the purpose of these images was to attract tourists⁵³, they did have additional meaning. In 1930, the year of the centenary of the foundation of the state, the *Revue postale* wrote: "*Après les sites et les cathédrales, on a choisi des sujets dont toute la Belgique put s'enorgueillir et qui montrent bien que notre nation remonte beaucoup plus haut que 1830, nos châteaux historiques*"⁵⁴.

The *Touring Club's* argument about the artistic tradition of the Belgians had frequent parallels in the sources. Orval's national significance was that it was "*la toute première de l'Ordre [des Cisterciens] créée en Belgique*"⁵⁵. The Cistercians contributed to the development of national agriculture and "*les écoles d'Art qu'ils ont instituées ... firent la gloire du Pays*"⁵⁶. Art and artists of previous centuries often provided the basis for Belgian stamps. Works of art by Van Dyck, Rubens, Memling, Rogier van der Weyden and Barend van Orley were reproduced on Belgian stamps (fig. 11) while portraits of Rubens, Van Dyck and Jan van Eyck also appeared on stamps.

50 See foundation list of *Les Amis de la Basilique nationale du Sacré-Coeur à Koekelberg*, 13 Dec. 1922 (MP, 1938/3 *Emission spéciale Basilique nationale du S. C. de Koekelberg*). The project was also directly linked to Cardinal Mercier and the royal family.

51 See MP, (1932) *Timbre poste "Cardinal Mercier", monument and 1932 : à la gloire de l'infanterie*.

52 *Le Métropole*, 30 Aug. 1922 (MP, 1921 *Timbre type Houyoux*). Already in 1910 *L'Etoile belge* had proposed very similar stamp themes, see *L'Etoile belge*, 20 Nov. 1910 (MP, 1912 *Création timbre-poste à 5 Frs*).

53 Especially the 1929 series, see: Protocol *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, 5 July 1929 (MP, 1929-30 *Timbres Antituberculeux "Sites"*).

54 Extrait de la *Revue postale*, Dec. 1930 (MP, 1930 *Timbres Antituberculeux 1930-31, châteaux*).

55 In 1132, seven centuries before 1830 !

56 See letter *Comité exécutif de la Commission de Patronage pour la Résurrection d'Orval* to *Premier Ministre*, no date (1927) (MP, 1929 *Timbres "Orval" avec surcharges 1928-1929*).

New stamps were often criticised as unworthy of the national artistic tradition. In 1920, for example, *Le Carillon* of Ostende wrote : “*La Belgique tient à se dire la patrie des arts, mais ne tient pas du tout à le prouver*”⁵⁷, while *Le National liégeois* wanted “*un beau timbre commémoratif, digne de la Belgique et de l’art belge*”⁵⁸. Admittedly, there were strong Flemish connotations to much of the pre-1830 art, for example, the famous 1902 exhibition during which many of these artists were rediscovered by a larger public was called “*Exposition des Primitifs flamands et d’art ancien*”⁵⁹. This did not, however, prevent the use of Flemish art in a Belgian national context. In 1930 the *Commission philatélique* proposed to issue two advertisement stamps for the international exhibitions in Antwerp and Liège as complementary stamps to the centenary commemoration series. As regards the themes, it thought : “*le mieux serait de rappeler, pour Anvers, l’art flamand, en reproduisant le portrait du peintre célèbre Rubens et, pour Liège, l’art industriel en faisant choix de l’effigie du grand inventeur Zénobe Gramme*”⁶⁰. Thus these stamps combined the old, pre-1830 traditions with the modern, industrial art and, together with the portraits of the first three Belgian monarchs, they constituted the official stamp series celebrating 100 years of national independence.

Finally, during the Second World War, the political, intellectual and legendary past of the territories which later became Belgium served as means of self-representation for the first time. The *Oeuvre nationale de Service social aux Familles de Militaires* successfully proposed to create a series called “*Portraits historiques de l’Ecole flamande*”⁶¹. The series contained portraits of important Burgundian and Habsburg rulers of the (Southern) Netherlands from Philip III (1396-1467) to Maria Theresa (1717-1780) (fig. 11).

The theme of the 1942 anti-tuberculosis series was that of portraits of important scholars initially including Erasmus of Rotterdam⁶². However “*Un échange de vues s’établit immédiatement au sujet d’Erasme. Malgré que la majeure partie de sa vie se soit écoulée sur notre sol, Erasme était de nationalité (sic !) hollandaise. L’idée de patrie doit-elle rigoureusement dominer le choix du Comité?*” The answer was positive : “*une reproduction des traits d’Erasme dans une série de timbres consacrés aux savants ayant honoré la*

57 *Le Carillon*, 7 Jan, 1920 (MP, 1919 *Timbre “Roi casqué”*).

58 *Le National liégeois*, 21 June 1925 (MP, 1849-1924 *Timbres commémoratifs*).

59 See official catalogue : anon. [W. H. JAMES WEALE], *Expositions des Primitifs flamands et d’art ancien*, Bruges 1902 and FRANCIS HASKELL, *History and its Images*, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 433-495.

60 See *Note Directeur général to Ministre*, 9 Dec. 1929 (MP, 1930 *Exposition Anvers-Liège*).

61 See letter *Oeuvre nationale de Service social aux Familles de Militaires to Directeur général*, 20 June 1941 (MP, 1941/2).

62 See Protocol *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, 17 Sept. 1941 (MP, 1942-4).

*Belgique, ne peut être retenue. Au surplus, la Hollande a elle-même déjà glorifié Erasme sur un timbre-poste*⁶³. Thus the committee applied the modern concepts of Belgian and Dutch nationality to a period where neither of these states existed. Interestingly, similar arguments about the appropriateness of commemorating German born Rubens and Memling were never raised.

Legends from each province were represented on the 1944 antituberculosis series. The author of an anonymous typescript, possibly intended for the *Revue postale*, explained the appropriateness - especially in a time “où chaque peuple met l’accent sur ses originalités, sur les valeurs spirituelles qui lui sont propres” - of the representation of legends transmitted over centuries from distant ancestors: “*Avant l’aube de toute littérature, ces légendes ont été la source même de la poésie. Elles sont la traduction des premières émotions de notre peuple, jaillies de son âme et de son imagination, (...) n’est-ce pas une affirmation éclatante de l’originalité de notre terroir, et de la pérennité de notre race?*”⁶⁴. Thus, during the German occupation, contemporary ‘Blut und Boden’ theories were curiously mixed together with the structural framework of the Belgian provinces to show the existence of the eternal and singular Belgian race.

The cult of the royal family received an important new element in 1935⁶⁵. The tragic accident which killed Queen Astrid immediately became part of the collective memory of the Belgians and allowed for new forms of representation of the royal family. An undated typescript “*Une Série Reine Astrid*”, very probably for an issue of the *Revue Postale*, argued in emotional language for a stamp series for the dead Queen. “*La grâce, la beauté, la bonté, la charité, l’amour familial, la tendresse maternelle*” were all aspects of Astrid’s personality and the author stressed the importance of commemorating her. “*Dans son char rapide, le Temps, puisqu’il faut le nommer, emporte les meilleures choses dans le domaine de l’Oubli. A la faux de Saturne, opposons notre arme mieux fourbie : le culte du souvenir*”. The text ends with: “*Le ‘Roi casqué’ occupe la première page de nos albums. Il réclame à ses côtés Celle qu’il affectionnait tout particulièrement. Sa prière sera exaucée*”⁶⁶.

And indeed, the “*culte du souvenir*” of Astrid manifested itself in three stamp series which compare favourably with the success of the “*Roi Casqué*”. The 1935 antituberculosis

63 See Protocol *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, 22 Sept. 1941 (MP, 1943-2).

64 Typescript, 6 July 1944 (MB, 1944-4).

65 The stamps created for Leopold III did not differ markedly from those created for his father, both wore military uniform.

66 See RICHARD BYL, *Une Série “REINE ASTRID”* (MP, 1935 *Timbres antituberculeux, Emission 1935-36*). On Queen Astrid see the very interesting book by PASCAL DAYEZ-BURGEON, *La Reine Astrid. Histoire d’un mythe*, Paris, 1995.

stamp was dedicated entirely to the memory of Astrid (fig. 8). 21.9 million stamps were printed⁶⁷, the total profit of this stamp series was 2.124.850 Francs, compared to only 493.765 Francs the year before⁶⁸.

The second Astrid stamp appeared in 1937 at the initiative of the *Société belgo-suédoise*. While the profits of the first series went to various charities, the profits of the second one were used for the “*culte du souvenir*”. In order to “*perpétuer le souvenir, si cher au peuple belge, de Sa Majesté Astrid, Reine des Belges, et, comme manifestation de son activité sociale*” the funds were to be used to erect a monument in Brussels, to fund children’s parks in provincial capitals and to establish a sanatorium for young children⁶⁹. On the stamp, Astrid appeared holding crown prince Baudouin (fig. 9). Therefore, her (lost) role as mother of her own and the country’s children was stressed by this stamp series, both by means of the imagery and by the way in which the money raised was spent. The final stamp showing Astrid appeared in a fund-raising series in favour of the Red Cross in 1939. While the original plan was to represent only the living members of the royal family, Queen Elisabeth let the Post Office know that she would like an image of Astrid to appear on one stamp of the series⁷⁰ (fig. 10 c).

It is interesting to note the general change which took place in the royal representation on stamps in our period. In contrast to previous Belgian Kings, Albert appeared together with his wife on banknotes (1919)⁷¹ and stamps (fig. 5). During the pre-war years of the reign of Leopold III, all his children figured on antituberculosis stamps⁷² and, as we have seen above, Queen Elisabeth made sure that the 1939 Red Cross series showed all living members of the royal family as well as Astrid (fig. 10 a-d). Thus there was a development from the portrait of the King alone under Leopold II to representations of the royal couple of Albert and Elisabeth to the representation of the entire royal family of Leopold III.

Intentional representations of Flanders and Wallonia were rare in this period⁷³. The 1929 series of ordinary stamps showing the Belgian lion nevertheless caused some

67 See report of *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, 5 Jan. 1937(MP, 1936/2 *Timbres Antituberculeux*, 1936-7).

68 See *Relevé des émissions spéciales de timbres-poste avec surtaxes parues depuis 1932*, (MP, 1938/3 *Emission spéciale Basilique Nationale du S.C. de Koekelberg 1941*) partly the success of this series was due to smaller extra-charges levied on the antituberculosis stamps, as stated in the report of *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose*, 2 June 1936 (MP, 1936/2 *Timbres Antituberculeux*, 1936-7).

69 Speech of Postal minister, M. Bouchery, entitled *Actualité*, no date (MP, 1937/2 *Souvenir “Reine Astrid” 1937*).

70 See letter of *Cabinet du Roi* to Postal Minister, 3 Feb. 1939 (MP, 1939/1 *Emission Croix-Rouge de Belgique*).

71 During the occupation 1914-1918, there had been *ersatz* banknotes showing the first Belgian royal couple, Leopold I and Louise-Marie.

72 All three in 1935, Baudouin in 1936, Joséphine-Charlotte in 1937 and Albert in 1938.

73 Apart from the use of both national languages from 1893 onwards.

discussion (fig. 6). Joseph Lecharlier, a businessman from Jette-St-Pierre, complained about “*ces timbres misérables*” : “*Il me semble que l’on écarte le plus possible notre Grand Roi, ou la famille Royale au profit du ‘Lion des Flandres’*”⁷⁴. In the Senate these stamps received negative criticism from all parties⁷⁵ and Senator Vinck personally complained : “*Quelle vulgarité*”, and thought of the lion : “*à pleurer, n’est-il pas vrai*”⁷⁶. As a result, the Post Office proposed new stamps with classical allegorical imagery (Ceres, Mercury) but they were criticised as being even uglier so that the *Revue postale* wrote : “*Je suis sûr que les Wallons eux-mêmes aimeront encore mieux le Lion de Flandre*”⁷⁷.

However, such problems were mostly avoided either by employing royal imagery which was neutral and which was, as we have seen above, very popular or by using the country’s provincial rather than linguistic divisions as a means of identification⁷⁸. A 1944 series of famous men of each province posed the problem of a suitable representative of Brabant. The solution was found in Ruusbroeck (1294-1381) : “*personnage vraiment Européen (...) ce n’est pas une personnalité flamande, son oeuvre n’a aucune attache nationaliste, c’est un extatique des altitudes de la pensée, et personne n’y pourra voir autre chose*”⁷⁹. The postal administration was also keen to keep a certain regional balance of stamp themes. In 1929 the director general compiled a list of all of the cities represented on stamps. He found that there had been 7 Walloon, 9 Flemish and 3 bilingual (Brussels) themes so far and, because of this disproportion, he proposed to choose “*une vue wallonne, p. ex. l’église (caractéristique, me dit-on) de St. Hubert*” instead of Antwerp for the new series of air mail stamps⁸⁰.

The first intentional representation of Flanders and Wallonia dates from 1944 when two *Secours d’Hiver* stamps showed St. Martin “*dans des paysages typiques de nos contrées, symbolisant l’action du Secours d’Hiver dans le pays tout entier*”⁸¹. In the following year the idea of representing Belgium by means of its linguistic elements inspired the creation of two fund-raising stamps in favour of “*les sinistrés*

74 Letter Lecharlier to *Ministre des Postes*, 4 Dec. 1930 (MP, 1928 “*Lion héraldique*”).

75 Account of Senate session of 11 May 1932 in *Revue Postale*, June 1932 (MP, *Timbre -poste “Cardinal Mercier” Monument*).

76 Letter Vinck to *Ministre des Postes*, 29 Nov. 1931 (MP, 1932 *Belgique Récoltante et Mercure*).

77 *Revue postale*, June 1932 (MP, *Timbre -poste “Cardinal Mercier” Monument*).

78 1940: series of coats of arms of provincial capitals; 1944: series of provincial legends and series of famous men of each province; 1945: series of provincial coats of arms. All provincial coats of arms had already appeared on banknotes in 1852.

79 Letter Tierlink, member of *Comité de Coordination de l’aide aux prisonniers de guerre belges et à leurs familles*, to *Directeur général*, 25 March 1944 (MP, 1944-3).

80 After this series the proportions were: Wallonia: 9, Flanders: 10, Brussels 4. *Note Directeur général* to *Ministre*, 15 Oct. 1929 (MP, 1935 *Timbres “Avion”*).

81 Advertisement leaflet, 1943 (MP, 1943-4).

belges”⁸². The director general wrote : “*L’un de ces dessins symbolise l’union des wallons et des flamands dans la douleur, et l’autre concrétise cette même union dans le travail de reconstruction*”⁸³ (fig. 14).

Finally, the Second World War provided Belgium with a new theme of self-representation. The Post Office planned to issue commemoration stamps for the liberation, however, this time there seemed to be no glorious “*Roi casqué*” to be celebrated. The director general realised that the stamps planned were supposed to show “*le lion héraldique encadré d’un V*” (fig. 12). But he also pointed out that Luxembourg and the Netherlands would certainly show their sovereigns on the liberation stamps. He then argued : “*Des trois pays du bloc économique décidé par les gouvernements intéressés, la Belgique serait donc le seul qui émettrait un timbre de la libération sans l’effigie Royale. Il me paraît indispensable de corriger cette omission afin d’éviter dans le pays et même à l’étranger des commentaires regrettables sinon des critiques véhémentes*”. He proposed to add a ‘V’ to the ordinary stamps showing the King and to issue them too as liberation stamps⁸⁴. These stamps were issued early in 1945 (fig. 13). This episode shows, on the one hand, the divided opinion within Belgian society about King Leopold III since obviously some members of the administration thought that the royal image was not an appropriate symbol for the liberation stamps. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the royal image seemed important both because of the other two Benelux monarchies and their identification with the sovereign and because of the potential domestic problems an absence of a royal image might cause. Thus the cult of the monarchy had acquired both domestic and international significance.

The Post Office also issued stamps to commemorate the resistance in 1945. The *Comité d’initiative et d’organisation du timbre belge de la libération* led by the princesse de Mérode proposed to edit such stamps⁸⁵. While Prime Minister Pierlot thought this was a very good idea⁸⁶, minister Demany warned against issuing such stamps because “*cette émission aurait lieu avec la collaboration d’une série d’organismes*⁸⁷ *n’ayant absolument rien de commun avec les organisations de la résistance proprement dites*”. Neither *Solidarité* nor *Solidarité socialiste* had been consulted and he further believed that the princess was

82 *Arrêté royal*, 10 April 1945, in ADMINISTRATION DES POSTES (ed.), *Recueil chronologique des lois et des arrêtés concernant la Poste*, Bruxelles 1964.

83 Note *Directeur général to Ministre*, 9 April 1945 (MP, 1945-1).

84 Letter *Directeur général to Ministre*, 7 Nov. 1944 (MP, 19/2 1944).

85 Letter *princesse de Mérode to Premier Ministre*, 11 Oct. 1944 (MP, 1945-3).

86 See Letter *Premier Ministre to Ministre des Postes*, 17 Oct. 1944 (MP, 1945-3).

87 Among them the *Foyers Léopold III*, the *Oeuvre nationale belge de Défense contre la Tuberculose* and the Red Cross.

“assez peu qualifiée pour parler au nom de la Résistance”⁸⁸. The stamps were nevertheless issued in October 1945 (fig. 15).

III. Stamps and National Identity in Belgium, 1914-1945

During this period the images on Belgian stamps were not the manifestation of a homogeneous concept of Belgian national identity. Rather, several discourses about the nature of Belgianness existed contemporaneously. These discourses could be conflicting, as in the case of the 1944 liberation stamps, or internally incoherent, as in the case of the refusal of Erasmus and the acceptance of Rubens as a means of Belgian self-representation. The best example for this multiplicity and diversity of identity discourses is the 1930 centenary series containing elements such as the cult of the dynasty, the memories of the 1830 revolution and of the First World War, the identification with the pre-1830 cultural patrimony as well as Belgium’s modern industrial success.

These identity discourses can be divided into two main groups. Firstly, there were identity discourses connected with the Belgian state. The most important of these was the cult of the royal family. Belgian by definition, if not by origin, the royal family always symbolised the Belgian state. Often genuinely popular, it proved to be very adaptable to most Belgian identity discourses and it also successfully engaged in an active construction of its own cult. The other main element of this kind of identity discourses was the collective memory of the First World War. The Belgian nation was remembered struggling against an external aggressor and united behind a formidable King.

Secondly, there were identity discourses connected with a locality, mostly a city or a province, which were important throughout our period⁸⁹. There were numerous cases of intense city rivalries and the provinces were increasingly used as a means of identification. Often an element of the cultural patrimony, such as a building or a famous personality, had a strong local significance. However, since these symbols were usually grouped together in a series with equivalents from around the country, these potential manifestations of local identity were firmly put into a Belgian context. Thus a series of castles, including Gent and Bouillon, were meant to show that Belgium dated back

88 Letter *Ministre Demany* to *Ministre des Postes*, 17 Oct. 1944 (MP, 1945-3). Before entering the government, Demany had been secretary-general of the *Front de l’Indépendance* and opposed plans to disarm left-wing resistance groups.

89 Strong regional identities are by no means a Belgian exception and no obstacle to successful nation building. Both Germany and Switzerland, for example, witnessed similar phenomena. See CELIA APPLIGATE, *A Nation of Provincials, The German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley, 1990 and GEORG KREIS, *Die Schweiz unterwegs, Schlussbericht des Nationalen Forschungsprogrammes 21, Kulturelle Vielfalt und nationale Identität*, Basel, 1993.

much further than 1830. If a single locality received a stamp series, royal patronage and imagery could emphasise its national significance, for example in the case of Orval. Local identities were certainly much stronger than identifications with language. Intentional representations of Flanders and Wallonia only appeared towards the very end of the period.

Based on the evidence of the significance of stamp imagery, it is possible to conclude that the strongest collective identity discourses manifested themselves both on a local and sub-linguistic level as well as on a state and supra-linguistic level. Belgium thus appears to have operated mainly on two levels of identity, local-provincial and national. It might be no coincidence that linguistic identifications appeared during the Second World War and immediately afterwards, at a time when the position of the royal family was disputed. Temporarily, the discourse of the identification with the state had a limited use of one of its main means of propaganda, the cult of the Belgian dynasty. Therefore it can be argued that it was when a third level of identity - regional and linguistic - interposed itself that the balance of local and national began to fall apart, and when the problems of the Belgian nation-state began.

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Illustrations ¹



• Fig. 1 : Albert, 1912.



• Fig. 2 : Perron liégeois, 1919.



• Fig. 3 * : Albert, 1919.



• Fig. 4 * : Albert, 1922.



• Fig. 5 : Elisabeth and Albert, 1926.



• Fig. 6 * : Lion héraldique, 1929.



• Fig. 7 * : Elisabeth, 1931.



• Fig. 8 * : Astrid, 1935.

¹ Source : Stamps collection FRANÇOIS UYTENHOVE. Most illustrations show exemplary images of longer series. Entirely reproduced series are marked with *.

Postage Stamps and National Identity



• Fig. 9 * : Astrid and Baudouin, 1937.



• Fig. 10a * : From the left :
Josephine-Charlotte, Albert,
Elisabeth, Baudouin.



• Fig. 10b : Joséphine-Charlotte, Léopold III,
Albert, Baudouin.



• Fig. 10d : Elisabeth visiting a hospital, all 1939.



• Fig. 10c : Astrid.



• Fig. 11 : Charles le Téméraire by Rogier van der Weyde, 1941.



• Fig. 12 * : Liberation, 1944.



• Fig. 13 * : Liberation, 1945.



• Fig. 14 : Union des Wallons et des Flamands dans la douleur, 1945.



• Fig. 15 : Résistance, 1945.