

History

Belgium and its Language Border

Running right across the middle of Belgium is a horizontal line, stretching from the border with France in the west to the German border in the east. As it approaches the German border, the line bends quite sharply southwards, running vertically towards the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. This is the 'language border', a frontier which divides Belgium into three distinct language areas: Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking area of Belgium), Wallonia (the French-speaking region in the south of Belgium) and, close to the German border, German-speaking Belgium. There is actually a fourth language area, right in the centre of the country: the Brussels Capital Region. Officially bilingual (French and Dutch), this region is in reality highly Europeanised and intercultural. The Brussels Capital Region lies in the midst of Flanders like an oasis. It is entirely surrounded by Flemish territory, though French speakers living in some of the peripheral municipalities around Brussels have been granted individual rights, or 'facilities'. Broadly speaking, these give them the right to use French in contacts with the authorities. A comparable system is in existence in a number of Walloon and Flemish municipalities along the language frontier.

In round numbers, there are around six million inhabitants in Flanders, four million in Wallonia, 75,000 in German-speaking Belgium and 1.1 million in Brussels, taking the total population of Belgium to just over 11 million. These figures do not however include the very large presence of embassy staff, EU officials, NATO personnel, asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants in and around Brussels (the capital of Europe and headquarters of the European Commission). When all these groups are included, the real figure for the number of residents in the Brussels Capital Region is several tens of thousands higher.

The driving force behind the division of Belgium into language regions (and in fact behind the entire process of Belgian state reform) was and remains Flanders. Belgium was created in 1830, when it separated from the Netherlands. Until the end of the 20th century, it was governed as if it were in reality a mono-



Peter Missotten, *Bezonken rood*,
2006 © Peter Missotten / De Filmfabriek.

Glass my design and immediately warned him that it was unlikely that I would change it much after that. That's how it turned out too, the copper sculptures that drift down on to the stage, the singers moving like the orbit of a planet on it. I kept all these ideas. Glass had also written music for during the scenery changes, but there weren't any changes of scenery. We didn't do each other any favours in that respect, with the result that the 'change music' created an alienating tension on the stage.'

In the Spring of 2010 the cooperation between Cassiers and Missotten that had gone on for years came to a (temporary?) end on account of 'differences of artistic opinion', and Missotten left the Toneelhuis. 'Apart from the personal friendship I find it a great pity, especially from the point of view of theatre. I love the big auditorium and everything it's got to offer, which seems to have frightened off a lot of producers in Flanders in the past. Flemish theatre has far too many medium size productions and hands the large auditorium over to commercial productions and musicals. That's a shame, because I'm convinced that you can attract a broad public to the large auditorium as well if you have fascinating images.'

Liv Laveyne

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

lingual - French-speaking - state. This led to protests in Flanders, ultimately resulting in the division of the country into distinct language areas.

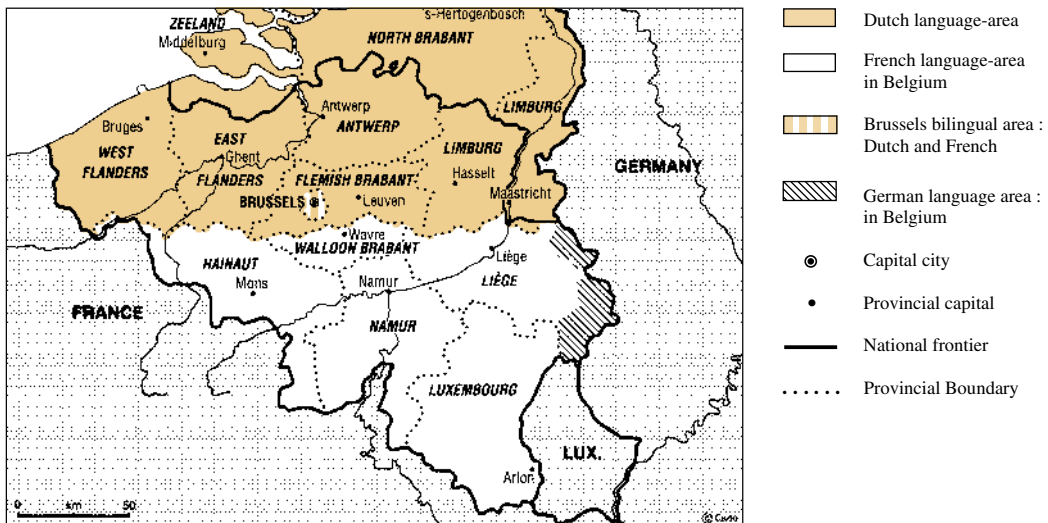
The first language law dates from 1873, and allowed the use of Dutch in court cases. In practice, however, this law was rarely applied, based on the argument that 'the right of one party - the Flemish defendant - to use his own language did not imply a duty on the part of the other party - the French-speaking judge or lawyer - to understand that language'. The 1873 law was somewhat symptomatic of the way in which the unfolding language legislation in Belgium was systematically held back and boycotted by French-speaking Belgium, which was keen to retain its hegemony throughout the whole country.

Belgium's wealth at that time was generated almost exclusively by heavy industry. That industry was located in Wallonia, which was also where the political power was concentrated. It is no coincidence that the 'Flemish movement' only began to achieve real success from the 1960s onwards, which among other things was the period when the division of the country into language areas was established. Heavy industry then relocated to the major port areas, which were located in Flanders. Step by step, separate parliaments and governments were gradually installed within the different language regions, sometimes with differ-

ing powers (a fact that regularly leads to confusion). In addition to the Federal (or national) government seated in Brussels, Belgium also has a Flemish government (also seated in Brussels) and a Walloon government (with its seat in Namur), the government of German-speaking Belgium (with its seat in Eupen), the Brussels government (again seated in Brussels) and, to top it off, a separate government for the French Community (with its seat in Brussels). The Belgians themselves still sometimes have trouble working out who is who in this plethora of institutions.

German-speaking Belgium is a case apart. After the end of the First World War Belgium, which was on the winning side and had fought bravely in battles on the river Ijzer, in the extreme west of the country, had requested the 'return' of the province of Zeeland (containing the Scheldt estuary) and Luxembourg (the Grand Duchy). These requests were not successful but, by way of consolation, under the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 three German *cantons* in the east of the country were ceded to Belgium: the German-language cantons of Eupen and Sankt-Vith and the Walloon canton of Malmedy. No one had asked for this, and the integration of Eupen and Sankt-Vith into Belgium proved to be a very lengthy and difficult process. Today, however, these 'newest Belgians' are proud to be so.

The division of Belgium into language areas was



given official form in 1962/1963, when both houses of parliament passed a series of laws on the use of the different languages (Dutch, French and German). This event had been preceded by a long history of language disputes, but the debate also continued thereafter, and in fact still rages today. Walloons, Flemings, natives of Brussels and German-speaking Belgians are still engaged in a quest for an internal Belgian equilibrium. While that process is by no means complete, it has the great merit of being conducted peacefully, without violence, weapons or secret armies (such as, until recently, the IRA in Northern Ireland or ETA in the Basque country). Each step in this internal Belgian reform process undergoes thorough and lengthy preparation, sometimes leading to frustrations, as well as to endless and not always particularly interesting debates between politicians and between opinion-makers in the media.

The international press has written frequently, especially recently, about the impending demise of Belgium, but that is still a long way off. The process of state reform is simply continuing, and the likelihood that it will never result in the complete break up of the country into four language zones has a great deal to do with Brussels. Both Flanders and Wallonia are closely interwoven with the Belgian capital: Flanders because Brussels is like an enclave surrounded by Flemish territory; Wallonia because Brussels has a very large number of French-speaking residents. Immigration from Brussels also means that in some 'peripheral communities' - Flemish municipalities surrounding Brussels with facilities for French-speaking inhabitants - French speakers now make up the majority, and French-speaking politicians consequently regularly demand that Brussels be enlarged by absorbing these municipalities into the Capital Region. However, the Flemish will not hear of this; they believe that these French speakers should adapt to the language of their new region, and should therefore learn Dutch.

And so the debate goes on.

Guido Fonteyn

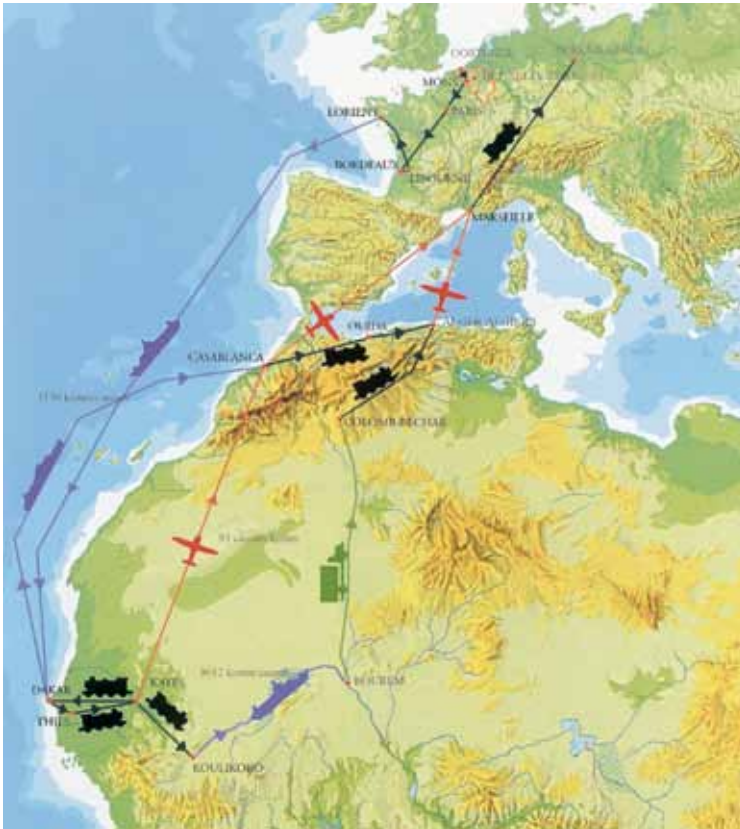
Translated by Julian Ross

Belgian Money and Finance during World War II

A Magisterial Survey

Financial historians have only recently begun a serious examination of banks and banking on the European continent during the Second World War. As often as not the impetus for this research has come from outside, the result of pressure exerted by representatives of clients robbed by the Germans through the banking system. The result has been a wave of publications which has entirely changed our perception. From an understudied sector of the wartime economy, banks and banking have become one of the best known, creating a new kind of bias: what happened in banking now risks being taken as an example of business behaviour under dictatorship simply because we know so little about other key sectors, such as construction, mining, textiles, transport or communications.

Though not prompted by outside pressure, the book under review, a comprehensively rewritten and condensed English edition of a Dutch volume published in 2005 as part of the Belgian national bank's history series, therefore forms part of the ongoing examination of European wartime banking. It amounts to an outstanding achievement. Two historians in their late seventies publishing a substantial book based on extensive research in archives at home and abroad is remarkable enough in itself. But for them to use their combined experience to present an object lesson in composition gives cause for rejoicing. Anyone who has ever tried to weave the many different strands of a large company into a satisfactory narrative knows just how difficult that is. Now imagine doing that for two companies performing roughly similar semi-public services in the name of the same country, yet under entirely different circumstances and facing fundamentally different challenges: one in occupied Belgium juggling to balance the increasingly pressing demands and preemptory orders of the Nazi regime with the needs of the population and the economy at large, the other improvising to keep the government in exile financed and manage Belgian economic and financial interests outside occupied Europe.



The Mysterious Ways of Belgian Gold during World War II, © Lannoo / Nationale Bank België.

The very wealth of themes clamouring for attention might easily have led to a sprawling book, but Van der Wee and Verbreyt have succeeded marvellously in composing a compelling storyline, moving effortlessly from occupied Belgium to London or New York and back, from fundamental macro-economic problems to the logistics of transporting gold, or from conflicts between Nazi officials and bank directors to personal portraits of the main protagonists, flavouring the narrative with telling quotations from original documents and using quantitative data sparingly and effectively. The often painful dilemmas of business under dictatorship are discussed frankly and fairly, without the facile guilty verdicts of some historians, but also without glossing over clear mistakes and misjudgements.

Rather than a conventional history of the Nationale Bank van België/Banque Nationale de Belgique, the book therefore offers a comprehensive account of money, monetary policy, banking and finance during the Second World War on both sides of the front lines. Interestingly, the two parts remained in remarkably

close contact with each other, enabling a considerable degree of coordination between them. When faced with difficult decisions about Nazi demands bank officials could consult the government in exile and determine their position accordingly. Conversely, Belgian officials in London knew what was happening in the country, which helped them materially in planning the return of the government and preparing key policy decisions such as the currency purge. By contrast, the Nederlandsche Bank in occupied Amsterdam and the Dutch government in exile, for instance, exchanged information only intermittently, so the bank's board was out on a limb when faced with Nazi demands, and the government knew next to nothing about the situation in the country. This created considerable friction following the return of the government after the liberation.

In showing how Belgium managed it, this magisterial survey presents a model history of finance during the Second World War which other countries would do well to follow: dispassionate yet fully committed, wide-

ranging without being exhaustive, giving fair criticism but not picking every bone. If only we all possessed such powers of composition.

Joost Jonker

HERMAN VAN DER WEE AND MONIQUE VERBREYT,
A Small Nation in the Turmoil of the Second World War; Money, Finance and Occupation, (Belgium, its Enemies, its Friends, 1939-1945),
Leuven University Press, 2009, 494 pages.

M - STAM - MAS

City Museums

Three Flemish cities, Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven, all have a new museum. The Leuven museum was the first to open, launching out with a large exhibition on the 15th century painter Rogier van der Weyden. The Ghent museum opened its doors to the general public on 9 October 2010, and the opening of the Antwerp museum is planned for 17 May 2011. Three new museums within two years - that really is quite remarkable.

These museums have certain common characteristics. All of them are municipal museums. They make use of collections that have existed in their cities for quite a considerable time and are now being provided with a more updated presentation. All three of them are housed in new or renovated premises. Lastly, all three have a snappy, catchy name: M, STAM and MAS. But that is where the similarities end.

M is Leuven's municipal museum. It is situated in the city centre, not far from the Gothic city hall and the university library. A city museum had already existed there since the early 20th century: *Museum Vander Kelen*. Architect Stephane Beel was given the task of making a new, spacious and airy museum out of this old building, along with that of the former academy. Old and new had to be forged into a whole new entity. Beel has created a striking white building in which there is an eye-catching abundance of travertine and the original columned frontage has been preserved as some kind of symbol.

Furthermore, the new museum houses an original collection that is most interesting for its unique collection of late-Gothic paintings and sculptures, including works by such artists as Dirc Bouts, as well as for 19th century paintings by various Flemish masters and sculptures by such artists as Constantin Meunier and George Minne. In addition, M wants to let present-day and classical art enter into a dialogue. This has been achieved via an abundance of exhibitions that have a rich mixture of classical and contemporary art. Works by such present-day artists as Jan Vercruyssen, Angus Fairhurst, Matthew Brannon, Robert Devriendt have already been on show. The exhibition of work by



M in Leuven.

Rogier van der Weyden has commanded international attention. The ritual objects of the Congolese region of Mayombe or the magnificent, ornamented pages of the Anjou Bible have also featured in successful exhibitions. With this combination of contemporary and classical art, M seeks to attract a public from way beyond the boundaries of the Leuven region. One year after opening, it has at any rate gained a solid position in the cultural life of Flanders.

STAM, Ghent's new city museum (*STAdsmuseum*), is housed in the former *Bijlokeabdij*. For a museum that wishes to show the history of the city of Ghent, this abbey, whose earliest history goes back to the 13th century, is a dream location. The abbey houses, for example, one of the finest medieval refectories in Western Europe. Furthermore, an art college is situated in the immediate vicinity of the museum, really making this a venue for art and culture. Here, too, serious conversion has taken place, although the architecture is less spectacular than in the case of M and certainly than the new museum in Antwerp. The city architect, Koen Van Nieuwenhuysse, has primarily created a new reception pavilion, adapting the rest of the existing buildings to the needs of a contemporary museum. An

STAM in Ghent.



important part of the STAM collection consists of items from the former *Bijlokemuseum*. From the more than 17,000 artefacts in this collection, STAM has made a selection that narrates the history of the city of Ghent. It makes intelligent use of multimedia, too. It is possible, for example, to walk over a large map of the city and almost explore it house by house. A scale-model allows you to sense how the city has evolved through the ages. There are, though, real highlights worth admiring: medieval manuscripts and documents, paintings and sculptures. The history of the city is told chronologically. There is also enough room in STAM for contemporary exhibitions, although here - unlike M - the accent is on the permanent collection and on showing the history of the city.

MAS stands for the museum on the river (*Museum Aan de Stroom*). The river in question is of course the Scheldt and the city is Antwerp. The new building is without a doubt the most spectacular of the three new museums. The internationally recognised Dutch firm of architects Neutelings Riedijk has designed a sixty-metre-high tower with large exhibition spaces. There are magnificent views of the city of Antwerp and the old harbour from the large glass sections of the building, which features references to the 16th century warehouse or *Hanzehuis*. At the foot of the museum lies a 1600 m² square, for which the well-known artist Luc Tuymans has designed a large mosaic. MAS tells the story of the city of Antwerp, the river, the port and the world. To do this, it makes use of three existing collections: the ethnographical museum, the national maritime museum and the folklore museum. In addition, sections of the *Vleeshuis* Museum collection will be moved to MAS. And there will also be a place for the unique collection of pre-Columbian art from the estate of the Flemish industrialist Paul Janssen, which has been acquired by the Flemish Community.

A maximum of 5% of all the artefacts from the collection will be able to be put on show. The intention is to display new items in regularly changing temporary exhibitions. At present, however, MAS is not yet open to the general public, which will first be able to ascend the tower on 17 May 2011. Until then, it can sample the pavilion in front of MAS. That is where this large-scale



MAS in Antwerp.

project is being presented and where there is a temporary exhibition illustrating contacts between Antwerp and China.

Three venues, three new museums, three different ways of tackling a project. In each case, existing old collections are given a new, engaging presentation. Important items are being dusted off, once more being made accessible and sometimes being placed in a different perspective via the use of new media. With their collections, new exhibitions and, especially, their new settings, these museums will also become major tourist attractions for their respective cities and regions.

Dirk Van Assche

Translated by John Irons

www.mleuven.be
www.stamgent.be
www.mas.be