

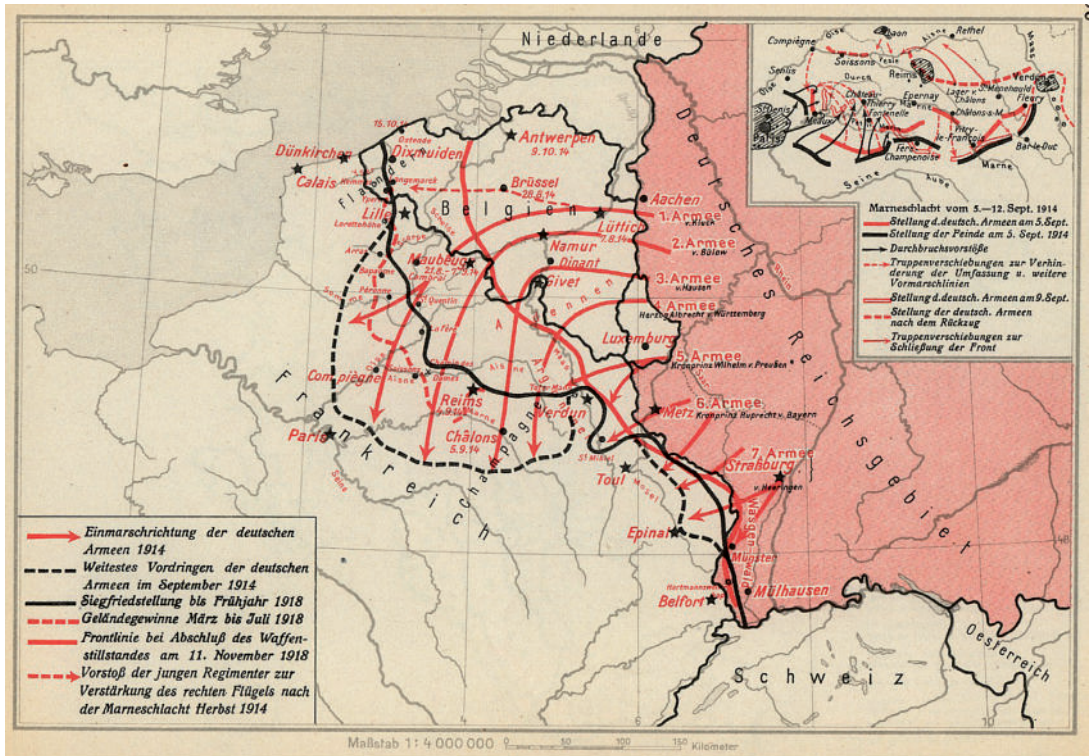
Violence and Legitimacy

Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918

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[SOPHIE DE SCHAEPEDDRIJVER]

When, at eight in the morning of 4 August 1914, the largest invasion army ever mobilized crossed the German-Belgian border, Belgium entered a war unlike that of the other belligerents on the Western Front. By November 1914, Belgian society had fallen apart into different segments: the government in exile, the army on the Yser, the small uninvaded corner behind the British and Belgian sectors of what was now the Western Front, the royal family on the westernmost Belgian coast, the refugees abroad – and, the largest segment of all, the occupied country. Belgium, at that point the most densely populated country in the world, was largely overrun: of its 2,636 communes, 2,598 were occupied. More than eight out of ten adult Belgians lived the war under military occupation. This made for an experience both marginal and central to the war. Germany, Britain and France (even if France was itself partially occupied) waged war through a division of labour between front and home front, their armies supported by domestic society. By contrast, the majority of Belgians, trapped inside the occupied country, neither fought at the front, nor produced munitions for the Yser army. Occupied Belgium stood at a remove from the raging war, since it was neither a front nor a home front. Yet at the same time occupied Belgium stood at the heart of the war on two essential counts. Firstly, the German capture of Belgium prevented the war from ending. The invasion was a massive breach of international law, since Belgium was a neutral state. Conceding permanent domination to the German Empire would allow military aggression to shape international law. Most of Entente opinion refused such a departure from the rule of law and considered a European postwar order without the restoration of Belgian independence unthinkable. (In neutral countries, many thought likewise.) By contrast, German opinion saw a redrawn map of Europe that reflected the actual balance of power as a better guarantee for future peace than international law. The wartime Wilhelmine elites wished for a satellite Belgium that would constitute an advance bulwark for the German Empire and a permanent obstacle to attempts to encircle Germany. It is important to note that, on both sides, this was not an unemotional disquisition on the international system: the hecatomb of the war's first months, with the bodies of young German, British, French and Belgian men strewn across Belgian soil, lent the issue a passionate intensity. Secondly, the occupied population was situated at the



heart of the war. The two major visions of the conflict – the quest to roll back an order of things created by military aggression versus the notion that invading armies, because of their superiority, were justified in establishing facts on the ground – confronted each other in the occupied country in myriad ways that cut deep into civilian society. The question before Belgian public culture during the occupation years was that of the legitimacy of an authority built on violence.

Map of conquest, The Western Front 1914-1918 (from Harms, *Neuer Deutscher Geschichts- und Kulturatlas*, 1934)

Invasion and violence

The capture of Belgium, as it happened, started with an outburst of extreme violence beyond the boundaries of accepted warfare. The German armies, as they advanced through Belgium, avenged setbacks on civilians. From Liège to Diksmuide, invading troops destroyed houses, used locals as living shields, and massacred thousands of people on flimsy accusations of sniping. Some 5,500 men, women and children were killed in this way from August – when the bulk of the violence happened, with explosions of vengeful paranoia in places like Leuven, Aarschot, Dinant, and Tamines, left as smoking ruins with mass graves – to October, when the advance to Western Flanders occasioned a last series



An improvised Triumphal Arch: Bridge over the Dyle in Werchter, August 1914. (Undated, unwritten postcard, collectie Haachtse Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring (HAGOK), with thanks to Bart Minnen)

of smaller-scale bursts of ferocity along the route. Much ritual enacting of conquest accompanied the violence: local dignitaries – burgomasters, priests – were singled out for humiliation; survivors testified that people herded together were made to sing praise to the German Empire; an improvised triumphal arch put up on a bridge in the badly battered Brabant village of Werchter bore the inscription 'To The Victorious Warriors'.

These massacres would deeply affect the fifty months of the occupation. Not because they were a harbinger of things to come. After October 1914 and up until the Armistice, fewer than a hundred Belgian civilians died in similar outbursts of violence. But the massacres, and especially the silence imposed around them, disqualified the occupying regime from being accepted by the occupied population beyond the wary, ad-hoc modus vivendi needed to survive.

Occupation and permanence

The war's most outspoken statement against military conquest was made in Belgium at the start of 1915. 'Occupied provinces are not conquered provinces. Belgium is no more a German province than Galicia is a Russian one.' This pointed reference to the unacceptability of all military occupations, including those by Entente states, was made by Cardinal Mercier in his pastoral letter for the New Year, entitled 'Patriotism and Endurance'. Mercier used his position as head of the Catholic Church in Belgium to break through the enforced silence surrounding the massacres and to state that a regime established on violence could expect no acceptance. He did not call to revolt; the occupied should

refrain from endangering their fellow citizens. But they should also steadfastly deny the occupying regime all legitimacy. The 'Power which has invaded your land and temporarily occupies the major part of it,' stated Mercier, 'is not a legitimate authority'.

The highest German authorities in Belgium reacted with affront. Belgium's Governor-General, the elderly East Elbian General Moritz von Bissing, called the letter's references to the violence of the invasion an insult to the honour of an imperial army that had acted in self-defence. His second-in-command declared the occupying authorities 'offended in their feelings'. These reactions are remarkable, because although Mercier had essentially called the new rulers usurpers, he *had* urged calm. A military occupation regime could scarcely ask for more. Yet von Bissing, in function since December 1914, did want more. His logic was no longer that of the offensive, but that of occupation. With the military outcome suspended, the German conquest of Belgium appeared to be an accomplishment in itself. Legitimacy was the key to rendering this conquest permanent; and that was precisely what Mercier's letter denied the occupying powers.

That same quest for legitimacy limited recourse to violence. Von Bissing certainly reacted with a heavy hand. He ordered the letter confiscated all over the diocese. This extended the confrontation over legitimacy to the parish level. Priests were made to relinquish the text under protest; underground copies instantly



'Patriotism and Endurance' as a devotional object (Miniature manufactured at Maredret Cloister, Namur, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City)



Moritz Ferdinand Freiherr von Bissing, Governor-General of Belgium, December 1914-April 1917

multiplied; and, in the majority of parishes, the text was read from pulpits anyway - at least in Mechelen, Belgium's largest diocese, with 2.4 million inhabitants and 2,000 priests, and the country's largest cities, Brussels and Antwerp.

Elsewhere in Belgium the letter barely circulated, because all five Belgian bishops had declined to co-sign it out of caution. Ghent and Bruges were not in the German Government-General under von Bissing, but in the so-called *Etappengebiet* closer to the front, which was under direct, harsh military rule. In heavily garrisoned Tournai, on the border between *Etappe* and Government-General, the bishop had been taken hostage in September 1914 and, still shaken, died in early 1915. As to the dioceses of Namur and Liège, they had both been terribly maltreated during the invasion. The Bishop of Liège, Rutten, stressed how vulnerable the civilians were: those deported in August 1914 were still in German camps, hostages in all but name. Rutten had a point. In the diocese of Mechelen, too, memories of civilian helplessness cut short gestures of defiance. In several parishes of the Deanery of Aarschot, still reeling from the massacre, priests read the letter in part, then desisted under duress. But in Antwerp and Brussels, the letter was read in full before packed churches. In the big cities, the German military authorities showed a marked reluctance to threaten force, which is revealing. And, ultimately, even in villages, where

the occupiers asserted their might more brutally, no priests were physically harmed, which was a far cry from the violence of the invasion. In January 1915, the time of extreme violence against civilians was over. What this means is that Mercier's assertion of non-acceptance was made at a time when the occupying power had made acceptance a priority.

Flamenpolitik

One way in which the occupying regime sought to rest its authority on acceptance was by seeking legitimacy among specific groups. In this context a cultural policy evolved that sought to accommodate the agenda of the Flemish Movement. This policy – eventually known as *Flamenpolitik*, Flemish policy – was more of a makeshift program than a strategic blueprint. But its symbolic value seemed beyond dispute: before international public opinion, *Flamenpolitik* redefined the invasion as an act of liberation. In occupied Belgium it was hoped that latching on to the Flemish Movement, and through it the Flemings, would help the regime acquire the legitimacy it needed to control civilian life.

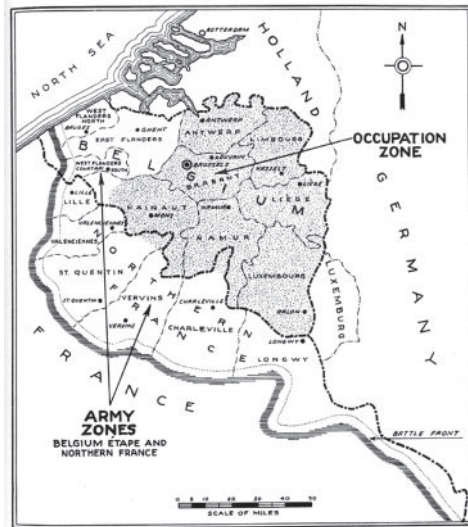
Yet the prewar leaders of that very Flemish Movement refused these advances: in their view, too, violence precluded legitimacy. 'A river of blood runs between the German policies and the Belgians,' wrote one of the Flemish tenors, the Socialist Camille Huysmans, from his Dutch exile. In the occupied country, Flemish leaders called 'a policy based on race and language' incompatible with civic sense in 'these tragic circumstances'. They would continue to withhold acceptance all through the occupation in a steady barrage of manifestoes; some wound up in prisons in Germany as a result.

Yet *Flamenpolitik* did win recruits. The first were members of *Jong-Vlaanderen* (Young Flanders), a small radical Flemish-nationalist student group constituted in Ghent in October 1914. The success of *Flamenpolitik* in this corner is unsurprising. Under the occupation, young men of the privileged classes found themselves in an awkward spot. Because of the invasion, most Belgian men were not at the front. At the end of the war, only 20% of Belgian men of military age would have been mobilized, as against 54% in Britain, 86% in Germany, and 89% in France. In the occupied country, networks smuggled young men across the Dutch border so they could join the Yser army; an estimated 30,000 men left in this manner. Some did so of their own accord; others under pressure from their environment, which was especially intense in the middle class out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*. In these circumstances, a way out for some young men of the university-bound classes was to reject the idea of a common destiny altogether and present the occupation as a moment of liberation that only the boldest dared to seize; it was a choice that, as one of them quite candidly wrote at the end of the war, 'made us, comfortable bourgeois non-combatants, feel a brush with greatness'.

A 'home front'

Meanwhile, civilian forces had started to regroup. The invasion had left hundreds of thousands of people homeless and millions facing hardship. The government in exile was in no position to help. Yet local authorities had remained in

Occupation zones:
Government-General and Etappe



place. The mass flight of 1914 did not indicate the collapse of an entire system, as would happen in 1940; holders of public office considered themselves duty-bound to stay. In addition, an ad-hoc organization called the National Committee (*Comité National*), secured international aid through the US-led *Commission for Relief in Belgium*, a neutral organization that centralized funds, purchased and shipped food, and guaranteed it from German confiscation. The wartime feeding of Belgium was the largest food-aid effort in history up until then. In Belgium, the National Committee sold the imported food and granted aid; it was, in fact, a kind of proto-welfare state with 125,000 agents that effected some real benefits in national health (infant mortality actually declined relative to prewar years) and ensured a – relative – check on dearth and profiteering that maintained a minimal level of public confidence. Its very existence was a statement: it enacted, in a practical manner, the autonomy of civilian society vis-à-vis military power. The occupying powers knew full well that the National Committee detracted from their authority. It was part of what one might call Belgium's 'home front', not in the sense of a society streamlined to support an army, but in the more immediate sense of a 'home' that was a 'front', with daily life an ongoing theatre of confrontation, largely unarmed though never without risk.

One of the unique features of occupied Belgium was the explosion of the clandestine press, replicated nowhere else in occupied Europe during the First World War. Almost eighty periodicals emerged, not counting the proliferation of ephemera – open letters, satirical songs, brochures, cartoons. All protested the imposition of censorship and denied the occupying regime legitimacy. The longest-lived periodical, *La Libre Belgique* (Free Belgium), skewered German mendacity over various points from the violation of Belgian neutrality to the confiscation of mattresses. Most periodicals were in French, although there was a clandestine press in Dutch too, ranging from the colloquial *De Vrije Stem* (The Free Voice) in Antwerp to the more high-brow *De Vlaamsche Leeuw* (The Flemish Lion) in Brussels. The clandestine press thrived especially in 1915, the year when the extreme violence of the invasion receded while the exhaustion wrought by attritional warfare had not yet kicked in; the year, therefore,

in which the standoff over legitimacy – the occupying regime’s quest for it, the occupied population’s withholding of it – was at its most intense. Not coincidentally, the national holiday of July 21 was widely celebrated that year in spite of the German ban – another confrontation over legitimacy that stopped short of violence, though offenders faced prison sentences as well as heavy fines that accelerated the already deepening material hardship.

By then, eight people had been shot at Liège for spying on the German armies, among them the mother of a little boy. After the war, a German war correspondent would write that ‘nowhere, at any time, have people spied more fanatically and with more of a spirit of sacrifice than in Belgium’. Occupied Belgium was in a unique position as a hostile hinterland of the German army on the Western front, open to the neutral Netherlands. The Belgian, French and, especially, British military intelligence services sought out Belgians who had left, both men and women, and enticed them to return to the occupied country, collect information on military matters and smuggle their reports into the Netherlands.

German bulwark

In response, a German engineer corps closed off most of the Dutch-Belgian border with a lethal electric fence between May and August 1915. This astonishing venture, the first of its kind in the history of military occupation, was part of the German endeavour to turn the conquered country into a bulwark. From early 1915, the Germans concentrated on turning the Western front into an ‘inactive’ theatre to free up troops for the East. That required defensive buildup. By the autumn of 1915, the defensive belt on the front had thickened to three miles. The coastline bristled with batteries; a special army department closely supervised the railways, instructing troops to shoot anyone who approached embankments or bridges. The secret police had reached full strength and were able to dismantle one Entente spy network after another. By mid-1916, as the battle raged at Verdun, none of the Entente armies had a serious intelligence operation left.

The terrible battles of 1916 changed the outlook among the occupied. The phrase ‘after the war’ came up more. With the end of the war receding from sight, more and more people dismissed it as a parenthesis that interrupted their actual lives, and turned towards personal matters – family, social life, career, political interests, survival, or even just respite. This made for a sense of relative normalcy not unrewarding to the occupation authorities. Meanwhile, the pool of recruits for *Flamenpolitik* expanded beyond the extremist confines of *Jong-Vlaanderen*, as the Flemish militant rank and file welcomed German linguistic considerations and the German-controlled press inflated and sometimes forged francophone anti-Flemish slurs. Flemish refugees in the Netherlands, with contributions from Dutch-German circles, fashioned a separate identity for those who accepted German support. Choosing true nationhood over imposed state earned them the title of *activists*. By contrast, the majority of Flemish militants who persisted in refusing German support were dismissed as *passivists*. The question of loyalty rose urgently over the German-sponsored ‘Flemishization’ of the University of Ghent. ‘Ghent’ was the trump card of *Flamenpolitik* because it fulfilled a long-held wish of the Flemish Movement and discredited the Belgian state, which the occupying government hoped would consolidate its authority. The German official in charge, the mathematician Walther Von Dyck, praised



‘La grosse poire’, undated cartoon, City Archives Brussels, Fonds Keym

the university as 'a mighty fortress, a trusty shield and weapon for us Germans'. (The paraphrase of the Luther hymn *Ein' Feste Burg ist unser Gott* gave his statement the required solemn impact.) In other words, the new Flemish university was considered part of the advanced defence works of the German Empire in that it established the occupying regime's legitimacy.

The Ludendorffian turn

Or so it was hoped. But the university's solemn opening in the autumn of 1916 coincided with the first wave of deportation of forced labourers from Ghent. These deportations heralded a return of terror that quite undercut what hopes of acceptance the occupation regime might have had. In Germany, the third Supreme Command under Paul von Hindenburg and, especially, Erich Ludendorff ushered in a harsh policy of winning the war at all costs; the result, for occupied Belgium, was a turn towards extreme exploitation. From October 1916, workers were deported in cattle-cars to German camps or to front-line labour. Of the 120,000 men taken, 2,500 died during deportation, a large number shortly thereafter, and many remained invalids. Brutal and messy, the deportations were more an expression of Supreme Command hubris than the implementation of a considered policy. They were halted in February 1917 for the Government-General, but continued until war's end in the *Etappe*.

To see Flemings subjected to forced labour was a considerable embarrassment to the recruits of *Flamenpolitik*. Most refrained from openly identifying as such, which indicated the extent of their awareness of ostracism. Still, surreptitiously, exasperation over the long war and mistrust of the government in exile continued to generate some degree of adherence to activism, all the more so as the occupying government's scission of the country created a great many administrative jobs for the recruits of *Flamenpolitik*, as well as positions in the newly created Walloon administration. Yet the new arrangements acquired little legitimacy, especially against the backdrop of ever-deepening exploitation as entire segments of Belgium's industrial infrastructure were hauled off to Germany.

Remobilization

The German spring offensive of 1918 seemed, to some, the ultimate blow: 'many people', as a municipal official in the city of Aalst recalled after the war, 'had become pessimists; they saw no other outcome than the victory of brutal force, the disappearance of our Belgium as an independent state'. The choice of terms is revealing: though permanent, such a conquest would lack legitimacy because it was a triumph of military aggression. It was around this basic refusal that the 'home front' remobilized. Though the clandestine press had reached a very low pitch, there was a revival, modest in quantitative terms but important qualitatively. From 1917, the high-profile *De Vlaamsche Wachter* (The Flemish Guardian) skewered *Flamenpolitik* and its champions. In mid-April 1918, *Le Flambeau* (The Torch) was launched in Brussels to combat anxieties over the German spring offensive. The much-persecuted *Libre Belgique* observed the German opposition closely and applauded its position on the war. A certain degree of sympathy with

Germans' plight reflected hopes of an eventual resumption of dialogue. However, the German retreat occasioned a renewal of violence: retreating troops engaged in looting, destruction and sometimes killing, and left explosives lying about near and in residences that would make for a long litany of deaths and mutilations – especially of children – until long after the Armistice.

Aftermath

When, on 22 November 1918, King Albert solemnly rode past the cheering crowds in flag-festooned Brussels, he was not presiding a classic victory parade so much as a reunion between the different segments of Belgium-at-war that had been separated for fifty months; a reunion that brought its share of tensions. Insistent exaltation of civilian valour, outbursts of brutality against those who had 'behaved badly' during the occupation, persistent material misery and disillusionment over the peace settlement made for a brittle mood. The return to a level-headed discussion of the language issue seemed postponed indefinitely. To some extent, the inevitable disillusionments of the postwar – inevitable because no postwar order could possibly satisfy the exasperated hopes of wartime – generated the very kind of discredit of the notion of common destiny that the occupation government had in vain tried to foster. Yet the very failure of the occupation government to gain a foothold – a failure now openly acknowledged by some in Germany – remained a source of genuine pride for the Belgian citizenry on both sides of the linguistic frontier, because it had demonstrated the unacceptability of an authority based on violence: many held on to this as a heartening thought amidst the pity of war. ■

Bulwark: 'Advance Base near Ypres' (from: Walther Stein, *Um Vaterland und Freiheit. Wirklichkeitsaufnahmen aus dem grossen Krieg nebst einer Einführung* (Hermann Montanus Verlagsbuchhandlung, Siegen/Leipzig, 1915, Volume 2, p.43))

