

The Last Belgians?

The German-Speaking Community in Belgium



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[J E R O E N D E W U L F]

Whenever the King of Belgium enters the federal parliament, he is officially announced in Dutch, French and German – *De koning, le roi, der König*. In fact, contrary to the widespread assumption that Belgium is a bilingual (French/Dutch) country, German is also an official language in the Kingdom of Belgium. Because of their patriotic disposition, the approximately 73,000 German-speaking Belgians are often referred to as ‘the last real Belgians,’ as opposed to the Walloons and particularly the Flemish who increasingly identify themselves with their own region. In recent decades Belgium has become a multilingual nation that, paradoxically, no longer projects itself on the basis of its multilingual Belgian identity, but rather on each area’s local, monolingual identity. In the eyes of many, Belgian identity has become an empty box, an anachronistic creed that survives only in a handful of nostalgic patriots, the royal family, the national soccer team, the smurfs and...the German-speaking community. A closer look at this community’s position within the Belgian state, however, allows a totally different interpretation, one which we might even call: ‘the Belgian of the future.’

‘New Belgium’: The East Cantons

Belgium received its German-speaking territories as indemnity after World War I. These territories had traditionally been referred to as ‘Eupen-Malmedy’, from the names of the former cantonal capitals. When they became part of Belgium in 1920, they were first called ‘New Belgium’ and later the ‘East Cantons’ or ‘East Belgium.’ This new Belgian territory consisted of two parts: the ‘Eupener Land’ in the north, and the regions of Malmedy and Sankt Vith in the south. The two territories are separated by the High Fens, an upland area between the Ardennes and the Eiffel highlands. Historically the north had been part of the Duchy of Limburg, whereas the south had been part of the Duchy of Luxembourg. With the exception of the bilingual (German-French) city of Malmedy, both territories had traditionally been exclusively German-speaking. The abbey of Malmedy was the religious centre of these intensely Catholic regions. After Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo both regions had been allotted to

Malmedy



Cathedral, Sankt Vith.

The abbey of Malmedy.



Prussia, while the Treaty of Versailles placed them under Belgian administration. Official Belgian historiography decreed that the regions had always been Belgian territory and therefore referred to them as '*cantons r dimm s*', as parts of Belgium that had finally been reunited with the mother country.

Initially the East Cantons were run by Herman Baltia, a general who had made his career in the Belgian Congo. The government counted on Baltia's colonial experience to impose Belgian rule and transform the new citizens as quickly as possible into 'real Belgians.' In actual practice, this entailed the elimination of all references to Germany and the imposition of the French language. One of Baltia's first official acts was the removal of the monument in Malmedy commemorating the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. As required by the Treaty of Versailles, Baltia organised a referendum to determine whether the East Cantons would be permanently separated from Germany and annexed to Belgium.



General Herman Baltia
(1863-1938).

However, the vote was not secret. Every opponent of annexation had to write his name and address in an ad hoc register. As a result only 271 out of some 34,000 voters dared to do so, and consequently the regions officially became Belgian territory. Historians later termed the referendum '*la grande farce*'.

The fate of these 'new Belgians' might have been the same as the so-called '*deutschsprachige Altbelgier*', who had been part of Belgium since the establishment of the Belgian State in 1830. These German-speaking Belgians, around 50,000 in all, had been completely integrated into the French community and had lost their German roots. However, although Baltia was awarded the title of Baron for the great service he had done his country, the Belgian government was surprisingly hesitant when it came to the future of the East Cantons. Significantly, soon after the referendum Belgium entered into secret negotiations with Germany to sell both regions back.

If we look at events in Flanders during the same period, we get a better understanding of this surprising change in attitude. In 1866 the city of Antwerp had



Postcard with Belgian
soldiers in 1914.

adopted Dutch as the official language of its administration. In the 1870s the Flemish Movement celebrated two other important victories: Dutch became accepted in the courts and later in the administration. In 1883 Dutch also became an optional language of instruction in state secondary schools, and with the Equality Law of 1898 the Belgian constitution became officially bilingual. These changes indicate that by around 1900 the traditional idea that Belgium could only exist as an entirely francophone nation was already obsolete. It is telling that even members of the Socialist Party, who traditionally had been sceptical about the demands of the elitist Flemish Movement, started to link social with linguistic reforms.

Although after World War I the Flemish Movement lost credibility as a result of some of its members' collaboration with the German occupier, it was clear that there could be no return to the 1830 situation. The days when French was considered the only language of progress and cultural refinement were defini-

tively gone. Moreover, the war had demonstrated with terrible clarity how dramatic the consequences of traditional Belgian politics could be. As almost all senior officers in the army were Francophone, communication with Flemish soldiers was generally lamentable. These grievances against the Belgian State, which asked them to fight bravely but at the same time treated them as second-class citizens, was a key element in the ongoing Flemish drive for autonomy. At the same time, the economic development of Flanders and decline of Wallonia proved unstoppable. In the light of these factors, the very idea of the compulsory Gallicisation of an entire German-speaking region in the name of Belgian unity seemed not only unrealistic but also completely outdated.

In fact, the dismantling of the Belgian State as created in 1830 proceeded inexorably. In 1930 the University of Ghent replaced French with Dutch as its language of instruction, and soon new laws laid the foundation for the federalisation of Belgium – the post-war transformation of the centralist, Francophone Belgian state into a federal state, divided into an exclusively Dutch-speaking Flanders and an exclusively French-speaking Wallonia. Within this concept there was no place for a tiny German-speaking region. Besides, the calamine ores in the East Cantons had proved of little interest to Belgian industry. In the eyes of many Belgian politicians, selling the region back to Germany seemed to be the best option.

World War II: scapegoat politics

Yet the outbreak of World War II and the new occupation of Belgium by German troops reshuffled Belgian politics. After two decades of clumsy Belgian governance in the East Cantons, it was no surprise that the German troops were welcomed with open support. What followed was the annexation of the East Cantons – ‘*Heim-ins-Reich*’, the induction of the male population into the Wehrmacht and, finally, the almost complete destruction of the region during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. After the war, the East Cantons returned to Belgium and suffered extremely harsh retribution. People were encouraged to demonstrate their true Belgian patriotism by betraying others, causing deep wounds that in some cases persist to this day. Considering the scale of the legal proceedings – a quarter of all the inhabitants, women and children included, were accused of collaboration – one cannot help but suspect that the East Cantons were treated as a scapegoat. In the following years, the old policy of ruthless assimilation was reintroduced, particularly with regard to the young population. The school-system suffered a ‘*restauration culturelle*’ based on the Alsatian model, with the hilarious effect that children whose fathers had fought as German soldiers now learned about the heroic resistance of the Belgian troops against the German barbarians.

The population of the East Cantons did its best to adapt to the post-war political situation. Identification with Germany was avoided at all costs. Until 1971 politicians refrained from creating specifically German-speaking political parties, and instead participated in Belgian and later Walloon parties. Although the East Cantons had never been bilingual, local politicians favoured a bilingual administration for the region as part of the (French-speaking) Walloon electoral district of Verviers. Suggestions for political and cultural autonomy tended to be labelled – even within the community itself – as ‘*Deutschtümelei*’. As a



'Counterattack Clipped' after the Battle of the Bulge. *Time Magazine.*

result, nowhere in Belgium was the voting abstention rate higher than in the East Cantons, where it could reach as high as twenty per cent of the electorate, despite the fact that voting was (and is) compulsory. It is telling that when in 1971 the first specifically German-speaking party, the Christlich-Unabhängige Wählergemeinschaft, participated in the elections, it explicitly mentioned on its posters that it was not a 'Heim-ins-Reich-Movement'. It is therefore no surprise that the region eventually did not opt for the name 'German Community,' but rather for 'German-speaking Community,' in contrast with the French-speaking Belgians, who decided to call themselves the 'French Community.'

Political and social change finally came about as a result of Flemish pressure. Although the war had caused a temporary interruption in the progress to Flemish autonomy and the Flemish Movement once again lost credibility because of collaboration with the occupiers by some of its radical members, the pressure to continue with the federalisation process had not ceased. In the 1960s the decision to federalise Belgium was officially enacted. Whereas in 1830 Belgium was founded on the basis of a French revolutionary model as a 'nation elective,' unit-



Ted Paluch (left), a survivor of the 1944 Malmédy massacre of 84 US soldiers in Belgium, compares a photo taken of the scene then and how the area looks now. Photo by Ken White.



ed by the idea of freedom, the federalisation process established internal borders according to linguistic principles. These language boundaries, drawn in 1963, reflected a territorial principle based on historical and ethnic grounds. And so, along with the Dutch- and French-speaking community, the German-speaking Belgians were able to achieve linguistic and cultural autonomy while avoiding any suspicion of irredentism. They simply had to echo the Flemish demands in order to have their own ambitions implemented. In 1970 the German Cultural Community was formed. In 1983 the German-speaking Community was officially established, with a proper government and parliament.

The German-speaking community in Belgium is now one of the best protected minorities in the world. Awareness that the Flemish were sympathetic towards the German Belgians was crucial to this. There are several explanations for this sympathy. One important factor was religion. The East Cantons are traditionally a deeply Catholic region and in this respect are still quite different from the strongly socialist Wallonia. For decades the Flemish had fought for the right to use their language in education and in the courts, for cultural and political au-

The government seat (Council of the German-speaking Community) in Eupen

tonomy, and thus they recognised similar problems in the German-speaking community. For many people in Flanders, as in the East Cantons, the liberation in 1944 had been a traumatic experience. Not only were large parts of conservative Flemish society shocked by the moral laxity in the days after the liberation, but also in many parts of Flanders the punishment of both real and alleged collaborators was out of control. In its initial phase this chastisement of collaborators was not a legal process. Rather, it was the mob taking to the streets in order to exact justice, in some cases using the opportunity to settle old scores. Another important point is that, in contrast to the Netherlands, in Flanders after the war there were no strong anti-German feelings. It is quite remarkable that as soon as Germany and Austria recovered, both the Catholic Rhineland and the Bavarian and Austrian Alps became favourite destinations for Flemish tourists.

German-Speaking Community: a place in the Belgian labyrinth

Becoming patriotic Belgians was undoubtedly an interesting option for the population of the East Cantons. The Belgian passport helped the German-speaking population to forget and in some cases also to conceal what had happened dur-



‘Council of the German-speaking Community’, Eupen.

ing the war. At the same time, the process of federalisation enabled the German-speaking community to preserve its German character. Belgium had, in fact, developed into a patchwork of two seemingly opposing interpretations of nationalism. On the one hand, the Belgian State – represented by the national government, parliament and the monarchy – reflected and still reflects a common Belgian identity, in the sense of Ernest Renan’s model of identity as a voluntary association. The autonomous regions, on the other hand, have been established according to linguistic criteria clearly influenced by the Romantic idea of a “Kulturnation”, where a nation is defined on the basis of ethnicity and language. The region of Brussels, however, represents an important exception, as it remains the only officially bilingual part of Belgium. This unusual con-

Eupen



struction, which the Belgian journalist Geert Van Istendael has called '*the Belgian Labyrinth*', made it possible for the German-speaking community to identify with a new state without relinquishing its own cultural identity.

Other German-speaking minorities in Europe had more difficulties in this respect; while a victorious skier from South Tyrol who refused to sing the Italian national anthem on the podium could cause a scandal, in Belgium almost no one knows the lyrics to the 'Brabançonne'. This lack of national patriotism in Belgium also made it easier for the German-speaking Community to engage in cross-border activities within the European Union (Euregio Maas-Rhein, Grossregion Europa, etc.). In recent years, however, the German-speaking community has been confronted with an unexpected consequence of border-crossing. Because of its favourable tax-system, Belgium has attracted many citizens from neighbouring countries. In some municipalities in the south-eastern part of the country almost half of the population now consists of German immigrants, many of whom continue to work in Germany and only use Belgium as their country of residence for tax purposes.

Beside the increasing number of German immigrants, another somewhat contentious issue is whether the German-speaking Community should be allowed to develop into an autonomous region. At present its autonomy is basically restricted to language and cultural matters, with social and economic affairs still under the jurisdiction of the Walloon Region. The creation of an autonomous German-speaking Region would obviously weaken the political power of Wallonia, which strongly opposes this political course. Significantly, Jean-Claude Van Cauwenberghe, the former Minister-President of Wallonia, used to refer to the population of German-speaking Belgium as '*Walloons who speak German*'. Whether it actually makes sense to concede economic autonomy to a region of barely 73,000 inhabitants remains an open question, especially bearing in mind that due to massive immigration in the 1960s and 1970s other minorities like the Moroccan or Turkish communities, who have no language rights at all, far outnumber the German-speaking Belgians.



St Maarten celebration
in the 'East Cantons'.

Due to their high birth rates and tendency to import marriage-partners from their countries of origin, these immigrant communities are growing steadily and will inevitably change the social structure of Belgium. In this context, the disparaging reference to Belgian identity as an *'empty box'*, might also be seen from a positive perspective. In fact, emptiness gives newcomers the necessary space to integrate. It is not by chance that descendents of immigrants tend to identify more with Belgian than with Walloon or Flemish identity. In times of globalisation and migration, the very vagueness of its national identity could prove to be Belgium's salvation. The successful integration of its German-speaking community is proof that it is possible for a new community to identify with Belgium. Combining loyalty to the new state with the preservation of cultural self-awareness, the German-speaking Community represents an interesting model for the integration of newcomers in Belgium. It is even possible that those whom today we call 'the last Belgians' will eventually become a role model for Belgium's future. ■

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