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LEARNING FROM FAILURE

The First World War and the »Flamenpolitik« of the German Militärverwaltung in Belgium in 1940

When it comes to experience and expectations, the German occupation of Belgium during the Second World War seems to be an interesting case. Belgium was one of the few countries in Europe that endured a German occupation of almost all of its territory in both World Wars. In the 30 years stretching from 1914 to 1944 most of Belgium remained under German rule for more than eight years[1]. Living under German occupation was thus one of the key experiences for most Belgians in the first half of the 20th century.

In the First World War the Germans put into action a highly ambitious *Flamenpolitik* (Flemish policy). Under this, not only was the first Dutch-language university in Belgium founded and a Flemish puppet government installed, but an administrative separation of Belgium into Flanders and Wallonia was also undertaken. Even though these German reforms were only short-lived, it is safe to say that they contributed greatly to the emergence of a radical anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism after the war.

In 1940, when German troops invaded for the second time, they came as the representatives of a state that had the *Volkstumspolitik* (nationality policy) as one of its core principles. Nonetheless, a radical restructuring of the Belgian state, like that which occurred during the First World War, did not take place.

In this article I ask the question whether this different approach to Belgium and Flemish nationalism was due to a learning process, and how the experiences of the First World War shaped the occupation of the Second World War in general. While doing so I will focus on the *Flamenpolitik* mainly in the first year of the occupation, but with an eye to the general circumstances, which differed in many respects from those of 1914/18[2].

»Flamenpolitik« in the First World War

If we believe Oscar von der Lancken, the former head of the political division in the German Generalgouvernement in Belgium in 1914/18, the German troops that invaded Belgium in August 1914 entered a *terra incognita*, an uncharted territory[3]. Although this statement might have been hyperbolic, it was true in the sense that there had been a complete absence of plan-

1 Except for a tiny strip of land in West Flanders, about 5 % of the country's territory, which during the First World War was held by Belgian troops under the command of King Albert.

2 An inspiration was the general comparison of both occupations and a detailed study of the Brussels police department in both wars by Benoît Majerus, Von Falkenhausen zu Falkenhausen. Die deutsche Verwaltung Belgiens in den zwei Weltkriegen, in: Günther Kronenbitter (ed.), Besatzung: Funktion und Gestalt militärischer Fremdherrschaft von der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert, Paderborn 2006, p. 131–145; id., Occupations et logiques policières. La police bruxelloise en 1914–1918 et 1940–1945, Bruxelles 2007.

3 Oscar von der Lancken Wakenitz, Meine dreißig Dienstjahre 1888–1918, Berlin 1931, p. 212–213.

ning with respect to the occupation of this country[4]. The same can be said of the Belgians, for whom the invasion came as a surprise. Belgium had never experienced an occupation regime before, nor did it have any guidelines on how to deal with one.

From the beginning the German occupation in 1914/18 had to deal with serious challenges to its authority and legitimacy. The first was the failure to conquer all of the country. The Belgian troops who had managed to hold a small strip of Belgian territory around the city of Ypres fed the hope for the liberation of the country.

Other problems were self-inflicted, especially on an organizational level. Most of Belgium was part of the Generalgouvernement, but the provinces of East and West Flanders remained under the direct military command of the German armies and the navy: a serious obstacle to a coherent occupation policy. Another heavy burden was the atrocities that German troops had committed in 1914, and which had cost the lives of about 5000 Belgian civilians. These war crimes had not only damaged the international reputation of the German Reich, but contributed to a bitter and hostile atmosphere between the occupiers and the occupied population. The German administration was confronted with almost unanimous opposition, and the introduction of the *Flamenpolitik* can be read partly as an attempt to deal with this situation. It was meant to gain Flemish support for the occupation through the implementation of reforms in favor of the Dutch language[5].

In the face of the international concern for »Poor little Belgium« and for the »Rape of Belgium«, as the propagandists of the *entente* had successfully dubbed the invasion and occupation of the country, the Germans felt the need to establish a counter-narrative. They accused Belgium of abandoning its neutrality even before August 1914. Seized archives of the Belgium government were scanned for evidence and the *Flamenpolitik* had to make up for the rather disappointing results of these efforts. According to this narrative, the francophile elites had transformed Belgium into a *französische Ostmark* (eastern province of France) and oppressed the Flemish. The invasion was thus not only an act of self-defense, but also justified in order to liberate the Flemish and to save them from *Französierung* (Frenchification)[6]. Except – most Flemings did not feel the need to be rescued by the Germans.

Another important aspect of the *Flamenpolitik* is to be found in the interior struggles of the German Empire, namely in the so-called *Kriegszieldebatte* (war aims discussion). The call for an outright annexation of Belgium was widespread and limited the possibilities for peace negotiations. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg therefore presented the *Flamenpolitik* as a compromise between the annexation of the country and the restoration of Belgium as it had existed before the war. He saw the *Flamenpolitik* also as an exit strategy, guaranteeing German influence in Belgium, even in case of a military defeat[7].

4 There is no indication of any planning regarding the occupation of Belgium on the part of German state institutions or the military. Nevertheless, there had been a certain interest in Belgium mainly from the Alldeutscher Verband (Pan-German League). See: Winfried Dolderer, Deutscher Imperialismus und belgischer Nationalitätenkonflikt: die Rezeption der Flamenfrage in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit und deutsch-flämische Kontakte 1890–1920, Melsungen 1989, p. 11–15; Bruno Yammine, Drang nach Westen. De fundamenten van de Duitse Flamenpolitik (1870–1914), Leuven 2011.

5 Dutch in Belgium had been underprivileged, while French was not only the language of Wallonia, but also spoken by the ruling classes in all of the country, including Flanders. Against this discrimination a Flemish movement had formed in the 19th century and gained momentum with the growing democratization of Belgium, where Dutch-speakers formed a clear majority of the population.

6 Pius Dirr, Belgien als französische Ostmark. Zur Vorgeschichte des Krieges, Berlin 1917.

7 Fritz Fischer, Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914/18, Düsseldorf 1967. Still the standard work on the German war aims discussion.

The *Flamenpolitik* was, therefore, not only a tool of the occupier to divide and rule the country, but it also included important foreign and interior policy aspects. This mixture of interests resulted in an increasingly ambitious project, which one might call a German nation-building policy in Flanders[8]. In 1916 Belgium's first Dutch-language university was founded under German auspices in Ghent, and in the following year a Flemish puppet government called the Raad van Vlaanderen (Council of Flanders) was installed. The Germans introduced also a so-called *Verwaltungstrennung* (administrative separation) of Belgium into Flanders and Wallonia, which split up the federal state. For the first time the language border was transformed into a political border, and for the first time modern institutions of Flemish statehood were created and the core of a Flemish nationalistic elite was formed.

Inevitably these measures triggered resistance. In 1917/18 most of the Belgian civil service went on strike and ceased its (up to this point) pretty frictionless cooperation. The Germans, as a result, had to rely increasingly on their own forces and the help of a few Flemish collaborators, the so-called activists. The ensuing administrative chaos made the occupation more expensive and personnel-intensive than had been expected, but in one respect the *Flamenpolitik* was a success: it contributed greatly to the emergence of a radical anti-Belgian and pro-German Flemish nationalism after the war[9]. Even though the German reforms were short-lived and removed after Belgium's liberation in 1918, they would help to destabilize the Belgian state in the long run.

Preparing for the Second Occupation

In the inter-war period, the Germans and the Belgians both evaluated the experiences of the occupation and tried to draw from them lessons for the future. In 1940 Belgium was thus no longer uncharted territory to the Germans, but the Belgian side had also made its preparations, based on the experiences of the First World War.

In Germany, as early as 1917 – during the war – there had been attempts to evaluate systematically the experiences of the occupation. The project of a multi-volume *Verwaltungsgeschichte* (administrative history) of the occupation was continued in the Weimar Republic and was coordinated in the Reich Archive by Robert Paul Oszwald, a historian who had played a crucial role in the *Flamenpolitik*[10].

In addition to these military–administrative evaluations, there was a considerable public and scholarly interest in Belgium and the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s, which had not existed before 1914. These academic activities, most notoriously the *Westforschung* (Western Studies)[11], were inseparably intertwined with German ambitions for hegemony in Europe. Scholars were crucial in the preparation as well as in the execution of the second occupation[12].

8 Jakob Müller, Nation-building *avant la lettre*? – Deutsche Flamen- und Besatzungspolitik ab 1914, in: Sebastian Bischoff et al. (ed.), Belgica – terra incognita? Münster 2016, p. 146–154.

9 Lode Wils, Onverfranst, onverduitst? Flamenpolitik, activisme, frontbeweging, Kalmthout 2014, p. 328.

10 If this »Geschichte der deutschen Zivilverwaltung im besetzten Belgien 1914–1918«, which most of the authors simply called the »Verwaltungsgeschichte Belgiens«, was ever finished is unclear. In German archives there are only fragments and single chapters to be found. Stephan Laux, Flandern im Spiegel der »wirklichen Volksgeschichte«. Robert Paul Oszwald (1883–1945) als politischer Funktionär, Publizist und Historiker, in: Burkhard Dietz et al. (ed.), Griff nach dem Westen. Die »Westforschung« der völkisch-nationalen Wissenschaften zum nordwesteuropäischen Raum 2 vols, Münster 2003, p. 260–262.

11 Dietz et al. (ed.), Griff nach dem Westen, ibid.

12 Etienne Verhoeyen, Een Duits netwerk bij de voorbereiding van de Militärverwaltung in België (1939–1940), in: Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen 69 (2010), p. 289–305; Id., Spionnen aan de

The planning of the occupation, however, lay with the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH), the Supreme Command of the German Army. The OKH used the material of the Reich Archive and other scholars, but had a rather critical view of the occupation policy of the First World War. It intended to install a Militärverwaltung (military administration) for the duration of the war, which would be strictly limited to economic and military purposes and would have the explicit goal of reducing political interference from the Reich. Looking at these plans and the first annual report of the Militärverwaltung in 1941, we could conclude that the Germans regarded the occupation policy of the First World War mainly as a failure[13]. Eggert Reeder, the head of the Militärverwaltung under Militärbefehlshaber (military commander)[14] Alexander von Falkenhausen, distanced himself repeatedly from the *Flamenpolitik* of the First World War and in particular from the administrative separation, which in his eyes had hampered the economic exploitation of Belgium for the German war effort[15].

The intention of the Militärverwaltung to avoid a rupture with the Belgian administration was met by a Belgian evaluation of the wartime occupation that came to similar conclusions, but for different reasons. The Belgians wanted to prevent a confrontation as had happened in 1917 in order to keep as much power as possible in Belgian hands. Several legal provisions tried to define the scope of action for the civil servants in case of a second occupation[16]. In 1935 all officeholders were obligated by law to remain at their posts in wartime. In a leaflet prepared for the mobilization it was explicitly stated that, in the event of an occupation, they were obliged to cooperate with the occupier in the best interests of the country. A law issued on the day of the German invasion (and subsequently called the law of May 10th, 1940) determined that if an emergency situation should arise, the responsibilities of an officeholder would be shifted to the subordinate next in rank. When the Belgian government left Brussels on May 16th, 1940, the most high-ranking bureaucrats, the Secretaries General, took over the responsibilities of the ministers[17].

To the same effect was the decision to accept that Belgian industry would continue to work under German occupation. Industrial production was kept up to prevent large-scale damage to the economy, as had happened in 1914/18, even if that meant helping the German war effort. A group of high-ranking bankers, led by Alexandre Galopin, the governor of the Société Générale, carried out this policy of the »lesser evil.«[18]

Both the Militärverwaltung and Belgian bureaucracy wanted to avoid the kind of confrontation that had taken place in the First World War, and were willing to make a trade-off with the other side. In the case of the German position on Belgium it is, however, necessary to distin-

achterdeur. De Duitse Abwehr in België 1936–1945, Antwerpen 2011; Konrad Kwiet, Vorbereitung und Auflösung der deutschen Militärverwaltung in den Niederlanden, in: Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen 38 (1969), p. 123–129.

13 Kriegstagebuch Nr. 1 des Oberquartiermeisters der Heeresgruppe B vom 19. Oktober 1939 bis 20. Mai 1940, in: Kwiet, Vorbereitung (as in n. 12), p. 132–135, 141; Annual report of the Militärverwaltung in May 1941, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (Military Department of the German Federal Archive Freiburg) BArch RW 36/201.

14 A somewhat misleading title. Falkenhausen's function was more that of a military governor.

15 Annual report (as in n. 13), p. 37.

16 Herwig Jacquemyns, Een bezet land. België in de Tweede Wereldoorlog vol. 2, Kapellen 1984, p. 28–30.

17 Under the German occupation the committee of the Secretaries General evolved into the highest executive Belgian body, but was still monitored by the judiciary. Nico Wouters, De Führerstaat. Overheid en collaboratie in België (1940–1944), Tielt 2006, p. 19–21.

18 Dirk Luyten showed, however, that this decision was made without a direct order from the Belgian government. Dirk Luyten, De ›opdracht‹ van de regering aan het Galopin-komitee op 15 mei 1940, in: Cahiers – Bijdragen 16 (1994), p. 163–173.

guish between the occupation policy of the Militärverwaltung on the one hand and the Nazi post-war plans on the other. In a Europe under German domination there would have been no place for a Belgium as it existed before the war, and in fact even in 1940 there was a real possibility of a »more political« occupation.

Shortly before the Belgian capitulation, Hitler talked with Himmler about the installation of a Reichskommissar for Belgium, a step that would have implied a future incorporation into a Greater German Reich[19]. Although we know that the *Führer* was in favor of such a step, the matter was delayed again and again[20]. Only four years later, some weeks before the liberation of Belgium, on July 19th, 1944, was Militärbefehlshaber Falkenhausen replaced by Reichskommissar Josef Grohé, thus revealing Germany's real intentions for the country. The question, therefore, is not why a Reichskommissar was installed in 1944, but why this happened so late.

When Nazi Germany was the Future – The Summer of 1940

As mentioned above, the Militärverwaltung invoked mainly economic arguments against a more political occupation and in particular against the administrative separation of the country. But economic considerations had not stopped Hitler from the introduction of Reichskommissare in Norway or the Netherlands, and it is very unlikely that they were the determining factor in the Belgian case. There was little reason for political restraint. In an astonishing *Blitzkrieg* the Germans had occupied Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, and had driven the British Expeditionary Force from the continent. When in June 1940 the French army collapsed, it seemed as if the Wehrmacht were invincible and there was no one to challenge German supremacy in Europe for the foreseeable future.

In particular the image of France, which had been idealized by many Belgians before 1940, had suffered. This was not only due to the shattering defeat of *La Grande Nation*, but also a result of personal disappointment. Fearing German atrocities like those of 1914, 1.5 to 2 million Belgians fled to France when the Germans invaded in May 1940. While many were received in a friendly and helpful manner by the French, others experienced humiliation, were threatened and called traitors, especially after the capitulation of the Belgian army on May 28th, 1940[21]. The alienation between Belgians and the French worked in favor of the Germans, who presented themselves as generous victors. Many of the Belgian refugees who were lost in France were repatriated by the Wehrmacht and received German help, for instance from the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist People's Welfare)[22].

The effectiveness of this charm offensive can be judged from the remarkably positive view of many Belgians toward German soldiers, who were often described as young, friendly, and disciplined – a description that did not resemble at all the image of the troops of the German *Kaiserreich*, who with their looting and killing had ravaged the country in August 1914. Two Belgian authors who had witnessed both invasions asked themselves in May 1940 whether it was possible that the troops of the Nazi regime were more accommodating and mild than those

19 Albert De Jonghe, De strijd Himmler—Reeder en de benoeming van een HSSPF te Brussel deel 1, in: Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog vol. 3 (1974), p. 18; Notes in Himmler's agenda 25 May and 15 June 1940, in: Markus Moors, Moritz Pfeiffer (eds.), Heinrich Himmlers Taschenkalender 1940, Paderborn 2013, p. 261, 276; Wilfried Wagner, Belgien in der deutschen Politik des Zweiten Weltkriegs, Boppard 1974, p. 156–158; Konrad Kwiet, Reichskommissariat Niederlande. Versuch und Scheitern nationalsozialistischer Neuordnung, Stuttgart 1969, p. 61–62.

20 Hitler on Leopold III on 28 March and 24 July 1942, in: Henry Picker, Hitlers Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier ed. by Percy Ernst Schramm, Stuttgart 1963, p. 221, 473.

21 Édouard Bonnefous, Histoire de la Troisième République vol. 7, Paris 1967, p. 190.

22 Jacquemyns, Een bezet land (as in n. 16), p. 47.

of the German Empire[23]. Another source even remarked that many Belgians were of the opinion that the German soldiers also compared favorably to the French and British troops, who were accused of having left a trail of devastation while retreating from Belgium[24].

In the first months of the occupation Germany seemed to be the model for the future, and the readiness of Belgians to work for the enemy is proof. On May 1st, 1941 the 150 000th Belgian worker signed a contract to work in Germany[25], and some found the working conditions so compelling that they returned for a second stay. These – in contrast to 1914/18 – rather positive encounters with the enemy, were only a little clouded by steps to move Belgium in the direction of the New Order, as for example by the anti-Jewish measures the Militärbefehlshaber issued in October 1940. There were some protests on the part of Belgian officials, but the general public stayed indifferent[26].

The atmosphere in favour of the Germans was only short-lived, but the reasons for the turnaround in public opinion in autumn 1940 were military and economic rather than political. The defeat in the Battle of Britain made a German victory in the near future unlikely, but the heaviest influence on public attitudes was probably the worsening of the food situation. Unlike in 1914/18, when the Commission for Relief in Belgium supplied food for a large part of the Belgian population, they now depended on food imports from Germany. As a result, many Bel-

23 »L'Allemand de 1914 aurait-il changé à ce point et se pourrait-il que le régime nazi se montrât plus accommodant et plus doux que celui de l'Allemagne impériale?« Paul Delandsheere, Alphonse Ooms, La Belgique sous les nazis vol. 1 (1940–1941), Bruxelles n. d. [1945–1949], p. 38; Leopold III remarked upon this difference, when he met Hitler. Aufzeichnung über die Unterredung zwischen dem Führer und König Leopold von Belgien am 19. November auf dem Berghof, Berlin, 21. November 1940, in: Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik (ADAP), Serie D, vol. 9, Frankfurt/Main 1962, p. 516. In this talk Hitler also pointed at the Allied occupation of the Rhineland and remarked that the actual occupation of Belgium would be in comparison »much better« (*unendlich viel besser*).

24 Paul Struye, who wrote reports of public opinion in occupied Belgium, noted in May 1941 that, although most Belgians were hostile towards the German occupation, they had a rather favorable view of the occupying troops: »[…] on admet unanimement qu'ils [the occupation troops] restent fort en deçà de ce que l'on peut normalement redouter du contact d'une armée en campagne avec une population étrangère. On établit parfois (à tort ou à raison) un contraste, flatteur pour les Allemands, entre leurs attitudes vis-à-vis de la population et les excès des troupes françaises et surtout britanniques qui ont souvent laissé de fâcheux souvenirs de leur passage en mai 1940. Il n'est même pas rare d'entendre reconnaître qu'aucune armée au monde n'aurait pu occuper notre pays avec autant d'ordre, de discipline et de correction, et avec aussi peu d'incidents que les troupes du Troisième Reich.« Paul Struye, L'Évolution du sentiment public sous l'Occupation allemande, in: José Gotovitch (ed.), La Belgique sous l'Occupation allemande (1940–1944), Bruxelles 2002, p. 70, similar quotes, p. 81.

25 Tätigkeitsbericht Nr. 16 der Militärverwaltung für den Monat April 1941, CEGESOMA (Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Society Brussels) AA 577/86, p. 5. During the First World War only 30 000 Belgians had signed a contract to work in Germany before the deportations in October 1916 began. Uta Hinz, Zwangsarbeit, in: Gerhard Hirschfeld et al. (eds.), Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg, Paderborn 2004, p. 979.

26 Struye noted that although the general public didn't take much interest, these steps resulted in some disillusionment among parts of the elites. »Si la masse est demeurée indifférente aux ordonnances contre les Juifs, à la mise à la retraite des fonctionnaires de plus de 60 ans, et à la suspension des conseils communaux, beaucoup d'intellectuels, au contraire, ont vu dans ces mesures de véritables actes d'annexion, ne pouvant s'expliquer que par la volonté de traiter la Belgique en pays conquis et de lui enlever toute autonomie véritable.« Struye, Sentiment public (as in n. 24), p. 74.

gians suffered from malnutrition and its attending ills[27]. Hunger was common among the working classes. The Germans were blamed for this hardship, but the lack of food also helped the occupiers to control the country. As the head of the Militärverwaltung put it: »From Belgium's lack of independence in its food situation results its dependency from on the Reich and the willingness to place its economy to a degree at Germany's disposal, as the Reich, directly or indirectly, contributes to the supply of the population.«[28]

The initial belief that Germany had won the war, and the economic dependency on Germany, were the main differences from the situation in 1914, but both factors could also be found in other occupied territories. What made Belgium distinct was the presence of the Belgian King. In the case of the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Norway, their governments and crowned heads had gone into exile. This opened the way for a political rearrangement according to German tastes, but at the same time underlined the illegitimacy of the occupation. In May 1940 the Belgian government left the country, but King Leopold III as commander-in-chief not only decided to capitulate against the will of France, Britain, and his own government, but he also decided to stay with his troops in Belgium as a prisoner of war.

The presence of the King had a considerable effect on what the Belgians expected from the occupation and the future. After the King had surrendered, there was a wave of sympathy for the monarch, who in the eyes of many had saved the lives of his soldiers, who were fighting a war that was already lost. Leopold was seen by many Belgians as the embodiment of national independence and the only one who could possibly attain some kind of acceptable position for Belgium in Germany's coming »New Order« Europe. The fierce attacks on the King from outside the country, most notoriously from the French Prime Minister Reynaud, who called him a »criminal King« (*roi felon*)[29], but also from the British Prime Minister Churchill and the Belgian government in exile, created outrage.

Why Leopold decided to stay in Belgium is open to debate, but many expected him to play a political role. Already in the 1930s an anti-democratic tendency had manifested itself in Belgium and ideas about a reform of the political system circulated not only in fascist and conservative circles. Almost all of these concepts centered on a strong King with far-reaching executive powers. The defeat of the army and the flight of the government was seen by some as a chance to realize such ideas. Leopold, whose authoritarian tendencies were well known, seemed not completely unwilling to live up to these expectations[30].

The presence of Leopold lent some legitimacy to the occupation regime, and the alienation between the King and the government in exile opened an opportunity to move Belgium toward the New Order. It was probably Leopold's presence in Belgium that made Hitler postpone his plans to install a Reichskommissar[31]. The Militärverwaltung tolerated Belgians showing their admiration for the monarch in public, and thus the illusion was created that a more or less independent Belgium in a Europe under German hegemony was possible. To maintain this illusion, which lured many Belgians into collaboration, it was necessary to respect, at least formally, the Belgian state.

27 Guillaume Jacquemyns, La Société belge sous l'Occupation allemande (1940–1944). Privations et espoirs, in: José Gotovitch (ed.), La Belgique sous l'Occupation allemande (1940–1944), Bruxelles 2002.

28 »Aus der Unselbständigkeit Belgiens in seiner Ernährungslage ergibt sich seine Abhängigkeit vom Reich und der Wille, Deutschland seine Arbeits- und Wirtschaftsleistung in einem Umfange zur Verfügung zu stellen, in dem das Reich direkt oder mittelbar zur Ernährung der Bevölkerung beiträgt.« Tätigkeitsbericht Nr. 16 (as in n. 25), p. A 12.

29 Jacques Benoist-Méchin, Soixante jours qui ébranlèrent l'Occident, Paris 1956, p. 334–339.

30 Wouters, Führerstaat (as in n. 17), p. 30–31.

31 Albert De Jonghe, Hitler en het politieke lot van België, Antwerpen 1972, p. 117.

Nazi Germany and the Flemish Nationalists

The – in comparison with 1914 – rather positive perspective of many Belgians on the occupation was the result of recent and unpredictable events, but there was one group in which sympathy for a German occupation existed even before the attack: Flemish nationalists.

Flemish nationalism as part of Belgian political life was a direct result of the German *Flamenpolitik* of the First World War. In the 1930s the fascist Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV), the Flemish National Union, had succeeded in unifying most of the nationalistic groups and had established itself as a sizable factor in Flanders. Nonetheless, it was far from winning over a majority of the Flemish, let alone Belgian, electorate. Only a force from outside could bring the VNV to power and, although the party officially promoted a strict Belgian neutrality, party leader Staf De Clercq and many ordinary members were ready for a second activism[32]. De Clercq had, in fact, entertained secret contacts with Germany since the 1930s and, in coordination with the German Abwehr (military intelligence), he installed a clandestine group inside the Belgian army[33]. This early commitment to the German cause made the VNV different from other collaborationist groups and from the beginning De Clercq tried to translate it into political power. Even before the official capitulation, he met with agents of the Abwehr and as early as June 3rd, 1940 he was received by the newly appointed Militärbefehlshaber[34].

The expectation of the Flemish nationalists was that Nazi Germany would continue the *Flamenpolitik* that Imperial Germany had been forced to stop in 1918. It seemed to make sense that the »racial state«[35], would pursue a *Flamenpolitik*, and maybe in an even more radical way than during the First World War.

This expectation was shared by some Germans, such as for example Theodor Reismann-Grone, whom one could call a veteran of the *Flamenpolitik*. As a representative of the Alldeutscher Verband (Pan-German League) he had sponsored the German-Flemish newspaper *Germania* to promote his ideas even before the First World War. In 1914 he wrote several memorandums on the »Flemish question« and advised the newly appointed Generalgouverneur »to destroy Belgium with the help of the Flemings«[36]. After the war he joined the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) and was made mayor of Essen in 1933, but had to leave office because of a tax fraud scandal in 1937. The 78-year-old Reismann-Grone clearly greeted the second invasion as a chance for a political comeback, and it seems that in June 1940 Hitler considered him for the post of Reichskommissar of Belgium[37]. The appoint-

32 The Flemish collaborators of the First World War were called »activists«.

33 The Abwehr was active not only in Belgium, but also tried to make military use of nationalistic movements all over Europe. Irish and Breton nationalists, for example, were supplied with weapons and explosives and received military training. In comparison with these and other groups that entertained contacts with the Abwehr, the VNV collaboration seems rather meager. Only in March 1940, according to the former Abwehr member Fritz Scheuermann, did about 50 VNV members receive military training during a visit to the Black Madonna of Częstochowa in German-occupied Poland. Verhoeyen, Spionnen (as in n. 12), p. 233–234, 260; Maurice de Wilde, België in de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Deel 5: De kollaboratie, Kapellen 1985, p. 66.

34 Bruno De Wever, Greep naar de macht. Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde: het VNV 1933–1945, Tielt 1994, p. 351, 386.

35 Michael Burleigh, Wolfgang Wippermann, The Racial State, Cambridge 1991.

36 On this quote, which has often been falsely ascribed to the general-governor: Jakob Müller, Winfried Dolderer, België vernietigen. Het kronkelpad van een citaat, in: Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen 74 (2015), p. 103–111.

37 Stefan Frech, Wegbereiter Hitlers? Theodor Reismann-Grone: ein völkischer Nationalist (1863–1949), Paderborn 2009, p. 367–372; Wagner, Belgien (as in n. 19), p. 229.

ment did not take place. Belgium remained under a Militärverwaltung until 1944 and Reismann-Grone had to stay in Essen.

As shown above, the state of affairs in the summer of 1940 provided the Germans with far more options than had been available during the first occupation. The opportunity to exploit and, maybe at a later stage, to incorporate Belgium with the help of the traditional elites made a radical *Flamenpolitik* inopportune and probably led to the postponement of the installation of a Reichskommissar.

Nonetheless, there was a *Flamenpolitik* and, in fact, this was one of the few political directives the Militärverwaltung received from Berlin. In an order from July 14th, 1940 Hitler's intentions for Belgium were summarized: »The *Führer* has not decided on Belgium's future at the moment. He wishes for the time being every possible support for the Flemish, including the release of the Flemish Prisoners of War. No privileges are to be granted to the Walloons.«[38]

The decision on Belgium's future was thus postponed, but it is clear from this statement that this did not mean that Germany intended to refrain from an active *Flamenpolitik*.

In July 1940 the Militärverwaltung wrote a memorandum on the Flemish question. This document stated that the Flemish nationalists were the only group in Belgium that the Militärverwaltung could rely on as a counterweight to the Belgian elites. At the same time, it pointed to the shortcomings of Flemish nationalism in general and the VNV in specific. Although the Flemish were attested to be a people with »vital völkisch energies and instincts«[39] they were deemed incapable of converting Belgium from a French *Ostmark* into a German *Westmark*. The VNV was criticized for what was seen as a superficial adaptation of the National Socialist ideology. In the absence of alternatives, however, cooperation with the party was advised. At the same time, the range of collaborating Flemish groups should be extended in order to shift power to those who were ideologically more like-minded[40].

The attitude toward Flemish nationalism and the VNV was thus fairly pragmatic. The party was seen as a counterweight against the Belgian elites and served as a reservoir for personnel to replace unwanted Belgian functionaries.

On this basis the Militärverwaltung introduced its own version of a *Flamenpolitik*. There was no administrative separation of the country into Flanders and Wallonia and no Flemish puppet government – a serious disappointment for the old activists. The Flemish collaborators of the First World War had to content themselves with some minor and rather symbolic concessions, such as for example a language control commission and monetary compensation for activists who had suffered disadvantages owing to their pro-German activities in the previous war. During a meeting with the figurehead of the Flemish nationalists, the old activist August Borms, Reeder stressed that under the conditions of total war, an administrative separation into Flanders and Wallonia or even a minor change in the administration of Belgium was out of the question[41].

During the Second World War, unlike the First, the Germans were unwilling to risk a conflict with the Belgian elites for the realization of Flemish nationalistic goals. What is more, they

38 Der Chef des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht Keitel an den Oberbehfehlshaber des Heeres von Brauchitsch am 14. Juli 1940, in: ADAP, D, 10, p. 174. »Der Führer hat hinsichtlich der Zukunft des belgischen Staates noch keine endgültige Entschließung getroffen. Er wünscht einstweilen jede mögliche Förderung der Flamen einschl[ießlich] Rückführung der flämischen Kriegsgefangenen in ihre Heimat. Den Wallonen sind keinerlei Vergünstigungen zu gewähren.«

39 Cf. *»mit urgesunden völkischen Energien und Instinkten«*.

40 Bericht zur Flamenfrage Franz Thediecks, 31. Juli 1940, PA AA (Political Archives of the German Foreign Office Berlin) R 101301.

41 Notes of Reeder about a meeting with Borms and the VNV Secretaries General Victor Leemans and Gérard Romsée on October 11th, 1941, Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archives Berlin) BArch NS 19/1547, p. 21.

watched the Flemish nationalists with suspicion, for their goal to create a Greater Netherlands – a unification of all Dutch-speaking territories – was irreconcilable with plans for a Greater Germanic Reich.

Nonetheless, the extent to which the Germans enabled VNV members to take power inside the structures of the Belgian state was impressive. The Militärverwaltung removed unwanted functionaries from their posts and replaced them with personnel that were deemed loyal. In Flanders the new men were, in their overwhelming majority, Flemish nationalists. Force was used when necessary, but when possible the Germans tried to stay formally inside the boundaries of Belgian legislation.

On the federal level the Germans pressed the committee of the Secretaries General to accept the VNV members Victor Leemans as Secretary General for the economy in 1940 and Gérard Romsée as Secretary General for the Interior in 1941. On the level of the provinces and municipalities the replacement policy was very far-reaching. At the end of the occupation about 70 % of all Flemish municipalities had a VNV member or someone associated with the party as mayor[42].

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, military collaboration became increasingly important. About 10 000 Flemings were members of the Waffen SS, about 8000 served in the National Socialist Motor Corps (NSKK), and another 10 000 were working for the Organization Todt. Alongside such collaboration inside German military organizations, there existed paramilitary organizations in Belgium with tasks such as the protection of airfields, factories, and train installations[43].

The traditional bond of Flemish nationalism with Germany and the tradition of activism made the Flemish nationalists a useful tool for the occupation of Belgium. While the activists of the First World War had been a small and heterogeneous minority – even inside the Flemish movement itself – the VNV in 1940 was an organization with subdivisions all over Flanders and Brussels. These men were able and willing to take power[44]. The *Flamenpolitik* of the Second World War gave Flemish nationalists the opportunity to collaborate, but at the same time the Militärverwaltung and (with even more vigor) the SS fought Flemish nationalism as an ideology. Gradually the Germans tried to replace the VNV with the Flemish SS/DeVlag. The Waffen SS in particular provided an opportunity to indoctrinate young Flemish nationalists, who were far away from home in their German training camps, and estrange them from the VNV. These two-faced methods led to a conflict, which reached a climax in August 1943 when the VNV stopped its propaganda for the Waffen SS. Nonetheless it continued to collaborate, both politically and administratively, until the end of the war[45].

Learning from Failure?

Let's return to the opening question: how far did the experiences of the First World War shape the second occupation? Did the Germans learn from their failures, when they refrained from a *Flamenpolitik* as in 1914/18?

First of all, it must be acknowledged that there were four major differences between 1914 and 1940, which had nothing to do with the previous war and which rendered the conditions for the second occupation fundamentally different. First, the capitulation of the Belgian army and the complete occupation of the country; second, the dependence of Belgium on German food imports; third, a lack of international attention for the country in comparison to the First

42 Wouters, Führerstaat (as in n. 17), p. 112.
43 Bruno De Wever, Collaboratie, in: Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging Vol. 1, Tielt 1998, p. 772.
44 De Wever, Greep (as in n. 34), p. 268–269.
45 De Wever, Greep (as in n. 34), p. 540–541.

World War, when the fate of »Poor little Belgium« was one of the key questions; and fourth, the character of the Second World War, which was a war not only between nations, but also between ideologies. In Belgium, as in the other occupied territories, there existed groups, such as the Rex party, which even before the war felt attracted by the model of National Socialist Germany[46]. These factors contributed to a high degree of willingness on the part of the Belgians to cooperate with the German occupiers.

The willingness to cooperate was, however, not only a result of different circumstances, but also, as in the case of the civil service, has to be understood against the background of the experiences of 1914/18, when a strike of the civil service and the judiciary had led to a far-reaching German control of Belgian institutions.

The most direct result of the German occupation policy of the First World War was the existence of an anti-Belgian and pro-German Flemish nationalism in 1940. The *Flamenpolitik* of 1914/18 had succeeded in creating a group in Belgium on which the Germans could rely. Many Flemish nationalists were ready to collaborate before May 1940, and some were even willing to serve as a fifth column for the Germans. But the effects went further: Belgium was politically far more fragmented in 1940 than it had been in 1914. The decision of Leopold III to stay in Belgium against the will of his government – a decision that led to the worst interior crisis of the country after the war and to Leopold's forced abdication in 1950 – can be attributed to this lack of cohesion. It is not an exaggeration to say that this condition of the Belgian state and society was at least partially a result of the *Flamenpolitik*.

The German occupation of the First World War thus paved the way for a structural change in Belgium's society and political life, which made the political and economic penetration of the country in 1940 far easier than it had been in 1914.

With regard to the German side, one has to differentiate between political concepts regarding Belgium and the actual occupation policy. Ideologically Belgium was seen as an unnatural mixture of two peoples, a monstrosity and absurdity among the European nations. This racial view of Belgium can even be traced back to the 19th century; it became dominant during the First World War and was established as the mainstream view on Belgium in the inter-war period. Although during the Second World War there were antagonisms between different German institutions over the actual occupation policy, the need to dissolve Belgium after the war was never really disputed. The decision to install a Reichskommissar in July 1944 and to establish two Reichsgaue (Reich districts), Flanders and Wallonia, in December 1944 when Belgium already had been liberated reveals that the general perspective on Belgium had not changed much since the First World War.

A major difference between the two occupations was the change in perspective with respect to Flemish nationalism. During the First World War the foremost objective of the *Flamenpolitik* had been to establish Flemish nationalism as an anti-Belgian and pro-German movement, a movement that had not existed before 1914. In 1940 Flemish nationalism was a fact, but the nationalists' goal to establish a Greater Netherlands was unacceptable in the context of the German plans for hegemony in Europe and the establishment of a Greater Germanic Reich.

Nevertheless, the Flemish nationalists were the most important group on which the Germans could rely during both occupations. But: the *Flamenpolitik* had never been a goal in itself. It was meant to serve German objectives in both World Wars. Thus, abstaining from a First World War-like *Flamenpolitik* in 1940 was the result of different general conditions rather than of a different approach to Belgium and Flanders. The influence of Flemish nationalists would presumably have been even bigger, had it not been for the exceptional situation in the summer of 1940, when substantial parts of the Belgian elites were ready to collaborate. Presented with the choice between Flemish nationalists and Belgian elites, the Germans decided to take both.

46 Martin Conway, Collaboration in Belgium. Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement 1940–1944, New Haven 1993.