

# Nationalism and Commemoration in Belgian Military Cemeteries

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses the commemorative practices in Flanders from World War I through World War II. In particular, the paper investigates the challenges faced by the primary belligerent countries after WWI: How to commemorate the dead soldiers that lay along trench lines from Belgium into France? Flemish and Belgian nationalist concerns affected the implementation of postwar national cemeteries. The article examines both the material embodiment of World War I – for instance the *heldenhuldezerken* – and the meanings attributed to commemoration and remembrance of the war dead.

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## **Introduction**

[1] There is a plurality in the memories of the Great War in Belgium. It is the fragmentation of several memory communities, between Flanders and Belgium and within the Flemish community, that have served as obstacles for a cohesive national commemoration of World War I throughout the past century.<sup>1</sup> The gravestones for the Flemish dead, in cemeteries also dedicated to World War II, provide a tangible connection to a distant past, but a past by which many in the region were deeply affected. In immediate post-World War I commemorative practice there was no dominant discourse of national patriotism. Flemish nationalism succeeded in maintaining its visibility in Francophone Belgium through the raising and maintenance of the *heldenhuldezerken*, unique tombstones designed during the war to mark the graves of flamingant (Flemish-minded) soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan WO II, 1945-2010*, Antwerp 2012.

[2] After the Great War, each of the primary belligerent countries was faced with how to commemorate the dead soldiers that lay along trench lines from Belgium into France. For Belgium, several factors affected the implementation of postwar national cemeteries. This article addresses a history of the commemorative practice for the dead from Flanders through the rise and fall of a Flemish nationalist sentiment. It examines both the material embodiment of and the meaning people have drawn from memory and commemoration of World War I through Flemish and Belgian nationalist concerns.<sup>2</sup>

[3] Since war often serves as an impetus to both reinforce ideas of nationalism and question existing political power structures, the formation of Belgian cemeteries provides an interesting case study on the negotiation of nationalist issues between the Belgian government and the Flemish as well as within the Flemish community. The presence and absence of Flemish bodies in the material spaces of Belgian commemoration, in both state-sponsored military and local community cemeteries, has served a cultural and political agenda for nearly one hundred years. This article is a study of cultural and national identity through the examination of the *heldenhuldezerken* – the most iconic symbol of Flemish nationalism arising from World War I. It addresses a history of Belgian military cemeteries in light of the rise and fall of a Flemish presence within Belgium, looking at the manner in which the Flemish were commemorated after the war both within and outside of the official Belgian system.<sup>3</sup> It concludes by contrasting the commemoration of the flamingant soldiers of the Great War to that of the Flemish nationalist casualties – the Collaborators – who fought on the Eastern Front during World War II.

[4] Flemish commemoration was not necessarily in opposition to Belgian practice,<sup>4</sup> but postwar memorials and rituals enacted in Flanders, as opposed to in Brussels or Wallonia, pointedly invoked and continually re-invoke a Flemish perspective on the war experience. The Great War was a turning point for a Flemish (nationalist) discourse that had been simmering under the surface of Belgian politics since the late nineteenth century. It brought to the fore the rift between the Catholic and the Liberal Flemish-minded that resulted in two branches of the nineteenth century

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<sup>2</sup> A longer version of this paper was published as "Belgian or Flemish: National Identity in the World War I Belgian Military Cemeteries", in: *Journal of First World War Studies* 3/6 (2015), 257-276. In different contexts, the *heldenhuldezerken* have been addressed in Karen Shelby, *Flemish Nationalism and the Great War: The Politics of Memory, Visual Culture and Commemoration*, London 2014, and "Little Flemish Heroes Tombstones: The Great War and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Belgian Politics", in: *Remembering the Great War*, ed. Bart Ziino, London 2014, 186-206.

<sup>3</sup> Major Rob Troubleyn, the Expert of the First World War at the Royal Army Museum, Brussels (and former Director of the Belgian War Graves Commission), is currently writing a book on a complete history of the Belgian Military cemeteries.

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Rosoux and Laurence Van Ypersele, "The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence", in: *Memory Studies* 5/1 (2012), 45-57, here 47.

Flemish Movement. Originally a cultural movement, by 1890 the Movement broadened to advocate a Flemish Belgian sub-nationalism – a pro-Flemish platform within Belgium.<sup>5</sup> During World War I, it was apparent that the Flemish Movement had split into two distinct groups: the Passivists, who advocated for more rights for Flanders within the Kingdom of Belgium, and the Activists, who collaborated with German occupiers through the implementation of German Flamenpolitik in an attempt to establish a separate Flemish state.<sup>6</sup> The manner in which the politically engaged Flemish, the flamingants, soldiers, were either disregarded or commemorated during the war reflected tensions within Belgium and within the legacy of the schisms in Flanders itself, serving to move Flemish nationalist ideology to the national stage of Belgian politics in the postwar years. Through the rise in the influence of the Activists, anti-Belgianism led some Flemish to collaborate with the Nazis during World War II, an extreme example of Flemish nationalism that only underscores the movement's multiplicity.

### The Belgian Front: The Foundation for Double Commemoration

[5] Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914. On 10 October, Antwerp fell, and the Belgian army began a retreat that ended at the IJzer River, between the coastal town of Nieuwpoort to the north and Boezinge to the south. This region is known as the Belgian Front. On 29 October, after two previously unsuccessful attempts, the canal locks of Nieuwpoort were opened, and the North Sea gradually rose in the low fields following the line of the IJzer. The river and the flooded plains remained, for the duration of the war, the divisional and defensive line between the German and Belgian armies. This period, the Guard of the IJzer (Wacht aan de IJzer), was not totally immune from violence, but the bloody battles with heavy losses were not the same as those that overwhelmed the Ypres Salient to the south, which afforded a very different war experience for soldiers in the Belgian army.

[6] After the Battle of Liège on 5 August 1914 and the subsequent German occupation, men from Wallonia were less available for service. The forced retreat of the Belgian army to the small corner of northwestern Flanders resulted in an

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<sup>5</sup> Stengers argues that Belgium was only institutionalized as a modern nation state after 1830 and, as a result, Flanders is a by-product of the formation of Belgium; initially language does not appear as a major political element of national identity. Wils argues that Belgium was a product of international negotiations. Jean Stengers, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, vol. 1: *Les racines de la Belgique. Jusqu'à la Révolution de 1830*, Brussels 2000, as well as Jean Stengers and Éliane Gubin, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge. De 1830 à 1918, Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918*, Brussels 2002, and Lode Wils, "Naar de barst in België. Over Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge van Stengers en Gubin", in: *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent* 11 (2003), 203-209.

<sup>6</sup> The first to address this issue was Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en aktivisme*, Leuven 1974. A more recent study is Bruno Yammine, *Drang nach Westen. De fundamente van de Duitse Flamenpolitik*, Leuven 2011.

increased number of Flemish enlisting in the army after 1914. The Flemish men who joined the ranks did so for a variety of reasons. The majority enlisted in defense of Belgium and others in answer to the king's call for volunteers, in which he appealed directly to the patriotic pride of the men of Flanders, indirectly implying more rights for Flanders after the war.<sup>7</sup> This "promise" was raised in 1917 in an infamous letter known as the Open Brief (Open Brieven), addressed to the king and drafted by the flamingant soldier Adiel Debeuckelaere.<sup>8</sup> Selections from the Brief confirmed the long-lasting and romanticized impression that the majority of the Flemish joined the war effort as Flemish volunteers. This idea is supported by the citations in soldier's diaries, flamingant-centered trench journals, and correspondence with those on the home-front.<sup>9</sup> Some entered the ranks with an already established sense of flamingantism, fighting for more autonomy for Flanders.<sup>10</sup> Others joined the flamingant cause after exposure to calculated nationalist messages. A small-but-vocal group of Flemish soldiers, numbering no more than 1,000,<sup>11</sup> who considered their oppression in the Belgian army as symptomatic of subjugation within Belgium, created the Front Movement (Frontbeweging), an initially social and literary group movement, which became a politicized organization as Flemish grievances against the Belgian army increased. Ideological differences within the Front Movement did exist. A few members crossed over into German occupied Belgium joining the Activists.

[7] It was the literature of the nineteenth-century Flemish-centered forefathers that provided a foundation for the Flemish nationalisms that were spread via the Front Movement. A unifying thread was the Flemish language. The language of the Flemish people was an important aspect to building the bedrock of a singular Flemish cultural patrimony in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> This history, primarily spread through the Romantic novels of Hendrick Conscience (1812-1883) – particularly his popular novel *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen of de Slag der Gulden Sporen* (The Lion of Flanders) (1838) –, the poems of priest Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), and the works of the poet and student leader Albrecht Rodenbach (1856-1880), served as the basis

<sup>7</sup> Theo Hermans et al., *The Flemish Movement*, London 1992, 226. King Albert also roused the Walloon men to serve, appealing to both language groups in bolstering the beleaguered Belgian army and perhaps also acknowledging Belgium's double-identity. King Albert made an overt appeal to each region's sense of patriotism and heroic past to create a united front of Belgians resisting the German army.

<sup>8</sup> *Open brieven van de Vlaamsche Frontpartij in het jaar 1917 en vertoogschriften van het Vlaamsche Frontverbond*, in: Hermans, *The Flemish Movement*, 227-228.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging: De Vlaamse strijd aan de IJzer*, Koksijde 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Seberechts, "Slechts de graven maken een land tot een vaderland", in: *Duurzamer dan graniet. Over monumenten en Vlaamse beweging*, ed. Frank Seberechts, Tielt/Ghent 2003, 123-154.

<sup>11</sup> Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging*, 112.

<sup>12</sup> French was declared the official language of Belgium in 1831.

for the flamingant message. Front soldiers cited the language discrepancies between French-speaking Belgian officers and the often uneducated volunteer Flemish soldiers as one of the primary motivating factors in unifying the Flemish soldiers against a perception of the suppression of their language and culture.<sup>13</sup> This narrative of the inability of the Flemish-speaking soldiers to understand the orders of French-speaking officers significantly affected pro-Flemish rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the deaths of the Flemish volunteers were placed at the center of an expanding flamingantism that encoded the deaths of the soldiers, flamingant or not, as sacrifices for the greater Flemish nationalist cause. This had a direct impact on the design and implementation of the heldenhuldezerken as a pointed and public commemoration of dead Flemish soldiers during the war.

### The Heldenhuldezerk: A Martyr's Tombstone for the Flemish Dead

[8] During the first years of the war, all of the belligerent countries followed traditional military burial protocol. Officers were interred in individual graves and ordinary soldiers in mass graves.<sup>15</sup> But since so many World War I soldiers were civilian volunteers, methods were altered to reflect civilian practice of burying all of the dead in individual graves.<sup>16</sup> In addition, once the trench lines were established, the armies settled in place allowing for unprecedented downtime.<sup>17</sup> In Belgian battlefield cemeteries, soldiers were initially buried beneath a cross marked *Mort pour la Patrie* – neither the language nor nation of the flamingant. As Antoine Prost notes, when writing about memorialization in France, to adopt the inscription "Morts pour la France" was to accept the language of the state, and not that of local tradition.<sup>18</sup> This sentiment also accurately describes the flamingant ideology; for members of the Front Movement, for a Flemish soldier to be buried beneath a makeshift cross inscribed in French – the language of Belgium – his political identity would effectively be erased and subsumed into the dominant Francophone culture. This is reflected in one of the more unusual aspects regarding the raising of the heldenhuldezerk – it was the soldiers themselves who took the initiative in the

<sup>13</sup> Luc Coenen and Luc De Vos, "De taalagitatatie in het Belgische leger tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog", in: *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen op het gebied van de Vlaamse Beweging* 47/3 (1988), 142-145.

<sup>14</sup> The matter is still under deliberation. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, Amsterdam 2013, 202; Geert van Istendael, *Het Belgisch labyrint, Een wegwijzer (overschilderd natuurlijk)*, Amsterdam/Antwerp 2011, 41-42; Anne Morelli, *De grote mythen uit de geschiedenis van België, Vlaanderen en Wallonië*, Berchem 1996, 221.

<sup>15</sup> Luc Capdevila and Daniele Voldman, *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War*, Edinburgh, 2006, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Capdevila and Voldman, *War Dead*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Capdevila and Voldman, *War Dead*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la Societe francaise 1914-1939*, vol. 3: *Mentalités et Idéologies*, Paris 1977, 42.

recognition of the war dead. The fabrication of these particular headstones reveals a collaborative grassroots practice serving a political cause. Indeed, the heldenhuldezerk initiative was funded by local donations and functioned well outside the traditional framework of the military.

[9] In 1916, the Committee for Flemish Heroes' Tombstones (Comite voor Heldenhuldezerkjes) was founded and the heldenhuldezerk, designed by a soldier named Joe English, debuted that same year. English, a Flemish national of Irish descent, chose as his model the High Cross – a well-established Irish symbol of Catholicism and martyrdom. But English may also have been inspired by crosses found in local Flemish cemeteries, which featured a roundel at the crossing of the two arms. Perhaps at the suggestion of committee members, most specifically the influential Doctor Frans Daels, Joseph Verduyn, and the priest Cyriel Verschaeve, he also researched the nineteenth-century Flemish Movement (Vlaamse Beweging). English incorporated the AVV-VVK slogan *Alles voor Vlaanderen – Vlaanderen voor Kristus* (All for Flanders – Flanders for Christ), coined in 1881 by the priest Frans Drijvers, and added a *Blauwvoet* (Bluefoot) bird, the symbol of the late nineteenth-century Flemish student movement led by Rodenbach. In repurposing these nineteenth-century symbols, the Front Movement forged continuity with the past in the interest of creating nationalist loyalties during the war. As the Front Movement evolved into a politically engaged lobby, the heldenhuldezerken and all of the symbols enfolded within became a means through which specific factions of the postwar Flemish veterans could inscribe a flamingant statement on the visual field of the battlefield cemeteries and, after the war, in Belgian military cemeteries. A martyr's cross for the Flemish discontents of the Belgian state was the perfect vehicle with which to venerate soldiers, many of whom, as Sophie de Schaepdrijver has noted, were posthumously enrolled in the flamingant cause.<sup>19</sup> This circumstance is clearly articulated in the community cemetery of Zonnebeke discussed later in this essay.

[10] Until quite recently, it was understood that these Flemish tombstones were funded for Flemish soldiers by Flemish soldiers. This was an underlying assumption based on the ways in which the heldenhuldezerk served as a nationalist symbol during and after the Great War. But the recent discovery of a notebook used to record the names of recipients and donors indicates that both Flemish and Walloon soldiers financed heldenhuldezerken, and both were buried beneath them.<sup>20</sup> Heldenhuldezerken were engraved in Flemish and French, respectively. The exception was the AVV-VVK slogan, which remained on both. The first soldiers to

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<sup>19</sup> Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Belgium", in: *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne, Oxford 2010, 397.

<sup>20</sup> The notebook, a record kept by Gabriël Verduyn, was acquired in 2012 by the Archief en Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaams-nationalisme (ADVNI) in Antwerp, Belgium. Peter Verplancke, historian at the Museum aan de IJzer, is responsible for the analysis of the contents of this notebook.

receive a heldenhuldezerk were the Catholic flamingant students, but the program was soon expanded to increase visibility of the symbol.<sup>21</sup> The Belgian army's acceptance of this flamingant sign is surprising in light of the way members of the Front Movement were treated during the war. Flamingant activities, however minimal their impact in the larger military sphere, were viewed as undermining a unitary Belgian identity forged against German occupation. King Albert attempted to suppress any voice of protest and to curtail what the army considered to be insubordination in the ranks.<sup>22</sup>

[11] Because of the suppression of flamingant actions, and through the early Catholic associations of the Flemish Movement, the dead Flemish soldiers were venerated as martyrs – the dead man's name crowned by the halo of English's High Cross. It is important to remember that in 1914, many of the Flemish men, although influenced by the King's patriotic references and alleged promises to Flanders postwar, were still thinking of their enlistment as a defense of Belgium. Thus, when looking to the heldenhuldezerken to provide evidence of an influential flamingant movement during the war, one must recall the ways in which the soldiers' deaths were co-opted by those lobbying for Flemish autonomy during this period and the interwar years.<sup>23</sup>

### A State-Sponsored Memorial Practice

[12] In line with the practice of Great Britain and France, the Graves Registration Unit of the Belgian army was established at the end of the war to oversee the creation of concentration cemeteries for the Belgian soldiers (Germany began this process in the 1930s). For the sake of expediting organization, Belgium was divided into three parts: from the French border to Ghent; from Ghent to Mechelen (Fr. Malines); and from Mechelen to Namur. It is in the first division in West Flanders and the site-specificity of the Front Movement on the Belgian Front that the majority of the heldenhuldezerken are located.

[13] What if a state-sponsored memorial practice is, if not fractured, indicative of the cultural and political place of the Flemish dead with implications that extend beyond the armistice of 1919? The burial and commemoration practices after the Great War have been addressed from a variety of perspectives. The best known is Mosse's *Fallen Soldiers*, in which he analyzes, for Germany, the myth of the war experience through the tangible symbols of death and the cult of the dead soldier. Lacqueur addresses the relationship after the Great War "between names, bodies, and memory – both personal and political".<sup>24</sup> Schepens, Vansuyt and Van den Bogaert, and De Schaepdrijver have written specifically on the heldenhuldenzerken,

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<sup>21</sup> Notebook, Gabriël Verduyn.

<sup>22</sup> For more information on the Front Movement: Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging*.

<sup>23</sup> The *heldenhuldezerken* continue to be utilized as a political symbol in the twenty-first century. Shelby, "Little Flemish Heroes Tombstones".

establishing a historiography of the gravestones.<sup>25</sup> But, in Belgium, the soldier buried beneath, who was to serve as a symbol for national unity, was ultimately destabilized by the presence of the *heldenhuldezerken* in the military cemeteries.

[14] A powerful anxiety regarding erasure was at the fore in the postwar burial practices of the countries that fought on the Western Front.<sup>26</sup> But for the flamingant, it was not the fear of the individual being subsumed into the collective, which was mitigated in Britain, for example, by the acknowledgement of the individual in the rows of names of the Menin Gate and the Tyne Cot memorials. For the surviving front soldiers, whose flamingantism was suppressed during the war, there was a need to mark the dead as Flemish dead. The *heldenhuldezerken* underscored that these men fought for Flanders and the Flemish. The politically engaged Flemish veterans were anxious that this distinction would be disregarded through the adoption of a universal Belgian-sponsored grave marker.

[15] Despite an effort by the Belgian army to formulate a postwar national Belgian unity in death, Belgian military cemeteries lack the sameness that is more readily apparent in those cemeteries for the French, British, and, eventually, German, dead (Fig. 1).

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<sup>24</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York u. a. 1990, and Thomas Lacqueur, "Names, Bodies, and the Anxiety of Erasure" in: *The Social and Political Body*, eds. Theodore R. Schatzki and Wolfgang Natter, London 1966, 123-144. Prost and Winter have addressed monuments to the dead in the postwar social fabric of France and Great Britain respectively. Antoine Prost, "Monuments to the Dead", in: *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, eds. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York 1997, 377-404; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge 1998, among others.

<sup>25</sup> Luc Schepens, *In Pace: Soldatenkerkhoven in Vlaanderen, Cimetières militaires en Flandre*, Tielt 1974; Michel Vansuyt and Michel Van den Bogaert, *De militaire begraafplaatsen van WO1 in Vlaanderen, Deel 5, De Belgische en de Duitse militaire begraafplaatsen*, Erpe 2001; De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Lacqueur, "Names, Bodies, and the Anxiety of Erasure", in: *The Social and Political Body*, eds. Theodore Schatzki and Wolfgang Natter, London, 1996, 132.





1 Erepark (honorary park) in Stekene. Three heldenhuldezerken are visible; the most prominent is in the lower right. The remainder is the official Belgian military tombstone. Archief en Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaams-nationalisme (ADV), Antwerp, VFFY 36/192 (© ADVN)

I suggest that while these countries chose to adopt uniformity in commemoration, in Belgium the postwar result of the coexistence of two disparate headstones within the Belgian military cemeteries implies that the cultural identity of Flemish soldiers was acknowledged and accepted as being as important as those of their Francophone comrades. This may have been the result of the postwar needs of veterans, their families, and those in Flanders who had survived occupation and deprivation from 1914 to 1918. The strife between the Front Movement and the king would take a back seat to the nation's profound collective grief after 1918.

## Two Grave Markers for the Belgian Dead

[16] The standard Belgian Military headstone was designed by Brussels architect Fernand Simons (Symons). Expectedly, each military headstone was to underscore Belgian national unity since there was not yet any administrative distinction between Flemish and Walloon. The news prompted a panic for veterans of the Front Movement that the Belgian government was going to impose this uniform design on those buried under heldenhuldezerken. The Minister of Defense Pierre Forthomme addressed these concerns noting that the goal was to "arrive at a uniform appearance of our military cemeteries, of the cemetery of the brave, who all perished for the same task".<sup>27</sup> The tombstones reference the Greco-Roman tradition with a tripartite division similar to a classical column crowned by a projecting arch reminiscent of an Ionic capital. A Greco-Roman swag, or festoon, that formed the principal decoration for an altar, is located beneath the nameplate. These references associate Belgium with a classical heritage, linking the state to a glorified and noble

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<sup>27</sup> "Om in onze militaire kerkhoven den gelijken aanblik te bekomen dien het wenschelijk is te geven...", in: *Bedevaart naar Vlaanderens Doodenveld*, S.e. [Bedevaart naar de graven aan de IJzer], Diksmuide, 1938, 181-183.

past. Above the name of the deceased and the slogan *Mort pour la Belgique* is an enamel tri-color Belgian flag of red, yellow, and black. But cultural affiliation is noted in the final stones. Some of the enamels are blank; others have a cross or a lion placed against the yellow center. It is clear that regional distinction was not opposed during this process. But the mark is small and certainly not discernable in the visual field of uniformity.

[17] The familial *laissez-faire* attitude toward the flamingant cause affected the reburial of those under *heldenhuldezerken* at the close of the war when Belgium initiated the creation of nine military cemeteries in Western Flanders that currently contain the remains of soldiers of the Belgian army: Adinkerke, De Panne, Hoogstade, Houthulst, Keiem, Oeren, Ramskapelle, Steenkerke, and Westvleteren. Those who lost a family member in the war received a letter, called a "blue letter", that outlined the plans for the relocation of all bodies from the makeshift burial grounds and, in particular, from the parish cemeteries.<sup>28</sup> Some Flemish families chose to retain the *heldenhuldezerk*; the majority chose the Belgian stone. For many Flemish families the soldier's cause was not their own and it was through the Great War that Belgian nationalism flourished.<sup>29</sup> Some families disregarded the contents of the letters and the *heldenhuldezerken* that were not claimed were destroyed. The most infamous act of destruction was in the Adinkerke cemetery when, on 27 May 1925 by order of the Minister of Defense Albert Hellebaut, *heldenhuldezerken* were crushed and utilized in the construction of a local road. Accounts of the exact numbers of the destroyed tombstones vary. According to a group of Flemish veterans, over six hundred of eight hundred stones were destroyed. The Belgian army placed the number at one hundred and forty stones out of a total of four hundred.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the government's motive or the families' desires, this act helped transform these culturally specific grave markers into the material embodiment of a politically active Flemish nationalist movement.

[18] The revolutionary impact of the Front Movement during the war was negligible. Beginning as early as 1919, the *heldenhuldezerken*, which started as an assertion of a robust recognition of Flanders and the Flemish, had faded into a sentimental symbol of commemoration. Thus, the importance of the organization is primarily found in the myths of the treatment of the Flemish soldiers in the ranks and the rituals devised after the war in commemoration of those persecuted. For the *Comite*, the martyrdom of the Flemish soldiers, materialized in the *heldenhuldezerken*, took on a greater existential meaning after the war, coinciding with the condemnation of the *Activists* and *Flamenpolitik* and King Albert's reluctance to make any concessions to the Flemish demands.<sup>31</sup> 1923 was a turning point in the political turn

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<sup>28</sup> Letters were sent in both Flemish and French. Interview, Rob Troubleyn (November 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en Activisme*.

<sup>30</sup> Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging*, 438.

of the Flemish Movement on the Belgian stage.<sup>32</sup> It was in this year that King Albert chose to set aside the request by Frans Van Caulewaert, a moderate Flemish nationalist and member of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, for the Dutchification of the University of Ghent.<sup>33</sup> This was a goal that Van Caulewaert had been working toward since 1911 through established parliamentary channels, and a cause that was embraced by the Front Movement. With this decision, the king alienated the moderate wing of the admittedly small Flemish Movement.<sup>34</sup> The tide swung toward a reactionary nationalism, some of whose adherents advocated for the end of Belgium, the line taken by the so-called Activists. The propaganda surrounding the destruction at Adinkerke in 1925 helped turn the Flemish Movement into a viable political body in the second half of the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> The myth of Belgian

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<sup>31</sup> De Wever points out that Albert's role was to manage opposing ideologies and because the Flemish Movement was compromised by Activist collaboration, he chose, instead, to support the Socialist introduction of universal suffrage. Bruno De Wever, "The Flemish Movement and Flemish Nationalism: Instruments, Historiography and Debates", in: *Studies on National Movements* 1 (2003), 50-80. Van Goethem asserts that it was this latter point, first broached in 1893 through the General Multiple Voting Right that served as the pivot for Belgian nationality conflict because "the masses gradually came to realize that the language barrier was also an economic barrier, and so they became convinced that all French influence had to be removed from their region". Herman Van Goethem, *Belgium and the Monarchy*, Antwerp 2010, 255-256.

<sup>32</sup> The rise and fall of a postwar Flemish political voice coincided with the rise of the *heldenhuldezerken* as a propaganda symbol for the Flemish cause. In 1919 the Front Movement was formalized as a political party calling itself the *Front Partij* achieving a small victory at the polls that same year. Lode Wils et al., "Controverse onder historici. Een triptiek", in: *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen op het gebied van de geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, contributions by Lode Wils, Herman Van Goethem and Harry Van Velthoven 68/1 (2009), 6-62.

<sup>33</sup> Lode Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie: een geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, Leuven 2009, 197-198.

<sup>34</sup> "Controverse onder historici. Een triptiek". In 1917, a few days after the distribution of the *Open Brief*, the Flemish soldier Lode De Boninge noted in his diary that 80% of the army was composed of Flemings stressing that his turn toward *flamingantism* was strengthened by these unequal numbers (Vanacker, *De Frontbeweging*, 206). The "myth of the 80%" has continued to be a point of debate even within the Flemish nationalist literature published in the last twenty-some years. Bruno De Wever, *Greep naar de macht: Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde. Het VNV 1933-1945*, Lannoo 1994, 28, and, for a summary of the shifting debate, Stanislas Horvat, *De vervolging van militairrechtelijke delicten tijdens Wereldoorlog I: de werking van het Belgisch krijgsgerecht*, Brussels 2009, 52-53, and Daniel Vanacker, "De mythe van de 80%", in: *Jaarboek Joris van Severen* 7 (2003), 6.

<sup>35</sup> An appeal was made by veterans of the war and former members of the Front Movement to halt the destruction of the *heldenhuldezerken* in Adinkerke. For an account of these events see Seberechts, "Slechts de graven maken een land tot een vaderland". During this period a number of individuals who did not fight in the war were buried beneath *heldenhuldezerken*

attempts to symbolically and literally crush Flemish-minded ideologies and activities was later incorporated into the narrative of the Front Movement and both factions of the postwar Flemish Movement – those who embraced autonomy for Flanders and those who lobbied for a separate Flemish state.

### Heldenhuldezerken outside the confines of the Military Cemeteries

[19] Notwithstanding a number of exceptions, only few heldenhuldezerken remain today in local communities. For example, in Jongershove, the lone heldenhuldezerk for Camiel Duron, an assistant chaplain who died at Steenstrate in 1915, is still in situ in the small church cemetery. Six remain in the community cemetery of Moorsel, and there are at least two in a small town near Aalst. Odon Van Pevenage is buried beneath one in the Wallonian town of Anseroeul. The majority of heldenhuldezerken in community cemeteries belonged to either veterans of the war or individuals who wished to be buried beneath what had become an icon of flamingantism. But beginning in the 1960s, all families were faced with a decision on whether to retain the burial plot with its heldenhuldezerk. After fifty years, the families had to either renew the lease for the plot or give up the space in the limited grounds around the church. This was standard practice until, in the mid-twentieth century, larger community cemeteries were established. A most unusual grouping of heldenhuldezerken remains in the Zonnebeke municipal cemetery. A low crypt, centrally placed in the graveyard, contains the coffins and remains of twelve dead from the Great War, two from the Second World War, and F. Godderis, a veteran from the conflict in 1830 for the independence of Belgium. The body of Godderis was discovered in 1918 as the dead of World War I were collected for military burial. The men in the crypt are from Zonnebeke, but they were not buried in this municipal cemetery until 1921. The crypt was the initiative of Edmond Roselle, the then-Secretary of the VOS, and local resident Maurice Verbeke and funded by monies from the village council and through donations from various veterans' associations. Above ground, the parameters of the crypt are framed by heldenhuldezerken for veterans of the Great War who died in 1922, 1924, and 1938. Preliminary research indicates that the dead from the crypt probably were not as Flemish-minded as the assertive grouping of heldenhuldezerken lead one to believe. Their coffins, unusual in that they are visible to the public, do not betray any sense of flamingant associations. It is not well understood who took the initiative to bury the men in the crypt beneath the heldenhuldezerken nor why the absent bodies of the men above, who died after the war, are marked by them. What is clear is that at some point a resident of Zonnebeke claimed the men of the town as flamingant, betraying his or her own motives and, as noted previously, enrolling them in posthumous flamingant rhetoric. The fact that they are physically present at their strategic location in the center of the parish cemetery underscores their importance for the Zonnebeke

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bringing more visibility to the cause through the *flamingant* symbol.

community. These bodies have a concreteness that transcends time, making the flamingant past of the years 1914 to 1918 tangible in the present.<sup>36</sup>

### Flemish Veterans of the Eastern Front: The Flemish Legions

[20] Flemish and German interactions during the Great War influenced the trajectory of Flemish nationalism in the postwar years. Although those who collaborated with the Germans, referred to as the Activists, tended to be outside of the framework of the Front Movement, several veterans from the Front Movement did engage to varying degrees with the National Socialists during the Second World War. This included, as noted prior, Daels and Verschaeve, both of whom were deeply devoted to the principles behind the heldenhuldezerken and the subsequent construction of the IJzertoren. The most infamous example is the Collaboration during the Second World War of Verschaeve, mentor and priest to the young Flemish men of 14-18. As a result, for many, his status within the Flemish Movement was tarnished; for others who lauded his efforts in the unattainable goal of a separate Flemish state during the Great War, his star shone more brightly. One of the ways in which Verschaeve collaborated with the occupiers, was by actively recruiting among the Flemish for soldiers to fight on the Eastern Front for the Third Reich.<sup>37</sup>

[21] Some of the young Flemish men, influenced by their very anti-communist Catholic upbringing, were also more susceptible to the promises of the Nazis in the formation of an autonomous Flanders. The Nazi agenda was again named, as in the First World War, Flamenpolitik, and designed specifically to demonstrate partiality towards the Flemish in Belgium.<sup>38</sup> The policy allowed the invasion to be effectively framed within the rhetoric of the liberation of a nation (Flanders) from the clutches of a state (Belgium).<sup>39</sup> Recruitment for the Eastern Front soldiers, directed by Heinrich Himmler, began in late 1940 for a series of Legions under the control of the Waffen-SS; an estimated 10,000 Flemish volunteers fought in the Waffen-SS for Nazi Germany against the Soviet Red Army.<sup>40</sup> After the war, many of the veterans were accused of treason and sentenced to prison or death. After being released from prison in 1951, some of the Eastern Front soldiers founded an association called the Former Eastern Front Soldiers (Vlaams Verbond van Oud-Oostfrontsrijders). The name proved to be too polarizing, and was replaced by Sint-Maartensfonds in 1953.

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<sup>36</sup> Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, New York 1999, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Carlos Van Louwe and Pieter Jan Verstraete, *De Oorlogsbedevaarten. Kroniek van de vergete IJzerbedevaarten van 1940-1944*, Groeninghe 2002.

<sup>38</sup> De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*, 282. For more information see Wils, *Flamenpolitik en activism*.

<sup>39</sup> De Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*, 281.

<sup>40</sup> The Flemings were originally organized into the SS-Freiwilligen-Verband Flandern. Richard Landwehr, *Lions of Flanders: Flemish Volunteers of the Waffen SS 1941-1945*, Maryland 1982, and Jonathan Trigg, *Hitler's Flemish Lions*, Stroud 2009.

Since the group purported to be an organization of comrades, created to support one another in the difficult political postwar years as former East Front soldiers struggled socially, financially, and politically, the reference to St. Maarten (St. Martin), a saint prominent in Flanders, was calculated. St. Martin, according to legend, tore his cloak in half during a storm to clothe a beggar. The organization supported individuals in reclaiming a life after the war and initiated the installation and maintenance of the graves and memorials in Eastern Europe.

[22] The symbol for these soldiers was not the heldenhuldezerk, but a berkenkruis, a birch cross (Fig. 2).



2 A berkenkruis with a symbol of the Flemish lion at Erepark (honorary park) in Stekene. Wim Maes was a co-founder of the VMO (Flemish Military Order). Archief en Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaams-nationalisme (ADV N), Antwerp, VPBY 89/C (© ADVN)

The birch cross was derived from the inverted rune symbol for life and also refers to the birch tree that is common in the part of Russia where the soldiers fought and died. The graves of the Eastern Front soldiers, who were repatriated to Belgium, are not included in the official military cemeteries of the Second World War as the heldenhuldezerken were included after the Great War. Although the activities of the Front Movement were problematic for the Belgian military, the soldiers buried under heldenhuldezerken were perceived primarily as insubordinates within the military institution. It was the Activists, those flamingant in the occupied areas, who forged a relationship with the Germans in 1917 and set the stage for the more overt collaboration during World War II. The Activists were publically condemned, many standing trial for treason and sentenced to imprisonment. Some of the penalties

meted out to these men were perceived to be unjust leading to a rise in flamingantism in the 1920s. The consequences for overt collaboration in the 1940s were much more severe. In Belgium, these soldiers are acknowledged only in Erepark (honorary park) in Stekene near the Dutch border. The park was built in the late sixties by the Vlaamse Militanten Orde (Flemish Military Order) (VMO) and was managed by Sint-Maartenfonds. In 2004, maintenance of the site was taken over by the Vlaams Nationaal Jeugdverbond (Flemish National Youth Association) (VNJ) who held, until recently, an annual service for the surviving East Front soldiers (Sint-Maartenfonds was dissolved in 2006). The park remains quite difficult to find in Stekene, with no published address and no signage to direct visitors to the site.

[23] At the end of the war, Verschaeve escaped to Austria and was condemned to death in absentia by the Belgian court. He died of natural causes in Solhad Hall, Tyrol in 1949. In 1973, the VMO, in a clandestine operation called Operatie Brevier, exhumed his body.<sup>41</sup> The initial plan was to rebury him in the crypt of the IJzertoren, but rumors persist that the regional government prevented this.<sup>42</sup> He was buried in Alveringem, the site of his prewar work, and encased in concrete eighteen feet below the surface so that his body could not be removed (and secretly reburied at the IJzertoren site). A heldenhuldezerk, not a berkenkruis since he was not a veteran of World War II, marks his grave. Although he is a symbol of disgrace for the moderate Flemish, even those with nationalistic tendencies, he remains a celebrated figure among the right-wing factions of Flemish nationalism. In Alveringem, a memorial plaque is dedicated to him, and a portrait hangs in the local church. For temperate Flemish nationalists, it was problematic that his grave and that of other overt collaborators that were flamingant in the Great War are marked with a heldenhuldezerk; this conflated the two agendas – the moderate and the reactionary – which served to hamper forward movement for the Flemish Movement as Belgium evolved from a unitary state to a federal one through a series of reforms that began in 1970. For followers of Verschaeve, the exhuming and reburying of his body repositions him as an ancestor within the lineage of honored forbears.<sup>43</sup> Through the heldenhuldezerk, he is posthumously rehabilitated through the community and camaraderie of the World War I dead. Verschaeve, particularly in his role of priest, serves as a father of the Flemish Movement, similar to the ways in which he and his fellow members of the Front Movement looked to the nineteenth-century literary figures during the war. But he is a polarizing figure, forcing individuals to couch their

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<sup>41</sup> The VMO, originally the *Vlaamse Militanten Organisatie*, was created in 1949 by Bob Maes as a security force for the protection of the collaborators against public lynching. Eventually the VMO evolved into a full-sized paramilitary organization.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Frank Godderis (March 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London 1983, and David Schneider, "Kinship, Nationality and Religion: Toward a Definition of Kinship", in: *Symbolic Anthropology*, eds. Janet L. Dolgin, David Kremnitzer and David Schneider, New York 1977, 63-71.

adulation by framing it either within his service to Flemish nationalism during the First World War or the Second.

## Conclusion

[24] In Belgium, the grave marker, the symbol of the soldier beneath and more broadly for the dead of both World Wars, has been used as a stand-in for the body, causing death to be manipulated to serve disparate contemporary causes. The IJzer martyrs and the heldenhuldezerken have served several Flemish nationalisms since its inception in 1915. These symbols, both the dead soldiers and the stones, arose from a specific set of histories, but they are now used in contexts that modify them for an unambiguous rhetoric. Because Belgium did not demand conformity in the national cemeteries, the presence of the outlier heldenhuldezerken scattered throughout the military cemeteries served to imply an acceptance of Flemish identity distinct from that of Belgian. This status of the heldenhuldezerken reinforced the link between the present and a storied past of a victimized Flemish – from the nineteenth century, through the Great War, and World War II. The looming IJzertoren and the subsequent rituals to the IJzer, which are always covered in the Belgian, and particularly Flemish press, maintain Flemish agency in contemporary society.

[25] But the same recognition was not possible for those who fought on the Eastern Front. There is no place for the Eastern Front soldiers in Belgian state-sponsored memorial spaces. This is in spite of the development of Flemish nostalgia over the 1950s and 1960s with a privileged vision of the Flemish people as victims of the war years and, in particular, of the postwar repression by the Belgian authorities of those "idealist" Flemish intellectuals who were drawn toward the Third Reich because of their longstanding perceived marginalization within the Belgian nation-state.<sup>44</sup> The formation of the separate cemetery in Stekene was a necessary step in not only establishing visibility for the East Front soldiers but also for the like-minded nationalists who mourned them. Attendance at the commemorations at Stekene underscored a political association with the site regardless of intent. The presence of the heldenhuldezerken amid the Belgian-sponsored stones and the outlier cemetery at Stekene is a reminder that the cohesiveness that is visually implied in the cemeteries of Great Britain, Germany, and France is absent, leaving a distinct and fraught political landscape in Belgium.

## Guest Editors of Special Issue

Christian Fuhrmeister and Kai Kappel, eds., *War Graves, War Cemeteries, and Memorial Shrines as a Building Task, 1914-1989. Die Bauaufgabe Soldatenfriedhof/Kriegsgräberstätte zwischen 1914 und 1989*, in: *RIHA Journal* 0150-0176

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Conway, "The Ends of Memory: Memories of The Great War in Belgium", in: *Journal of Belgian History* 42 (2012), 181.



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