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ARTICLE

The Improbable Minority: Flanders and the Fluidity of Minority and Nationality Questions, 1919–1944

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Scholarship on minorities in the inter-war period have largely ignored the Flemish question. One obvious reason is that the Flemish accounted for a majority of Belgium's population. This article, however, argues that the domestic and international historiography would benefit from considering the Flemish a minority, albeit a peculiar one. I suggest that the Flemish question embodies the contradictions of an age in which the nationality question 'morphed into the minority question' (as Holly Case has pointed out) without disappearing altogether. The article traces the evolution of different understandings of Flanders in the Belgo-Dutch-German transnational space and shows how such understandings challenge traditional conceptions of minorities, majorities, nationalities and kin states. The article further contributes to a broader shift in historiographies of nationalism and diversity in inter-war Europe by moving focus from East to West and considering minority questions as a pan-European phenomenon.

What is Flanders? I suggest that this provocative question can move this European region from the margins of international historiographies on the inter-war period to the centre of an alternative account of minority and nationality questions after the First World War. The population of Flanders was a demographic majority that, in many ways, behaved like a sociological minority and thus blurred the supposedly neat lines of division between majorities and minorities, as well as between nationality and minority questions.[1] Flanders also did not have any obvious kin state, understood as a 'state that represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighbouring territories'.[2] True, Flanders had a cultural and linguistic connection with the Netherlands, but Flemish nationalists did not conceive of the Hague as their patron, while the Dutch government always kept a distant attitude towards the Flemish question. This in turn contributed to radical Flemish nationalists seeking support in Germany, which eventually had disastrous consequences for Flanders itself. In short, the dynamic relationship between Flemish nationalists (of different stripes), on the one hand, and Dutch and German actors, on the other, challenges traditional conceptions of the relationship between minorities and kin states.

With the exception of a few recent contributions that have examined the Flemish question in comparative perspective, international historiographies of the inter-war period have almost completely

[1]On the idea of the Flemish population as a sociological minority see: Peter H. Nelde, 'Le conflit linguistique', in *Confli(c)t*, ed. Peter H. Nelde (Brussels: Association Belge de Linguistique appliquée, 1990), 129–41; Els Witte and Harry Van Velthoven, *Languages in Contact and in Conflict: The Belgian Case* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2011), 15.

[2]Myra A. Waterbury, 'Kin-State Politics: Causes and Consequences', *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 5 (2020): 799.

ignored the Flemish question.[3] In contrast, Belgian historians have studied the contacts, collaboration and conflicts between nationalist activists and state authorities in the Belgo-Dutch-German transnational space in depth, but they have focused on domestic concerns rather than examining transnational processes. What was the impact of the German occupation on the development of Flemish nationalism during the First World War? What kinds of activities did German spies carry out on Belgian soil during the inter-war period? What role did Flemish radical nationalists play in the collaboration with the Nazis during the occupation in the Second World War? These questions are at the core of much of the historiography on this topic.[4]

In contrast, this article examines the transnational relationship between Flemish nationalists, the Dutch government, German nationalists and the German state from a different angle. It argues that the Flemish question embodies the contradictions of an age – the inter-war period – in which the nationality question, which had been ubiquitous in the long nineteenth century across Europe, 'morphed into the minority question' without disappearing altogether.[5] Within this context, different understandings of the Flemish population coexisted in the Belgo-Dutch-German transnational space from the end of the First World War until the 1940s: as a region of Belgium with cultural ties to the Netherlands; as an oppressed nationality and a majority in Belgium that fought for linguistic protection and equality like many minority communities across Europe; as a nation endowed with a right to self-determination; as the smaller part of the Greater Netherlandic nation; as low Germans (*Niederdeutsche*) and thus members of the broader German *Volk*. Most of these understandings located Flanders at the frontier between majority and minority, and the Flemish question between a minority question of the inter-war years and a nationality question of the pre–First World War age.

This article follows the evolution of these understandings during the inter-war period, focusing particularly on understandings that were pursued by radical Flemish nationalists and their German allies. It shows how Flemish radical nationalists criticised their moderate counterparts for making claims of linguistic equality and protection that, in other European countries, were the prerogative of minority communities. Yet, with their thought and action, Flemish radical nationalists also unwittingly steered the Flemish population into a minority position, by either defining it as part of a Greater

[3]Emmanuel Dalle Mulle and Mona Bieling, 'Autonomy over Independence: Self-Determination in Catalonia, Flanders and South Tyrol in the Aftermath of the Great War', *European History Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (2023): 641–63; Emmanuel Dalle Mulle and Mona Bieling, 'Sovereignty and Homogeneity: A History of Majority–Minority Relations in Interwar Western Europe', in *Sovereignty, Nationalism and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe*, ed. Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno and Mona Bieling (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 105–24. While the first article comparatively examines the transnational efforts of Flemish radical nationalists during the so-called Wilsonian Moment, the latter analyses Belgian trends towards homogenisation in comparison with similar trends in Italy and Spain. The current contribution shares their determination to overcome the primarily eastern European focus of the existing historiography. Methodologically, however, it goes beyond the inter-war period and reorients the focus towards the Belgo-Dutch-German transnational space.

[4]See Lode Wils, *Flamenpolitik en aktivisme: Vlaanderen tegenover België in de eerste wereldoorlog* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1974); Lode Wils, *Onverfranst, onverduitst? Flamenpolitik, activisme, frontbeweging* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2014); Bruno De Wever, *Greep naar de macht: Vlaams-nationalisme en Nieuwe Orde: Het VNV 1933–1945* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1994); Etienne Verhoeyen, 'De financiering van het dagblad "De Schelde–Volk en Staat" (1929–1940). Deel I', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 46, no. 4 (1987): 224–40; Etienne Verhoeyen, 'De financiering van het dagblad "De Schelde–Volk En Staat" (1929–1940). Deel II', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 47, no. 1 (1988): 35–61; Etienne Verhoeyen, 'Een Duits netwerk bij de voorbereiding van de Militärverwaltung in België (1939–1940)', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 69, no. 4 (2011): 289–305; Etienne Verhoeyen, *Spionnen aan de achterdeur: de Duitse Abwehr in België, 1936–1945* (Antwerpen: Maklu, 2011); Bruno Yammine, *Fake news in oorlogstijd: Duitse mediamanipulatie en de Flamenpolitik (1914–1915)* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021). This is also the case with some works by German historians, for example Winfried Dolderer, 'Een beleid uit één stuk? Continuïteit en discontinuïteit in de Duitse Flamenpolitik', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 73, no. 4 (2014): 289–317; Winfried Dolderer, *Deutscher Imperialismus und belgischer Nationalitätenkonflikt* (Melsungen: Kasseler Forschungen zur Zeitgeschichte, 1989); Jakob Müller, *Die importierte Nation: Deutschland und die Entstehung des flämischen Nationalismus 1914 bis 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

[5]The expression comes from Holly Case, *The Age of Questions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 59.

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Dutch nation, or striking an alliance with Nazi Germany that eventually threatened the existence of the Flemish population as an autonomous group altogether.

The story of Flemish radical nationalists is not an isolated one and instead belongs to the broader minority question of inter-war Europe. The peculiarity of the Flemish context lies in the special nature of a population at the crossroads of competing understandings of majority, minority and nationality.[6] Inter-war Flanders is probably the best European example of the relative and situational nature of these categories, which were as much self-attributed as they were attributed by others.

Furthermore, the article contributes to a broader shift in the historiography of nationalism and diversity in inter-war Europe. As the minority rights system that was established by post-war treaties and supervised by the League of Nations concerned only central and eastern European states, the historiography has essentially followed this focus. Accordingly, most authors have unconsciously reproduced the inter-war bias whereby minorities were deemed to be 'a problem of eastern Europe'.[7] Yet questions of national heterogeneity – a term that I propose to collapse together both minority and nationality questions – were not absent in western European states. From Ireland to Venezia Giulia, many of the countries not touched by the treaties experienced similar tensions between state authorities, local communities, sub-state nationalist movements and kin abroad, either alleged or actual.[8] Integrating the Flemish question into this broader European and comparative context allows us to see inter-war heterogeneity questions through a different prism, one that switches the focus from East to West and avoids the 'pathologisation' of central and eastern Europe as a land of endemic national heterogeneity and permanent ethnic strife that has been dominant until recently.[9]

Belgian historiography has tended to identify only actors who pursued Flemish independence or autonomy as nationalists and has tended to use the expression *Vlamsgezinden* (Flemish-minded) to refer to the moderate Flemish Movement. This implies an understanding of nationalism that was linked only to independent statehood or autonomy. In contrast, this article builds upon a broader definition of nationalism, wherein nationalist movements mainly seek self-determination (meant as the right *to be able to* decide about a community's political future), not necessarily independent statehood. In this understanding, self-determination is compatible with participation in wider political units. As Walker Connor argued, self-determination is more about choice than about result. According to

[6]On the consequences of the radicalising context of the late 1930s and early 1940s for European minorities and nationalities see Matthew Frank, *Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[7]See for instance Carlile Aylmer Macartney, 'Minorities: A Problem of Eastern Europe', *Foreign Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1931): 674–82. On the League's minority system see, among others: Carole Fink, 'Defender of Minorities: Germany in the League of Nations, 1926–1933', *Central European History* 5, no. 4 (1972): 330–57; Carole Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mark Mazower, 'Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe', *Daedalus* 126, no. 2 (1997): 47–63; Christian Raitz von Frentz, *A Lesson Forgotten: Minority Protection under the League of Nations: The Case of the German Minority in Poland, 1920–1934* (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 1999); Carol Weisbrod, 'Minorities and Diversities: The Remarkable Experiment of the League of Nations', *Connecticut Journal of International Law* 8 (1992): 359–406.

[8]On inter-war Ireland and Venezia Giulia, see Alvin Jackson, *Ireland, 1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 241–85; Marina Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Border, 1866–2016* (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2016), 83–153.

[9]For a review of the historiography on minority questions in inter-war Europe and the argument that it has reproduced the inter-war central and eastern European bias, see Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno and Mona Bieling, 'Introduction: Sovereignty, Nationalism and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe', in *Sovereignty, Nationalism and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe*, ed. Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Davide Rodogno and Mona Bieling (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 1–20. On the 'pathologisation' of central and eastern Europe, see: Rogers Brubaker, 'Myths and Misconceptions in the Study of Nationalism', in *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism*, ed. John A. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281–5; Tara Zahra, 'The "Minority Problem" and National Classification in the French and Czechoslovak Borderlands', *Contemporary European History* 17, no. 2 (2008): 143; Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 39; Timothy Snyder, 'Introduction', in *The Balkans as Europe, 1821–1914*, ed. Timothy Snyder and Katherine Younger (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2018), 1–10.

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nationalist principles, 'any nation has the right to secede, *if it so desires*' (emphasis in the original) and can temporarily forfeit the implementation of such a right if it can retrieve it again in the future.[10]

Flemish historians have implicitly agreed with such a view. Commenting on the attitude of the *Vlamsgezinden* within the Catholic party during the First World War, Lode Wils argued that for them 'at first glance, Flanders and Belgium were identical as their homeland . . . but on closer inspection, it becomes clear that Flanders was paramount for them and that the most fundamental point of contention with activists such as Dosfel was that, as democrats, they did not want to impose their programme on the Flemish people with German bayonets'.[11] In his biography of the Catholic *Vlamsgezind* Frans Van Cauwelaert, Wils contested the idea that Van Cauwelaert's nationalism was only cultural and suggested that his minimum programme amounted to a form of autonomy that was in fact political.[12]

Herman Van Goethem has gone even further. Discussing the Flemish Movement against the background of the international literature on nationalism, he concluded that 'based on the analyses of [Benedict] Anderson and [Anthony] Smith, it is fair to characterise both the Flemish and the Walloon movements since their creation in the 19th century as "nationalist"'.[13] Although I do not question the advantages of following the vocabulary of contemporary actors, who mainly reserved the 'nationalist' label for radical nationalists, this article anchors the Flemish case more firmly within broader international historiographies. For this purpose, I prefer to use a less idiosyncratic terminology, one that can be easily understood also by readers who are not familiar with the Belgian case. I will thus refer to the so-called *Vlamsgezinden* as moderate Flemish nationalists.

Nationalities, Minorities and Majorities: Heterogeneity Questions in Inter-War Europe

The concepts of nationality and minority evolved in parallel throughout the nineteenth century. Both began populating European texts and public discourses about sovereignty and difference at the beginning of the century, although with varying frequency and salience. The principle of nationality could already be recognised in inchoate form in discussions about the American and Irish questions in the early nineteenth century before becoming consolidated in intellectual debates after the 1848 revolutions, in particular between 1850 and 1875 with the works of Pasquale Mancini, John Stuart Mill and Johann Kaspar Bluntschli. The principle further developed in the context of the rise of movements claiming autonomy in the central and eastern European empires, as well as in reference to the so-called Eastern Question.[14]

The term minority also appeared, in the sense of a 'rigid' (religious, linguistic, 'racial'/ethnic or national) minority, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, more specifically in the context of discussions about the 1801 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland and, later, the inclusion of the Catholic population in the broader United Kingdom through processes such as Catholic emancipation (in the 1810s and 1820s), the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland (1860s) and Home Rule

[10]Walker Connor, 'Democracy and National Self-Determination: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow', in *Empire and Terror: Nationalism/Postnationalism in the New Millennium*, ed. Begoña Aretxaga et al. (Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2005), 23.

[11]Lode Wils, *Honderd jaar Vlaamse Beweging* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1977), 57–8.

[12]Lode Wils, *Frans van Cauwelaert en de barst in België, 1910–1919* (Antwerpen: Housekept, 2000), 311.

[13]Herman Van Goethem, *Belgium and the Monarchy from National Independence to National Disintegration* (Antwerp: University Press Antwerp, 2011), 18. See also De Wever, *Greep*, 26.

[14]See Johann Caspar Bluntschli, *Allgemeines Staatsrecht geschichtlich begründet* (München: Literarisch, 1852); Johann Caspar Bluntschli, *Lehre vom modernen Staat* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1875); Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, *Della nazionalità come fondamento del diritto delle genti* (Torino: Tipografia Eredi Botta, 1851); John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, 1861). On the origins and development of the principle of nationality and the nationality question, see André Liebich, *Cultural Nationhood and Political Statehood: The Birth of Self-Determination* (London: Routledge, 2023); Case, *The Age of Questions*, 35–71. For earlier references see René Johannet, *Le principe des nationalités* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie nationale, 1923); Robert Redslob, 'Le Principe des nationalités', *Collected Courses of the Hague Academy of International Law* 37 (1931): 1–276.

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(1880s).[15] This usage of the term extended to Canada, notably regarding debates on representative government, the union between Upper and Lower Canada in 1838–40 and the confederation of the North American British provinces in the 1860s.[16] It appeared also in discussions about democratic representation and equality between nationalities in the Habsburg Empire in the late 1840s and early 1850s, but it became mainstream in that context only at the end of the century, especially in statistical analysis of the distribution of national groups in different parts of the Empire.[17]

By 1900 the two terms were consistently used in debates relating to cultural, ethnic and national diversity in different European countries and beyond. However, the term nationality was deployed much more frequently. This was especially the case in the context of international agreements.[18] From the end of the First World War the couple majority–minority, and the related concept of minority rights, arose as pillars of a new age of international affairs based on the principles of popular sovereignty, nationalism and self-determination, while the category of nationality slowly lost relevance in relative terms.[19] Paradoxically, the enshrinement of the principle of nationality in international politics – under the new name of self-determination – brought about the relative effacement of the category of nationality in European public discourses.[20]

In 1923, Joseph Kunz, Director of the Juridical Section of the Austrian Association of League of Nations' Societies, conveyed this transition in a letter to Helmer Rostig, civil servant of the League of Nations' Minorities Section. Kunz had been told that the Section was seeking scientific books on the minority question in former Austria-Hungary. He thus wrote to suggest some literature and unmindfully began his message with a reference to the 'question of minorities or, as we rather called it, the nationality question', thus stressing the transition from one term to the other.[21] Google ngrams of words and expressions associated with the distinction between nationalities and minorities also confirm this shift (see Figures 1, 2 and 3 below). The transition marked a different understanding of the position of national and ethnic groups in the pre- and post-war periods. While the category of nationality evoked ideas of collective equality and group rights, that of minority implied a

[15]On the idea of 'rigid' as opposed to 'fluctuating' (parliamentary) minorities see Georg Jellinek, *Das Recht der Minoritäten* (Wien: Hölder, 1898). For early examples of the use of the term 'minority' with this meaning see Francis Plowden, *Historical Review of the State of Ireland*, vol. 2 (London: Rowarth, 1803), 980; James Mackintosh, 'Review of Plan for Parliamentary Reform in the Form of a Catechism', *Edinburgh Review* 31 (1819): 184–5.

[16]See, for instance, John George Lamberton, Earl of Durham, *Report on the Affairs of British North America from the Earl of Durham* (London: Her Majesty's High Commissioner, 1839); *Parliamentary Debates on the Subject of the Confederation of the British North American Provinces* (Quebec: Hunter, Rose & Co., Parliamentary Printers, 1865).

[17]Kai Struve, '"Nationale Minderheit"-Begriffsgeschichtliches zu Gleichheit und Differenz', *Leipziger Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur* 2 (2004): 233–58. For these statistical analyses see in particular: Heinrich Rauchberg, 'Die Entwicklung der nationalen Minderheiten in Böhmen, 1880–1900', *Deutsche Erde* 4 (1905): 9–14; Johannes Zemmrich, 'Deutsches und tschechisches Sprachgebiet', *Geographische Zeitschrift* 4, no. 5 (1898): 241–65; Johannes Zemmrich, 'Die Völkerstämme Österreich-Ungarns', *Geographische Zeitschrift* 5, no. 6 (1899): 297–317. This line of argument differs considerably from the traditional understanding of minorities as a concept that originated in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and developed around the Eastern Question, notably the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. It also takes some distance from recent revisionist accounts that have interpreted minority as a novel concept ushered in with the 1919 minority treaties that were supervised by the League of Nations. For the traditional account, see Jennifer Jackson Preece, *National Minorities and the European Nation-States System* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others*; André Liebich, 'Minority as Inferiority: Minority Rights in Historical Perspective', *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008): 243–63. For the recent revisionist historiography see László Bence Bari and Anna Adorjáni, 'National Minority: The Emergence of the Concept in the Habsburg and International Legal Thought', *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, European and Regional Studies* 16, no. 1 (2020): 7–37; Laura Robson, 'Capitulations Redux: The Imperial Genealogy of the Post–World War I "Minority" Regimes', *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 3 (2021): 978–1000; Till van Rahden, *Vielheit: jüdische Geschichte und die Ambivalenzen des Universalismus* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2022).

[18]On this see Struve, '"Nationale Minderheit"', 255–8.

[19]On the end of the First World War as a key moment of transition in international affairs, see Eric D. Weitz, 'From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions', *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1313–43.

[20]Bari and Adorjáni, 'National Minority'; Struve, '"Nationale Minderheit"', 247.

[21]Kunz to Rostig, 11 Nov. 1923, League of Nations' Archives (LoNA), Minorities, Committee on New States, S336/1/5.

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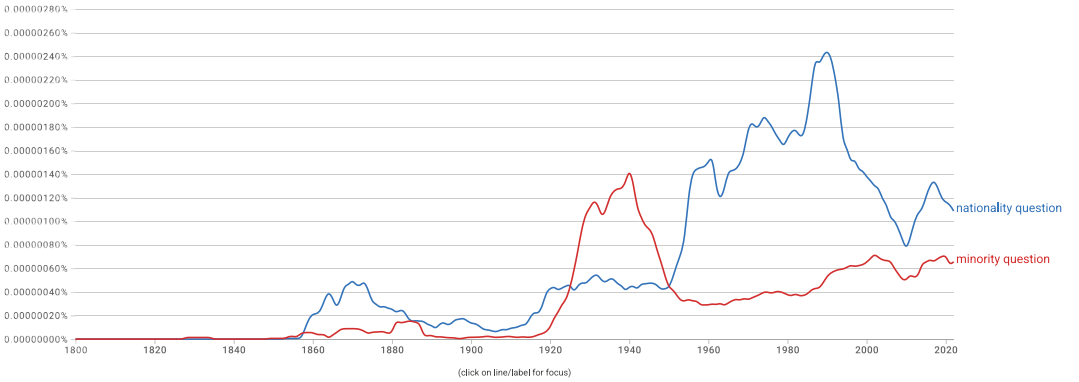

Figure 1. Google ngrams of 'nationality question' and 'minority question' in the English Google Books Corpus, 1800–2022. Created by the author using https://books.google.com/ngrams/ (accessed on 3 Nov. 2024).

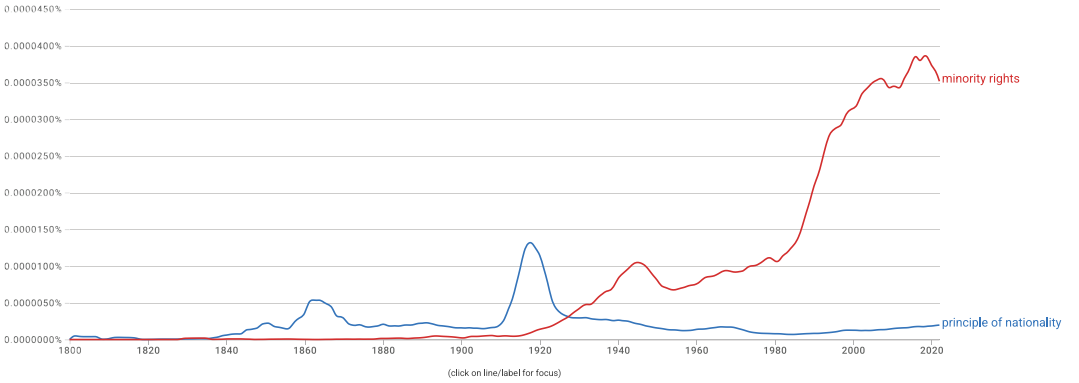

Figure 2. Google ngrams of 'principle of nationality' and 'minority rights' in the English Google Books Corpus, 1800–2022. Created by the author using https://books.google.com/ngrams/ (accessed on 3 Nov. 2024).

position of inferiority and individual rights.[22] Above all, the move from nationalities to minorities signalled the denial of any possibility of obtaining independent statehood in the new European order of nation-states. The window of opportunity that had been open for a few months at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was now closed. Some nationalities had been allowed to convert themselves into sovereign political majorities. Others had to settle for minority rights.[23]

However, the above figures also show that the transition was not complete. The category of nationality proved resilient and a number of actors, especially among groups identified as minorities, continued to use it to refer to themselves and other communities. When minority actors used the label minority, they often did so for strategic reasons: to tie international rights to their local contexts.[24] More broadly, people tended to conflate the two terms and use them as synonyms. The Congress of

[22]Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, 'Home-Rule versus Non-Territorial Autonomy? Western European National Movements and Their Views on the Minority Question, 1919–1939', *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 2 (2023): 482–5. See also Bari and Adorjáni, 'National Minority'. However, an important nuance should be stressed: the rights enshrined in the minority treaties of the League were not exactly individual rights, but collective rights that individuals enjoyed as members of specific groups. On the distinction between individual, collective and group rights, see Peter Jones, 'Human Rights, Group Rights, and Peoples' Rights', *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1999): 80–107.

[23]On the Paris Peace Conference, see Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[24]Núñez Seixas, 'Home-Rule', 484.

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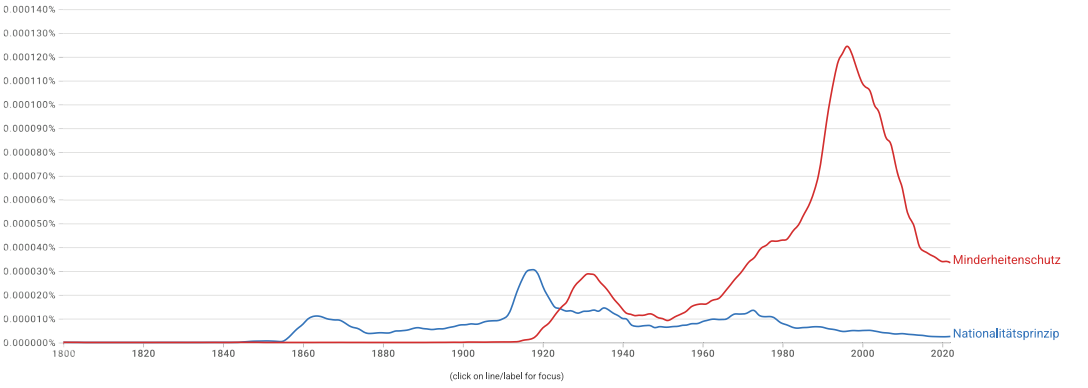

Figure 3. Google ngrams of 'Nationalitätsprinzip' and 'Minderheitenschutz' in the German Google Books Corpus, 1800–2022.
Created by the author using https://books.google.com/ngrams/ (accessed on 3 Nov. 2024).

European Nationalities (CEN), an organisation founded in 1925 to lobby for minority rights in the international arena, embodied the most significant illustration of this ambiguity. As the name of the organisation indicates, most of its members refused to drop the older vocabulary of diversity. Yet the organisation also played by the rules of an order in which the term nationality did not allow domestic claims to be linked with international standards of protection. The overlap between the semantic fields of nationalities and minorities were such that Josip Wilfan, one of the CEN's founders, affirmed in 1927: "'minorities", "national minorities" and "nationalities" are used haphazardly in the discussions [of the organisation]'.[25]

The Flemish question in Belgium offers similar grounds to challenge any neat divisions between the categories of minority and nationality in inter-war Europe. At the foundation of the Kingdom of Belgium there was no perception of a deep and politically salient division between the populations of Flanders and Wallonia. The development of a movement claiming linguistic parity between French and Flemish in Flanders throughout the nineteenth century infused a new political relevance into the linguistic differences between the north and the south of the country. By the first decades of the twentieth century, greater numbers of observers came to perceive the Flemish population of Belgium as a distinct nationality.[26] The most famous was likely Jules Destrée, the Walloon Socialist leader who in 1912 announced the existence of two national groups in the country: 'there are no Belgians, but Walloons and Flemings', he wrote in a public letter to the King.[27] Less emphatically, in 1916, as a member of the Union of Nationalities (*Union des Nationalités*), an organisation that campaigned for peace and the principle of self-determination during and immediately after the First World War, the Belgian intellectual Paul Otlet compiled a list of 'nationalities and races existing in the world' in which the Flemings were labelled as a nationality within the broader German 'racial' group.[28] Immediately after the war, different Flemish nationalists referred to the population of Flanders as a nationality

[25]Quoted in Stefan Dyroff, 'From Nationalities to Minorities? The Transnational Debate on the Minority Protection System of the League of Nations, and Its Predecessors', in *The First World War and the Nationality Question in Europe*, ed. Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 260.

[26]On the history of Flemish–Walloon relations and the national question in Belgium see Lode Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie: een geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging* (Leuven: Acco, 2009); Jean Stengers and Éliane Gubin, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge: de 1830 à 1918* (Bruxelles: Éditions Racine, 2002); Van Goethem, *Belgium and the Monarchy*.

[27]Jules Destrée, *Lettre au Roi sur la séparation de la Wallonie et de la Flandre* (Brussel: Weissenbruch, 1912).

[28]Paul Otlet, Peuples et Nationalités. Problèmes généraux. Solutions générales, in Union des Nationalités, III Conférence des Nationalités. Documents préliminaires, Lausanne 27 June 1916, 16–7, see also 27, Mundaneum (Mons), Otlet Papers, box PP PO 257.

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similar to those that were striving for self-determination in central and eastern Europe. They even tried to internationalise the Flemish question during the so-called Wilsonian Moment.[29]

Few Belgian actors used the word minority to refer to the Flemings. The word used most often was *volk*. However, some did note that the Flemish Movement was pushing for policies, such as linguistic protection, that were typically advocated by minority communities in other countries and even made direct connections between the Flemish question and that of groups that stood in a minority position within their state. In 1917, for instance, the leaders of the moderate Flemish Movement, Alfons van de Perre and Frans van Cauwelaert, emphasised the similarities between the Flemish and the Irish questions. In an article on the pro-Flemish but Belgian loyalist weekly newspaper *Free Belgium* (*Vrij België*), Van Cauwelaert reproached the British government for mistreating the Irish population during the war and reneging on the promise of Home Rule. He then concluded that the Irish situation was 'in many respects . . . a mirror image of our Flemish situation'.[30] During the inter-war period, the Flemish ethnologist Gustav Schamelout wrote a number of essays on the nationality question in different European countries, from Czechoslovakia to Spain, comparing these foreign examples with the Flemish question in Belgium.[31] In a 1931 book on *The Origins and Ethnic Composition of the Flemish People* (*Herkomst en ethnische samenstelling van het Vlaamsche volk*), he did not hesitate to compare the Flemings to 'minorities with unequal rights' in other countries. To reinforce his argument, he focused on the population of Flemish monolinguals and accused the Belgian state of having introduced universal male suffrage only 'after Frenchification had progressed to such an extent that the unilingual Flemish speakers constituted a minority in Belgium and were economically too weak to assert themselves'.[32]

The participation of Flemish nationalists in inter-war international organisations defending minority rights was lower than that of comparable western European sub-state nationalist movements (for instance the Catalan one or the South Tyrolean and the Slovenian ones in Italy), but not insignificant. The jurist Jozef Van Overbeke consistently took part in the International Federation of League of Nations Societies (IFLNS) and even drafted a project for the recognition of minorities as legal subjects in international law. An internal memo of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed Van Overbeke's expertise on minority questions and his support for the universalisation of the minority treaties, including its extension to the Flemish 'minority'.[33] Unfortunately, Van Overbeke left too few documents to corroborate this position. However, in the context of the IFLNS's efforts to provide a definition of minority, he proposed and defended a formulation that did not take into account the size of groups, but only their condition of subordination within the state.[34] Finally, in 1930, both Flemish

[29]On the Wilsonian Moment, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). On the attempts of Flemish radical nationalists to lobby President Woodrow Wilson and other international statesmen in 1919, see Dalle Mulle and Bieling, 'Autonomy over Independence'. On the threats of moderate Flemish nationalists see Frans Van Cauwelaert to Alois Van de Veyvere, 20 Nov. 1917, Letterenhuis Antwerp (LA), Frans van Cauwelaert papers (FvC), Uitgaande brieven (UB) 1899-1918, Le-SP.

[30]Frans Van Cauwelaert, 'De Les van Ierland', *Vrij België*, 30 Mar. 1917, 1. See also Frans Van Cauwelaert to Alfons Van de Perre, 23 Mar. 1917, LA, FvC, UB 1899-1918, Le-SP.

[31]See Gustaaf Schamelhout, *De Tsjechen en de wereldoorlog* (Antwerp: Drukkerij De Vos-Van Kleef, 1924); Gustaaf Schamelhout, *De volkeren van Europa en de strijd der nationaliteiten* (Amsterdam: Drukerij van de Wereldbibliotheek, 1925); Gustaaf Schamelhout, *De Polen en de wereldoorlog* (Antwerp: Mercurius, 1925); Gustaaf Schamelhout, *De strijd der Cataloniërs om hun zelfstandigheid* (Antwerp: Uitgaven van de Volksuniversiteit Herman van den Reeck, 1932).

[32]Gustav Schamelhout, *Herkomst en ethnische samenstelling van het Vlaamsche volk* (Antwerpen: Die Poorte, 1936), 136, note 45.

[33]Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Note for the Minister, 12 Aug. 1929, n. 4864, Belgian Diplomatic Archives (BDA), folder 10.784. The Ministry closely watched Van Overbeke's activities because Van Cauwelaert had proposed him as a member of the Belgian delegation at the League of Nations. The Ministry's conclusion was that he was too much of a Flemish nationalist to be included in the delegation. Therefore, Van Overbeke was not appointed.

[34]On Van Overbeke's definition within the IFLNS, see Bovet to the sub-committee in charge of the study of a Minority Statute, 20.1.1929, LoNA, IFLNS, P45/101. See also Jozef A. van Overbeke, *Een lezing over het probleem van de nationale minderheden* (Antwerpen: Lux, 1940), 2.

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and Walloon representatives attended the sixth meeting of the CEN as observers and submitted a request to join the organisation, which the CEN's leadership ignored, mostly to avoid triggering a diplomatic backlash from French and British diplomats.[35]

Foreign observers were not blind to the existence of nationalist movements in Belgium. The statistician Wilhelm Winkler regarded the Flemings as a nationality, although one of 'doubtful political nature', and a majority in Belgium.[36] Showing a more nuanced understanding of group relations in the country, in their 1930 edition of the *Ethnopolitical Almanac* (*Ethnopolitischer Almanach*), published with the support of the CEN, Otto Jungham and Max Hildebert Boehm, both German politicians with an interest in minorities, described Belgium as a bi-national country with Flemings and Walloons constituting minorities in those areas of the state prevalently inhabited by the other linguistic group.[37] Joost Van Hamel, a Dutch civil servant of the League of Nations' Legal Section, likely shared this view. In an exchange with the director of the League's Minorities Section on the subject of a study on minorities in the countries subjected to the minority treaties that the Section was then conducting, Van Hamel recommended that the Section extend the investigation to countries 'which have no Minority treaties, but which have minorities (the French Canadians, Dutch and English in South Africa, French and Flemish in Belgium and so on)'. Although Van Hamel's formulation was ambiguous, he probably implied the extension of the minority label to the Francophone and Flemish populations in the opposite linguistic region.[38]

Other actors openly discussed the validity of the minority label to the Flemings. In a study for the American Inquiry that advised President Wilson and other US diplomats on ethnic relations in Europe, Charles Haskins, Professor of History at Harvard, examined German claims that the Flemings were an oppressed minority. Haskins agreed that the Francophone population was dominant in Belgium, but denied that the Flemings could be considered a minority. They were a numerical majority and 'the remedy in a democratic state obviously lies in the hands of the majority', he concluded. However, Haskins also admitted that the study had been drafted in haste and from the United States without access to the field.[39] Oddly enough, one of the authors who significantly contributed to defining minority questions as 'a problem of Eastern Europe' (as he himself affirmed in the title of a 1933 article in *Foreign Affairs*) was also the most vocal purveyor of the idea of Flanders as a sociological minority. In his *National States and National Minorities* (1934) Carlile Aylmer Macartney asserted that 'one western country – Belgium – is, indeed, faced with a national problem almost as difficult as any in the east'. 'Here', Macartney concluded, 'the "minority" is actually, numerically speaking, in a small majority in the state; but politically, its position is that of a true minority'.[40]

The strongest and most long-standing interest in Flanders as a place inhabited by something similar to a kin minority under foreign rule originated in the German space in the final third of the nineteenth century. The idea that the inhabitants of Flanders were part of the broader German world traced back to the early part of that century. In 1813, Ernst Moritz Arndt wrote that 'as far as German and Flemish are spoken, there lies Germany'.[41] The idea that the people living in the Low Countries were Germans echoed in German national propaganda throughout the century. Thus, it is not surprising to find this idea in the first serious attempts at calculating the number of Germans in Europe. In 1869, in the middle of the process of German unification, the famous Prussian statistician Richard Böckh published *The German National Population and Language Area* (*Der Deutschen Volkszahl und*

[35]Nuñez Seixas, 'Home Rule', 10. See also Guido Provoost, *Ward Hermans* (Antwerpen: Rockox-uitgaven, 1977); Ward Hermans, 'Nationaliteiten-Congress te Genève', *De Schelde*, 6 Sept. 1930, 2.

[36]Wilhelm Winkler, *Statistisches Handbuch der europäischen Nationalitäten* (Wien: Braumüller, 1931), 3.

[37]Otto Junghann and Max Hildebert Boehm, *Ethnopolitischer Almanach. 1. Jahrgang* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1930), 157–9.

[38]Van Hamel to Colban, 24 Nov. 1922, LoNA, Minorities, Committee on New States, S336/1/5.

[39]Charles Haskins, 'Belgian Problems', doc. 207, 30 Nov. 1918, 55–6, in Inquiry Documents, Special Reports and Studies, 1917–1919, United States National Archives Microfilms, M1107, roll 14.

[40]Carlile Aylmer Macartney, *National States and National Minorities* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 484.

[41]Quoted in Dolderer, 'Een beleid uit één stuk?', 292.

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Sprachgebiet). The book was not only a statistical work but also a nationalist text, whose ultimate purpose was to convince German leaders to complete the process of unification.[42] According to Böckh, 'there is no border between Flemish and German'.[43] The Flemings were a German population, one that, in his opinion, was undergoing a harsh policy of denationalisation that risked transforming them into 'Belgium's Ireland'.[44]

Such conception of the Flemish population became a central tenet of the All-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*).[45] Created in the 1890s, this nationalist and colonialist organisation quickly turned into a pressure group with a strong *völkisch* imperialist character that by the beginning of the twentieth century had around 22,000 members. In a text published in 1897 and written by Harald Graevell, a Prussian publicist living in Brussels, the organisation promoted the idea that the Flemings were a 'genuinely Germanic people, mostly from the Frankish stock, but mixed with Frisians and Saxons' who spoke a low German dialect.[46] The Flemings were in danger and required German assistance. 'Here in Belgium', Graevell wrote, 'there is an oppressed German brother-nation [*Brudervolk*] crying out for help. Germanness is being taken away from them in every possible way, and thus their soul is being taken away from them'.[47] The word minority was used seldom in these discussions. Yet by the early twentieth century the idea of the Flemings as a section of the German *Volk* oppressed by foreign domination had firmly been established in All-German circles.

Under the German occupation of the region during the First World War, All-German goals and realpolitik merged into a hybrid policy of promotion of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism in occupied Belgium called *Flamenpolitik* (Flemish policy). The *Flamenpolitik* had a momentous impact on Belgium. Through propaganda and pro-Flemish measures, the *Flamenpolitik* created the so-called activist current, which consisted of Flemish nationalists who were willing to collaborate with the occupier to achieve their goal of self-determination. The actions of the German occupier also crystallised the idea that Flanders and Belgium were the antithesis of one another within the ranks of part of the Flemish Movement, which pushed Flemish nationalism into more radical directions. By enacting the Dutchification of the University of Ghent, the German occupier also realised a long-term Flemish nationalist dream, which set a precedent for the broader Flemish Movement and any future government that would rule over the region.

The *Flamenpolitik* went beyond that. It played upon and reinforced *völkisch* understandings of nationhood that set Flanders apart from Francophone Wallonia (and Belgium) and tied it closer to the Netherlands, first, and Germany more broadly. In this way, it also promoted a transition within Greater Netherlandism from a cultural to a political movement, which further developed in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Flamenpolitik* influenced other Flemish actors, notably the Front Movement, which grew from a group of former soldiers who were dissatisfied with the treatment of Flemish troops during the conflict. The *Flamenpolitik* contributed to the Front Movement's radicalisation and created links between the Fronters and the activists that remained throughout the inter-war years. These links were notable within the Front Party (*Front Partij*, FP), and, later, the Flemish National Union (*Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond*, VNV), the two most important Flemish nationalist parties

[42]Richard Böckh, *Der Deutschen Volkszahl und Sprachgebiet in den europäischen Staaten: Eine statistische Untersuchung* (Berlin: J. Guttentag, 1869), 207–16.

[43]Böckh, *Der Deutschen Volkszahl*, 189.

[44]Böckh, *Der Deutschen Volkszahl*, 191.

[45]Following Winfried Dolderer, I prefer to use the word All-German, instead of Pan-German, to mark the difference between the inter-war meanings of *alldeutsch* and *pangermanisch*. The latter had a broader scope, as it included Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian populations. *Alldeutsch*, by contrast, referred only to people who were deemed to belong to the German *Volk*. The *Alldeutsche Verband* thought of the Flemish as German, not only as Germanic. See Dolderer, *Deutscher Imperialismus*, 18–23.

[46]Harold Arjuna, *Die vlämische Bewegung: vom alldeutschen Standpunkt aus dargestellt* (Berlin: Lüstenöder, 1897). Graevell published most of his works, including this, under the pseudonym Harold Arjuna.

[47]Arjuna, *Die vlämische Bewegung*, 43.

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of the period. Finally, the *Flamenpolitik* cast anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism as a transnational phenomenon that continued to feed on networks of influence and collaboration that crossed the Belgian, Dutch and German borders.[48]

This policy offered the advantage of working even in case of defeat, by leaving behind a weak and divided Belgium, even if, on the Flemish side, collaboration with the occupier remained a minority phenomenon and all-Germanism even more so.[49] With the end of the war and the creation of the Weimar Republic, All-German interest in Flanders survived only within fringe right-wing circles. In Flanders, activists who had collaborated with the German occupier fled in exile, which consolidated the transnational nature of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism.[50] Those who remained in Belgium were socially stigmatised and criminally or administratively prosecuted. Yet, slowly, a new generation of extreme right militants emerged in both countries. All-German ideas on the one hand and the determination to find German support for Flanders' self-determination on the other progressively grew throughout the late 1920s and especially in the 1930s, which had fateful consequences for European politics and Flemish dreams of linguistic emancipation and political self-determination.

From Cultural Protection to the Greater Netherlands

During the inter-war period, Flemish national identification spread throughout Flemish society.[51] This process took different forms, from the establishment of Flemish-minded associations in different spheres of social activity to the organisation of popular cultural and commemorative events tinged with Flemish nationalist overtones.[52] Politically, this coincided with the reinforcement of moderate Flemish nationalist factions within the three traditional Belgian parties (Catholic, Liberal and Socialist), but above all within the Catholic party and the General Catholic Workers' Union.[53] Moderate Flemish nationalist actors did not define Flanders as a minority. In contrast, they stressed several times that, as a majority in Belgium, the Flemish population deserved a stronger political position that was commensurate with its demographic weight. Yet their demands closely resembled those of minority communities in other European countries.

Frans van Cauwelaert, the Catholic mayor of Antwerp between 1921 and 1932, was one of the main leaders of the moderate Flemish nationalist current. In the early 1920s, his faction could rally roughly forty MPs in the Belgian Parliament, which was equivalent to between 40 and 50 per cent of the total number of seats elected in Flanders.[54] Van Cauwelaert conceptualised the Flemings as a people (*volk*) within the Belgian state, one that deserved recognition and equality with the Walloons, but without pursuing the creation of its own independent state. In his 1919 letter to King Albert I, written to persuade the monarch to maintain the promises of linguistic equality that he had made during the

[48]On the *Flamenpolitik* see: Lode Wils, 'Het aandeel van de "Flamenpolitik" in de Vlaamse natievorming', *Journal of Belgian History/Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 45, no. 2/3 (2015): 216–37; Wils, *Onverfranst, onverduitst?*; Lode Wils, 'De Groot-Nederlandse beweging', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 64 (2005): 23–34; Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 29–194.

[49]Wils, *Honderd jaar*, 19–30.

[50]Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, p. 193.

[51]On working-class identification in Flanders with either Flanders or Belgium, see Maarten Van Ginderachter, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers: A Social History of Modern Belgium* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 5. For Flemish and Belgian national identification during the war see Barbara Deruytter, 'The Layering of Belgian National Identities during the First World War', in *Nations, Identities and the First World War: Shifting Loyalties to the Fatherland*, ed. Nico Wouters and Laurence Van Ypersele (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 155–74.

[52]See Guy Leemans et al., eds. *Vlamingen komt in massa: de Vlaamse beweging als massabeweging* (Gent: Provinciebestuur van Oost-Vlaanderen, 1999); Anne Himpe, *De beweging in huis: Vlaamse huizen tijdens het interbellum* (Gent: Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen, 1992).

[53]Lode Wils and Emmanuel Gerard, 'Het ACW, de Katholieke Partij en de taalwetgeving (1929–1932), eerste deel', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 55, no. 4 (1996): 235–55; Lode Wils and Emmanuel Gerard, 'Het ACW, de Katholieke Partij en de taalwetgeving (1929–1932), tweede deel', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 56, no. 1 (1996): 3–24; Lode Wils, 'Het ontstaan van de "kleine" Vlaamse natie', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 50, no. 4 (1991): 220–38.

[54]Wils, *Honderd jaar*, 80–2; Van Goethem, *Belgium and the Monarchy*, 138–9.

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war, Van Cauwelaert referred to the wave of support for the principle of self-determination that was spreading all over the world. 'A great thirst for justice has taken hold of all peoples', he asserted. 'The Flemish people', Van Cauwelaert added, 'do not want to be the only people who would not enjoy the blessings of this general renewal of life'. The letter made clear that the population of Flanders did not seek their own political unit and did not reject the rule of the King. The Flemings, the text argued, wanted 'the possibility and the freedom to develop their own Flemish personality in Belgium unhindered and undisturbed'.[55]

This conception of the Flemish population and its position within the Belgian state coincided with the formulation of the so-called minimum programme. The programme aimed at ensuring equality between Flemings and Walloons through the Dutchification of the education system, the administration and the courts in Flanders, as well as true linguistic equality within the army. It was realised during the inter-war period, especially in the early 1930s, when the country adopted the principle of territoriality as the standard norm for the linguistic organisation of the country – except for Brussels, Eupen-Malmedy and the linguistic frontier. As a consequence, by the late 1930s, from an educational and administrative perspective, most of Belgium's territory was split into two monolingual areas: Flanders and Wallonia.[56] While Van Cauwelaert and other moderate nationalists – who represented the dominant current within the Flemish Movement – were keen to stress that the Flemings were the majority in Belgium, the minimum programme made claims that were akin to those of minority communities in other parts of Europe, an irony that did not go unnoticed among radical Flemish nationalists. In its 1935 manifesto, for instance, the VNV, then the strongest radical nationalist party in Flanders, defined Van Cauwelaert's policy as a form of cultural independence that amounted to a device that in 'some countries . . . has been worked out as a solution to the issue of national minorities'.[57] The tension between self-identifying as a majority but making claims similar to those of minority communities not only concerned moderate Flemish nationalists but also extended to some Flemish radicals.

During the inter-war period, the anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism that had first emerged during the First World War developed and became more extreme. Radical Flemish nationalism was not a homogenous phenomenon. In the 1920s, one could distinguish between the FP and the activists in exile who published the journal *Vlaanderen*. The FP was the first outspokenly Flemish nationalist party and counted many former members of the Front Movement who had radicalised mainly as a consequence of the *Flamenpolitik* in its ranks.[58] The activists too had emerged because of the *Flamenpolitik*. They were a group of Flemish nationalists who had collaborated with the German occupier and held stronger authoritarian, separatist and pan-Dutch ideas than the FP.[59] The activists were initially weaker than the FP but grew considerably from the late 1920s. As a result, both within and outside the Front Party, radical Flemish nationalism became even more radical, especially because of the influx of new young nationalist militants who were attracted to new order ideas.

The FP's view of the Flemings was similar to that of Van Cauwelaert's moderate faction. Both conceived of the Flemish population as a nationality distinct from the Walloons that was entitled to defend and cultivate its language and culture. Yet the FP went one step further, since it called for

[55]Frans Van Cauwelaert, *Aan zijne Majesteit Albert I, Koning der Belgen* (Brussel: De Standaard, 1919), 5–6.

[56]On the switch from personality to territoriality, see Witte and van Velthoven, *Languages*, 207–13; Dalle Mulle and Bieling, 'Sovereignty and Homogeneity', 116–17.

[57]Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (VNV), *De Dietsche Volksstaat* (Aalst: Dietschland, 1935), 38.

[58]Luc Vandeweyer, 'Robrecht De Smet in het Vlaamse Front 1918–1920', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 43, no. 3 (1984): 173–85; Luc Vandeweyer, 'Machtsstrijd in het Vlaamse Front. Het afsterven van "Ons Vaderland" en de geboorte van "Vlaanderen"', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 44, no. 4 (1985): 206–24. On the influence of the *Flamenpolitik* on the Fronters see Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, p. 173.

[59]In fact, the *Front Partij* too was divided between a democratic faction, mainly centred around Herman Vos, Hendrik Elias and Hendrik Borginon, and an authoritarian, clearly anti-Belgian faction, represented by Herman van Puymbrouck and Ward Hermans, among others.

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political autonomy within Belgium.[60] For instance, in a message sent to the delegates at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the party asked the great powers to recognise the right of self-determination of the Flemish 'nationality', as it had done for the peoples of central and eastern Europe. At the same time, the FP clarified that the Flemings did not reject their inclusion within the Belgian state but sought autonomy within it.[61] More concretely, this view crystallised around the draft bill for a federal statute that was presented before the Belgian Parliament by the FP's leader Herman Vos in 1931. This provided for the establishment of a United Kingdom of Flanders and Wallonia, within which these two federated states would have their own parliament and enjoyed extensive competences.[62]

In an international perspective, the case of a demographic majority calling for autonomy, or independence, from the demographic minority of the same country was unprecedented outside a colonial context. The irony of this situation did not go unnoticed. The Flemish Catholics, for instance, criticised any proposal to separate Flanders from the rest of Belgium (either within a broader federation or as an independent state), arguing that 'only if the Flemings were a weak and oppressed minority, would they have to hide behind the separation'.[63] The radical, anti-Belgian and Greater Netherlandic publication *Vlaanderen* touched upon this tension even more explicitly. In a 1926 article discussing the broader policy of minority rights at the League of Nations, the editors asserted that 'we [the Flemings] are not a "minority" and yet we must seek international help. Otherwise we will perish. That is the problem'. Later in the same text, the newspaper eventually concluded that the Flemings formed 'the majority of the Belgian state, but in fact, thanks to a cunningly organised deception, remain suppressed as a minority'.[64]

The activists and, especially, the young radicals of the 1930s, by contrast, reinforced an alternative conception of Flanders as part of a broader Greater Netherlandic (*Dietsche*) nation.[65] Reimond Tollenaere was one of the main purveyors of this view. Born in East Flanders in 1909, Tollenaere started his political career within some nationalist student movements at the University of Ghent. During those years he became an ardent supporter of the Greater Netherlandic movement. A stint in Germany between 1931 and 1932 brought him in contact with National Socialist ideas, which he actively promoted within student associations once back in Ghent. By then the FP had started a process of redefinition that led to the creation, in October 1933, of a more unified and better organised nationalist party, the VNV, under the leadership of Staf De Clercq.[66] De Clercq was convinced that new order and Greater Netherlandic ideas had taken root among young Flemings to a greater extent than in previous generations and became increasingly willing to tap that unexploited resource. It is with this goal in mind that in late 1933, he gave to a 24-year-old Tollenaere the role of VNV-propaganda leader.[67]

[60]However, Van Cauwelaert often defined his minimum programme as 'cultural autonomy with administrative adaptation' (*culturele zelfstandigheid, met bestuurlijke aanpassing*). Quoted in Wils, *Onverfranst*, 301.

[61]'Aux Délégués des peuples à la Conférence de la Paix', Brussels, 20 Nov. 1919, BDA, folder 257, dossier général 1913–1934.

[62]Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 234.

[63]Algemeen Christelijke Werkeraverbond van Belgie, *Wetgevende Verkiezingen 1932. Voor onze propagandisten* (Brussel, 1932), 7, Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving (KADOC, Leuven), CVP Antwerpen, Box 55.

[64]'Vlaanderen en de "Volkenbond"', *Vlaanderen*, 27 Feb. 1926, 1.

[65]Luc Vandeweyer, 'Het Katholieke Vlaams-nationalisme in Antwerpen naast het Vlaamse Front 1925–1931', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 50, no. 4 (1991): 193–7; Luc Vandeweyer, 'Het Katholieke Vlaams-nationalisme in Antwerpen naast het Vlaamse Front 1925–1931. II', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 51, no. 1 (1992): 1–16; Bruno De Wever, 'Het Vlaamsche Front', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, revised online version, ed. Reginald de Schryver (Tielt: Lannoo, 2023); Louis Vos, 'De politieke kleur van jonge generaties. Vlaams-nationalisme, Nieuwe Orde en extreem-rechts', in *Herfsttij van de 20ste eeuw: Extreem-rechts in Vlaanderen 1920–1990*, ed. Rudi Van Doorslaer (Leuven: Kritak, 1992), 15–46.

[66]On Tollenaere's biography see the rather hagiographic Pieter Jan Verstraete, *Reimond Tollenaere: biografie* (Kortrijk: P.J. Verstraete, 1996); and the homonymous entry in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*.

[67]On De Clercq's biography see Bruno De Wever, *Staf De Clercq* (Brussel: Grammens, 1989); and the homonymous entry in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*.

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Tollenaere thought that the FP had neglected the cultural and linguistic bonds between Flanders and the Netherlands. He referred to the unity of these two communities as the *Dietsche volk*. According to Tollenaere, domestic and international circumstances offered an unprecedented chance to forge a new course. The renewal had to run along three axes: the complete rejection of the Belgian framework, the adoption of Greater Netherlandism as the main goal of the party and the adaptation of new order principles to the Flemish context.[68] His ideas began to shape the VNV's agenda from summer 1935, notably through the brochure *The Greater-Netherlandic People's State* (*De Dietsche Volkstaat*), the party's most important programmatic document published before the Second World War. Despite being a compromise between different factions, the text marked a remarkable discontinuity with the past. First, fascist elements penetrated VNV's propaganda.[69] Second, the document put the Greater Netherlandic idea at the core of its agenda. All of a sudden, Greater Netherlandism went from being a notion defended by cultural and political movements on the fringes of the Flemish nationalist spectrum (although loosely shared by a broader set of actors) to becoming mainstream.[70]

The concept of the *Dietsche volk* further blurred any understanding of the Flemish population as a minority, a majority or a nationality. Conceptions of Flanders went from a relatively stable consensus within the Flemish Movement around the idea that the Flemings were a distinct and autonomous people, although one that sought minority-like protection, to a conception of the Flemish population as part of a Greater Netherlandic nation, whose majority lived in another state.[71]

This realignment of Flemish radical nationalism did not find support among the Dutch authorities, which represented Flanders' most 'obvious' kin state. Throughout the inter-war period, the Dutch government closely monitored the evolution of Flemish nationalism and promoted the development of Dutch culture in Belgium, but carefully avoided being dragged into the confrontation between the Belgian state and Flemish nationalists. 'The Netherlands', wrote the Dutch Embassy in Brussels in 1929, 'can very well support Flanders culturally but should refrain from interfering in Flemish politics'.[72] More specifically concerning the Greater Netherlandic Union (*Algemeen Nederlandsch Verbond*, ANV), in 1929 the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frans Beelaerts van Blokland, accused some ANV members of engaging in political activities that were connected to the Flemish question. He thus asked the Ministry of Education, Arts and Science to remind the ANV's leadership that, if they wished to continue to receive state support, they had to limit their activities to the cultural sphere.[73]

[68]Verstraete, *Reimond Tollenaere*, 157–213; Tollenaere to Robrecth de Smet, 30 June 1933, LA, Tollenaere papers, T371.

[69]VNV, *De Dietsche Volksstaat*, 14. See also De Wever, *Greep*, 168–74.

[70]VNV, *De Dietsche Volksstaat*, 29–37. On the Greater Netherlandic movement see Bruno De Wever, 'Groot-Nederland als utopie en mythe', *Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis/Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent* 3 (1998): 91–108; Wils, 'De Groot-Nederlandse beweging'; Bruno De Wever and Pieter Van Hees, 'Groot-Nederland', in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*. Greater Netherlandism had become politicised already during the First World War, notably under the influence of the *Flamenpolitik*. Some members of the *Front Partij* openly defended Greater Netherlandic ideas, as was the case with many of the former activists. Yet, the FP itself did not. In general, no major Flemish party showed sympathy towards Greater Dutch ideas before the 1930s.

[71]Another spatial perspective not taken into account here for reasons of scope is that promoted by Joris Van Severen and his Union of *Dietsche* National Solidarists (*Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen*, Verdinaso). Van Severen was one of the first members of the FP to openly defend the unification of Flanders and the Netherlands in the mid-1920s. Founded in 1931, the Verdinaso was initially a Greater Netherlandic party. However, in July 1934 Van Severen proclaimed a 'new direction' and began promoting the unification of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, thus including the Walloons into a hypothetical *Dietsche* state. On the Verdinaso, see Romain Vanlandschoot, 'Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen', in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*.

[72]The Dutch Embassy in Brussels to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 Jan. 1929, National Archief (NA) (the Hague), Gezantschap België, folder 898. For other formulations of this doctrine see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Embassy in Brussels, 25 Feb. 1920, NA, Gezantschap België, folder 890; De Ligne to van Karnebeek, 27 Mar. 1920, Ministerie van Buitelandse Zaken, van Karnebeek papers, folder 22; Patijn to Paulus, 17 June 1937; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Patijn, 19 June 1937, the last two in NA, Gezantschap België, folder 916.

[73]Beelaerts van Blokland to the Minister of Education, Arts and Science, 25 Jan. 1929, NA, Gezantschap België, folder 898. Founded in 1895, the ANV initially was a cultural organisation that defended the Dutch language and promoted a stronger cultural integration of Flanders and the Netherlands. From its inception, it was also an expression of *völkisch* kinship between

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More broadly, although some important members of the Dutch elite actively promoted Greater Dutch ideas, the appeal of Greater Netherlandism remained limited in the Netherlands. In particular, no major Dutch party or politician supported a union with Flanders.[74] This changed in part in the 1930s, when the Dutch National Socialist Movement (*Nationaal Socialistische Beweging*, NSB) was founded. Indeed, the formation of a Greater Netherlandic state was a central plank of this party's programme.[75] Overall, however, the Greater Netherlandic movement remained too weak to offer any serious prospect of realisation of reunification. Hence, Flemish radicals looked ever more towards Berlin as the only external actor that could bring this about, mostly through the dismantlement of Belgium in a new war. While they initially received little attention, this changed in 1933. Ideological convergence around authoritarian new order ideas further favoured this realignment.[76]

From Greater Netherlands to Greater Germany

The realignment of Flemish radical nationalism towards the *Dietsche* ideal coincided with the Nazis' rise to power. This rekindled German interest in the Flemish Movement and led to the creation of a new *Flamenpolitik*, which eventually threatened the very existence of the Flemings as an autonomous people. In other words, by seeking Nazi support, Flemish radical nationalists who had struggled to achieve their Greater Netherlandic ideals steered themselves into a situation whereby the Flemish population came to be considered as a German minority that ought to be reintegrated into the Reich by Belgium's Nazi occupiers during the Second World War.

From 1921 onwards, the Weimar Republic had consistently followed a policy of observation without intervention with regard to Flemish–Walloon relations.[77] This did not mean that there were no private contacts among German nationalists and members of the radical Flemish Movement, but these contacts remained at the margins of Belgian–German relations for about fifteen years. Things changed with Hitler's accession to power. Initially, the Nazi regime denied any overt support to the Flemish Movement. Yet this cautious approach generated tensions within National Socialism because it contradicted its ideology. The German government and the Nazi party began reaching out to Flemish radicals slowly and covertly.[78]

In early 1937, German officials established contact with Flemish nationalist Staf De Clercq. In spring that year, De Clercq met with Robert Holthöfer, who led the office of the Ministry of Propaganda (Promi) in Essen. De Clercq obtained financial support to buy and run the newspaper *People and State* (*Volk en Staat*) – founded in 1936 and successor to *De Schelde*. From September 1937 onwards, *Volk en Staat* began receiving 800 Reichmarks a month from the Promi.[79] Behind the scenes

Flemish and Dutch. See Pieter van Hees and Hugo de Schepper, *Tussen cultuur en politiek: het algemeen-Nederlands Verbond 1895–1995* (Den Haag: Algemeen-Nederlands Verbond, 1995).

[74]De Wever and Van Hees, 'Groot-Nederland'; Karel De Clerck, Joris Dedeurwaerd and Jan Rock, 'Nederland', in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*. See also: De Wever, 'Groot-Nederland'; Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 198; Wils, 'De Groot-Nederlandse beweging'. On Geyl's and Gerretson's contacts with and influence on the *Front Partij*, see: Lode Wils, 'Gerretson, Geyl en Vos. Spanningen tussen de Groot-Nederlandse Beweging en de Vlaams-Nationalistische', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 41, no. 2 (1982): 95–120; Peeter Van Hees and A.W. Willemsen, 'Leuvens Recidivisme. Het gebruik door Prof. Dr. L. Wils van de briefwisselingen Geyl en Vlaanderen en Gerretson-Geyl', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 42, no. 1 (1983): 44–58; Lode Wils, 'Nog eens: Gerretson, Geyl en Vos', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 42, no. 1 (1983): 59–63.

[75]On the NSB see: Robin te Slaa and Edwin Klijn, *De NSB: Ontstaan en opkomst van de Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, 1931–1935*, 3rd ed. (Amsterdam: Boom, 2021); Edwin Klijn and Robin te Slaa, *De NSB: Twee werelden botsen, 1936–1940* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2021).

[76]The realignment partly had its roots in the inter-war period, as an anti-democratic current already existed within the anti-Belgian Flemish Movement that arose then, in great part as a consequence of the *Flamenpolitik*.

[77]Winfried Dolderer, 'De Republiek van Weimar en de Vlaamse beweging: Tweede deel: de betrekkingen', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 56, no. 3 (1997): 146; Dolderer, 'Een beleid uit één stuk?', 305–6.

[78]Müller, *Die importierte Nation*, 240–3.

[79]De Wever, *Greep*, 310–42.

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De Clercq also worked with Fritz Scheuermann, an officer of the German Armed Forces, to add a military component to the collaboration between the VNV and the Nazis. De Clercq and Scheuermann met several times between late 1939 and May 1940 to discuss the spread of Nazi propaganda and even the establishment of a militia within the VNV. Scheuermann was involved in supporting various minority movements in western Europe, with a view to undermining state authority within the countries in which they operated. He saw the VNV as just another such movement. The VNV's collaboration with the Nazis before the occupation of Belgium confirms how the Nazis saw the Flemings as another minority that could be manipulated to destabilise neighbouring countries for their own expansionist purposes, as well as to how far De Clercq was ready to go to facilitate the Nazi takeover and realise the party's *Dietsche* goals.[80]

In July 1940, only about a month after the German conquest of the country, De Clercq felt confident enough to declare that 'the moment has come for the *Dietsche* Netherlands again to secure their unity. Flanders, all Flanders, and the northern Netherlands belong together'. A few weeks later, Tollenaere proclaimed that 'the *Dietsche* revolution was imminent'.[81] In the months following the German invasion, Tollenaere kept beating the Greater Netherlandic drum. 'The moment has arrived', he wrote in a brochure published in the second half of 1940, 'when the law of life, which is the law of unity, will come into force: Flanders, Holland, French-Flanders, in a strong *Dietsche* state'.[82]

When compared to the jubilant statement of the first weeks after the occupation, it was clear that this time something had changed. The pamphlet featured a section entitled 'Our Germanic Destination'. There, Tollenaere defined the *Dietsche volk* as a Germanic people, something that had been absent in previous party publications. Tollenaere argued that this did not endorse the incorporation of the Netherlandic territories as provinces of the Reich, but the text did mention that the future would be based on greater state formations and the dominance of people higher up in the hierarchy of races. According to him, Germany would clearly dominate among the Germanic national communities (*volksgemeenschappen*). At the same time, he remained extremely vague about the exact form that the Flemish participation in the Reich would take. The 'exact position of these Netherlandic territories within the League of German people cannot be determined right now', he asserted.[83] In a few months, VNV's discourse had sharply altered and made room for the greater accommodation of All-German views.

Tollenaere was not alone in his attempt to appease the German positions on the Flemish, or rather the *Dietsche*, question. De Clercq began making direct contact with the German occupier in early June 1940. His efforts to build a privileged relationship with the military authorities initially remained secret. Similarly, the VNV's public support for Nazi rule in Flanders was voiced only gradually. Yet a growing belief within the party that the German intervention would provide the definitive push needed to realise the party's *Dietsche* dreams accelerated the process. The Nazis, however, had little interest in the Greater Netherlands. In fact, within the regime the dominant view was that the Flemish were 'a border people very close to the Germans, with very healthy *völkisch* energies and instincts'.[84] Immediate incorporation within the Reich was postponed only because of practical reasons, notably the need to ensure an efficient administration of Belgium. Hence, the military administration that remained in power until 1944 had both long-term and medium-term goals. While the long-term aim of annexing Flanders to the Reich was there from the outset, in the medium term the administration privileged the smooth running of Belgium.[85]

[80]De Wever, *Greep*, 310–42. The Nazis considered De Clercq a V-Mann (*Vertrauensmann*), that is, a trusted informant or agent recruited by the Abwehr.

[81]Both quoted in De Wever, *Greep*, 355–7.

[82]Reimond Tollenaere, *Ons volk in den nieuwen tijd: naar de nationale orde en de socialistische gemeenschap* (Aalst: Dietschland, no date), 14. The text does not have a precise date, but from context it was written in the second half of 1940.

[83]Tollenaere, *Ons volk*, 18.

[84]Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 282.

[85]Werner Warmbrunn, *The German Occupation of Belgium 1940–1944* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 134–5.

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The Chief of the Military Administration, Eggert Reeder, warned De Clercq in July 1940 that Hitler had not yet made a final decision about the Belgian state, although he indicated that he wanted the military to favour the Flemish population over the Walloon. Hence a kind of new *Flamenpolitik* began, but collaboration with the VNV would not imply any clear commitment concerning the future of Flanders. In this regard, Reeder wrote in an internal memo that 'the military administration must at all times maintain a state of suspense for any possible decision of the Führer'. He warned the VNV leadership that, to collaborate with the military administration, 'the old ideas should be put aside or be refurbished'. Reeder also dismissed Flemish support for Greater Netherlands. 'Great-Netherlandic thought', he wrote in a report to Berlin, 'has practically only an academic meaning [in Flanders]'.[86]

De Clercq took note and in November 1940 declared its full collaboration with the Nazis without obtaining any guarantee for Flanders' future in return. At a party meeting in Brussels, he declared that he would reject any concrete discussion about future 'borders' because these would be settled after the war. He and the party simply trusted Hitler. Above all, De Clercq struggled to outline a clear vision for how the Flemings fit within the broader German universe. 'The Flemings are Germanics . . . the destination of the Flemish people is Netherlandic, hence Germanic', he asserted. He called on the Flemish people to be aware of their 'Netherlandic nature' and of their 'German solidarity' (*samenhoorigheid*). He did not clarify what that meant concretely and only provided a concrete example of where Flanders did not belong: 'Belgium is not the fatherland of the Flemings, it has never been our fatherland … Our fatherland is the place where our own ancestors have suffered, struggled and lived'. Was this Flanders, Greater Netherlands or the German Reich? De Clercq did not spell this out clearly.[87]

In the following months, anxiety about Flanders' future spread within the VNV and in broader nationalist circles. In the autumn of 1940, the creation of the SS-Flanders and Nazi support for the German–Flemish Working Community (*Duitsch-Vlaamsche Arbeidsgemeenschap*, also called *DeVlag*), both All-German organisations, introduced two strong competitors who challenged the monopoly of the VNV in the Flemish occupied territory. The Nazis saw the SS-Flanders and *DeVlag* as organisations that would favour the penetration of Nazi ideas into Flanders. Among these ideas, there was the understanding that the Flemish people were a German national community that had to be integrated in the German Reich.[88] The SS-Flanders' newspaper, *SS-Man*, for instance, regularly published pieces in which one could find sentences along these lines: 'we [Flemings] are Germans [it used the word *Duitschers*, not *Germanen*], as much as the Bavarians, the Austrians'.[89] The combination of uncertainty about the future status of Flanders and SS-Flanders/*DeVlag*'s All-German propaganda sent shockwaves across the Flemish nationalist spectrum. In May 1941, De Clercq attacked the Flemish-SS as 'a fighting machine against the VNV and an ally of all those who harbour annexationist plans'.[90] In September, De Clercq and Hendrik Elias, who would replace De Clercq as VNV leader in October 1942, met with the military administration to discuss the conflict between the party and the SS-Flanders/*DeVlag*. De Clercq and Elias declared that the VNV would stop any collaboration with organisations that promoted the Germanisation of Flanders and the region's *Anschluss* to the Reich. They also warned that these instances of 'German imperialism' were stirring hostility, as many Flemings feared that their land would become a German province.[91] Ten days later, speaking in

[86]De Wever, *Greep*, 363, 373 and 377. Simultaneously, the occupation administration in the Netherlands hampered the NSB's Greater Netherlandic activities and, in December 1941, even forbade them altogether. See Jan-Jaap van den Berg, 'Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging', in de Schryver, *Nieuwe Encyclopedie*.

[87]Staf De Clercq, *De Nieuwe Orde in Vlaanderen*, 10 Nov. 1940, Archief en Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaamsnationalisme (ADVN), D16212.

[88]Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 299.

[89]Excerpt from SS-Man quoted in Report on the meeting between President Reeder, Vice-President von Craushaar, KVR Heim and Dr Reusch, on the one hand, and the Leader of the VNV and Dr Elias, on the other, 17 Sep. 1942, ADVN, D16637.

[90]Staf De Clercq, Speech at the General Council of the VNV, 3 May 1941, 1, ADVN, D16212.

[91]Meeting between Reeder, Reusch and Elias, 17 Sept. 1942, ADVN, D16637.

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front of concerned party members, De Clercq recognised the discontent brewing among the Flemish public:

> I know what is going on in the country – he acknowledged – the dozens of letters that arrive at the secretariat every day, the dozens of people I have spoken to since my return, they have given me an echo of the uneasy mood of unrest that exists in Flanders at the moment and that has been aroused by certain statements and certain opinions, which one fears could lead to political movements that are a danger to our national character (*volkspersoonlijkheid*).[92]

De Clercq took advantage of the meeting to reformulate the party's goal. This consisted in the establishment of the 'National Socialist order and the inclusion of the Dutch national community in the *complex* of the Germanic peoples' (my emphasis). He also clarified that this Germanic entity was viable only if 'the various Germanic peoples that make it up [were] enabled to maintain and fulfil their national identity'.[93] He tellingly titled a section of his speech 'Our Right as Netherlanders to our own Existence as a Nation'. There, he vigorously rejected any collaboration with All-German organisations and concluded that 'it is not about a dispute over borders or the form of the state, but . . . it is about the very essence of our movement, hence about our right as a people to exist'.[94] Similar concerns were repeated in the following two years, with ever more alarming tones as uncertainty around the future of Flanders and the activities of SS-Flanders and *DeVlag* continued unabated.[95]

In November 1942, De Clercq died of a stroke. Hendrik Elias, a member of the 'moderate' faction within the VNV, took over the party and soon began vocally criticising the Nazi occupier. In May 1943, he drew Eggert Reeder's attention to the growing hostility against the Reich among the Flemish population. Emphasising the Nazi regime's support for All-German movements, Elias asserted that one of these movements, *DeVlag*, 'did not grow out of Flemish soil with Flemish means: it is the result of a deliberate German policy, which has not been able to resist the temptation to create a movement that expresses its ambitions in the slogan: *"Heim ins Reich"*' (my emphasis).[96] The reference to the Nazi policy of bringing German minorities in central and eastern Europe 'home to the Reich' powerfully underlines the formidable trajectory of domestic and international understandings of Flanders and the Flemish population: from a 'minoritised' or oppressed majority in Flanders, to a constituent part (although the smaller one) of a unified *Dietsche* volk, to a German *volksgemeenschap* (national community) to be reintegrated within the German Reich. The latter outcome eventually occurred briefly in July 1944, when Hitler ordered the annexation of the region.

Conclusion

Between the end of August and the beginning of September 1944, 15,000 Flemings followed the retreating German troops. Once in Germany, the leadership of the VNV found that Hitler had personally appointed Jef van de Wiele, the head of the rival *DeVlag*, as leader of the Flemings (*Landsleider van de Vlamingen*). He was instructed to recruit troops for the Waffen-SS among Flemish refugees. In contrast, the former leader of the VNV, Hendrik Elias, was interned for attempting to disrupt

[92]Staf De Clercq, *Bindende Verklaring*, 27 Sept. 1941 (published in 1942), 1, ADVN, D16212.

[93]De Clercq, *Bindende Verklaring*.

[94]De Clercq, *Bindende Verklaring*.

[95]See for instance the articles published in *Volk en Staat* on the occasion of Tollenaere's funeral in February 1942. These expressed the wish that the leader's sacrifice had not been in vain and that Flanders could one day eventually find its place in the new Europe. See Jef François, 'Het Legioen Vlaanderen gedenkt zijn pionier: De heckte kameraad Reimond Tollenaere', *Volk en Staat*, 3 Feb. 1942, 3. See also, Bert De-Bruycker to Staf De Clercq, 9 Feb. 1942, ADVN, D15598(1/4). Tollenaere died in battle close to Leningrad in January 1942, after having led the Flemish Legion that joined the Nazis on the Eastern Front.

[96]Hendrik Elias to Eggert Reeder, 7 May 1943, Centre d'étude guerre et société (CegeSoma, Anderlecht), Documents Jans, folder 183.

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the recruitment process.[97] The Greater German turn that had been imposed by the Nazi regime had triumphed over any dreams of creating a *Dietsche* nation-state.

In the historical and sociological literature on majority–minority relations, a kin state is usually identified as an asset for minority communities.[98] Within historiography on the inter-war period, this is often the result of a focus on Jewish minorities, who suffered because of the absence of any kin state that could defend their rights through diplomatic pressures. Jacob Robinson, a Jewish legal scholar and activist, formulated this line of argument already in the inter-war period. He suggested that precisely because of the international system's reliance on the idea of state reciprocity, all states could freely enact anti-Semitic policies targeting their Jewish populations. The motto 'I hit my Jews, you hit your Jews', Robinson argued cynically, reflected the dark face of the reciprocity at the core of international relations.[99] The Flemish story discussed in this article makes this assumption more complex.

If one considers Flemish nationalism in the broader and unstable context of minority and nationality questions – or, as I suggest, heterogeneity questions – in inter-war Europe, two questions immediately come to mind: what is a minority and what is a kin state? While Flanders was not a straightforward minority, different nationalist understandings of the Flemish community at the crossroad between majority and minority (as well as between minority and nationality questions) floated freely throughout the inter-war period in the Belgo-Dutch-German space. These understandings fluctuated between three extremes: of a minoritised or oppressed majority within Belgium in search of linguistic equality or autonomy; a section of a broader Greater Netherlandic nation to be slowly built through persuasion, force or a combination of the two; and a German border people to be reincorporated in the broader German Reich. Each of these three understandings took hold within Flemish society at different points in time during the inter-war period and in the early 1940s.

Each of these understandings also coincided with a different potential kin state. The idea of a Flemish oppressed majority in Belgium established only a loose cultural connection and solidarity with the neighbouring Netherlands, whose state institutions were not invested with nor interested in assuming the role of a true kin state. The *Dietsche* idea, on the other hand, openly identified the Netherlands as the most obvious kin state of the Flemish community in Belgium. Yet, Dutch reluctance to meddle in Belgian affairs and collaborate with the Greater Netherlandic movement pushed supporters of this idea to find allies for its realisation in Nazi Germany. Other reasons contributed to the VNV's attempt to seek help in Germany, notably: ideological convergence between the Nazis and Flemish radical nationalism; the awareness that only Belgium's dismantlement could lead to the realisation of the VNV's *Dietsche* goals (especially given the relative weakness of the Greater Netherlandic movement in both Flanders and the Netherlands); and a *völkisch* understanding of nationhood that cast Flemings and Germans as related people (although not the same nationality). All-German nationalists in the Reich were glad to collaborate with the VNV. Yet they had a different view of Flanders, one that coincided with the third understanding above and clashed head-on with the dreams of autonomy and self-determination of Flemish radical nationalists. Flemish radicals sought help from the Nazis to realise the *Dietsche* community but discovered that Nazi interpretations of the nature of Flanders threatened the latter's existence as an autonomous nationality. In their quest for support, Flemish radicals realised that receiving 'help' from a kin state can in fact be the worst thing to befall nationalist actors and the communities that they claim to represent in their quest for self-determination.

[97] Müller, *Die Importierte Nation*, 308.

[98] For a review of the literature see Waterbury, 'Kin-State Politics'.

[99] Robinson quoted in James Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 57. The focus on the need for state support can also be found in the work of Hannah Arendt. See for instance: Hannah Arendt, 'The Perplexities of the Rights of Man', *Headline Series* 318 (1998): 88.

More broadly, Flanders in the inter-war period was a complex field of contestation with unstable meanings that reflected the complexity and ambiguities of inter-war minority and nationality questions. Until now few works have tried to connect the Flemish question to this wider European context. This article moves towards ending such separation and establishes links that go beyond the Belgo-Dutch-German transnational space that has already been studied intensively by Belgian and German scholars.

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