

Social Democracy and National Identity: The Ethnic Rift in the Belgian Workers' Party (1885–1914)*

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SUMMARY: The image of the Belgian Workers' Party as a solid party unchallenged by ethnic tensions and united around a common Belgianness does not stand up to historical scrutiny. Using the key concepts of *imagined communities*, *ethnies*, *mythomoteur*, and *oppositional patriotism*, this article argues that despite its undeniable integration into the political, social and economic structures of the Belgian nation-state, the BWP was ethnically divided between Flemish and Walloon socialists in the period 1885–1914.

“Labour and nation” have a longstanding relationship, which was interpreted well into the 1960s as one of mutual rejection: nationalists were deaf to class appeals and socialists had no fatherland. During the last three decades Marxist assumptions about class-consciousness have been re-evaluated. The monolithic image of “class” has been shattered and the theme of social democracy and national identity is one of the fragments. Research has gone in two main directions: attitudes towards sub-state national movements¹ and the integration of socialists into the nation-state (to explain the “war willingness” of August 1914).²

Today scholars agree that the *belle époque* social democrats of western Europe were not uniformly opposed to the fatherland: “emotions oscillated in a multi-layered patchwork between alienation from, critical reception of and commitment to”.³ In general, they became increasingly integrated into their respective nations before 1914 (meaning both their integration into the political and socio-economic system and their emotional acceptance of the fatherland). To describe this process the

* I would like to thank the anonymous referees of the *IRSH* for their comments.

1. E.g. Hans Mommsen, *Arbeiterbewegung und nationale Frage: ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1979).

2. E.g. Dieter Groh and Peter Brandt, *Vaterlandslose Gesellen: Sozialdemokratie und Nation 1860–1990* (Munich, 1992).

3. Stefan Berger, “British and German Socialists between Class and National Solidarity”, in Stefan Berger and Angel Smith (eds), *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870–1939* (Manchester [etc.], 1999), pp. 31–63, 34.

concept of *oppositional* or *radical patriotism* has been introduced, a democratic form of patriotism, in contrast to bourgeois chauvinism.⁴ Most explanations of this phenomenon refer to the social-democratic obsession with gaining power within the state. Reformism implied parliamentarianism, coalition governments, and hence a conciliatory rhetoric in which the nation featured prominently. The development of the welfare state and state-sponsored social initiatives accelerated this evolution.⁵

Taking the case of the Belgian Workers' Party (BWP, Belgische Werkliedenpartij/Parti ouvrier belge), this paper tackles two moot questions in the research on social democracy and national identity. First of all, the rather intuitive approach to this theme. Despite the obligatory references in other works on this subject to authorities on nationalism such as Benedict Anderson, core concepts are regularly left undefined, which results in a confusing equation of nation and state. Consequently, some authors overemphasize the *political attitude* of the social democrats towards the institutions of the state, while underestimating the question of *identification* with a particular nation.⁶ The Belgian case shows that this is not a mere conceptual nicety. Secondly, the image of the BWP is that of a solid party, unchallenged by the ethnic tensions that split Austrian social democracy. According to Eric Hobsbawm, the existence of "a single Belgian labour movement" was *the* "most impressive" example of labour internationalism.⁷ The linguistic divide in Belgium did not affect the unity of the Flemish and francophone workers, who saw themselves "primarily" as Belgians before World War I.⁸ Based on a comprehensive examination of the BWP between 1885 and 1914, I argue that the ethnic tensions ran much higher than has been assumed.⁹

4. Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Rochester, NY, 1998), p. 4.

5. Stefan Berger and Angel Smith, "Between Scylla and Charybdis: Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity across Five Continents, 1870–1939", in Berger and Smith, *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity*, pp. 1–30, 16.

6. Marcel van der Linden, "The National Integration of the European Working Classes, 1871–1914: Exploring the Causal Configuration", *International Review of Social History*, 33 (1988), pp. 285–311.

7. Eric Hobsbawm, "Working-Class Internationalism", in F.L. van Holthoorn and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830–1940*, I (Leiden [etc.], 1988), pp. 3–16, 9.

8. *Idem*, "Afterword: Working Classes and Nations", in Dirk Hoerder (ed.), *Labor Migration in the Atlantic Economies: The European and North American Working Classes during the Period of Industrialization* (Westport, CT, 1985), p. 436.

9. This article summarizes my Ph.D. research, (partly) published as: Maarten Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WO I* (Tielt/Ghent, 2005). [The Red Fatherland: The Forgotten History of the Ethnic Tensions in Belgian Socialism before World War I].

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND ETHNIES

Anderson's constructivist definition of the nation as an *imagined community* has become a classic.¹⁰ As such, the nation does not differ from class, or from any other collectivity which exceeds the smallest of groups. This is no surrender to postmodernism, in spite of Dick Geary's just claim that "communities are not simply 'imagined' but also built in spaces of brick and mortar".¹¹ Geary interprets *imagined* as imaginary, not grounded in reality, but the term has at least two meanings: (1) to form delusory ideas about, and (2) to conceive of. In the first meaning *imagined communities* are fictitious communities that do not exist outside the brain of the social elites who invented them to further their own interests. In the second sense, the one used here, they are groups of people who need not necessarily know each other face to face to share a feeling of connectedness. This last meaning does not exclude the role of "matter" in the formation of collective identities.

Anthony D. Smith's concept of *ethnie* is a useful complement to Anderson's concise definition. An *ethnie* is a group of people who imagine themselves as a community with a collective name of their own, who believe that they share a distinctive culture and a common ancestry, who have a sense of solidarity and an association with a territory. All the myths connected to this particular feeling – about the group's history, its mission, and ancestral homeland – "provide the focus of a community's identity and its *mythomoteur*, or constitutive political myth".¹² Smith differentiates between *ethnies* and nations by reference to the characteristics of the modern state that *ethnies* lack, viz.: "a clearly delimited territory or 'homeland', a public culture, economic unity and legal rights and duties for everyone".¹³ Along similar lines, a nation can be interpreted in at least two ways: as a juridical, political community of equal citizens who have the same legal rights, but who do not necessarily feel they share cultural or kinship ties; or as an *ethnie* that does not *per se* coincide with this polity. This theoretical distinction ranges back to Max Weber and Otto Bauer ("Gesellschaft vs Gemeinschaft").

Historians can follow processes of national identification by looking for their outward expression, viz. allusions to the symbols and myths of the nation. In the Belgian case, for instance, this involves references to freedom and resistance against foreign usurpers, as the generative force in the

10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1994 [1983]), pp. 6–7.

11. Dick Geary, "Labour History, the 'Linguistic Turn' and Postmodernism", *Contemporary European History*, 9 (2000), pp. 445–462, 446–447.

12. Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1994 [1986]), p. 58.

13. *Idem*, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London, 1998), p. 196.

history of Belgium since Caesar called the “Belgae” the bravest of all Gauls, and the culmination of these principles in the Belgian revolution of 1830. Equally important are personification and appropriation mechanisms that “banalize” national identity by presenting it as a “natural”, “logical” tie between people.¹⁴ Examples are the paraphrasing of the proletariat as “working Belgium”; affectionate references to “little Belgium” which was sometimes described as a small girl maltreated by the bourgeoisie; or the explicit appropriation of the country with possessive pronouns and descriptions such as “our poor Belgium”. However, we should keep in mind that these references do not *per se* indicate a high degree of national identification. A socialist speaker, who sounds his country’s praises in front of a bourgeois audience, is not necessarily a convinced patriot. Because people can and do say things for pragmatic or opportunistic reasons, it is important to consider the motivations and context behind national propositions.

RECONCILING CLASS AND NATION

Well into the twentieth century, Marx’s and Engels’s motto “the workers have no fatherland” was considered to be *the* keystone of the Marxist and social-democratic nation theory.¹⁵ For a long time, national identity was interpreted as a false consciousness that necessarily obstructs the class awakening of the proletariat. Both the labour movement and its historians believed “that patriotism and socialism have coincided only in individuals, or accidentally due to events outside the control of socialists, such as wars”. Consequently, World War I was seen “as something of a surprise, a break with the past”.¹⁶ This so-called “incompatibility view” stems from a one-sided reading of Marx and Engels. Their ideas about the national question were unsystematic and contradictory. On the one hand, Marx denounced nationalism as a bourgeois contrivance to divide emancipatory movements; on the other hand he distinguished between “a justified nationalism in progressive ‘historical’ nations such as Britain and a counter-revolutionary nationalism in backward nations”.¹⁷ Both Marx and Engels were influenced by *great state nationalism*. They believed that only large, homogeneous nation-states had a role to fulfil in history and

14. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995).

15. The relevant literature is immense: e.g. E. Cahm and V.C. Fiserá (eds), *Socialism and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe (1848–1945)* (Nottingham, 1978–1980); Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984); Michael Forman, *Nationalism and the International Labor Movement* (University Park, PA, 1998); J.J. Schwarzmantel, *Socialism and the Idea of the Nation* (London, 1991).

16. Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, p. 1.

17. Berger, “British and German Socialists between Class and National Solidarity”, p. 41.

that minorities, the “history-less anti-revolutionary” peoples, were doomed to disappear.

Before World War I, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists had already denounced the patriotism of “bourgeois reformists”. After 1914, the communist opposition coined the term *social patriotism* to criticize the *union sacrée* mentality of most social-democratic parties. However, the early historiography of social democracy adopted the “incompatibility view” because Marxist historians primarily focused on the degree to which the proletariat was able to fulfil its historical, revolutionary mission in each nation. Ethnic, national, and religious loyalties were thought to be obstacles. Consequently, the classical histories of the Second International painted a sharp contradiction between the war participation of most social democrats and their prewar professions of internationalism.¹⁸ Gradually, starting from the mid 1960s with the work of Conze and Groh, the traditional opposition between class and nation was questioned.¹⁹ Since then, the radical break between the *belle époque* and August 1914 has been interpreted as a more continuous transition. At the same time it has been argued that the support of workers for the national war effort did not necessarily denote “the demise or absence of class consciousness”.²⁰

THE BWP: BELGIAN AND ANTI-FLEMISH?

The “modern” Belgian nation took shape in the late eighteenth century. When Belgium seceded from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830, French – spoken in Wallonia, which is the southern part of the country, and by the elites across the linguistic border – became the sole language of state, although more than half of the population used a Flemish/Dutch dialect exclusively. Against this background the Flemish movement (whose supporters are called *flamingants*) arose to protect the vernacular culture, and ultimately the Flemish nation.

How the Belgian and Flemish nations related is not unequivocally clear. There is a continuum of opinions which begins with the francophone historian, Jean Stengers, who maintained that before 1914 the Flemish population did not care about Flanders and was fervently Belgian.²¹ A variation on this theme states that there was a weakly developed sense of Belgianness that completely overshadowed the (virtually non-existent)

18. E.g. George D.H. Cole, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (London, 1956); James B. Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (New York, 1966 [1955]).

19. Werner Conze and Dieter Groh, *Die Arbeiterbewegung in der nationalen Bewegung. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor, während und nach der Reichsgründung* (Stuttgart, 1966).

20. Dick Geary, “Working-Class Identities in Europe, 1850–1914”, in Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *National Histories and European History*, 2nd edn (London, 1994), pp. 204–215, 213.

21. Jean Stengers and Eliane Gubin, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge: de 1830 à 1918* (Brussels, 2002), pp. 86–87.

Flemish and Walloon identities.²² At the opposite end of the spectrum, it is argued that “Belgium” never conquered the hearts of the Flemings because of their strong ethnic identity, a view associated with partisan Flemish nationalist historiography. Between these poles we find Lode Wils, the *éminence grise* of Flemish historiography, who sees no immediate contradiction between the different national loyalties: until 1914 love of Flanders and Belgium were complementary. It was only after the Great War, as a result of the German *Flamenpolitik*, that anti-Belgian sentiments took root in Flemish nationalism.²³

Where is the BWP to be situated on this continuum of opinions? Until recently, Belgian research on national identity and the labour movement was mainly a political historiography studying Christian-democratic and social-democratic attitudes towards the Flemish movement and linguistic legislation. There is hardly any research on how national identity was constructed within the labour movement. Most standard works and monographs on Belgian social democracy have barely touched this theme, sometimes claiming that internationalism precluded ethnic and national identifications.²⁴

In spite of this neglect, the overall image that emerges from publications dealing with bordering issues (the relationship of the labour movements to the Flemish movement, the monarchy, colonialism, militarism, and World War I) is relatively clear: “the BWP did not evolve ‘du rouge au tricolore’: from the very start it was both Belgian and socialist”.²⁵ Socialists barely identified with Flanders, “whatever national orientation they had, referred to the Belgian dimension”.²⁶ If scholars refer at all to Flemish–Walloon differences within the BWP, it is in the limited context of linguistic legislation shortly before 1914. At that point the gap between Flemish and Walloon MPs about the range of language laws became so large that party discipline was relinquished: they could freely choose how to vote.²⁷ Yet, it is generally agreed that this dissension had only a limited impact (for instance there was no language conflict

22. Patricia Penn Hilden, *Women, Work, and Politics: Belgium 1830–1914* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 101, 306.

23. Lode Wils, *Van Clovis tot Di Rupo: de lange weg van de naties in de lage landen* (Leuven, 2005 [1992]).

24. J. Beaufays, “Le socialisme et les problèmes communautaires”, in Claude Desama (ed.), *1885–1985: du parti ouvrier belge au parti socialiste* (Brussels, 1985), pp. 255–278, 255.

25. Guy Vanschoenbeek, “Socialisten: gezellen zonder vaderland? De BWP en haar verhouding tot het ‘vaderland België’”, *Cahiers d’histoire du temps présent* [Brussels], 3 (1997), pp. 237–255, 238.

26. Patrick Pasture, “The Temptations of Nationalism: Regionalist Orientations in the Belgian Christian Labour Movement”, in Patrick Pasture and Johan Verberckmoes (eds), *Working-Class Internationalism and the Appeal of National Identity* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 107–149, 109–110.

27. Harry Van Velthoven, *De Vlaamse kwestie 1830–1914: macht en onmacht van de Vlaamsgezinden* (Kortrijk, 1982).

within the party²⁸) and that it had nothing to do with diverging national identifications.

This consensus derives from two influential scholarly paradigms. On the one hand, the gradual integration of the BWP into the socio-political and economic system is seen as a direct indication of its Belgianness. Thus the movement's reformism, its participation in elections and municipal executives, its bureaucratization, and its heavy reliance on consumer cooperatives predisposed the BWP towards the Belgian fatherland.²⁹

On the other hand, research inspired by the thesis of Wils, that Christian democracy and the Flemish movement were exclusively and inexchangeably interwoven, maintains that the anti-*flamingant* BWP was hostile towards Flemish nation-building.³⁰ The positive attitude of Christian democrats towards *flamingantism* implied their "vanguard position [...] in a process of regional [Flemish] identification", while the negative socialist reaction denoted a negligible identification with Flanders.³¹ Pasture explicitly claims that the socialists "de facto identified with the dominant language [French] and the leading ethnic group [the francophone Belgians]".³²

This thesis is indebted to Miroslav Hroch's comparison of "small national movements" in nineteenth-century Europe. Hroch concluded

28. A. Pletinckx, "Van relatieve eenheid naar scheiding: het Vlaams-Waals probleem", in Jaak Brepoels *et al.* (eds), *Eeuwige dilemma's: honderd jaar socialistische partij* (Leuven, 1985), pp. 96–126, 100.

29. 1885–1985. *Honderd jaar socialisme: Een terugblik* (Ghent, 1985), p. 94; Jaak Brepoels, *Wat zoudt gij zonder 't werkvolk zijn? Anderhalve eeuw arbeidersstrijd in België* (Leuven, 1988), p. 67; Hugues Le Paige and Pascal Delwit (eds), *Les Socialistes et le pouvoir: gouverner pour réformer?* (Brussels, 1998); André Mommen, *De Belgische Werkliedenpartij: Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van het reformistisch socialisme (1880–1914)* (Ghent, 1980), p. 231; Janet Louise Polasky, *The Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde: Between Reform and Revolution* (Oxford, 1995), p. 52; Pascal Delwit and José Gotovitch, "La peur des rouges", in *idem* (eds), *La peur du rouge* (Brussels, 1996), pp. vii–xv, x; Leo Picard, "Tussen de twee wereldoorlogen", in Jan Dhondt (ed.), *Geschiedenis van de socialistische arbeidersbeweging in België* (Antwerp, 1960–1968), pp. 483–516, 489; Herman Balthazar, "Bestaat er een Vlaams, Waals en Brussels socialisme?", *Ons Erfdeel*, 22 (1979), pp. 544–551, 547–548.

30. Jan Erk, "Sub-state Nationalism and the Left-Right Divide: Critical Junctures in the Formation of Nationalist Labour Movements in Belgium", *Nations and Nationalism*, 11 (2005), pp. 551–570, 560–561; Patrick Pasture, "Divergent Developments, Regional Alliances and National Solidarity in Belgium", in Johan Wets (ed.), *Cultural Diversity in Trade Unions: A Challenge to Class Identity?* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 35–70, 42.

31. Pasture, "The Temptations of Nationalism", p. 138. Even Strikwerda, who points out that Belgian workers were divided by language, claims that the Ghent socialists did not take the "Flemishness" of their rank and file seriously because of their anti-*flamingantism*; Carl Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium* (Lanham, MD, 1997), p. 314.

32. Patrick Pasture, "Kerk, natie en arbeidersklasse. Een essay over collectieve identificatie, in het bijzonder m.b.t. de (christelijke) arbeidersbeweging in België", *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent* [Brussels], 6 (1999), pp. 7–36, 10.

that such movements were hard put to attract working-class support and become a mass affair if they only started to make political demands once the industrial and bourgeois-democratic revolutions were already over, for it was these revolutions that created the conditions for the rise of autonomous labour organizations. According to Hroch, the workers' movement became successful in Belgium before the Flemish movement could link an emancipatory project to its cultural programme in order to reach the proletariat.

In the early nineteenth century, Belgium was the first country on the continent to industrialize. The bourgeois revolution that broke the political power of the *ancien régime* elites took place in 1830. But it was only afterwards, from 1835 onward, that the Flemish movement took root, and only at the end of the century that it started to formulate a comprehensive socio-political programme. At that point the working classes and their political manifestation, the BWP, were – following Hroch – already integrated into the larger Belgian fatherland. The smaller Flemish nation passed them by. Hence, Hroch labels pre-1914 Flanders as a “disintegrated” nation because the Flemish movement went from phase A (folkloric interest) to B (patriotic agitation), but it did not reach phase C in which “national consciousness [had] become the concern of the broad masses”.³³ Hroch’s framework clearly introduces the question of international comparability. How evolutions in Belgium related to developments in the rest of Europe, and in similar multi-ethnic states such as the dual monarchy and Switzerland, is of course an issue that necessitates a monograph in its own right. Nevertheless I will briefly examine this question in my conclusion.

Historians who doubt Wils’s proposition about the interwoven nature of Christian democracy and the national movement, stress that – while the Flemish socialists were no trendsetters – they consistently backed the pro-Flemish linguistic legislation.³⁴ They agree, however, that the socialist unity was bolstered by a shared Belgianness across the language border. Ideological differences were due to socio-economic and not ethnic reasons.³⁵

This paper contends that a gradual integration of the BWP within the Belgian socio-economic and political system did indeed occur between

33. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, 2000 [1985]), p. 23.

34. E.g. Van Velthoven, *De Vlaamse kwestie 1830–1914*.

35. Jan Dhondt, “Inwendige strijd over de te volgen tactiek (1885–1914)”, in Dhondt, *Geschiedenis van de socialistische arbeidersbeweging*, pp. 413–420, 418; Marcel Liebman, *Les socialistes belges 1885–1914. La révolte et l’organisation* (Brussels, 1979), pp. 92–97; Els Witte, Jan Craeybeckx, and Alain Meynen, *Political History of Belgium from 1830 onwards* (Antwerp, 2000), pp. 78–79.

1885 and 1914. This national integration, in its strictest sense, implied a more positive attitude towards national defence, the monarchy, and colonialism, but it did not develop into a unified national identity because the ethnic differences between Flemings and francophones within the BWP remained. The rationale behind this argument can be summarized into five points.

First of all, as the BWP was a decentralized party divided into local federations, my research is based on an explicit comparison of three federations: Ghent (Flanders), Brussels, and the Borinage (Wallonia) – but it is supplemented by material that justifies more general conclusions for the whole party.³⁶ Owing to this comparative method, contrasting situations, in which clear differences between the federations surfaced, are more readily identifiable. It is, for instance, striking how patriotic references in francophone party publications were lost in translation. When Borinage socialist Léon Defuisseaux called the Ghent socialists “convinced patriots”, this phrase was dropped in the Dutch translation. Defuisseaux’s description of the socialist rank and file as “thousands of citizens trembling with patriotism” became “thousands of enthusiastic democrats”.³⁷ On their own, examples such as these are inconclusive, but taken together they provide a meaningful background.

Secondly, my conclusions are not based on a guided sample, but on a systematic long-term analysis of complete source series from the *belle époque*. Thus it is easier to contextualize socialist propositions that have been hitherto used in historiographical discussions and to distinguish between relatively stable and more superficial elements in discourses about Flanders and Belgium.

Thirdly, research into national identity in Belgium has generally overemphasized Belgian *ethnicity* prior to 1914, by focusing too strongly on the uncontested acceptance of the Belgian *state*. Because of Lode Wils’s influential thesis that anti-Belgian sentiments were a mere product of the German *Flamenpolitik* during World War I, scholars have tended to underrate exclusively Flemish ethnic tendencies before 1914.

Fourthly, the general overestimation of the party unity is due to the “memory loss” within the BWP after 1914 – the pre-war ethnic discord did not fit the party’s postwar success story. Fifthly, due to the

36. Besides material on the three case federations, my Ph.D. research is based on all surviving party archives and publications at the national level (e.g. the minutes of the party council, bureau, and congresses). Additionally, I have used police reports and court archives for the whole provinces of East Flanders, Brabant, and Hainault (including the important “red” regions of Charleroi and the Centre). I have also examined 54 party papers of which 18 were not issued by or limited to the 3 case federations. Research into the federations of Liège and Antwerp is underway.

37. Resp. Léon Defuisseaux, *Les hontes du suffrage censitaire* (Brussels, 1887), pp. 115, 280; *idem*, *De schanddaden van het cijnskiestelsel* (Ghent, 1891), pp. 146–148, 340.

twentieth-century *flamingant* discursive monopoly on “Flanders”, the distance separating the socialists from the “small” nation has been exaggerated. The Flemish movement has successfully imagined itself as the whole nation’s vanguard and its enemies as “bad Flemings”. Consequently, the Ghent socialists who were often hostile towards the *flamingants* for concrete ideological reasons have been depicted as lukewarm Flemings, but enthusiastic Belgians. Yet, there is not necessarily a causal link between (anti-)flamingantism and (non-)identification with Flanders, just as we cannot equate (anti-)socialist to (anti-)social. A belief in the Flemish *imagined community* does not imply unhesitating support for the Flemish movement as there were too many competing interests at play.

To illustrate the impact of ethnicity in the BWP, this paper will develop four themes: the socialist views on the Belgian revolution, pragmatism and conviction in national discourses, the rise of oppositional patriotism from 1895 onwards and the growing ethnic tensions shortly before 1914.

THE BELGIAN REVOLUTION OF 1830

At the time of the BWP’s founding in 1885, francophone socialists vilified bourgeois Belgium as “the paradise of capitalists”, but bemoaned the *real* working-class Belgium as “our pitiful country”.³⁸ As in Great Britain, France, and Germany, the socialist champions of the abused fatherland grounded themselves within the national tradition by appropriating the Belgian past.³⁹ Working-class protests were nothing but a manifestation of the typically Belgian lust for freedom – of the proud “Belgian blood that ran through their veins”⁴⁰ – that had inspired past risings against “foreign” tyrants.⁴¹

In Ghent, the indisputable spearhead of Flemish socialism before 1914, things evolved differently. The Ghent socialists regarded Belgium primarily as a *Gesellschaft*, a polity of equal citizens that was to be realized in the future, not as an *ethnie*. On the one hand, they emphasized the unity of the *Belgian* proletariat, appealing to the “socialists of Belgium”,⁴² but the argument of a shared Belgian ethnicity was not brought to bear. For one thing, they did not appropriate Belgium with

38. *En avant pour le SU*, 15 August 1886, p. 3.

39. E.g. Berger, “British and German Socialists between Class and National Solidarity”, p. 45; Roger Magraw, “Appropriating the Symbols of the Patrie? Jacobin Nationalism and its Rivals in the French Third Republic”, in Berger and Smith, *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity*, pp. 93–120, 112.

40. Police surveillance report of a socialist meeting in Brussels, 25 March 1886, City of Brussels Archives, Police. Pol. 176 XII 5.

41. *Le Peuple*, 9 May 1886, p. 1.

42. *Vooruit*, 26 March 1885, p. 1.

ANNIVERSAIRE DE LA RÉVOLUTION DE 1830

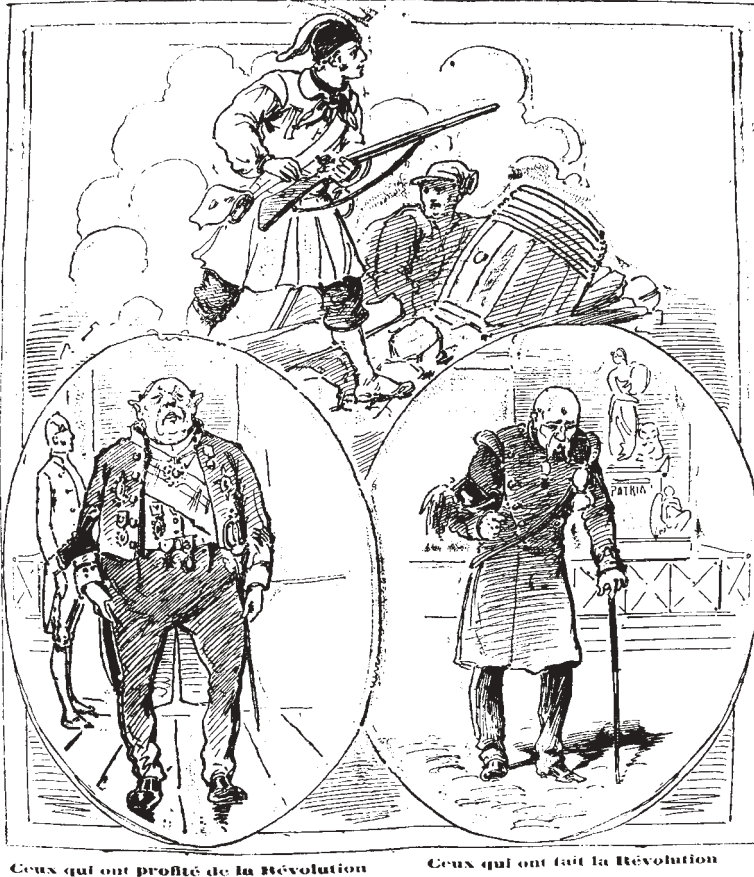


Figure 1. The stolen Belgian revolution: the old veterans who were on the barricades in 1830 are destitute while only the fat bourgeois have profited.

Le Peuple, 23 September 1888

personifications, possessive, or affectionate descriptions. When *Vooruit*, the Ghent party paper, featured articles from the francophone party press, significant adaptations were made in Dutch. While “our beloved Belgium”⁴³ was tersely translated as “Belgium”,⁴⁴ “suffering Flanders” was indeed pitied.⁴⁵ The Flemish *mythomoteur* provided a background for

43. *En avant pour le SU*, 16 May 1886, p. 1.

44. *Vooruit*, 17 May 1886, p. 2.

45. *Vooruit*, 5 and 6 April 1886, p. 1. Until World War I, two meanings of “Flanders” were used side by side: the modern concept indicating the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium and

many of the Ghent articles, brochures, songs, and speeches. The era of the medieval Flemish communes (that were *not* identified as Belgian) was particularly popular, as was the Battle of the Spurs (the battle of Courtrai on 11 July 1302 between the troops of the French king and the victorious army of the communes of the county of Flanders). When Edouard Anseele, the Ghent party boss and leader of the Flemish socialists, was imprisoned in 1886 for *lese majesty*, *Vooruit* encouraged the rank and file not to lose hope: “when a Flemish warrior fell in the Battle of the Spurs, there were ten to take his place [...]!”⁴⁶

The poor appeal of the Belgian *mythomoteur* in Ghent is best exemplified by the myth of 1830. Most historians have considered the “stolen revolution” as *the* socialist interpretation of 1830: the proletariat had spilled its blood to drive away the Dutch king, William I, but in the new state it was excluded by the bourgeoisie. The fruits of a proletarian rising were stolen! All over Europe labour movements had myths of great historical events in which the working classes took centre stage but were cheated by the bourgeoisie (e.g. the Norman Conquest in British socialism).⁴⁷

Francophone socialists actively participated in the annual commemoration of the 1830 revolution in the late 1880s. It was not only its revolutionary or social dimension they appropriated, but also its national meaning as a rebellion of “our forefathers”⁴⁸ against the despised “Dutch yoke”.⁴⁹ As such, the myth of the stolen revolution received a patriotic subtext – paralleled, for instance, by the SPD’s emphasis on “the national implications of the 1848 revolutions more than the actual revolt of the masses”.⁵⁰

It has been generally assumed that the “stolen revolution” was also a dearly held myth of the Flemish socialists, and this argument has been supported by reference to Anseele’s 1882 novel, *The Revolution of 1830*.⁵¹ Yet, in his preface and epilogue, Anseele dismissed the idea of an

the older localist meaning of the medieval county of Flanders (spanning the eastern part of present-day Flanders). This conceptual confusion does not preclude the imagining of a Flemish *ethnie* in the nineteenth century. For contemporaries both concepts were so interchangeable that “small Flanders” came to evoke “large Flanders”; Maurits Gysseling, “Vlaanderen: Etymologie en betekenis-evolutie”, in *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* (Tiel, 1998), pp. 3491–3496, 3495–3496. After all, localism *is* compatible with larger identifications; Alon Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), p. 98.

46. *Vooruit*, 8 November 1886, p. 1.

47. Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, p. 7.

48. *Le Peuple*, 18 March 1886, p. 1.

49. Gendarmerie surveillance report of a socialist meeting in Charleroi-Nord and Lodelinsart, 6 June 1886, National Archives Anderlecht, Cour d’appel de Bruxelles-Parquet-général, 225.

50. Kevin Callahan, “Performing Inter-Nationalism’ in Stuttgart in 1907: French and German Socialist Nationalism and the Political Culture of an International Socialist Congress”, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), pp. 51–87, 56.

51. Vanschoenbeek, “Socialisten: gezellen zonder vaderland?”, pp. 238–239.

expropriated rising and wrote that 1830 was nothing but “a self-service revolution of the papists and the bourgeoisie”, it was “no proletarian revolution” at all.⁵² He did not only reject its labour dimension, but also its “national consequences”, viz. the founding of Belgium. The 1830 revolution was “a disastrous evil, because it has created yet another border on the map, a huge obstacle to the fraternization of two children of the same race”. This alluded to the idea of the Greater Netherlands (the *Dietsche* nation), an old ethnic and cultural unity between Flanders and the Netherlands based on a community of language. According to Anseele, Belgium was an artificial country, in the same league as “the preposterous governments of [...] Austria, Sweden and Norway, Russia, England, Ireland and Scotland and other such political absurdities”. The union of Flanders and the Netherlands was “more reasonable and more natural than the present union of Flemings and Walloons [...] as this has turned out to be at the expense of [the Flemings]”.⁵³

Anseele was no exception. The appeal of the *Dietsche* nation in Ghent has been underestimated. Some scholars have hinted at “Pan-Netherlandic” tendencies during the period of the First International, which disappeared after the foundation of the BWP.⁵⁴ Yet, until World War I, contacts with Dutch colleagues were cordial (even during the rows with the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis),⁵⁵ and the idea of an ethnic Pan-Netherlandic community remained consistently more popular than the myth of the stolen revolution. This was especially clear in 1905 when Belgium celebrated its seventy-fifth birthday. The critique that “the historical stupidity of 1830” had split the Pan-Netherlandic nation was given voice in the Ghent propaganda that rejected the celebrations.⁵⁶

In explaining this Pan-Netherlandic current, one might refer to the pro-Netherlands, “Orangist” tradition in the liberal bourgeois circles of Ghent. But these Orangists – after the Dutch royal house of Orange – only regretted the dominance of the clergy in the Belgian state and the loss of the Dutch colonial markets. They had few qualms about the ensuing “frenchification” or the split of the *Dietsche* “race”.⁵⁷ Moreover, it is

52. Edouard Anseele, *De omwenteling van 1830. Historische roman* (Ghent, 1882), pp. i–iii.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 460–462.

54. Hendrik Defoort and Guy Vanschoenbeek, “Socialistische partij”, in *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging*, pp. 2777–2789, 2777; Daisy Devreese, “De rode Groot-Nederlandse gedachte”, *Spiegel historicael*, 9 (1975), pp. 476–485, 485.

55. Bert Altena, *Een broeinest der anarchie: arbeiders, arbeidersbeweging en maatschappelijke ontwikkeling: Vlissingen 1875–1929 (1940)* (Amsterdam, 1989), pp. 75, 78–82, 125; Dennis Bos, *Waarachtige volksvrienden: de vroege socialistische beweging in Amsterdam 1848–1894* (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 168–169, 242; Hendrik Defoort, *Werklieden bemint uw profijt! De Belgische sociaaldemocratie in Europa* (Leuven, 2006), pp. 409–410.

56. *Vooruit*, 22 July 1905, p. 2.

57. Maurice De Vroede, “Het orangisme in de Vlaamse beweging”, *Nieuw Vlaams tijdschrift*, (1948), pp. 964–995, 980–981.



Figure 2. Edouard Anseele.
Collection AMSAB-ISG. Used with permission.

unlikely that these bourgeois francophone Orangists were able to exert a direct influence because there were hardly any contacts between them and the early Ghent socialists.⁵⁸ It is more likely that we are dealing with a popular, relatively autonomous remnant of Orangism.

PRAGMATIC VS CONVINCED DISCOURSES

We might ask ourselves whether the diverging national discourses within the BWP were merely a reaction to the differing social milieus in which the labour movement developed, rather than a reflection of a deeper conviction. Before the introduction of general plural suffrage in 1893–

⁵⁸ Guy Vanschoenbeek, *Novecento in Gent: de wortels van de sociaal-democratie in Vlaanderen* (Antwerp, 1995), pp. 245–246.

1894, the Ghent socialists had to woo the petty bourgeoisie, the artisans, and the *flamingants* at the time of elections.⁵⁹ Was it to please them that they exalted Flanders and the Greater Netherlands? Two arguments plead against this opportunistic interpretation.

First of all, the *flamingants* did have a pronounced Belgian patriotic streak before 1914. Indeed, Flanders and Belgium were compatible with them at this point in time as evidenced when they celebrated the Battle of the Spurs by flying the Belgian tricolour.⁶⁰ Yet, the Ghent socialists, especially in the early years of the BWP, were very contemptuous of the tricolour, “the national patchwork”.⁶¹ When it appeared in popular theatres, the “reds” in the audience began to whistle and yell.⁶² During the whole *belle époque*, both liberal and Catholic *flamingants*, as well as the Christian labour movement, severely criticized this socialist disrespect. They presented themselves as Belgian patriots against the “Vaterlandslose Gesellen”. In 1891 the front page of *De Domper*, a Catholic anti-socialist workers' paper from Ghent, showed a Christian worker waving a Belgian flag with the motto “Religion, family, property”, while vanquishing the monster of socialism (see Figure 3 overleaf).⁶³

If mere opportunism was the Ghent socialists' motive to talk of Flanders, it is remarkable that they did not moderate their anti-national and anti-Belgian rhetoric. This did not only deter the *flamingants* and anti-socialists, but it also gave them easy ammunition against the “red menace”. Because these opponents were Flemish-minded and Belgian patriotic, it would have been logical if the socialists had attuned their “opportunistic” discourse to both elements. As this did not occur, it is an important indication that it was the result of a “convinced” identification with Flanders.

A second argument which nuances the supposed opportunism of the Ghent socialists is the emotional acuity and continuity of their Flemish discourse. Their references to “the race of the free Flemings, that once battled so valiantly for Flanders' freedom, for work and bread”⁶⁴ were too passionate to be a mere electoral appeal to *flamingants* or Christian workers. Moreover, they persisted outside electoral periods, even at turbulent times when working-class identities were continually stirred up.

59. *Idem*, “Vooruit”, in *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging*, pp. 3563–3566, 3563.

60. Louis Vos, “The Flemish National Question”, in Louis Vos and Kas Deprez (eds), *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780–1995* (London, 1998), pp. 83–95, 87.

61. *Vooruit*, 26 May 1890, p. 1. In Ghent the flag was not merely denounced as a *bourgeois* symbol, but (unlike in francophone BWP federations) also for being *Belgian*. If it had not been for the 1830 revolution “that infamous national flag would have been history”; *Vooruit*, 25 August 1886, p. 1.

62. *Vooruit*, 20 April 1886, p. 3; 27–28 November 1886, p. 4; 26 February 1887, p. 4; 21 January 1889, p. 1.

63. *De Domper*, 16 August 1891.

64. *Vooruit*, 10 April 1885, p. 1.

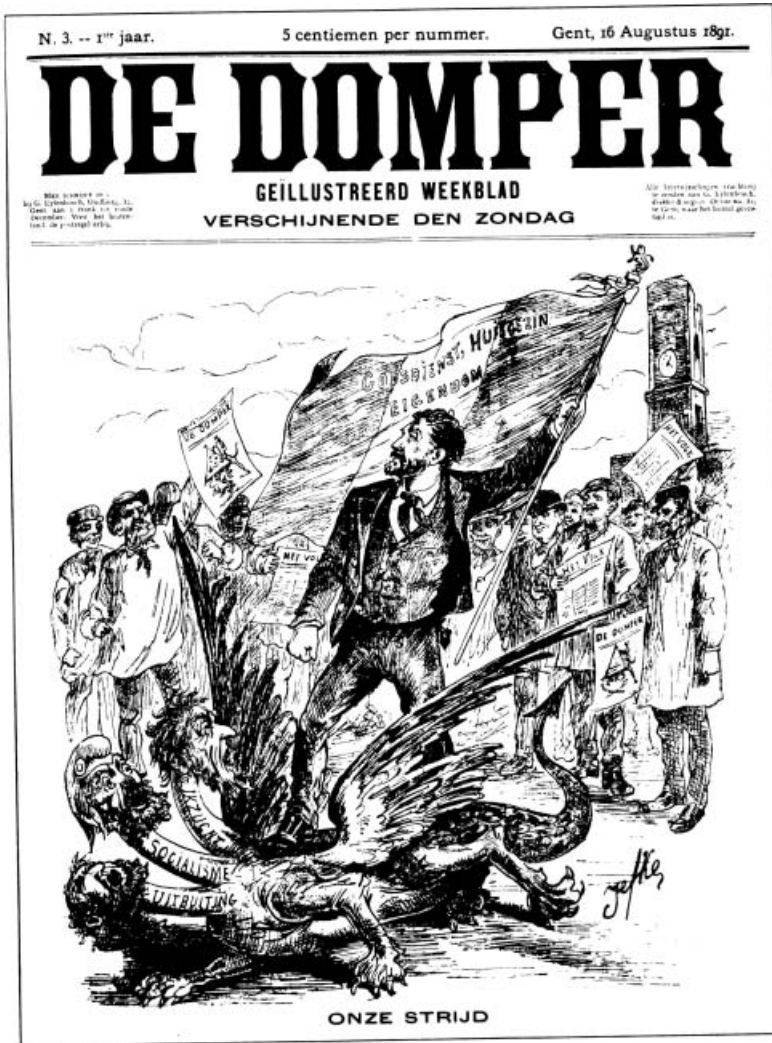


Figure 3. The Belgian tricolour in the Christian labour movement
De Domper, 16 August 1891.

In April 1886 for instance, *Vooruit* published an ode to Flanders in two consecutive lead articles, while the largest wave of labour unrest in the country's history was climaxing in Wallonia and help from the *flamingants* failed to come. Socialism was given a “full-blooded Flemish” parentage. “Flemish socialism”, so the author claimed, “has accepted the sublime mission to awaken [Flanders] from its murderous slumber by use of the

Dutch language, the language of our forebears, our parents and our children".⁶⁵

There may indeed have been times when the Ghent socialists flaunted their love of Flanders to play up to the Flemish-minded electorate. But the only reason that they *could* do this was because it did not impinge upon their convictions.⁶⁶ After all, opportunism has its limits. How can one otherwise explain that a possible alliance with *flamingants* might have seduced the Ghent socialists to the Flemish *mythomoteur*, while the dearly held principle of party unity did not produce references to Belgian ethnicity?

THE RISE OF OPPOSITIONAL PATRIOTISM

From 1895 onwards, oppositional patriotism became dominant in the BWP, as in most other social-democratic parties of western Europe. An incident that clearly highlighted the changing attitudes was the 1898 burning of a Belgian flag in Charleroi. On 23 May, the local socialists had celebrated their victory in the parliamentary elections. Amidst the revelry a Belgian tricolour had been set aflame and the entire Belgian anti-socialist press took exception to this. The federations of Brussels, Charleroi, and the Borinage were quick to minimize what had happened and to put their patriotism on record. They emphasized that what had been assailed was not the symbol of national unity ("we love our country with a passionate and sincere love"), but an icon of "the inequality and injustice of the present regime".⁶⁷ The socialist *Journal de Charleroi* published several articles to deny "that the socialists of Charleroi had insulted the Fatherland and burned the national flag",⁶⁸ and to announce: "More than ever we will have the pleasure and the honour to fly the national flag on holidays."⁶⁹

This positive appropriation of the national flag by socialists, who until the late 1890s had almost unanimously rejected it as a bourgeois symbol, was but one symptom of oppositional patriotism. The ideal of the "nation armée" (arming the people to replace standing armies) was relinquished for a "realist" campaign for general conscription and improved living conditions in the army. Gradually the conditions required for the participation of the working classes in the war were worn down. Around 1895, the BWP demanded total social and political equality in exchange for its support of a defensive war, but by 1914 the leadership had become convinced that partial suffrage was worth defending. The republican

65. *Vooruit*, 5 and 6 April 1886, p. 1.

66. Similar reasonings apply to the Belgian discourse in francophone federations; Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland*, pp. 103–104.

67. *Le Peuple*, 25 May 1898, pp. 1–2.

68. *Le Journal de Charleroi*, 26 May 1898, p. 2.

69. *Le Journal de Charleroi*, 29 May 1898, p. 2.

programme was also steadily mitigated, especially after the marriage of Albert, the popular heir to the throne in 1900. Finally, from 1908 a “reformist colonialism” replaced the former rejection of Leopold II’s colonial Congo.

Four phenomena were at the root of this evolution. First of all, the economic growth of the Second Industrial Revolution improved the living conditions of Belgian workers from 1895 on. In contrast to Marx’s prediction, capitalism did not implode. Most Belgian socialists, who were already adepts of “revolutionary attentism”, realized that they had better get to grips with certain aspects of bourgeois society.

Secondly, in 1893–1894 universal male suffrage was introduced (with a system of plural votes for family heads, academics, and house owners). As a result, twenty-eight socialists were elected to Parliament in 1894 and the BWP could put its programme into practice in the provincial executives of Hainaut and Liège and in a considerable number of municipal executives. This certainly reinforced the conciliatory currents in the party.

Thirdly, the end of the nineteenth century saw a revival of Belgian nationalism in francophone bourgeois circles that campaigned against the “socialists without a fatherland”. Because the BWP had chosen the path of “power through elections”, it could not afford to frighten off voters with radical internationalism (state borders and national differences had to disappear as all workers were subject to the same capitalist exploitation).

Fourthly, it was the introduction of universal plural suffrage in 1893–1894 that made the ethnic relations really relevant to the BWP. The elections in October 1894 established the trend for years to come: Flanders voted Catholic, Brussels liberal, and Wallonia socialist. The BWP leadership was acutely aware of the dangers this posed to the unity of the party and to the Belgian proletariat. To fend these off, the francophone leadership started to wield a patriotic discourse. It has been argued that Anseele became a *Belgian* symbol because of his election as an MP in the Walloon city of Liège.⁷⁰ The Ghent federation, though, had to offer the Liège socialists an interest-free loan of 10,000 francs in exchange for this seat.⁷¹ Moreover, the indivisibility of the Belgian proletariat was sacrosanct to the Ghent socialists, but they upheld it without reference to the Belgian *mythomoteur*. In Walloon federations the ethnic image of Belgium as an extended family was propagated with the well-known patriotic dictum “Flemings and Walloons are but first names, Belgian is our family name”.⁷² Yet, Anseele, when confronted with this motto at a francophone meeting in Laken (near Brussels) in June 1896, ignored it and even called “the revolution of 1830 [...] a mistake”.

70. Stengers and Gubin, *Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge*, pp. 85–86.

71. Vanschoenbeek, *Novecento in Gent*, p. 31.

72. *Le Journal de Charleroi*, 15 February 1897, p. 1.

The audience, which had loudly acclaimed the other speakers, remained ominously silent.⁷³

Despite oppositional patriotism, a unified national or ethnic identity did not develop. Too many contradictory mechanisms were at work. For instance, the abolition of the parliamentary majority system in 1899 and the concomitant extension of the Ghent constituency with the district of Eeklo favoured Flemish identification processes. An initial consequence was that the Ghent socialists had to reach out to the rural voters in the province, the “brothers of poor Flanders”.⁷⁴ It is true that they rejected “bigoted Flanders”,⁷⁵ but several scholars have overlooked the positive appropriation. Time and again, *Vooruit* summoned the Ghent proletariat “to wake up Flanders from its deadly sleep. [...] Flanders is in danger! Flanders will be saved!”⁷⁶ Secondly, many Walloon socialists, who had benefited from majority rule, grew dissatisfied as they lost several seats in the 1900 elections, while the Flemish socialists, who had campaigned for proportional representation, only obtained 7 per cent of the vote. The Borinage party paper, for instance, complained that “the most enlightened part of Belgium is subjected to the domination of the fanatical and most ignorant part”.⁷⁷

The 1902 general strike for suffrage was an important catalyst too. As the BWP wielded a revolutionary rhetoric, police reports of suffrage meetings in Wallonia contain many references to the Belgian revolution of 1830. Former miner and Charleroi MP, Cavrot, for instance, stirred up a working-class audience exclaiming that “the blood of the 1830 revolutionaries still runs through the veins of the people”.⁷⁸ This revolutionary verbalism went hand in hand with a patriotic discourse. On 11 April, two days before the official proclamation of the general strike, the national party council issued a manifest “to save the country”.⁷⁹

In Ghent, the suffrage campaign had a different background: patriotic arguments and references to 1830 were lacking, but there was a heavy emphasis on “poor Flanders” and the Battle of the Spurs. In 1902 the 600th anniversary of the battle was celebrated. A fierce symbolic struggle over the Flemish *mythomoteur* ensued.⁸⁰ The Ghent socialists denied “the clerical party the right to celebrate this victory of our forefathers”.⁸¹ They

73. *Le Peuple*, 19 June 1896, p. 1.

74. *Vooruit*, 11 February 1900, p. 1.

75. *Vooruit*, 28 September 1902, p. 2.

76. *Vooruit*, 13 November 1900, p. 1.

77. *Le Suffrage universel*, 3 June 1900, p. 1.

78. Gendarmerie surveillance report of a socialist meeting in Gosselies (Charleroi), 2 March 1902, National Archives Anderlecht, Cour d'appel de Bruxelles-Parquet-général, 240.

79. National Party Council BWP, 11 April 1902, Amsab-ISG, Ghent, 118/14.

80. Gevert H. Nörtemann, *Im Spiegelkabinett der Historie: der Mythos der Schlacht von Kortrijk und die Erfindung Flanderns im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2002), p. 264.

81. *Vooruit*, 27 February 1902, p. 1.

linked 1302 to their own struggle. As in the past, “Flanders is ready for the great battle and, when the Flemings want it, nothing can withhold universal suffrage from them.”⁸² Scores of articles in the Ghent party press depicted the battle as an internationalist class struggle between the free burghers of Flanders and the aristocracy. Although the idea of 1302 as a “race conflict” between the Flemish and the French was explicitly rejected, there was an undeniable ethnic subtext to this propaganda.

In the ensuing years the propaganda of the Ghent socialists became more ethnicized. Their class discourse fused with *Organisationspatriotismus* and Flemishness into a kind of “ethno-class consciousness”.⁸³ They were proud of what *Vooruit* realized in *Poor Flanders*, a feeling fuelled by the Walloon critique of their failure to conquer the Flemish countryside. After the unsuccessful 1902 general strike, the Ghent socialists decided to subordinate the political propaganda for general suffrage to their economic campaign for reduced working hours, playing class feelings with an anti-capitalist (rather than an anti-clerical) discourse.⁸⁴ The suffrage programme that hinged upon political rights within the Belgian *Gesellschaft* disappeared into the background. Flanders, however, was central to the new class propaganda. As Anseele wrote in 1903, “Flanders has indeed deserved well of the Workers’ Party, and if two terrible powers (Capital and Church) did not oppress it, its flight would be glorious!”⁸⁵ The economic reorientation worked; at least the Ghent socialists had the feeling that they had made progress, as witnessed by the 1906 election of the first Flemish socialist MP outside Ghent (August Debunne in Courtrai) and the increased strike activity in the province. Repeatedly a new optimism was voiced: “Poor Flanders rises, it awakes from its apparent sleep, reborn by the warm breath of socialism”.⁸⁶ Yet, this did not assuage Walloon criticism.

TOWARDS WORLD WAR I: GROWING ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC TENSIONS

The period 1907–1914 showed a growing ethnic and linguistic split in the BWP. The Walloon disillusionment about the electoral impotence of the Flemish socialists became markedly more ethnicized as every difference of opinion was interpreted as a “race” incompatibility.

The bone of contention was the attempt to expand the existing language

82. *Vooruit*, 26 January 1902, p. 1.

83. John J. Kulczycki, *The Foreign Worker and the German Labor Movement: Xenophobia and Solidarity in the Coal Fields of the Ruhr, 1871–1914* (Oxford, 1994), p. 8.

84. Vanschoenbeek, *Novecento in Gent*, p. 44.

85. Letter from Eduard Anseele, in August De Winne, *Door arm Vlaanderen* (Ghent, 1903), pp. v–vi.

86. *Vooruit*, 26 October 1906, p. 1.

legislation to Wallonia and to promote individual bilingualism. A 1907 mine bill obliged mining engineers in Wallonia to have a practical knowledge of Dutch to communicate with Flemish miners. Of the nineteen Walloon socialist MPs, fifteen voted against this measure and it was ultimately cancelled. In 1909, the situation came to a head with the discussion of the bill on labour courts, which ruled that judges had to know both national languages. In Parliament, Anseele, who defended the thousands of Flemish immigrants in Wallonia, clashed with his Walloon party members who found it unacceptable that Walloon judges would have to learn Dutch.⁸⁷ As a result of the growing discord, the clause on language equality was dropped from the BWP programme.

This was a symptom, but also a catalyst, of the ethnic tensions within the party. At the annual party congress of 1909 a Walloon delegate demanded to have the national party council split because the Flemish and the Walloon mentalities were irreconcilable.⁸⁸ The ethnic quarrels in the council did indeed increase. Repeatedly Walloon representatives railed against Flemish migrants in Wallonia and the North of France for undermining the unions.⁸⁹ Anseele, defending his “compatriots”, grew increasingly irritated. In January 1910 he snapped at his Liège colleague Léon Troclet: “The whole socialist movement of the North of France has been founded by immigrant Flemings. No one can maintain that the immigration is reactionary. It is revolutionary.”⁹⁰ In Ghent frustration grew about the reluctance of the Walloon federations to address “the Flemish population of Wallonia” because of their prejudice against “Flemish”, a clerical and unenlightened dialect of strike-breakers.⁹¹

The support of the Ghent socialists for migrant language rights in Wallonia is an example of their complex attitude towards the Flemish movement, linguistic rights, and Flanders. Undeniably, Anseele and his followers were anti-*flamingant*, meaning that they were often, though not always, hostile towards the organizations and front men of the, predominantly Catholic and conservative, Flemish movement. There were very concrete reasons for this: the lack of *flamingant* support in the general suffrage campaign, the anti-socialist activities of the Flemish movement (e.g. recruiting strike-breakers) and its francophobia. Consequently, the Ghent socialists completely subordinated the language problem to the solution of the social question: once the proletariat received its full rights, the language question would solve itself. They did little to support traditional *flamingant* language laws (for instance in secondary and higher education considering that the most basic schooling for the masses was

87. *Vooruit*, 4 and 5 February 1909, p. 3.

88. Beaufays, “Le socialisme et les problèmes communautaires”, p. 260.

89. National Party Council BWP, 13 October 1909, Amsab-ISG, Ghent, 118/25.

90. National Party Council BWP, 21 January 1910, Amsab-ISG, Ghent, 118/26.

91. *Vooruit*, 12 May 1910, p. 2.

lacking). Yet, when the linguistic rights of the proletariat were directly at issue (as in Wallonia), they refused to compromise. Nor did they question Flanders as an imagined community, nor the ultimate legitimacy of the right of Flemings to use their own language. This is often contested by reference to Anseele's short-lived membership of the *Association pour la vulgarisation de la langue française* (founded in 1898 to fight language equality in Belgium). Whatever his motives (networking in anti-clerical circles,⁹² finding financiers for his consumer cooperatives⁹³), Anseele supported the initiatives of the *Association* to spread the knowledge of French as a *second* language (as a means of social emancipation), but *not* its hidden agenda to oust the vernacular. He wanted "both races in Belgium to know both languages".⁹⁴

For the sake of their Walloon colleagues, the Ghent socialists were willing to distance themselves from the organized Flemish movement, for instance by not participating in *flamingant* meetings and marches, but *not* to drop what they considered to be justified language demands. In Parliament Anseele called the diffusion of bilingualism in Wallonia "inevitable",⁹⁵ although this infuriated his Walloon colleagues. Most scholars have underestimated the Ghent socialists' efforts in this field, including Craeybeckx in his insightful essays on socialism and Flemish movement.⁹⁶

The national elections of 1910 and 1912, which did not bring the long hoped for breakthrough of socialism in Flanders, worsened the situation. As Georges Hubin from Huy complained in the national party council meeting of May 1910: "we are tired of trailing the ball and chain of Flemish fanaticism that prevents us from liberating ourselves. [...] The Walloon industrial workers are oppressed by the fanatical Flemish peasants." Anseele's reply was equally harsh: "We must uproot the bad weeds of [Walloon] particularism, chauvinism and nationalism". A month later, the two faced each other again.⁹⁷

Perturbed by the increasing language demands of the *flamingants*, several Walloon socialists veered towards the Walloon/*wallingant* movement which had fought against measures to put Dutch on equal footing with French since the 1880s. In July 1910, the Hainault socialists decided

92. Guy Vanschoenbeek, "Anseele, Edward", in *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging*, pp. 296–298.

93. Hendrik Defoort, "De derde arm. Socialisme en coöperatie in Europa voor 1914" (Ph.D., Ghent University, 2002), p. 285.

94. *Vooruit*, 31 May 1905, p. 1.

95. *Annales Parlementaires Chambre des Représentants de Belgique*, 1897–1898, 11 March 1898, pp. 834–835.

96. Jan Craeybeckx, "Socialisme en Vlaamse beweging omstreeks 1900", in *Provocatie en inspiratie: Liber Amicorum Leopold Flam. Dl. II* (Antwerp, 1975), pp. 787–798, 791, 794; *idem*, *Arbeidersbeweging en Vlaamsgezindheid voor de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Brussels, 1978), pp. 7, 30.

97. National Party Council BWP, 25 May 1910 and 26 June 1910, Amsab–ISG, Ghent, 118/25–26.

to found an overarching provincial federation “to defend the Walloon interests and resist the *flamingant* pretensions”, as read the fourth article of their charter.⁹⁸ In May 1911, a plenary assembly of the Borinage federation *unanimously* adopted a long motion by which it officially entered the *wallingant* camp.⁹⁹ The climax of this *wallingant* turn was the *journée wallonne* organised by the Hainault socialists in September 1913 in Mons. The local *maison du peuple* was adorned with a huge red and Walloon flag to symbolize the symbiosis of the democratic and national programmes.¹⁰⁰

Although the *wallingant* socialists emphasized the incompatibility of the Flemish and Walloon “races”, they were not anti-Belgian. On the contrary, they were disappointed Belgians. As their view of Belgium as an essentially Latin nation was challenged, they symbolically retreated to that part of the fatherland which still corresponded to their mental image, viz. Wallonia. They presented Wallonia as the last resort against the *flamingant* dividers of the country. The Belgian revolution became a preconfiguration of their own battle against the Flemish demands: “the Belgians rebelled in 1830 in French to combat *flamingantism*”.¹⁰¹

The Brussels BWP federation tried to counter the growing ethnic dissension by emphasising its bridging function between Flemings and Walloons and by referring to the unity of the Belgian nation, as did Emile Vandervelde, the patron of the party. In his essay “Is Belgium but a Geographic Term?” he claimed that “the Belgian nationality is not a vain word or a simple diplomatic creation”. It was “born from common traditions, the devotion to the political liberties inscribed in the Constitution, and also, from fear of being absorbed by a neighbouring nation”.¹⁰² In spite of the conciliatory efforts of Brussels and the unifying campaign of the 1913 general strike, the relations between Flemish and Walloon socialists were very tense at the moment that war broke out.

The invading enemy restored the unity of the BWP, but not all differences had disappeared. Not coincidentally, the front-men of socialist *wallingantism* became the fiercest supporters of the most radical strand of Belgian nationalism that would only stop at a total defeat of Germany. Peace initiatives such as the Stockholm conference had more appeal in Flemish BWP federations, that did not support the war unconditionally.¹⁰³

98. *L'avenir du Borinage*, 29 July 1910, p. 2.

99. *L'avenir du Borinage*, 10 May 1911, p. 1.

100. *L'avenir du Borinage*, 8–9 September 1913, pp. 1–2.

101. *L'avenir du Borinage*, 13 January 1911, p. 1.

102. Emile Vandervelde, “La Belgique, est-elle autre chose qu’une expression géographique?”, *L'avenir social*, 11 (1906), pp. 325–327.

103. Mieke Claëys-Van Haegendoren, *25 jaar Belgisch socialisme. Evolutie van de verhouding van de Belgische Werkliedenpartij tot de parlementaire democratie in België van 1914 tot 1940* (Antwerp, 1967), pp. 66, 72, 101–102.

This can be partly put down to the discrepancy between their ethnic and *Gesellschaft* identities.

CONCLUSION

The case of the BWP can elucidate the broader issue of national identity and ethnicity within class-based social movements. The BWP's history has to be re-examined within the context of linguistic and ethnic diversity. As such it is a highly relevant subject for historic research into interlocking identity constructions. The aim of this paper was twofold: (1) to present a more nuanced interpretation of the theme of "social-democracy and national identity" by differentiating between state integration and ethnic identification; and (2) to dispute the image of the BWP as united by a common Belgianness using the evidence of the historic record.

Before World War I, the BWP became steadily integrated in the Belgian nation-state. As in the British, French, and German labour movements, different national discourses existed in juxtaposition, but between 1885 and 1914, *radical or oppositional patriotism* became dominant. Compared to the Russian or Italian social-democrats who actively fought colonization and the duty of national defence, the BWP was more integrated, but beside its German, French, and British sister movements, it seems to have lagged behind. This is, for instance, testified by the complete absence of a patriotic concern for natality and foreign immigration (cf. British *Labour*¹⁰⁴) or by its continuous anti-militaristic propaganda in the army (which the SPD abandoned to avoid the stigma of "Vaterlandsloze Gesellen").¹⁰⁵ This "slower" integration is most likely due to the weakness of traditional nation builders in Belgium. General conscription and compulsory schooling were only introduced shortly before 1914. The Belgian army carried the odium of poverty and abuse (unlike in France and Germany¹⁰⁶), schooling infrastructure was abysmal and literacy levels low. Moreover, because of its neutral status in international relations, Belgium was not involved in violent conflicts between 1839 and 1914, while war is one of the most important nation builders.¹⁰⁷

The BWP's *radical or oppositional patriotism* can be described as national integration in its strictest sense. It was reflected in the gradual marginalization of radical internationalism and the growing acceptance of the monarchy, colonialism, and the principle of national defence, but not in the development of a unified ethnic Belgian identity. In the BWP

104. Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, p. 55.

105. Van der Linden, "The National Integration of the European Working Classes", pp. 285–286.

106. Jakob Vogel, "Military, Folklore, Eigensinn: Folkloric Militarism in Germany and France, 1871–1914", *Central European History*, 33 (2000), pp. 487–504, 488.

107. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT [etc.], 1992), p. 5.

sections of Brussels and Wallonia a francophone Belgian *mythomoteur* held sway, which – especially in the province of Hainault – received a *wallingant* content after 1907 as a result of the dissatisfaction with the growing demands of the Flemish movement. In Ghent a Flemish, even anti-Belgian, ethnic identity prevailed.

The case of the Ghent socialists shows that hostility towards a “small” national movement does not necessarily imply rejection of the “small” nation. This hints at the restrictions of interest-based or top-down explanations of national identity construction. It is not merely a case of rationally choosing the most advantageous collective loyalty, nor of simply swallowing an elite identity force-fed to the passive masses. The Ghent socialist movement – proletarian in origin – was at odds with the *flamingant* elite that promoted a Flemish identity. In other words, we have to take the bottom-up perspective and grassroots appropriation processes at least into account. These conclusions question Hroch’s appraisal of Flanders as a disintegrated nation before 1914. The Ghent socialists identified ethnically with the smaller rather than with the larger nation. Whether this means that Hroch’s phase C (national identity spreads to the masses) had already started before 1914 contrary to what is generally assumed, has to be the object of further research.

An important question in this respect is “how relevant was Flemish identity to the Ghent socialists?” There was clearly a breeding ground for ethnic mobilization. The Flemish *mythomoteur* was at times highly prominent *and* politically relevant (e.g. in the aftermath of the 1902 general strike), but it was not continually translated into “hard” political positions. Unlike their Czech comrades the Ghent socialists were not in the vanguard of the language struggle. The Habsburg and the Belgian situations were too different. In Bohemia the German-speaking and the Czech-speaking rank and file lived side by side, which caused concrete problems of cohabitation. The Czechs felt discriminated against because the local social-democratic party primarily appealed to a labour elite that knew German and felt linguistically emancipated.¹⁰⁸ In Flanders (with the exception of Brussels) the labour movement was universally Dutch. At the grassroots level, there was little language contact and consequently little conflict which could become the basis for a socialist language movement.

Within the Swiss social-democratic movement there were ethnic differences too, but these were less problematic as they were not intertwined with insufficient democratization as in Belgium. On the one hand, Switzerland’s radical constitution of 1848 had already given the labour movement what the Belgian socialists still lacked (universal male

108. Hans Mommsen, “Das problem der internationalen Integration in der Böhmisches Arbeiterbewegung”, in Hans Mommsen (ed.), *Arbeiterbewegung und nationale Frage: ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1979), pp. 166–179, 170.

suffrage and referenda). However, on the other hand, the absence of a strong social-democratic party at the national level and the confederal structure of Switzerland defused the potentially divisive character of ethnicity.¹⁰⁹

Finally, the question arises of how the party unity could be maintained in spite of the ethnic differences. The reason they did not cause a break are the same as those that stopped other tensions (e.g. between the left and the right wing of the party) from causing a break. There were plenty of unifying elements: “the comradeship – strengthened by the general hostility surrounding the party”, the presence of an influential and conciliatory centre group around Emile Vandervelde,¹¹⁰ the gravitational power of the social-democratic meta-narrative and the eventual ascendancy of class over all other imagined communities within the BWP. It was only from 1910 onwards that the linguistic and ethnic tensions really came to threaten the party unity. What might have happened if World War I had not intervened remains an interesting but unanswerable question.

109. Gregory A. Fossedal, *Direct Democracy in Switzerland* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), pp. 46–47; Hans Ulrich Jost, “Switzerland”, in Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (eds), *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870–1914: An International Perspective* (Leiden, 1990), pp. 271–292, 278, 287, 289; Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* (Cambridge, 2003 [1976]), p. 174; M. Vuilleumier, “Traditions et identité nationales, intégration et internationalisme dans le mouvement ouvrier socialiste en Suisse avant 1914”, *Le Mouvement Social*, 147 (1989), pp. 51–68, 53.

110. Liebman, *Les socialistes belges 1885–1914*, p. 257.