Chapter 3: Stalemate

Hatred of the Germans is very real, but with time sentiments of this sort die down, particularly in a nation which is more reasonable than passionate. – King Albert talking to Colonel House

End of the War Movement

With the fall of Antwerp on October 10, 1914, the Belgian army was forced to retreat to the west. They chose to settle behind the Yser River, the last natural barrier available in Belgium. This situation had not been planned, but it was the only option left to keep Belgian territory in Belgian hands. There they fought with the German army once again and this time they were able to hold them at bay with the help of the Allied Powers’ forces. Colonel Wielemans made a plan to inundate the area by opening the flood gates at Nieuport so the Germans would not be able to pass. The operator of the Noordwaterwerking of Veurne, Karel Cogge, was called upon to discuss the possibilities of opening the flood gates. The plan was presented to King Albert, commander of the Belgian army, who approved it, and the strategy succeeded in stopping the German offensive. But the Allied Powers’ forces were unable to push them back, resulting in a stalemate. Both sides started digging themselves in. The first phase of the war was over, and the second, the trench warfare, began.

From then until September 28th 1918, the Belgian army, unlike the Allied Powers’ and Germans’ forces, did not participate in any major attacks. King Albert of Belgium, who was by virtue of the constitution the commander-in-chief of the Belgian army, thought that the offensives that the Allies launched during this time, the Somme, Passchendael, and others, would not be effective and would only sacrifice his already small number of men. His army

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consisted of around 75,000, reduced by death, injuries, capture and escape to the Netherlands during the first phase of the war. In his mind, the attacks could not succeed in piercing through the German defenses, and trying to do so would only be a waste of men and resources. Their activities therefore were confined to staging minor attacks to take some tactically important areas, or to capture German soldiers to get information about what the Germans were planning to do.

Figure 3.1: Western Front

In this phase of the war, in which neither side was able to break through the other side's defenses, a kind of normalcy started to set in among the soldiers. Two conflicting experiences, going in opposite directions, emerged during this time. On the one hand, soldiers got used to their situation at the front and adapted to it. New and old internal conflicts arose again, such as the Flemish/French speaking divide, and encounters with the enemy allowed for personalization.

2 http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/3600/3695/3695.htm.
of the men on the opposite side. The soldiers became aware that men on both sides
experienced and lived in similar situations. On the other hand, the war was still going on,
comrades were getting killed, the Germans shelled and attacked them, brutalities were
committed in the occupied areas, and there was continued remembrance of the invasion and
the atrocities that had happened at the war’s beginning.

What the Belgians Thought of Their Enemy

The stalemate permitted many elements to play a role in the experience of the soldiers.
A good example is a funeral that was held for the patients who suffered an attack of poison gas
at the hospital, just behind the Belgian front lines, where Hilarion Antonius Thans, the monk
who fled Belgium to avoid imprisonment by the Germans, worked. Thans tells us that a general
spoke at the funeral. He said that all Germans were traitors and cowards, and that “[w]e will
avenge ourselves!” Soldiers who worked in the rear area thought that the speakers at the
funeral should have had more pity for the deceased. Men of the cloth would have liked more
emphasis on the sacrifice and devotion of the soldiers in the eulogies. The front line soldiers just
left to go have a drink. Depending on their background, rank, the section of the army they were
in and where they were stationed, soldiers had different views, opinions and experiences of the
war. The two opposing experiences, active animosity or resignation to their situation, as
explained in the previous paragraph, worked in various ways on soldiers of the First World War,
which accounts for the wide range of perceptions soldiers had of their enemy and of the war in
general.

Now that the war had reached a stalemate and both sides dug themselves in to
trenches, or in areas where the ground water level was too high, as in many parts of the Belgian

front, they stacked sand bags for protection. It became rare to see the soldiers of the opposite side. Without personal contact with the other side, they began to speculate about what men on the opposite side are like and what they are doing. Coming out of the first phase of the war, in which emotions were heated because of the events that took place during the invasion, it makes sense that often characteristics opposite of one’s own were attributed to the enemy. According to Grossman, distance between the two sides makes it easier to fight and kill the enemy. Not just physical distances, which were created over great stretches of the Belgian front by the inundation, but also emotional distance. The invasion as well as the rumored and actual atrocities of the Germans created a huge moral distance.\footnote{Dave Grossman, \textit{On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society} (New York: Back Bay Book, 1995), 169.} Rationalizations about the reasons for these differences between the two sides increased the distance even greater.

Pasquier noted in his diary on the 19th of August, 1915, that the Belgian observers he had met never saw any German soldiers out in the open. In his opinion it was thanks to their incredible discipline. Belgians, on the other hand, came out to look at planes fighting in the sky battling against each other, something the Germans never did.\footnote{Arthur Pasquier, \textit{De Grote Oorlog van onderluitenant Arthur L. Pasquier: Veldtochtennotities 1914-1919 van een Waal in de Westhoek}, trans. Andre Gysel (Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zonen, 1999), 127-128.} This was not the only difference between Belgian soldiers and the Germans. De Decker, who joined the war to fight against militarism, recalled,

\begin{quote}
often I wondered: “Do the damned Germans never have enough of the war, are they truly different from us?” Certain is that they too have difficulties laying ahead of them, but I think I can answer affirmatively to my own question, because they have exactly the right power to dominate their own people. They believe in their cause, they feed the war cultus. Additionally their Army and State form an organized unit, while with ours the unity was formed as best as could be as a consequence of the war. I do not have the impression that the Belgian people fight, only the army command have a bellicose soul.\footnote{Rene De Decker, \textit{Deckers’ Dagboek 1914-1919: Notities van een oorlogs vrijwilliger}, trans. Andre Gysel (Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zonen, 1999), 87-88.}
\end{quote}
De Decker attributed the Germans’ bellicose attitude to their staunch belief in their cause and their culture of war, and their conviction that others had to submit to their superior culture. De Decker, however, had doubts about this explanation. He confessed “to tell the truth I have to admit to know only one people who truly have a culture: the French people. The English too but in a lesser amount and seen from a material and practical point of view.” As seen in the introduction, hatred is related to physical and psychological distance from the enemy. Seeing them as different both created and reinforced such a distance.

Other accounts dealt with the issue on a more personal level. Polleke, a Belgian soldier, Van Meerbeek tells us, heard German soldiers singing during Christmas, and went over the top to join them in their musical escapade. The moment they saw Polleke, the Germans shot him. From events like this, Van Meerbeek made up his mind that Germans were cold and unmerciful. On one occasion, Tuesday May 2nd 1916, Pasquier met a wound German officer who was undergoing questioning while a prisoner of war. Despite his severe wounds and new status as a prisoner, however, he remained unfriendly and arrogant toward his Belgian captors. This was to be expected, according to Pasquier, of officers from the other side of the Rhine, thus confirming the stereotypes soldiers already had of them. One soldier even noted that a German officer cut his own throat, rather than be captured by Belgian soldiers. These types of events that the soldiers experienced or heard about confirmed the view of German militarism that the Belgian soldiers already had, and contrasted with themselves, the peace-loving men they thought they were.

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7 Ibid., 87-88.  
9 Fritz Francken, De blijde kruisvaart: een blijmoedig verhaal (Amsterdam: Nederlandsche Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1929), 97-98.  
11 Pasquier, 147.  
Claes’ rage against the Germans increased following his capture and time spend in the prisoner of war camp in Germany. Belgian prisoners were treated incredibly harsh by the Germans. There was very little bread or other food for them. Once, as punishment, Claes was tied to a pole and had to endure the pain and cold for a whole day. The guards had no mercy or sympathy for him. From his experience, he thought that all Germans were the same, both the cruel and the kind. They tried to outdo and bully others with their power, but in reality they are just jealous of what the French and English had, and they wanted, he thought.\(^\text{13}\) Another soldier, Jan Van den Broeck, was discharged from the army because he was wounded after 11 months of war and no longer able to fight. He had gone back home, but was arrested by the Germans as a prisoner of war and sent to a camp for six months. He had this to say about the camp: “the suffering endured there I cannot possibly describe, I went to prison as a healthy man; when I was released I could barely stand on my legs.”\(^\text{14}\)

Later in his book about his stay in Germany as a prisoner of war, Claes does admit that there were some good Germans who enabled him to reconcile himself with his pre-war love for Germany. Many contacts with common Germans allowed him to see that they were not all bad, but Belgian soldiers at the front did not often come into contact with them, except as prisoners of war. The distance between the two sides on the front, part of it on flooded terrain, made contact nearly impossible. To get out of the prisoner of war camp, Claes lied and said that he was a stretcher-bearer in the Belgian army. Claes did not rejoin the Belgian army after his release, so it is improbable that the tale of his experience reached soldiers at the front, but many other similar stories of prisoners of war did.\(^\text{15}\) Van den Broeck tells us that prisoners were

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\(^{13}\) Ernest Claes, *Bei uns in Deutschland* (Hasselt: Heideland-Orbis, 1971), 100.
\(^{15}\) Claes, *Bei uns in Deutschland*, 86.
allowed to write letters. A friend gave his address to soldiers at the front and his story appeared in a trench paper, *De Stem van Opwijk*.\(^\text{16}\)

In air combat, on the other hand, the Germans seemed to have shown a completely different attitude, as we learn from Belgian Ace Willy Coppens’ experience. On one of his flights, he encountered four German planes whose pilots inexplicably quickly broke off their pursuit of him. According to him, they were not very aggressive and frequently weak enough to hesitate, at least on the Belgian front, something he believed that the Allied pilots would never do. The excessive prudence of the Germans was beyond Coppens’ comprehension. Coppens said that from these kinds of events he learned to despise the enemy.\(^\text{17}\)

In the trenches, at times, Germans were also thought of as cowards. Van de Walle tells us of a German soldier who surrendered after all his comrades were killed. The Belgian soldiers thought this was cowardly, first attacking them and then surrendering when his situation was hopeless. They were furious. Luckily for the German, a Belgian officer was there, although he was still kicked.\(^\text{18}\) In another situation, all the Germans who surrendered claimed they were stretcher bearers. No one admitted to have used a machine gun; handlers of machine guns were generally hated.\(^\text{19}\)

On the ground, when the Germans were too quiet for the Belgian soldiers at the front, they became suspicious and wondered what the Germans were planning. This was especially the case when the Belgians were attacking or bombarding them and got no response from the Germans in reply to their actions.\(^\text{20}\) For many front line soldiers, the Germans could not be

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\(^\text{16}\) *Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,”* 332.
\(^\text{19}\) Franz De Backer, *Longinus en andere verhalen* (Hasselt: Uitgeverij Heideland, 1961), 64.
trusted at all. They had not forgotten what had happened in Belgium during the invasion. Paredis writes in a letter back home that they should try to avoid having to give shelter to German soldiers, and if they were forced to do so, they should hide everything that had of any value, “[b]ecause you cannot trust them and what they did at other places, i.e. stealing, why would they not do it at Hamont?”21 When newspapers wrote about peace talks with Germans, Paul Heuson, a Walloon soldier, who had been wounded in combat and was now disabled, wrote to his friend, Jean Bolle, who was at the front, that the Germans could not be relied upon to give back occupied Belgium territory if a peace treaty were signed at that time, and thus that it was better to fight on.22

Snoeck went one step further. In the trenches, soldiers had new troubles with rats and other vermin. They were a new enemy, and according to Snoeck, as fearsome as the other enemy, the Germans. Both gave them a hard time and took everything they could get their paws on. Germans were just like vermin, just a bit fatter, in Snoeck’s opinion. But it was more interesting to kill Germans than it was to kill rats.23 Snoeck was very extreme in his views, but many soldiers still distrusted the enemy too much to support any sort of negotiations with them.

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23 Snoeck, 61, 65, 94.
During Christmas of 1914, many soldiers from all sides on the Western Front stopped fighting and fraternized with the enemy in the now-famous Christmas Truce. This stunning event has gotten a lot of attention from the public and scholars alike over the years. In Belgian soldiers’ writings, only a few accounts can be found of this event. But there were other noteworthy events on the Belgium front around Christmas of 1914. On the 24th of December, 1914 at Pervyse, De Wilde describes dining with other officers and soldiers while, in the background “the stars shine wonderfully, and the sky is lightened up by blue rockets from the German trenches.” Christmas Day brings change:

It appears that at Dixmude 60 unarmed Germans came to the trenches in front of us to sing “Lieds.” They asked for a one-day truce, and to win our goodwill they threw a monstrance of the college of Dixmude over the Yser. They also threw chocolate, we reply with cigarettes, and celebration of Christmas for a moment united enemies of yesterday and tomorrow with the same feelings. Of the next day De Wilde says: “The next day the hostilities started again and the German whistling projectiles went on your path to reach the station.”

De Nil speaks about fraternization in his account of the 1914 Christmas between Belgian and German soldiers at Dixmude, the area where the distance between the two sides was the smallest. There was a truce made between the two sides; Germans began to sing, and they exchanged goods among each other. Deflo cites Jozef Simons, saying that hatred decreased during the Christmas period, but that it was not really a truce; there was still fighting going on, although in many sectors neither side fired during Christmas. Van de Walle thought that there was a trend toward fraternization during this period, but when the German soldiers were

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25 Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,” 204.
convinced by propaganda that it was still possible to win the war, it suddenly stopped. P. J. Dyckmans probably best describes the situation during Christmas on the Belgian front: “Rarely any shooting on December 24th. We went to the Christmas Mass, and enjoyed ourselves and stayed up all night.”

Other soldiers do not mention anything out of the ordinary going on during the Christmas of 1914. For the lack of mention of Christmas in many writings, we can assume that on the Belgian front there was not much direct fraternizing between enemy fighters going on in 1914. One of the factors that could be important to explain this is that wide areas in this region had been inundated, so contact between the two sides was difficult and, as seen in the previous chapter, the sentiments of Belgian soldiers were anything but favorably disposed toward Germans after the invasion and what happened in Belgium during the first phase of the war. A Christmas truce for the Belgians consisted mainly of a temporary quieting down of the fighting.

**Forms of Communication**

There was occasional communication between the trenches of the two opposing sides. Letters from occupied Belgium were thrown over to the Belgian side by the Germans in hopes of pleasing the soldiers and reducing their hatred for the Germans, and to exploit dissatisfaction in the Belgian army, especially of the Flemish-speaking majority with the dominant French-speaking elite, about which more will be said later. Messages from the other side were accepted by the Germans and sent to occupied Belgium. Coppens, the Belgian flying ace, tells us that messages were regularly sent between the two sides, sometimes whole message bags at a time. He himself requested someone to send one such message to ask about his brother Jamar, who

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27 Ballings, 12.
was still at home in German-controlled territory and was arrested by the Germans on several occasions.\textsuperscript{28}

Official correspondence with occupied Belgium was possible through neutral countries, especially the Netherlands, but was censored by the Germans. Some thought that only the bad news, going both ways, got through the German censorship, or at least got through it more quickly.\textsuperscript{29} Others thought that it was dangerous to write to family members, believing that if the Germans found out that they were doing something that was against German interests, they would punish the soldiers’ families in occupied territory instead of the soldier at the front.\textsuperscript{30} Their fears were probably right, Zuckerman gives two examples of how the Germans reacted to defiance. When a small boy imitated the goose step, he was imprisoned for several days. During a discussion, a German soldier remarked that Paris was only a three-hour march away. When a Belgian corrected his mistake, he had to spend 24 hours in jail and pay 50 marks (40 francs) for “having tried to discourage a German soldier.”\textsuperscript{31} Stories such as this, with the perceptions the soldiers got of the Germans in the first phase of the war in mind, we can assume that they imagined the Germans using the slightest offense or pretense as an excuse to take action.

After the Germans closed the border between Belgium and the Netherlands with electrified wire in 1915, smugglers offered illegal services to send letters to and from occupied Belgium, such as \emph{Le Mot du Soldat}, a secret network to deliver letters between the front and the occupied territories, most often by crossing the border with the Netherlands. The Germans would arrest anyone they caught doing so, however.\textsuperscript{32} Through these sources, Belgian soldiers could obtain information about what was happening in the occupied part of their homeland.

\textsuperscript{28} Coppens De Houthulst, 268; Van de Walle, 70.
\textsuperscript{29} Heuson, \textit{et al.}, 67; Coppens De Houthulst, 12, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{30} Joseph De Cuypers and André De Cuypers, 94.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 97.
without having it censored by the Germans, Belgians or the other Allied powers, Britain and France. Smuggling became a lot more difficult when the Germans closed the border with the Netherlands and put up an electric wire to stop anyone from going in or out of Belgium. But it was still possible to get through, as evidenced by Thans’ escape from occupied Belgium.\footnote{Thans, 33.}

De Nil read in a letter from Jozef Abbeloos, who live in the same town as he did, that the Germans were taking everything away from the people in the occupied areas, with widespread poverty and hunger as a consequence.\footnote{Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,” 348.} This was not the only type of abuse the Belgian civilians in the occupied territory had to endure at German hands that the Belgian soldiers heard of. Snoecks’ parents were arrested and fined. Coppens’ brother was arrested for trying to escape occupied Belgium.\footnote{Coppens De Houthulst, 157.} Others complained about the passes they needed to buy to be able to travel, even for very short trips, for example to the next town.\footnote{Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,” 398; Ballings, 66, 71.} Each soldier probably knew of a family member or friend that they had left behind who had these kinds of trouble.

Another source of news for the soldiers were the refugees and escapees from occupied Belgium, such as Thans, a monk who fled from his monastery over the border to the Netherlands to escape arrest for writing an anti-German poem before the Germans occupied his area of residence, but after Belgium was invaded. To escape, Thans had to crawl alongside a river to pass the guards and fences. Dutch policy was to bring refugees to internment camps, but many blended in or had contacts so they could move along their journey. In the Netherlands, on his way to join the army in unoccupied Belgium, Thans met many other refugees who each had their own story, often emphasizing German abuse.\footnote{Thans, 33.} Because his health did not allow him to be a regular soldier, Thans became an aide in a hospital just behind the
front lines. There were also men who crossed enemy lines to join the Belgian army. Gabriel Petit admitted to aiding such men at her trial for distributing the newspaper *Libre Belgique* that the Germans had made illegal; she was convicted and executed.\(^{38}\) Undoubtedly, some stories of this type must have surely reached the soldiers at the front, through talk between soldiers or direct contact with refugees or escapees.

News of Germans taking everything they could to aid their war effort was widely reported on in Belgian letters. The Germans had not taken a long war into account when planning for the material resources they would need. To make up for the shortage, and being in complete control of Belgium, they seized machines, tools and raw materials from Belgian workshops and factories and hauled them to Germany.\(^{39}\) Everything in the occupied areas became more expensive throughout the war, with hunger and poverty among the civilian population a result. People needed to buy passes to travel around, even if only to the next town. Some had to allow German soldiers to stay in their homes. The soldiers hung around town to scare the townspeople into being compliant. All this and more, the soldiers read in their correspondence with friends and family in occupied Belgium.\(^{40}\) Paredis, whose town was spared from the worst of the war, read in a letter from Antoine Rijcken from Hamond, the town he was from, written on the 31\(^{st}\) of December 1914: “Well, they leave us alone, they have not take anything away yet; in the surrounding villages they have claimed cattle, hay, etc.”\(^{41}\) He also heard from Hubert Pennings, a visitor to Liege, that seven priests had been killed there by the Germans.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{39}\) Zuckerman, 91-92.

\(^{40}\) De Stem uit Opwijk, #9, *Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,”* 400; Ballings, 65-66, 71, 79.

\(^{41}\) Ballings, 79.

Soldiers could get some information from newspapers, too. But this seems to have been limited, and over time interest in them faded rapidly. Paredis informs us that he did not buy newspapers anymore, “[b]ecause it is the same every day,” always “[t]here is progress everywhere.” In his opinion Belgian newspapers “are read rarely, because the daily papers are not very interesting these days and often for me several days pass before I read a daily paper.”

Lack of information from the home front, patriotism and propaganda, deliberate or otherwise, resulted in articles in newspapers printed in the rear that were in some cases completely inaccurate and often contradicted each other. It did not boost soldiers’ confidence in newspapers. Over time, soldiers trusted them less and less. Articles were often written by and for bellicose persons in the rear, who advocated all-out warfare, where soldiers had to fight to the death no matter what, and extensive war demands were made, including annexation of territories, after the war. These views conflicted with the experiences of the soldiers at the front, which did not improve their trust and confidence in what they read in newspapers. XXe Siècle, owned by de Broqueville, Prime Minister and Secretary of War, is an example of one such publication. It was a very patriotic and annexationist newspaper that additionally was anti-Flemish. Not surprisingly, it angered many Flemish during the war.

Paredis writes in a letter on 26th November 1914 that he read in some newspapers that the Germans had burned down his home town of Hamont. It was believable to him, because of “[h]orrors and cruelties happening at other places in our Belgium.” In a reply letter, he hears that Hamont is doing fine, no damage at all. Later he asks in a letter to find out if it is true what he read in an English newspaper that the Germans were taking everything away and that as a

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43 Ibid., 63, 67, 73.
44 Ibid., 83.
46 Ballings, 57.
consequence poverty in Belgium was widespread. Over time, very little trust in newspapers was left.

News from the outside world became unimportant to the soldiers at the front; only local news, the front and the town or the region from which they were, interested most soldiers. The first to start such a trench newspaper for Belgian soldiers was chaplain E. H. Bernaerts in 1915 for soldiers from Sint-Jans-Molenbeek. Many others followed his lead; in total about 350 trench newspapers were published. Most of these appeared irregularly and were often short-lived. Mimeography was used by many of these papers; some were printed.

In these papers, soldiers learned of comrades in arms from the same region who were at the front, and about events at home, confiscations, arrests, German treatment and all other aspects of life in the occupied territories. The papers published soldiers’ addresses, in an encoded form, so they could contact each other, until the army command prohibited this out of fear that the Germans would break the address code and be able to use this information to their advantage. These papers got most of their information from letters that soldiers were sent from home, but any sources of information that they could get their hands on was used, for example from people who escaped from occupied Belgium.

In October 1916, the Germans, under the influence of industrial leaders, started forcefully deporting men in the occupied territories to work in their factories in Germany. This

47 Ibid., 68.
48 Christens and De Clercq, 107-109.
49 Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,” 385.
51 Getuigenissen van de “ander oorlog,” 391-408.
policy began in the Etappegebied behind the front lines. Sixty-two thousand men were deported to Germany. Later this was extended to the rest of occupied Belgium, and another 58,500 men were deported. After international protest, including neutral countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, the Vatican, and Belgian Kardinal Mercier who sent a letter on October 19th 1916, the forced deportations to Germany were stopped, although deportations from the Etappegebied to the front lines in France continued.

News of the deportations spread quickly in the Belgian camp. The soldiers were shocked and appalled. De Cuyper’s reaction when hearing about the German deportations was: “that is horrible,” he immediately thought of his brothers, who were still at home, and what would happen to them.\(^{52}\) According to Snoeck, everyone was filled with hatred and a will for revenge because of the deportations, which added to the news and rumors about German behavior they got from the home front. For him, these were great crimes that demanded revenge and satisfaction.\(^{53}\)

Pamphlets were spread throughout the Belgian trenches and signs were put up for Belgian soldiers by the Germans with messages such as “Comrades, come over. I shall treat you well, it is surely true. We do not shoot at you.”\(^{54}\) For similar reasons the Germans allowed letter exchanges, to reduce soldiers’ hatred toward them and exploit dissatisfaction among the soldiers. Some pamphlets and signs warned against coming attacks and bombardments. Others showed soldiers taken prisoner among their family, and invited Flemish soldiers to desert from the army and go back home.\(^{55}\) In their correspondence two Walloon friends, Heuson and Bolle, who wanted independence from Flanders for the French-speaking part of Belgium, they wrote

\(^{52}\) Van Meerbeek, 97; Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 73, 124, 131.
\(^{53}\) Snoeck, 123, 168-169.
\(^{54}\) Pasquier, 150.
\(^{55}\) De Decker, 66; Pasquier, 149; Wils, 236.
to each other that the German notes targeted mainly the Flemish who were, in their opinion, “uniquely pacifistic.”

Van Severen, a Flemish nationalist who came into conflict with the military authorities for his views on multiple occasions, wrote in his diary about a German note declaring that the Belgian army will cease to exist on May 8th 1916, a warning for an attack. His reply: “Idiotic braggarts!” Most Flemish soldiers remembered what had happened in Belgium, Flanders included, during the invasion. Some gave preference to furthering the Flemish cause, even if it would be at the expense of Belgium, for which they were often punished. Van Severen was sent to a camp in Rouen; others were sent to other camps in France. Few believed in good German intentions; they were all too obvious for most. Eventually the Belgian army, fearing that the Flemish would fall for the German propaganda and encourage desertion back to their homes, forbade its soldiers to possess these pamphlets distributed by the Germans. Those who were caught with any of them got eight days in prison.

Violence Matters

Even though there were no major offensives in the Belgian sector of the Western Front, the regular violence of war took its toll on the men who had to live with it day in, day out. On a daily basis, soldiers died at the front, usually killed by snipers or artillery, leaving their comrades behind, angry and vengeful. Holmes points out that “[s]ome soldiers do feel hatred for their

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56 Heuson, et al., 139.
57 Joris Van Severen, Die vervloekte oorlog: Dagboek 1914-1918 (Kapellen/leper: Uitgeverij Pelckmans, 2005), 70.
58 Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 155.
enemies, if only briefly and for specific reason.” The death of a comrade is often such a reason. Grossman agrees that the loss of a friend or a beloved leader often leads to reactions of anger.59

After a funeral, Jozef Van Hercke wrote “first the stretcher-bearers make a pit, and then the body is brought by bier; the last prayers are said, the body without anything more than his clothes is put in the pit, some chalk spread over it, and there we have said goodbye to another victim of the emperor that calls for vengeance.”60 One soldier recounts the time when he could hear the death rattle of some of his poor comrades in no man’s land who had been wounded and could not get back by themselves. Assassinated by the Germans, he says. A fit of furious anger and mad, indescribable rage took possession of him. Animated by an irresistible thirst for revenge, he later killed a German major with his bayonet.61

After another death, the seminarian Dury cursed and exclaimed that he would shoot the first German he saw, even if he happens to be a prisoner. Dury did not immediately make good on this promise, but later he shot some surrendering Germans. This also happened with other soldiers, and other armies, during the war.62 Friends killed by the enemy fed soldiers’ desire to fight the enemy and get their revenge for their friend. As Jean Verhaegen explains “well, the others, wanting to avenge their comrades in arms, again fired with violence and persist, and from the flank a pile of Germans.” This was sometimes even the case for slain animals, which

61 Buffin, 281.  
makes clear the bond the men formed with their animals, especially during the war. One soldier, after his horse Belle was killed, exclaimed: “Villainous Boches, in the name of God ... The pigs!”

Destruction in the surroundings of the Belgian soldier at the front also affected soldiers, as had the destruction they had seen during the invasion. When viewing the ruins of Nieuport, one soldier said he had “a sentiment of infinite sadness mingled with revolt.” Van Herck commented in his diary about the destruction of the town of Ypres. In his opinion, the Germans had done much worse damage to the city in their attacks than all previous invaders combined, again showing that there was a clean difference between the Germans and other peoples.

Many Belgian villages along the front line were completely destroyed. The soldiers at the front saw these towns every day when they were there, which reminded them of the Germans’ presence in Belgium. Snoeck called it the “destruction by the barbarians.” Francken tells the tale of his friend who could not find his own house anymore because his village was completely destroyed. The ruins of destroyed towns were always around to remind the Belgian soldiers of what the Germans had done to their country.

Active combat clouded soldiers’ minds with hatred and they became very bloodthirsty. Bourke gives the opinion of a rifleman of the First World War in her book, soldiers in “the actual heat of combat” killed “remorselessly and indiscriminately” in combat. De Decker asserted that hatred only surfaced in action. When there was danger and blood, all uses of violence

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64 Buffin, 361.
65 Van Herck, 46.
66 Snoeck, 165.
67 Francken, 195; De Decker, 299-300.
68 Bourke, 135.
became justified.\textsuperscript{69} On 18\textsuperscript{th} July, 1916, Snoeck wrote of an attack that he was involved in that was preceded by an artillery bombardment,

> We found half-buried torn apart bodies, the survivors still had images of fear in their eyes. If you were not yet, you would become mad of such cruelties. But during the event we did not give in to sentimentality. We were intoxicated by gunpowder, hatred and survival instinct. In the beginning of the war we were all too often victim of our own friendliness. But the times have changed, experience of too many trials has hardened us.\textsuperscript{70}

Firmin Bonhomme, an artillery man, felt that shelling the enemy “really invigorated us again and it is with real pleasure that we think of the carnage that it causes in the Teutonic masses.” He felt hatred for those who made them suffer and wanted horrible things to happen to them.\textsuperscript{71} Pasquier remembered that Belgian soldiers screamed with joy when a German airplane crashed, and thought to himself: “how our feelings of compassion are derailed!”\textsuperscript{72}

Fighting made soldiers’ blood boil; all restrain seemed to fall away during periods of actual combat. Killing came automatically without conscious thought. For some, it became an addiction, “[t]he adrenaline of combat can be greatly increased by another high: the high of killing.”\textsuperscript{73}

Weapons that the enemy used in the war, some of them new, others old, but used on a massive scale, shocked the Belgian soldiers. Holmes confirms this in the case of taking prisoners. Men who used certain weapons such as tanks and minenwerfers were hated more than regular soldiers and had a greater chance of being mistreated or killed.\textsuperscript{74}

After being attacked on March 17\textsuperscript{th} 1918, with a combination of coughing gas and poison gas in sector Sint-Jacobskapel, which Snoeck called refined cruelty, the Belgian soldiers

\textsuperscript{69} De Decker, 61.
\textsuperscript{70} Snoeck, 92.
\textsuperscript{72} Pasquier, 111, 191.
\textsuperscript{73} Grossman, 233-236.
\textsuperscript{74} Holmes, 386-387.
were ecstatic with rage. He told his men: “avenge yourself how ever you can.” No limits were set on how to get back at their enemy. Later on Snoeck complains that the Germans made them into murderers, even to where they chopped up Germans with axes to avenge themselves. 

Pasquier was more neutral in his judgment on the use of gas. He cursed all science for what it had made possible.

Zeppelins, another technology used by the Germans in the First World War, mainly for observation and bombardment, were called “dragon balloons” by some soldiers. For example, Antwerp had been one of the first cities to be bombed from the air on August 25th 1914. Van Meerbeke describes Zeppelins as pure evil that made satanic noises, demon toys in the hands of a cruel people, an assassin of the innocent. He was not the only one who thought this way. Another weapon the Germans used in the First World War, of which Belgian soldiers were critical, was the submarine and its torpedoes. When the news that the Lusitania had been torpedoed on May 7, 1915 by a German submarine, killing 1,198 passengers out of a total of 1,959 on board, reached the Belgian front, they thought, as did everyone on the Allied side, that it was a foul and cowardly way of fighting. In reaction to this event, many said that the Germans should be punished after the war for all their crimes.

De Decker was very happy when he heard that the British were going to start using “explosives forbidden by international conventions” to counter the Germans, who in his opinion had already played enough dirty tricks. He thought that the Belgians were no match for the Germans in using such weapons of mass destruction, and characterized Germany with “the
horrible greatness of their destructive genius.” Van Severen agreed with De Decker’s idea that the Belgians were nothing compared to the Germans in the art of warfare and the use of weapons. According to him, they were never a bellicose people.82

Belgian actions do not always conform to the view of a peaceful people who are not very skilled at using weapons. They too could use their weapons efficiently and some even enjoyed it. Valentin tells us in a letter he wrote on August 6th, 1916: “We do not complain when we have to get out of our beds to go shoot; the smell of gunpowder makes us shake with pleasure, especially when we think that with it we are killing a couple more Germans.”83 When he met some German prisoners of war on May 7th, 1918, he heard about the effect of his weapon: “From the prisoners with whom we spoke we hear that my balleuse [type of mortar] scared them stiff and caused lots of destruction. Pure joy for me!”84 Lekeux tell us in a letter about the time when they shelled the Germans while they were having breakfast, so that they would drop their food and run for shelter, which they did. He concludes: “And we find it excellent, stoemp [type of food], when you know that the Germans do not have any and it is because of us.”85 Jean Verheagen used his mortar “in a way to cause a maximum amount of carnage in enemy lines.”86 Some soldiers really enjoyed being in the war.

81 Ibid., 121.
82 Van Severen, 158.
83 Jaques Dewaele, ed. & trans., De oorlog van Valentin: Brieven van Oostendenaar Valentin Dewaele, kanonnier aan het ijzerfront (Koksijde: Uitgeverij De Klaproos, 1999), 66.
84 Ibid., 112.
85 Lekeux, 297-298.
86 Verhaegen, et al., 109.
New Ways of Life

On the other hand, there were forces that went in the opposite direction, away from all the hatred and rage against the enemy. Over time, the animosity of the first phase of the war faded. Many aspects played a role in this process. Soldiers became accustomed to their new environment and settled in. They were busy with their own work and activities, new conflicts arose between individuals and groups and old ones resurfaced, and soldiers came into contact with Germans as prisoners of war or just across the trenches. All these factors countered the emotions that were prominent during and immediately after the invasion and, as we have seen, continued to play a role when the war bogged down.

Most soldiers who wrote down their experiences of the First World War found that German prisoners of war elicited feelings of pity rather than hatred. In their new situation, the Germans did not have any choices anymore. They must do as they are told or get shot. Often they were in bad shape, injured and underfed. Many times Belgian soldiers expressed feelings of sympathy for them, and gave German prisoners cigarettes and other things they had on hand. But sometimes the Belgians reacted in a different way, as in De Cuyper’s account. The soldiers howled at the German prisoners who were being brought away, and brandished their weapons at them. De Cuyper himself found this kind of behavior despicable.

Surrendering Germans were not safe from Belgian soldiers trying to kill them for many reasons. Once Jantje Kiggen, who used a fake birth certificate to enlist and was probably the youngest Belgian volunteer of the war, and his comrades found two Germans who wanted to surrender. But Bauwers, a soldier in the same group as Kiggen, did not want that and tried to throw a grenade at them. Charel, another soldier who was part of the same group, knocked it out of his hands before he could throw it at the Germans. The sergeant finally ordered the

87 De Decker, 94; Pasquier, 193; Van Meerbeek, 44.
88 Jospeh De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 140.
Germans to march toward the rear.⁸⁹ Captain Raymond did not have any pity for the German prisoners, either. All they uttered, according to him, were words to elicit pity from the Belgians. For example, many said they had five children back home and they hoped to be spared from Belgian wrath. Belgians could not be forgiving for what the Germans did in Belgium. Raymond did not believe a word they said.⁹⁰

Pity was not limited to prisoners of war. After a bombardment on June 5th, 1918, Van Severen and a major went to an enemy trench, where we found another two, among them a small, young boy 18 years old, bare-footed, who barely looked 16, pretty, clear, blue eyes, light blond hair. Two dumb rude soldiers of ours wildly jumped him and the boy thought his last moment had arrived. Never have I seen a human so completely shiver and tremble and beg for his life, never looked so deeply into human nature. I really had to hold back not to embrace the boy.⁹¹ Fraternizing between soldiers in the German and Belgian trenches also took place at times. De Decker gives us an account in the entry of June 1, 1916 of his diary of the two sides coming together that he had heard from soldiers in the battalion that was leaving the Dodengang, a famous, and dangerous, trench they moved into near Dixmude that was very close to the German lines.⁹² He believed it to be real, because in a couple of minutes it was told hundreds of times by soldiers of the departing battalion to soldiers in his battalion. Belgian and German soldiers were fraternizing in the trenches until a Belgian machine gun officer caught them in the act and prohibited them to continue. The two sides started to throw soil and tin cans toward the other side about 17 meters away in a play fight game.⁹³ In Thans’ front line

⁹¹ Van Severen, 413.
⁹² ‘Path of the dead’, name of a trench near Dixmude.
⁹³ De Decker, 197.
hospital, Belgians and Germans, civilians and soldiers lay amongst each other. According to him, "there was no race hatred to be found here."94

Being a soldier during the First World War was extremely tiring. Aside from fighting, the soldiers had to do a lot of hard physical labor: constructing new trenches, restoring old trenches, bringing in ammunition.95 With all the work and combat they had to perform, it should come as no surprise that the soldiers were exhausted. De Decker noted in his diary that their weariness was so great that they nearly forgot to avenge their dead comrades.96 Thans adds that the interest in the war decreased over time; they were too busy, too tired, to take much notice of what was going on around them.97 Paredis put it this way: "exhausting and boring days of doing nothing and then also days of superhuman effort, when a horse's power would not be enough."98 But in his case it did not make him less willing to fight: "Life in the trenches is exhausting, which you surely understand, but still our small army stays calm, steady, full of courage to keep their stand at the Yser and not to let any German pass except when dead or as a prisoner."99

Over time, the fighting men grew more and more used to the war and their situation at the front. It became familiar to them, even home for some. Soldiers made "homes" for themselves at the front where they built their abris,100 or in abandoned houses when they were in the reserve lines, and furnished the places to gain some level of comfort. They lived there for extended periods of time. In certain areas, especially the peaceful ones, the soldiers became very comfortable. P. J. Goosens complains that not everything was well at the front; there was

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94 Thans, 327.
95 Christens and De Clercq, 66.
96 De Decker, 88.
97 Thans, 123.
98 Ballings, 111.
99 ibid, 104.
100 'Shelter', place where they stayed, home.
just too much noise, but “we are completely used to it because I have been at the front for 16
months already and now another two months...”101 He admits: “War is good for me but peace is
still better.”102

After some time even the ruins of destroyed villages all around them at the front
became just another part of the background that they were all too familiar with for many of the
soldiers. In a letter, Paredis reflects on his feelings when looking at a completely destroyed
town: “everything is leveled with the ground. One would cry when they see it, but a human is
made in a way that he gets used to it.”103

Ernest van Daele tells the story of chaplain E. H. Willem Rijcken’s tent as he remembers
it. When Rijcken was in England, he procured a huge tent with the financial aid of an English
friend. He had trouble transporting it, but with the help of some sailors and people he met on
the way, he succeeded in bringing it to the front. There he set the tent up and made it into a
church. Soldiers were enthusiastic about his initiative. They brought all kinds of religious objects
from nearby town churches that were destroyed by the war. The first time Rijcken performed a
ceremony in his tent-church, the Germans tried to bomb it. A lot of the soldiers were furious,
but Rijcken stayed calm. He decided to camouflage the tent. After it was camouflaged, the
Germans left it alone, but the wind caused problems.104

After their period of duty in a sector was over and they had to move to another sector,
soldiers usually had regrets about having to leave and start all over. Human beings are very
adaptable, and the soldiers, Belgian soldiers and others on the whole Western Front, certainly
proved that in the way they adjusted to their situation at the front. When Rijcken’s group was
ordered to leave their sector, he had to leave his tent-church behind. He gave it to the incoming

101 Ballings, 40.
102 Ibid., 42.
103 Ibid., 112.
104 Ibid., 123.
chaplain.\textsuperscript{105} When he later became a chaplain, his life became easier, but “I have to say that I have gotten so used to this life that it hurt me to have to change.” His company had practically become his life and family.\textsuperscript{106} Soldiers became attached to their style of life and were averse to change.\textsuperscript{107}

Certain areas on the Belgian front, as on other fronts, were more peaceful than others. One obvious reason is that some areas were under water, because the Belgians had opened the flood gates of the Yser near Nieuport to stop the Germans from advancing any further in 1914, and were able to keep control of the gates throughout the war. In these sectors, contact between the two sides was hardly possible. Another reason for peaceful sectors is the so-called “live and let live’ system; the fighting men let the soldiers on the other side alone and in return hoped to be left alone themselves. This system was built on mutual trust, in expectation that the enemy would do the same as they did. Over time, trust built up; the longer the regional peace lasted, the higher the trust between the two sides became. Violence, on the other hand, destroyed that trust immediately in areas of the front, such as Dixmude, where the distance between the two sides was minimal, and fighting was at its most violent. Active combat did not allow for the building of trust, so a “live and let live” system was not possible. Most soldiers had no desire to go to this region of the front.

The longer the war lasted, the more old conflicts, like the Flemish/French language divide that originated from before the war started to reappear, and new ones arose from the novel situation the men were in. Front line soldiers were annoyed with their commanding officers for all the “useless” work, in their opinion, that they were made to do, such as filling

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{107} Verhaegen, et al., 257.
endless number of *vaderlanders*,\(^\text{108}\) the nickname they gave to sandbags. Jail sentences were given for trivial offences and there was a lack of recognition by the higher ups. For example, medals mainly went to staff officers instead of to regular soldiers at the front who had to do all the fighting. Officers at the front sometimes had to defend their men against staff officers from the rear. P’tit Jo, Lekeux tells us, went up against higher command for his men, which according to Lekeux hampered his own prospects of promotion.\(^\text{109}\) For some front line soldiers, army command became the true enemy.\(^\text{110}\) De Decker, who joined the army to fight militarism, was annoyed with all the army duties, rules and regulations, and tried to avoid them. For his resistance against the army he was given four days in prison on one occasion. Many others had similar feelings and experiences.\(^\text{111}\)

Many soldiers at the front were irritated by those in the rear, including other soldiers, whom they called *embusques*. Officers paid less for everything they brought. Not all men had to work as hard as they did; for example, chauffeurs, cooks, doctors and *ordannances*\(^\text{112}\) to officers were exempt. Every middle man took something from the supplies on the way to the men at the front lines, including their own officers.\(^\text{113}\)

Nearly all soldiers, including King Albert, were upset about the Belgian exiles’ statements of patriotism. Their bellicose views and war demands did not conform with the reality of war as experienced by the men doing the fighting who were close to it and saw it. Most annoying were some individuals in the Belgian government in exile in Le Havre in France, such as those expressed in the *XXe Siecle* of de Broqueville. Everything was seen in the light of

\(^{108}\) Name the Belgian soldiers used for sandbags (literally it would mean “patriots,” they used it because they had to fill the sandbags with soil of the fatherland).

\(^{109}\) Lekeux, 274.

\(^{110}\) Deflo, 104.

\(^{111}\) De Decker, 56-58.

\(^{112}\) Aid/servant of an officer.

\(^{113}\) Verhaegen, *et al.*, 246-254.
achieving victory, optimistic war news messages, encouraging the soldiers to fight and to hate the enemy, and in no case could anyone work together with the occupier. Pacifistic messages seemed like treachery to them.\(^{114}\) In general, according to Bourke, civilians had more hatred toward the enemy than the men doing the fighting.\(^{115}\)

Young Belgian men who had fled abroad in exile during the invasion and did not join the army upset the local Allied populations because of their perceived inactivity, and were another target of the soldiers’ rage. Soldiers were disillusioned with the ideals which dominated thinking at the beginning of the war when everyone wanted to fight for their country, according to Verhaegen. They thought that the civilians did not do their duty. In Verhaegen’s opinion, this was because of quick and superficial judgments made by the soldiers. When they went to the rear for vacation when they were on rest, in most cases they did not have any family there or anyone else they were close to. Since they were there only for a very short period, they met only a few people. In that time, they could not get a good picture of the life and the opinions of those in the rear, just from the noisiest elements in society.\(^{116}\)

Questions arose about why they were risking their lives in combat when others were not willing to do the same. Some soldiers wanted to get away from the front and move to the rear, where it was much safer and they would have an easier job. After being wounded in battle, Bartelemy wanted to be declared unfit for duty and quit the fighting in the front lines.\(^{117}\) Many of the educated soldiers who started out at the front chose to change to different sections of


\(^{115}\) Bourke, 148.

\(^{116}\) Verhaegen, *et al.*, 191.

the army during the war, leaving many uneducated and illiterate men on the front lines. This split created another gap between those at the front and those in the rear.\textsuperscript{118}

After long stints in the trenches, soldiers realized that the enemy suffered the same ordeal as they did. Robert Vivier writes about the time when he was in the trenches enjoying a good night with a clear sky and good weather. It occurred to him that on the other side there were probably other men also enjoying this fine night, just like him, and he wondered why they should not, since it was the same beautiful night.\textsuperscript{119} Van Severen went even further. He sometimes felt closer to the German soldiers on the other side of the trenches, he wrote, than to the civilians back in Paris, London, France and England.\textsuperscript{120}

\textit{Divide between Flemish and Walloon}

The divide between the Flemish- and French-speaking populations had already been apparent before the war. The elite in Belgium spoke what was the official language at the time, French. All matters of government, education and military were conducted in French. Flemish speakers who wanted to able to use their own language sought to change this situation; their main aim was to change the language used at the University of Ghent. The main proponents of this idea were Flemish clergy and university students, several of whom, like Van Severen, who would fight in the war, were basically middle class. The German invasion temporarily united the Flemish and Walloons against the invader, but old conflict between them arose again in 1915 over the perceived injustices done to the Flemish soldiers, their overrepresentation in the infantry on the front lines, and commanded in a language they did not understand.

\textsuperscript{118} Christens and De Clercq, 32.
\textsuperscript{119} Robert Vivier, \textit{Avec les hommes; six moments de l'autres guerre} (Bruxelles: Renaissance du livre, 1963), 71.
\textsuperscript{120} Van Severen, 63.
This issue caused conflicts and problems in the military during the war. Many officers only spoke French, while a majority of their men only understood Flemish. Because you needed to be able to speak French to be promoted in the army, many competent soldiers never rose in rank. Many Flemish soldiers felt unfairly treated. De Cuyper described the Flemish movement, especially on the front lines, as one against the “rule of favoritism” and a “very profound movement.”\textsuperscript{121} There was clear hostility from the French-speaking elite, within which the Belgian military leadership mainly existed, toward the Flemish. This is clearly seen in a casual statement that Captain Raymond made about the Flemish language in a letter to his Canadian marraine, when he doubted: “if Flemish could even be called a language.”\textsuperscript{122}

These conflicts during the First World War gave birth to the myths on which the Flemish movement has relied over the years. It is alleged that 80 percent or more of the soldiers were Flemish, infantrymen who did not understand a word of what their officers commanded them to do because they refused to speak any Flemish and they did not understand any French, which led to many unnecessary deaths, and lots of unnecessary suffering. These myths have become commonplace in the Flemish movement. The first myth has been extensively researched by scholars. They calculated the actual Flemish concentration among regular soldiers at around 70 percent and more than 75 percent among officers, higher than their representation in the total Belgian population, which was 55 percent, but not as much as the myth would make one believe.\textsuperscript{123} Testimonies from soldiers who were there put the number of Flemish at the front line itself much higher, 80 percent or more. One reason for the high representation at the front lines are low education level; in Wallonia the education level was higher and thus Walloons had a better chance at getting into other sections of the army or at being stationed in the rear. To

\textsuperscript{121} Joseph De Cuyper and André De Cuyper, 175, 195.
become an officer, one had to be able to speak French, and only the educated Flemish spoke it. Also, the small part of Belgium that was not occupied, and where recruitment was still possible, was completely Flemish. The second myth seems highly unlikely; some men did understand French and could translate for their fellow soldiers, and the men were able to pick up the basics after awhile. The last myth, according to Luc Coenen and Luc De Vos, approaches what happened at the front. This was not solely due to the anti-Flemish stance of the army command, but also because of order and discipline measures in the army. Intellectuals suffered the most under this regime because the regular soldier was used to being commanded by the French-speaking elite before the war. Flemish intellectuals saw their chances for promotion taken away from them, and they were well aware of it.\(^{124}\)

The role King Albert played is controversial among scholars. At the time, the Flemish soldiers still believed that he was on their side. They even sent him letters complaining about their situation in the hope that he would be able to help them. Later scholars such as Lode Wils have argued that he blocked all reforms that the Flemish wanted, and even worse that he used the security services, “his personal instrument,” against the Frontbeweging, the organization of Flemish nationalist soldiers at the front. For example, Van Severen’s personal papers were searched. Another scholar, Luc Schepens, thinks that the king installed a government of national unity with all parties in it, a compromisdemocratie, but as a consequence it was impossible to change anything. Some politicians used very small Walloon groups, and their reaction to any reform, to scare the others into compliance. The first victims of this were the Flemish soldiers.\(^{125}\)


\(^{125}\) De Wever, 28-29.
Van Severen was a student at the University of Ghent and had already been involved in the Flemish movement that demanded the right to use Flemish in education and government, and autonomy for Flanders; the radicals had even demanded independence before the war. He was also a germanophile at the time. When Germany invaded Belgium, Van Severen denounced it as the most disgraceful act ever committed. On September 23rd 1914, he was called up for military duty. During the war, he was in contact with other members of the Flemish movement, such as Karel De Schaepdrijver, a friend from the university, who would be one of the *Sublime Deserteurs*, messengers sent to occupied Belgium by the *Frontbeweging*, on whom more later, and Cyriel Verschaeve whose home in unoccupied Belgium was a meeting place for Flemish nationalists. The army command saw them and others like them as agitators and problem makers. As such, they kept a close eye on them. De Schaepdrijver got into trouble with the military authorities on several occasions, under suspicion of gathering with other Flemish nationalists. Despite these episodes, he gained the rank of lieutenant, but he was conflicted about serving as an officer in the army of a country that did not recognize his language and culture, and doubted the wisdom of keeping his rank. He did not feel that it was right to be part of a military command structure he so hated. Eventually, he was sent to a camp in Rouen, away from the front, as punishment for his perceived crimes, namely inciting Flemish nationalism, and he lost his rank, which actually was quite a relief to him; he no longer had to think about this issue.\(^{126}\)

Over time, he began to hate the Belgian army and its military commanders, whom he accused of not caring about anything other than their own careers, and the Allies, who he believed were just fighting in pursuit of their own goals, mainly economic, to make money. For

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\(^{126}\) Van Severen, 330.
him, England was just as much the cause of the war as the Germans, and had become a money
venture. When he was called back to the front from Rouen, he wrote:

   I, who do not want to fight anymore, who am aware that this war is a miserable-
dangerous comedy about money, I am sent back to the front. I who was sick for
a month from front depression, now only feel the pain from leaving this place.
How is my life there going to be? Katia’s love dead, my enthusiasm dead, my
idealism is dying in a pool of amoralism and deadly tired, broken and beaten.
He was sick and tired of the war, but stayed at the front for his men.  

The Germans did their best to convince the Flemish that it would be in their best
interest to join them. As early as September, 1914, Bethmann Hollweg recommended a Flemish
policy to Sandt, head of the German civilian administration in occupied Belgium. At first it was
cautious, seeking contact with Flemish intellectuals, enforcing existing language laws. The
second phase was started by the Chancellor again, proposed a Flemish committee, realized in
the Raad van Vlaanderen. On April 5th 1916, Hollweg announced before the Reichstag a Flemish
policy; it became a war aim to protect the Flemish against “frenchification.” October, 1916
brought a different policy of forced deportations of Belgian men to work in Germany. This policy
was opposed by von Bissing, Governor-General of occupied Belgium, but industrialists, soldiers
and political groups insisted that the war would be lost without the workers. The deportations
alienated most Belgians completely from the Germans. The Raad van Vlaanderen tried to hold
elections to prove their authority, but they were stopped by the Germans after much violence
against them by their opponents. Flemish nationalists were still a small part of the population.
They were split up into Activists and Passivists in the occupied territories, and outside of
occupied Belgium there were Passivists and the Frontbeweging at the front. Activists were very
unpopular with the Belgian population. There was not enough support to build their own state
on.  

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127 Ibid., 180, 344, 379, 403, 424, 459, 464.
128 Wils, 222; Elias, 99.
Radical Flemish nationalists continued to work with the Germans, especially the Jong-Vlaanderen, a group in Ghent. These people were called Activists. But their goal was different from what the Germans sought. They wanted true independence, while the Germans wanted an easily controlled puppet-state. The Raad van Vlaanderen, consisting mainly of radicals, proclaimed independence on December 22nd 1917; the Germans only accepted their proclamation after the term “independence” was changed to “autonomy.” Their program asked for their own legislature, executive and judiciary. This caused problems with the Germans, who vetoed it and keep the power over Belgium in their own hands. A partition of Belgium was not easy, and would damage some German economic interests.

Before the Spring Offensive of 1918, the Germans tried to open negotiations with King Albert again to make a separate peace with Belgium. King Albert’s negotiations with the Germans were very secret; they only became publicly know after the Second World War.

Consequently in the spring of 1918 the German government was still working for “administrative separation,” but also aiming at keeping the economic unity of Flanders and Wallonia intact. It is noteworthy that its plans envisaged giving Flanders and Wallonia not only a common monarch, but also a common Ministry of Economics. The problem of Belgium’s final shape was thus still entirely open in the summer of 1918.129 This divided the Flemish movement at the front and in exile. Some supported, or at least did not condemn them for their actions, for example, the Flemish in the occupied areas who were working with the Germans on these issues. Others were against any cooperation with them, namely the Passivists, so-called by the Activists. In a meeting of leaders of the Frontbeweging at Verschaeve’s place, many of whom had sympathy with the actions of the Activists, they decided to send some messengers to occupied Flanders.130 Seven Flemish soldiers, later called the Sublieme Deserteurs, went to occupied Belgium by crossing no-mans-

land to tell the moderate Flemish nationalists in occupied territory of the suffering of the 
Flemish soldiers at the front. Charpentier was sent to deliver the message; three others acted as 
guides through the front lines. Originally, they were supposed to come back, but they stayed 
with Charpentier. De Schaepdrijver joined them. Two more were sent by Verschaeve. When 
they got to occupied Belgium, their audience was mainly the Activists and Germans, who used 
them as propaganda tools. De Schaepdrijver was most involved with the Activists. Van Severen 
knew of this mission, but decided not to join them. He would fight the battle in his own way.¹³¹ 
The top leaders of the Frontbeweging, consisting mainly of young Catholic men under Adiel 
Debeuckelaere, almost 30 years of age, saw that the mission had failed and could backfire on 
them. They denounced the seven men.¹³² 

The intentions and power that the Frontbeweging and its leadership had during the war 
are not very clear. Why did they send Charpentier to occupied Belgium? What would they have 
done if the Germans had launched an unstoppable attack on the Belgian front during the Spring 
Offensives? Would they work together with the Germans? Elias thinks that the Frontbeweging 
was strong enough to make a hole in the defenses if it had wanted to, not because of the 
soldiers’ radical Flemish feelings, but because of war fatigue and fear of a murderous German 
attack. Since there was no German attack on the Belgian front during the Spring Offensives of 
1918, we will never know for sure. Most Frontbeweging leaders thought that a German victory 
was the worst possible outcome. Debeuckelaere, leader of the Frontbeweging, was taken 
prisoner by the Germans. He did not go voluntarily, but fought hard until the end.¹³³ 

Walloons, people from the French-speaking part of Belgium, worried about the Flemish 
separatist movement, too. In their letters, two young Walloons who advocated independence

¹³¹ Van Severen, 334; Wils, 20. 
¹³² De Wever, 30. 
¹³³ Elias, 145, 152-154.
for Wallonia (which was only a very small movement, Wallingantism, an anti-Flemish movement), wrote about their hatred for the Flemish and the Flemish hatred for them.

Walloons were called “wrong, banal, hypocrites, etc.” by the Flemish soldiers. They reported an increase in incidents between the two groups. They thought that the Flemish would rather join the Germans in fighting them, and they too wondered if they were not fighting the wrong enemy.\(^{134}\)

Kiggen’s experience tells us something about the Flemish experience in the First World War, and shows a clear picture of the way the Belgian military handled the Flemish issue, and how they saw it as a serious threat to the Belgian military effort. On 11 July, 1917, an important day for the Flemish when they commemorate the *Guldensporenslag*, the victorious battle fought against the French in 1302, a piano concert was held on a piece of grassland, but everything was in French. A Flemish captain encouraged one of his men, Corryn, to step on the stage and sing a Flemish song. When he finished, he got a standing ovation for his performance. Kiggen said that it was not just for the artistic and humorous quality of the song, but “it was also ‘Flemish’, their ‘own’ that the soldiers greeted and rewarded.”\(^{135}\) On another occasion, Kiggen sang a Flemish song at a bar; Walloon soldiers protested, and a fight between the two sides ensued. The Flemish soldiers were arrested as Flemish nationalists who were dangerous to military order, and punished with prison time, while the Walloon soldiers were left alone to go their own way.\(^{136}\) But not everywhere were these feelings shared. Bonhomme writes that despite the presence of many Flemish men in his sector, the issue of language never arose.\(^{137}\)

In Kiggen’s opinion, the tension between the two language groups had been building up for awhile already. Flemish intellectuals pointed out to the regular soldiers that the situation in

\(^{134}\) Heuson, et al., 117, 118, 120, 141.
\(^{135}\) Kiggen, 33.
\(^{136}\) Ibid., 35-37.
\(^{137}\) Bonhomme, 31.
the Belgian army, where they were commanded in French, a language they did not know, was not just. But the soldiers, in Kiggen’s view, were so familiar with how things were done that the shock effect that some of intellectuals were expecting did not occur, although over time Flemish national sentiment grew.\textsuperscript{138}

Communication between the intellectual top of the Flemish movement and the regular Flemish soldiers, who for the first time came in contact with each other on the front lines, was not easy. A Flemish nationalist wrote this back home in 1917:

Joseph, it is easy for you to write about the pure People, great People, but do you know our People, or just the people? When I was at high school, I too thought with love of our Flemish people, but it does not exist. He that labors here in the mud does not care much if his officers order him to his death in French or Flemish. The only thing that interests him is getting out alive and that is the best motivation to fight.

This does not mean that there was no rise in Flemish nationalism. Similarities between oppression at the front and how it had been at home—the Flemish had always been commanded in French—raised their awareness. Together with war weariness and the Russian Revolution in 1917, which showed that there was another way, it made Flemish nationalism appealing to some common soldiers.\textsuperscript{139}

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\textsuperscript{138} Kiggen, 33.
\textsuperscript{139} Marc Reynebeau, \textit{Het Klauwen van de Leeuw} (Van Halewyck, 1995), 10.
}
Figure 3.2: Part of “Open brief aan de koning de Belgen Albert I”

From July 1917, protest against their treatment started. At first, they only did vliegtochten, nightly outings to put up posters and slogans. Later they even protested in broad daylight. With these actions, the Frontbeweging wanted to pressure the Army leadership and the government. They also sent a letter to King Albert, whom they still trusted, an “Open Brief aan de koning der Belgen Albert I,” to voice their complaints and demands. Flemish-minded soldiers were prosecuted along the entire Belgian front, and many were punished. For example,
several men were arrested while they were putting up posters. They were sent to a military court, with Muls as their lawyer, convicted and sent to a disciplinary camp.\textsuperscript{140}

The reaction of the Belgian government in exile to this agitation of the Flemish nationalists, on the other hand, despite some meetings in March, 1918, was the same as their reaction to the \textit{Flamenpolitik}, nearly nonexistent. They did not think it serious enough to do anything, but saw it as just more defeatism. They had better things to do with their time.\textsuperscript{141} This inaction contributed to the resentment of the Flemish nationalists.

These two opposing experiences at this stage of the war, one of anger and rage against the Germans and the other of a return to a sort of state of normalcy, represented everyday life at the front for the soldiers, in which the Germans played a less and less important part, continually opposed each other throughout this phase of the war. Each soldier experienced them differently, shaping all individual perceptions uniquely. Some could not forget what the Germans had done during the invasion, which kept their anger and hatred alive. Others moved on; other concerns kept them occupied.

\textit{On the Offensive}

In the third phase of the war, starting from September 28\textsuperscript{th} 1918 until the end of the war, we see the return of a war of movement. This phase had several similarities with the first phase of war, in that there was again a certain amount of mobility for the armies and a lack of access to information for the soldiers. An enthusiasm similar to that at the very beginning of the war returned, but it was also different. The Belgians joined the general offensive and were winning against the Germans, which got them more motivated, and after four years of war they desperately wanted to go back home.

\textsuperscript{140} Wils, 208-228; Elias, 120-121, 131.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Ibid.}, 133.
The Spring Offensives of 1918 were launched by the Germans after troops from the Eastern Front were moved west following Russia’s collapse and surrender. They initially had some success in breaking through the lines of the Allied Powers. However, the tide turned against the German army in the summer of the same year; they were stopped and pushed back by the Allied forces with a general counter-offensive that started on August 8th 1918. The German soldiers were exhausted; their resources were becoming scarcer every day. On the other side, after the United States declared war on Germany (because of the latter’s renewed policy of unrestricted submarine warfare sinking American ships, an infringement on the rights of a neutral country for the United States), and joined the war in 1917, numerous new American troops were arriving at the front every day, and resources were plentiful for the British, French and their allies on the Western Front. Victory was now for the taking by the Allies. King Albert of Belgium came to this conclusion too, and after holding back for four years when there was uncertainty over who would emerge victorious, he decided to join the new Allied attack, ordered by General Foch, who was appointed commander of the Allied forces. The general offensive had begun. On September 28th, the attack against the German forces on the Belgian front was launched. Now the Allies were on the offensive on the entire Western Front.

Belgian soldiers reacted enthusiastically when they heard of the upcoming offensive. They had not participated in any of the major attacks that the Allies launched during the four years the war that had been going on. During these years, they had been on the defensive. While grateful that their commander, King Albert, did not waste their lives in futile operations, they wanted to make progress, and retake occupied Belgium, so that the war could finally be put to an end and they could return home.

Bonhomme, who was at officer training camp when he heard of the coming offensive, wanted to get back to his regiment as quickly as possible, as did all the other soldiers at the
officer camp, to join in the fighting.\textsuperscript{142} De Decker had been in the infantry for most of the war, but on December 25\textsuperscript{th} 1916, he switched to an artillery regiment. Now he was furious that he was not able to rejoin his infantry unit to participate in the upcoming offensive. He felt that the artillery crews “shot away with the projectiles all the anger that they had accumulated in their hearts” at the Germans.\textsuperscript{143} Captain Raymond, who did participate in the offensive, was happy that finally there was an attack conducted on all fronts, and was convinced that soon the victory would be theirs. Of the effort that was needed and the men who were sacrificed, he said: “We will go until the end and avenge those that died at the moment when victory was so close.”\textsuperscript{144}

Right before the attack, Snoeck, who died on the second day of the offensive, wrote down his ideas about how the Belgians should fight during the attack: “This time we will get them and will know no mercy. They deserve unrelenting punishment for all the misery they caused for all this time. Since they showed no cordiality, we shall not let our hearts speak. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, nothing can wipe away the blood that they have shed.”\textsuperscript{145} Vannuffel, a friend of Snoeck who was with him when he died, wrote in his diary that “[w]hile I said my last farewell to him before his still warm body, I promised to avenge him ... I held my word.”\textsuperscript{146} As had happened so many times before, the death of a comrade spurred the survivors to fight harder to get their revenge on the opponent.

Some soldiers put these sentiments of vengeance into direct action. They showed no mercy for the enemy. In one account, a soldier started shooting at a German who was shaving. Another soldier went completely berserk and killed surrendering Germans with his bayonet,

\textsuperscript{142} Bonhomme, 75.
\textsuperscript{143} De Decker, 303-304, 309.
\textsuperscript{144} Des Ormes, 113-114.
\textsuperscript{145} Snoeck, 175.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 182.
against orders given to him and his comrades. His commanding officer reported this incident to the captain. The soldier was later punished for his excesses.\textsuperscript{147}

During the offensive, the number of soldiers on the Belgian side who were killed increased substantially, similar to the situation before the stalemate occurred at the beginning of the war. War of movement was much more costly in human lives than trench warfare had ever been. Trenches provided protection; the Belgians never launched any major offensives, and on many parts of the Belgian front there was quite some distance between the two sides. But this time they were pushing the Germans back and making rapid progress; they got up to Ghent when the armistice was declared. Valentin commented on the German retreat: “I cannot even shoot at the Germans anymore, they are running away that hard!”\textsuperscript{148}

The third and last phase of the war was similar in other ways to the first phase of the war. Valentin writes in a letter: “We are all very excited, but we do not really know what is happening, there are no newspapers or accurate reports.”\textsuperscript{149} As in the first part of the war, when the mobility of the army was considerable, information became scarce again. Quick movement did not allow for easy provision of letters, newspapers, or any other forms of communication.

Now that they were winning the war and pushing the Germans out of their country, Pasquier noticed that the Belgian soldiers felt much stronger than ever before; they could do anything now. “All of us without distinction felt stronger men, who can force their will on an enemy whose resistance and will to win until yesterday seemed unlimited.” The prospect of going home only added to the euphoria. Conflicts, like the divide between the Flemish- and French-speaking populations, again diminished in importance for all but the most ardent Flemish nationalists, with the prospect of returning home. Germany, after being pushed backed

\textsuperscript{147} Van de Walle, 109.
\textsuperscript{148} Dewaele, 128.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 128.
by the general offensive of Foch, the French, British, American and Belgian forces combined, and
a shortage of supplies because of the British naval blockade, sued for peace, it lost its arrogant
tone. For Pasquier, “[w]hen the bad guys are punished, we are going to live in peace. And there
will be no more fights, there will be no more war, never again.”

While marching through Belgium, both during the offensive, to Ghent at the end of the
war, and after the armistice, encounters with the population of occupied Belgium and the
consequences of the occupation were unavoidable. During the four years of occupation, some
women associated with the occupiers. There was even a story told by soldiers of Germans
leaving the retreating German army and hiding out in Belgium to be able to stay with their
girlfriends. Evidence of romances of this kind was encountered by the Belgian troops. Vivier
found a picture of some girls posing with German soldiers, and sarcastically told his friend: “A
beautiful Boche! [German] Don’t you think, Moreau?” A bit later he repeats what his friend said
of another girl: “Yes, Dumoulin affirms, it’s one that looks for soldiers. She already went with a
German, she is experienced.” These women’s heads were shaved, “a practice the minister of
justice [Carton de Wiart] seemed not to mind and which he said ‘did not lack for
picturesqueness.’” On the other hand, when the Belgian soldiers liberated towns that previously
had been in occupied territory, often people came to greet them. King Albert and the Queen
triumphantly went through Bruges on October 21, 1918, on horseback.

150 Pasquier, 229, 244.
151 Vivier, 79.
152 Ibid., 79, 86, 124.
153 Zuckerman, 215.
Before the war, Valentin’s family, consisting of his mother, sister and himself, had a clothing store, “Het Anker,” in Ostend. With the Germans getting nearer every day, they fled to England, where Valentin volunteered to join the Belgian army. The salesgirls from the store stayed in Ostend. Even during the war, Valentin and his family heard about the salesgirls’ misbehavior, associating themselves with the Germans, using the shop and everything in it as if it were their own. At the end of the war, the salesgirls fled together with the Germans. One was rumored to have gone to Germany with her fiancé. Valentin’s family hired an attorney to get money back from the salesgirls for their stay in the store and what they did to it. One of them, Verbruggen, Valentin tells us, eventually agreed to pay 3500 francs “as advance on the rent for the four years of war.” They never heard from the others again.\textsuperscript{155}

The four years of war had worn the soldiers down. Internal conflicts and the struggles that we saw in the previous chapter took their toll on the men. Feelings of animosity toward the

\textsuperscript{155} Dewaele, 129, 141, 150-151.
Germans as they had existed in the beginning of the war had greatly diminished over time for most. Now most just wanted the war to be over, so they could go back home to their families and friends. Vivier said of his friend Pietje, also a Belgian soldier: “Pietje wants to go home and he wants everyone to return home because it is better that way, everyone at home.” When the armistice came on 11 November 1918, they were very happy that the war was finally over and they could go back home.

For others like Captain Raymond, the Germans had not changed at all since the invasion. They were still doing the same things as then. During the retreat, they took everything they could with them, “those vandals have stolen ...” In July, 1918, Germany had started to dismantle factories in Belgium, officially targeting war industries. Some five hundred seventy-three of them were dismantled, mostly metal works. Factory owners now had to choose between giving up their factory or producing for the German war effort; craftsmen were also affected by this policy. Proof that this was intended to cripple an industrial competitor was never found, but the destruction often looked more like vandalism than anything else.

Machinery, spare parts, whole factories, as well as livestock, horses, cows, sheep, had been moved east. After the war 80 percent of the Belgian workforce was unemployed. Only relief from neutral countries, mainly by the American-led Commission for Relief in Belgium under Herbert Hoover, kept the Belgians from starving. In the last days before the armistice, the Germany army destroyed railroads, canals and factories. They planned to demolish the Hainaut coal mines, but diplomatic pressure prevented it. Equipment in Mons was removed, so the mines could no longer work, and all able-bodied men were forcibly deported. The Germans also

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156 Vivier, 77.
157 Des Ormes, 119.
took the hay, straw, coal, oils, and mining horses with them.\textsuperscript{159} Retreating German soldiers were selling the goods they had stolen elsewhere.\textsuperscript{160}

According to Jules Leroy, the Germans were the first to get out of their trenches. “They jumped, yelled and threw their helmets in the air.”\textsuperscript{161} Belgians, too, were happy that the war was finally over. De Decker was very enthusiastic over the armistice. “Then the cries stopped abruptly, and all the brave poilu who had endure for four years mud, steel and death, fell in each others’ arms,” said Adjudant A.D.\textsuperscript{162} Now they could go back home.\textsuperscript{163} With their country freed from occupation, there were many festivities and parades to celebrate the happy event. The King and Queen made an official entrance into Brussels, cheered on by masses of people. In many other towns, such as Welkenraedt, where Valentin noticed a huge difference in atmosphere in the Belgian and German part of the village, ceremonies and other festivities were held.

When they were collecting weapons from the Germans, Leroy noticed that “[s]trangely enough Germans ratted out each other.” They probably wanted to show themselves in a positive light to the Belgian soldiers for better treatment.\textsuperscript{164} Coppens notes in his memoir that after the armistice he was looked after by a German stretcher bearer. With their defeat, the Germans were now at the mercy of the Belgians and the Allies. They thought they would get better treatment from the victorious Belgians and Allies by aiding them.\textsuperscript{165}

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 215-216.
\textsuperscript{160} Wils, 238-239.
\textsuperscript{161} Elfnovembergroep, 82.
\textsuperscript{163} De Decker, 317; Vivier, 97.
\textsuperscript{164} Elfnovembergroep, 82.
\textsuperscript{165} Coppens De Houthulst, 285.