Chapter 4: Conclusion

Post-War: End of Animosity?

With the Armistice, the soldiers’ duty was not over yet. One of the conditions of the armistice was the evacuation by German soldiers of the Rhineland and occupation of it by the victors of the war, including a part by the Belgians; in 1921 they still had 25,300 soldiers there. This occupation was confirmed in the Treaty of Versailles to last until 1935, although the occupiers left in 1930 in a goodwill gesture toward the Weimar Republic. Valentin was one of the men sent there, but he found out that it was nothing like military duty, nothing like it had been at the front. “There is no real soldiers’ life left. Only the uniform remains.”¹ He was at first stationed at Welkenraedt, divided by the border between Belgium and Germany, where he lived with Germans in their house. On one occasion there was a patriotic ceremony to celebrate the victory over the Germans. The Belgian part of the town was filled with Belgian flags and portraits of King Albert, but on the German side it was devoid of such decoration.

¹ Jaques Dewaele, ed. & trans., De oorlog van Valentin: Brieven van Oostendenaar Valentin Dewaele, kanonnier aan het Ijzerfront (Koksijde: Uitgeverij De Klaproos, 1999), 143.
The German people he met when he was in Germany were very friendly, but for a reason, according to Valentin: “They are very friendly to us, but it is cowardice and hypocrisy, they are scared and crawl before us.” Later he was transferred to another town. There too he was stationed in the house of a German family. These people did everything they could for him. “Incredible the change of mentality. We hate them and they probably hate us, but we do not notice that at all, and we have fun with them, laugh and party as crazy men.”

During Christmas and New Year, he was still there and celebrated together with local Germans. He was surprised at how the Germans treated them: “As if there had never been a

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2 [http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2700/2741/2741.htm](http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/2700/2741/2741.htm).
3 Dewaele, 139.
war between us. Absolutely incredible!” And he added, “[w]e ate, partied, laughed and danced until four in the morning. With Germans! Who had thought that possible?”

Post-War Belgium

Most soldiers’ testimonies stop at the end, or even before the end of the war. Of course soldiers’ lives, ideas and perceptions did not stop with the war. Conflicts which emerged during the war continued, between Belgium and Germany, and internally in Belgium. Looking at Belgium and its population in general will give a good idea of the consequences of the war for the soldiers who fought it, and what became of them.

The negotiations in Paris for a peace treaty, which led to the Treaty of Versailles, did not go as the Belgians had expected. They sent Paul Hymans, Jules van den Heuvel and Emile Vandervelde, liberal, Catholic and socialist respectively, to appease internal political divisions that raged in Belgium between the three different political ideologies. Partly because of their own faults, their negotiators were not up to the task, especially Hyman who thought he just had to insist long enough to get what the Allies had promised and had a “prickly self-righteousness” about him; Henri Davignon, son of a former foreign minister would later write that it would have been better if de Broqueville or Beyens, a capable diplomat and minister to Germany before the war, had gone to the negotiations. Expectations were too high, which included complete compensation and trials for those guilty of war crimes, but the Allies’ opinion of Belgian participation during the war had also dropped dramatically, and views on German war atrocities had altered. Belgian casualties totaled only 40,000 killed and 75,000 wounded during the war; while France had lost many more. Belgium did suffer great material loss, and most of the

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5 Ibid., 144-145.
country was occupied during the war, so they had to borrow a lot to sustain their war effort. They did not get what they wanted and had been promised during the war. One such promise France and Britain made on February 14th 1916, was to fight until Belgium was free and complete compensation had been paid by Germany for all the damage done to Belgium during the occupation. This did not happen. However, Belgium did get a small part of Germany (Eupen, Malmedy, Sankt-Vith) and the protectorate of part of Germany's East African colonies, current-day Rwanda and Burundi. At times, the negotiations became particularly painful for the Belgian delegation. During one session before the Council of Four, Hymans, the Belgian foreign minister, spoke of Belgian complaints too long for Clemenceau. At the end, Hymans, said: “I wish there was something I could do for Belgium.” Clemenceau replied with “[t]he best thing you can do for Belgium is die or resign.” Disappointment with the peace treaty was great in Belgium.

Another issue that came up was that of bringing those who had committed crimes against Belgium, France, and others, and its peoples to justice. An international tribunal was proposed and supported by the British and French, but the Americans opposed and blocked it. A compromise was reached; the trials would take place in the victims’ country and the offender would be sentenced following existing laws. The original list of those to be tried was 3,000 names long, including Hindenburg, Falkenhayn, Ludendorff, Prince Rupprecht and Kluck. It was reduced several times, at the request of the Germans, who warned that the Communists or the military would take over if the list was not adjusted. When it was reduced to 854 names, the French refused to shorten it any more. A German proposal was accepted as a compromise; the trials would be held in Germany in German courts. Only one man would go to trial in Leipzig for crimes committed in Belgium, Max Ramdohr. He mistreated children to get information. He was acquitted because he was just following orders. The Belgian delegation left Leipzig. The French

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fared little better with one conviction. They too left. The British got five convictions out of six and their delegation was satisfied, although in London they were just as outraged over these show trials as they were in Paris and Brussels.9

With the war over, Belgium did not go back to being neutral; on the contrary they tried to work together with France and Britain to keep their wartime alliance alive. They signed a bilateral agreement with France on September 7th 1920. Britain was not interested; in their view this alliance would make France too dominant in Europe. The Locarno Agreements of 1925, supported by Britain and Italy, fixed the Franco-German and Belgian border. Now Belgium did not have to depend solely on France.10 Also, France signed military agreements with Poland and Czechoslovakia that same year.11

In 1923 and 1924, France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr area of Germany, because Germany had not paid compensations for the war previously agreed on, with the aim of using the coal, iron and steel production for the debts Germany owed them. In total, Belgium received about 2 milliard gold marks ($500 million), 18 percent of the damages and fines it was entitled to.12 Belgium’s hardship after the war received scant attention. A lot of the money they did receive went to repaying the war debts they had been forced to incur during the war, because Belgium had been occupied and it lacked any revenue from taxation.13 Not until 1936, after occupation and re-militarization of the Rhineland and the denunciation of the Locarno Pacts of 1925, with which Hitler tried to undo the Treaty of Versailles and return Germany to

10 Luc de Vos and Frank Decat, Belgie in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, deel 10: Mei 1940, van Albertkanaal tot Leie (Kapellen: Peckmans, 1990), 7-9.
11 Gilbert, 531.
12 Lipkes, 683.
13 Zuckerman, 261.
superpower status, did Belgium restore its neutrality in the hope that this time it could avoid getting involved in any future war.\textsuperscript{14}

After the war, only radical soldiers continued to agitate for Flemish nationalism, while most others were happy just to be able to go home. They brought Flemish nationalism to the common people, who had not come into contact with it before. Because of Activist collaboration during the war and fear of a severe Flemish challenge against the Belgian government, there was a backlash against Flemish nationalism. The population was also hostile toward Flemish nationalism. With victory came triumphalism and nationalism, the Belgian population’s pent-up hatred for the Germans and everyone associated with them boiled over. The actions of the Activists during the war were seen as treason. The entire movement was discredited, including the Passivists, who had been against working with the Germans. Frans Van Cauwelart, a leading Passivist, was yelled at on his return to Antwerp by people on the streets, who called him a traitor and a \textit{mof}.\textsuperscript{15} A soldier stopped them, and praised him and the Flemish movement. Activists, many of whom had already fled, were not as lucky. Their possessions, and sometimes even their houses, were vandalized, and in rare cases burned.\textsuperscript{16}

It did not take long before it became clear to the Flemish nationalists that their wishes would not be fulfilled anytime in the near future. Loppem became the King’s headquarters after the armistice. There he invited prominent members of Belgian society for discussion on the future of Belgium. Absent were the Flemish. Neither Helleput, Poullet nor Van de Vyvere,


\textsuperscript{15} Insulting way of saying German in Dutch.

ministers favorable to the Flemish, nor Van Cauwelaert were called to Loppem. On the other hand, de Broqueville, an opportunist, and the anti-Flemish Renkin did get to meet the King in Loppem. After the armistice, at the end of 1918, the Flemish nationalists had no real power. Several had died in the last offensive; others were scattered throughout the country with few means of communication. Their base among the soldiers was more interested in heading home, and the Belgian population wanted to have nothing to do with Flemish nationalism, out of disgust with the collaboration of the Activists. There was a true anti-Flemish reaction among the Belgian population after the war. Elias put it this way, “Belgian nationalism poisoned the anti-Flemish atmosphere that was already heavily loaded with anti-Flemish and anti-Activist reactions.”

While other groups such as the movement of laborers, who wanted the right to a single vote for every man, got their wishes, promises made to the Flemish nationalists during the war were not kept. The Belgian government reversed the German policies in Flanders, the University of Ghent became French again, and any autonomy Flanders disappeared. Flemish collaborators with the German occupiers fled to the Netherlands, deserting soldiers as well as those in the occupied territories. In their absence they were condemned by Belgian courts, some them to death. A total of three hundred twelve were sentenced to imprisonment longer than eight months, but many more got “administrative” punishments. Around 3,200 people who worked for provincial or municipal agencies lost their jobs; students who had taken courses during the war lost their degrees and were not allowed to study at their university any longer. Until April 30th 1919, they had to appear before a military court that was very strict and severe, because the country was officially still at war. Activists were also excluded from reparations for war damages and had to pay heavy fines themselves. This was a serious overreaction of the Belgian

17 Wils, 240; Elias, 154-155, 175-177.
authorities. In turn, many Flemish nationalists would become very anti-Belgium. Flemish suffering at the front and repression after the war provided the Flemish movement, Frontpartij and later VNV, Vlaams National Verbond, with a near-inexhaustible source to recruit from. General public opinion of the Flemish people also quickly turned toward a call for amnesty for the Activists after the Belgian government’s brutal repression. The refusal of the moderate Flemish nationalists to condemn those who collaborated during the war and permit them to rejoin their ranks after the war, allowed the Activists to have a huge influence on the Flemish movement.

After the war, Flemish nationalists created a political party, Frontpartij, named after the movement of Flemish soldiers at the front. They were successful in several elections in the 1920s, and in 1929 scored their biggest victory. Flemish nationalism was on the rise during the 1920s. Their supporters were mainly Catholics and intellectuals. When some of their demands were met, their loss of mandates in the elections of 1932, their internal struggles, which had been there from the beginning, came to surface, and they started arguing among themselves. Lack of an operational leadership made it impossible to keep all the different groups together. Eventually they split into several smaller parties.

Activist August Borms, who had collaborated with Germany in occupied Belgium, was condemned to death on September 9th 1919. The sentence was later changed to life imprisonment. He refused a deal offered to him for early release which meant no more involvement with politics in Flanders for him. He became the symbol of the fight for amnesty for the “victim” of the repression of Flemish nationalists right after the war. It was not until after

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18 Marc Reynebeau, Het Klauwen van de Leeuw (Van Halewyck, 1995), 15; Elias, 181-182.
19 De Wever, 31; Wils, 241.
20 Elias, 181.
21 De Wever, 33-83.
22 Ibid., 63.
the election of Activist August Borms, as a member of parliament in 1928 while he was still in prison, that change came. His victory shocked the establishment into action. In 1930 the University of Ghent was completely Dutch, the convicted Activists were pardoned and could return to Belgium in 1937. A year later the army was split into Flemish and Walloon regiments. But not all went well. On May 30th 1930, a letter from a minister on the implementation of the law on the language requirements for officers in the army was sent, which gutted the law. The economic crisis inspired the Flemish movement to make a turn to the right during the 1930s; the leadership following their radicalizing base, especially Catholic youth, became ever more anti-Belgium. Many of them would repeat their collaboration with the Germans in the Second World War, but then it would surface at the very beginning of the war. Anti-Belgium feeling had taken deep roots in the Flemish movement. Dutch and German money kept going toward Flemish nationalist movements, especially to printed publications, in a continuation of the Flamenpolitik.

In the postwar years, the Flemish movement built a monument to remember the Flemish soldiers who died in the war, the Ijzertoren, where they have a gathering each year, even up to this day. All combatant countries built monuments to commemorate the First World War, including many places in Belgium. As Horne and Kramer noted, the “early post war years had been marked by bitter memories of 1914 and overt hostility toward Germany.” Several of the proposed memorials upset the Germans. For example, the inscriptions that were planned to be added to a memorial in Dinant referred to “German barbarism” and “Teutonic fury” in 1927. Under German pressure, the Belgian government tried to stop them. Dinant persisted, but had a

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23 De Vos and Decat, 10.
24 De Wever, 58; Wils, 263.
25 De Wever, 38; Wils, 262.
problem finding enough money, so they had to make the monument smaller. A similar
inscription was to be used at the rebuilt library in 1928: “Furore Teutinico.” Conflict arose over
the inscription. When the Germans invaded Belgium again during the Second World War, they
destroyed several of these monuments, including the one at Dinant and the library of Leuven. 27
In the end, the inscription was not installed on the memorial.

Other instances of hostility toward Germany, and over which tension arose between the
two countries, were postcards of German atrocities seen through Belgian eyes (see Figure 1 - 5,
Appendix A). Over time, during the 1920s and 1930s, the Belgian government became ever
more reconciliatory toward Germany, for obvious reasons. Good relations with the big neighbor
country were necessary for commerce, trade, and defense. By 1936, with the tensions between
Germany and other European countries rising again, a lot of things had changed; the memories
of the First World War had become less prominent in public life, which was a problem for the
ministry of defense for whom it became increasingly problematic to get adequate funding. As a
consequence the size of the army and the duration of conscription was reduced. Veterans and
officers were very dissatisfied with these measures. 28 Other issues, such as the Flemish matter,
came to the fore. 29

In his last letter to his Canadian marraine, 30 dated March 1919, Captain
Raymond gives his view on what the German occupation and the constant warfare during the
four-year period did to Belgium: “poor people of Belgium, they will never know enough of how
you suffered under the German occupation ...” 31 The same applied to its soldiers. Even as the
years passed, the Belgian population and its soldiers never forgot what had happened, the

27 Lipkes, 669-671.
28 De Vos and Decat, 9.
29 Zuckerman, 269.
30 ‘Godmother’, used for women, usually foreign, they wrote letters to.
brutalities and atrocities of the Germans, but also the other side, living in the trenches with its hardships, conflicts and their fellow soldiers, in the First World War.

Final Notes

In this study, it was shown that the Belgian soldiers’ perceptions of the enemy changed during three phases of the First World War: first the invasion of Belgium, second the stalemate between the two sides and trench warfare, and eventually, the third and last phase, the Allies’ simultaneous offensive on the Western Front which led the defeat of Germany. This study also explored the long-term consequences of the war on Belgian ethnic identity politics and national unity in the post-war years. These three phases shaped the experience of the Belgian soldier, which in turn affected their perception. Each chapter looked at one of the three phases.

The first chapter was concerned with the invasion of Belgium. During this period, the Germans marched into Belgium despite the guarantee of its neutrality that the major powers, including Germany, had signed. This act enraged the entire Belgian population. Masses volunteered to fight. While going through Belgium, the Germans did not hesitate to use violence and destruction against the civilian population. Soldiers in the Belgian army, and the population in general, saw these acts as atrocities. Their hatred of the enemy increased with every new incident they heard about, real or imagined. The whole population of Belgium, Walloons as well as Flemish, united in their opposition to the invader.

During the second phase, the longest, there were two opposite experiences working on the soldiers at the same time. One reinforced the feeling of the first phase. Violence and killing, abuse in the occupied territories, and other such behavior fed Belgian hatred for the Germans. On the other hand, there was a process of normalization during the stalemate on the battlefield. Soldiers adjusted to their new environment on the Western Front. They made it their new
“home.” New and old internal conflicts arose again, front against the rear, French versus Flemish-speaking soldiers. A mixture of these experiences made for the unique perceptions each soldier had of the war.

With the third phase, the end of the war was nearing. The Allied forces started a combined offensive against the Germans on the Western Front and started to push them back. Now the Belgians were winning, retaking their country. For most Belgian soldiers only one thing was on their mind, going back home to family and friends. After the war, some soldiers were stationed in Germany to occupy part of the bordering territory. Yet is it clear that the armistice did not change the views developed during the war. Belgian opinions on the peace treaty and the memorials built for the dead were shaped by their wartime experiences. The peace treaty signed in Versailles was a huge disappointment for the Belgians. Several memorials built in Belgium offended the Germans and led to tension between Belgium and Germany in the post-war period.

Over the course of the phases of the war, the perceptions of the Belgian soldiers toward their enemy changed. From intense hatred for the Germans in the beginning, with trench warfare, views among the soldiers started to diverge in two opposite directions, hatred and normalization, and at the end war fatigue started to play a role; most were just tired of war and wanted to go home.

In the introduction to this study, the question of why soldiers fought during the First World War was raised. Throughout the study, we saw that the views of the soldiers toward their enemy can be one of the reasons. In addition, perceptions that soldiers had of their enemy influenced how they fought. In the beginning, all Belgian soldiers, and the population in general, had an intense hatred for the enemy, no matter what their differences before the war. They fought very fiercely and were able, against all odds, to slow down the Germans. At the end of
the war, they fought hard, but now with the idea of being able to go home in mind, they exhibited much less the result of animosity toward the enemy. The second, middle phase was more complex. Sometimes soldiers wanted to confront the enemy, often for very specific personal reasons, for example to avenge a fallen companion; other soldiers wanted to stay away from the fighting, go to the rear, because their will to fight and die had gone. The main influences on their attitudes were the general environment in which they fought, what area the soldiers were in, what they saw and heard, who they fought with. Many soldiers had similar experiences during the war, although every individual soldier is unique in his own way. Most adjusted to the war. It became a regular life to them; they were just doing their job, no extreme emotions were involved. But there were of course outliers. Van Severen, a Flemish nationalist, developed a hatred for the Belgian army command, whom he regarded as anti-Flemish, and their Allies, who did not try to bring peace. Snoeck, on the other hand, carried the feelings of the first phase of the war with him throughout the war. He thoroughly hated the Germans until his death on 30 September, 1918.

Depending on their experiences during the war and their individual personalities, soldiers had perceptions of the enemy which changed how they fought the war over time. Intense hatred in the beginning remained for some; others adjusted to the war situation. Many became weary of the war after many years of fighting. This led Flemish soldiers to the Flemish movement, and its agitation against the circumstances at the front. With the end of the war, many happily went back to their homes and families.

Soldiers’ experiences and perceptions during the war shaped how they lived after the war. The Flemish movement became anti-Belgian, where it had not been before, because of the perceived injustices done to them, but remained loyal to the king, whom they still trusted as
their commander from the war. Relations with Germany remained difficult, because of feelings resulting from the war, and troubles with reparations.

The invasion temporarily reduced all internal conflicts and struggles. Everyone was united against the invader. Soon these conflicts returned, when people got used to the war, and the dynamics of pre-war ethnic tensions and internal conflicts changed because of the war. The Flemish struggle created myths of their war experiences that last until today. Feelings that the men had at the front, had lasting consequences over the years.

The importance of the First World War on the Flemish movement cannot be underestimated. Several myths originated from the war, including the 80 percent myth. These myths have been powerful recruiting tools over the years. By not condemning the Activists, allowed them and their ideas to have a major influence on the Flemish movement in the post-war years.

At this point, it is time to look back at the comments by soldiers of their feelings toward their enemy. Holmes spoke about the abstract image soldiers had at the beginning, which disappeared with the first contact with enemy, and Bourke is of the opinion that hatred is related to physical and psychological proximity; the further away, the stronger the feelings. And in combat, less experience results in more intense emotions. Many histories written on the soldiers of the First World War, mainly focused on British and American soldiers, agree with Holmes and Bourke. This work on Belgian soldiers showed that the intense hatred Belgians felt toward the Germans, started with the invasion and their perception of German actions in Belgium, did not disappear when they came into contact with the enemy. It went on for an extended period of time; for some it never went away. The long duration of the war allowed soldiers to settle in and adjust to the war. Other things became more important than thinking about the enemy. After awhile war fatigue began to take its toll; the main result of which, at
least in the Belgian army was that many Flemish soldiers joined the Flemish nationalist movement. At the end, when the soldiers could glimpse victory, they only longed to go home. Hatred for the enemy and conflicts from during the war, such as the Flemish issue, were not very important anymore for most men. Yet strong feelings about the enemy continued to linger among veterans after the war and died hard, if they died at all. When starting from a different situation and experience, as soldiers from different countries in the First World War had, this study shows that the feelings among the soldiers could be very different.