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The Language War in Belgium

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[On July 19, 1931, the centenary of the present Belgian dynasty, the House of Saxe-Coburg, was celebrated. Throughout the century of Belgian history, the Flemish-speaking territory, including Flanders, Limburg and Brabant, has agitated for autonomy. Dr. Laurent in the following article discusses the movement of the Flemings and the recent extensive concessions granted them.]

THE Flemish question in its present status is no longer a matter of Belgian politics, but concerns foreigners keenly. What affects Belgium cannot be ignored by students of the political evolution of Europe. Located at the crossroads of England, France and Germany, with a national wealth of \$12,232,000,000, and a great colonial empire, she plays a more important rôle in the destinies of Europe than might be expected of a country comprising only 11,752 square miles and 8,000,000 inhabitants. For some years past the Flemish question has been threatening not only the morale but the material existence of Belgium.

Racially, Belgium is cut in two by an almost straight line, which runs from south of Ypres on the French frontier, north of Liège toward the point where Belgium, Holland and Germany meet. North of this line, in the provinces of West and East Flanders, of Antwerp and Limburg, as well as in Northern Brabant (which takes in Brussels and Louvain), the majority of the population is Flemish, a branch of the Germanic race, speaking the Flemish language and Germanic dialects. South of this line, in the provinces of Hainaut, Namur,

Liège and Luxemburg, as well as Southern Brabant, the majority of the population consists of Walloons, a branch of the Latin race, speaking the French language and Latin dialects. The Flemish are slightly more numerous and significantly stronger in national spirit.

The origins of this curious linguistic frontier go back 1,500 years. In the first century B. C. Belgium was conquered by Caesar and became strongly Romanized. The Roman military engineers constructed a highway which ran eastward across Belgium from Bavai to Cologne, parallel to the Sambre-Meuse. In the time of the Germanic invasions, protected by a chain of blockhouses, it became the line of defense, the front which the Romans opposed to the Germans. Beginning with the fourth century, all the land to the north of the front was abandoned to the invaders and was slowly colonized by the Salic Franks, distant ancestors of the Flemings. All land to the south was sheltered from invasion and colonization, and remained Gallo-Romanic. This is the essential fact which explains why Belgium is still divided into two ethnic groups.

The treaties of 1815, closing the era of the Napoleonic Wars, promised an end to the vicissitudes of Belgium. Uniting under William of Holland the Netherlands of the north and the south, a new State was established and assured of the support of the major powers in its development. Yet it lasted only sixteen years. In 1830 revolution broke out in Belgium and

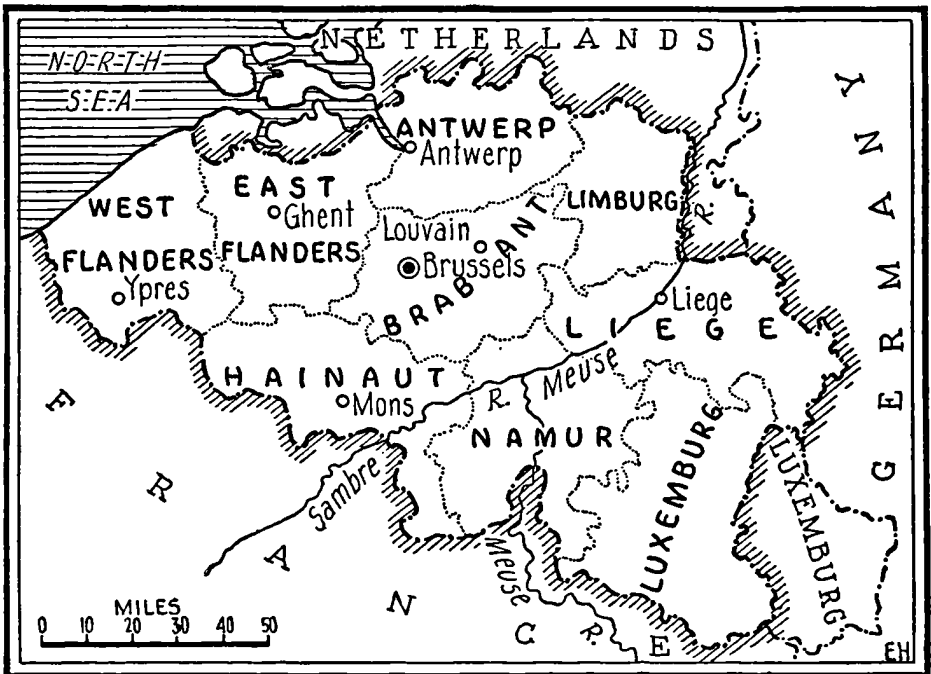
eventually independence was won from Holland by force of arms.

The revolution of 1830 was essentially a reaction against the authority of The Hague. Among the Flemings who participated in it there was no racial animosity, but merely political and religious opposition. Moreover, the revolution was led by Brussels and the Walloon provinces. It was French in its ideology and its inspiration, following within a month upon the July revolution at Paris. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Belgian revolution should have established the political preponderance of the Walloons over Flanders.

Out of this situation have proceeded two consequences. At this time there was born and developed the idea that to be Flemish is to be anti-Belgian. Or more exactly, we may say that since the central government decreed the use of the French language all reaction tending to admit the equality

of the two languages came to be interpreted as anti-patriotic, anti-national. The governing classes of the Flemish population have lent more or less weight to this conception. By systematically ignoring the language of the people, they completely failed in their duties for at least seventy-five years. This is too often forgotten today when a point is made of defending "the right" of this class to continue to receive instruction in French. In this sense the Flemish question has been essentially one of classes. The Socialists have comprehended this perfectly, and since the beginning of socialism in Belgium in 1885 it has strongly supported the Flemish movement.

The Flemish movement has its roots in the romanticism of writers and professors, and this origin gives it certain traits which are still perceptible. It proceeds directly from the ideas of German philology as to the function



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of language as a profound expression of the soul of a people, and from the romantic taste for the past, manifest in the success of the historical novel. After fifty years of concessions the moderate Flemings still cling to the issue of language. "In Vlaanderen, Vlaamsch!" they say. (In Flanders, Flemish.) The use of Flemish as an official language was first sought in 1840; there was a drawing up of memoranda of grievances in 1847, and the appointment of a Parliamentary commission for the study of these grievances. After that, the Flemish tongue was placed on the same basis as French in the courts of Flanders (Coremans Law of 1873, amended four times up to 1908). It was first admitted on equal footing with French in the government of Flanders, then in all Belgium. The teaching of Flemish is officially sanctioned, and even takes precedence over French in primary and secondary schools. In the army all officers and the medical staff are required to know Flemish.

Thus by the time of the World War the Flemings had in forty years won at least a legal victory (we shall presently see the importance of this reservation) of almost complete equality with the Walloons. But the history of the Flemish movement since the war reveals increased bitterness. Far from being satisfied when they won linguistic equality, the Flemings gave new evidence of fanaticism and of hostility toward both the Walloon executives and the government at Brussels. It was claimed that all their grievances had been adjusted only after militant campaigns, directed much more by threat than persuasion, and that their demands had been granted grudgingly.

The Flemish movement has displayed many of the characteristics of a revolution—a peaceful revolution, without bloodshed, but a revolution all the same. Not only does it have its leaders, its press and its defined objectives, but it is animated by the

force of ideas. It is imbued by what Georges Sorel, the revolutionary theorist, would call a myth, that of equality of language. The Flemish University of Ghent, established in 1930, is a realization of this idea of which the Flemish peasants had been dreaming as the Communist workmen dream vaguely of the five-hour day. Furthermore, the Flemish movement since the war has had its party of extremists, which might even be termed, in the phrase of the historians of the French Revolution, its *parti d'enragés*. This party has concentrated in itself all the diffused radical tendencies which existed before the war, and is acting as if it were the spokesman for all Flemings of other parties. It speeds the rhythm of their evolution, forcing them accept the principle of all revolutions: "No division within the ranks!"

In 1914, the Germans invading Belgium by Liège and Luxemburg, overwhelmed the Walloon territory in a few weeks (Aug. 4-23), while Flanders, during the siege of Antwerp and the sallies of Belgian troops from its forts, remained free of invasion for nearly two months. As a result mobilization was more complete in Flanders than in Wallonia and included the young recruits scheduled for 1915, who were enrolled in Flanders and not in Wallonia. In short, there were proportionally more Flemings in the army than Walloons.

When the Germans saw that the war was to be prolonged they instituted a whole series of political manoeuvres designed to create sympathy in the regions which they hoped to annex after their victory. Autonomous Flanders with a Flemish university at Ghent was one of their promises. It was a Machiavellian plan, which, pretending to be inspired by the right of self-determination, seemed to grant Flanders the independence which she had been unable to obtain under Belgium. This attempt collapsed before the loyalty of the mass of the

Flemish people and the express disavowal of the leaders of the Flemish movement, who denied the Germans, under Article XLIII of The Hague Convention, all right to modify the laws of the Belgian State, and promised not to settle the Flemish question except on the platform of "the independence of the Belgian nation." The German manoeuvre succeeded in winning only a small number of Flemish intellectuals, especially a few embittered professors, who reproached Belgium as much with failure to appreciate their talents as with delay in the settlement of the Flemish question.

Another manifestation of the Flemish movement during the war appeared on the battlefield itself and was called "frontism." It was more serious, and the impartial historian must admit that it had some validity. Even at first the Belgian Army contained more Flemings than Walloons, and after the establishment of the front, the disproportion increased. The Flemish leaders have even asserted—without authentic statistics—that 80 per cent of the fighting army was Flemish. Even if this figure were exact, the situation was not created by any distressing prejudice among the staff officers but arose from the fact that the Flemings, coming chiefly from agricultural districts, were assigned mainly to the infantry, which is both the mainstay and chief sufferer in battle. The Walloons, on the other hand, who were usually metallurgists, miners or skilled artisans, were more numerous in the technical divisions—heavy artillery, telegraphy, airplane mechanics. When the war was prolonged these men were in demand for the munitions factories behind the front. On the other hand, since Flanders lacked upper-class leaders, the bourgeois Walloons, men of Brussels, or Flemings of French sympathy, had always been the army officers. After the casualties of 1914 the whole staff of Lieutenants was new, and was composed mainly of

young university students, which is to say, those of French training. It was a fact that the officers knew very little Flemish. But they were patriots; they were even nationalists.

The Flemings at the front carried on secret propaganda in the ranks. In 1917—the year when all the allied armies suffered a serious lowering of morale—this propaganda was responsible for a certain number of desertions to the enemy and the beginnings of mutiny. There was nothing more serious than this. None of the movements affected more than one company of 150 to 180 men. In a larger army than the Belgian, which never had more than 150,000 men, such facts would have been only local incidents. For some time these facts were suppressed, although it may be questioned whether this discretion was wise.

On Nov. 22, 1918, the day of his triumphal return to the capital at the head of his troops, King Albert formally promised the Flemings equality of language and the free ethnic development of Flanders by the creation of a Flemish University of Ghent. The announcement of the reform program is said to have been made partly in order to avoid a revolution, and some justification appears for this hypothesis in view of later events. As soon as the danger was believed to have passed concessions to the die-hards noticeably decreased. The Flemish university, solemnly promised in 1918, did not materialize until 1930.

In all fairness to the government's hesitancy to undertake a settlement of the Flemish question as a whole, it should be said that infinitely more urgent matters—or what were considered to be such—presented themselves immediately after the armistice. The first thing was to recoup the war losses: 50,000 soldiers and several thousand civilians slain, 100,000 buildings destroyed, 250,000 acres torn up or flooded, 3,000 miles of railroad wrecked. The total damage was

estimated in January, 1919, at approximately \$6,500,000,000. Once this first crisis was past, Belgium, like all the countries in the war, underwent a fiscal crisis which reached its height in July, 1926, coinciding with the French crisis, when the franc was quoted at 45 to the dollar. When the fiscal crisis had been miraculously surmounted and the currency stabilized, a new period of recuperation followed, to be succeeded in its turn, since 1929, by an economic crisis. It is a good sign for the future of Belgium that it was the lulls between these critical periods which witnessed the most vigorous Flemish agitation—1922-1925 and 1928-1929. When the general economy of the State is in danger, the Flemish leaders moderate their claims. But, considering its whole course, the Flemish question has been and remains the central question of Belgian domestic politics.

The Flemish sentiment has naturally invaded the three traditional parties, which contain a certain proportion of Flemish members. The Catholic party has always been the party of the well-to-do, conservative bourgeoisie, and since the end of the nineteenth century it has attracted the rural democrats of the same faith. This democratic Catholic wing, which consists of Flemish farmers, is ardently Flemish, often obeying the counsel of the extremists, and itself influencing the rest of the party, by the usual machinery of party discipline. The following table shows the party alignment in the Chamber of Deputies:

	Cath- olics	Lib- erals	Social- ists	Front- ists	Com- munist
1919	73	34	70	5	0
1921	80	33	68	4	1
1925	79	23	78	6	2
1929	76	28	70	12	1

The Liberal party, comprising the intellectual, anti-clerical, bourgeoisie swings perpetually between a right wing of doctrinaires always ready for conservative social policies in collaboration with the Catholics—by which

they acquire more Cabinet places than their numbers justify—and a progressive anti-clerical left wing. As a whole, this is the party which has remained the most impenetrable to Flemish influence.

As for the Socialist party, its name need not unduly alarm the American reader. It is a party of workingmen, not revolutionary, essentially reformist, with a strong backing of syndicates, cooperatives, societies for mutual aid, which bind it more and more to capitalism. As such, it is much nearer the Labor party than the Socialist, a French section of the International. As we have said, the Socialists, calling the Flemish question one of class struggle, have never ceased to support it and be supported by it. From 1925 to 1926 the Socialists and the Flemish Catholic Democrats were in the Cabinet majority. Of late, however, the Walloon Socialists seem increasingly disturbed by the progress of the Flemish extremists and by their influence on the moderates.

As a matter of fact, the Flemings in all the traditional parties are moderates and respect the existing Belgian State. But since the war a new party has appeared. It takes the name of Frontism, the movement born during the war at the front. Its program demands a Federal State in place of the centralized Belgian States, whose sole aim it sees as the subjugation of Flanders to Wallonia, and hence to France. The membership of this party consists of all those Flemings who have somewhat suddenly been seized with a craving for culture after generations of ignorance. But it is none the less true that Frontism constitutes the active wing which sweeps Flemings of all parties along with it, exercising the most unfortunate influence on them, both indirectly and in provincial councils.

From the administrative point of view, progress has been most rapid and satisfactory. The Flemish language, which, since 1898, had been the secondary official tongue, has

been increasingly used and has driven French from the established position which it held in Flanders. The law of July 31, 1921, divided Belgium into two parts, in which all administrative matters are conducted respectively in a single language, Flemish in Flanders and French in Wallonia. Local authorities may add a translation if they wish. The same law obliges the central authority to conduct business in Flemish with the Flemish authorities. In order to belong to the central administration, it is now indispensable to know Flemish, as a result, placing the Walloons at a disadvantage, at least for a generation to come. The observance of this law is honest, as Shepard B. Clough, the American historian, recently noted. But now the Flemings have set a new objective: the complete duplication of all central administration.

The struggle for the establishment of the Flemish University of Ghent has been even more bitter. On this question the future of the free cultural development of Flanders was felt to hinge. Public opinion in Wallonia was careful not to oppose the right of the Flemings to have their own university, but the Walloons suffered pang at the thought of losing the old French University of Ghent, which had been a noted centre of culture for more than a century. The Flemings insisted on the substitution of the new Flemish university and the suppression of the old French university. They would have no compromise such as the maintenance of the French university at Ghent and the creation of a new Flemish university at Antwerp or even at Ghent. In truth, such a compromise would have had its drawbacks, for Belgium is too small to maintain five great universities. If the existing French university in Flanders were maintained, the Flemings felt that a hostile competition would arise. The conflict was between the principle of Flemish unification by degrees, favored by the Walloons, and of Flemish unification outright,

favored by the Flemings. At length in 1922, after unedifying Parliamentary disputes and street brawls, the principle of Flemish unification by degrees was carried by a narrow majority of four votes. The Nolf law, which enacted this principle in 1923, was carried by a majority of only twelve votes. Irreconcilable Flemish extremists were among the minority, with a number of Walloons, who continued to oppose any attack on the French university. The Nolf law decreed that Flemish should be the official language of the University of Ghent, and that the students should have a choice of two alternatives: one consisting of two-thirds of their courses in Flemish and one-third in French, the other offering two-thirds in French and one-third in Flemish. As a result, the Flemish extremists boycotted the Nolf University, asserting that free development was denied them there.

At last, after a six-year interregnum, Flemish unification was voted at the price of a long Cabinet crisis, which increased the impression of Walloon hostility. Nevertheless, there was an overwhelming majority of 154 to 10, with six members not voting. This enormous majority is evidence that the Walloons are no longer opposing the principle of the ethnical development of Flanders, and also that they are losing interest in the fate of the French minorities in Flanders. The completely Flemish university has opened its doors, and henceforth Belgium will have two systems of education in evolution.

Amnesty for political prisoners has taken the same course of compromise. The activist leaders were sentenced in 1919 by due process of law as follows: Forty-five sentences of death, eleven to life imprisonment, twenty to terms of twenty years, sixteen to terms of fifteen years and sixty-five to miscellaneous lesser penalties. These sentences soon were much modified and none of the death sentences were carried out. The death penalty is still

pronounced in Belgium but is never inflicted. Various measures of clemency followed each other until, seven years after the trials, all the prisoners had been released except one named Borms. This exception was a mistake. By keeping Borms in prison several years after the liberation of the others, because he had boasted of his treason, no crime was committed, as the majority of the Flemings declared, but an error in political judgment, which, according to Talleyrand's epigram, is much more serious. All the advantage of the leniency to the other prisoners was lost and the frontists were given their chance to have a martyr.

On Dec. 9, 1928, in a by-election, Borms, who was still in prison and whom the government had not even bothered to declare ineligible to office, was elected to the Assembly by Antwerp. Under this insulting threat a law of general amnesty was passed. Unfortunately the clemency obtained by threat appeased nobody. In the next general elections twelve frontists were elected to the Chamber of Deputies and four to the Senate. The Frontist party is not numerous (the Chamber has 187 Deputies), but it is extremely active, holds many offices and its elected representatives speak only Flemish in Parliament, a thing seldom known before.

The radical reforms in the army came last. The army, of course, is the symbol of national unity. There was prolonged hesitation over interfering with it, but this delay was not used for any profound study of the complex problem. The solution reached, and now in force, is faulty and provisional. Since 1928 the principle of regional recruiting has been established, by which each soldier serves in his home region. The law requiring officers to have a working knowledge of Flemish has been enforced. Finally, since 1930, things have gone further. The army has been divided. It is not yet a Flemish army and a French army, which would be the end of

everything, but the regiments and units of the corps are either all Flemish or all French or mixed—that is to say, composed of French or Flemish battalions or groups. All the small units—companies, squadrons, batteries—are homogeneous in language, except in the technical corps, such as aviation or transport. As it was difficult to combine this division of the army with regional recruiting, bizarre situations have arisen. It may be asked whether the military staff has fully estimated the consequences of this reform. In the infantry the proportion has remained almost equal, but, on the other hand, in the cavalry and the motorcycle force thirty-three squadrons and companies out of forty-eight are French. It is well known that the cavalry is more generally used in time of trouble. In the artillery two-thirds are Flemish, although the Walloon population comprises a much larger number of skilled workmen than the Flemish. It is extremely difficult to form an officers' training battery in each Flemish artillery regiment. The Flemish semi-intellectuals of these unit schools are affected by the frontist propaganda, as appears in recent incidents, which may well be advance signs of more serious disorders, especially in time of stress.

The verdict as a whole on the concessions made to the Flemings since 1918 can only be harsh toward the successive governments which have ruled Belgium. Not one among them has frankly undertaken to solve the Flemish question, by exhibiting a spirit at once national yet considerate of the ethnical right of Flemings and Walloons. This is not impossible, however. Not one of them has proclaimed a salutary distinction between what is allowed and what is not. Whether intentionally or not, the impression has been given the Flemings that reforms must be snatched one by one, each one conceded at the last moment—a method which may eventually drain the State of all conception of authority.

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