

# "That Theory of Races"

Henri Pirenne on the unfinished business of the Great War<sup>1</sup>

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Exactly one year after the end of the First World War, on November 11, 1919, the new academic year was opened at the University of Ghent. Heralding the resumption of scientific endeavour after four years of German military occupation, the event called for solemnity. It also called for interpretation – amply provided by the commencement address of the new rector, Henri Pirenne. The deceptively modest title of his speech, "*La nation belge et l'Allemagne: quelques réflexions historiques*", belied its ambitious content: Pirenne's address aimed high. It sought to transcend the prevailing mood, which was one of lingering indignation over Belgium's past suffering at the hands of the Wilhelmine Empire, coupled with bewildered resentment over Entente governments' perceived ingratitude for Belgium's contribution to the war effort. Pirenne's speech proffered an overarching interpretation of the war – one that deftly brought out the particular relevance of Belgium's part in it. Pirenne defined German aggression vis-à-vis other states and their citizens as having been, at heart, an aberration caused by racist thinking:

"if the barbaric manner with which the Germans conducted their military operations shocks us today, later generations will marvel even more at how their race theory led them astray".

If, during the war, German authorities and German troops had shown a particular "disregard for pity and justice", blame must be attributed squarely to "that theory of races, the most false but also the most pernicious ever". According to Pirenne, an infatuation with German-ness and concomitant contempt for other peoples had progressively encroached upon Wilhelmine

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culture, rendering attacks upon sovereign states conceivable to begin with, and then justifying them after the fact. "A people's cult of its so-called race consciousness," he claimed, "dooms it first to moral isolation and before long to moral decadence".

Pirenne made his case with reference to the German invasion of neutral Belgium in August 1914, and, specifically, to the ensuing German discourse of justification – a discourse that had sought to defend the invasion by denying the invaded country any claim to nationhood, and hence, implicitly, any right to sovereign statehood. Among Wilhelmine literati, a chorus of academics and self-appointed experts of all stripes had promptly formed to dismiss Belgium as an 'artificial state', a justly doomed amalgam of 'Latin' Walloons and 'Germanic' Flemings. This rhetoric presently came in for some sarcasm:

"What pamphlets, what books, what newspaper and journal articles on this Leitmotiv! (...) Such doggedness in demonstrating to us that we did not exist!".

Having thus implicitly stated the robust existence of 'us' – his like-minded audience needed no further affirmation – Pirenne went on to depict the invaders' ethnic-essentialist perspective as fundamentally flawed, since the majority of Belgians had, after all, refused to countenance any outcome of the war short of the restoration of national independence. In his conclusion, he returned once again to a general perspective on "that theory of races", ending his speech on a note of ringing optimism: Germany's defeat in the world war spelt the end of race theory and a return to humanist views.

"And this, surely, (...) is one of the happier results of this war which has cost so much blood and so many tears. Future generations will grow up in an atmosphere purified of noxious fumes."

This fond hope was, however, followed by a caveat: Pirenne dryly announced that he hardly expected "the half-educated and the dogmatic to immediately open up to the light of evidence" and that many, indeed, would continue to affirm their belief "that race determines peoples' mentality, language, sentiments and potential" (Pirenne, 1919, 5-24, citations 18, 16, 7, 20).

It was highly symbolic that Pirenne held his speech in the *aula* of that very university that, under the past military occupation, had been a focus of the occupation authorities' most concerted efforts to redraw the boundaries of Belgium's imagined communities. The largely francophone University of Ghent had closed its doors under the occupation. In 1916, it had been reopened as a Dutch-language institution on orders of the German military authorities. That reform was part and parcel of the occupation regime's effort

to seek favour with the Flemish public in order to both establish its own legitimacy and sap the basis of the Belgian state. Although this "Flemish policy" (*Flamenpolitik*) had made some inroads in Flemish militant opinion, it had failed to gain wide traction due to the repressive nature of the regime, which was especially marked in heavily-occupied Ghent. As a consequence, the occupation authorities had turned to a top-down approach and cracked down on resisters. Pirenne himself, as everybody in the audience and a large part of the educated public worldwide knew, was deported to Germany in 1916 (together with his fellow medievalist Paul Fredericq) and held there until war's end. After his return, he was lionised as an emblem of national resistance. His work on the war, from the 1919 commencement speech to the monograph *La Belgique et la Guerre Mondiale*, published with the Carnegie Foundation in 1928, interpreted the German occupation of Belgium essentially as an assault upon a liberal-leaning polity with a voluntarist view of nationhood by an authoritarian regime guided by a "pernicious race theory", with the 'Big Bertha' of *Flamenpolitik* (his simile) a case in point (Pirenne, 1919, 22).<sup>3</sup> That this policy had failed to sway the larger citizenry and that the theory underpinning it was vanquished, underscored, for Pirenne, the essentially regressive and therefore doomed nature of such an assault.

Meanwhile, Pirenne's November 1919 speech was held in French only, in a city where none but the educated elites spoke French, and where, ever since the Armistice, advocates for linguistic equality had been vilified as latter-day recruits of *Flamenpolitik* by diehard promoters of the dominance of French in Belgian public culture.<sup>4</sup> These self-serving distortions of Pirenne's vision need not detain us here, save to point out that they completely passed over his core argument regarding the essential difference between the past occupation regime and the present, restored public sphere. (Even if Pirenne's notion of public sphere did have distinct elitist overtones.)

Pirenne's argument shifted the German occupation of Belgium from a baffling episode in the margins of the 'real' war to a critical experience speaking to central issues of modern history. It should be noted that the study of this experience left intact the confident liberal narrative of progress, unlike the study of what had happened in the trenches. While the hecatomb at the fronts left the post-war historical imagination, as Modris Eksteins (1989, 291) pointed out, "sorely challenged", the war's military occupations – or, at least,

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<sup>3</sup> Pirenne's *La Belgique et la guerre mondiale*, Paris-New Haven, 1928, was part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace series *The Economic and Social History of the War*.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., with the epithet 'neo-activist' ('activists' were the Flemish recruits of *Flamenpolitik*) (Basse, 1933, 21).

the German occupation of Belgium – could be confidently interpreted as an ideological confrontation between an authoritarian, militarist empire and a flawed but valiant parliamentary democracy; a confrontation of which the outcome seemed to allow a measure of cautious optimism. Among Belgian historians Pirenne offered the most forceful and systematic exposition of this point of view, but it was more widely held, and not just by fellow franco-phone liberals: the Flemish Catholic medievalist Alfons Fierens (1880-1921), for instance, defined the occupation in precisely the same manner. Significantly, Fierens expressed these views in the underground press during the occupation, a medium which lent the message added relevance.<sup>5</sup> The 'optimistic' view was not blithely Whiggish; Pirenne and his colleagues did mention the long-term damages wrought by the occupation, such as physical debilitation, political alienation, social resentment, and economic strain. Still, histories of the occupation were essentially confident. The military fronts' toll on a generation gave pause to all who tried to interpret their age; but the other locus of confrontation, that of military occupation, did not fundamentally perturb meliorist views of history, since it had after all ended with the restoration of a parliamentary democracy, and the occupation regime had been unable to garner a critical mass of legitimacy.

Meanwhile, Pirenne remained uncomfortably aware of the resilience of 'race theory'. In a September 1923 letter to a Harvard colleague, the historian of science George Sarton, he restated his position against what he called, using the German term, '*Rassentheorie*'. History, as well as contemporary events, wrote Pirenne, were perfectly understandable without any recourse to the concept of 'race'. Circumstances, past experiences, institutions, education, and other tangible and measurable collective phenomena explained national differences (which were not themselves immutable) far more satisfactorily than did the notion of a primordial, unchangeable 'essence' supposedly permeating cultures and nations. And yet that notion, he darkly wrote,

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<sup>5</sup> Fierens' essays were reprinted after the war as Fierens (1919). Other examples are works by the sociologist Ernest Mahaim, the jurist Fernand Passelecq, the agronomist Albert Henry, the economist Charles de Kerchove de Denterghem, and others, all contributing volumes to the aforementioned Carnegie Endowment for International Peace series on *The Economic and Social History of the War*. Pirenne oversaw the Belgian volumes in this series. On this series, published in the 1920s and 1930s, see Prost & Winter (2005, 110-113). Another example of this view is a wartime study of the fears in the German army that had caused the civilian massacres of 1914, written by the young sociologist Fernand Van Langenhove (1916). On this remarkable study, see Marc Bloch (2006 [1921], 306-310).

remained popular with all-too-many "philosophers, sociologists and historians, most of them German".<sup>6</sup>

Much has been made of Pirenne's post-war hostility to German historical scholarship; a 'virulent anti-Germanism' has been detected in his stance, and his commencement speeches have been dismissed as a "settling of scores with Germany, its history and its historians" (Verhulst, 2001, 510; Verhulst, 1998, 872). This is altogether too one-dimensional a critique. It is true that Pirenne's post-war statements carried peremptory accents, and the precise nature of his exclusion of German historians from international projects – what Jo Tollebeek has called his "abortive internationalism" – remains open to debate.<sup>7</sup> But it is also true that Pirenne's critique did not target German historians per se so much as the direction taken by German scholarship.<sup>8</sup> And he was absolutely correct in pointing out that this scholarship was increasingly framed by essentialism. One of the forms taken by right-wing political remobilisation in the Weimar Republic was that of the critical strengthening of the *völkisch*-national perspective on continental Europe, its history and its future. The idea of a continent reshaped along 'genuine' ethnic lines instead of 'artificial' state boundaries made headway. In historiography, a new paradigm, that of *Volksgeschichte* ('ethnic history'), promised a renewal of scholarship. One major new field was constituted by so-called *Kulturraumforschung* ('cultural area research'), which aimed at highlighting German cultural traditions and legacies in Germany's eastern and western borderlands. In 1924, *Kulturraumforschung* took the national stage at the Frankfurt history conference, the most prestigious arena for German historical scholarship; but the field had already gained solid institutional underpinnings by 1920.

In what follows, I will focus mainly on Western borderland studies, or *Westforschung*. (It should be noted in passing that *Ostforschung*, the study of Germany's Eastern and Central European borderlands, enjoyed even more significant institutional support.) In 1920, the 'Institute for the historical area research of the Rhine region' (*Institut für die geschichtliche Landeskunde der Rheinlande*), was created in Bonn as a centre for interdisciplinary expertise on Germany's western border; it was funded by the Weimar state through the 'Western Border Fund' (*Westgrenzfonds*) and through the 'Foundation for the

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<sup>6</sup> Pirenne to Sarton, September 25, 1923; manuscript, Harvard University, Houghton Library, bMS Am 1803 (1140), ff. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Schöttler (2003, 507-517) disputes that Pirenne irrevocably excluded German historians from international projects. By contrast, John Horne's (2003, 451) comment in the same volume emphasises Pirenne's exclusionary actions. "Abortive internationalism", (Tollebeek, 2010, 195-196).

<sup>8</sup> The present author agrees with Peter Schöttler's (2003, 507) statement that Pirenne's critique of German historiography was constructive.

study of German ethnicity and land cultivation' (*Stiftung für Volks- und Kulturbodenforschung*).<sup>9</sup> Obviously, historical research on the German-French-Belgian-Dutch borderlands predated 1920, indeed it had predated the First World War; but, as Peter Schöttler has argued, earlier scholarship had been mainly diplomatic and political in perspective; *Westforschung's* turn for the *völkisch* came after Versailles. It was in the context of the so-called 'Rhenish defence struggle' that the terms *Volk* and *Kulturraum* became central (Schöttler, 1997, 205-261; Schöttler, 1999, 89-113). By the 1930s, of course, the non-essentialising view could be dismissed as both outdated and self-serving. The German medievalist Franz Petri, the fastest-rising luminary of *Westforschung*, duly criticised Pirenne's work for not giving language and popular "character" (*Art*) their due as "moulding powers of history". In a 1935 obituary of his Ghent *confrère*, Petri was to reproach him for having failed to understand

"the innermost essence of the Germans and of German science's struggle for a closer connection to the *Volk* (*Volksverbundenheit*)" (Schöttler, 1997, 225-228).

Both *Ost-* and *Westforschung* have been studied very fruitfully for the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> Yet so far little attention has been paid to possible links between this collective effort and the First World War, specifically to Germany's wartime rule over the equivalent of 28% of its home population. By and large, the scholarship on Weimar ethno-history situates it in the run-up to the German occupations of the Second World War, not with retrospective reference to those of the First. The occupations of 1914-1918, if they are mentioned at all, are seen as ethno-politically *ad hoc*. One two-volume edited work on *Westforschung* from 2003, for example, contains 42 contributions, but only one of them deals with both the occupations of the First and of the Second World Wars. The introduction to this massive collection only mentions the occupations of the First World War in passing – in a footnote that refers to the "still-improvised cultural occupation policies in Belgium and northern France" of 1914-1918 (Dietz, Gabel, & Tiedau, 2003, IX-XXX).<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that this diagnosis echoes Nazi-era ethno-historians' sense of their expertise as compared to that of earlier generations –

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<sup>9</sup>. On the latter, see Fahlbusch (1994).

<sup>10</sup>. Since Michael Burleigh's 1988 study on *Ostforschung*, and more intensely since the 42<sup>nd</sup> German Historians' Conference of 1998.

<sup>11</sup>. See p. X, footnote 5. The note alludes to work then still in progress: the dissertation by Ulrich Tiedau on cultural occupation policies in World War I Belgium, which has since been defended at Münster University but remains unpublished. The chapter encompassing both occupations is Laux (2003, 247-290).

if, obviously, with reverse moral connotations. Around 1943, for instance, the aforementioned medievalist Franz Petri, now called upon to preside over cultural policies in occupied Belgium, wrote that

"the present *Flamenpolitik* compared to that of the First World War has the fundamental advantage of possessing, in the racial principle, the greater German imperial idea, and the concept of the new Europe under a socialist order, a set of *völkisch*-political rallying cries, far more capable of swaying the Flemish constituency (*das Flamentum*) from the inside out than was the case with the First World War's essentially narrow-German (*kleindeutsch*) and state-centred perspective".<sup>12</sup>

And yet, 'the racial principle' and the 'greater German imperial idea' were precisely the forces that Pirenne, Petri's *bête noire*, had pointed out as the driving forces behind Germany's conduct of the First World War. Did Pirenne overstate the point? It is certainly true that his discourse harked back to the Entente war-culture trope of 'Pan-Germanism' – though it remains to be seen to what extent that constitutes a disqualification. 'Pan-Germanism' was more a rebuke of certain currents of opinion in Weimar Germany than a blanket repudiation of all German thought.<sup>13</sup> It is also true that, when Nazi policies in the East are taken as the standard, what 'racial principle' might have been at work in 1914-1918 appears benignly wan indeed. But that is not the point. This chapter in no way intends to establish an untenable similarity or continuity between the two occupation eras. As Matthias Middell has argued, a critical approach to the ethnic paradigm of the interwar years should not focus exclusively on its potential for being instrumentalised by a specific regime, but should hone in on its 'essentialising approach' more generally, viz. its view of history through the dimensions of space (*Raum*), culture defined holistically (*Kultur*), and *Volk* perspectives which have endured well beyond the Second World War (Middell, 2005, 3-14, specifically 9). Pirenne's pinpointing of the notion of 'essence' as the central problem in this type of historiography remains instructive.

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<sup>12</sup>. *Militärverwaltungsoberrat* Franz Petri, undated report (1942-1944), untitled, filed after the war under the title "Rapport over het activisme en de Flamenpolitik tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in functie van de toestand in 1940-1942" [*Report on the activism and Flamenpolitik of World War I from the point of view of the situation in 1940-1942*]; typescript, 39 pages, quotation p. 38. The title is in Dutch, but Petri's text is in German. The underlining in the above quotation is Petri's. Brussels, Royal Army Museum, with thanks to the late Richard Boijen.

<sup>13</sup>. One example is a remarkably subtle text, written in 1930 by the jurist Fernand Passelecq, which explains both the invading armies' massacres of Belgian civilians in 1914 and Weimar refusal to acknowledge them by reference to "the Pan-German psychosis", a pathology which, Passelecq (1930, 157-194) warned, would sap the Weimar Republic's legitimacy from within.

And if the First World War is taken on its own terms, some links might yet be established between an emerging ethnic perspective and what Isabel Hull (2005) has termed the "instrumentalisation of civilians". One illustration of this is the emergence, during the First World War, of plans for "a kind of 'ethnic territorial cleansing'".<sup>14</sup> In the autumn of 1914, for instance, projects were hatched to buttress Prussia's eastern border with a strip of Polish territory that was to be evacuated by resident Poles (and possibly also Jews) and colonised by hardy East German farmers. This so-called 'Polish border strip' project was heavily lobbied for by diverse leagues and parties, generating, in 1914-1915, a corpus of memoranda in which the racial geopolitical implications of the creation of what Wolfgang Mommsen (2004 [2001], 124) has called "a kind of ethnic military frontier" were very clearly spelled out. While the 'Polish border strip' was never more than a blueprint, to which the imperial government refused to commit,<sup>15</sup> the project's enthusiastic endorsement in broad circles exemplifies how a zero-sum view of ethnic purity and danger could erode certain qualms.<sup>16</sup> Plans for forced evacuation of Western territory were drawn up as well. From September 1914, the Wilhelmine annexationist lobby declared its wish to see the industrial region of northern France handed over to Germany "free of population".<sup>17</sup> In December 1917, the civilian occupation administration in Belgium put forward a plan to expand Flemish territory by shifting the linguistic border between the Flemish and the francophone regions further southward; the "large-scale expulsion" of the resident Walloons was envisaged – and even, as one official proposed in April 1918, the expulsion of French-speakers from Brussels. Smaller-scale plans involved the 'Flemishisation' of the Walloon region of Visé, on the German-Belgian-Dutch border, as a kind of Germanic corridor; at a meeting with German officials, one Flemish recruit of *Flamenpolitik* considered such a measure quite feasible, given that the area was largely depopulated already.

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<sup>14</sup>. The term was used by the head of the Pan-German League, Heinrich Class, in a memorandum of September 18, 1914 ("eine Art 'völkische Flurbereinigung'"); quoted in Wolfgang Mommsen (2004 [2001], 118-136, 120).

<sup>15</sup>. The ground-breaking work by Imanuel Geiss (1960) may have overestimated the extent to which the plans to 'germanify' the Prussian-Polish borderland were official German policy (Mommsen, 2004 [2001], 134-135, notes 3 and 17).

<sup>16</sup>. It seems a stretch to define World War I plans for population transfers away as mere diplomatic strategy, as the *Ostforschung* scholar Ingo Haar (2005, 15) does.

<sup>17</sup>. Heinrich Class, memorandum of September 18, 1914 (Mommsen, 2004 [2001], 120). On German plans for the wholesale evacuation of residents of the *Nord*, see also Gromaire (1925, 425-426). See also Hull (2005, 257, note 187).

(Visé had been burned to the ground by the invading troops in August 1914.<sup>18</sup>)

Both cases foreshadow the geopolitical imagination of the nineteen-thirties, with its insistence on ethnic bulwarks, corridors, salients, and islands. More in general, an emergent ethnic-spatial perspective can be detected in the discourse and practices of the occupations of the First World War.<sup>19</sup> (Which, it must once more be stressed, was benign enough, comparatively speaking.<sup>20</sup>) In 1916, Ludendorff's administration in the occupied Baltic (Ober Ost), bent on mapping the baffling ethnic landscape, 'discovered' a new ethnicity: the Belarussians, or, more strategically, "White Ruthenians", a "superficially Polonised tribe" the "rebirth" of which would, it was hoped, weaken the Polish cause, including in the ethnically mixed regions of eastern Prussia (Liulevicius, 2000, 120-121).<sup>21</sup> In Belgium in that same year, the creation of the Flemishised University of Ghent was greeted by the official in charge of education matters, the mathematician Walther von Dyck, as

"a guard – and a corner tower (...) against the onslaught of Walloon and French dominance"; "a mighty fortress (*ein' feste Burg*), a solid defence and weapon for us Germans, and German in its very essence; German, because it has been created with a confident eye towards our future; German in spirit and in truth" (De Clerck, Bossaert, & De Clerck, 1980, 117).<sup>22</sup>

How did these discourses and endeavours carry over into the post-war? The Armistice certainly constituted a dividing line, for example with regard to *Flamenpolitik*. Among the wider German public, interest in Flemish matters quite plummeted (Dolderer, 1989, 233, 240). One telling example is that of the pedagogue Herman Nohl, who while stationed in Ghent during the war

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<sup>18</sup>. This qualifies Franz Petri's 1943 claim that the emerging notion of Wallonia as *Lebensraum* (sic) for Flemings would have been "utterly unthinkable" to Flemish militants in World War I (Petri, undated report 1942-1944, 4). But it is true that, in World War I, the occupation authorities were far more outspoken than their Flemish 'activist' collaborators about the desirability of Walloon evacuation (Vandeweyer, 1998, 55-59).

<sup>19</sup>. There is, one should note, no general agreement on this. The aforementioned *Ostforschung* scholar Ingo Haar refers to the social historian Werner Conze's 1958 monograph on Germany and Poland in World War I in order to claim the absence of ethnicising perspectives during the 1915-1918 occupation of Poland (Haar, 2005, 15). The question of whether Haar, who analyses Conze's 1939 *völkisch* blueprint for a German-dominated Poland (*Ibid.*, 11, 13-14), is correct in taking the 1958 work at face value, must remain open. Jan Eike Dunkhase's (2010) recent biography only mentions Conze's 1958 monograph in passing.

<sup>20</sup>. Compared, for one, to Bulgaria's occupation of Macedonia in 1915-1918, which occasioned a brutal repression of Serbs, Greeks, Vlachs and other minorities (Opfer, 2005).

<sup>21</sup>. The quotations are from a secret report on ethnic policies in Ober Ost by Ludendorff.

<sup>22</sup>. On Von Dyck's wartime activities, see Part 6 in Hashagen (2003).

wrote several very popular essays, such as the 1916 *The idyllic soul of Flanders*, that painted a fond picture of Flanders as an essentially congenial land for Germans, even a kind of *Heimat*. But after returning home, Nohl never wrote another word on Flanders.<sup>23</sup> Official policies, too, backed away from Flemish initiatives. Within the Interior Ministry in Berlin, continued attempts at influencing the Flemish question within Belgium were fostered by one official in particular, the colonial administrator Rudolf Asmis, who had headed the *flamenpolitische* section of the Government-General's Political Department in occupied Brussels in 1918, and by Asmis' protégé, the medievalist Robert Paul Oszwald. But the Foreign Office in Berlin, concerned with normalising relations with Belgium, put a stop to these attempts (Dolderer, 1989, 232-234; Laux, 2003, 259). Regarding German-Flemish contacts, "the caesura of defeat", as one scholar has claimed, "marked a generational change among the German actors" – the German organisers of 'Flemish' activities of the 1920s were newcomers (Dolderer, 1989, 241).

However, looking for clear institutional continuities – and amidst the upheaval of Germany's post-war, to boot – might be casting the question too narrowly. The question remains that of continuities between ethnic/cultural occupation endeavours in 1914-1918, on the one hand, and the championing of the 'essentialising approach' during the interwar era, on the other hand. Although this brief chapter cannot treat this question exhaustively or even systematically, a few avenues of continuity on the personal (and personnel) level may be pointed out. Several *flamenpolitische* experts and champions ardently endorsed *völkisch*-national, not to say racial-theoretical views in their Weimar-era writing. The Dutch studies expert and musicologist Hermann Felix Wirth (1885-1981), who as an occupation officer in Ghent from November 1914 had been one of the very first proponents of a radical version of *Flamenpolitik*, was to be a co-founder of the SS-funded *Deutsches Ahnenerbe* ('German ancestral heritage') in 1935 (Wiwjorra, 1995, 91-112; Mees, 2004, 255-270).<sup>24</sup> The jurist and *völkisch* publicist Max Robert Gerstenhauer (1873-1940), a prominent member of the *Deutschbund* before the war and author of an oft-reprinted pamphlet on "Racial Theory and Racial Care" (*Rassenlehre und Rassenpflege*, 1913), an official with the Political Department in Brussels during the German occupation of Belgium, and afterwards a virulent opponent of Weimar, would continue to advocate the importance of the "western marches" for the "family of Germanic peoples"

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<sup>23</sup> Nohl's wartime essays and correspondence are published by Walter Thys (2005).

<sup>24</sup> Hitler owned an inscribed copy of Wirth's (1931) essay *Was heisst deutsch? Ein urgeistesgeschichtlicher Rückblick zur Selbstbesinnung und Selbstfindung* (Mees, 2004, 269, note 73).

(Gerstenhauers, 1932).<sup>25</sup> The aforementioned Rudolf Asmis (1879-1945?) became a diplomat in 1922, bringing an ethnic perspective to his different postings; he headed the justice and culture department in the Colonial Policy Office of the NSDAP during the Second World War.<sup>26</sup> A fourth example is that of the Thuringian aristocrat Kurd von Strantz (1863-1949), a patriotic polemicist and retired cavalry captain, who during the last year of the war issued a memorandum urging the government to greater efforts to reach "our *völkisch* war aim", viz. territorial expansion in East and West (von Strantz, 1918).<sup>27</sup> The liberal historian Veit Valentin, one of the very few German historians to wholeheartedly support the Weimar Republic, would, in 1921, skewer von Strantz' 1918 memorandum for its wishful "*völkisch* reasoning". Valentin (1921, 267), by then, had already incurred the wrath of defenders of the ethnic paradigm: during the war, he had lost his right to lecture at the university of Freiburg, among other reasons because of his criticism of *Flamenpolitik*, a fact not lost on Pirenne (1919, 6). (Valentin was to leave Germany shortly after the National Socialist takeover.) As to von Strantz, he repeated in 1920, in an open letter to a former Flemish collaborator presently living in German exile, that the Low Countries and Northern France remained "ancient Germanic ethnic territory".<sup>28</sup> Other examples of men who represented a clear continuity between wartime *flamenpolitische* efforts and post-war championings of the ethnic approach include the Egyptologist and militant Pan-German Friedrich Wilhelm von Bissing (1873-1956), the son of the Governor-General of occupied Belgium, the aforementioned medievalist Robert Paul Oszwald (1883-1945), an official in both occupation regimes, and, to some extent, the aforementioned mathematician Walther Von Dyck (1856-1934), whose post-war crusade to 'repatriate' the papers of Johannes Kepler had distinct *völkisch* overtones.

Beyond these individual continuities, it is hard to imagine that the sheer mass of wartime prose on Germany's continental conquests did not exercise a lingering influence on German *Weltanschauungen* in the post-Armistice decade – including, crucially, those of *Gymnasium* pupils too young to have

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<sup>25</sup> Until the spring of 1919, Gerstenhauer, with the support of Asmis, organised aid to the Flemish recruits of *Flamenpolitik* who had fled to Germany with their families. From 1924, he served as a high official (*Ministerialrat*) in the Thuringian Education Ministry; from 1921 to his death, he was 'Bundesgrossmeister' of the *Deutschbund*.

<sup>26</sup> Asmis had been a colonial official in Togo and Cameroon in 1906-1911; from 1922, he was stationed, among other places, in Siam and Sydney, where he was the German Consul-General, and wrote reports on ethnic policies in Australia. See, a.o., John Perkins (1990).

<sup>27</sup> Von Strantz had polemicised against France since the 1880s.

<sup>28</sup> Von Strantz' October 1920 statement, in the journal *Heimdall*, is quoted in Dolderer (1989, 236).

been called up. But this question must remain open. German imaginings and memories of overseas domination during the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras have been well studied; so has the experience and memory of German lands occupied by Entente troops (Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, & Zantop, 1998; Wildenthal, 2001; Poley, 2005).<sup>29</sup> But there is, surprisingly, little or no scholarship on Weimar representations of Germany's wartime military occupations. Did these occupations leave a trace on the political consciousness? To take the example of Germany's conquest of the Baltic: as Vejas Liulevicius has written,

"certain conclusions were drawn from the experience and given durable form in political agitation and propaganda".

After the war, former Ober Ost administrators met in Berlin to reflect on their war work; these meetings were often attended by Hindenburg and at first by Ludendorff. Both men's memoirs, and especially Ludendorff's which was mass-distributed in 1919, enshrined a heroic colonial vision of the Baltic occupations as the selfless bringing of order to "chaotic lands and ungrateful people" (Liulevicius, 2000, 247-248).

It is true that defeat did bring a measure of discontinuity. Looking back, in 1918-1919 former officials and sundry commentators dismissed the cultural policies of Ober Ost as insufficiently assertive (*Ibid.*, 249). Ludendorff in his memoirs poured scorn at the 'liberal' line that had been taken in 1917-1918 vis-à-vis minorities in Lithuania (Tauber, 2007, 433-444, 434, 439). A comparable rejection struck *Flamenpolitik*, retrospectively lambasted for its failure to assert the ethnic principle more forcefully – a failure attributed to the fact that several occupation officials were Jewish.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, defeat, Versailles, territorial loss, and the occupation of the Rhineland wrought their own dynamics. And it certainly is true that the shift toward the ethnic perspective – the privileging of the *Volk* as a decisive factor, as a creator of its own existential space – was rooted in conservatives' and neo-conservatives'

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<sup>29</sup> On the *völkische* literary co-optation of the memory of the Ruhr occupation, see Gertrude Cepl-Kaufmann (2004, 47-61).

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Friedrich Wilhelm von Bissing (see above) and Kurd von Strantz (see above), quoted in Dolderer (1989, 236-237). Conversely, one of the most radical leaders of Flemish collaboration, in a letter to a member of parliament for the *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* (and, before then, of the Christian Social Party) who had intensely championed a radicalisation of *Flamenpolitik*, attributed post-war Germany's lack of support for the cause not to "the noble German Volk" but to "that Jew-Germany that tramples its Ludendorff, Tirpitz etc. etc." *Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, Nachlass Mumm*, 90 Mu 3, No. 90, 300 verso, Pastor Jan Derk Domela Nieuwenhuis Nyegaard to Reinhard Mumm, October 31, 1919.

despair over and contempt for the Weimar state.<sup>31</sup> Still, the definition of the ethnic as the real locus of legitimacy, superseding the epiphenomenal – not to say fraudulent – state, predated the war and was much stepped up during the conflict, as a means of legitimising the conquest of foreign territories (and perhaps, too, as a means of justifying, to the home audience, these conquests' costs in young German lives). The *Zeitschrift für Völkerrecht*, tellingly, in dismissing criticism of the invasion of Belgium came to reject international law as irrelevant altogether by 1915.<sup>32</sup> Calls for greater ethnic 'decisiveness', too, could already be heard during the war – with occasional anti-Semitic overtones: Hermann Wirth, for one, in criticising the tendency of the German Government-General in Brussels to tolerate, even privilege the use of French, pointed to the presence of "all-too-many Jews" in this administration.<sup>33</sup>

Did the redefinition of public issues in ethnic terms endure after the end of the war among occupied populations? The situation in the Baltic and Poland, where 'occupation' was an extremely muddled category given previous Russian rule (cf. Showalter, 2002, 1-19), and where, at any rate, the fighting continued in 1918-1919, calls for a different framework of interpretation that must remain outside of the scope of this chapter.<sup>34</sup> But in Belgium, the 'half-learned minds' criticised by Pirenne did indeed stick to their guns. Whereas several Flemish intellectuals took pains to point out that their effort to obtain linguistic equality was not an ethnic matter – "we had left that kind of racial romanticism far behind us", as the poet Karel Van De Woestijne<sup>35</sup> wrote – others scoffed:

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<sup>31</sup>. As argued by Oberkrome (1997, 104-128, 105). On a related note: according to the German historian Eduard Mühle (2005), the medievalist Hermann Aubin (1885-1969), a major *West-* then *Ostforscher*, was not influenced intellectually by his experiences on the Eastern front so much as by the collapse of the Habsburg empire (he was a Sudeten German from Bohemia) and the loss of German influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>32</sup>. The pacifist Hans Wehberg left the journal's editorial board for this reason (Dreyer & Lembcke, 1993, 40).

<sup>33</sup>. Wirth's complaint was related to an official at the Prussian *Kultusministerium* in Berlin by the medievalist and philologist Gustav Roethe (1859-1926), who was then stationed in France as an officer in charge of a railway *Kommandantur*. Roethe, too, advocated a more decisive *Flamenpolitik*, suggesting, for instance, that meetings of the Flemish Academy of Arts and Sciences (of which he was a member) be monitored so as to combat 'bad tendencies'. A copy of this letter can be found at the *Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, Nachlass Von Dyck*, Roethe to *Ministerialdirektor* Schmidt, September 6, 1915, typescript copy, ff. 286-290, quotations 287, 288. On Roethe, the author (a.o.) of the 1913 *Deutsches Geistesleben in den Ostmarken*, see Jörg Judersleben (2000).

<sup>34</sup>. On widely different assessments of 'occupation' and 'liberation' in the Latvian capital of Riga, an imperial borderland, see Mark Hatlie (2007, 318-346).

<sup>35</sup>. Karel Van De Woestijne in the Dutch daily *NRC-Handelsblad*, February 23, 1919; reprint in Van De Woestijne & Deprez (1992, 562).

*"Can ancestry (...) be excluded from our perspective on human action? Have Germanic, Slavic, Latin people ceased to exist? (...) The Flemings are Germanic, give or take some Celtic-Latin background. The Walloons are Celtic Latins, with some traces of Germanic influence. They are therefore of different stock"* (Van der Schelden, [1919], 4-5, Italics in text).

This was a criticism of the work of Alfons Fierens (see above), who, like Pirenne, rejected the terms 'race', 'stock', and *Volk* as unscientific. It was written by the Catholic jurist Lodewijk Dosfel, who was soon to stand trial for his acceptance of a chair at the occupation-time University of Ghent. In July 1920, he was condemned to ten years in prison for having put his considerable prestige at the service of *Flamenpolitik*. Although Dosfel was released not long afterward, his trial heralded a recasting of Flemish collaboration as resistance against an 'artificial' state (cf. De Schaepdrijver, 2002, 114-127). The punitive drive against 'unpatriotic' behaviour that accompanied the triumphant return of the Belgian state both satisfied popular demand and ended outbursts of 'popular vengeance', but it also fuelled a ethnicised redefinition of the language question, first among the targeted, then in wider circles.<sup>36</sup>

The post-war punitive drive would eventually be criticised as harsh and chauvinist; the eventual rejection of the entire war as an absurd conflict meant that the issues of occupation lost their contours. In the process, Pirenne's confidently liberal interpretation of the occupation came to be dismissed as part and parcel of the discourse of the victorious. Today, Pirenne's work on the First World War is generally regarded as marred by nationalism, at least in Belgium.<sup>37</sup> This criticism has obscured Pirenne's startling relevance as a contemporaneist. This is regrettable, for as the centenary of the First World War – which Simon Schama called "the original sin of the twentieth century" – approaches, it bears pointing out that the Ghent medievalist was ahead of his time in pinpointing "that theory of races" as one of that war's totalising, and far from exhausted, dynamics.

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<sup>36</sup> This 'repression', both popular and state-led, by no means targeted the recruits of German Flemish (and Walloon) policies exclusively (Rousseaux & Van Ypersele, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Including in francophone historiography, see, for instance, Christophe Bechet (2008, 49-101).

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## Een rassistheorie: Henri Pirenne en de nasleep van de Grote Oorlog

SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER

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### SAMENVATTING

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In November 1919 hield de Belgische mediëvist Henri Pirenne een rede aan de opnieuw geopende Universiteit van Gent. Daarin bood hij een korte interpretatie van de Duitse bezetting van België als in wezen een strijd tussen een parlementaire democratie en een autoritair regime dat meer en meer vasthield aan een "nefaste rassistheorie". In zijn rede sprak Pirenne de hoop uit dat deze "rassistheorie" door de oorlog zou zijn gediscrediteerd; in 1923 stelde hij echter vast dat dit bepaald niet het geval was.

Dit artikel stelt dat Pireennes bezorgdheid over het om zich heen grijpende essentialisme met name in het naoorlogse Duitse geschiedschrijving terecht was. Dit blijkt uit de evolutie onder andere van de zogeheten *Westforschung* (onderzoek naar de landen en regio's ten westen van Duitsland). De historiografie van *Westforschung*, en meer in het algemeen van de verglijding naar een *völkisch* perspectief, heeft tot nu toe vooral de nadruk gelegd op de link met de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Dit artikel stelt de vraag of een blik terug op de Duitse bezettingen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog niet evenzeer lonend kan zijn. Diverse elementen wijzen op een verband. Maatregelen genomen tijdens het bezettingstijdperk wijzen op een emergent essentialisme in de zoektocht naar Duits gezag in de bezette gebieden. Ideeën over "ethnische bolwerken" werden weliswaar niet geïmplementeerd, maar vonden veel weerklank. Op

het Duitse thuisfront raakten voorstanders van een liberale visie op het volkenrecht gemarginaliseerd. En al vormde het einde van de oorlog een breekpunt, toch bleven diverse tenoren uit het bezettingstijdperk ook tijdens het interbellum actief, en droegen krachtig bij aan de genese van een *völkische* doxa. Pirennes visie was, kortom, die van een scherpzinnige en (dus) bezorgde contemporanist.

## Une "théorie des races": Henri Pirenne à propos des suites de la Grande Guerre

SOPHIE DE SCHAEPDRIJVER

### RÉSUMÉ

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En novembre 1919, le médiéviste belge Henri Pirenne fit un exposé à l'Université de Gand qui venait de rouvrir. Il y présenta l'occupation allemande de la Belgique comme un conflit entre une démocratie parlementaire et un régime autoritaire qui, de plus en plus, s'accrochait à une "néfaste théorie des races". À l'occasion de son exposé, Pirenne exprima son espoir que cette "théorie des races" ait été discréditée par la guerre. Mais en 1923 il constata que cela n'avait pas été le cas.

Cet article propose l'hypothèse du bien-fondé de la préoccupation de Pirenne à propos de l'essentialisme ethnique dans l'historiographie allemande de l'après-guerre. Essentialisme qui apparaît dans l'évolution entre autres de la "*Westforschung*", c'est-à-dire la recherche à propos des pays et régions situés à l'Ouest de l'Allemagne. La riche historiographie de la "*Westforschung*", et plus généralement du glissement vers une perspective "*völkisch*", a jusqu'à présent mis l'accent sur le lien entre ces théories et la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cet article pose la question de savoir s'il n'est pas également utile de remonter jusqu'aux occupations allemandes de la Première Guerre mondiale. Divers éléments plaident en faveur d'un lien. Des mesures prises durant cette période d'occupation indiquent qu'un essentialisme ethnique émergeait dans la quête d'autorité allemande dans les régions occupées. Ces idées ne furent pas il est vrai mises en pratique mais trouvèrent tout de même un écho, tandis que sur le front intérieur allemand, les tenants d'une vision libérale du droit des peuples furent marginalisés. Et bien que la

fin de la guerre constitue un point de rupture, divers ténors de l'époque de l'occupation restèrent actifs dans l'entre-deux-guerres, et contribuèrent vigoureusement à la genèse d'une doxa "*völkisch*". La vision de Pirenne était, en bref, celle d'un contemporaniste clairvoyant et (donc) inquiet.