

BRANDING (A SLICE OF) BELGIUM

■ *Nationalism and tourism promotion in politics and the press
(ca. 1935-1985)*

- **Silke Geven & Gerrit Verhoeven** -

Tourism fuels nationalism.¹ It is a claim that reverberates through much of the literature about the spread of tourism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, North America, and other parts of the globe. Travellers were filled with patriotic pride when they visited the *must-see list* of historical monuments, dramatic *lieux de mémoire*, well-stocked museums, industrial sites, and iconic landscapes on their domestic excursions to every nook and cranny of their fatherland.² Feelings of nationalism were also strengthened by outbound journeys to neighbouring or even more exotic countries, as powerful processes of “othering” often turned these destinations into a primitive, hopelessly backward counterpart of one’s own truly modern nation.³ New theoretical literature has recently challenged such a sleek narrative whereby nationalism is boiled down to a simple by-product of tourism.⁴ Drawing inspiration from a recent trend to write the history of nationalism “from below”, experts have shown that travellers were far more than just passive consumers of *top-down* nationalism. They had the agency to swallow the patriotic menu whole, to pick out some ingredients, or to throw it away.⁵ Following this last trajectory, experts have uncovered a lot of “national indifference”, as tourists were often unimpressed – or completely disillusioned – by national monuments, landscapes, and other *lieux de mémoire*. Nor did travellers always show much interest in national history or folklore. Frequently, they also abstained from saluting the flag, humming the national anthem, or other patriotic acts that were staged by travel guides or advised in guidebooks.⁶

I. Introduction

Even though research has problematized our understanding of how nationalism was consumed – and sometimes appropriated – on domestic and foreign trips, less is known about the production. Who were the puppeteers behind the scenes, who saw tourism as a strategic tool to further nationalism? Ellen Furlough, Shelley Baranowski, and a range of other experts have shown how National-Socialists, Fascists, Communists, and other totalitarian regimes used tourism – and tourism promotion – as a perfect tool for fostering feelings of national belonging,⁷ but less is known

about government policies in post-war democracies.⁸ How important was an ideological agenda in the afterwar years when nationalism, allegedly, experienced a latent phase in Europe and North America? Did policymakers still envisage tourism as the ultimate tool for kindling nationalism, or was it rather seen as a centripetal force that would stimulate the European unification process? Up until recently, tourism promotion in *Les Trente Glorieuses* has been predominantly analysed through an economic lens, as policymakers became increasingly aware of the economic potential of tourism development. Less attention has been paid to the ideological dimension.⁹

1. Some of the theoretical literature on this link: PATRICK NAEF, "Nationalism and tourism", in: JAFAR JAFARI & HONGGEN XIAO (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Tourism*, Geneva, 2016, 1-2; LEANNE WHITE, "Commercial Nationalism: Mapping the Landscape", in: Id. (ed.), *Commercial Nationalism and Tourism. Selling the National Story*, Bristol, 2017, 3-24; MICHAEL PRETES, "Tourism and Nationalism", *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30, 2003, 125-142; LEANNE WHITE & ELSPETH FREW, "Tourism and national identities. Connections and conceptualisations", in: Id. (eds.), *Tourism and National Identities. An international Perspective*, London, 2011, 1-9.
2. Classics are: KATHERINE HALDANE GRENIER, *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770-1914. Creating Caledonia*, Aldershot, 2005; MARGUERITE SCHAEFFER, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940*, Washington, 2001; RUDY KOSHA, *German Travel Cultures*, Berg, 2001.
3. More about the process of "othering": JOEP LEERSSEN, "Imagology: history and method", in: MANFRED BELLER & JOEP LEERSSEN, (eds.), *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters: A critical survey*, Amsterdam, 2007, 17-32.
4. For a more critical reflection on the link between nationalism and tourism: ERIC STORM, "Overcoming Methodological Nationalism in Nationalism Studies: the Impact of Tourism on the Construction of National and Regional Identities", *History Compass*, 12, 2014, 361-373.
5. More literature on these new trends in research on nationalism: MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "Nationhood From Below: Some Historiographic Notes on Great Britain, France and Germany in the Long Nineteenth Century", in: MARNIX BEYEN & MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER (eds.), *Nationhood from below. Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century*, London, 2012, 120-136; JONATHAN HEANEY, "Emotions and Nationalism: a Reappraisal", in: NICOLAS DEMERTZIS (ed.), *Emotions in Politics. The Affect Dimension in Political Tension* (London 2013) 234-263; MARNIX BEYEN & MAARTEN VAN GINDERACHTER, "General Introduction: Writing the Mass into a Mass Phenomenon", in: Id. (eds.), *Nationhood from below*, 3-22.
6. SHELLEY BARANOWSKI, "Radical Nationalism in an International Context: Strength through Joy and the Paradoxes of Nazi Tourism", in: JOHN WALTON (ed.), *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity, and Conflict*, Clevedon, 2005, 125-143; GERRIT VERHOEVEN & NINA PAYRHUBER, "'Les pèlerins de la saison sèche'. Colonial tourism in the Belgian Congo (1945-'60)", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 54, 2019, 573-593.
7. SHELLEY BARANOWSKI, "Radical Nationalism in an International Context: Strength through Joy and the Paradoxes of Nazi Tourism", in: JOHN WALTON, *Histories of Tourism. Representation, Identity, and Conflict*, Clevedon, 2005, 125-143; STEPHANIE MALIA HOM, "Empires of tourism: travel and rhetoric in Italian colonial Libya and Albania, 1911-'43", *Journal of Tourism History*, 4, 2012, 281-300; ANNE GORSUCH, "There's No Place like Home. Soviet Tourism in Late Stalinism", *Slavic Review*, 62, 2003, 760-785.
8. Some important exceptions are: ERIC ZUELOW, *Making Ireland Irish. Tourism and National Identity since the Irish Civil War*, New York, 2009; JAMIE NUGENT, "Come to Ulster: the imagery and activities of the Ulster Development Association in Northern Ireland, 1923-1939", *Journal of Tourism History*, 13, 2021, 188-220; JOHN BECKERSON, "Marketing British Tourism: Government Approaches to the Stimulation of a Service Sector, 1880-1850", in: HARTMUT BERGHOFF et. al. (ed.), *The Making of Modern Tourism. The Cultural History of the British Experience, 1600-2000*, Basingstoke, 2002, 133-157. For a post-war totalitarian example: SASHA PACK, *Tourism and Dictatorship. Europe's Peaceful Invasion of Franco's Spain*, Houndmills 2006).
9. More about tourism marketing in this period: JAN HEIN FURNÉE, "'When in Holland you should see the capital': Tourism promotion in Amsterdam, 1930-1945", in: FERDINAND OPPL & MARTIN SCHEUTZ (eds.), *Ferhweh und die Stadt*, Wenen, 2018, 295-322; For Belgium: ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, "How to sell a city? Urban tourism and the emergence of city marketing policies in Belgium (ca. 1880-1980)" in: BRECHT DEWILDE & JOHAN POUKENS (eds), *Entrepreneurs, Institutions & Government Intervention in Europe (13th-20th centuries*, Brussels, 2018, 219-244; STEPHEN WARD, *Selling Places: the marketing and promotion of towns and cities, 1850-2000*, London, 1998.

Moreover, recent literature has shown that tourism promotion – even, and this may sound somewhat paradoxical, on a national level – was rarely if ever produced by national governments and administrations alone, since the most ardent advocates of national tourism branding were often local or regional committees.¹⁰ Therefore, this paper will break new ground by looking at evolutions in tourism policy and branding strategies from a *top-down* and *bottom-up* perspective in one particular – yet highly tormented – nation: Belgium. In the post-war years Belgium was slowly but surely torn asunder by rivalling nationalisms, whereby patriotic sentiments could be cloaked in a Flemish, Walloon, German-speaking or Belgian coat.¹¹ How did changing ideals about nationhood (re)shape the promotion of Belgium as a product for domestic and foreign tourism? Which brand should be developed, by whom, and with which media?

To answer these questions, we have tapped a series of classic and more innovative sources. First of all, the remaining documentation of the *Commissariaat-Generaal voor Toerisme* (CGT) – Belgian's national tourist board – and its predecessors has been scanned. Unfortunately, most of the archive has been lost over the years,¹² yet the remaining reports offer a fascinating – mainly quantitative – insight into the development of Belgian tourism in the second half of the twen-

tieth century.¹³ Secondly, these serial sources can be combined with a more qualitative, in-depth reading of the debates on tourism in the Belgian parliament. Fortunately, the proceedings have been fully digitalized and are searchable online.¹⁴ Tourism was frequently discussed from the 1930s onwards, as a mass of hits on the Flemish equivalent *toerisme* (1978 mentions) and the French lemma *tourisme* (2455 items) show. On the whole, the debate reached its climax in the 1960s and 1970s. Discussions slowly but surely petered out in the 1980s, when cultural matters – including tourism – were transferred to the Flemish, French- and German-speaking Communities.¹⁵

Together, these debates shed light on the ideologies and ideas behind marketing policies in Belgium on a national level. They rather illustrate discourse than reality and document how a handful of Flemish MP's imagined how tourism promotion should ideally look like. To gain an insight into how these *top-down* ideas about tourism promotion were taken up by local administrations, the archives of the *Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer van Gent* [the local Commission for Tourism Promotion of Ghent] have been consulted.¹⁶ This archive contains yearly reports of the Commission that document their strategies, cooperations with other local, regional and national tourist organizations and the media that they used to promote the city. It also

10. For instance: ERIC ZUELOW, *Making Ireland Irish*, XIX-XXIV. For the Low Countries: TYMEN PEVERELLI, *De stad als vaderland. Brugge, Leeuwarden en Maastricht in de eeuw van de natiestaat, 1815-1914*, Amsterdam, 2019.

11. Surprisingly enough the link between nationalism and tourism has been largely ignored in Belgium. An exception is: INGRID LEONARD e.a. (ed.), *75 jaar Toerisme (in) Vlaanderen*, Antwerpen, 2014; KAS SWERTS, *100 jaar trippen. De Vlaamse Toeristenbond, 1922-2022*, Antwerpen, 2022. For a good overview of the rise of Flemish nationalism in Belgium: VINCENT SCHELIENS, *Met Dank Aan De Overkant. Een Politieke Geschiedenis Van België*, Kalmthout, 2017.

12. *Toerisme Vlaanderen*, the legal successor of the CGT still preserves some of the historical archive, and the same is true for the *Commissariat-Général au Tourisme – Wallonie*, yet the large bulk of the original archive has been lost.

13. For these annual reports: *Jaarverslagen CGT* (1960-1980). Even these are hard to find, but fortunately they are available at the libraries of the universities of Leuven and Antwerp, but also at the national library of Belgium in Brussels.

14. Discussions in the parliamentary sessions were word for word registered in the proceedings, which have been digitized on: www.plenum.be

15. INGRID LEONARD, *75 jaar Toerisme*, 55-66.

16. Today, these archives are preserved in the Ghent city archives “De Zwarte Doos” Archive of Festivities XXI. This archive contains the documents produced by the service for festivities of the city of Ghent. This consists of the archives of the opera and theatre, but more importantly for this research, also the archives of the Commission for Tourism Promotion (*Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer*). This Commission was founded in 1908 to attract tourists to the city. The archive contains documents about the foundation, the yearly reports of the commission (up until now), correspondences with Commissions in other cities, tourism organizations inside and outside Belgium, production dossiers on movies, posters and brochures and more material that could be used to reconstruct the history of tourism promotion in the city of Ghent and even broader, Belgium and beyond.



This poster by Freddy Conrad was commissioned by the Commissariat General for Tourism to promote Belgium as a tourist destination, c. 1946-1960. Source : University Library Ghent, BIB.AFF.C.000953.

contains correspondence with the *Commissariaat-Generaal voor Toerisme* and newspaper articles that focus on the collaborations between the CGT and local tourism organizations. Although these correspondences mostly focus on positive cooperation, they are also brimming with complaints about how the CGT promoted the city and the country. Tourism was also frequently discussed in the Ghent city council. The written reports of these discussions have also been consulted.¹⁷ Last but not least, there is also the press, as political discussions on the local and national level about all sorts of societal issues – including tourism – were also reported in popular newspapers and magazines. Due to the BelgicaPress project of the National Library of Belgium, a sample of historical newspapers has been searched online.¹⁸

II. Flanders is not Belgium – the product

In 1967 Mik Babylon, a strapping young MP from Roeselare [West Flanders], who was one of the representatives of the Flemish-Nationalist party *Volksunie* (VU), interpellated the Catholic State Secretary of Tourism Jan Piers. During his long intervention, Babylon drew up a longlist of all the flaws in Piers' policy, yet the crux of his argument came down to a surprisingly small set of statistics:

“Minister Piers has to acknowledge that tourism is, in essence, a Flemish industry, since 70% of the overnight stays in hotels, residences, flats, and homes for social tourism are localized in Flanders. The same holds true for camping grounds: more than 67% is to be found in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium.”¹⁹

Traditionally, the lopsided localization of tourism over the country had been weighed against the

uneven – and in Flemish eyes unfair – distribution of government subsidies, which were, in the best Belgian tradition of waffle-iron politics, split fifty/fifty over the Flemish and French-speaking part of the country. It was an old sore, which had already cropped up in the 1930s. Frans Desmidt, a liberal MP and mayor of Knokke, complained bitterly in March 1937, that the privately funded Belgian-Luxembourg Tourist Board – the *Office Belgo-Luxembourgeoise du Tourisme* (or OBLUT) – spent too much money on the promotion of the Luxembourg holiday resorts, while the Flemish coastal strip – the true engine of tourism development in Belgium – was largely ignored.²⁰ Mik Babylon – and other VU representatives – simply recycled the old argument in the 1960s. The same drum was beaten over and over again. In his interpellation in 1969, Babylon quoted from one of Piers' earlier speeches. It was rumoured that the state secretary would have said that the provinces of [Belgian] Luxembourg and West-Flanders were subsidized on the same footing. It was an outrage pure and simple, at least in the eyes of Babylon, since:

“70% of our Belgian tourism is localized in West-Flanders, while this is barely 10% in Luxembourg. Nonetheless, they get the same amount of funding. This is the famous *arithmétique hollandaise* [unfair funding] that we have known before [our independence in] 1830. I hope that this outrageous injustice will soon end. I have put the finger on the sore spot before, but I must insist on this point”.²¹

Babylon's “objective grounds” could be inferred from the annual reports of the *Commissariaat-Generaal voor Toerisme* or Belgium's national tourism board, that had been installed in 1939. Each year, the CGT collected data on the nights that were spent in Belgium by local and foreign visitors.

17. *Gemeentebladen van de stad Gent*, 1935-1985.

18. Some years ago the national library of Belgium (KBR) launched an ambitious project to digitize all Belgian newspapers. It is an ongoing project, but the first results are searchable through: Belgicapress.be. Even though a systematic search on the lemma “tourism” falls beyond the scope of this project, we used the database strategically to illustrate some of the more important debates about the promotion of Belgium by the CGT.

19. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jan Piers by Mik Babylon*, 7 February 1967.

20. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Frans Desmidt*, 9 March 1937.

21. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

From a tourism perspective, Belgium could be divided into four major zones: the narrow strip of seaside resorts along the North-Sea Coast, the *Kunststeden* [or the Cities of Art], the thickly wooded Ardennes-Meuse region, and the heathery Kempen (Map 1). While the three last zones barely held a market share of less than a third of overnight stays in 1967 – respectively 11.8% for the Cities of Art, 12.1% for the Ardennes, and 5% for the Kempen – the importance of the Coast was paramount (Graph 1).²² It gave Flemish Nationalists the much-needed ammunition to ask for a new allocation model for tourism subsidies. Funds should not be distributed 50/50 between the Flemish- and French-speaking communities, but *proportional* to their actual weight as tourist hubs.²³ *Kust, Kempen & Kunststeden* were in this discourse increasingly appropriated as Flemish rather than Belgian assets, while the North-Sea coast was time and again labelled as the prime catalyst for tourism development.²⁴

Flemish nationalists cleverly sidestepped the fact that, at least in the long term, the Coast was losing ground as a tourist destination, while the Ardennes were – albeit modestly – gaining momentum (Graph 1). They also strategically turned a blind eye to the fact that the *Kunststeden* [Cities of Art] were a Belgian rather than a Flemish brand, as the label also included French-speaking cities such as Liège, Tournai, and Brussels.²⁵ Funds for tourism policy and promotion should be allocated proportionally. Mik Babylon and others advocated that Flanders was entitled to at least 70% of the subsidies.²⁶

Those debates about tourism were part of a larger discussion on economic leverage. Initially, when the Flemish movement took root, it had predominantly strived for more cultural autonomy and the right to use Dutch in local administrations, courts of justice, schools, and other public spaces, since, even in Flanders, French was still the *lingua franca* in the late nineteenth century. However, during the interbellum years, this cry for more cultural elbow room was trumped by economic demands. Industrial development in Flanders – starting with the coal mines in Limburg – had led to more self-confidence in the part of the country that had always been regarded as economically backward. Lobby groups such as the *Vlaamsch Economisch Verbond* (the Union of Flemish entrepreneurs) became zealous advocates for more autonomy in economic matters. Especially in the post-war period, when the Flemish economy eclipsed the ailing Walloon industry, these demands gathered momentum. Financial transfers between north and south became a bone of contention.²⁷ Tourism, as Babylon and other MPs explained, should not be overlooked, since it was one of the fastest growing economic sectors in Belgium's *Trente Glorieuses*.²⁸ Flanders was not really exceptional, as Europe witnessed the rise of a “Nationalism of the Rich” in the 1960s and 1970s. National movements in Northern Italy, Catalonia, and other regions increasingly underpinned their cry for independence with economic arguments by claiming that their development as a modern region was impeded by a backward core, while the

22. *Jaarverslagen CGT* (1960-1985) For more background on these figures: Van Damme & Verhoeven, “How to sell a city?”, 219-244.

23. A similar argument was used in the interpellation of Emile Claeys, a Catholic MP and mayor of Ghent: PLENUM, Interpellation of Emile Claeys, 13 March 1962.

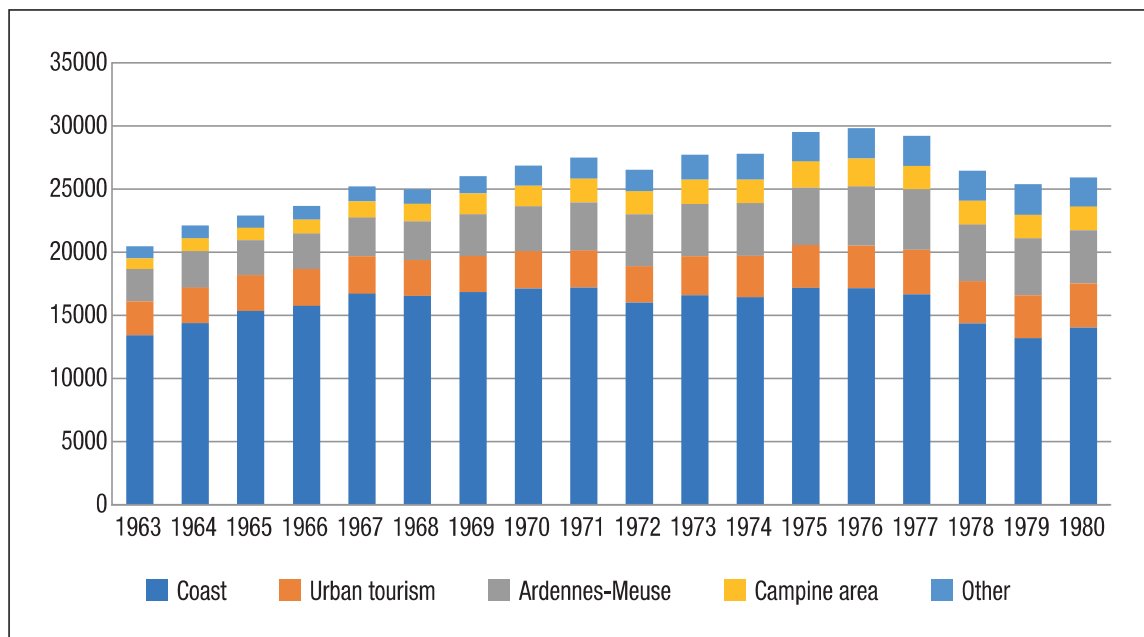
24. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jan Piers by Mik Babylon*, 7 February 1967.

25. More about the brand of the *Kunststeden*: ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, “How to sell a city?”, 219-244; ILJA VAN DAMME, “1880 – Brugge. Toerisme in de ‘Kunststeden’”, in: ANDREAS STYNEN & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, *Bestemming België. Een geschiedenis van toerisme in dertien etappes (1830-2030)*, Deurne, 2022, 59-76.

26. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

27. More background on the development Flemish movement and its economic policy: VINCENT SCHELTJENS, *Met dank aan de overkant*, 112-114; 162-164; OLIVIER BOEHME, *De welvaart & trots van naties. Een geschiedenis van economisch nationalisme*, Antwerpen, 2013, 185-189; OLIVIER BOEHME, *Greep naar de markt. De sociaaleconomische agenda van de Vlaamse beweging en haar ideologische versplintering tijdens het interbellum*, Leuven, 2008, 941-954; LODE WILS, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie. Een geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging*, Leuven, 2009, 264, 313-322; ELS WITTE, “Increasing Tension”, in: JAN CRAEYBECKX, ALAIN MEYNEN & ELS WITTE (eds.), *Political History of Belgium from 1830 onwards*, Brussels, 2009, 361-392.

28. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.



Graph 1: Number of overnight stays in Belgium x 1000 (1963-1980). The graph is based on the figures in the annual reports of the CGT: *Jaarverslagen CGT* (1963-1980).

more traditional cultural motives were pushed to the background.²⁹

However, the state secretary Jan Piers, a veteran politician from the CVP [the Catholic Party] was not impressed by Babylon's lamentations, as he hammered home the classic argument that, from a tourism marketing and policy perspective, Belgium should be regarded as one and the same product where all zones should be given due attention:

"We do not share the same opinion when it comes to the distribution of the subsidies. My point of view has always been that a 70/30 distribution code is not advisable, as the final allocation of the money depends on the submitted projects... Moreover, it is beyond doubt that our country should be treated as one and the same tourist zone because of the short distances. Tourists at the coast take

trips to virtually every other tourist region in Belgium and vice versa. Therefore, the development of one zone is vital to stimulate the appeal of other areas."³⁰

Both opposing views resurfaced time and again in discussions on tourism in the 1960s and 1970s, although they slowly but surely radicalized.³¹ Especially in the late 1970s, when Belgian tourism was hit hard by the economic recession and the expansion of the tourist market came to a sudden halt, the cry for reforms grew louder. The downward trend was most dramatic for the Coast, where the annual number of overnight stays decreased dramatically due to cyclical and more structural factors (See Graph 1).³² Moreover, the argument to abandon the traditional waffle-iron politics slowly but surely spilled from the Flemish nationalist *Volksunie* (VU) to more mainstream parties, which kept pace with the broader evolution of the

29. EMMANUEL DALLE MULLE, *The nationalism of the rich: Discourses and strategies of separatist parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland*, Abingdon, 2018.

30. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jan Piers by Mik Babylon*, 7 February 1967.

31. Similar arguments about the uneven distribution of the subsidies were used in: PLENUM, *Interpellation by Polydore Holvoet*, 1 July 1970; PLENUM, *Interpellation by Willem Content*, 29 June 1978.

32. ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, "How to sell a city", 219-244; ANDREAS STYNEN & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, "Bestemming België: een inleiding", in: ID., *Bestemming België*, 9-22.

Flemish movement in post-war Belgium. During the 1970s, claims for more cultural, economic or political autonomy were no longer the privilege of VU representatives, but spread unchecked through the rank and file of other parties.³³ Willem Content, an MP from the, then still unitary, socialist party (BSP) and also the mayor of Blankenberge, complained bitterly about the deep crisis in June 1978, peppering his speech with dramatic figures about plummeting overnight stays, the surge in bankruptcies of hotels, restaurants, and other facilities, and other gloomy statistics. Even though Content identified a series of possible causes to explain the slump, he also pointed out the failing national promotional policy.³⁴ Daniel Coens, MP for the CVP [the Catholic Party] and mayor of Damme [West-Flanders], added a little extra. Once again, the main bone of contention was the unbalanced subsidies for tourism marketing:

“If I’m correct, the CGT has reserved two times 106 million [Francs] for tourist promotion, which is not much. I would like to know why the Minister holds to a distributive formula of 50/50, while there are other possibilities... However, let us, for a moment, focus on this 106 million. When we know that the total turnover from tourism in West Flanders exceeds 18 billion francs a year, and we assume that a budget of 5% for promotion is reasonable, it would follow that this province should receive a least 900 million a year. We are far off from this default scenario. Therefore, action should be taken to safeguard and stimulate the economic potential of this crucial sector.”³⁵

Flanders was, at least in the eyes of malcontent Flemish MPs, entitled to a larger piece of the pie in order to overcome the crisis. The same process could be witnessed in Northern Italy, Scotland, and other parts of Europe, where the economic slump became the catalyst of a new wave of (economic) nationalism.³⁶ However, in Flanders, the cry for more autonomy came from a very specific angle. It was probably no coincidence that Coens, Content, Babylon and other advocates of a fairer allocation formula were predominantly based in West Flanders. With *Westtoerisme* [the provincial board of tourism] the region housed one of the most powerful lobby groups in tourism which stood up for the vested interests of the coastal resorts such as Ostend, Blankenberge and Knokke, heritage cities such as Bruges, Ypres or Veurne, or regional landscapes such as the Flemish Hills. Moreover, there were the ‘In Flanders Fields’ war memorials, trenches, graveyards, and other commemorative sites, which drew a steady stream of tourists.³⁷ Together, these West-Flemish lobbyists wielded a big stick in matters of tourism development and promotion.³⁸ No matter what topic was discussed in parliament – be it urban tourism, unsupervised camping, or tourist promotion – the West-Flemish MPs bent the debate to their will in order to protect the economic interests of the Coast and its immediate hinterland.³⁹ In this case, they cleverly capitalized on burgeoning nationalist feelings to further the interests of Ostend, Blankenberge, and other coastal resorts, as it was believed that a transfer of powers from the national to the regional level would bring more efficiency and – more importantly – would

33. LODE WILS, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie*, 321-322; Vincent Scheltiens, *Met dank aan de overkant*, 191, 207-211; OLIVIER BOEHME, *De welvaart & trots van naties*, 187-189; Els WITTE, “Increasing Tension”, 361-365.

34. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jos Chabert by Willem Content*, 29 June 1978.

35. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jos Chabert by Daniel Coens*, 29 June 1978.

36. DALLE MULLE, *The Nationalism of the Rich*, 17-32.

37. More about the magnetism of the region: MARC CONSTANDT, “1870 – Westende. Kusttoerisme in stijl”, in: ANDREAS STYNEN & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, *Bestemming België*, 41-58; ILJA VAN DAMME, “1880 – Brugge”, 59-76; DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, “1920 – Flanders Fields. Naar de slagvelden van de Grote Oorlog”, in: ANDREAS STYNEN & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, *Bestemming België*, 129-147; RONNY GOBYN (ed.), *Te kust en te kuur: badplaatsen en kuuroorden in België, 16de-20ste eeuw*, Brussel, 1987.

38. More background on *Westtoerisme*; MARC CONSTANDT, *100 jaar toerisme. Een eeuw vakantie in West-Vlaanderen*, Tielt, 1986; STEPHEN WARD, *Selling Places*, 50-51.

39. For instance: ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, “Selling the City”, 219-244; GERRIT VERHOEVEN, “No campers wanted. Mass tourism and the discouragement of ‘tent-cloth vacationing’ in Belgium’s Trente Glorieuses (1945-’78)”, *Journal of Tourism History*, 12, 2020, 237-255.

earn some extra millions. It was a masterly example of what Emmanuel Dalle Mulle has recently labelled as the “nationalism of the rich”, where the benefits of regionalization were calculated in economic rather than cultural terms.⁴⁰

Whereas the angry voices from West Flanders were difficult to ignore, it is striking that MPs from Antwerp, Mechelen and other Cities of Art rarely if ever participated in the debates about tourism. Even if they touched upon the issue, the (unequal) distribution of money between the regions was hardly ever an issue. A notable exception was the Catholic MP and mayor of Ghent Emile Claeys, who complained bitterly about the waffle-iron politics in tourism in March 1962:

“Finally, I have to argue strongly against a morbid habit in this country [...] For every 50 francs that is asked to subsidize each fresh initiative in West Flanders, a similar initiative has to be set up in the Ardennes to spend the same 50 francs. In my opinion, such an approach is totally unacceptable. If the budget has to be distributed, it has to be done in proportion to the touristic importance of the region. Is it wise to put locations that only account for 20% of the tourist activity on a par with hubs that bring in more than 80% of the revenues?”⁴¹

It is striking that Claeys did not refer to his own hometown Ghent – or any other City of Art – to ask for a new distribution code, but stood up for the interests of *Westtoerisme*. It is also telling that the national discussions about financial issues did not pop up in the reports of the Ghent city council, nor in the administration of the local tourist board, the *Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer in Gent*.⁴² Apparently, the city did not question the allocation model. It remains unclear why the national debate about

tourism promotion did not resound in the city halls of Antwerp, Liège, or any other city, but it seems likely that the mayors and aldermen of these Cities of Art – and their MP’s in the national assembly – still did not see tourism as a fully-fledged economic sector that was worth a discussion in parliament. They simply had other fish to fry.⁴³

Even with the oil crisis wreaking havoc on the sector, Content’s and Coens’ pledges for a fairer distribution code fell on deaf ears. Jos Chabert, the Minister of Traffic – and Tourism – in the late 1970s, who was *nota bene* a fellow CVP party member of Coens, had little if any sympathy for their lobbying. According to his view, it was parochial to focus on the fifty/fifty distribution between the Flemish- and French-speaking parts of the country, as the two times 106 million Francs were nothing more than a budgetary illusion. Forced by the new community legislation, the CGT budget had indeed been theoretically split in half in line with the linguistic register. In practice, however, one and the same budget was used to sell Belgium at home and abroad, whereby Flanders, the Walloon provinces and Brussels were given due attention. Chabert argued that this was in everyone’s interest, since:

“a foreign tourist does not limit his visit to Flanders, the Ardennes or Brussels, but travels through the entire country. Therefore, the promotion should cover Belgium as a whole”.⁴⁴

Flemish nationalists, for their part, tried to beef up their argument for splitting up the budget – and, eventually, for the dismantlement of the CGT itself – by referring to the *communis opinio*. Grist to their mill was the criticism voiced by Jozef Van Overstraeten, the president of the *Vlaamse Toeristenbond* [the Flemish Tourist Association] in his column *Zon &*

40. More background on economic nationalism in: OLIVIER BOEHME, *Griep naar de markt*, 941-947.

41. PLENUM, *Interpellation by Emile Claeys*, 13 March 1962.

42. *Gemeentebleden*, 1880-1980 (City Archive of Ghent); Yearly reports of the Commission for Tourism Promotion between 1909 and 1965 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 73, 201, 202, 251, 252, 696, 697).

43. ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, “How to sell a City?”, 219-244. Bruges was a notable exception, as the interests of the city were promoted by *Westtoer*.

44. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jos Chabert by Daniel Coens*, 29 June 1978.



Poster depicting the Belgian Coast by Herman Verbaere, 1946. Source : NMBS Collection – Train World Heritage 4387.

Schaduw [Sun & Shade] in the widely read VTB magazine *De Toerist* [The Tourist]. Initially, the Vlaamse Toeristenbond had been founded in 1922 as a bulwark against the Francophone – and allegedly rabid Belgian nationalist – *Touring Club de Belgique* (TCB).⁴⁵ Showering his readers with statistics, Overstraeten illustrated the supposed disavowing of Flemish tourists by the Francophone lobby. Tourism was also frequently discussed in *'t Pallieterke*, a satirical weekly for conservative, far-right and pro-Flemish readers, whereby the fifty/fifty budget was a bone of contention: “with the Ardennes getting too much (although tourism is in decline there) to the detriment of the burgeoning Flemish coast.”⁴⁶

It is striking that even a Flemish nationalist newspaper described the debate predominantly in purely economic terms, while the potential cultural profits were rarely if ever mentioned. None of the articles – nor the interventions of any of the Flemish nationalist MPs – referred to the fact that the hard-won autonomy in matters of tourism could be used to strengthen a Flemish identity.⁴⁷ It was, basically, all about the money. Discussions on tourism reflected wider stereotypes of a progressive, thriving and modern Flemish economy that was exploited – or at least hindered – by the backward Brussels institutions and the ailing Walloon industry.⁴⁸ Eventually, the lobby of malcontent pro-Flemish politicians would net a big haul in parliament, as the power of the CGT was slowly but surely sapped in the early 1980s, and the regional tourist boards such as the Flemish *Commissariaat-Generaal voor toerisme* [later on transformed into *Toerisme Vlaanderen*] took control. Flanders could finally paddle its own canoe.⁴⁹

III. Francophone nitwits – the producer

Mik Babylon and other Flemish nationalist MPs not only slated the unfair allocation code in state subsidies for tourism, but also attacked the institutional framework. Especially the *Commissariat-Générale au Tourisme* – Belgium's National Tourism Board – became a sitting target. Flemish nationalists deliberately painted a dystopian portrait of a lax, sloppy, incompetent and largely Francophone organization, in which tourism promotion was seasoned with amateurism and arbitrariness. During his long parliamentary interpellations, Mik Babylon zealously tallied all the painful mistakes in the posters, brochures and other promotional material of the CGT, which – at least in his eyes – had made Belgium the laughing stock of other European countries. For example, in the CGT brochure of 1965, the Brabantine municipality of Asse had been wrongly situated in East Flanders, while Temse, located in the province of East Flanders, was erroneously situated in Antwerp on the banks of the *Scheeldt* [sic]. On a map from the CGT hotel guide, Komen (Comines) – a French-speaking enclave in Flanders – was linked to the Walloon province of Hainaut by an imaginary corridor.⁵⁰ It was like a red rag to a bull, since the introduction of the linguistic border, which neatly separated the language communities, had been one of the main demands of the Flemish movement.⁵¹ In a similar vein, the hills in West Flanders were confounded with the Flemish Ardennes in East Flanders in a brochure on *Belgian folklore and picturesque regions*. Babylon even raked up a diplomatic incident with the Dutch government in the early sixties. On a map

45. More information on the Flemish Tourist Association (VTB): KAS SWERTS, *100 jaar trippen*, Deurne, 2022; BRUNO DE WEVER, “Vlaamse Toeristenbond – Vlaamse automobilistenbond (VTB-VAB), in: *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Tiel, 1998, Vol. 3: 3478-3484.

46. *'t Pallieterke*, 28-9 (1972) 4. Note that it was actually the other way around: the Coast was slowly but surely losing ground, while the Ardennes were on the rise. (see Graph 1)

47. Even in Franco's Spain ideological motives to support tourism were soon trumped by economic incentives: PACK, *Tourism and Dictatorship*, 1-12, 105-136.

48. Elsewhere in Europe, in Northern Italy, Scotland, and other regions, similar economic discourses were used to fuel a new wave of nationalism, see: DALLE MULLE, *The nationalism of the rich*, 17-32.

49. PLENUM, *Interpellation by André De Beul*, 29 January 1985; *'t Pallieterke*, 37-12 (1981) 4. Look for the institutional story also in: INGRID LEONARD, *Toerisme (in) Vlaanderen*, 5-20, 55-66.

50. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

51. ELS WILS, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse Natie*, 317-321; VINCENT SCHELIENS, *Met dank aan de overkant*, 114-115.

published by the CGT, the Belgian province of Limburg was bordered by Germany in the east, as if Netherlandish-Limburg – the region of Maas-tricht and Venlo – had been annexed.⁵²

Mistakes in communication were not only discussed in parliament, but also found their way to the press, the city councils and local tourists boards. In Ghent, the *Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer* [Ghent Commission for Tourism Promotion] collected all kinds of complaints about the *Commissariat-Générale du Tourisme* in a dossier called 'Grievances CGT'. It contains newspaper articles, letters from disgruntled tourists, and correspondence between the local board and the CGT. One of the newspaper clippings is an article from *De Gentenaar*, a Catholic daily that had been published from 1879 onwards. It proclaimed that the publication of a new tourist map by the CGT in 1960 was a crying shame.⁵³ On the map, Walloon and Flemish cities were classified according to their size. According to the disgruntled writer, some huge mistakes had been made. Mol, Geel, and some other Flemish cities were – deliberately – depicted as dwarfs of less than 3,000 souls (while in reality they boasted more than 20,000 inhabitants), while La-Roche-en-Ardenne, a Walloon townlet with an impressive castle, was wrongfully upgraded to the rank of a small city.⁵⁴ According to the author of the newspaper article, the map was created "with apparent malice, [and] the importance of the Flemish municipalities is minimised while the population of the Walloon municipalities is ridiculously inflated".⁵⁵ Even though the Ghent civil servants did not really stumble across such grave mistakes in the representation of their city in the posters, brochures, and other promotional material of the CGT, they obviously regarded the publications of the CGT with suspicion.

Numerous errors – deliberate or not – strengthened the impression among the more radical Flemish MPs that the CGT was manned by a small army of inept Francophone nitwits, who were totally unfamiliar with, or, even worse, completely indifferent to the Flemish-speaking part of their homeland. In his interpellation, Mik Babylon also ran through the CGT policy to translate all Flemish place names and events into their French equivalent in English, German and other international brochures, whereby Brugge became Bruges, Ieper – Ypres, Mechelen – Malines, Knokke – Le Zoute, or Scherpenheuvel – Montaigu.⁵⁶ Language – and more especially the urge to force back the use of French in public life in Flanders as the *langue préférée* in politics, administration, schools, and courts and to stimulate the use of Flemish – had been at the heart of the Flemish battle for more autonomy from the early nineteenth century onwards. Nonetheless, national institutions only slowly but surely swapped their monolingual communication for a bilingual strategy when Flemish became mandatory.⁵⁷ French names for Flemish cities worked as a firebomb in this context. Babylon, once again, referred to public opinion by quoting an article in the Catholic and pro-Flemish newspaper *Gazet van Antwerpen*:

"Anyone following the activity of the CGT inevitably gets the impression that Belgium is a French-speaking country with a folkloric Flemish appendage. Tourist promotion is drafted by French speakers and then superficially translated, usually by over-paid private companies whose knowledge of Dutch is often limited to a bunch of dictionaries."⁵⁸

According to Babylon and other faultfinders, one of the main reasons for the blunders was the allocation of the personnel, as the staff of the promo-

52. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

53. Correspondences and newspaper articles concerning the CGT (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568)

54. Correspondences and newspaper articles concerning the CGT (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568).

55. Idem.

56. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jan Piers by Mik Babylon*, 7 February 1967.

57. Els Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie*, 264-265; VINCENT SCHELIENS, *Met dank aan de overkant*, 25-27, 114-117, 191-192.

58. Quoted in PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.



This poster by Fernand Ponthier promotes the Walloon town of Malmédy as an ideal destination for a day trip by train, 1946. Source : NMBS Collection – Train World Heritage 4325.

tion department – true to the waffle-iron politics – consisted of five French and just as many Flemish-speaking civil servants. Once again, these figures were confronted with the fact that the lion's share of tourist attractions – the Coast, the Cities of Art, and the Kempen – were situated in Flanders. Therefore, it was claimed that the Flemish-speaking officials of the CGT were swamped with work, while their Francophone colleagues were twiddling their thumbs. Mik Babylon hammered home the argument that Flanders and more in particular West Flanders and the Coast – the true engine of tourism development in Belgium – were treated unfairly by this rule. An allocation model of four French- versus six Flemish-speaking employees would be more reasonable.⁵⁹

Babylon's arguments resonated well with the razor-sharp discourse that was ubiquitous in *'t Pallieterke*, the mouthpiece of right-wing, conservative Flanders, which had started a crusade against the "Francophone" CGT. Myriad mistakes in the communication and promotion of the National Tourist Office were put under the microscope.⁶⁰ In 1979, the popular weekly published an interview with Karel De Meulemeester, the president of the *Vlaamse Toeristenbond* (Flemish Tourist Association), who mauled the (staff) policy of the CGT:

"Who is hired to stand up for us [at the recent holiday fair] in Lisbon? Which criteria are used? In certain circumstances, this I know for sure, they appointed a *fijs-a-papa* [whipper-snapper], who did not understand any Flemish. Thickheads who were at a complete loss. Who had never seen Ghent or Bruges with their own eyes. How can such people promote Flanders abroad?"⁶¹

It was a well-worn strategy. Focussing on the inept Francophone staff of the CGT – as a *pars pro toto* for the whole defective Belgian govern-

ment administration – the pro-Flemish press, the MPs, and other rainmakers created powerful hetero- and auto-images. Tall tales about Walloon incompetence, sloppiness, and even corruption strengthened the Flemish self-image of integrity, efficiency, and professionalism. It was a carbon copy of the wider stereotypes of hopelessly incompetent Belgian institutions that circulated in the Flemish movement. Meulemeester linked this lack of CGT professionalism to the economic slump. It was the "one and only reason" why Flanders was losing ground as a tourist destination. "For tourism promotion requires that one has to be part of a culture to sell a country, a nation, or a society. That's where the problem lies."⁶²

Meulemeester, Babylon, and others used a specific set of more or less rational economic arguments to argue in favour of reform, but they did not shy away from a spark of populism either. Arthur Haulot, the director of the CGT was subjected to heavy criticism on personal grounds. Ideological tensions fuelled the smear campaign. During the war, Haulot had been one of the big shots of the Belgian resistance. Being the president of *Les Jeunes Socialistes* (the young socialists), he was even sent to the concentration camp of Dachau. It made him *persona non grata* in (far-right) pro-Flemish circles, as they had been drawn into the vortex of collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War. Mik Babylon referred to Haulot in parliament as the "*lion tamer, who was unable to control his lions*."⁶³ It was a carbon-copy of the more radical discourse from the right-wing newspaper *'t Pallieterke*, where Haulot's policy was invariably discussed as the extravagances of *Tuurke* [little Arthur]. The director of the CGT became the stereotypical emanation of a tyrannical, unilingual – say Francophone – official, who was impervious to Flemish sensitivities. When Haulot was honoured for his long service in 1972, the newspaper sneered that a French-Dutch dictionary would have been a perfect farewell pres-

59. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

60. For instance: *'t Pallieterke*, 19-27 (1963) 5; 19-39 (1963) 7; 29-9 (1973), 4; 34-24 (1978) 11.

61. *'t Pallieterke*, 35-42 (1979) 11.

62. *'t Pallieterke*, 35-42 (1979) 11.

63. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Alfred Bertrand by Mik Babylon*, 9 September 1969.

ent, so that – in the future – at least the Flemish place names would be correctly spelled.⁶⁴

Language issues were also a perfect tool for putting the personnel of the local tourist offices of the CGT through the wringer. In the Catholic newspaper *Het Volk*, an anonymous reader tells the story of his contact with the hostesses of the local tourist office of the CGT in Brussels' Central Station.⁶⁵ Tongue-in-cheek, the article described a standard visit of a Flemish-speaking tourist to the tourist office:

"First you call the office. At the other end of the line comes the voice of a French-speaking lady. As soon as she realises that the correspondent is speaking Dutch, you can hear something like *"Jeanne, c'est en Flamand"* [Jeanne, the call is in Dutch] And then comes Jeanne, *la Flamande de service* [the Flemish lady on duty], who speaks to you in neat language, and very politely asks you to visit the office of the CGT in Brussels. After this phone call, you go to the CGT office to get the information. At the counter, you meet a French-speaking lady who does not know anything about the information you want and does not speak Dutch either. After a long dialogue, the lady herself decides to call *'La flamande de service'*, Jeanne. In the end, this one colleague who does speak Dutch helps the tourist, after he or she has had a humiliating conversation with the French-speaking lady."⁶⁶

Caustically, the author dedicated the article to the person he deemed responsible for this bad treatment of Flemish tourists: Arthur Haulot, the director of the CGT. Even though such criticism could be heard in liberal and socialist newspapers too, it was predominantly Catholic papers who took the lead in denouncing such alleged discrimination. It

resonated well with their ideological affiliation, as Catholic dailies and tabloids were often more eager to beat the Flemish drum than Liberal or Socialist media. Even though pro-Flemish sentiments flared up among the rank and file of all traditional parties, it was the Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP) that turned into the most zealous advocate for more autonomy in the post-war period. With a pro-Flemish programme, the CVP tried to recuperate the votes from the Vlaams-Nationaal Verbond (VNV), the Verbond der Diets Nationaal-Solidaristen (Verdinaso), and other extreme right Flemish nationalist parties that had been tainted by collaboration during the war.⁶⁷

During his interpellation of February 1967, Mik Babylon referred to a similar experience of "a certain gentleman", who had allegedly inquired about Klein-Brabant [a Flemish tourist region to the west of Mechelen] at the tourist office in Brussels' Central Station, which had – in his experience – been rightly labelled as the Augean stables in certain newspapers. The epithet was indeed frequently used in *'t Pallieterke* to describe the dreadful state of the federal institutions. According to the anonymous gentleman, it was spot on:

"Last week, I went to the local office of the CGT to ask for a brochure on Klein-Brabant. The two ladies behind the counter looked totally flabbergasted. When I repeated the question, it dawned on me that none of them spoke or understood one word of Dutch. After several attempts, one of them seemed to have picked up the word Brabant and came up with a brochure on the province of Brabant. Apparently, they were not only hindered by a linguistic barrier, but were also totally unaware that the region of Klein Brabant was actually situated in the province of Antwerp. When I pointed out the mistake, I got a brochure on Antwerp... in German!"⁶⁸

64. *'t Pallieterke*, 35-11 (1979) 5.

65. Correspondences and newspaper articles concerning the CGT in *Het Volk* (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568)

66. Correspondences and newspaper articles concerning the CGT in *De gazet*, 1961 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568).

67. THEO LUYCKX, "De opinierichtingen in de Belgische dagbladers", *Res Publica*, 17, 1975, 223-244.

68. PLENUM, Parliamentary of Jan Piers interpellation by Mik Babylon, 7 February 1967.

Black humor was a weapon that was frequently used by Flemish nationalists.⁶⁹ However, the Catholic State Secretary of Tourism, Jan Piers, was not impressed by Babylon's long lamentations. Calmly, he refuted all assertions. For example, the problem of the imbalance in Flemish-French language ratios within the CGT would be solved by hiring new personnel. A proportion of forty Flemish- versus thirty-five French speaking officials would become the norm. Piers did not deny that there had been some issues in the past, but made assurances that steps had been taken to reorganize the National Tourist Office and make it future proof. At the same time, he poked fun about the longlist of – supposedly – capital blunders that had been committed by the CGT, since Babylon had simply copy-pasted these errors from an earlier intervention. According to Piers, Babylon's allegations were nothing more than mere political spin. On the contrary, the state secretary seized the opportunity to congratulate his staff: "whether they are Flemish- or French-speaking, who had to cope with ever more tasks in the most difficult circumstances."⁷⁰

What added even more fuel to the fire in the eyes of Flemish nationalists was the presence of members of the CGT at strikes which put tourism flows at risk. In 1960-1961, the government of Gaston Eyskens (1958-1961) drafted the 'Law for Economic Expansion, Social Progress and Financial Recovery' to avert the looming economic crisis. The *Eenheidswet* (Unity Act) tried to cope with snowballing unemployment, the closure of the Walloon coal mines, the surging national debt, and the loss of the former colony of the Belgian Congo by raising new taxes and by budgetary cuts.⁷¹ It led to the "Great Strike" or "The Strike of the Century", which lasted for six weeks. Between 600,000 and one million workers were laid off work, including the railway employees of the Belgian NMBS. Tourists were no

longer able to use the train to travel around the country. Arthur Haulot – a staunch supporter of the socialist cause – and some of his staff took to the streets to support the general strike. *La Libre Belgique*, a Catholic newspaper, headlined with *Le tourisme & le cynisme* in 1961:

"In a photo reproduced here, Mr Arthur Haulot, Commissioner-General for Tourism, can be seen in the third row of the procession of strikers marching through the streets of Brussels on a Saturday. Arthur Haulot is a socialist. That is his right. But for the Commissioner-General for Tourism to appear at the head of a procession of rioters who, through their violence and sabotage, have created a vacuum around Belgium, it is a mockery of the country. Mr Haulot, who is paid by the government (quite handsomely !) to promote tourism in Belgium, has the indecency to lend his support to the cohorts who have blocked rail traffic, disrupted Sabena, erected roadblocks, put nails in the road, plunged our country into darkness, stagnation and misery at the time of what we call the 'New Year's celebrations' ! Cynicism has its limits. By joining those who are paralysing Belgium and [...] to starve Belgium by blocking supplies to the port of Antwerp, Mr Haulot is voluntarily stripping himself of his qualification to retain his position as General Commissioner for Tourism."⁷²

La Libre Belgique's position was obviously coloured by ideological differences. While the *Eenheidswet* was radically rejected by the socialist trades union (ABVV), the Catholic comrades (ACV) were less unanimous. Arthur Haulot, one of the headmen of the socialist pillar, was singled out for his inconsistent behaviour. Grievances about Haulot's *faux pas* also popped up in local Flemish newspapers such as *Geïllustreerd Blankenberge*,

69. More about the role of humor in parliamentary discussions: BIEKE NOUWS, "'De bulderlach van het halfroond', Vlaamse parlementaire humor in historisch perspectief", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 47/1, 2017, 10-35.

70. PLENUM, Parliamentary statement of State Secretary Jan Piers, 12 December 1967.

71. VINCENT DUJARDIN e.a. (red.), *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België, III: 1950-heden*, Brussel, 2009.

72. 'Le Tourisme et le Cynisme', *La Libre Belgique*, 2 January 1961 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568); 'Als het kalf verdronken is', *Geïllustreerd Blankenberge*, 30 June 1961 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568)

the local tabloid from one of Belgium's mayor coastal resorts, although the journalist added a little extra. According to the article in June 1961 the drop in British travellers visiting the Belgian coast in the 1960s was due to the sloppy design of the CGT office in London. It was crystal-clear that the entire institution for tourism promotion on a national level was inept and should be reorganized, although "this should not mean that cronies and nephews of our politicians find safe jobs" in the new board "where numerous nitwits are accommodated."⁷³ It was a carbon copy of the Flemish stereotypes of the bungling Brussels administrations. Despite the repeated complaints about the so-called 'nitwits', the CGT remained in control until the mid-1980s, when the tourist boards of the Flemish and French-speaking communities were installed.⁷⁴

IV. Looming questions – media & brand

In their desire to reorganize the CGT, pro-Flemish politicians not only focussed on the allegedly uninformed, inept, and largely Francophone staff of the National Office for Tourism, but also regularly focussed on the media that were used – or rather not used – to promote Belgium to domestic and foreign tourists. It was an old sore. Frans Desmidt, a liberal MP and mayor of the seaside resort Knokke complained in 1937 that the promotional strategies of the OBLUT – the *Office Belgo-Luxembourgeoise du Tourisme* – were completely outdated. Professionals should be hired to take up the propaganda of Belgium abroad and to lift it to the next level.⁷⁵ Faced with the scathing criticism of a front of Flemish- and French-speaking MPs – such as the Catholic representative from Bruges, Gerard Eneman, the liberal MP for Brussels Marcel Piron and the Catholic mayor of Ghent

Emile Claeys – on the procedures of the CGT in 1962, the Catholic Minister of Transport Alfred Bertrand listed all the actions that should be taken to improve the publicity campaigns of the CGT:

"I know very well that we have been criticized more than once in connection to our existing tourism offices in Paris and London. Regarding Paris, the solution is very close. [...] As far as the budget allows, we will also expand and use other means of promotion such as systematic actions in travel agencies and in major companies, lectures, regular use of the general and specialised press, radio and television, and film."⁷⁶

Complaints were not only voiced in parliament, but also reverberated through the city halls. Adelbert Van de Walle, head of the local *Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer in Gent*, criticized the fact that the CGT often used outdated photographs to illustrate their brochures. In 1963, the CGT had provided Sidney Clark, a well-known travel writer, with a set of snapshots of Flemish cities to illustrate his book *All the best in Belgium and Luxembourg*.⁷⁷ Van de Walle found that "the book also included an outdated shot of the Graslei [one of the most important tourist streets in Ghent], which, however typical it may seem to Americans, still detracts from the contemporary aspect of our city."⁷⁸ For being so outdated, it would be hardly recognizable for the Ghent inhabitants or for international tourists. The *Commissie voor Vreemdelingenverkeer in Gent* also complained about the posters commissioned by the CGT, which deliberately depicted Ghent (and other Cities of Art) through an old-fashioned, picturesque lens to attract more tourists. According to the CGT representative, the organization saw this as "an exclusively decorative interpretation that has nothing to

73. 'Als het kalf verdronken is'..., *Geïllustreerd Blankenberge*, 30 June 1961 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 586).

74. PLENUM, *Parliamentary interpellation by André De Beul*, 29 January 1985.

75. PLENUM, *Parliamentary interpellation by Frans Desmidt*, 9 March 1937.

76. PLENUM, *Parliamentary statement of Alfred Bertrand*, 15 March 1962.

77. *New York Times*, *Author of 'Fifty Dollar' and 'All the Best In' Series Dies*, April 21, 1975, 32.

78. Letter from Van de Walle to Buntinx, 12 April 1963 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568).

do with the architectural reality of the buildings that one might recognize there".⁷⁹ Their only aim was to draw the public's attention to the Cities of Art. However, local governments and commissions were afraid that this outdated way to brand Belgium as a destination frozen in time would harm tourism in the city and the country.⁸⁰

Traditional posters, drawn by famous *Art Nouveau* and *Art Deco* designers, full of cathedrals, belfries, gabled houses, beguinages, and other medieval monuments, which had been used in ante- and interbellum Belgium to promote the Cities of Art, had been gradually swapped for a more abstract and modern style, which showcased modernist architecture, buzzy shopping-streets and, other vibrant aspects of city life. Even though Flemish cities still successfully capitalized on their medieval or renaissance cityscape in the 1960s and 1970s, they were also eager to brand themselves as cities of progress.⁸¹ Focussing on the picturesque places of Bruges, Ghent or Liège, the CGT's promotion seemed hopelessly outdated in this regard. Not only the message was strongly criticized, but also the medium. Flemish politicians argued that traditional media, such as posters, brochures, lantern-slide lectures, or local tourist offices were not enough to promote a destination in a modern way. To be really successful modern, audio-visual media, such as promotional films, radio- and television programmes, and other trail-blazing ways of marketing should be deployed. In the eyes of Flemish MP's and representatives from local tourist boards, the CGT was hopelessly in arrears in this regard. An illustrative example was the media campaign launched by the Flemish communications consultant Henri Buntinckx, who was hired by the CGT in the 1960s to consolidate relations with the Flemish newspapers, the provincial federations, and the municipal tourism boards. In June 1962, he came up with the bril-

liant idea to organize a recurring tourism chronicle on the regional radio stations. With more than a dash of dark sarcasm, Van de Walle, head of the Ghent tourist board, commented that the initiative came too late in the day:

"At least Ghent did not wait for this action, as our city has already achieved a lot on this particular front in the past. I can make the texts of our own radio reports available to you at a simple request."⁸²

Even at the end of the 1970s complaints about the outdated media used by the CGT remained rampant. For example, Willem Content, the socialist mayor of the seaside resort Blankenberge, claimed in 1978 that the economic crisis in the sector could only be averted by a modern media campaign. To highlight the importance of the national tourist attractions, the Flemish- and French-speaking broadcasting companies BRT and RTBF had to join forces in his opinion in order to develop an attractive tourist programme.⁸³ Jos Chabert, the Minister of Transport, riposted gruffly that radio and television were already widely used to promote Belgium at home and abroad. For example there was the weekly show *Postiljon*, a travel programme, where 65 % of the broadcasting time (or 3570 minutes) was used to promote every nook and cranny of Belgium.⁸⁴

Chabert's snappy tone is rather puzzling unless it is analysed in a wider context. Flemish nationalists had a tendency to portray the media strategies of the CGT as appallingly unprofessional, deadly dull, and hopelessly outdated. It was part and parcel of their strategy to portray the whole Belgian administration as hopelessly inefficient. To a certain extent, it was mere political spinning, since the CGT deployed an impressive array of marketing tools including radio and television reports,

79. Letter from J. Goffin to Vermeulen, 23 December 1950 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568).

80. Letter from Vermeulen to J. Goffin, 21 November 1950 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568)..

81. ILJA VAN DAMME & GERRIT VERHOEVEN, "How to sell a city?", 219-244; ILJA VAN DAMME, "1880 – Brugge", 59-76.

82. Letter from A. Van de Walle to Buntinx, 13 June 1962 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 568).

83. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jos Chabert by Daniel Coens*, 29 June 1978.

84. PLENUM, *Interpellation of Jos Chabert by Daniel Coens*, 29 June 1978.



Postcard of the Graslei in Ghent with the Korenmeetershuis and the Gildehuis der Vrije Schippers, published by Jules Nahrath between c. 1895-1910. Source : Collection City Archive of Ghent, SCMS_FO_1696.

brochures, posters, and much more. Yet, for the pro-Flemish lobby it was but a drop in the ocean. Karel de Meulemeester, one of the top brass of the *Vlaamse Toeristenbond* [Flemish Tourist Association] belittled the promotional policy of the CGT in 1978 as senseless:

“For sure, they spread some brochures hither and thither, but there is no underlying message, no thread, no inspiration, and above all, no vision whatsoever.”⁸⁵

According to de Meulemeester, the intellectual anaemia of the CGT was almost tangible in a series of witless, tawdry campaigns, whereby *Manneke Pis* became the central figure in Belgium’s brand. It was clear evidence of the unmarketable nature of Belgium. Flanders, by contrast, offered ample opportunity for tourism promotion, as the region, at least in the eyes of de Meulemeester, held all the winning cards: its landscapes, its people, and its culture.⁸⁶ However, aside from these extremely hazy indications, it remained unclear which particular brand had to be developed to lure foreign and domestic tourists *en masse* to Flanders. Meulemeester came up with a stereotypical catalogue of:

“our Flemish gastronomy [...] our landscapes, our rich and numerous museums, our famous hospitality, our carillons, our belfries, our beautiful Flemish cities, our Lam Gods [Van Eyck’s Altarpiece], Rubens, Brueghel, our chicory and you name it.”⁸⁷

It was a carbon-copy of the older recipes which had been used by the CGT to brand Belgium. Besides monuments, landscapes and local gastronomy, events were also seen as attractions that could be incorporated into the promotion of Bel-

gium. This sparked a heated discussion among national and local stakeholders, as they deliberated the role of events within the broader context of regional and national branding. In 1962 Henri Buntinx, the Flemish press representative of the CGT, suggested that the *Gentse Feesten* [the famous Ghent Festival] could be promoted as a national event that would attract more domestic and foreign tourists.⁸⁸ Yet, according to the head of the Commission for Tourism of Ghent, these festivities had almost nothing to do with tourism promotion:

“This is an initiative of our local city administration, without any national, let alone international, pretences and only intended to offer relaxation to residents who cannot leave the city during the holiday period.”⁸⁹

Local politicians and public servants were convinced that they did not need the spoon-feeding from the CGT if they wanted to explore the potential of the *Gentse Feesten* further.

While the brand of the CGT was portrayed as hopelessly outdated by Flemish nationalists, critics such as De Meulemeester did not really come up with an alternative. It was emblematic of the lack of vision of most Flemish MPs and civil servants. Even if they all trumpeted that Flanders did not need a Belgian wet-nurse anymore in tourism matters, they stumbled in the dark when it came to developing their own, unique brand. For years, they had invested vast amounts of time and energy to fight the CGT, but when they could finally set up their own Flemish national tourist board in the 1980s, they seemed unsure about how to proceed. Eventually, the traditional products – the Coast, the Cities of Art, & the Kempen – were once again

85. ‘t Pallieterke, 35-3 (1979) 9.

86. ‘t Pallieterke, 35-3 (1979) 9.

87. ‘t Pallieterke, 35-42 (1979) 11.

88. Letter from Buntinx to the schepenen van Handel-Nijverheid-Middenstand, 26 July 1962 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 586).

89. Letter from A. De Decker to Schepenen of Tourism Vander Stegen, 30 August 1962 (City Archive of Ghent, *Archive of Festivities*, XXI 586).

BELGIEN



MECHELN STADT DES GLOCKENSPIELS



TRANS EUROP EXPRESS NACH BRÜSSEL von FRANKFURT (M) 5 St. 17 Min. /
von KÖLN 2 St. 44 Min. / von BASEL 6 St. 7 Min. / von ZÜRICH 7 St. 24 Min.

*This poster by Herman Verbaere features a classic image of Mechelen's Grote Markt with the tower of St Rombouts Cathedral in the background, 1963-1964. Source: NMBS Collection
– Train World Heritage 3668.*

recuperated. It would take some time before Flanders would develop its own particular brand.⁹⁰

V. Conclusion

National tourism promotion was a matter that sparked a heated discussion in post-war Belgium. Opinions on how the country should be branded and marketed at home and abroad not only differed along ideological lines – with (more or less) subtle differences between Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal MPs – but also created a widening rift between representatives of the Flemish and Walloon linguistic communities. Tourism – and its promotion – became ever more politicised in the 1960 and 1970s, as the cry for more regional autonomy spread from the Flemish nationalist *Volksunie* (VU) to the more mainstream parties. Flemish MPs felt the powerful lobby groups such as the *Vlaamse Toeristenbond* (Flemish Tourist Association) breathing down their neck and, at the same time, strategically used this public opinion as a lever to call for fundamental reorganizations.

Classic tropes served this purpose. Flemish MPs unearthed the discourse about the *arithmétique hollandaise* and tailored it to the tourism policy, whereby the fifty/fifty waffle-iron politics were squared to the actual location of tourist attractions in Belgium. Flemish nationalist MPs argued that they were entitled to a larger share of the cake, since tourism was predominantly situated in the North. Popular tourist products and regions, such as the Coast, the Cities of Art, and the Kempen were increasingly appropriated as Flemish assets. Moreover, the traditional allocation key seemed particularly unfair, as the budget was squandered – or so it was framed in the national hemicycle – by a bunch of Francophone nitwits and *fiils-à-papa*, who were unfamiliar with or even indifferent to the specific needs for tourism promotion in Flanders. Flemish nationalist MPs zeroed in on the myriad

mistakes in the marketing of the CGT, the outdated media that were used, and the obsolete branding of Belgium. These topics mirrored wider stereotypes that were circulating about the inefficiency of the Brussels federal administrations and their lazy, French-speaking officials. This black-and-white framing was also fuelled by the news coverage in the Flemish nationalist weekly *'t Pallieterke*, where *Tuurke* Haulot was portrayed as the archetype of a tyrannical, haughty, and startlingly incompetent French-speaking bourgeois. A similar tune – although a touch less caustic – was sung in *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Volk*, and other mainstream Catholic newspapers, which became zealous advocates for a more reasonable distribution of money and means in tourism marketing. Flanders was in their eyes entitled to much more than the traditional waffle-iron politics allowed. Eventually, they would exact their pound of flesh and ask for the dismantlement of the CGT and the establishment of the regional boards of tourism.

Evidently, it is easy to read these debates in terms of nationalism, as the burgeoning Flemish self-awareness drove a wedge between the linguistic communities. Yet, it would be naïve to close our eyes to more pragmatic – or calculating – motives. It is striking that tourism was rarely if ever envisaged as a tool to strengthen a nascent Flemish identity, but was mainly seen through an economic lens. Flemish nationalists predominantly saw tourism (promotion) as a promising sector that would earn some extra millions. It was a classic example of the “nationalism of the rich” that was on the rise in Northern Italy, Scotland, Catalonia and other regions in post-war Europe. However, the spinning in parliament – focussing on French-speaking nitwits, who deliberately ignored the economic engine of the country – created some powerful hetero- and auto-images whereby the alleged Brussels and Walloon incompetence were contrasted with an – equally assumed – Flemish professionalism. Nationalist

90. Even today, these three “products” remain vital to Flanders’ branding as a tourist destination, although in recent decades the region has also tried to attract tourists with its culinary tradition, its cycle racing heritage, its fashion industry and other attractions. See, for instance, the policy document of Ben Weyts, who was Minister of Tourism in the last Flemish government: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/beleidsnota-2014-2019-toerisme>

such as Babylon, de Meulemeester and others were particularly bold in creating the stereotype of a hopelessly inefficient CGT, but were not very successful in providing an alternative. Even in the late 1970s, when the dismantlement of Haulot's maligned Augean stable was in the air, they did not come up with a particular brand or marketing strategy that was different from the older Belgian recipes.

Moreover, nationalism seems to have been partly hijacked in this case by regional lobbyists. Cam-

paigners of *Westtoerisme* – the provincial tourist board of West Flanders – cleverly capitalized on nationalist discourses to transfer more money to the Coast and its hinterland. A similar trend – although a touch less outspoken – could be witnessed among the representatives from the Cities of Art [such as Ghent], who argued that they did not need a CGT wet-nurse to promote their city. Eventually, the national policy in Belgium would be shaped just as well from the bottom-up by the regions, the cities, and other local stakeholders as from the top-down.

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