

DEBATE

Introduction : Commemorating 1914-1918

Chantal Kesteloot

August 2014. Exactly one hundred years ago, the German army invaded Belgian territory. This was the beginning of what would become 'The Great War', a conflict of unprecedented intensity and violence that would instigate a century of violence on a scale and nature unknown until then.

One century after the beginning of what would become the 'war to end all wars,' this event will become the topic of an enormous wave of commemoration. This anniversary will occasion a massive event, preparations for which have been underway for quite some time now.

This will be the first time that a commemoration of this scale and weight will take place in the context of the Belgian federal state. This in itself is already a significant issue. What specific view will the regions and the federal government develop? What focal points will they prioritize and on the basis of what values? These commemorations will form a laboratory on many levels : they will reveal how the past is constructed, almost in the literal sense of the word. What is at stake here is to assess the place wars occupy in the public memories of Belgian society. And already, the discussion has been opened and some concerns have been voiced : over-investment of resources on the one hand, attempts to instrumentalise the event on the other. Preparing for these commemorations, our gaze is naturally directed at the north of the country, and it is obvious that both World Wars do not occupy the same place in public memories in the two

regions. But besides the divergences, there are also convergences. In a country that finds itself in a state of profound change, the past has become the object of an unprecedented investment from all levels of government, where not too long ago the unitary Belgian state was often conspicuously absent in the 'politics of memory'. Besides the resources made available for these commemorations, this will also be a test for the specific type of Belgian federalism. To what extent will this allow the creation of unusual partnerships across the language border? Or will we end up with a primarily confrontational policy?

Besides the convergences, diversity will also prove to be important, from the local to the international, from the spontaneous to the meticulously planned. This multi-dimensional event will involve many actors, from politicians to historians, from teachers to journalists, from amateurs to professionals involved in cultural fields. Two years before all these commemorations will actually start, it seems legitimate to reflect upon what we wish to achieve : that these unprecedented commemorations will add something to our knowledge, our understanding, and might help us to transfer the particular experiences of a country at war and of an occupied society to a more universal message. That is really at the heart of the debates in terms of public history. It will be to the historians of tomorrow to judge whether the event can be considered a success or a failure. The editors-in-chief of the JBH believe it is important to open up the debate. In this section, we present three different perspectives on the event, each offering a different piece reflecting on the aims and the nature of these commemorations by three different historians. Laurence van Ypersele is one of Belgium's foremost experts

on the history of the First World War. She is professor at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) and president of the official working group charged with coordinating the commemoration programme for the Walloon-Brussels Federation. Another dominant historian in this field is Sophie de Schaepdrijver, author of one of the major reference works, published in both Dutch and French, on the German occupation of Belgium during the First World War. She is currently associate professor at Pennsylvania State University in the United States. The third and final author, Nico Wouters, is not an expert on the history of the First World War, but offers a critical reflection on what is commonly known as the politics of memory on both sides of the language border.

Belgium 1914-18 : a tale in the middle

Sophie De Schaepdrijver

'2014-2018'. The landscape of commemoration in Belgium has not yet been mapped, but – unexploited terrain and unbridged chasms aside – we know that it is a rich and varied landscape. The *Flanders Fields Museum* in Ieper/Ypres has been carefully 're-thought'. In Mons, a museum is planned. The archives are buzzing. The faculties are humming. Policy documents flutter. Heritage organizations and municipalities do useful work : people digitize serial sources – from leaflets to posters – and chart the 'small heritage', collect testimonies, photos, diaries, and launch historical exhibitions which will illustrate the experience of 1914-18, all in time for the festive – well, modestly festive – opening in the summer of 2014.

The emphasis of all this lies on the *experience* of the war : personal, local, tangible. That is a wise and timely choice. The impact of the war on actual life, on an individual's course of life, on the daily and local, speaks to the imagination. This angle also offers an opportunity for historiographical renewal. Recent international examples include Roger Chickering's extensive study of the city of Freiburg in the war, Martha Hanna's subtle analysis of the correspondence of a French farming couple, Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau's collection of case-studies of the mourning process, and Salim Tamari's *Year of the Locust*, which describes the Palestinian campaign via diaries of soldiers in the Ottoman army. We are past the era of ordinance maps and glass cabinets containing uniforms. Or, better, these are still there, and rightly so, but we

view them with different eyes – and our field of vision is vastly enlarged. Children's toys, bread coupons, talismans, death notifications, caricatures : nothing escapes attention.

Here, however, there also lurks a danger : that all the planned exhibitions and commemorative volumes will not offer anything more than a procession of artifacts, a multiplicity of events, images and objects which are not embedded in any unified way in a greater story. And, no, refusing such embedding in advance is not an option. Any historian, certainly any public historian, who limits him/herself to simply presenting the material, however rich, does not take his or her responsibilities seriously. It is better to be didactic than disengaged.

But, equally, didacticism has thoroughly set in. In my opinion, the commemoration projects are leavened through with didacticism. Not embedded in a story? They are embedded in a story as firmly as in a rock. And what a story : "peace" as the central value. "Never another war" as the unyielding conclusion. The visitor must leave museums, demonstrations, guided tours and other events in the strong conviction that war is a bad thing (above all for the Common Man.)

That is also true now. It can be said, it must be said. The knowledge that wars *always* bring unhappiness with them, cannot be anchored firmly enough in European cultural DNA. (With apologies for the mixed metaphor.)

But this truth plays little part in our understanding of the First World War, in this case our understanding of Belgium in the First World War (or, again, our understanding of specific groups, communities and individuals

in the First World War.) The accepted fact that 1914-18 brought great misery teaches us little about that period, about what animated contemporaries, about what was at stake in the game (or what was thought to be at stake), about the balance of power, about institutions, about the political economy of blood, tears, money, grain. The peace narrative does not suffice.

Between the broad – all too broad – peace narrative on the one side and the multiplicity of local and personal stories on the other, there is a need for a connection in the middle. There is a need for a framework. The biggest commemoration event in the history of the Belgian state, as Nico Wouters puts it, must deliver more than truisms or anecdotes. “2014-2018” must not only profit tourism – though I have nothing against that, let the peace-tour-busses roll – but must also profit public history as well.

Where to look for this tale in the middle? Here is a proposal : through the specificity of Belgian suffering in the First World War. Through *Belgium 1914-18* – a conceptual framework concrete as well as sweeping, for the multitude of soon-to-be-forthcoming data, images and objects. “Belgium 1914-18” serves as a narrative in the middle.

It must be immediately underlined that this is not a story of the one and only pure historical truth. There was no homogenous Belgian perception of the war. The wartime suffering of some groups appears more similar to that of other foreign groups than that of fellow-citizens. An example : the suffering of deported Belgian unemployed people in the *Zivil-Arbeiterbattalions* behind the front looks more like the experiences of their *confères*

in Lithuania, or for that matter Roubaix, than those of their compatriots in uniform on the *IJzer*. And, let us be clear, a Belgian framework is not an *a priori* ‘Belgianised’ framework; quite otherwise : the countrywide view indicates rifts more precisely. A second point : *Belgium 1914-18* is altogether not a *sanctifying* tale of murdered innocence or spotless innocence. A national framework does not require that, either. To draw a parallel : the historian Jan Gross shows the Polish complicity in the Shoah - in other words, he pushes the picture of Poland as murdered innocence from its pedestal – but continues to work within the framework of Polish wartime suffering from 1939-1945. A national framework is, in other words, neither coercive nor normative. But it is usefully heuristic : it sharpens the vision.

So we have *Belgium 1914-18* as a conceptual framework, and for the following reason. Belgium as state and Belgium as society stand in a well-defined position within the First World War. Three dimensions are of importance here : international law, mobilization, and occupation.

Firstly : international law. How the commemoration of war – quite rightly – will coordinate with international views of peace cannot be disentangled from this dimension. The Belgian suffering in the First World War is very instructive in this respect. It is often said, but also equally often forgotten : the German invasion of a neutral country was a very significant break with international law, a break which was taken very seriously by contemporaries – Belgians, Dutch, Americans, allies, Germans. Much has been written facetiously about ‘Poor little Belgium’, a lament which has indeed come to be a symbol for all the hypocritical nonsense

which rushed people to the front; but we will never comprehend what contemporaries in 1914-18 perceived if we do not recognize that in 1914 this idea was important. Ditto the law of the rule of the strongest versus feigned agreements; of the right to survival of a poorly defensible country; of the 'Concert of Europe' versus the law of the jungle. This was no abstract principle, but a matter which affected public opinion deeply, for the simple reason that upon it depended the future of citizens - in a Europe governed by military *force majeure*, or by international law. The neutrality of Belgium was no technical diplomatic detail, or an irrelevance blown up by wartime propaganda. It depended on principles which, to this very day, are very significant : who or what provides security to a country (a group, a citizen) which is not armed to the teeth and which does not want to be so armed?

And with this, we have landed at point two : mobilization. Belgium was by far the least militarized country of the European continent. Compulsory military service was seen rather as pure coercion rather than as a 'school of the nation', the war budget as a waste of money, careers in the army were seen as less prestigious than in France, Germany or Serbia. In short, Belgian society maintained an exceptional ambivalence with regard to the military. At the same time, 'national defence' was no hollow phrase. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is also a present-day dilemma : complete demobilization and the maintenance of peace (and the defence of human rights) do not always go seamlessly together. Belgian national defence in 1914-18 is, in other words, a modern story.

'Mobilization' signifies not only military mobilization, but also the bringing of an

economy, a society, a political system, a culture, to a wartime footing. That process occurred in Belgium in a different way from elsewhere. The three great belligerents, the United Kingdom, Germany and France, had a front and a home front. Belgium, on account of the invasion, had no home front.

So to point three : the occupation. The Belgian war-experience of 1914-1918 looks much more like the general European war experience of 1939-1945. The majority of Belgians – including men of arms-bearing age – went through the First World War as occupied citizens. In Serbia and in occupied northern France, for example, the degree of military mobilization was much higher. The Belgian war experience was thus specifically civilian – in the sense of citizens not participating in the military. The specific course of the confrontation, of the coexistence of this unarmed population with an armed occupying force is extremely instructive. Which ideas of citizenship, authority, law, were in play here? And what impact did the remarkable underground 'home front' have on internal power dynamics and on the political horizon? For instance, how did material need in wartime influence thinking about social justice?

International law, mobilization, occupation : three dimensions of Belgian specificity in the First World War, which offer a framework for the multiplicity of data and at the same time indicate why *Belgium 1914-18* is not only relevant in the present day, but is also internationally relevant.

This is no plea for strengthening the involvement of the Belgian federal authorities with regard to commemoration. It would be a good thing

were it to happen, but in the present-day context, such hopes have a somewhat utopian character. I share Nico Wouters' hope that serious projects will "automatically arrive at a correct historical contextualization". In other words, that phrases such as "our soldiers at the Belgian-German front on Flemish ground" – a passage from a text from the *IJzer*-pilgrimage committee, which in fact denies the nature of the occupation and suggests that Flemish society stood outside the war – should remain rare. I would like to see a *de facto* Belgian framework for the sake of contextualization. And also, because a perspective that starts from the specificity of the Belgian position in the war sharpens our view of the larger, internationally relevant problems of the war : citizenship, power dynamics, violence. *Belgium 1914-18* as a tale in the middle thus offers a great heuristic profit. It also offers a great *mnemonic* profit : the more story, the more remembrance - even, or especially, as the story is readjusted over the course of time. But everything is better than the memorial misery, as described by a character of the Belgian writer Xavier Hanotte : "This country has no history, sir. At best a few snippets of folklore, a heap of self-contained little myths. It lives in a sort of eternal today. How, then, can it have a memory?"

The preparations of the 14-18 commemorations by the Walloon-Brussels Federation and Wallonia

Laurence van Ypersele

In December 2010, the Francophone regional Prime Minister Rudy Demotte expressed his desire to create a working group that would prepare for the commemorations in Francophone Belgium concerning the First World War. Created in March 2011, this group brought together academic scholars, policy makers and civil society representatives. The presidency of this group was reserved for a historian. Professor L. van Ypersele (UCL) was appointed as the president of this group, which had to deliver a report by June 2011. In this period of three months, the working group determined the core values which had to come to the fore in these commemorations, the larger issues which had to be addressed, and which types of project to finance.

What does it mean to commemorate?

The first question addressed by the working group was on the nature of an official commemoration. The historians in the group pointed out that 'to commemorate' meant to collectively remember past events in such a way that they create a foundation for our identity, our 'being together' and our relationship with the wider world. One does not simply commemorate anything. In terms of official memory, there is always a choice that implies a politics of memory: in remembering the past one confirms certain values for the present. However, this choice cannot be arbitrary, nor contradict the concept of historic truth. Indeed, one can use and abuse memory. Therefore, it is necessary to 'historicize' memory in order to counteract these abuses.

It is in this light that Rudy Demotte hoped that academic scholars would have a significant presence in this working group. And it is in this same light that those historians who were invited to participate in the group decided to involve themselves in this commemorative process. The real issue for them is to safeguard the historical values of the subjects which politicians decide to commemorate, as well to translate these political choices to the larger public.

What does one want to commemorate and for what identity?

The second issue, one which arose from the first question, was to determine which values to bring to the fore and of which the period 1914-18 bore witness. Immediately we encounter a paradox: the First World War involved the entirety of Belgium, still a unitary state at that time. It was Belgian neutrality that was violated; the massacres perpetrated on civilians occurred in Walloon and Flemish villages and towns; the Belgian army defended the territory behind the river Yser; almost the entire Belgian territory lived through the occupation. Therefore, there was no specificity in the historical experience of Francophone Belgium compared to Flanders. The past we are commemorating is therefore a national Belgian past.

We then addressed the main themes we thought to be the most important: the large battles of August 1914 (Liège, Namur, Mons and Charleroi), the small piece of stabilized front in Comines-Ploegsteert (where, from the end of December 1915 until May 1916, Churchill would seek redemption after the defeat of the Dardanelles), the 'martyr' towns and villages (Visé, Dinant, Tamines, Andenne, southern Luxembourg etc.) and most parti-

cularly the occupation (looking at the difficulties in food supply, international aid, the resistance, the deportations). It became clear that this aspect would be at the heart of the Francophone commemorations, because this occupation experience prefigured in many ways the violence upon civilian populations that would characterise the twentieth century. These different themes contain values that are still brought to the fore today, because they still lie at the heart of Belgian Francophone identity : adherence to the country and independence (the refusal of the German ultimatum in 1914 and the continued battle on the front), adherence to fundamental liberties (freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, of education, free movement etc.), the respect for human rights and international laws (violated in the massacres of August 1914 and the deportations), solidarity (the creation of the CNSA and international humanitarian aid), resistance against oppression (moral resistance by personalities like Brussels mayor Adolphe Max, Cardinal Mercier, historian Henri Pirenne, the intelligence networks, escape lines, clandestine press). In other words, the notion of 'peace' which is at the heart of the Flemish commemorations, is not given the same place as such by the Walloon-Brussels Federation and Wallonia.

Why not 'peace'?

Of course, even on the Francophone side, peace will be an underlying value in several commemorations. However, the working group wanted to use the Great War to reflect on the contents of this peace we want to celebrate. Indeed, peace is a highly consensual and 'politically correct' value : everybody supports peace, as individuals (the desire to be left in peace) and collectively (the hope that we can live in peace). But this value has been used in

all kinds of ways, by democracies as well as totalitarian regimes : Hitler himself claimed to strive for peace in Europe, and what to think of the peace brought about by Ben Ali or Gaddafi? Indeed, already during the Great War, the soldiers at the front as well as their families dreamed of nothing but peace, albeit of a victorious peace. This was certainly the case from 1917 onwards, when the sacrifices made at Verdun and at the battle of the Somme made it impossible to return to a simple peace of *statu quo ante bellum*. At the end of the war, the sentiment of a mourned victory prevailed, as did the glorification of the heroes that had fallen so that the fatherland could continue to live, as well as the stigmatization of Germany as the sole cause of the entire catastrophe. Only after the Locarno Pact of 1925, in the context of an international *détente*, would perceptions of the war slowly change and would pacifism develop. From then on, the war itself was stigmatized, A narrative which emphasized the absurdity of a war in which everyone was a victim took root and peace became an absolute value. Nevertheless, during the second half of the 1930s, pacifist movements were increasingly put in a difficult position : how were they supposed to fight for peace and against fascism at the same time? During the Munich Conference in 1938, the desire to make the Great War into the 'war to end all wars' remained strongly present : the democratic regimes wanted to save the peace at all costs and ended up accepting all of Hitler's demands. However, as it turned out, peace was not saved at all.... And the Second World War would prove to be even more total than the First.

The working group 'Commemorating 1914-18' decided that one could not ignore the history of this very dark twentieth century. This is not

so much a case of 'drawing lessons from the past', but rather using history to reflect on the contents of the kind of peace we want. Peace is a supreme value but not an absolute one; it is a value which has to be supported by other fundamental values without which peace would not be worth striving for. The 1914-18 commemorations should be the occasion for these reflections. What kind of peace would we have without freedom, without respect for human rights, without respect of international laws, without solidarity...?

The main pillars of the plan

The intention on the Francophone side is to organize and stimulate a certain amount of coherence in the many grassroots, local initiatives launched by the provinces, towns and different organizations. The intention is also to ensure the historical nature of memory through the presence of historians who specialize in the Great War and/or memory. As in Flanders, the goals are also the safeguarding of heritage (undertaking inventories, restoration, the creation of 'centres of interpretation'), the transmission of memory and the values it entails towards younger people (through education) and in general to the larger public (through national radio and television and museum exhibitions), the development of a 'memory tourism' (travel routes, centres of interpretation etc.) and the international visibility of Francophone Belgium (Liège, Namur, Charleroi and the south of Luxembourg for France, Mons and Ploegsteert for the Commonwealth : the organization of events).

One can distinguish action on several levels. First, the projects undertaken by the ministerial departments involved : the restoration of monuments by the Ministry of

Local Governments and Heritage, the creation of tourist routes by the Ministry of Tourism, educational programmes by the Ministry of Education, academic research by the Ministry of Higher Education on the impact of the Great War upon the evolution of international laws etc. Secondly, projects supported by the federal government : an online site, the organization of activities, the open project calls based on a budget financed directly by Demotte's political secretariat. There will be open project calls for larger scale projects (minimum 25,000 euros) for local governments and for smaller scale projects for schools. We also foresee prizes for the best artistic creation, the best theatrical production, educational or research programme. And we should also not overlook the national radio and television network (RTBF) that will produce a series of new documentaries on Belgium during the Great War.

The report was delivered to the Francophone regional Prime Minister in June 2011. The essential parts were approved by the two governments concerned at the end of the summer of 2011. Afterwards, the exact budget had to be determined. This was finished in September 2011 and fine-tuned during the following months. This was a long and difficult process, because not all of the ministerial departments involved had the same vision for, or level of interest in, the report. For example, the Minister of Heritage, Paul Furlan, did not wait for the final plan to reserve one million euros for the restoration of monuments. In contrast, the minister of Education, Marie-Dominique Simonet, did not possess any additional financial means to invest in educational programmes (such as the plan to have thematic educational programmes which would be suitable for the entire region,

and which could also be possibly adapted for particular localities). We therefore still have to find internal solutions for this or seek out external partnerships. The final plan will be presented by the end of 2012.

The difficulties we encountered

There are still a series of problems connected to the difficulties in creating synergy between the regional entities and the Belgian federal level.

- The Federal Level

On 3 November 2011, the ministerial council discussed a document on the commemorations, in which there was a proposition to make 15 October 2014 a day of national commemoration in Brussels, Liège and Leper, during which foreign heads of state would be invited. Organizing this event will be a real challenge. A central coordinating body at the national level does exist, but we also cannot fail to note that the federal level does not have a lot of ambition in this matter, beyond serving as a bridge between the regions... Because of this, certain Belgian federal institutions, like the Royal Army Museum, which houses one of the most impressive collections in the entire world on the First World War, are not supported by any political goodwill. The museum galleries dedicated to 1914-18 have to be reorganized, but the Belgian administration responsible for maintaining federal buildings has not acted. The result is that the reorganization will not be finished in 2014. Another example : the Francophone organization is waiting for the national level to decide on a logo, in order to avoid creating another logo which would distract from the national character of the commemorations. Flanders has proposed its own logo as the national one. The Francophone organization

is not against the logo *per se* : it is a very successful design, although the proposition has been made to add one more 'Belgian' element to it, such as the iconic Adrian Helmet. But in this area, as well, no advances have been made. Moreover, the Walloon-Brussels Federation and Wallonia, as well as the Capital Region of Brussels itself, where matters are also moving forward, would like to know whether the Belgian federal state will put together a large exposition supported by the regions, addressing the experiences of the whole of Belgium during the war. The European Museum is preparing something, although still unofficially.

- The Capital Region of Brussels

During the first meeting of the working group 'Commemorating 1914-18' we expressed our desire to involve the Capital Region of Brussels. A delegate, Pierre Dejemeppe, was invited, but he informed us that due to the specific situation of the Brussels Capital Region, full involvement with our projects was impossible. This led to the creation of a separate working group, led by Dejemeppe, and consisting of academics as well as politicians. The ambitions of the Capital Region of Brussels in this regard are bogged down by its lack of financial means. But the main goal remains to bring to the fore the capital of a united Europe which has been able to ensure over half a century of European peace. Brussels wants to associate itself with both national and international projects : the hope that a large exposition will take place there, and that the capital could also host an international conference. The Capital Region is also thinking along the same lines as the Walloon-Brussels Federation as well as Flanders when it comes to educational programmes. The Region has already pro-

posed one concrete action : the creation of a quasi-exhaustive overview of all material traces of 1914-18. This overview has to serve as a support for educational programmes, to attract tourism and to create a visually attractive publication. Moreover, the idea of calling for a sculpture competition to create a monument 'for universal peace' has also been suggested, and the winning monument would be placed in Brussels. Finally, there has also been the idea of naming a Brussels street after a particular German who served the cause of peace, such as Helmut Kohl, for example.

-The German-speaking region

As far as the German-speaking region is concerned, nothing has been decided yet : they should be asked what they wish to do and with whom. In any case, they could become involved with existing projects that are relevant for them.

- Flanders

Relations with the official representatives from Flanders are far from easy, because the perspectives, the means of addressing issues and the core values brought to the fore are different. Having said that, nobody from the Francophone side wants to start any kind of polemic (contrary to the media, which often tends to pour more oil on the fire). The complete absence of the word 'Belgium' in all Flemish plans and declarations makes Francophones ill at ease, and the same goes for the absence of the Belgian element in the Flemish logo, which exclusively features the British poppy. Moreover, the fact that the pacifist declaration 'In Flanders Fields' was proposed to all relevant foreign countries but *not* to the Walloon-Brussels Federation did not really help to allay those worries. The Francophone side had to wait until March

2012, although the declaration was officially presented on 9 November 2011, before they officially received a copy. This was not the case for Brussels, which was forced to insist on receiving a copy at all! In fact, an intervention by the Australian ambassador lit the powder keg : he declared that the Australians had not intervened in the war to save Flanders but Belgium. Other countries also felt uncomfortable and joined this intervention by communicating to Flanders they would only sign a declaration coming from the Belgian federal level. The result was that the Francophone government was invited to join the declaration, while Brussels declared it would also sign if everybody else agreed (and, of course, if they could finally receive the text). But the Walloon-Brussels Federation wanted to make some changes to certain phrases in the declaration. This is still an issue that has to be settled on the political, and not the academic level and is therefore unresolved.

Although we see that tensions exist on specific points, the will to transcend these tensions is also there, and is, in fact, increasingly evident. Thus, the idea of sharing a common logo (even if possibly with certain variations) has been accepted both in the north and south of the country. In matters of tourism, cooperation between Westhoek, Ploegsteert and Mons will be beneficiary for all parties concerned. The 'Martyr Cities' will be joined in one common project, perhaps not without some institutional difficulties, but with a very real enthusiasm. If a large national exposition could come to pass, all regional entities will support it. Other connections are imaginable, for example between Antwerp and Liège who both possess harbours which have entered into our national *mythos* : the harbour of Antwerp, so important to refugees during the war, and the harbour of

Liège, where the *Atlas V* put to sea. Exchanges between Flemish and Francophone schools can also be supported, most notably by the Prince Philippe Foundation. One can therefore hope that these improving relationships will be extended to the commemorations themselves, with respect for the political choices made on both sides.

'Poor little Belgium?' Flemish- and French-language politics of memory (2014-2018)

Nico Wouters

The commemoration of the First World War between 2014 and 2018 will perhaps be the greatest 'commemoration event' in the history of the Belgian state. Who, in 1914, could have imagined that 100 years later, the Belgian state itself would scarcely play a role in this commemoration? The focal point of the politics of commemoration and remembrance in 2014 lies with the Flemish and French-speaking regions. It is ironic that today these regions direct remembrance in a way that the Belgian state has never been able to.

I do not want to defend the 'poor' Belgian federal level against the overwhelming regional dynamic. It is evident that regions can develop particular initiatives, with their own means and directed at their own populations. Similarly, I do not wish to advocate the re-introduction of an historically accurate Belgian framework with regard to the First World War. High-quality projects which take themselves seriously will end up with correct historical contextualizations. Nevertheless, I do want to make some critical comments on the present-day politics of memory. At the same time, I want to use the commemoration of the First World War in both language communities to make some comparative observations concerning Flemish and French-language politics of memory in general.

Critical comments on commemoration policy

The Flemish community was the very first, in international terms, to recognize the opportunities of the commemorative year 2014.

This was above all the doing of the Flemish nationalist politician Geert Bourgeois, who, in addition to being the Flemish deputy Prime Minister, is also an inhabitant of Izegem, right in the heart of what was the battlefield region during the First World War. Thanks to the increased electoral importance of his party, the 1914-18 commemoration has in the meantime gained the support of the entire Flemish government.

The Flemish government has used the commemoration of the First World War to realize ambitious, intersecting policy aims. Attention is given to commemoration in policy documents concerning government policy, administrative matters, media, education, cultural and material heritage, urban and rural planning and tourism. Officially, the priorities of the Flemish commemoration programme are : tourism, cultural and material heritage, scholarly research, international policy, and education-remembrance.

Tourism is very obviously the most important of these. The Flemish government, according to their coalition agreement, intends to "(...) use this commemoration respectfully as a priority tourism event". Commemoration is to be the lever which will make Flanders a leading international destination for tourists. The 'brand' of Flanders will be linked to the 'product' First World War – or, better, to the derivative product 'peace-tourism'. Indeed, 'peace' is the key value. International conceptions of the attributes of peace – tolerance, forbearance, mutual understanding, human rights – function as a legitimizing force. The 'idea of peace' must become associated with twenty-first-century Flemish identity. A parliamentary resolution approved on 30 April 2009 even states that

“(...) pacifism lies at the basis of Flemish consciousness”; a statement which is highly debatable at the very least.

Flemish memory policy suffers from a shortcoming in internal consistency. Scholarly research is one of the self-declared priorities of the Flemish programme. However, this is not reflected in reality. For one thing, the most important Belgian (or Flemish) specialists were not involved in any consistent manner in the preparatory phase of the programme. That is a difference with French-speaking Belgium. There, academics were involved at an early stage through the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*, in a working group set up in March 2012. Laurence van Ypersele (UCL) is the scholarly coordinator of the commemoration programme. That someone such as Sophie de Schaepdrijver was not contacted by the Flemish authorities is telling, and marks the difference between Flemish and francophone Belgium. For another thing, in the Flemish commemoration programme there is as yet no budget earmarked for scholarly research. There is no Flemish policy document concerning ‘scholarly research’. Thus, there are also no resources, there are no plans for implementation, or any ‘call’ for researchers. Therefore, scholarly research will inevitably have to be a derivative product of heritage projects or tourism programmes. For fundamental scholarly research, it is implied, we should look to the ‘normal’ channels (that is, the Research Foundation – Flanders or FWO). This is a policy choice. But so long as it is the case, the Flemish authorities would be better off not parading ‘scholarly research’ as a priority. At present, scholarly research functions merely as a fig-leaf to legitimize a political agenda.

That said, it is not surprising that the Flemish government wants to use the commemoration to propagate the identity of the Flemish nation. One cannot really blame the Flemish government for this. But one can blame them for not implementing policies in harmony with their own statements. This also appears in the fulfillment of another priority : international collaboration. Collaboration was to be sought with pretty much everybody. There are already bilateral agreements with New Zealand and Australia. An international consultation on commemoration, coordinated by Flanders, brought thirteen countries together. It thus appears logical that Flanders should also open the dialogue with the Belgian federal authorities and the French-speaking community. Many historical sources and artifacts of cultural heritage, and much scholarly expertise concerning Flanders during the First World War are, after all, found at the Belgian and French-speaking levels.

From the beginning, however, dialogue seemed to be difficult. The resolution *Vlaams beleid voor een levende herinnering aan de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (“Flemish policy for a living remembrance of the First World War”), agreed upon in the Flemish parliament on 30 April 2009, announced collaborations with a number of partners. The federal authorities were mentioned in very general terms, it is true – but the only concrete path for collaboration with them was that Flanders “(...) will negotiate with the federal government for an increase of the frequency of train connections between Brussels and the *Westhoek*”. In mid-October 2011, the Flemish authorities distributed an English-language declaration of intent for international collaboration. This declaration was supported by the erection of a *Permanent Forum for the Educational, Academic and*

Cultural Evocation, or PEACE. A part of this was the *Flanders Fields Declaration*, which was sent to the 50 countries which had had soldiers at the Belgian front. This declaration was widely distributed, via some European embassies, among others. The Belgian federal government and the French-speaking community did not receive the invitation. Were there, then, no Belgian soldiers on the *IJzer*?

Structural collaboration between Belgium and Flanders is evidently unlikely. Of course, this is also prevented by the permanent fences of the institutional framework. Today, there seem to be few remaining institutional tools for realizing collaboration. A concrete example: the project *Martelaarsteden/Villes Martyrs* (Martyr Towns) was begun by the City of Leuven (Lovaine). This is a joint Flemish/French-speaking project. French-speaking professor Axel Tixhon (FUNDP-Namur) was appointed as scholarly coordinator for the project. This is an example of how practical, bottom-up projects lead to collaboration across the language divide. There appears to be little evidence, however, for any institutionalization of collaboration. In order to realize the *Martyr-Towns* project, an inter-communal organization had to be set up on the Flemish side. The French-speaking towns joined together in an *asbl* (non-profit organization). Only then, between these two entities, a sort of 'international' bilateral agreement could be concluded. One can, however, ask oneself why structural collaboration appears to be so cumbersome. Is it because tools are missing, or because there is no political will to make best use of the tools that do exist?

We might hypothesise that structural support for historic scholarly research is so difficult

for Flanders because it will inevitably lead to a form of negotiated collaboration with the federal authorities and the French-speaking community. In the current nationalist Flemish policy climate, anything that might create the impression that the Belgian level will be strengthened must be shunned. Again, I can only point out the inconsistencies in those same policy statements. In the light of the defensive (and even nationalist) Flemish position, the following passage from the Flemish policy documents takes on an ironic charge: "The commemoration project aims to sensitise current and future generations in Flanders to themes such as toleration, intercultural dialogue and international understanding, with an eye to an open and tolerant society and an active international orientation".

The French-speaking commemoration programme started after that of Flanders. Indeed, an important political motive for the French-speaking commemoration programme was the perception of having lagged behind in relation to Flanders. No one wanted to be left behind when it appeared that Flanders was laying claim to the First World War. The commemoration of the First World War thus appeared made-to-measure to create a sort of competitive struggle: a true 'struggle for memory'.

More interesting is the larger social context in which the commemoration politics of the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* has been conducted. In French-speaking Belgium, a political consensus has been growing over the last 20 years about history and its supposed social importance. The consensus *qua* content, terminology and approach is much more explicitly ideological than in Flanders.

French-speaking Belgium has, in recent years, been characterized by various political initiatives to stage memory and history. As a result, history and memory have been placed in an ideological and instrumentalist scheme of commemoration. That scheme revolves, in essence, around democratic civic education. That is, of course, a European development which was pursued in many countries (including Flanders). Its political implementation in French-speaking Belgium is, however, strikingly explicit and unambiguous. Above all, a strong consensus-model appears to exist. The difference between Flanders and French-speaking Belgium is also conspicuous at the federal level. Political initiatives which deal with the organization of historical research or remembrance and commemoration originate in the main from French-speaking politicians.

It was this sort of initiative against which historians, on 25 January 2006, reacted in the opinion-piece, *Het Verschil tussen herinnering en geschiedenis* ("The difference between memory and history"), which appeared in Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* and the French language newspaper *Le Soir*. This happened in a context in which some historical research was carried out as direct commissions from the political authorities, among others the research of the Lumumba Commission and the CEGES-SOMA research project 'Docile Belgium' (on the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War in Belgium). This opinion piece was signed by almost all historians of any standing, Flemish as well as French-speaking. The piece was written by a representative sample of the Belgian academic sector. At the time, the explicit warning from these historians about the 'duty of remembrance' imposed by the

authorities was a little under-discussed in the reception of the opinion piece.

We are now in 2012. In the meantime, and in the absence of opinion pieces or significant debates, the 'duty of remembrance' has been inscribed in French-speaking policy. This is clear in legislative initiatives. The two most important legislative initiatives of recent years in the field of dialogue with the past symbolize the difference between Flanders and French-speaking Belgium.

In Flanders, this stemmed from the heritage-decree of 2008 (a new version of which was passed on 27 June 2012). The decree was inspired in spirit by the Council of Europe's so-called *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*. The emphasis of this convention (and the Flemish decree) lies on the 'guaranteeing' (*safeguarding*) of heritage.

For the French-speaking community, we can place in opposition the so-called Memorial Decree of 2009 (in full : "*décret relatif à la transmission de la mémoire des crimes de génocide, des crimes contre l'humanité, des crimes de guerre et des faits de résistance ou des mouvements ayant résisté aux régimes qui ont suscité ces crimes*"). This decree is essentially different from the Flemish heritage-decree. The French-language decree turns on "*transmission de la mémoire*", something for which – as far as I know – there is no single policy equivalent in Flanders. At the same time, the political aim of the decree is much more explicit and coercive than the Flemish heritage-decree. Even in Article I of the decree it is clear that it centres on education of the citizenry ("*une citoyenneté responsable*"), and on the defence of democratic values, grounded

in the remembrance of genocides, wars, and crimes against humanity. The decree provides for the establishment of a “*Conseil de la Transmission de la Mémoire*” something which – grammatically, in substance and in socio-political terms – reads oddly in Flanders : a “Council for the Transfer of Memory”). This decree describes, in essence, what is called remembrance-education in Flanders. As one sentence of the explanatory memorandum on page 3 of the decree says : “knowledge of the past has to create a better understanding of current issues” (“*la connaissance du passé doit permettre de mieux cerner les enjeux actuels*”). History has a clear functionality : “The goal of history is not moral, it is civic” (“*La finalité de l’histoire n’est pas morale, elle est civique*”). Following this explanation, there follows a cross-sectional decree that goes beyond youth, culture or education : “the decree aims to create awareness amongst the citizenry in general” (“*l’objectif du décret est une sensibilisation à la citoyenneté en général*”).

It is in the context of that *décret mémoire* of 2009 that the commemoration of the First World War today is rooted. On 21 March 2012, nine politicians introduced a motion for a resolution in the Walloon Parliament concerning the commemoration of the First World War. The term “*devoir de mémoire*” (“Duty of remembrance”) appeared in the eighth sentence of this resolution¹. This resolution adopts the terminology of the *décret mémoire*. It centres on “democratic citizen-education”. Commemoration serves

explicitly stated ideological aims : “At a time where our society is faced with a globalization that has certain benefits but at the same time has a destabilizing effect, and with the growth of separatist tendencies, public authorities have to safeguard social cohesion”². The commemoration of the First World War thus becomes an explicit political tool : on the one hand against Flemish separatism, on the other against a ‘destabilizing’ globalization.

The Flemish politics of commemoration today is often associated with a pronounced ideological agenda. Here, however, I suggest that the ideological agenda on the French-speaking side is more explicit, and that the basic political consensus on the French-speaking side is stronger on this matter.

I will gladly substantiate that last point. In Flanders, over the last ten years, an important professional field has grown up consisting of institutions which, in part, direct the politics of memory. These are heritage stakeholders such as FARO (the Flemish Interface Centre for Cultural Heritage), but also scholarly institutions such as the *Vlaams Vredeinstituut* (Flemish Institute for Peace). Today in Flanders, these professional bodies can influence the politics of commemoration and remembrance. It is essential to note that these bodies sometimes take a critical stance towards Flemish policy (which is characteristic of the Flemish cultural sector in general). In a recent recommendation of 2 February 2012 on the commemoration of the First World War, the Flemish Peace Institute warned

1. Original Quotation : “*Si, de nos jours, le devoir de mémoire se focalise, avec raison, sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale et le génocide qui fut alors perpétré, il convient de rappeler la place centrale qu’occupe ‘La Grande Guerre’ dans notre histoire*”. 2. Original Quotation : “*À l’heure où notre société prend peur face à une mondialisation certes bénéfique mais parfois déstabilisante et où notre pays connaît une montée des courants séparatistes, les autorités publiques se doivent de s’assurer du renforcement de la cohésion sociale*”.

against the instrumentalisation of the 1914-18 commemoration and called for more scholarly input. In addition, the Flemish Interface Centre FARO will direct part of the activities for the commemoration of the First World War in the coming years. These organisations are structurally embedded in the system. What I see in Flanders is a diversely organized field of dissenting voices, with real influence on policy. This makes an (openly) politically-driven remembrance policy difficult.

The importance of the (self-)critical sector as a factor also crops up in debates about the relationship between history and heritage. On 4 April 2011, Professor Bert De Munck (Antwerp University) debated with the director of FARO, Marc Jacobs, about that relationship. Among other things, the debate referred to the critical opinion piece which De Munck wrote on 21 April 2006 in *De Standaard*, entitled *Geschiedenis is meer dan Erfgoed* ("History is more than Heritage"). During that debate, Marc Jacobs emphasized the importance of an autonomous, bottom-up dynamic for the new Flemish heritage sector; and indeed, practice appears to show this. Flemish heritage-policy has without doubt developed over the last 15 years in the political context of strengthening Flemish national identity. But the political agenda is, at least in part, watered down by the manner in which new professional heritage players have arisen in the field. In that respect, the Flemish commemoration programme for 2014-2018 may also be an important test for the (young) heritage sector. It remains still to be seen how critical and/or autonomous a position this new heritage sector can maintain.

In comparison with French-speaking Belgium, we see here a substantial difference. Of course, there are many critical voices on the French-speaking side. However, I am aware of no equivalent of the Flemish organisations which I mention above. One of the most important French-speaking players is *Les Territoires de la Mémoire* in Liège. This is a centre, formally recognized by the French-speaking community, which supports remembrance projects aimed at citizen-education and strengthening of the democratic fabric. An explicit basic legitimisation is also found here, in the use of remembrance to call a halt to extreme-right trends in society. Another player is *Démocratie ou Barbarie*, an educational working-group of the French-speaking ministry for education (based upon the *décret mémoire*). This explicitly treats the history of genocide and war as an educational tool: "We approach this from the angle of history, by which an in-depth analysis of historical facts can create a stronger civic consciousness"³.

The institutions and organisations which dominate the field of 'dealing with the past' on the French-speaking side have another relationship with the political authorities. They are an integral part of the basic political consensus about the present-day moral ideology of remembrance, and they are themselves the direct expression of this. This creates another context. There are at the moment no stakeholders in French-speaking Belgium which can combine being embedded in the system (and thus having real influence on policy) with an autonomous

3. Original Quotation: "L'approche se fait ici par le biais de l'histoire, d'une analyse rigoureuse des faits du passé pouvant éveiller à une conscience citoyenne".

critical role. The organized diversity of dissenting voices to which Marc Jacobs referred in relation to the Flemish heritage sector does not exist today in French-speaking Belgium.

In Flanders today, a business-like, managerial approach to remembrance is taken. I mean business-like in two ways. On the one hand, that can be taken literally. There is a strong symbiosis with the tourism sector, which imposes its economic priorities on commemoration. On the other hand, the Flemish discourse is also business-like. The legal framework was formed through a rationalized, management-technique approach which characterizes the new professional heritage sector. The realization of policy and the choice of projects – as well as the underlying ideology – is embedded in the use of rationalized criteria within a heavily bureaucratic framework. Explicit or overly assertive references to ‘Flemish identity’ have to be avoided. This is also the case for projects which are too obviously driven by ideological purposes.

In French-speaking Belgium, an openly moralistic interpretation of history and remembrance is prioritized. This moralistic approach is characterized by a much stronger emphasis on the duty of remembrance and history as a tool for democratic civic-education. Flanders says explicitly that it will not prescribe what ‘good’ remembrance is. In French-speaking Belgium it is impossible to be sufficiently explicit in defining this. Moreover, in French-speaking Belgium there are hardly any influential critical voices which are mandated to present an alternative view.

Conclusion : two sides of an ideological coin

The commemoration of the First World War between 2014-2018 is now at the beginning of a struggle. The motor of that struggle is the competition between communities. Self-assured Flanders began early, and French-speaking Belgium does not wish to fall behind. It is striking that the Belgian state itself, which has never put a stamp on a commemoration policy since 1945, nevertheless tries to be involved today. That is an interesting, new situation. This struggle over remembrance makes manifest how Flanders and French-speaking Belgium implement the politics of remembrance. What is the impact of the differences which I have described above : the business-like approach of Flanders and the moralistic approach of French-speaking Belgium? Is this simply a difference of ‘style’? Differences in context, in sensibilities? The impact of these differing ‘realities of commemoration’ is never unambiguous.

I suggest that the ideological content which hides under the surface is essentially the same. The key values which were pushed to the fore in both commemoration programmes are the same. The Flemish conception of ‘peace’ is nothing but an emblem. It seems to carry the same load as the French-speaking aims. In both commemoration programmes, all things considered, the overarching concept of human rights remains central. The same conceptions recur in policy-documents on both sides : solidarity, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding, basic individual freedoms, the rule of law, the struggle against racism and exclusion, and so on. The priorities also appear the same. In French-speaking Belgium, they appear to be based on

heritage, on '*patrimoine*', on proclamations of French-speaking Belgium as a marketable identity in the world. Under the surface of the various realities and policy-contexts, the remembrance paradigms precisely parallel one another. In spite of the differing contexts which I have described above, the essential similarities are thus greater. This is a result of the same targets and the same ideology in both Flanders and French-speaking Belgium, albeit in differing socio-political contexts.

For historians, this calls for self-reflection in every respect. That academic historians are no longer the most important players when it comes to dealing with the past is very clear, and will become clearer still over the course of the coming years. How do we deal with this development, and how do we define our changing role? These are, of course, long-standing questions : the debate is not new. However, the current context is exceptional. The scale and character of the commemoration programmes for 2014-2018 make these questions more relevant today than ever.

Will we become active players who take a central part in constructing remembrance and memory? Or will we remain critical deconstructors of remembrance and myths? Will our critical approach not speedily put us in a marginal position? Must we all become public historians and, if so, what does that concept actually signify? I think this is a debate worth having.