

PHD RESEARCH

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Fighting for French in Flanders : The Promotion and Defense of French Language Rights in Flanders, 1880-1975

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This dissertation examines the efforts of French-speaking populations in Flanders to maintain a place for French in the Flemish public realm, which I define here as the administrative, judicial, and educational institutions of Flanders. Chronologically, it spans the period between the late nineteenth century, which witnessed the first concerted legislative efforts to (re)introduce Dutch into the overwhelmingly Francophone administrative and educational institutions of Flanders, and the 1970s, when a combination of legislative measures and socioeconomic pressures erased the last vestiges of a French-language public life in Flanders. By examining the periodical press, debates in scholarly publications, political pamphlets and posters, parliamentary speeches, and private correspondence produced by Francophones of Flanders, I question how and why their arguments in favor of a legal presence for French in Flanders changed over the course of the period in question. During the *fin-de-siècle*, many Francophones of Flanders made triumphant appeals to the universality and utility of French language and culture, and did not typically present themselves as a single, coherent group. During the period between the world wars, and again during the 1960s, however, those Francophones of Flanders who wanted French-language rights in schooling and administration portrayed themselves as a *minority group*. They constructed a collective identity, couched in

terms (of ‘minority rights’) that they hoped would make their claims more legitimate in the eyes of both the Belgian state and the international community. Ultimately, the Francophones of Flanders were unsuccessful in their making of claims, and the Flemish public realm has become completely Dutch, even the once-thriving Francophone periodical press having faded away. While there are still significant numbers of ‘Francophones of Flanders’ who speak French *at home*, this is no longer a salient political or social fact.

This project addresses several fields of scholarship. First, the French-speaking elites in Flanders provide a fascinating case study of identity formation. Historical analyses of identity formation have tended to study the ‘creation’ of national identities from previously ‘non-national’ populations, as in the work of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, or Eugen Weber; others have focused on subaltern groups who have struggled to define themselves against the ruling elite, such as Catalans, Québécois, Czechs, and, indeed, Flemings. My work, however, looks at a (former) elite group, losing its monopoly on political and cultural power, which attempted to fashion a minority identity in order to validate its claims to linguistic rights. Second, my study addresses the growing scholarship on ‘*Francophonie*’: that is, the French-speaking world outside of France. I look at the problematic role of French in a society adjacent to France, as well as the way in which the global profile of the French language changed. The decline of French in Flanders was linked to the decline of French as an international language throughout the twentieth century. Third, the story of the French-speaking

elites in Flanders is one of a challenge to classical liberalism. While the French-speakers of Flanders claimed that 'free choice' of language was inseparable from any understanding of political liberty, many in the Flemish Movement argued that such a 'choice' was a dead letter in a society in which the speakers of one language – not that of the majority – held the levers of power.