pupils do not feel the impact of the war at school. Besides material difficulties, such as paper shortage or bombardments, anti-Semitic policies, for example, have an obvious influence on the running of schools. Based on a German regulation of October 1940, Jewish teachers are forbidden to teach in Belgian schools. They are allowed to teach only Jewish children, who will be banned from mainstream education from 1942 onwards to the so-called Judenschule. Although a number of underground networks for Jewish children are active, these excluding measures do not provoke much public protest.

Apart from the German measures or war conditions, the occupation also marks educational practice. Although it is forbidden and can lead to denunciation, the international political context is often the subject of discussions in the classroom. This frequently causes conflicts at school, where various political-ideological persuasions collide. In November 1940, for example, tempers become heated at the Sint-Jozefcollege in Turnhout after the disappearance of a book about the 18 Days’ Campaign, a symbol of the Belgian resistance against the German invasion in May 1940. It finally turns out that a number of Flemish-nationalist pupils seem to be behind the disappearance. They oppose such open expressions of Belgian patriotism because these opposed the pre-war involvement of the college in “the Flemish cause.” Such stories show how the occupation brings a new dynamic to education. The schools are not merely victims of a unilaterally imposed repressive German policy, but pupils, teachers and parents shape the school culture themselves.

THE ENEMY, MY FRIEND: COLLABORATION WITH THE OCCUPIER

Bruno De Wever

If you have visited one of the museums or visitors’ centres at Flanders Fields, you surely must have seen artistically decorated shells. They were made by soldiers in the trenches during the First World War. The shell we see here comes from another war and was used on a front that is more than 2,500 km away to the East. The place and date where the shell was decorated are mentioned on the weapon: “Kscheng Rusland 15-9-1942”. Most probably Kshenskiy (Кшенский) in the Kurskaya oblast. The spelling errors and germanisation of Russian place names in German documents often make it difficult to identify the exact location.
Miniscule cogs in a large war machine

There can be no doubt about the maker(s). He is/they are (a) Flemish volunteer(s) in the Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahrkorps (NSKK), a German Transport and Supply unit that operates within the framework of the German Wehrmacht. More specifically, it is the 5th Regiment that is on its way to Stalingrad, where many of the volunteers will die. The design of the shell contains political messages rather than artistic expression. “Den Leider Hoozee in Houwe Trouwe”, the VNV Delta sign and the Lion of Flanders testify to the affiliation of the maker(s) to the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (Flemish National Alliance (VNV)) and its former leader Staf De Clercq. The VNV is the major collaborationist political organisation in Flanders. It hopes to seize power in an independent Flanders with German support and is willing to call upon its followers to join German military and paramilitary formations to show the Flemish “life force” on the German fronts. However, it soon realises that many volunteers are being indoctrinated with ideas of Großdeutschland. That is why the VNV tries to keep its grip on its militants on the front.

On paper, the VNV members in the NSKK belong to the “Dichte Militie Gemotoriseerd Korps”, as indicated on the shell. This formation is formally part of the Dietse Militie-Zwarte Brigade (DM-ZB). The wolfsangel rune on the shell is the emblem of this militia of the VNV. Incidentally, the VNV’s Pan-German competitor in collaboration, the Duits-Vlaamse Arbeidsgemeenschap (DeVlag), has its “own” regiments in the NSKK, just as the French-Belgian collaborationist Rex movement of Léon Degrelle has its Brigade motorisée rexiste. In reality, all these units, in which more than 4,000 Belgians are active, are tiny cogs in the large German war machine.

There are also many Germans in the so-called Belgian units. The swastika, symbol of the Third Reich, unites them. Finally, there is also a blauwvoet on the shell, symbol of the Dietse Blauwvoetvendels, the boys’ section of the Nationaal Socialistische Jeugd in Vlaanderen (NSJV – National Socialist Youth in Flanders), a youth movement associated with the VNV. It suggests that the maker(s) had a past in this, like many other (para) military collaborators originating from collaborationist youth movements where they were brainwashed with propaganda insisting on their duty to put their political ideals into practice in their efforts on the front. It immediately shows how much (para)military collaboration, political collaboration and youth collaboration are entwined.

However, this should not lead to the conclusion that all military collaborators have a distinct political profile. The NSKK is a good example. In 1941 many Belgians join this formation with a short-term employment contract and without any marked political background. There are also many Belgians in other (para)military formations who – in addition to politically and ideologically motivated volunteers – sign up for personal or socio-economic reasons. After the war, some 40,000 Belgians were sentenced out of 53,000 convicted for military collaboration. It is therefore by far the most important type of collaboration, but certainly not the only one.

Collaboration is not easy to define as a concept. Overall, it means co-operating with the occupier, but actually the majority of the population and the local leaders of the occupied country co-operate one way or another with the occupier. The Hague Convention (1907) even goes as far as to state that figures of authority must co-operate with the occupier if such co-operation does not go against the legislation of the occupied country. A distinction must therefore be made between the co-operation of an occupied population and its authorities with an occupier to make everyday life possible and collaboration in the strictest sense of the word. Collaboration then implies a deliberate and voluntary co-operation to help achieve the politics of the occupier and their objectives.

Some 100,000 Belgians are willing to do just that. During the occupation they are branded as “blacks” and “incivists” and will be legally convicted and/or sentenced after the war. This is not a simple operation, partly because the fortunes of war set the boundary between socially acceptable co-operation and collaboration branded as incivist. Collaboration is less accepted when Germany starts losing. Some actions that are considered to be particularly objectionable co-operation with the enemy cannot always be defined as collaboration. An example is the so-called horizontal collaboration of women who...
started a relationship with a German soldier. They often received harsh treatment in popular reprisals after the liberation.

The collaboration in Belgium is rooted in pre-war society for two reasons: anti-democracy and Flemish nationalism. The first is present throughout Europe and has brought together collaborationist movements everywhere, also in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. The second is, prima facie, a Flemish phenomenon. However, many other collaborationist movements in occupied Europe are also nationalist in nature. Anti-democracy and nationalism do not automatically lead to collaboration during the German occupation: they sometimes even spur on resistance against the occupier.

**Fighting with the enemy**

The group easiest to condemn are the Belgians who wear the uniform of a collaborationist organisation and/or who carry a weapon. They are literally and figuratively in the public eye. This mainly concerns (para)military collaborators. The most famous are the Oostfronters (Eastern Fronters), the Belgians deployed against the Red Army in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. After Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union (22 June 1941), anti-communist legions are set up in occupied Europe. In Belgium, along the lines of political collaboration, the Flemish Legion (VNV) and the Walloon Legion (Rex) are deployed on the Eastern Front, respectively in the ranks of the Waffen-SS and the Wehrmacht. From 1943 onwards, the Walloon Legion is also used as the Sturmbrigade (later Division) Wallonien in the Waffen-SS alongside the Flemish Sturmbrigade (later Division) Langemarck.

A total of 10,000 Flemish and 8,000 French-speaking Belgians join these units. From 1943 on, some 700 Belgians, mostly Flemish, join the German Kriegsmarine. The introduction of this chapter already referred to the Belgian NSKK members, who are largely but not exclusively deployed on the Eastern Front as drivers and mechanics. In the Organisation Todt (OT), many thousands of Belgians are employed to carry out construction work on the German fronts, including on the Atlantic Wall. On the Eastern Front they are often armed to defend themselves against partisans. At least 3,000 Belgians were convicted for military collaboration in the OT. Many OT and NSKK members enrol in a paramilitary formation or in the Waffen-SS after the end of their contract.

Belgians in German army units are involved in war crimes such as murders of civilians, partisans and Jews in Poland, Ukraine and Russia. Some actively participate in the murders, many witness them.

In Belgium itself, formations are set up to take over tasks from the occupying army, in particular the Vlaamse Wacht and the Gardes wallonnes. The Luftwaffe has its own formation with the Fabrieksweach. It was renamed Vlaamse Wachtbrigade in 1943 and
Flakbrigade in 1944. These guard units assume security assignments for military installations and strategic locations and are deployed against the resistance. After the liberation of Belgium, the units move to Germany where most of their members are incorporated in the Waffen-SS. Some 8,500 Belgians are part of these auxiliary troops of the occupier. Some of them are politically motivated, but many take on the job to earn a living or to avoid forced labour.

Political castles in the air

Two political parties that existed before the war, namely VNV and Rex, pin their hopes on a political co-operation with the occupying forces in the belief of thus being able to achieve their objectives. They build castles in the air, because ultimately only the self-interest of Nazi Germany counted. This supports an annexist Pan-German movement in Belgium.

The VNV acquires a firm following before the war, with about 25,000 members in 1940. Led by Staf De Clercq, who founded the party in 1933, the VNV sees a major role for itself in Germany-led Germanic Europe. It hopes to achieve its political ideal of Flanders united with the Netherlands (Dietland) and to seize all powers in Flanders as a Flemish national-socialist party. VNV leader De Clercq immediately opts for collaboration, but already realises in the summer of 1940 that the VNV does not receive guarantees from the occupier; far from it. However, in July 1940, Hitler decrees that the Germanic Flemings shall be given precedence over Latin Walloons. The VNV can benefit from this Flamenpolitik only if it accedes to the wishes of the Führer and those in power in Berlin. They have no particular interest in any Dietland and, when the VNV persists in promoting this, a campaign initiated by the VNV to recruit new supporters is forbidden.

In November 1940, De Clercq places his fate and that of Flanders in the hands of the Führer who would decide on the political future of Belgium. The VNV is fully modelled on the NSDAP. The officers wear uniforms and the militia, the Zwarte Brigade (Black Brigade), becomes an important propaganda component and the VNV integrates the national-socialist ideology. The VNV thus becomes the privileged party of the German occupation administration. In May 1941, with German support, it absorbs the competition of Dietse Nationale-Solidaristen (Verdinaso) and Rex-Vlaanderen to form the Eenheidsbeweging-VNV. The militias of the parties are merged into the Dietse Militie–Zwarte Brigade. However, the party is not granted the political monopoly. Its ambitions are thwarted by the German occupation administration, which on the one hand maintains the Belgian State for the time being for economic reasons and on the other hand also gives free rein to building a Pan-German movement in Flanders.

The Algemeene-SS Vlaanderen (ASSVL – General SS Flanders) is founded in November 1940 on the initiative of the German SS to create a Pan-German movement in Flanders, of which the organisation would be the spearhead and the elite. There is a rapid turnover at the top of the organisation. The successive leaders are actually front-men from the German SS leadership in Berlin and Belgium. They use the organisation as a competitor to the VNV and as part of the strategy to expand the power of the SS in occupied Belgium. The VNV tries in vain to integrate the ASSVL, as it has done with Verdinaso and Rex-Vlaanderen, but it cannot count on the support of the military occupation administration, also under pressure from the powerful SS. When, on 1 October 1942, the ASSVL formally becomes part of the German SS with Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler as its highest-ranking leader, it is clear that integration is now out of the question. The Flemish SS now has the format of a militia. Members participate in military training camps and are selected on the basis of racial credentials and physique. That is partly the reason why the organisation has only a few hundred members. They are also pressured to sign up for the Waffen-SS. Those who do not go to the Eastern Front are deployed in Belgium in surveillance and investigation campaigns led by the Sipo-SD.
The Flemish SS works closely with DeVlag, which takes over its political role from 1942 onwards. DeVlag already existed before the war as a cultural organisation with Germanic languages teacher Jef Van de Wiele as its chairman. Under the occupation the organisation takes a completely different turn. German members of DeVlag have important positions in the German occupation administration. In August 1940 DeVlag renews cultural activity with a New Order direction. The VNV initially gives its support. In secret, DeVlag becomes part of the German SS in early 1941, and receives substantial financial support. Van de Wiele becomes the leader of a party organisation, structured on a national-socialist model, that supports the ideology and objectives of the Third Reich fanatically and unconditionally.

In November 1941, Gottlob Berger, leader of the SS Head Office and one of the top figures of the German SS, becomes president of DeVlag. DeVlag, as a private organisation, no longer has much weight in 1940. Degrelle is arrested in May 1940 as a danger to the Flemish SS works closely with DeVlag, which takes over its political role from 1942 onwards. DeVlag already existed before the war as a cultural organisation with Germanic languages teacher Jef Van de Wiele as its chairman. Under the occupation the organisation takes a completely different turn. German members of DeVlag have important positions in the German occupation administration. In August 1940 DeVlag renews cultural activity with a New Order direction. The VNV initially gives its support. In secret, DeVlag becomes part of the German SS in early 1941, and receives substantial financial support. Van de Wiele becomes the leader of a party organisation, structured on a national-socialist model, that supports the ideology and objectives of the Third Reich fanatically and unconditionally.

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In Germany, Degrelle and Van de Wiele respectively set themselves at the head of a Walloon and a Flemish National Government, which, as governments in exile, try to integrate the Flemish and Walloon collaborators who flee as best as they can. They mainly exert pressure on young men to join the Waffen-SS. Degrelle even introduces conscription for Walloons. In December 1944, at the time of the von Rundstedt offensive, Degrelle and Van de Wiele are presented in the German press as leaders of the respective Walloon and Flemish Liberation Committee. Elias, on the other hand, is interned because he is spreading the message among the VNV people in Germany not to sign up for the Waffen-SS.

Providing manpower for the war and occupation activities is a way of proving loyalty to the occupier and, at the same time, acquiring a power base. The recruitment of personnel for military units, paramilitary surveillance units and any type of administrative and economic control services is often done through collaborationist parties competing for the favours of the occupier. In addition to membership of a collaborationist political group and/or publicly proclaiming positions in favour of the occupying forces, political collaboration can also take the form of administrative, cultural, paramilitary, military and police collaboration.
War mayors and civil servants

Rex and the VNV in particular succeed in infiltrating the Belgian administration from top to bottom with the support of the occupier. They usually carry out the German demands and regulations with greater readiness than the directors they ousted. The war mayors in particular play an important role because of their powers regarding law enforcement and food supplies. In Flanders, 70% of the mayors’ offices are occupied by VNV members. In French-speaking Belgium, Rex can take over only one-eighth of all mayoral offices. New administrations based on an authoritarian New Order model are created, in which political collaborators play an important role, such as the National Agricultural and Food Corporation, the Commissariat of Prices and Wages, and the National Labour Office. The police services are also infiltrated by collaborators.

All these collaborators in the public service are caught between Belgian legislation – to which they are subject in principle – and their party – which demands that they act as loyal party soldiers and carry out what the party leadership and, de facto, the German occupier ask, even if it goes against Belgian law. Many collaborators in public services lack administration experience and especially recognition from their colleagues and subordinates. This often results in parallel circuits of collaborating civil servants.

Many collaborators in public positions place their office at the service of politics. For example, many VNV mayors bring their local council into national-socialist waters. They grant subsidies to like-minded collaborationist organisations, name squares and streets after fallen collaborators and display party symbols in the town hall. They use an authoritarian management style and are an important link in the information chain that the occupier can use against opponents or for the exploitation of the population.

Black muses

Political collaboration can rely on writers, musicians and artists to spread its message. The VNV is particularly active in this field. The party, which holds almost all Flemish governor offices, develops its own cultural policy through Provincial Culture Services and an Inter-provincial Culture Service. With the networks of the Flemish movement, it can rely on some prominent cultural figures. For example, the song of the Flemish NSKK members is composed by Armand Preud’homme, one of the most famous Flemish composers. Acclaimed writers and poets such as Filip De Pillecijn, Wies Moens and Cyriel Verschaephe play an active role in political collaboration. Priest-poet Verschaephe, a leading figure in the radical Flemish movement during the First World War and the interwar period, goes the furthest. He becomes chairman of the collaborationist Flemish Culture Council and a figurehead of the Pan-German movement in Flanders. In

French-speaking Belgium too, some lend their artistic or literary talent, although considerably less than in Flanders. Rex is therefore more socially isolated than the VNV.

Those who have youth have the future

National-socialism is strongly committed to a youth that is being prepared to defend the regime and to wage wars of conquest. Under the occupation, Belgian youth movements are “levelled” on a German model. This means that, in principle, only national-socialist-minded youth movements can continue their activities, although the Catholic youth movement, under the protection of the Church, can operate more or less normally until 1943. The collaborationist parties each have their own youth movements: the VNV has the Algemeen Vlaams Nationaal Jeugdverband (AVNJ), Rex has the Jeunesse rexiste / Rex-jong (Rex), and there is also the Jong-Dinaso of the Verdinaso and in 1940 the Groot-Duitse Vlaamse Jong is founded, which is affiliated to the ASSVL.

Under the impulse of the German Reichsjugendführung, the occupier strives for a unified collaborationist youth movement under German control. In Flanders, the NSJV is created between May and July 1941, in which all the above youth movements are brought together. The NSJV receives German funding and is presented as non-partisan, but the VNV manages to keep control because the AVNJ is by far the largest and best organised group. That is why DeVlag sets up its own youth movement with the Hitlerjugend Vlaanderen (Hitler Youth Flanders) in November 1943. This sparks a crisis within the NSJV. Many youth leaders believe that the VNV betrays its Diets ideals and that it does not offer sufficient resistance to the Pan-German trend in the collaboration. The Diets Blauwvoetvendels in particular is racked by dissent and in late 1943 the NSJV finally ceases to exist.

In French-speaking Belgium the Jeunesses légionnaire originates in 1943 from the merger of the Jeunesse rexiste and a few other small collaborationist youth movements. The Jeunesse légionnaire receives support from the German SS and Hitlerjugend. As its name suggests, it acts as an antechamber for Degrelle’s Eastern Front troops.

Earning money in times of war

The Belgian penal code provides severe punishments for those who supply goods to the enemy. In practice, however, Belgian business leaders and bankers, led by the Governor of the Société Générale, Alexandre Galopin, agreed that Belgian companies can do business with the occupier under specific conditions. In principle, anything that does not contribute directly to the German effort, such as the supply of weapons and
ammunition, can be traded. This so-called Galopin doctrine is actually recognised by magistrates and post-war political rulers. This does not change the fact that a prosecution policy is indeed pursued against business leaders who have made excessive war profits and/or who have made deliveries to the occupier that can be used for immediate war purposes. Legal assessment of economic collaboration is much more complex than that of the other types of collaboration, given the very nature of the beast. Some 1,500 Belgians are sentenced for economic collaboration.

**Denunciation, arrest and abuse**

Betrayals are a massive phenomenon during the occupation. After the occupation, more than 30,000 Belgians are accused of being informants, while fewer than 6,000 are effectively prosecuted. It is therefore often very difficult to prove, because it usually happens anonymously. It also takes very different forms. Groups targeted by the occupier, such as Jews, resistance fighters or work refusers, risk being betrayed by collaborators, but sometimes also by neighbours, colleagues or even family members. Whoever insults members of the occupying power or listens to Radio London also risks betrayal. It is often the result of a purely personal vendetta, sometimes it is related to the function performed by the informer. It is obvious that Belgian members of German police and intelligence services are structural informers. Less obvious and more complex is the role of administrators who, by performing their duties, manage information and sometimes forward it, directly or indirectly, to the occupying authorities. For example, mayors who forward lists of unemployed workers to the occupier, who then risk being arrested for forced labour.

At the beginning of 1942, the occupier decides that Belgians could be part of a *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie* to be established, as auxiliary troops of the German *Feldpolizei* (FP), the police of the occupation administration. Rex and VNV co-operate. About 1,300 Belgians join, besides VNV members and rexists also many Belgians without political conviction. At the end of 1943, the occupier also sets up the *Zivilfahndungsdienst*, an investigation service that is meant to help the FP in finding work refusers. Rex and DeVlag co-operate. Some 1,000 Belgians join this well-paid armed corps that carries out 25,000 arrests.

The SS has its own police services in the occupied country with the *Sipo-SD*. Members of the Flemish SS, DeVlag and, from 1943, Rex join. They acquire a dubious reputation as enemies of the resistance and persecutors of Jews. They are involved in bloody acts of terror, which, incidentally, also involve the *Hilfsfeldgendarmerie*, the *Vlaamse Wacht*, the *Vlaamse Wacht Brigade* and the *Gardes wallonnes*.

All the collaborationist organisations are increasingly involved in violent clashes with the resistance. Some 850 collaborators are killed. The violence is greater in Brussels and in the industrial regions of Wallonia than in Flanders, where the spiral of violence is limited to parts of Limburg and the Leuven region.

**X-ray of the collaboration**

Research on collaboration in Belgium focuses heavily on political and military collaboration, on the various collaborationist organisations and on the biographies of leading collaborators. The perspective of the individual collaborator has been only partially explored and requires more research. Research into the motivation of Flemish collaborators based on post-war criminal records shows that 40% collaborate solely for ideological reasons. For 60% personal motives are involved, but about half of this group is also ideologically motivated, which means that the share of ideologically motivated collaboration is almost 70%. Money prevails among the personal motives. Collaborators who aim for work and an income mainly come from lower social classes, but more than three-quarters of the ideologically motivated collaborators also come from lower social classes. A large majority believe in national socialism and admire Hitler. Motives such as...
Flemish nationalism, anti-communism and anti-Semitism are more prominent in the discourse of the collaborationist press and leading collaborators than in that of ordinary collaborators.  

June 1940. People were trying to recover their spirits after the horrendous events that occurred in the month of May. The vast majority of the population bitterly resented living under occupation but had to resign themselves to the situation as they could not see any credible alternative. However, as the summer wore on, some women and men decided to resist the laws of the invading forces. The recalcitrance of this admittedly small number of people resulted in a series of symbolic acts, such as appearing in public wearing pins featuring Leopold III’s coat of arms.

General features

The first members of the resistance movement were recruited in particular from the ranks of the French-speaking lower and medium middle class with its close association with veterans’ circles. This was a class where patriotism was rife, so that even before the invasion, there was a deep attachment to the monarchy and a strong anti-German sentiment inherited from the Great War. Heightened by the fear of losing the comparatively privileged
Everything started from a telegram sent by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Mauroy, Commander of the Third Brigade in Stanleyville, to the Governor-General. He made it clear that his unit's officers disagreed with the government's policy and openly criticized the refusal to involve the Force Publique alongside the British forces. See: Émile Janssens, Histoire militaire du Congo belge (…), vol. I, p. 69-76.


In addition, they travelled 2,300 km, which equals the distance between Brussels and Moscow.

The porters were Congolese civilians who had to transport supplies for hundreds of kilometers in appalling conditions and generally barefoot.

The situation in March 1941 is very different from that of December 1940. Because of the successes of the Belgian and British battalions in Sudan and Kenya, the Italian threat is now limited. The Belgian government did not wish to deploy more than one battalion in one sector. However, it is no longer a problem to send a full brigade on the battlefield. The fear that the Italians could turn against the colony has now almost vanished, and it seems that the Allies are very close to victory in East Africa.

War and occupation


For the term “moderate”, see the contribution by Dimitri Roden in this publication.

For more details, see the biography of Lieutenant General Charles van den Wijngaert, M.V.O., in Bruno De Wever, De gevangenen van het Auffanglager Breendonk, 1940-1944, 240 pp., printed by the author, Leuven, 1985.

For the activities of the Belgian lawyers before the German military courts: Frédéric Eickhoff, De nazi rechtbanken in België: De belastingen, de arbeidsdiensten en de gelegenheid tot staking in de Belgische industrie, 1940-1945, 326 pp., printed by the authors, Leuven, 1980.

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The latter would be short (a few days) ... or long (up to three years). Breendonk soon became a transit camp whose ... by Richard Olivier, 1992. Interview with Wilchar, whose real name was Willem Pauwels.

Ironically, it should be noted that the ... anti-ageing order' causes a radical purification of the administration. See: Nico Wouters, 'Administratieve collaboratie, 'Inflatoire' maatregelen en herinneringscultuur', on https://www.belgiumwwii.be.


The latter would be short (a few days) ... or long (up to three years). Breendonk soon became a transit camp whose ...

Index – Moet herinneringseducatie geschiedenis vervangen?' , on https://www.belgiumwwii.be.

Nico Wouters, 'Moeilijke omstandigheden: de belastingbelastingen', op. cit.

Nico Wouters, 'De moeilijkste omstandigheden: boeren, soldaten en belastingbelastingen', op. cit.

In 1944, the 'Moscow archives' (with archives on the First World War and the interbellum in Belgium) returned to the Royal Military Museum.

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