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§1: *The Flemish Movement*

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#### DOI

[10.5117/9789462981188/ngXE6n36jYkT5lksQXQT3Ewh](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462981188/ngXE6n36jYkT5lksQXQT3Ewh)

#### Publication date

2018

#### Document Version

Other version

#### Published in

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

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[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Rock, J. (2018). Flemish. Background: Historical context. §1: The Flemish Movement. In J. Leerssen (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (Vol. 2, pp. 892-894). Amsterdam University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462981188/ngXE6n36jYkT5lksQXQT3Ewh>

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*Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*

## *The Flemish Movement*

Historical background and context    Flemish

**Cultural Field:** Background

**Author:** Rock, Jan

The history of the Flemish Movement is inseparable from other processes of modern state formation and nation-building in the Southern Netherlands. While, among these, the nation-building in [Belgium](#) can be considered the most successful in terms of liberal-revolutionary and national-separatist goals – an independent Belgian state was created after revolutions in 1789–93 and 1830 – the Flemish Movement was the most successful in terms of a Herderian equation between language, people and nation, and in its broad mobilization across social strata throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

The present-day territory called "Flanders" is larger than the ancient-regime County of Flanders (one of the provinces of the Habsburg Netherlands, around the cities of Brugge and Gent); it also includes the province of West-Flanders with Ypres, Roeselare and other cities, the southern part of the historical Duchy of Brabant around Antwerp, Brussels and Leuven, and the northern, Netherlandic-speaking part of the Prince-Bishopric of Liège around Tongeren and Hasselt. A territorial demarcation of "Flanders", signifying the parts of post-1830 Belgium where the Flemish, i.e. Netherlandic [language](#) predominated, became important only towards the First World War.

The immediate and overriding concern of the Flemish Movement was the defence of the Flemish language in government, education and justice, against the use of French and – to a lesser extent – Dutch. Language choices had until the 19th century played only a subordinate role in public life in the Austrian Netherlands: large parts of the inhabitants had a regional variant of Flemish as their native tongue and used it in everyday speech, but French was generally accepted in other fields (government, political debate, *belles-lettres*), as was Latin (in the Catholic Church, higher education, science). A more or less standardized written form of Flemish was used in theatre, chambers of rhetoric (*rederijkerskamers*) and sometimes in political pamphlets.

It was only during the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–30) that language became an identity element, when [William I's](#) cultural policy met with opposition in the southern provinces, and these provinces themselves came to be seen as a bilingual complex under the antonymic appellation "Flemish/Walloon". William employed the Netherlandic (Dutch/Flemish) language as a means to unify and streamline his new realm, in tandem with other measures that included an economic policy aimed at integrating the industrialization of the South into the existing colonial trade in the northern provinces; a reform in the education of priests; and the institution of the office of a *Rijks-geschiedschrijver*, "national historiographer", with the task of establishing a common-Netherlandic past. While the official status of Netherlandic in the northern (Dutch) part of the realm was confirmed in an 1819 law, William also actively supported and patronized Netherlandic/Flemish-language cultural and educational associations in the South. These initiatives met with resistance among French- and Walloon-speaking parts of the population, and thus, from 1825 on, linguistic arguments fed into the constitutional mismatch between the United Kingdom's two halves, and resistance to William's high-handed rule.

After the secession of Belgium (1830) and the establishment of a Belgian parliamentary monarchy (1831), French became the language of government, as a reaction against the former Dutch hegemony. Henceforth, Flemish identity would centre around the image of an oppressed language. The official position of Flemish was vindicated by a minority of "Orangist" loyalists (like the young Jan Frans [Willems](#) and Prudens [van Duyse](#)) and, more importantly, by middle-class cultural actors like the novelist Hendrik [Conscience](#), who thematized the language question in terms of both poetics and the nation in the foreword to his *Leeuw van Vlaenderen*, 1838. Similarly, literary societies – such as *De Olyftak* ("The Olive Branch"; 1835–79) in Antwerp or *De Tael is Gansch het Volk* ("Language is the Whole People"; 1836–93) in Gent, and other, older ones – explored Flemish literature in terms of the nation and liberal democracy. At the same time, philologists standardized Flemish in order to strengthen its position against French. To that end, a *Taelcommissie* ("Language Commission", 1836–39), installed by the government and chaired by Willems, proposed to adopt the [Dutch spelling](#). In the "spelling war" that followed, linguistic particularists (like Pieter [Behaegel](#)) also defended the integrity of Catholicism against Protestant influence from the Netherlands. Similar Catholic-Flemish particularism and traditionalism was upheld throughout the century by many teachers, writers, publishers and priests (with the support of the bishops), of whom Guido [Gezelle](#) became the most exemplary. Official acknowledgement of the Flemish language grew in the meantime. After a petition (*petitionnement*) to parliament (1840) had led to the establishment of a *Grievencommissie* ("Commission of Grievances", 1856–59), bilingualism was recognized in the northern provinces of Belgium. Also, a triennial state prize for Flemish-language theatre plays was awarded from 1858 on, almost exclusively for plays situated in Belgian/Flemish history and culture, such as Hippoliet van [Peene's](#) *Mathias de Beeldstormer* ("Mathias the Iconoclast"), Domien [Sleeckx's](#) *Grétry*, Frans van [Geert's](#) *Jacob van Artevelde*.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, the Flemish Movement got entangled in the politico-confessional divisions that dominated Belgian politics. After the establishment of Liberal and Catholic political parties from 1841 on and the Liberal rise to government from 1847 to 1884, confessional politics culminated in a "school war" (1878). Flemish nationalists faced the choice of allying either with the emancipatory agenda of the Liberals or with the traditionalist stance of the Catholics. The division became the more apparent as the Flemish Movement broadened its scope beyond language vindication towards emancipation of the lower social strata. An educational and literacy-oriented association for the benefit of workers and peasants, the *Willemsfonds* (named after J.F. Willems), was established in 1851 in Gent by the Liberal politician and historian Jules de [Saint-Genois](#), the philologist Ferdinand Augustijn [Snellaert](#) and the poet Frans [Rens](#). It established local branches in all Flemish provinces, together with libraries and lecture series. From c.1870 on, the *Willemsfonds*, under its chairman Julius [Vuylsteke](#), became anti-clerical and politically active, partly out of dissatisfaction with the Catholic predominance in schools. As a reaction, a Catholic counterpart was established in 1875: the *Davidfonds* (named after priest/professor Jan Baptist David). It mobilized the Catholic part of the Flemish Movement, together with the Catholic students' movement instigated by teacher/priests such as Hugo [Verriest](#). In secondary school, seminaries, teacher training colleges and at the Catholic University in Leuven they founded local associations, which in 1903 were federated into the *Algemeen Katholiek Vlaams Studentenverbond* ("General Catholic Flemish Student Association"). Their activities, such as communal singing, traditional sports and theatre, and their periodicals had vital recruiting potential, despite growing discordance with the episcopacy. Further mobilization came with universal plural suffrage for men (1893) and a Catholic labour movement (*Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond*, "Confederation of Christian Trade Unions"; 1912). Both the Liberal and the Catholic sides maintained ties with their respective political parties, resulting in legislation on the use of Flemish in court cases (1873), in government (1878) and in education (secondary state schools, 1883; secondary Catholic schools, 1910; Catholic university, 1911). A *Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* ("Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature") was founded in Gent in 1886, but by then philological language vindication and social language emancipation had drifted far apart.

Despite having a different linguistic loyalty and its own [literary programme](#), the Flemish Movement shared many forms of Romantic-Nationalist cultivation of culture with Belgian nationalism. The myth of autonomous cities like [Brugge](#), Gent and Antwerp opposing foreign domination could be understood as equally Belgian and Flemish; painters from the 15th to the 17th centuries (from Jan [van Eyck](#) to Peter Paul [Rubens](#) and Anthony [van Dyck](#)) could be celebrated at the same time as local, Flemish and Belgian (and also transnational) artists; Neo-Gothic architecture (e.g. that of Joris [Helleputte](#)) could be used to signal both Belgian-Catholic authority and Flemish cultural traditionalism. However, in the historical imagination, Flemish nationalism squarely opposed the Belgicist master narrative of bridging Germanic and Latin culture groups, focusing on their irreconcilable conflicts instead. This became most clear in the successive [commemorations](#), from 1867 on, of the *Guldensporenslag* ("Battle of the Golden Spurs") of 1302, when the French royal army had been beaten near Kortrijk by an army of commoners from Flemish cities. After 1870, the Liberal wing also glorified the *Geuzen*, the 16th-century insurrectionists against Spanish rule. As the century proceeded, the Flemish Movement also commemorated itself through its "phase A" (Hoch) philologists: Willems, David, Conscience, Snellaert and others; their memory was monumentalized by statues and in the Campo Santo cemetery in Gent.

From the 1880s onwards, not only historicist or educationalist, but also international fin-de-siècle aesthetics were paired to the expression of a Flemish national identity, especially in the journal *Van nu en straks* ("Of now and later", 1896–1901). Emblematic for its anti-Belgian orientation towards a European modernity was the phrase formulated by historian August [Vermeulen](#): "Wij willen Vlaming zijn om Europeërs te worden" ("We want to be Flemish in order to become European"). Additionally, modernist Flemish local colour found its way into Francophone literature, with internationally acclaimed representatives like Emile [Verhaeren](#) and Nobel Prize laureate Maurice [Maeterlinck](#) (and in the 20th century also *chansonnier* Jacques Brel).

representatives like Ernie Vermeulen and Robert Hoeft made medieval masterpieces (and in the 20th century also Brno) for subsequent eras.

A good decade after the intense centennial celebrations of the the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1902, Belgium was overrun by German troops on their way to Paris. The First World War offered unprecedented challenges, possibilities and pitfalls to the Flemish Movement, because some Flemish nationalists saw their demands supported by the occupiers' Pan-Germanic-inspired *Flamenpolitik*. Flanders and Wallonia were administratively separated and the university in Gent was *vernederlandst* ("Netherlandified"). While the end of the war nullified these measures and many of those who had participated in the *Flamenpolitik* were put on trial for collaboration, a *minimumprogramma* ("minimum programme", conceived by the Catholic politician Frans van Cauwelaert) was realized in the interwar period, with the renewed Netherlandification of Gent University (1923, with Vermeylen as the first rector), unilingualism in the Flemish and Walloon provinces and bilingualism in Brussels. A territorial "Flanders" emerged from this realization of linguistic demands; after the War it took an explicitly anti-Belgian stance in its annual Golden Spurs commemorations, which were symbolically relocated to the trenches of the Western Front at the *IJzertoren* ("Yser Tower", 1930, a modernist, cross-shaped landmark commemorating the Flemish fallen). The territorial demands would be constitutionally enshrined in 1962 when an east-west "language border" officially divided Belgium into territories with separate linguistic regimes. Belgium was federalized in 1993, with a sub-state "Flanders" as its northern constituent part.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462981188/ngXE6n36jYkT5lksQXQT3Ewh>

**Direct URL:** <http://show.ernie.uva.nl/flm-1>

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