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FEDERALIZATION OF THE BELGIAN NATIONAL PAST

Do collaboration and colonization still matter?

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11.1 Introduction

Is Belgium exceptional in terms of memory issues? To address this question, this chapter focuses on Belgian authorities' attitudes (whether at the federal or regional level) toward two controversial episodes in the national past, the collaboration with Germany during WWII and the colonization of Congo. Both episodes are comparable in terms of their demographic importance, as they had an undeniable impact on society while only concerning a tiny portion of the citizens.¹ Moreover, these two events are particularly salient with regard to the crucial question of how groups with diverging memories coexist.

The current situation in Belgium reflects one of the critical questions that arise at a national level in numerous countries: how can communities digest “a past that is hard to swallow” (Conan & Rousso, 1994)? No Western state has been spared controversies relating to WWII (Mink & Neumayer, 2007). As for the colonial past, no country has found it easy to take on board a part of history that many people, especially young people, see as a mistake or failure (Spencer & Valassopoulos, 2021). However, there is one factor specific to Belgium: the language tensions gradually tearing apart the nation's fabric. As this chapter suggests, the increasingly frequent doubts voiced as to how long the country will survive have influenced representations of Belgium's history. After observing the ‘federalization’ of memories of WWII (Labio, 2002), can we detect the same process regarding memories of the country's colonial legacy?

The aim of the chapter is not to present a thorough historiographical study of these two periods. Instead, it focuses on the ways in which they have been represented, and how these portrayals have evolved over time. To detect potential Belgian specificities, it is worth exploring the attitudes of other European

authorities toward collaboration and colonization.² The limited scope of this chapter does not allow for a systematic comparative analysis. Nonetheless, it underlines some major similarities and contrasts with two neighboring countries, France and the Netherlands. France is one of the most emblematic cases in memory politics, as the evolution of the official representations of the Vichy regime and the colonization of Algeria demonstrates.³ The added value of the Dutch case results from a common feature with Belgium: the existence of a monarchy. In the three cases (Belgium, France, and the Netherlands), the same fundamental trend can be observed: the gradual fragmentation of a supposedly smooth and reliable national version of history. However, beyond this common trend, the shift in the two narrative templates indicates the existence of some Belgian specificities. The guiding question throughout the analysis concerns the origins of these specificities: are they all related to the fact that Belgium is a “deeply divided society” (Guelke, 2012)? If so, does this characteristic impact the official representation of collaborationism and colonialism in the same way?

The analysis is divided into three parts. The first underlines the research posture adopted in the study. The second looks at the gradual polarization of the representations of collaboration during WWII. The third stresses the references – or the lack thereof – made to the colonization of the Congo. From a methodological perspective, the chapter combines two main approaches. The first is based on a corpus of official speeches, parliamentary documents, news articles, and commemorative monuments. The second results from interviews with families affected by the repression of collaborators during WWII or the return of colonists in 1960.⁴ These interviews were conducted three generations from both sides of the linguistic border. Research on the intergenerational transmission of narratives and emotions reminds us that drawing a line between the past and the present is a far more complex process than it appears at first glance. The Belgian case indicates that this complexity is further increased in a context characterized by three main features: an ongoing federalization process, nationalist tendencies that emphasize particular narratives of the past to justify the need for independence, and relative indifference of the federal State, which does not provide a strong national counter-narrative (Hirst & Fineberg, 2012).

11.2 Research posture: broadening the approach

Human memory makes it possible to encode, preserve, transform, and restore lived and transmitted experiences. It refers to a set of psychological functions by which humans can update past impressions or information. In this regard, memory cannot be an exact and perfect reflection of the past: it is only its evocation or trace (Kensing, 2009; Lavabre, 1994). Memories are not literally preserved but are reconstructed according to the present context. It is from this perspective that Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory during the interwar years. Contesting the notion of isolated individual memory,

the French sociologist emphasized the influence of the social on the content of individual memories (1997: 52). In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, he demonstrated that, over the course of an era, it is a group's shared beliefs and its collective experiences that shape the meaning of individual memories, and not the other way around (1994). When the notion of collective memory resurfaced at the end of the 1970s, it was in the realm of history, not sociology. As Nora argued, collective memory is "what remains of the past in the groups' experiences, or rather what these groups do with the past" (1978: 401). Since then, this notion has gradually spread throughout the humanities and social sciences (Kurze & Lamont, 2019; Olick, 2007; Olick *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the wealth of existing literature, there remain two major limitations to collective memory studies. The first concerns the relatively partial nature of studies devoted to the management of conflicting memories. These generally focus on only one of the two dimensions that constitute the subject under examination. The first of these is the choice of the past, referring to how memory agents strategically mobilize the past (Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Langenbacher & Shain, 2010; Ricoeur, 2000). The second is the weight of the past: this aspect is more concerned with the traces or imprints left by the past on individuals and groups (Bell, 2010; Davoine & Gaudillière, 2006; Rosenblum, 2009). The aim of this chapter is to better understand the articulation between the macro level, most often reduced to the strategic dimension, and the micro level, which has been almost exclusively analyzed through the prism of 'trauma' (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011). It is thus critical to examine the intertwining mechanisms operating at the official and individual levels. In this regard, the Belgian case study is exemplary because political adversaries continually activate both dimensions (choice/weight of the past).

The second limitation of collective memory studies relates to the temporal dimension of the research conducted to date. Understanding the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission necessarily implies a broadening of the timescale. Rather than limiting itself to studying one generation of actors, this chapter is based on research projects that consider three generations within each family studied. This ambition is demanding, but it is a *sine qua non* condition for identifying tensions, gaps, and even contradictions between one linguistic community and another and from one generation to the next.

One of the main questions that arise throughout the study concerns the degree of compatibility of the observed representations of the past. Do the various accounts of collaborationism and colonialism result from a series of different viewpoints or do they reveal fundamental contradictions, whereby one version of events is systematically denied by another? Addressing this question in the Belgian case is particularly stimulating since it allows us to combine two main variables: the linguistic community (French-speakers versus Dutch-speakers) and the generational dimension (G1: one of the children of the collaborator/colonist, G2: one of their grandchildren, G3: one of their great-grandchildren). Potential overlaps between G3 narratives on both sides

of the linguistic border would indicate the significance of a generational effect beyond the stories emphasized by each community's representatives. Conversely, repetition of the same diverging narratives across generations on each side would indicate the depth of the divide between communities, independently of the generational effect. Accordingly, Belgian exceptionalism allows us to analyze closely the articulation between variables relevant in several countries in Europe.

11.3 Collaboration: long-lasting divisive memories

11.3.1 *Historical context*

During WWI, three categories of Belgians were classified as traitors: Flemish and Walloon activists, those who had made their fortune from the war, and spies paid by the occupying authorities. Reprisals against these traitors lasted a relatively short time. Between 1919 and 1922, 3900 cases were brought to court; a few dozen death sentences were pronounced, and none of them were ever carried out. The nationalist wing of the Flemish Movement would, however, during the interwar period and even beyond, preserve the memory of Flemish activists and portray these events as an injustice committed by the Belgian State against the Flemish cause. In January 1921, two Flemish Socialists put a question to the Belgian government concerning the severity of the judicial measures taken against certain activists who 'committed a political error in good faith', and asked whether it might not be appropriate to extend clemency to them. The French-speaking press in Flanders reacted violently and equated the whole Flemish Movement with the shameful memory of a few activists. The stereotypical portrayal of a pro-German Flanders spread rapidly throughout the Francophone press and continued to grow stronger throughout the interwar period. Over a period of approximately 10 years, Belgian memories of the WWI became fragmented: Flemish and French-speaking historical versions began to diverge (Beyen, 2002; Rosoux and van Ypersele, 2012; Warland, 2019).

This fragmented memory of WWI had an undeniable impact on how people acted in the WWII (Kesteloot, 2013). Thus, the VNV (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond, a Flemish nationalist party, 15% in the 1939 elections) collaborated with the German occupiers with a view to obtaining independence. This hope explains why collaboration was less contested in Flanders than in Wallonia, where there were also collaboration movements. One of the most famous examples is the extensive collaboration of the far-right party 'Rex', led by the French speaker Léon Degrelle.⁵

By 1945, some voices in Flanders demanded the consideration of mitigating circumstances for Flemish collaborators (again, citing the traitors' idealism to mask their antidemocratic tendencies). On the Francophone side, there was a unanimous demand to strike uncompromisingly against traitors. This attitude explains why any proposed amnesty was systematically rejected. In short,

repression crystallized new memory conflicts: the French intransigence once more gave the impression that the Belgian State was unduly harsh vis-à-vis the Flemings. However, this time, this impression was not only experienced in nationalist circles but also reached a large segment of Flemish public opinion (De Guissmé *et al.*, 2017).

Today, in a context where the memory of the Holocaust has acquired a central place, Flemish historiography has stopped idealizing Flemish collaboration with the Nazi regime. Yet, current memories of the collaboration remain highly divergent (De Guissmé *et al.*, 2017). A survey conducted in 2018 confirms that, overall, Dutch speakers perceive collaboration as more morally acceptable, and more of them support an amnesty for former collaborators, than their Francophone counterparts (Bouchat *et al.*, 2020). These findings indicate that, 75 years after its end, the issue of collaboration during WWII still divides Belgian society.

11.3.2 Belgian specificities: the absence of amnesty and the royal question

Beyond this divide, we can observe the same trend in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands: a shift from denial of the collaboration with Nazi Germans (thanks to a strong emphasis on resistance against them – see Lagrou, 2007) to acknowledgment (the collaboration was more than a simple blip). In 2007, the report *Docile Belgium*, commissioned by the Belgian Parliament, presented Belgium's collaboration with the Nazis in detail (explaining its 'economic, ideological and legal-administrative' dimensions). In France, the 1995 speech by then-President Jacques Chirac acknowledging French responsibility for a major roundup of Jews in 1942, the 'Vel d'Hiv' roundup can be considered a turning point in terms of strategic narratives. Since then, except for some negationists, no one can decently deny the repressive, anti-Semitic, and pro-German collaboration that was official policy under Vichy. The deconstruction of the resistanialist myth started later in the Netherlands, where for a long time the official narrative focused on the collective opposition of Dutch society to German occupying forces. It was only in January 2020 that Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte apologized for the first time on behalf of the government for the wartime persecution of Jews, saying that too many Dutch civil servants "carried out the orders of the occupiers".

Another common feature between the three countries is that the passage of time has not fully exorcised the ghosts of the past. To the Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse, the swift and severe purge option chosen after the war in the three countries⁶ resulted in a problematic relationship with the past: "In the Netherlands, the emotion reappears like malaria: years of silence alternate with periods of high tension. Belgium is a case of chronic fever. Discussions on what happened during and shortly after the war are never far away. In France, this element of the past is [...] the source of an almost incurable neurosis" (Huyse, 1995: 77).

In the three countries, memories of humiliation, scorn, and unfair treatment have been transmitted down through the generations. The fact that collaborators were amnestied in France and the Netherlands, and not in Belgium, did not alleviate the memories related to the clampdown on collaborators. However, the absence of amnesty in Belgium explains to some extent the ongoing dimension of the debate between the two sides of the linguistic borders. All demands to rehabilitate collaborators or compensate “victims of postwar repression or their descendants” (to take the words used in a motion supported by Flemish-speaking far-right parties in 2011) have been systematically rejected by the Walloon Socialist Party (PS).⁷

Besides the issue of amnesty, one key aspect of Belgian exceptionalism is a result of one of the most serious crises faced by the monarchy: the Royal Question. From 1945 to 1951, there was significant tension between the Belgian government and King Leopold III about his role during the war. While the government went into exile in France, Leopold III remained in Belgium and was taken into captivity in 1944. After his liberation by the Allies in May 1945, the government suspected him of authoritarian sympathies and refused to allow the King to return to his functions. The popular consultation organized in 1950 deeply divided the country. The narrow majority (57%) who called for the King’s return were mainly Flemish citizens, whereas citizens from Brussels and Wallonia generally opposed it. The King’s return to Belgium led to widespread demonstrations in Wallonia and a general strike. The deterioration of the situation led to Leopold III’s abdication in favor of his son Baudouin in July 1951. The Royal Question – for which there is no equivalent event in French or Dutch history – crystallized the linguistic question.

Since then, Belgian politicians from both communities have regularly exploited the issues of collaboration and amnesty for political purposes. In October 2014, for instance, criticism of the coalition between Liberals and Flemish nationalists of the N-VA party provoked a heated debate in the Belgian Parliament. Evoking the ‘noise of the boots’ that resonated within the Belgian government, one of the leading socialist MPs emphasized the links between some N-VA members and former WWII collaborators. Five years later, the same comment was made in the aftermath of the federal elections. In January 2021, to give a final example, the inclusion of two Nazi collaborators in a profile of historical figures who were significant in the founding of Flanders as a legislative region immediately led to national and even international controversy.⁸

All these elements show that political exploitation of the legacy of WWII has increasingly fueled tensions between the two linguistic communities and contributed to their disunity. This fragmentation is also noticeable if we consider the way in which families affected by reprisals against collaborators refer – or choose not to refer – to this traumatic event. Admittedly, we can hardly categorize all Belgian citizens based only on their linguistic community. The case of bilingual families or German speakers, for instance, not to mention the case of refugees who recently migrated to Belgium, rapidly shows the limits of the exercise.

Nonetheless, it is striking that most Dutch-speaking families actively discuss collaboration, while French-speaking families still perceive this phenomenon as particularly stigmatizing. To take only one concrete example, several French-speaking interviewees asked for their testimonies to remain anonymous because they were 'afraid' that their grandchildren 'could lose their jobs'. Others expressed intense emotions, explaining that there was nobody to whom they could talk about this story. We have not, to date, observed these reactions among Flemish families. Similarly, the number of explicit references to 'secrets', 'unspeakable realities', and 'unspoken words' reveals that this past is still perceived as a burden in Wallonia.

In this respect, one interview was particularly telling. After speaking at length without any interruption, a woman concluded with the following words: "My father became very rich – millions [sic]. We had seven servants at home. But he did not know anything. He did not know that the Germans made lampshades from the skin of the Jews. He did not know that". She then started crying before explaining that she never wanted to have children but that she had been a pediatrician all her life – to help as many children as possible" (Brussels, October 3, 2019). Interestingly, interviews also showed that family members who decided to talk about their experience during the war were mostly condemned for it by their siblings. Once again, the reaction of the granddaughter of a French-speaking collaborator is emblematic. Speaking to her sister, who wanted to further explore their ancestor's responsibility for roundups of Jews during the war, she said, "We already organized a mass for the family 15 years ago. Stop that now" (Louvain-la-Neuve, October 28, 2019).

Do these reactions illustrate any Belgian specificity? Probably not. French and Dutch descendants of collaborators are also deeply affected (Venken & Röger, 2015). However, what is specific to Belgium is the contrast between the reactions in the different communities. The dividing effect of these memory discrepancies is reinforced by two key elements: the weakness or even inexistence of any unifying national memory of the war and the mutual ignorance of the other side's media coverage. Since the news in the different parts of the country rarely coincides, this mutual ignorance favors the multiplication of misunderstandings between communities, stereotypes, and simplified visions of the other (Klein *et al.*, 2012).

11.4 Colonization: consensual silence and memory resurgence

11.4.1 Historical context

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Belgian authorities represented the colonial past in such a way as to glorify the country's achievements. Belgian school textbooks were remarkably similar to the equally uncritical *Petit Lavis* schoolbook used by schoolchildren in France. All emphasis was placed on the

benefits of colonization since the concept of national identity made it inconceivable for crimes to be committed on behalf of the State. In the view of the Belgian authorities, Belgium's administration of a territory 80 times its size gave the impression to the outside world of the workings of a 'model colony'.

Following independence and the shedding of some illusions, Belgium's colonial history was scarcely referred to in official addresses. State representatives systematically erased the bitter criticisms that had been leveled for decades against colonization. This concealment policy was excused either by the need to 'normalize' relations with the former colony, or by the slogan 'Africa for the Africans'. Far from the *Belgium caput mundi* approach (Demoulin, 2000: 14), the Belgian authorities tried to avoid even the slightest accusation of neocolonialism. Within just a few decades, aspirations had changed completely. Henceforth, the aim would be to cease all involvement in the former colony's affairs and respect a critical partner's national sovereignty.

In 1999, the new government of Guy Verhofstadt would change this approach and encourage a critical acceptance of the country's colonial heritage. The aim of Louis Michel, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, was clear: to promote 'adult relations' with the African Great Lakes Region (Liège, February 28, 2003). To do so, he would acknowledge that "former colonial powers, such as Belgium, owe a large part of their development to their former colonies", and "it was thanks to 'these colonies' that we were able, in part, to create the country we are today, the twelfth richest country in the world - the fourth, if we follow the UN classification system" (Liège, February 28, 2003). This kind of acknowledgment became one of the spearheads of the 'ethical diplomacy' policy advocated by the minister.

This approach was again overturned in July 2004 with the appointment of a new Foreign Minister, Karel De Gucht. His attitude was far from apologetic, and he took an admonishing tone in his speeches. During his official visits to Central Africa, Karel De Gucht stirred up intense controversies by referring explicitly to the devastating effects of corruption, impunity, and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Rather than stressing Belgium's 'responsibility' toward its former colony, the talk was now of the need to stop being 'indulgent' (Kinshasa, April 21, 2008). Karel De Gucht wished to put aside any 'misplaced' feelings of guilt. By way of response to accusations of paternalism, he recalled that colonization also involved 'mass literacy campaigns', 'the setting up of an educational system', and 'generalized health coverage' (Tervuren, February 3, 2005).

From a radically different perspective, Belgian representatives launched a Parliamentary Commission in 2000 to determine the exact circumstances of the murder of Patrice Lumumba and the possible implications of Belgian political responsibility therein. In 2019, former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel apologized for the kidnapping, segregation, and forced adoption of thousands of mixed-race children throughout Belgian colonial Africa. One year later, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent 'Black Lives Matter'

movement impacted the Belgian political scene. In the aftermath of a demonstration that brought together more than 10,000 protesters in Brussels, the Belgian Parliament established a special Commission to confront its colonial past. At approximately the same time, King Philippe marked the 60th anniversary of the independence of the DRC, expressing his ‘deepest regrets’ for acts of violence and brutality inflicted during his country’s rule over the Congo (June 30, 2020).

11.4.2 Belgian specificities: Leopold II and political interference

This progressive acknowledgment of the colonial past is indeed also noticeable in France and the Netherlands. The ongoing debates concerning the Algerian war in France or the mass violence at the end of the Dutch colonial empire in Indonesia illustrate a common trend. Descendants of the victims living in the three countries denounce long-lasting stereotypes and share common expectations, i.e., public apologies and reparations. In Paris, questions about the appropriateness of these gestures are at the core of the report written by Benjamin Stora on the Algerian colonization and war.⁹ In Brussels, they are initially being addressed by the panel of experts selected by the Belgian Parliament. In Amsterdam, the government is considering an apology for slavery in Suriname. In the three capitals, advocates and opponents of reparations emphasize contrasting arguments.

Official authorities in the three countries also commissioned reports on the return of looted art to their former colonies. In France, the Sarr-Savoy Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage was presented to French President Emmanuel Macron in November 2018.¹⁰ Two years later, a report written by experts from the *Raad voor cultuur* for the Dutch Ministry of Culture recommended that the Netherlands return looted artifacts to the countries from which they were stolen.¹¹ At the same time, the ‘restitution policy’ of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) recognized that its collections were acquired in the context of a policy of legal inequality: people were forced or placed under pressure to abandon objects, and they were too weak to negotiate the price when they wished to sell objects.¹² Thus, in the three countries, the coming to power of a new generation favored the gradual acknowledgment of its historical responsibility vis-à-vis the colonial past. This evolution was reinforced by the arrival of a new generation of historians and descendants in the respective diasporas, and by the progressive opening of the archives.

Besides this common contextual variable, two major Belgian specificities are also worth mentioning. First, unlike French and Dutch colonization, the creation of the Congo was “one man’s personal adventure” (Stengers, 2007: 45). Between 1885 and 1908, the *Etat Indépendant du Congo* (EIC – Congo Free State) was in fact the personal property of King Leopold II. Whereas in Belgium, his constitutional role prevented him from taking any public action without a

minister's approval, in the colony, the King enjoyed power often described as absolute. Only in 1908, mainly due to international pressure, did the Congo officially become a Belgian colony. Since then, Leopold II has become one of the most emblematic symbols of colonial brutality. Unsurprisingly, his statues were systematically targeted by recent protests against racism.

The second specificity results from the systematic political use of the past to deny the legitimacy of the federal State. The questioning of the country's colonial past thus enabled certain Flemish nationalists to criticize the role of the monarchy and the influence of the former French-speaking élite. One draft piece of legislation tabled by a Vlaams Blok (a far-right and secessionist party) parliamentarian in 2002 illustrated this clearly. It proposed to discontinue several allowances paid to the royal family, using the argument that the Saxe-Cobourg family fortune originated from the Congo: "The royal family owes its fortune to the Congo, and the scandalous way in which it was acquired is a historical fact".¹³ Militant nationalists are not alone in referring to the colonial past to disqualify 'the other'. We need only to think of the controversy related to Karel De Gucht's comments concerning the DRC. The diplomatic crisis provoked by the Foreign Minister stirred up criticism from all the French-speaking political parties belonging to the government coalition. Isabelle Durant, a member of the Green Party, condemned what she referred to as a 'politics of scorn'. The Liberal MP Armand De Decker spoke of a counterproductive approach. Elio Di Rupo, President of the PS, reminded Parliament that "the colonial era, characterized by unilateralism, paternalism and arrogance, is now a thing of the past". Minister De Gucht responded quickly, declaring that he had the impression that "French-speakers still seem to see the Congo as the tenth Belgian province, about which no critical comments can be made". All these reactions confirm that the tensions between communities have undermined the national account of the past associated with the 'Belgique de Papa' – a unitary Belgium with power largely in the hands of French speakers. As one NV-A ('New Flemish Alliance', Flemish nationalist party) representative told me, "in Flanders, we have nothing to do with the Congo".¹⁴ The sentence resonated with the idea often heard that "in Wallonia, we have nothing to do with collaboration".

11.5 Conclusion

Admittedly, this mirror image is a caricature of the Belgian memory landscape. Yet it reminds us that in the absence of a coherent *roman national* of the type which exists in France or in the Netherlands, the federalization of the State has two major consequences. First, it strengthens the fragmentation of national memories in a binary way. However, research carried out among Belgian families does not show two homogeneous narratives. It reveals tensions and inconsistencies within each community and a dynamic set of palimpsestic narratives (Silverman, 2013). For instance, how could we understand the wealth of vivid

memories related to WWII without considering the often-tragic narratives transmitted in German-speaking families, not to mention Jewish families? Likewise, how could we grasp the memories related to colonization without listening to the stories of Congolese, Burundian, and Rwandan ancestors of Belgian Afro-descendants? None of these specific trajectories can be reduced to the oversimplified representations that dominate the political scene and the media. Additionally, the arrival of new waves of migrants reinforces the diversity and sometimes divisiveness of the past experiences that are remembered. How would the Turkish/Kurdish remembrances of the past fit into the 'us versus them' boxes emphasized on the political stage? The same comment could be made regarding the memories of the war in the Balkans or the Rwandan genocide. From this perspective, the interactions between vivid memories resemble a crisscross of tensions rather than two homogeneous fields separated by a linguistic border.

Second, the fragmentation of memories along oversimplified lines prevents most citizens from making any reflexive effort. If the other community is collectively responsible for the past violence that was committed on behalf of the State, there is no need for introspection. Weighing up past crimes is not on the agenda. The objective of this chapter is neither to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad', 'sound', and 'unsound' narratives nor to regret the lack of a so-called common narrative for all. The dissemination of a sole, monolithic historical interpretation cannot be imposed from above. Citizens exposed to official discourses are not merely empty vessels waiting to imbibe state-sponsored narratives without hesitation. Instead, they co-construct the messages conveyed to them. Moreover, not even a negotiated narrative based on common ground would resonate with the diversity of experiences and emotions privately expressed by Belgian families. Experiences associated with scorn, humiliation, grief, anger, resentment, shame, and/or guilt leave long-lasting traces that cannot be replaced by an external narrative, however nuanced and balanced it might be. What makes Belgium exceptional is not the selective and teleological character of memory, but the myriad of variables that come into play: cultural belongings anchored in distinct emotional experiences, systematic use of the past to support a parochial political agenda, institutional fragility, recurrent questions about the responsibility of the royal family, successive waves of migration. The intertwining of these elements matters since it directly impacts the context that shapes political negotiations. The question is then: do the approaches adopted toward the national past enable the parties to move on, or do they reinforce the deadlock? Do they open citizens' minds, or do they, rather, close them?

Notes

- 1 At the end of WWII, 53,000 Belgian citizens were convicted of collaboration. On the eve of Congolese independence in 1960, around 88,000 Belgian colonists lived in the Congo.

- 2 This study was written as part of a larger research project initially anchored in COST Action IS 1205 on ‘Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union’ (2012–2016), and in the ‘Shared Society Project’ based at the University of Koblenz. This project brings together practitioners and scholars from seven countries (Germany, Israel, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Norway, Macedonia, and Belgium).
- 3 On the French propensity for commemorations, see Johnston (1991), Nora (1994), and Mathy (2011).
- 4 These interviews result from two main research projects: the TRANSMEMO project (‘The Sorrows of Belgium: WWII memories and family transmission’, Brain Belspo, 2018–2020), and the RE-MEMBER project (‘The transmission of memories related to stigmatization’, ARC UCLouvain, 2020–2025).
- 5 In Belgium, collaboration took many forms: political (Wouters, 2006), military and repressive (De Wever, 2003), economic (Nefors, 2006), and artistic and intellectual (Devillez, 2003). In the aftermath of WWII, 0.64% of Belgians were condemned for collaboration: 0.73% of Flemings and 0.56% of Francophones (see Van den Wijngaert *et al.*, 2015).
- 6 The number of prison sentences was about 53,000 in Belgium, 49,000 in the Netherlands, and 40,000 in France (Huysse, 1995: 67). In terms of severity, the level of repression of collaboration in the three countries is comparable (Kossmann, 1986; Huysse *et al.*, 1991).
- 7 The former socialist MP Philippe Moureaux explicitly highlights the ‘taboo’ dimension of this issue within the PS (see Brems *et al.*, 2020: 75–79).
- 8 The profiles were part of a special edition of the Belgian edition of *Newsweek* to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Flemish Parliament. They initially included well-known Nazi collaborators August Borms (who was sentenced to death) and Staf De Clercq (leader of the pro-Nazi Flemish National League, VNV). After a succession of adverse reactions, the Flemish Parliament apologized and excluded these two controversial names from the list of noble contributors to the Flemish cause.
- 9 Stora, B., *Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d’Algérie*, January 20, 2021, XXX.
- 10 Sarr, F., & Savoy, B., *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, November 2018, http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_fr.pdf
- 11 Raad voor Cultuur, *Advies Koloniale Collecties en Erkenning van Onrecht*, October 7, 2020, www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/adviezen/2020/10/07/advies-koloniale-collecties-en-erkenning-van-onrecht
- 12 RMCA, *Restitution Policy*, January 31, 2020, www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/restitution. In 2020, the Federation Wallonia–Brussels commissioned an expert report by the Belgian Royal Academy on the same issue (*L’avenir des collections extra-européennes*, to be published in 2021).
- 13 *Annales parlementaires*, Chambre des Représentants, June 11, 2002.
- 14 Brussels, September 14, 2020.

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