

Flemish Movement

By [Christine Van Everbroeck](#)

The First World War engendered a rift within the Flemish movement, with some wishing to pursue the advocacy for Flemish rights and others preferring to await the end of the war to obtain new laws. After the war, the Flemish movement broadened its base and radicalized, thus taking on a new dimension.

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The Flemish Movement in the 19th Century

In the 19th century, [Belgium](#) was ruled by a French-speaking elite. French indeed was the language of [schooling and higher education](#), administration, justice, and the army, while Flemish was mainly spoken by the lower classes. By 1830 a movement of Flemish intellectuals wished to develop the Flemish artistic and scientific scenes, because they saw this as a first step towards the emancipation of Flanders. The debate eventually focused on the creation of a Flemish [university in Ghent](#), becoming a symbol of the Flemish struggle in other fields. The movement influenced various political parties who started relaying the Flemish demands, strengthened by the new voters who had gained the right to vote in 1894 (universal suffrage for men). At the end of the 19th century, some laws introduced a timid bilingualism (1873 in justice, 1878 in public administration, 1883 in education). However, on the eve of the war little had been accomplished, eliciting frustration and anger among the Flemish. The war caused a profound rift within the Flemish movement, broken up as it was between activists, passivists and frontists.

Flamenpolitik during the First World War

In order to divide and weaken Belgium, the German occupier used Flemish frustrations to develop its [Flamenpolitik](#). This program aimed at reinforcing the bond between the Germans and the Flemish by granting the Flemish the as yet unenforced rights detailed in Belgian legislation. The Flemish extremists, opting for political collaboration with the Germans in view of seeing their requests met, were called activists. These men (and a few women) often came from society's middle-class and had not been involved in politics before the war. They represented a small minority in the Flemish movement. The movement aspired to a federal Belgium, with the more extreme faction dreaming of independence for Flanders.

Over the first two years of the war, the activists formed small and unrelated minority groups in Antwerp, [Brussels](#) and Ghent. However, the movement received a new impetus when the Germans started transforming Belgian institutions. Between October

1916 and March 1917 the Germans divided the Belgian administration, splitting all ministries in a Flemish section and a Walloon section. In October 1916 the Germans struck hard and deep with the creation of a Flemish university in Ghent, realizing the Flemish dream.

Flanders' Autonomy

The activists felt supported and therefore constituted the *Raad van Vlaanderen* (Council of Flanders) in January 1917, symbolizing an independent and autonomous Flanders. The Council was created as a central organization capable both of conducting an activist policy and of voicing Flemish demands on the international scene. The Council was to be a first step in establishing a Flemish parliament and government.

However, the Germans did not support this concept, as it hindered their diplomatic contacts aiming at a separate peace with Belgium. When the Council proclaimed Flanders' independence on 22 December 1917, the Germans nipped the Flemish autonomist ambitions in the bud and forced activists to hold elections in order to legitimize their power. Conscious of their limited popular support, the activists organized meetings during which supporters applauded the declaration of independence. These so-called elections were both a sham and a failure, and contest rallies were held in Antwerp, Mechelen and Turnhout. Simultaneously, the department of justice, obeying orders by the [Belgian government](#) in Le Havre, decided to arrest [August Borms \(1878-1946\)](#) and [Pieter Tack \(1870-1943\)](#), main characters in the Council of Flanders. However, German pressure led to the two activists' immediate release. Belgian magistrates felt powerless and went on strike.

The Passivists

In opposition to the activists, the Flemish who refused collaboration in whatever shape or form and remained loyal to Belgium were called passivists. They were found both in [occupied Belgium](#) and in exile, either in [The Netherlands](#) or with the Belgian government in Le Havre. Among them were many politicians who tried to legally obtain concessions from the Belgian government as a kind of refund for the sacrifices brought during the war. Their efforts to obtain concrete promises from the Belgian government regarding the delicate issue of the use of Flemish both in education and in administration did not meet with much success. This engendered both hostility on the part of Belgian nationalists (who reproached them for raising such questions when the country first and foremost needed unity) and contempt on the part of the activists (who reproached them for their failures and lack of fighting spirit).

On the Belgian Front

The two rival factions were complemented by the *Frontbeweging* (Front Movement). This secret organization saw the light of day on the Belgian front, when a number of Flemish intellectuals wanted to promote language equivalence within the army. It only represented a minority but nevertheless managed to communicate the Flemish struggle and to spread ideas beyond purely intellectual circles.

The Legacy of the Activism

The German defeat forced the activists into exile in [Germany](#) or The Netherlands. Those remaining in Belgium were arrested and put on trial before martial and criminal courts; honorary juries cleansed administration and parties of all activist influences. Some French speakers hoped this condemnation would put an end to all Flemish demands. The Belgian government nevertheless realized the time had now come to take certain measures. In his parliamentary address on 22 November 1918, [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) announced important reforms concerning language parity.

But although the war and its suffering engendered a call for equality, concrete realizations failed to appear. From then onwards new political parties, created around Flemish [nationalism](#), focused on the Flemish demands. Through the war, Flemish nationalism managed to broaden its popular base. It became a mass movement with permanent political weight in Belgium. The war also stimulated the emergence of a Flemish extremist wing with harsher demands, threatening the unity of Belgium.

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