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# Borms, August

By [Christine Van Everbroeck](#)

Borms, *August* Camillus Gislenus Maria  
Flemish nationalist  
Born 14 April 1878 in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium  
Died 12 April 1946 in Etterbeek, Belgium

**As a Flemish nationalist, August Borms actively collaborated with the Germans during the First World War. As a result of his ten-year imprisonment and his death sentence he became a true symbol of Flemish nationalism.**

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## 1. Early Life

After graduating from his hometown's Catholic high school, August Borms (1878-1946) obtained a degree in German philology at the Catholic University of Louvain. He spent his first years as a teacher in Peru. In 1909, he was appointed as a teacher at the Antwerp Athenaeum, an institution known for its Flemish radical activities.

Between 1909 and 1914, he engaged in numerous debates promoting the use of Flemish and became a popular lobbyist in French Flanders, as well as an advocate for the creation of a Flemish [university](#). However, he did not play any part on the political scene.

## 2. Borms' Activism during the First World War

When the First World War broke out, Borms initially respected the political truce. But in November 1914, he participated in the first Flemish gatherings contemplating collaboration with the Germans in the hope of seeing their demands met. As Borms felt Flemish soldiers were unfairly treated at the front, he considered it his duty to do more for the Flemish cause. He resolutely chose activism and collaboration in January 1915. He published several newspapers, spreading the activist ideals in *Antwerpen boven* (*Antwerp Up*), *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws* (*Flemish News*), and *De Antwerpsche Courant* (*The Antwerp Newspaper*), all submitted to German [censorship](#).

As a member of the *Raad van Vlaanderen* (Council of Flanders), the self-proclaimed Flemish parliament, since February 1917, Borms also was present in the *Commissie van Gevolmachtigden* (Committee of Trustees), which viewed itself as the government of independent Flanders. In this framework, he became what could be called the minister of defence. In this capacity he tried to create a militia, prefiguring a Flemish army. He also participated in the activist delegation meeting with Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) in Berlin in March 1917, in order to describe the Flemish plea. He made propaganda visits to [Belgian prisoners'](#) camps in [Germany](#), and by promising a possible return to [Belgium](#) he hoped to enthuse them for the activist cause.

Borms was a recognized figure of activism and as such elicited both veneration and criticism. The resolutions taken by the [Belgian government](#) in Le Havre, condemning collaboration with “bad citizens”, led to his arrest in February 1918, alongside [Pieter Tack \(1870-1943\)](#), president of the Council of Flanders. He was immediately released due to pressure by the German authorities; this increased his aura even further. The episode incidentally caused Belgian magistrates to go on strike.

## 3. The Martyr of Flemish Nationalism

At the end of the war, Borms chose the stay in Belgium. He went into hiding but was eventually arrested and sentenced to death by the Brabant criminal court in September 1919. The sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment.

In the eyes of his friends and supporters, Borms became a true martyr, comparable even to Jesus Christ. He was the symbol of the struggle for amnesty for all Flemish political prisoners, as well as a flag-bearer for the Flemish nationalist movement. Between 1920 and 1929 each and every Flemish nationalist electoral meeting, claims march or political rally honoured the “great Borms”.

His (invalidated) election to a seat in parliament during partial elections in Antwerp in December 1928 hastened his liberation, which was obtained by voting on the clemency law in January 1929.

Throughout the 1930s and without actually occupying a political function as such, Borms remained the primary symbol of Flemish [nationalism](#), a [movement](#) that used and abused his image. His political allies scorned him for his lack of political vision, but the militants adulated him for his sacrifices. He was a true foil during electoral meetings, attracting crowds.

## 4. Collaboration during the Second World War

The day Nazi Germany invaded Belgium, the Belgian government deported Borms together with other undesirable elements (communists, Rexists, suspect foreigners, etc.). He ended up in a refugee camp for Spanish republicans at the foot of the Pyrenees in the south of France. In July 1940 he returned to Belgium, only to start a second collaboration with the Germans. They used him as a propaganda instrument intended to draw the Flemish into collaboration.

The collapse of Nazi Germany sent him to Germany, a country in shambles, where some Flemish collaborators tried to constitute a temporary government in exile, an attempt that would prove quite ephemeral.

Borms was arrested in Berlin in August 1945 and brought to trial in Belgium. The court once again sentenced him to death, and this time, the penalty was executed. Borms was put before the firing squad in April 1946 in the courtyard of the [Brussels](#) state police barracks.

Glorified by his ten years in prison, August Borms became a martyr par excellence, having sacrificed both his life and his family (he was married and the father of six children) for the Flemish cause. His sheer persona mobilized crowds and his image was largely used and misused by his unscrupulous political "friends". Looked down upon and branded by his own group as mediocre and lacking in political weight, he nevertheless became the sublimated symbol of the Flemish movement.

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