

Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Belgium)

By [Laurence van Ypersele](#)

The scope of the commemorations that developed in Belgium and in the remainder of Europe showed the population's need to keep the memory of World War I alive. The majority of Belgian municipalities erected their own war memorials through local subscription, without state support, which allowed the expression of local identity to go unhindered. Due to Belgium's specific experience of war, memorials paid tribute not only to the soldiers (war heroes) but also to civilians (martyrs), to the civilians massacred in August 1914, the patriots killed by the occupying power, and to the deported workmen.

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Introduction: Belgian World War I Memorials

The scope of the commemorations that developed in Belgium and throughout Europe testify to the pressing need felt by the population to keep the memory of World War I alive. Town halls, mostly without state aid, reacted rapidly; most monuments were inaugurated between 1920 and 1924. The last large group of commemorations occurred in 1930, the year of the hundredth anniversary of

Belgian independence. A pressing need can therefore be seen to retain something from the war in order to ensure that people did not die in vain, to recover one's identity, and to secure the future.

Indeed, [total violence](#) prevailed during the First World War. Almost 10 million people [died](#). At the core of this torment, Belgium was particularly vulnerable. Its soldiers suffered the horrors of the trenches and its civilians were used as human shields, were massacred in August 1914, and were deported and used for forced labor in 1916. Additionally, several Belgian cities were destroyed, and the population went hungry and saw its land systematically plundered. At the end of the conflict, Belgium was ruined and left in mourning. Almost 40,000 soldiers fell on the battlefield and 20,000 civilians were killed. But thanks to the firmness of [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#), the Belgian army lost fewer soldiers than the allied or enemy forces. In contrast, however, civilian losses were much higher than in the neighboring countries. As was true throughout Europe, the vision of the world, of man, and of human life was profoundly shaken and monuments sprang up in order to help the population face this collective traumatism.

War memorials are a very rich source for historical study; rather than showing the reality of war, memorials help us to understand the actual or desired representation of war for those living in the period shortly after the war. Indeed, analysis of these monuments, their inscriptions, localization and the commemorations taking place around them discloses a coherent but largely fictive representation of the war. In fact, their purpose is not to remember the horror and suffering with great factual accuracy, but rather to pay tribute to the dead and fight against oblivion. Hence it was necessary to select symbolic locations for these stone memories, locations where people met and socialized. Steles, monuments and obelisks were therefore erected in public places and close to churches and city halls.

Ephemeral Monuments of 22 November 1918

For Belgians, King Albert's "*Joyeuse entrée*" into [Brussels](#) at the head of his troops in November 1918, heralded the end of the war. To welcome their King-Soldier, the atmosphere of the kingdom's capital city was festive;^[1] as early as 18 November, an impressive grant of 500,000 francs was accorded for the festivities. Eighty masts, each fifty meters high, hoisted the Belgian and the allied colors onto the Grand Place, Place Poelaert, Place des Palais and Place de Brouckère. In addition, eight stucco monuments were hastily erected in Brussels to express Belgian patriotism and the country's gratefulness to the Allies.^[2] Only one of these monuments was later cast in bronze, in 1930 on Belgium's hundredth anniversary. This was [Charles Samuel's \(1862-1938\)](#) representation of "La Brabançonne" on the Grand Place, which was eventually located on the Place Surllet de Chokier. The seven other monuments still impressed the crowd with their stately character and their profound patriotism. [Léandre Grandmoulin's \(1873-1957\)](#) monument representing the angel of peace was dedicated to the [United States](#), while [Jacques Marin's \(1877-1950\)](#) tribute to [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#) paid homage to [Great Britain](#). The monument carved by the [Marquis de Pouilly](#) represents a small Belgium driving back a gigantic German wave. [Jules Lagae's \(1862-1931\)](#) monument is

dedicated to King Albert, who, in the monument, is crowned with laurels and dressed in vintage clothing. [Louis Mascré's \(1871-1929\)](#) monument is dedicated to those soldiers who died for the fatherland and strongly expresses sorrow and mourning. [Philippe Wolfers' \(1858-1929\)](#) monument, dedicated to the Belgian heroes, represents the grateful fatherland as two naked women, Flanders and Wallonia, unite in a single gesture of offering and recognition. Finally the monument of [Joseph-François van Hamme \(1878-?\)](#) is dedicated to the wounded. These temporary monuments mainly celebrated military heroes rather than the heroism or martyrdom of civilians, probably because they were initiated by an occupied nation concerned mainly with welcoming the King and the army. Civilian martyrs were soon to be immortalized by grand posthumous funerals and by variously imposing, but enduring, monuments

The Belgian State – Weaknesses, and Clumsiness

To face the mourning and suffering after the war, the high costs of living, and reconstruction, it was necessary to maintain the sense of war as it was lived or imagined during the conflict. Heroes had fallen on the battlefield, in the name of the fatherland, but their memory would remain alive; barbarity was driven back in the name of civilization but the hated enemy would pay for all the evil they had perpetrated. The dead thus deserved to be remembered forever, whereas the consented sacrifices required amends. The memorial's intent was orchestrated not only by those who shared official memory, but also by the entire population. In Belgium, [associations of veterans](#), prisoners, those who had been deported and even simple citizens dictated the course of events to the national authorities. The state found it difficult to impose its decisions and even abandoned them altogether in an effort to stick to the memories experienced by the population shortly after the war.

Indeed, the Belgian state did not want to support the wave of war memorials erected to commemorate local deaths, as illustrated by the attitude of the ministry of "*Beaux Arts*" in charge of grant requests.^[3] After a debate in Parliament in June 1918, the government decided that only war memorials with an artistic character would obtain a state subsidy of up to one-third of the whole cost. In contrast, the project for a great national monument to the soldiers and civilians who died for the country was adopted by Parliament as early as 14 July 1919.^[4] But discussions stalled during the following two years; several locations were proposed without ever reaching a consensus, and the identity of the artists remained debated. Eventually, the Belgian government followed the example of [France](#) and Great Britain; under pressure from the veterans who were supported by public opinion, national funerals were organized in Brussels on 11 November 1922 to celebrate the "Unknown Soldier" buried under the Congress Column. The day before, the bodies of five unidentified soldiers originating from the strongholds of Liege, Namur and Antwerp, as well as from the Yser front and the area re-conquered in the fall of 1918 were gathered in a mortuary chapel at the railway station of Bruges. A blind soldier, guided by the Minister of National Defense, then designated the body of the "Unknown Soldier". In 1924, as a result of the veterans' request, a sacred flame was lit, which today still illuminates the tomb of the great Unknown. From that moment onwards the project of a great national monument, affirming Belgian identity forged by the war through the image of heroes and

martyrs, soldiers and civilians, became obsolete. Indeed it was never realized.

The Triumph of Local War Memorials, 1920 -1924

The majority of municipalities erected their war memorials through local subscription, without state support. Provinces did not contribute, except in Liege, where the provincial identity was strongest. Municipal freedom was triumphant and expressions of local identity went unhindered. At the typological level, the majority of municipalities opted for monuments that were either simple or very sophisticated. Indeed, a little less than half of all monuments were simple plates, and one fourth were monuments with classical style statues, while steles and obelisks form the remainder.

The war memory expressed by these innumerable monuments is rather specific. First it is important to note that, if in France people generally fought and died “for France”, in Belgium they fought almost exclusively “for Homeland”. This idea of the Belgian Fatherland triumphed immediately after the armistice, and is embodied by both soldiers and civilians, in contrast to the other belligerent countries, where it is represented only by military figures. Indeed, while the figure of the Belgian soldier remains the very symbol of national heroism, it does not occupy the entire memorial space. At his side are figures of civilians massacred in August 1914, the patriot shot dead, and the deported.^[5] According to local experience, an individual civilian may take precedence over that of the soldier. In Tamines, for instance, the martyrs of August 1914 are shown to be the most important; on the “Saint-Martin Place”, re-baptized “place des Martyrs”, a gigantic war memorial presents the bodies of fallen civilians, still intact, at the feet of an aching motherland raising its arms to the heavens. This monument, inaugurated in 1926, was created by the architect [Jules Laliere \(1875-1953\)](#) and the sculptor Louis Mascré. In Hainaut and East Flanders, by contrast, the place of deportees is remarkable. Very frequently, they are represented as martyrs, with bent backs or bloodless bodies, as in the Tournai War Memorial, sculpted by [Aloïs De Beule \(1861-1935\)](#) and inaugurated in 1922. Sometimes, though rarely, the deported would also be represented in a heroic attitude, shattering his tools, as in the Binche War Memorial. There is thus no suppression of memory about the occupied territories as is the case in northern France.^[6] Only exiled Belgians are excluded from the collective memory and are thus absent from the war memorials.

Throughout Belgium the memory of heroes and martyrs emphasized the greatness of the fatherland for which they had died ([pacifist](#) war memorials were indeed very rare and only arrived later). The glorification of fighters and civilians alike gave meaning to their deaths; they freely consented to sacrifice for their country and its future -- that is, for the living who owe the martyrs their gratitude. This new country is itself glorified by its children who died as heroes. The Belgian fatherland has multiple facets; the national identity is rooted in local or provincial identities. National symbols, such as the feminine allegory of the country, the lion overcoming the German eagle, or the sovereign representing the Belgian monarchy, interact with local saints, such as in the Mormont village in the municipality of Erezee, the coat of arms of a city like La Louvière, the “perron” of Liege in the surrounding localities or sometimes the “AVV-VVK” (“Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor

Kristus" i.e. "Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ") in Flanders. The Belgian identity in this immediate post-war period resembled a Russian doll, but its various levels are not articulated in the same way in the different locations. The provincial identity is very strong, not only in Liege, but also in [Luxembourg](#). In contrast, Hainaut blends national and local identity without reference to provincial exaltation. Similarly, in the north of the country, the symbolism of the monuments does not oppose national and Flemish identities. Additionally, medieval iconography, so dear to Flemish nationalists, hardly appears on monuments to the dead. In addition, the symbol AVV-VVK is not only a nationalist symbol but also, especially in this period of mourning, a religious symbol.^[7] Throughout Belgium, religious symbols, very present on monuments, express a need for consolation and a hope of eternal life. It is true that they are purely religious in Wallonia but more ambiguous in Flanders

All these deaths, so difficult to justify and even to accept, cannot be represented with all the details of the horrors that accompanied them. Therefore, as elsewhere in Europe, many war memorials represent the soldier as a defender or as a conqueror. On other war memorials it is the image of the fighter or of the deported that unfolds in a serene and even sweet (and sometimes soothing) climate. It is only the victims of the August 1914 massacres that evoke an unbearable pain and that call for revenge. But none of these deaths is disfigured, dirty or ugly; they do not moan, cry or revolt. The soldier dies without fear or suffering, in an impeccable uniform as in the Chatelet War Memorial, sculpted by [Eugène Paulus \(1876-1930\)](#) and inaugurated in 1921. The patriot to be shot by the occupier moves forward with pride, the torso unconstrained or the bandage in hand, to an invisible firing squad, under the sad but dignified view of an allegory of the fatherland. This is the case, for instance, in the La Louviere War memorial sculpted by [Alfred Courtens \(1889-1967\)](#) in homage to the patriot [Omer Lefèvre \(1878-1915\)](#), and inaugurated in the presence of [Elisabeth of Bavaria, Queen of the Belgians \(1876-1965\)](#) in 1923. The heroes never die alone, as they always have somebody close to them, somebody there when they breathe their last breath: brothers in arms, patriotic allegories or divine visions. In addition, a woman or a child sculpted at the base of the monument acts as a testimony of gratefulness and sorrow.

In many families, where war took loved ones, each remaining family member is transformed into a hero, as the memory is engraved in stone or bronze. In fact these war memorials transform the immense catastrophe of 1914-1918 into a "Great War". When we contemplate these monuments we could almost think that war was beautiful, clean and silent: no mud, no blood, no screams. The reality of war is embodied in only two dates: 1914-1918.

Monuments of the 1930s

After the Locarno pact was signed in 1925, it became possible for war memories to be reshaped.^[8] The emphasis on sacrifices for country and hatred of the enemy were supplanted by the idea of common suffering and the desire to put an end to all wars. The soldier was no longer the warrior, consciously defending a sacred cause against infamy, but rather a heroic victim participating in the advent of a war free world; the Great War was transformed into the "last of the last". Belgian national

authorities immediately adhered to this international movement and thereafter refused to participate in the inauguration of war memorials that recalled civilian massacres and accused the German nation of brutality.

However, official remembrance of the [atrocities](#) perpetrated in Belgium by the Germans gave rise to refusal movements led by writers and university professors and supported by large portions of the public. In the “Martyred Cities” a true divorce takes place between official and local memories. In 1936, for instance, the Dinant War Memorial “Furore Teutonico”, which accuses [Germany](#) and restates that there were no irregulars fighters in Dinant, was inaugurated in front of a huge crowd and with local authorities, but without any members of the Royal Family and government representatives. Let us remember that the inscription “Furore Teutonico”, which was initially meant to decorate the central balcony of the Louvain Library, was eventually rejected by the university’s academic authorities who were anxious to promote international scientific relations. This refusal aroused bitter feelings among Louvain inhabitants, convinced that it amounted to an insult to the memory of their city’s martyrs in August 1914; the inauguration of the new Library in 1928 was thus interrupted by boos. As can be seen, the topic of the atrocities remained delicate and the changing of minds and hearts remained relatively superficial.

In 1930, on the occasion of Belgium’s centenary, a few municipalities that had not yet built a war memorial erected them, usually in keeping with the same spirit as in the first half of the 1920s. This was the case, for instance, for the gigantic monument of Andenne, designed by [Angelo Hecq \(1901-1987\)](#). The cruelty of the enemy is clearly illustrated; the monument shows both the civilians slaughtered in August 1914 and the deported leaving with bent backs, suitcases in hand. On top of the memorial, the busts of three Belgian Kings gaze at this sad picture while in the center three Belgian soldiers take the offensive, bayonets in hand. The soldiers thus simultaneously fight for their oppressed fellow citizens, for the monarchy and for their hundred-year-old country. The meaning of the war and of the implicated sacrifices is strongly reaffirmed here. This monument, however, does not accuse Germany directly, unlike many other monuments of the 1920s, which did not hesitate to picture the German eagle with its beak open and wings spread, ready to pounce on its innocent prey.

In contrast, the Locarno spirit suited the Flemish [nationalists](#). The veteran associations, for instance, were more pacifist in Flanders than in Wallonia. In addition, the radical wing of the [Flemish movement](#) seized on the cult of the dead to give it specific, anti-Belgian shapes. Indeed, tombs laden with a forceful symbolic load appear in graveyards and suggest a form of political cult of the dead at variance with the official cult assumed by national authorities. These graves are somehow “antimemoires” which transform frontist and activist traitors into martyrs for the Flemish cause. The theme of the martyr is particularly important for the romantic mysticism of Flemish nationalism. It covers the entirety of the sacrifices borne by the Flemish during a war for an alien cause. The Yser Tower, of both Christian and Flemish inspiration, became its most apparent symbol; the tower’s foundation stone was laid in 1928 and inaugurated on 24 August 1930.^[9] This gigantic, pacifist monument, located in the vicinity of Dixmude, in the Westhoek, is dedicated to all Flemish soldiers who died between 1914 and 1918. The entrance door is dedicated to “Peace”. The eighty-four meter

tower, reaffirms pacifism with the inscription “nooit meer oorlog” (“never again war”) in four languages, and proclaims its allegiance to Flemish nationalism with the inscription “AVV-VVK”. However this monument is atypical; in the 1930s the majority of war memorials tried to perpetuate the memory of “our Great Dead”, to reaffirm the meaning of the Great War, and to express the debt of gratitude owed to the deceased.

It is also at this late stage that countries that fought on Belgian soil inaugurated some important monuments to their dead and missing. This is particularly true of the British, the only nation not to have repatriated the bodies of their nationals. The [Menin Gate](#), designed by Sir [Reginald Blomfield \(1856-1942\)](#) and built for the [British government](#), was inaugurated in Ypres in 1927. This triumphal arch contains the names of 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers who died in the area. Additionally, the memorial in Ploegsteert was erected to the memory of 11,367 Commonwealth soldiers who had gone missing during the First World War. Designed by architect [Harold Chalton Bradshaw \(1893-1943\)](#) and sculptor [Gilbert Ledward \(1888-1960\)](#), and it was inaugurated in 1931. The British, however, are not the only ones to mark the Belgian landscape with their memorial footprints. In the present German cemetery near Vladslo Dixmude, is a monument sculpted by [Käthe Kollwitz \(1867-1945\)](#) in 1932 in memory of her son Peter who died in 1914. The monument is of a father and mother, kneeling side by side, expressing the eternal and silent grief of the bereaved.

Conclusion

The memorials built after the Great War played a lasting role in Belgium throughout the 20th century. Indeed, at the end of World War II, Belgians turned instinctively to the war imagery that had been created immediately after the First World War. This imagery was meant to honor the dead and victims of the war and to raise them to the status of heroes (the resisters) and martyrs (the others). Even though the Second World War was not a repetition of 1914-1918, as after the First World War, the dead were glorified and seen as having sacrificed themselves for the fatherland. It is self-evident that immediately after the war the specificities of the Nazi occupation were still absent. Twenty years more would be needed to achieve that recognition. The names of the 1940-1945 victims were therefore engraved on monuments to the First World War. Similarly 11 November commemorations and the ‘Unknown Soldier’ ceremonies helped to assimilate the heroes of the Second World War with those of the First. Still, World War II rapidly superseded World War I as the main war to be commemorated; nobody will henceforth be able to ignore that 1914-1918 was not “the last of the last”.

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Notes

1. † Claisse, Stéphanie: *Ils ont bien mérité de la Patrie! Monuments aux soldats et aux civils belges de la Grande Guerre. Mémoire(s) et Reconnaissance (1918-1924)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Thèse de doctorat UCL (inédit), 2005-2006, p. 69-79.
2. † These monuments are known only through postcards kept in the Dexia fund. They were ordered by the city, from renowned artists of whom six were from Brussels, one French (the Marquis de Pouilly) and one from Roulers (Jules Lagae).
3. † An administrative of the “Beaux-Arts” ministry noted on 31 December 1918: “I believe that there will be no need for the government to suscite projects of commemorative monuments. These projects will arise spontaneously; they already arise; let us hope, without stating it, that in their mass some will be beautiful or satisfying”. (AGR, Anc. Fds des B-A, 100A, dossier 53).
4. † Its principle is adopted under item four of the 14 July 1919 law relative to the commemoration and glorification of the dead and the sentenced to death for Belgium during the Great War.
5. † Tixhon, Axel / Van Ypersele, Laurence: “Du sang et des pierres”, in *Cahiers d’Histoire du Temps Présent*, 7 (2000), p. 83-126.
6. † Becker, Annette: *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre*, Paris 1998.
7. † Jacobs, Mariette: *Zij die vielen als helden... Cultuurhistorische analyse van de oorlogsgedenktekens van de twee wereldoorlogen in West-Vlaanderen*, Brugge 1995.
8. † Horne, John: “Locarno et la politique de démobilisation culturelle. 1925-1930”, in *Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre (14-18, Aujourd’hui, Today, Heute)*, 5 (mai 2002), pp. 73-87.
9. † Seberechts, Frank: “Slechts de graven maken een land tot vaderland”, in: *Duurzamer dan graniet. Over monumenten en Vlaamse beweging*, Tielt 2003, p. 123-154. In the period between the two wars, these Yser pilgrimages generated virulent controversies between the Flamings and the Belgian patriots.

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