

Flamenpolitik

By [Antoon Vrints](#)

The German *Flamenpolitik* during the First World War aimed to instrumentalise the Flemish movement in order to ensure lasting German control over Belgium. It did not divide the Belgian or even Flemish population as a whole, but managed to split the Flemish movement in an anti-Belgian and a Belgian-loyal wing.

Table of Contents

[1 The Flemish Movement Instrumentalised](#)

[2 The Flemish Movement Divided](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

The Flemish Movement Instrumentalised

The *Flamenpolitik* consisted of the German policy of instrumentalising the [Flemish movement](#) in order to ensure German influence in [Belgium](#) in both the short- and the long-run. The Germans wanted to break Belgian [anti-German patriotism](#) by stimulating internal [tensions](#). To achieve this goal the Germans wished to alienate the Flemish movement from the Belgian cause and sense of nationhood by stimulating the Dutch language and culture in Belgium. [Germany](#) wanted to make use of the [occupation](#) to impose itself as the natural and lasting protector of the Flemings. If Germany were to be forced to give up Belgium, it still would be able to exercise great influence through its new pro-German Flemish [nationalist](#) allies. In a broader perspective, *Flamenpolitik* aimed at maximising German influence in the Low Countries as a whole, and even beyond. From the very beginning it had a particular pan-Dutch flavour, since it was meant to strengthen sympathy for Germany in the [neutral](#) Kingdom of [the Netherlands](#). The prospect of a Greater Netherlands or at least a weakened Belgium was used to try to lure the Northern Netherlands into the German zone of influence. Similarly, the pan-Dutch card opened good prospects for German advancement in French Flanders and [Southern Africa](#).

Before the First World War, the [German government](#) did not intervene in internal Belgian affairs, since it had been quite happy during the thirty-year conservative rule of the Catholic party, which kept its distance from republican [France](#). However, in German [imperialist](#) and nationalist interest groups like the *Alldeutscher Verband*, the *Flottenverein* and *Kolonialverein*, the necessity of integrating the Low Countries in the German sphere had been vividly discussed for decades on both *völkische* and geopolitical grounds. When it became clear that Belgium resisted the German invasion in August 1914, a number of plans what to do with the conquered kingdom – now generally perceived as “artificial” since it lacked *völkische* coherence – saw the light of day. These plans strongly diverged on the methods – (partial) annexation or the creation of satellite state(s) – but shared the common goal of lasting German dominance in Belgium. Each of the plans reflected pre-war thinking. The presumed ethnic rift between Flemings and Walloons was a major topic in most of these plans.

The Flemish Movement Divided

Even before the Dutch-speaking provinces were occupied, *Flamenpolitik* was initiated at the very highest level in Germany. Acting as a strong force, Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) ordered the German administration in [Brussels](#) to stimulate the Flemish movement on 2 September 1914. By the winter of 1914-15 a concrete program had been

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developed: support for the Dutch language with, as its *pièce-de-résistance*, the Dutchification of the state [University of Ghent](#) (the main pre-war demand of the Flemish Movement), the intensification of relations with Holland and administrative separation between Flanders and Wallonia (an idea almost absent in the Flemish Movement before 1914). This program was to be cautiously but systematically elaborated by the governor-generals of occupied Belgium. In 1916, Ghent University was re-opened with Dutch as the language of instruction. In 1917, a puppet parliament, the *Raad van Vlaanderen* (Council of Flanders), was created, and administrative separation was introduced. The military authorities in the *Etappengebiet* followed a more radical, overtly anti-Belgian policy which led to persistent conflicts with the *General-Gouvernement*. As both the authorities in the *General-Gouvernement* and *Etappengebiet* wanted to weaken or destroy Belgium, the difference was only tactical. In order to be successful, the governor-generals knew that they had to operate cautiously given the strength of Belgian nationalism and anti-German feelings.

Flamenpolitik did not divide the Belgian or even Flemish population as a whole, but managed to tear apart the Flemish movement. A minority of the adherents of the Flemish movement were willing to collaborate (the so-called *activisme*) with the result that the Flemish movement was permanently divided into a loyalist and an anti-Belgian wing. During the war, the effects of the *Flamenpolitik* on the ground might have remained meagre as it met popular resistance or indifference, however, in the longer run *Flamenpolitik* had a long lasting impact on Belgian history by stimulating the creation of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism as a political current. Until the early 1920s the Weimar Republic discreetly continued its *Flamenpolitik*; the Nazis later reactivated it. During the Second World War, [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) ordered a new *Flamenpolitik*; with a living memory of the administrative chaos created as a result of the administrative separation during the First World War, the German authorities largely limited themselves to the release of Flemish – and not Walloon – [prisoners of war](#) and the massive nomination of Flemish nationalists in the Belgian administrations.

Antoon Vrints, Ghent University

Section Editor: [Emmanuel Debruyne](#)

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