

3

'I am also a Foreigner, but with Me it's Different': Polish Displaced Persons, War Memory and Ethnification in Belgium

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It is estimated that during Second World War up to twenty million people left their homes. Many did not want to go back after their liberation since their homelands were within the Soviet sphere of influence and they feared that they would encounter repression. Following the unsuccessful attempt by the Allied Forces to repatriate all these people, a special body, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), granted them the status of Displaced Persons and coordinated their settlement in the Atlantic World. The Displaced Persons described in this chapter belonged to the First Polish Armoured Division. It was established in Poland in the 1930s and numbered, at its peak, about 16,000 soldiers. After the invasion by the Soviet Union in September 1939, the Division fled the country and marched through Southern Europe and France. It stayed in Great Britain for four years, and then helped to liberate Northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In sixteen days it passed through Flanders.¹ During their stay, many soldiers fell in love with young Flemish women. After the Division had passed through the Netherlands, it hoped to march on and liberate Poland, but in February 1945 the Yalta Conference consolidated the Soviet Union's influence over Poland. After the war, the Division was deployed as an occupying force in Germany for two years. When it was dissolved, all the soldiers who did not return to the Polish People's Republic lost their Polish citizenship and received Displaced Persons' status.² About three hundred of them married Flemish women and settled in the Flemish cities they had helped to liberate.³

For more than sixty years, starting in a polarised world during the Cold War and ending up in a unified Europe after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, these Displaced Persons asked for, were offered, or were deprived of incorporation in their Belgian host society. In this chapter, I explain how immigrant organisations containing former Division soldiers from Poland in Belgium promoted their case, gained power, and developed relations over time.

Displaced Persons (DPs) were overlooked in official collective war memories, and they receive little mention in general historical overviews of Europe's migration history. It is time to use the insights of both memory and migration studies to look at the incorporation of Displaced Persons. Only such a combined effort can shed light on the way perceptions of the past and of ethnicity affected their post-War incorporation over time. In what follows, I will explain how keystone social memory and migration paradigms contributed to ignorance of DPs' war memories, and their role in DPs' incorporation. Later, I present the theoretical framework developed for this study, which creatively borrows from both disciplines. Subsequently, a case study on the incorporation of a specific group of Displaced Persons in Belgium is discussed: former soldiers of the First Polish Armoured Division. As will become clear, their incorporation went through three phases, starting from local incorporation, evolving to national incorporation, and recently moving on to European incorporation.

Displaced Persons and Memory Studies

Displaced Persons were overlooked in official collective war memories. There does not exist, for example, a single Displaced Persons' group that has produced a shared war memory. Just like DPs, Prisoners of War (POWs) and resistance fighters had different backgrounds and various political opinions, but shared similar war experiences. In the post-War era, however, they came to be seen as homogenised groups with specific narratives of war memory, narratives that played an important role in various Western nation states.⁴ Historical research on war memory has mainly concentrated on nation states as frameworks of reference. The characteristics of nation states prescribe the access of people to, and the expressions of war memories in, pre-existing or newly shaped spaces of war memory articulation. The extent to which a nation state allows civil society movements or other social groups to debate its official war memory determines the possibilities of tolerating, or even integrating, the articulation of oppositional memories. Although nation states in

the Atlantic World during the Cold War era had a more open attitude in this respect than the ones 'behind the Iron Curtain', they did not prevent certain people from being more or less ignored. As nation states are constructions designed at the end of the eighteenth century in the image of the male citizen, as a result leaving other individuals such as women and non-citizens outside that project, the war experiences of people considered to be 'foreign' to the nation state were overlooked in official collective war memories.⁵

Changes in society over time have influenced research on war memories' articulation. Second-wave feminism in the Atlantic World, for instance, criticised the solely male representation in war memory.⁶ Feminist scholars saw it as their task to offer female war survivors a voice and started to collect oral testimonies. Besides second-wave feminism, another evolution has boosted the emergence of oral testimonies. As many war survivors are living their last days, recording their individual life stories is considered to be a means of preserving the reality of suffering, humiliation and death. It has led to the current situation in which written, oral or audio-visual personal testimonies have themselves become spaces of war memory articulation.⁷ Over the last couple of years, many testimonies by former soldiers of the First Polish Armoured Division have been made public. Ex-combatants published their own monographs whilst journalists and oral historians collected several testimonies and presented them in a biographical, thematic, or artistic way.⁸

To date, scholars have mainly followed these two tracks of memory articulation and focused either on official memory politics, or on oral testimonies. In conducting them separately, academics failed to pay attention to what led people to articulate their memories in these spaces. Historians working on war memory happened to have missed out on unravelling why DPs remained invisible to nation states during the Cold War. Looking at their war memories offers a unique perspective. As newcomers on the fringes of society, they interacted with host societies' memories and were offered or deprived of access to war memory articulation in public spaces.⁹

Displaced Persons and Migration Studies

In general historical overviews of Europe's migration history, DPs receive little mention.¹⁰ Since the 1990s, various studies have analysed ethnic groups of Displaced Persons (categorised by these historians) in one nation state or another over certain periods of time. In this process,

a history of 'Polish' Displaced Persons, 'Ukrainian' Displaced Persons, and so on came into existence. Nonetheless, studies on the identification of specific 'ethnified' DPs start from their arrival in their country of settlement and pay little or no attention to their war experiences and memories.¹¹

Recently, migration historians made a link between immigrants, their memories and their incorporation in European nation states during the Cold War era. Mareike König and Rainer Ohliger argued that only certain immigrants, as non-members or members on the margins, were perceived to be privileged newcomers. By means of a representation of their specificity, they could receive a visible place in society. The authors spoke for instance of post-colonial migrants and political refugees, who often could make use of a victim status based on their memories of experiences undergone before arrival to facilitate their incorporation. Other immigrants, such as labour immigrants, remained for a long time absent from representations.¹²

The Displaced Persons who came to Belgium, for instance, were above all miners recruited through the IRO, but to a lesser extent also students with a stipend and people who married Belgian citizens.¹³ For a long time, they were considered labour migrants, and were not distinguished from miners recruited from other countries, such as Italy, Turkey, Greece and Morocco.¹⁴ In the 1990s, refugee arrivals to the country inspired migration historians to look for similar arrivals in the past and for the incorporation of these past refugees.

Academic literature in the English language also focused on contacts between ethnified Poles. The sociologist Mary Erdmans, for example, analysed frictions between two different waves of Polish migrants in the United States: Polish Americans and Poles arriving during the Solidarity era.¹⁵ By contrast, Keith Sword looked at different ways in which first and second generation members of what he called the 'Polish community' interact with their British host society.¹⁶

Theoretical Framework

In order to research the incorporation of Displaced Persons, I have developed a framework that borrows concepts from both migration and Memory Studies. It assumes that migrants do not assimilate or adapt to the ethnic majority in a society, as was previously often assumed in migration studies.¹⁷ Instead, it maintains that immigrants come into contact with certain aspects of the society in which they reside that are important either for them or for the people who execute power over

them. I consider that, in line with Pierre Bourdieu, these certain aspects can be called fields, and that a society consists of various interdependent fields that engage persons according to their personal characteristics and to the constellations of power in their host societies.¹⁸

For the Displaced Persons I discuss in this chapter, giving meaning to their war experiences through the construction and articulation of a representation of these experiences was their main procedure for finding coherence in relation to themselves and to others. Not ethnicity, but war and its aftermath were important for their personal belonging and for the building of relationships with others in their new living environments. The various sources I gathered, ranging from oral testimonies to the bulletins of their organisations, their letters, and the decoration of their living rooms, first and foremost represented their war experiences. In this chapter, I therefore concentrate on what I call the cultural field of war memory and analyse Displaced Persons processes of negotiation within this changing field over time. I consider this field to contain all the narratives of war memory which are visible in the public sphere of a given society. Narratives are defined as reformulating an event or experience and helping people to identify themselves, i.e. to find coherence in relation to themselves and others.¹⁹ Following the literary historian, Susan R. Suleiman, narratives of war memory are said to mould war survivors' contingent war experiences into a coherent explanation for the present.²⁰ Such narratives of war memory operate as a cultural field within society, where different and changing interests are at stake. Timothy Ashplant and his colleagues have described how such interests are represented by what they call various agencies. Dominant agencies in articulating narratives of war memory are nation states and other elites, such as civil society agencies. Dominant agencies produce standardised articulations of what, according to them, the war represented.²¹

The memory building of the Displaced Persons described in this chapter interacted with similar processes of memory construction and articulation in narratives operating in the DPs' host society. This brings me back to migration studies and their focus on incorporation. When using ideas from migration studies within the light of the historical paradigm of memory, one can say that the way narratives of the war memory of DPs are constructed and articulated in the public sphere indicates DPs' incorporation into the host society. Depending both on the way the host society defines 'foreignness' (that is, how they draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them') and the power and creativity DPs have to negotiate these boundaries, various ways of incorporation are possible.²²

Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept 'collective memory', and in this way linked memory to social groups. According to Halbwachs, individuals are living among others, and consciously or not, are always exchanging their experiences. Inspired by Halbwachs, I am interested in the memories of people who share war experiences and, specifically, in the way in which their war experiences found articulation in the groups they formed. Due to the absence of their war experiences in national narratives of war memory, they gathered among themselves to remember. In this chapter, I therefore focus on the process of group formation taking place among former soldiers of the First Polish Armoured Division, and on the construction and articulation of narratives on war memory within their groups.

The nature and objectives of the organisations of a particular immigrant population can reveal much about its interaction with other people, the nation state, transnational networks and so on.²³ Organisations operate at the *meso* level and for this reason offer a unique entrance to research into immigrants' negotiations with, for example, each other, neighbours and the state. Organisations demonstrate immigrants' agency in using selected representations of historical experiences in order to influence their acceptance in their host society. This chapter analyses the various representations of the past the Displaced Persons at issue articulated and encountered within their immigrant organisations throughout the sixty-five years of their incorporation process. Various agencies articulating narratives in that field clashed over who should be remembered, and how such remembrance could be articulated. This created a power struggle with various mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.²⁴

Local Incorporation: 1945–1975

During the Cold War, nation states and civil society organisations formulated narratives that reinterpreted the events of Second World War through the perspective of the ongoing geopolitical crisis. The Western world was eager to equate communism with Nazism and set itself the duty of contending with this new but similar form of totalitarianism, whereas, behind the Iron Curtain, it was stressed that the Soviets' continuous concern for peace in the world, brilliantly displayed through the Soviet Union's participation in the defeat of the fascist Nazi regime, had now been forgotten by Great Britain and America. These narratives could only be installed because these agencies deliberately played up some parts of their war experience while suppressing other

areas. In the Atlantic World, for example, especially in the countries that had been occupied during Second World War, efforts were made to exaggerate all actions of resistance against the Nazi regime and to expunge any forms of collaboration with the Nazis from the official war memory. Despite the contradictory nature of the anti-totalitarian and anti-fascist narratives, they both attempted to silence the part played by 'foreign' people. The heroes and victims focused on the dominant narratives of war memory. Resistance participants and communist martyrs were people whom the various Atlantic World and Warsaw Pact nation states considered to be crucial for their nation state's identification.²⁵

Every country in Europe had to contend with its own specific war experiences, which were not necessarily applicable to others. The Belgian nation state faced enormous internal divisions, which were only partially addressed in its post-War national narrative. Contrary to the situation in First World War, Belgians had hardly fought on Belgian territory. Moreover, resistance fighters were smaller in number than people supporting Nazi occupation, and cooperation with the Nazi regime differed in Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders, for instance, certain Flemish movements highlighted the common 'ethnic' Germanic background of the Flemish and the Nazis during the war. Aiming to stimulate national identification, however, Belgium's immediate post-War national narrative let people believe that the whole country had resisted the Germans, even if few had fought them, and put a lid on remembering collaborationist activities. As such, liberated Belgium initially redefined itself through an imagined national identification of collective resistance and a deliberate forgetting of whatever did not fit into that narrative. Whereas Belgian patriotic organisations at first enjoyed support for their narratives of war memory in Belgian political circles, their influence declined by the end of the 1950s. The biggest Flemish political party, the Christian People's Party, articulated a narrative of war memory aligned with collaborationism and made it a strategy for greater autonomy for Flanders within Belgium. This stance resulted from the party's desire to regain power in 1957 by opposing the reigning anti-Catholic so-called 'Government of the Resistance'.²⁶ The link between Flemish Catholicism and collaborationism proliferated throughout the following decades.

Both the Belgian nation state and various civil society organisations were involved in producing narratives of war memory in the public sphere, and their efforts resulted in a patchwork of narratives that together represented a Belgian cultural field of war memory. Over the years, various people with similar war experiences, such as resistance

fighters, labour conscripts and victims of Nazi persecution, each formed their own group narratives of war memory, each lobbying politically for their own case, and in this way they searched for their path of incorporation in that constructed cultural field of war memory.

Initially, former Division soldiers in Belgium met up informally every so often with each other and went for a beer together or stopped for a chat in a grocery shop run by a former Division soldier.²⁷ Sometimes, local city councils were willing to offer support to this informal group formation as they considered the former Division soldiers to be liberators who had won Second World War in Belgium but had lost it back home, due to which they could not return.²⁸ These councils were generous in their financial and moral support for 'their' liberators by offering funding, objects of commemoration and parading opportunities. Their generosity can be explained by the fact that in the liberated areas, where the former Division soldiers settled, Catholics always had more political power than Socialists. Although the former Division soldiers had settled here for personal reasons, their religious backgrounds gained the approval of the political majority. Because of the support offered, their informal gatherings grew to become formal organisations. The city council of Ghent, for example, offered former Division soldiers infrastructural and financial support so that they could meet up in a house allocated to political refugees, who then established the Polish Colony of Former Soldiers and Catholic Association (PKVMKG) and began publishing a quarterly bulletin.²⁹

Due to its success at gathering together former Division soldiers settled in both Belgium and the Netherlands, it ambitiously renamed itself 'The Benelux Circle'. Seeing the experiences of the First Polish Armoured Division through the eyes of the ongoing Cold War, it was as if history had simply started with 'Catholic Poles' liberating Flanders. The establishment of the communist Polish People's Republic meant that they could not achieve the 'freedom of Poland', however, which forced them to stay in exile. Such a focus also legitimised the settlement of its members in Belgium as 'victims of communism'.³⁰ In some other cities where DPs settled, the same formal organising process occurred on a smaller scale.³¹ Within the liberated areas, they thus became remembered as brave Catholic Polish soldiers who liberated Flanders but were betrayed by communism. Over the years, a successful cult was developed which combined heroism and political victimisation. Interestingly, Belgian agencies offering support were initially councils of liberated cities, and not Belgian patriotic organisations. The favourable opportunities offered by local political agencies thus led to a growth of various former

Divisional soldiers' organisations. Building up what one could call a local and prestigious 'Polish ex-combatant' pillar within the cultural field of war memory in Belgium was a successful way of obtaining a voice and becoming locally incorporated. This observation runs counter to research, which depicts immigrant organisations as only concerned with their own people and as bastions hindering incorporation.³²

National Incorporation: 1976–2002

The Benelux Circle's authority was challenged in 1976, when the Belgian Association for Polish Ex-Combatants (BVPO) was founded in Antwerp.³³ The initiative was taken by a former Division soldier, Edmund Kaczyński, who had been declared 20 per cent disabled after Second World War, and wanted, now that his professional career was in a downward spiral, to receive financial compensation for his handicap.³⁴ The BVPO was initially small, but would have far-reaching consequences.

In its opening manifesto, the BVPO stated its objectives as striving for the same rights as Belgian ex-combatants not on a local level, but on a national level.³⁵ It therefore made contact with local Belgian patriotic organisations. Such organisations had been averse to contacts with former Division soldiers before but now supported the idea. Each year, on 11 November, Belgian patriotic organisations held parades to commemorate the end of First World War. In the 1970s, Belgian First World War ex-combatants were dying out, which meant these organisations were in need of people in ex-combatant uniforms to represent the missing First World War ex-combatants. Since Belgians had hardly fought on Belgian territory during Second World War, they looked for former Allied soldiers. Most of these former Allied soldiers, such as the Canadians, had returned home after the Liberation. As a result, several of the former Polish Division soldiers were invited to become members of Belgian patriotic organisations and to participate in the commemoration services of First World War.³⁶

The BVPO claimed that its members should receive the same rights as Belgian ex-combatants, which means that their pensions should take account of their years of service in the army, and that they should be granted the same privileges, such as a discount on public transportation, financial compensation in case of war invalidity, and cheaper health care.³⁷ With the help of their partners, the BVPO lobbied for its case. In 1983, a Royal Decree was passed, which came into effect a year later, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Liberation.³⁸ It granted all foreign soldiers, who held Belgian citizenship and had been

part of the Allied Forces during Second World War, a moral statute that enabled them to receive military decorations. However, there was no mention of war pensions or discounts in health care. In the following two years, 74 former Division soldiers received this moral ex-combatant status via the BVPO.³⁹

The Benelux Circle and the BVPO appeared to be very different organisations. Whereas the Circle concentrated its activities within the territory of the liberated cities and enjoyed sympathy from city councils and the local population, the BVPO strived for recognition at a national level. While the Benelux Circle cooperated with city councils, the BVPO managed to set up links with Belgian patriotic organisations. In addition, the BVPO filled a need that the Benelux Circle had overlooked. More important than commemoration services of the First Polish Armoured Division's contribution to the liberation of Belgium on a local level, it was raising its members' material needs at the national Belgian level. On the initiative of the BVPO, Belgian patriotic organisations started to lobby for equal ex-combatant rights. After approval of the ex-combatant statute for former Division soldiers, the Belgian Government used the BVPO to implement its policy, thereby recognising that the BVPO could function as a bridge between the state and individual immigrants.⁴⁰

That Edmund Kaczyński had played a vital role in the BVPO became clear once more when he died in 1989. After his death, it quickly declined to a mere paper organisation. The Benelux Circle opened its doors to all former Division soldiers, regardless of their previous organisational engagement. It established contact with its successor in Poland: the First Polish Armoured Division in Żagań, and started to cooperate with local Belgian politicians in lobbying for more ex-combatant rights in the Belgian Parliament.⁴¹ This time it did so with success: in 2002, former Division soldiers were granted an annual financial compensation according to the number of years they had served in the army.⁴² By doing so, the Belgian state granted former Division soldiers exactly the same rights as soldiers who had held Belgian citizenship during Second World War. From the Belgian state's point of view, there was no longer a difference in treatment between the former and the latter. National incorporation had succeeded.⁴³

National or European Incorporation: 1980s–2005

From the 1980s onwards, a new challenge appeared as new Polish migrants began to arrive in Belgium. These were Polish refugees escaping martial law and new, mostly irregular, Polish immigrants who

came to Belgium for work after the collapse of communism. Members of the Benelux Circle kept a distance from the newly arrived Polish immigrants. They felt that after almost half a century, the newcomers could challenge their successful national incorporation. They realised that the status of foreign liberators, on which they had been able to build their exclusiveness, could now all of a sudden be threatened. Consequently, they started to stress their *Belgianness* as the following respondent exemplified:

I don't say I am against foreigners
 I am also a foreigner
 but with me it is different
 I do not have to be ashamed
 I am with Belgian organisations and so on and so forth⁴⁴

The differences between former Division soldiers and the newly arrived Polish immigrants were indeed large. First, former Division soldiers had stayed in exile because they refused to recognise the communist regime in the Polish People's Republic, while the new Polish immigrants had been brought up within the communist system. Secondly, whereas former Division soldiers in the late 1940s had only had the right to settle in Belgium when they had an officially recognised labour contract, Belgian migration policy offered Polish refugees a *per diem* supplement, and Polish labour migrants mostly worked illegally. Citizens from the new member states of the EU were not granted full open access to the Belgian labour market until 1 May 2009. Representatives of Polish immigrant organisations say that the change of 1 May 2009 did not lead to more Polish citizens arriving for working opportunities in Belgium, but that more of them legalised their contracts.⁴⁵ And thirdly, former Division soldiers had Belgian wives, had become fluent in Flemish, and had built up a local social network. By contrast, new immigrants mostly had Polish partners, did not know Flemish and socialised mainly amongst themselves. The interviewee distanced himself from these new Polish immigrants.

But the exclusiveness former Division soldiers bestowed upon themselves was nonetheless a dead end now that they were growing older. On 3 April 2005, the Benelux Circle gathered its members in order to decide which organisation they could transfer the task of preserving their tradition to. It was proposed to join a Belgian patriotic organisation. The vote for that option stirred up so much emotion that people, who had got on well for more than 60 years, suddenly found themselves in opposite camps.⁴⁶

Whereas during the Cold War, history had simply started with 'Catholic Poles' liberating Flanders, now the recruitment element in the First Armoured Polish Division during Second World War became of crucial importance. During the Cold War that past remained hidden, but on the eve of a merger, Belgian patriotic organisations wanted this to be clarified. It turned out that the Division consisted not only of the soldiers who had left Poland in 1939 but also of people who had found their way to Great Britain between 1940 and 1944, having escaped from various prisoner of war and concentration camps in Europe, Siberia and Africa, or having managed to switch from the German front to the French or Belgian front. The latter were mostly people from Silesia who had voluntarily or forcibly been enrolled in the Nazi army and had managed to escape. The ones who had arrived in Great Britain could join the Division after going through a collaboration investigation and taking on a pseudonym, whereas the ones who had only met the Division in Belgium, simply shipped in somewhere on its liberation march.⁴⁷ Before a merger could take place, the Belgian patriotic organisation wanted to check the curriculum vitae of every single former Division soldier. It had been convenient for the former Division soldiers that the way Second World War had been remembered during the Cold War had centred around their post-War political anti-communist convictions. In addition, the fact that each year they remembered the liberation of the cities in which they had settled served to emphasise this 'safe' and common aspect of their war experiences. Detailing the whole of their war experiences turned out to open up 'unsafe' information and to divide them. The ones who did not join the division in 1939 would have to justify their possible engagement with the Nazi army. The members of the Benelux Circle were unable to reach an agreement as to whether they could allow having their individual war experiences checked.

Therefore, they finally decided to ally with the BVPO. In 1995, the BVPO resumed activity. Deprived of most of its former Division soldier members, it had addressed itself to new Polish immigrants and, as a consequence, became a social meeting point for people of proclaimed ethnic Polish descent.⁴⁸ In the end, the Benelux Circle members decided to merge with the new Polish immigrants of the BVPO, whom they had kept away from before.

European Incorporation: 2005–present

In the BVPO, former Division soldiers were welcomed with open arms. Their presence actually provided new Polish migrant members with an

extremely good argument to defend their stay in Belgium. Many new Polish migrants felt inferior to Belgians and other EU citizens because they were not granted the same rights on the Belgian labour market, and the narrative they developed about their presence in Belgium aimed to compensate for this feeling.⁴⁹

That narrative identified former Division soldiers as fellow ethnics. For example, in a speech made by the Secretary of the BVPO during an honorary meeting for the former Division soldiers, he addressed members in the following way:

Again we are gathered to honour some of *our* ex-combatants. About their role in the battles at all fronts of the Second World War a lot has been said and written. Today, I want to say something else. [I want to speak] about your impression, dear ex-combatants, on all of us who live abroad. *We are all migrants* and although the reasons [for migration] differ, for nobody it was easy, especially not emotionally. *The history of all of us is different. But there is something that binds us together: our love for our language, culture and traditions. I think I can say, in my name, but also in the name of the many Poles in Belgium: "Your lives, dear ex-combatants, were and are for us the example of a Polish emigrant."*⁵⁰

The self-evident ethnified link between new Polish immigrant members and former Division soldiers included new themes relating to Europeanisation and freedom. After all, had these former Division soldiers not been the forerunners of peace in Europe and did not the new Polish immigrant members have to continue to build a unified and peaceful Europe? The President of the BVPO, for instance, wrote the following about the merger in the organisation's bulletin: 'I have the hope that all members, sympathisers and friends will become members of our new organisation, which will enable us to take part in the further building of a Unified Europe, a Europe without war'.⁵¹

The president's interpretation of war memory transcends a nation-oriented focus. He encourages all members to function as guardians of peaceful Europeanisation, following in the footsteps of the former Division soldiers. He bestows an important mission on the members, one that can justify their presence in Belgium for more than merely labour-related reasons. That mission is articulated in memory practices at a visible touchstone of the past: the war cemetery in Lommel, where those Division soldiers who died during the liberation of Belgium are buried.⁵² Polish immigrant press articles, for example, speak about the

duty to go to the cemetery and to remember the fallen former Division soldiers. An article in the popular *Gazette* from November 2007 reads:

We associate 'All Saints' and All Souls' Day in the first place with visiting cemeteries, burning candles and praying for our deceased family members, friends and acquaintances (...). It is also the time we remember our ancestors, thanks to whom we exist. We tell our children about our family members, whom they never knew nor remember, but whom we don't want them to forget. We remember those who are already not among us, but will remain in our hearts and memories. It is also a special moment for reflection on our own life and destiny. Those of us who live in a foreign country, travel to their homeland or try to experience those days according to Polish tradition (...). If we cannot travel to our homeland, let's go to Belgian cemeteries. *Let's search the graves of our countrymen, who stayed forever on Belgian soil. Let's go to the cemetery of Polish soldiers in Lommel and let's burn a candle on the graves of those who gave their life for the freedom of Europe.*⁵³

In summary, after the collapse of communism, new lines of contention emerged among former Division soldiers. Former Division soldiers lost their credibility in Belgian patriotic organisations, but found new support among freshly arrived 'ethnic' fellows who championed them as the forerunners of peace in Europe. One could say that their national incorporation is in decline. Although they still enjoy the same rights as Belgian ex-combatants, former Division soldiers lost the sympathy of Belgian patriotic organisations. However, the merger of the Benelux Circle with 'Polish' newcomers could perhaps be a contemporary form of incorporation in a Europeanised narrative of war memory.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on a specific group of Displaced Persons that settled in Belgium after the end of Second World War: soldiers from the First Polish Armoured Division, who liberated parts of Flanders under Allied command. I looked at the way these former Division soldiers found or were given a place within Belgian society. Since war memory appeared to have played a crucial role, I concentrated on the representation of their war experiences by means of narratives of war memory, and the interplay of their narratives with other ones, in the public sphere.

Ultimately, that representation and interplay changed over time, since memories are historical. During the Cold War, former Division soldiers were incorporated based on their political (anti-communist) narratives of war memory, first only on a local basis, later also at a national Belgian level. When the geopolitical context changed, that political narrative came under scrutiny and a dark page in the history of the Division hinting at collaborationism was opened. As a consequence, former Division soldiers lost the sympathy of their Belgian partners.

In the 1980s and 1990s, new Polish immigrants also found their way to Belgium. At first, the former Division soldiers turned their backs on them since they felt that they could downgrade the soldiers' position as exotic political victims. However, when the former Division soldiers felt less welcome in Belgian patriotic organisations, they started to look for the company of these new Polish immigrants. The latter presented the former Division soldiers as fellow ethnics who had fought for peace in Europe. Such a presentation endowed them with a mission to safeguard peace in the contemporary enlarged European Union. As this entity embraces both Belgians and Poles, that presentation calls for equal treatment, which most of the new Polish immigrants for a long time did not enjoy in their professional lives.

The evolution of the incorporation of the former Division soldiers, from a local level to a national level, and later to a European level, does not fit within classic incorporation theories foreseeing a gradual incorporation into the host society. After the collapse of communism, the incorporation former Division soldiers experienced in previous decades had to be re-negotiated. The shift in the geopolitical context turned their incorporation upside down. While sympathy from Belgian patriotic organisations decreased, cooperation with the new Polish immigrants, who were not considered to be incorporated in Belgian public opinion, increased. Maybe the way new Polish immigrants currently ethnify former Division soldiers is in fact a successful road for European incorporation.

Notes

This chapter is partly based on a chapter of my book: *Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memories*, (Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Verlag, 2011).

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27. Interview with Mariusz on 2/12/2005 (250:257); interview with Andrzej on 7/12/2005 (37:42). The respondents have been given fictitious names. The recordings of the interviews are archived in the Studiecentrum voor Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij (CEGES/SOMA) in Brussels.
28. Interview with Artur on 14/7/2005 (88:90).
29. Goddeeris, *De Poolse Migratie in België*, 47.
30. See for instance interview with Robert on 13/2/2006 (97:105).
31. For activities in Willebroek see Archive of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department IV 6/76 Belgia. Towarzystwo Przyjaźni Belgijsko-Polskiej (1947/55/59–64/66/68). For activities in Sint-Niklaas see State Archives of Belgium, Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Naturalisation Dossiers, file 25186.
32. Rinus Penninx and Marlou Schrover, *Bastion of Bindmiddel? Organisaties van Immigranten in Historisch Perspectief*, (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Migratie- en Etnische Studies, 2001), 57.
33. The association was initially called the Polish ex-combatant Belgium circle (de Poolse oudstrijderscircle België / Koło Kombatantów w Antwerpii), but soon became the Belgian Association for Polish ex-Combatants (de Belgische vereniging voor Poolse Oud-strijders or BVPO).
34. Archive BVPO, Scheidreef 15, Kapellen, Belgium, In Memoriam Edmund Kaczyński.
35. Archive BVPO. 1e Sprawozdanie z zebrania Polskich Kombatantów. 1976. These were: The Coordination Committee 1940–1945 (Coördinatie comité 1940–1945) and the Royal Association of Patriotic Circles in Antwerp (het Koninklijk verbond van Vaderlandsminnende circleën van Antwerpen).
36. Notes on the interview with Rafał on 6/12/2005; Interview with Dominik on 26/12/2005 (178:187).
37. Archive BVPO Letter of Pools Ludstrijderscircle van België to Jacques Noel, adviser to the Prime Minister on 25/4/1977.
38. *Belgian Monitor*, 11 August 1983.
39. Archive BVPO. Registered list from BVPO to Ministry of Defence on 20/1/1984 with names.
40. Penninx and Schrover, *Bastion of Bindmiddel?*, 1.
41. Czesław Kajpus and Omer Van Dam, Non Omnis Moriar. Het Verhaal van Czesław Kajpus, Officier bij de Eerste Poolse Pantserdivisie en de Bevrijding van 1944, Leuven, Kritak, 1996, 68.
42. *Belgian Monitor* 31/12/2002; Bart Verstockt, *Vechten voor geen Vaderland*, Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds, co-production Vlaamse Radio – en Televisieomroep, 2004.
43. How fragile that incorporation was became clear when in 2004, on the 60th anniversary of the liberation, the decision was revoked because the Belgian Parliament argued that the soldiers had not held Belgian citizenship during

the war (*Het Nieuwsblad* 1/9/2004). Pieter De Crem (the current Belgian Minister of Defense) and Magda de Meyer, by that time both politicians from liberated cities, successfully lobbied for a change and, after a disruption of four months, twenty former division soldiers again received their financial compensation (*Het Volk* 4/12/2004).

44. Interview with Rafał on 6 December 2005 (84:88).
45. 'Otwarcie Rynku Pracy w Belgii dla Polaków' 4/2009, text retrieved from www.poloniam.be on 21/02/2010.
46. *Komunikat* BVPO. Sprawozdanie z Walnego Zebrania 3/3/2003, 96: 3; Interview with Waldek on 25/11/2005 (73:78); Interview with Robert on 13/02/2006 (48:55).
47. Stanisław Maczek, *Od Podwody do Czołga*, (London-Lublin, Orbis Books Ltd. – Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1992), 130; Zbigniew Mieczkowski, *Żołnierze Generała Maczka* (Fundacja Upamiętnienia Pierwszej Polskiej Dywizji Pancernej Generała Stanisława Maczka. Foundation for the Commemoration of General Maczek First Polish Armoured Division, Warsaw – London, 2003), 14.
48. *Belgian Monitor* 25/3/1995.
49. Elżbieta Kuzma, *Listy z Daleka* 27/11/2009.
50. *Komunikat* Verbond van Poolse Oud-strijders en Veteranen van de 1^{ste} Poolse Pantserdivisie van Generaal Maczek in België vzw / Związek Polskich Kombatantów i Weteranów 1 Dywizji Pancernej Generała Maczka w Belgii vzw 30, 1, 2008/2009, 3. The speech was given by Secretary Aleksandra Czacka. I put some important fragments in italic.
51. *Komunikat* Verbond van Poolse Oud-strijders en Veteranen van de 1^{ste} Poolse Pantserdivisie van Generaal Maczek in België vzw / Związek Polskich Kombatantów i Weteranów 1 Dywizji Pancernej Generała Maczka w Belgii vzw 27, 1, 2005, 4.
52. For an analysis of the memory practices of former division soldiers at the cemetery see: Machteld Venken, 'Konstrukcja i Recepcja Pamięci Zbiorowej Wśród Polskich Dywizjonistów w Belgii. Zimna Wojna w Praktyce', *Przegląd Polonijny*, 33, 1, 2007, 41–62.
53. Karolina Krakowska, 'Dzień Wszystkich Świętych a Halloween', *Gazetka* 66, 11, 2007, 12.