



# History of Education

Journal of the History of Education Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/thed20>

## Transforming secondary education in the Belgian–German borderlands (1918–1939)

Machteld Venken

To cite this article: Machteld Venken (2021): Transforming secondary education in the Belgian–German borderlands (1918–1939), History of Education, DOI: [10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977856](https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977856)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2021.1977856>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 03 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 392



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Transforming secondary education in the Belgian–German borderlands (1918–1939)

Machteld Venken 

Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C<sup>2</sup> DH), University of Luxembourg, Belval Campus, Maison des, Sciences Humaines, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg

### ABSTRACT

Establishing and implementing rules that would teach pupils to become citizens became a crucial technique for turning those spots on the map of Europe whose sovereignty had shifted after the First World War into lived social spaces. This article uses Arnold Van Gennep's notion that a shift in social status possesses a spatiality and temporality of its own, in order to analyse how principals of secondary schools negotiated transformation in the Belgian–German borderlands. It asks whether and how they were called on to offer training that would make the borderlands more cohesive with the rest of Belgium in terms of the social origins of pupils and the content of study, and examines the extent to which they were historical actors with room for their own decision-making on creating and abolishing a liminal phase, thereby leading secondary education through its rites of passage.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 January 2021

Accepted 1 September 2021

### KEYWORDS

Secondary education;  
Belgium; Germany;  
borderlands; Europe

## Introduction

The architects of Europe's interwar set-up in Versailles in 1919 were convinced that order would be restored in Europe if the continent's borders were redrawn.<sup>1</sup> It was thought that borderland inhabitants would play a crucial role in transforming the spots on the map of Europe whose sovereignty had shifted into lived social spaces.<sup>2</sup> The upheaval in national sovereignty meant that secondary education needed to be defined anew. Establishing and implementing rules teaching pupils to become citizens became a crucial technique for bringing about such a transformation.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on the land that was taken from Germany after the First World War and became part of the Kingdom of Belgium; it asks whether and how secondary school principals were called on to bestow schooling with a meaning that would make their region more cohesive with the rest of Belgium, and

**CONTACT** Machteld Venken ✉ [machteld.venken@uni.lu](mailto:machteld.venken@uni.lu)  Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C<sup>2</sup> DH), University of Luxembourg, Belval Campus, Maison des, Sciences Humaines, 11, Porte des Sciences, Esch-sur-Alzette L-4366, Luxembourg

<sup>1</sup>Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2002), 221.

<sup>2</sup>Caroline Mezger, *Forging Germans. Youth, Nation, and the National Socialist Mobilisation of Ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia, 1918–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Machteld Venken, ed., *Borderland Studies Meets Child Studies: A European Encounter* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Leiserowitz, 'Childhood in the Memel Region', in *Borderland Studies Meets Child Studies: A European Encounter*, ed. Machteld Venken (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 65–83.

examines the extent to which they accepted, refused or helped shape that responsibility. Bringing the reader into the offices of borderland school principals, it reconstructs how they shuffled papers on and across their tables in order to balance the different interests of the Belgian and German governments, the Catholic Church, teachers, parents and pupils. Nation-state representatives in Belgium did not simply impose their ideas concerning the desired social origins of pupils and the content of study on the borderlands, but provided for school principals to give meaning to the positions in between established categories in their own ways. To put it differently, the article looks at the extent to which school principals were historical actors who co-created the profile, knowledge and capacities of the future borderland elite. The author argues that school principals' room for decision-making in defining the composition of pupils and the content of their study evolved following the sequence of Arnold Van Gennep's rites of passage.<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist's concept of liminality, and the way in which it was developed after his death, was chosen to shed light on school principals' opportunities to influence their pupils' profile and curriculum.

## Concepts and methodology

Van Gennep's 'rites of passage' refers to the rituals marking, supporting or celebrating passages through the cycle of life. 'A complete scheme of rites of passage', Van Gennep explained, includes preliminal, liminal and postliminal rites.<sup>5</sup> The first stage harbours 'rites of separation from a previous world'; they detach an individual or community from its former structure. The second, which Van Gennep referred to variably as 'liminal', 'threshold' or 'transition rites', are the rites 'executed during the transitional stage'.<sup>6</sup> John McKenzie later reformulated this as 'a mode of activity whose temporal and symbolic in-betweenness allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with and perhaps even transformed'.<sup>7</sup> The great intensity that comes with passing through this stage of ambiguity and disorientation cannot be eternal; after managing and controlling the transformation, a compliance with social norms needs to be ensured. At the moment of stabilisation, postliminal rites play their role. Through ceremonies, 'the incorporation into the new world' is performed.<sup>8</sup>

Most researchers consider liminality solely as having a temporality of its own, even though Van Gennep preserved a balance between time and space.<sup>9</sup> In classical antiquity, the anthropologist wrote, 'each country was surrounded by a strip of neutral ground', but also, later in time,

the same system of zones is to be found. ... Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time, he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 21, 186.

<sup>7</sup>John McKenzie, 'The Liminal-Norm', in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial and Sara Bradley (London: Routledge, 2004), 27.

<sup>8</sup>Van Gennep, *Rites*, 21.

<sup>9</sup>Emiliya Karaboeva, 'Borders and Go-Betweens: Bulgarian International Truck Drivers during the Cold War', *East Central Europe* 41, no. 2–3 (2014): 230.

<sup>10</sup>Van Gennep, *Rites*, 17–18.

After Van Gennep's death, liminality was given a broader meaning, referring to a political change that releases forces within a society whose dynamics and outcome are unknown. In such cases, no master of ceremonies with experience in the entire cycle of rites of passage is available to guide society through the change, meaning that power becomes highly contested.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, the impact of borderland school principals on the social origins of their school's population and on the content of the curriculum is evaluated within the phases of the Belgian–German borderlands' rites of passage.

The Belgian–German borderlands are defined as the lands that belonged to Germany and switched to Belgian state sovereignty in the aftermath of the First World War, while still being contested by people in Germany and by borderland inhabitants. This article foregrounds a temporal dimension of borderlands and examines 'what happens when distinct societies . . . contest lands in between' within a specific time period in the past.<sup>12</sup> The Belgian–German borderlands consist of the regions of Eupen, Sankt Vith and Malmedy (hereinafter ESM). In the aftermath of the First World War, most local inhabitants remained and exchanged German for Belgian citizenship. Approximately six per cent of the population, around 4800 people, emigrated to Germany, and a smaller number of professionals, including teachers (whose number amounted to 68 in ESM in the year 1925), moved from other parts of Belgium.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars researching education in the Belgian–German borderlands are confronted with a paucity of sources. The archives of Belgian government cabinets and the Belgian Ministry of Education are practically non-existent.<sup>14</sup> The archives of borderland youth in another nearby borderland, Alsace, have been reported to be 'diffuse, dispersed and heteroclitic', but nevertheless to offer an unexpectedly 'rich body that has been hardly explored'.<sup>15</sup> This article presents the potential of borderland sources by analysing their content within their historical context. On the basis of documents in which school principals shed light on their selection of pupils and the content of study, some of their everyday practices have been able to be reconstructed. These practices do not enable me to detect a comprehensive pattern of changes throughout the interwar period, but they do allow me to dissect the extent to which individual school principals understood and engaged with the opportunities and limits of the power structure at the time. The social origins of secondary school pupils are detected through a quantitative analysis of recruitment figures and the profiles of pupils' parents. This analysis is combined with an exploration of how school principals provided a meaningful explanation of the First World War to the children of former German soldiers, who were living in borderlands

<sup>11</sup>Van Gennep, *Rites*, 39; Bjørn Thomassen, 'The Uses and Meanings of Liminality', *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 22, 51; Machteld Venken, 'Secondary School Principals and Liminality in Polish Upper Silesia (1919–1939)', *Journal of Modern European History* 19, no. 2 (2021): 58.

<sup>12</sup>Kathleen Duval, 'Introduction', in *Borderlands: Oxford Bibliographies Online Research Guide*, ed. Kathleen Duval (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Carlo Lejeune, Alfred Rauw and Wilfried Jousten, 'Die grosse Suche nach Heimat und Teilhabe. Wanderungsbewegungen als Spiegel einer unruhigen Zeit', in *Grenzerfahrungen. Eine Geschichte der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens. Band 4: Staatenwechsel, Identitätskonflikte, Kriegserfahrungen (1919–1945)*, ed. Carlo Lejeune, Christoph Brüll and Peter M. Quadflieg (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 2019), 244–60.

<sup>14</sup>See also Marc Depaep, 'The 1936 Curriculum Reform in Belgian Primary Education', *Journal of Education Policy* 6, no. 4 (1991): 371.

<sup>15</sup>Julien Fuchs, 'Sources et archives des mouvements de jeunesse. Préalables méthodologiques à une recherche sur l'univers associatif' (2008), 4, <https://revue-interrogations.org/Sources-et-archives-des-mouvements,248> (accessed June 27, 2021).

onto which supranational forces had imposed their visions of a peaceful Europe. In other words, the article investigates how borderland school principals copied, engaged with or refuted dominant narratives of war and peace.

It will be demonstrated that school principals in the Belgian–German borderlands could experiment with the content of history teaching, but that they did not intend to bring about a change in the social origins of pupils (and were mostly also not pushed to do so by nation-state representatives). Each of the school principals discussed in this article displayed a different mix of practices in response to national, supranational and local developments at the time. An analytical sequence of the practices of individual borderland secondary school principals offers the advantage of relating ‘the impact of a particular world historical transformation (world time) on social change in borderlands . . . to the developmental phases of the states concerned (state time), as well as the stages of the life cycle’ of the borderlands concerned, which Baud and Van Schendel called ‘borderland time’.<sup>16</sup>

In the Belgian–German borderlands, six schools offered secondary education during some years of the interwar period: two in Eupen, two in Sankt Vith and two in Malmédy (in each case, one of the two schools was for boys and the other for girls). The article discusses four protagonists working in two different secondary schools. Most documents that have been preserved are from the biggest secondary school in the Belgian–German borderlands, the *Collège Patronné* (Bishop’s College) for boys in Eupen, and we also possess materials detailing the practices of one school principal of the secondary school for girls in Eupen, the *Hildegardisschule* (also called *Heidbergerschule*).<sup>17</sup> Hardly any archival sources from the other secondary schools for girls were preserved.<sup>18</sup> In addition, archival documents regarding the schools for boys in Malmédy and in Sankt Vith are not detailed enough for an analysis of the practices of their school principals.<sup>19</sup>

## The preliminal phase

The preliminal phase of ESM’s rites of passage consists of the period from the end of the First World War until the instalment of the Belgian regime. Secondary education had developed significantly within the German Empire. Launching the *Kulturkampf* within his first years in power, Otto von Bismarck aspired to unite the population of the German Empire around Protestantism and the German

<sup>16</sup>Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, ‘Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands’, *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 236.

<sup>17</sup>Franz Melchior, ‘Vom deutschen Realprogramm zur belgischen Collège-Patronné. Eine Eupener Schule in der Zeit des Übergangs (1918–1925)’ (master’s thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1989); Berta Ramakers-Breuer, ‘Die Hildegardis-Schule auf dem Heidberg’, *Geschichtliches Eupen* 41 (2007): 167–70.

<sup>18</sup>For the closure of the girls’ schools in Sankt Vith and the operation of the girls’ school in Malmédy see Staatsarchiv Eupen (SE), Gouvernement Eupen-Malmédy, I/3, 30 (Arrêté supprimant. l’École moyenne de l’État pour filles, Malmédy, 07/09/1922); SE, Gouvernement Eupen-Malmédy, I/3 (Arrêté sur l’organisation de l’école moyenne de l’État pour filles à Malmédy, Malmédy, 07/09/1922).

<sup>19</sup>The Athénée Royale in Malmédy was smaller than the secondary school for boys in Eupen – it had 166 pupils in 1924 – but it provided more teachers to support pupils learning French (Gottfried Fittbogen, *Das Schulrecht der europäischen Minderheiten* (Berlin: Hobbing, 1930), 45); SE, C.2.2a Archeion X 58 (Ministère de l’instruction publique – direction de l’enseignement moyen. Athénée Royale de Malmédy, Rapport adressé à Monsieur le Ministre au sujet de l’enseignement à l’Athénée Royal de Malmédy). The secondary school in Sankt Vith was founded in 1926 as a secular, state-funded secondary school for boys and was transformed into a Catholic school in 1931 (Bruno Kartheuser, Hubert Jenniges and Joseph Dries, *Eine Schule in ihrer Zeit. Die Geschichte der bischöflichen Schule Sankt Vith aus Anlaß ihres 50-jährigen Bestehens* (Sankt Vith: Aktuell, 1981), 42).

language.<sup>20</sup> The measures that were taken affected children growing up in peripheral areas of the German Empire more than children living in more centrally located regions.<sup>21</sup> As the census of 1880 showed, Roman Catholics accounted for the majority of the population on the western fringe of the German Empire.<sup>22</sup>

In order to limit the influence of the Catholic Church, a law from 1872 uncoupled the relationship between the Church and education, placing all private and public schools under state control.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, a law of 1876 affirmed the German language as a quintessential aspect of national unity and required that all children learn standardised spelling and pronunciation in school, so as to create future citizens capable of leaving behind their regional and linguistic peculiarities. Until German unification, most children had received teaching in their vernacular languages, whether these were local variants of German or otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

German became the main language of instruction in schools in ESM. However, being the language of the great philosophers of the Enlightenment, French enjoyed considerable popularity and was intensively studied in secondary schools throughout the German Empire.<sup>25</sup> It therefore comes as no surprise that, some years before the First World War, German writers pleaded for more tolerance towards Walloon activists in Malmedy and for teaching in French.<sup>26</sup> In addition, pupils were no longer instructed by local teachers and priests, who left the profession in great numbers, but by newly trained teachers sent in from more central locations in the German Empire.<sup>27</sup>

Within the German Empire, the *Realgymnasium*, a school that offered a full secondary curriculum specialising in mathematics and sciences, enjoyed growing acclaim. In the Rhine province, there was a marked increase in the number of *Realgymnasien*, including a school for girls and one for boys in Eupen.<sup>28</sup>

How the 'separation of the previous world' came about in secondary education becomes visible through an analysis of two documents produced by school principal Dr A. Pottgiesser of the private *Hildegardisschule* for girls in Eupen, the first dating from June 1920 and the second from November 1920. In June 1920, the public consultation prescribed by the Treaty of Versailles to determine the state sovereignty of ESM (instead of a plebiscite, as happened for example in the Danish–German borderlands of North Schleswig) was ongoing.<sup>29</sup> The principle of self-determination Woodrow Wilson so vehemently supported was often given a national interpretation and used as an authoritative rhetorical device, also

<sup>20</sup>Ulrich Herrmann, 'Schulen, Hochschulen, Lehrer', in *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte*, Vol. 4: 1870–1918. *Von der Reichsgründung bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Christa Berg (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1991), 229.

<sup>21</sup>Marjorie Lamberti, *State, Society, and the Elementary School in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>22</sup>In the region of Eupen, Malmedy and Montjoie (which was split after the First World War, when the town of Sankt Vith and its vicinities changed to Belgian sovereignty), the proportion of Roman Catholics lay between 95.5% and 99.1%. Anon, *Königliches Statistisches Bureau in Berlin* (Berlin, 1883), lxxxiii, lxxxv.

<sup>23</sup>Lamberti, *State*, 212.

<sup>24</sup>Tomasz Kamusella, *The Politics of Language and Nationalism in Modern Central Europe* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 403.

<sup>25</sup>Herrmann, 'Schulen', 253.

<sup>26</sup>Francis Balace, 'Belgien und die Ostkantone im Versailler Vertrag. Irredenta-Gebiet, militärische Pufferzone oder Trostpreis?', in *Zoom 1920–2010. Nachbarschaften. Neun Jahrzehnte nach Versailles*, ed. Christoph Brüll (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 2012), 95.

<sup>27</sup>Klaus Pabst, 'Eupen-Malmedy in der belgischen Regierungs- und Parteienpolitik 1914–1940', *Zeitschrift des Aachener Geschichtsvereins* 76 (1964): 271.

<sup>28</sup>Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 13, 18, 20. In 1913, the Rhine province had 62 *Gymnasien* and 47 *Realgymnasien* (18, 22).

<sup>29</sup>The decisions made by the statesmen and diplomats who gathered in France in 1919 to determine the conditions of peace were influenced by important developments that had previously taken place in Eastern Europe: Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 236.

by borderland inhabitants from ESM, who considered the consultation as an infringement of their perceived right to self-determination and continued to contest it throughout the interwar years.<sup>30</sup>

Within days of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919, ESM were placed under the supervision of Baron Henri Delvaux de Fenffe (1863–1947), governor of the Province of Liège at the time, although this supervision would only come into effect after the treaty had been ratified by the Belgian government and signed by the German authorities. In the autumn of 1919, de Fenffe was replaced by Herman Baltia, the son of a Luxembourgish father and a German mother, a Belgian lieutenant-general with experience in colonial service in the Congo and a career in the Belgian army in the First World War. A transitional regime was installed in what was called Eupen-Malmedy, based on a well-practised method. Under Baltia's rule, ESM became the only institutionalised colonial polity on the European continent. In January 1920, upon being given legislative and executive control over a region to which the Belgian Constitution was not applicable, he was told by Belgium's Prime Minister Léon Delacroix, 'You will be like a governor of a colony, but a colony with direct contact with the metropolis'.<sup>31</sup> One of the control measures Baltia implemented was latent censorship, which put an end to a free press in which borderland inhabitants could have expressed their discontent.<sup>32</sup>

Delacroix was happy enough to hand over the responsibility. With no agreement being reached in Versailles on the amount of reparations Germany owed to Belgium, Belgian policy-makers needed to get to work on the reconstruction of their ravaged country themselves. Another major concern within the Kingdom of Belgium was politics. The war had mobilised the masses for political issues, and universal male suffrage was introduced in 1918. After the Catholic Party had monopolised rule for 30 years, the political landscape became characterised by rapidly changing coalitions of the Liberal, Socialist and Catholic parties; 25 governments ruled Belgium between 1918 and 1940.<sup>33</sup>

Herman Baltia arranged for the public consultation to be held between 23 January and 23 July 1920. Only those who were against Belgian state sovereignty were required to vote; anyone who did not vote was considered to be in favour of the annexation. In the end, only 271 of the 33,726 men and women entitled to vote registered. On 20 September 1920, the League of Nations confirmed the outcome of the consultation and 'recognised the transfer of the districts of Eupen and Malmedy under Belgian sovereignty as being final'.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Marina Cattaruzza and Dieter Langewiesche, 'Introduction', in *Territorial Revisionism and the Allies of Germany in the Second World War: Goals. Expectations. Practices*, ed. Marina Cattaruzza, Stefan Dyroff and Dieter Langewiesche (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 4; Victor O'Connell, *The Annexation of Eupen-Malmedy: Becoming Belgian, 1919–1929* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Léon Delacroix, as remembered by Herman Baltia, 'Memoiren 1920–1925', in *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Belgier*, ed. Els Herrebout (Brussels: Generalstaatsarchiv, 2011), 19.

<sup>32</sup> Heinz Doeppen, *Die Abtretung des Gebietes vom Eupen-Malmedy an Belgien im Jahre 1920* (Bonn: L. Röhrscheid, 1966), 148.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Dujardin et al., *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België 1905–1950* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 1111.

<sup>34</sup> *Rapport final sur le transfert définitif d'Eupen-Malmedy à la Belgique* (Geneva: La Société des Nations, 1920), quoted in Andreas Fickers et al., 'Timestrata.be. Prospections of an In-Between. East Belgium 1920–2020. A Virtual Exhibition', Eupen/Luxembourg: The German-Speaking Community of Belgium, the Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte and the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, 2020, <https://zeitschichten.be/en> (accessed June 9, 2021).



Dr A. Pottgiesser sent a letter to the Provincial School College (*Provinzialschulkollegium*) in Koblenz, Germany, on 2 June 1920, explaining that he was the last school principal holding German citizenship of all the secondary schools operating in ESM. He detailed his negotiations with the Baltia administration with regard to the recruitment of pupils. He wanted guarantees that 'German and Belgian female students, the German language and the teaching staff' would be 'treated equally', but admitted he was losing the fight: 'we will continue to ensure that, if the sky does not wish otherwise, the flag, which has been standing here at half-mast for so long, will at least be lowered in honour'.<sup>35</sup> Just six days later, the bilateral Belgian–German Convention of Aachen was concluded, which allowed teachers in ESM to become Belgian civil servants but required them to swear an oath of loyalty to the Belgian state. This oath would prohibit them from seeking employment in Germany in the future.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, almost the entire teaching force decided to leave for Germany, including school principal Dr A. Pottgiesser. There is evidence of German financial support being secretly transferred to Eupen-Malmedy in 1921, but we do not know whether that money was used in school education. In any case, Baltia's control measures soon caused this funding to dry up.<sup>37</sup> In addition, when Baltia found out that a considerable number of children were crossing the border to receive their education in Germany, he declared German school certificates invalid.<sup>38</sup> As a result, fewer parents sent their children across the border for their education.<sup>39</sup>

Dr A. Pottgiesser's fear that German would be abolished as the main language of instruction was precipitate. Local inhabitants in the regions of Eupen and Sankt Vith could continue to use the German language in education. Only the inhabitants in the region of Malmedy needed to switch to education in French, after census data gathered by Baltia indicated that French was the mother tongue of a majority of the population.<sup>40</sup> These measures correspond to decisions on education taken elsewhere in Belgium at the time. Following the First World War, the Belgian authorities opted for unilingualism in the vernacular. Although they wanted every child to learn how to read and write in French, Dutch or German, their regulations continued to give French the upper hand.

Under the Belgian educational law of 1914 (fully implemented in 1918), school authorities could introduce the learning of a second language from the fifth year of primary education. Most French-speaking children in Wallonia, however, finished their primary school in French without receiving training in a foreign language, whereas in Flanders, all Dutch-speaking children received education in their mother tongue and were offered French as a foreign language.<sup>41</sup> In addition, primary schools in Flanders were allowed to operate in French without being required to offer lessons in Dutch. These schools remained popular given the political and economic opportunities for people mastering French.<sup>42</sup> All guardians living in

<sup>35</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts Berlin (Political Archive of the German Federal Foreign Office; PAAAB), R 76473 (Betrifft: Eupen bzw. Hildegardis-Lyzeum, Eupen, June 2, 1920).

<sup>36</sup> Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 69.

<sup>37</sup> Carlo Lejeune, *Die Säuberung Vol. 1: Ernüchterung, Befreiung, Ungewissheit (1920–1944)* (Büllingen: Lexis Verlag, 2007), 30.

<sup>38</sup> Pabst, 'Eupen-Malmedy', 306; SE, Gouvernement Eupen-Malmedy, C.3.3.150, p. 2 ('Gazette de Liège', 263, 22/11/1921); Stadtarchiv Aachen, Nachlass Benker, 23/75-76, unpagged (T. Gierets an Stadtbüroinspektor Benker, Aachen, 03/02/1930).

<sup>39</sup> Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 102.

<sup>40</sup> Selm Wenselaers, *De laatste Belgen. Een geschiedenis van de Oostkantons* (Antwerp: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2008), 52.

<sup>41</sup> Vernon Mallinson, *Power and Politics in Belgian Education: 1815 to 1961* (London: Heinemann 1963), 116.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice de Vroede, 'Language in Education in Belgium up to 1940', in *Schooling, Educational Policy and Ethnic Identity*, ed. Janusz J. Tomiak et al. (New York: Dartmouth Publishing, 1991), 128.



Flanders could declare their child's mother tongue as French and put their child in a French-speaking school. The number of schools where Dutch was the language of instruction in Wallonia could be counted on one hand. In 1929, a Flemish priest indicated that Flemish miners working in Wallonia were not aware that they could demand Dutch as the primary language of education for their children.<sup>43</sup> These miners were often illiterate and did not benefit from political representation. Flemish activists were more occupied with efforts to turn Ghent University into the country's first Dutch-speaking university (which would eventually happen in 1930) than guaranteeing language rights for miners' children in Wallonia.<sup>44</sup>

In the Brussels agglomeration and municipalities located at language borders, the language of instruction in schools could change on the basis of the results of language censuses organised every 10 years, which indicated the dominant mother tongue of inhabitants. If at least 20 children spoke a different language from the one offered at a school, a separate class needed to be set up within the school. If they were in a majority, the whole school needed to switch its language regime. Individual school principals had the authority to make these changes, but they needed to be approved by a school inspector afterwards.<sup>45</sup> This regulation caused German to be reinstated (after a long break) as the main language of instruction in some municipalities of the historically German-speaking part of Belgium (mainly the town of Arlon/Arel and its surroundings). However, the fact that no additional German language teachers were trained indicated that the Belgian authorities did not entirely accept a return to the 'languages used in Belgium' principle laid down in the Belgian Constitution.<sup>46</sup>

As we learn from the second archived document produced by Dr A. Pottgiesser in 1920, he agreed with the Baltia administration to leave for Germany in 1921. In November 1920, he declared that the school would be closed because of 'difficulties with the border, foreign currency, language and the recruitment of specialist teachers and schoolgirls'.<sup>47</sup> Afterwards, the Belgian state made the Catholic Church responsible for a considerable number of the issues regarding education that had previously been handled by the German state authorities, a result of the compromise between the state and the Catholic Church to offer the latter the freedom to organise its schools reached in the aftermath of the School Wars (*luttés scolaires*) – fought verbally between the Liberal and Catholic parties in the late nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> The *Hildegardisschule* opened again as a Catholic state-subsidised institution under the supervision of the Recollect Sisters (*Rekolektinnenschwester*) the same year, but the shift had implications for the curriculum and number of pupils. Whereas the *Hildegardisschule* had offered a full secondary school education and had had 311 pupils in 1919 and 340 in 1920, from 1921 it operated as a secondary school institution offering only the lower three school years, and saw pupil numbers drop to 190.<sup>49</sup> Before the First World War, it had been more usual for boys than girls to finish secondary school education in both Prussia and Belgium, but

<sup>43</sup>Anon., 'De Volksgazet', October 16, 1929, 1.

<sup>44</sup>Tim M. Schmidt, 'Sprachnationale Konflikte, Staatsreformdiskurs und Sozialdemokratie. Ein Vergleich zwischen den böhmischen Ländern und Belgien 1894–1938' (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 2014), 406.

<sup>45</sup>Heinrich Bischoff, *Die deutsche Sprache in Belgien. Ihre Geschichte und ihre Rechte* (Eupen: Esch, 1931), 59–60; Machteld Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2021), 93.

<sup>46</sup>Pabst, 'Eupen-Malmedy', 300; Johan Petrus Dorothée van Banning, *Gebiedsovergang en zijn gevolgen. Getoetst aan de praktijk van de inlijving van Eupen-Malmedy door België* (Schaesberg: Drukkerij Bijkorf, 1949), 44.

<sup>47</sup>PAAAB, R 76474 (Geschäftsberichte der Hildegardis-Frauenschule m. b. H., Eupen, November 1920).

<sup>48</sup>Joeffrey Tyssens, *Om de schone ziel van 't kind ... Het onderwijsconflict als een breuklijn in de Belgische politiek* (Ghent: Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen i.s.m. het Liberaal Archief, 1998).

<sup>49</sup>Anon, *250-jähriges Jubiläum der Heidberg-Schule Eupen* (Eupen: Paul Kaiser, 1956), 30; Ramakers-Breuer, 'Hildegardis-Schule', 167–70.

in Prussia the tendency to increase the number of school years for girls was more visible than in Belgium.<sup>50</sup> This type of ‘middle school’ (*école moyenne*, as it was called in Belgium at the time) was something of a dead end; it did not offer pupils the possibility of continuing to further academic education.<sup>51</sup>

A similar fate awaited the state-owned secular *Realgymnasium* or secondary school for boys in Eupen. In 1886, the new school principal switched from a *Realschule* to a *Progymnasium mit vollberechtigten Realparallelklassen*, a hybrid consensus form that lay between the traditional humanities and natural science profiles.<sup>52</sup> In 1913, in turn, the school turned into a full *Realgymnasium*, with a renewed emphasis on trade and industry and the aim of preparing pupils to go on to university.<sup>53</sup> In 1921, it became a state-subsidised Roman Catholic Bishop’s College, offering the full secondary school curriculum, administered by the diocese of Liège and Eupen town council. Although the Belgian Minister of Education, Jules Destrée, was a socialist politician who favoured state-owned secondary schools, he agreed to Catholic patronage over the former *Realgymnasium* because the majority of available German-speaking teachers, after the entire teaching staff of the *Realgymnasium* had moved to Germany, were priests. Belgian law allowed priests to teach all lessons in Catholic schools but not in state schools.<sup>54</sup> In 1931, another Catholic secondary school for boys, with six school years, was opened in Sankt Vith.<sup>55</sup>

In Malmedy, where the Belgian state took control of the organisation of secondary education for boys and girls in French, a similar school regime was implemented. The little archival material we possess documents that, in 1922, the *Athénée Royale* offered a full secondary school curriculum of six school years that ‘already adhered very closely to similar Belgian establishments’.<sup>56</sup> As was the case in Eupen, the middle school for girls in Malmedy offered only the lower three school years.<sup>57</sup>

## Establishing the liminal phase

With the previous political order having come to an end, secondary school education was steered in a new direction. During Baltia’s autonomous regime, textbook authors and school principals were not given a say in the narration of war and peace.<sup>58</sup> Herman Baltia himself took the initiative in establishing a liminal phase. Possessing legislative and executive power,

<sup>50</sup>Claude Diebolt, ‘Die langfristige Entwicklung des Schulsystems in Deutschland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’, GESIS Datenarchiv, ZA8221 Datenfile Version 1.0.0, 2005, Tabel 109 (dataset), <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.8221> (accessed June 9, 2021); Mallinson, *Power*, 62; Herrmann, ‘Schulen’, 200.

<sup>51</sup>This was a result of the Van Humbeek School Law of 1881. In 1924, the curriculum of the *école moyenne* was brought into line with that of the lower school years of full secondary school education, but no evidence could be found in archival sources suggesting that girls in ESM continued their education after finishing the *école moyenne* (Mallinson, *Power*, 137).

<sup>52</sup>Fittbogen, *Das Schulrecht*, 44.

<sup>53</sup>Melchior, ‘Vom deutschen Realprogramm’, 18, 22.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 67, 81.

<sup>55</sup>Norbert Meyers and Engelbert Cremer, *Geschichte der Bischöflichen Schule St. Vith mit Daten und Fakten zu Ostbelgien 1920–2007* (Sankt Vith: Geschichtsverein ZVS, 2007).

<sup>56</sup>SE, C. 2.2. A. (Rapport adressé à Monsieur Le Ministre au sujet de l’enseignement à l’Athénée Royal de Malmédy, July 25, 1922).

<sup>57</sup>SE, C. 2.2.B (Rapport sur une Inspection faite le 5 Décembre 1934).

<sup>58</sup>Henri Schrymecker was born in Neutral Moresnet and had been a pastor in the Walloon city of Liège before he became the first principal of the secondary school for boys in Eupen. He left the school when he was appointed as a pastor in a village near to Liège (E. Janssen et al., ‘Collège Patronné’, in *300 Jahre Eupener Schulgeschichte*, ed. Collège Patronné (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag 62, 1981)), 63; H. Willems, ‘Un savant de la région des trois frontières. Henri Schrymecker. Premier Directeur du Collège Patronné à Eupen’, *Im Göhlthal. Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Kultur, Heimatkunde und Geschichte im Göhlthal* 39 (1986): 30.

he demanded the creation of a special textbook for literature and history lessons in German-speaking secondary schools in the regions of Eupen and Sankt Vith and forbade the use of any other textbooks. School inspector Joseph Lousberg was given this task. He adapted Heinrich Bone's standard German book *Deutsches Lesebuch für höhere Lehranstalten*.<sup>59</sup>

In the rest of Belgium, in the years immediately after the First World War, history textbooks emphasised the fact that Germany had started the war, and that for the first time in the history of their nation-state, Belgians had taken up arms in order to defend their country. The tone of the depiction varied considerably depending on the textbook, because the Belgian Ministry of Education did not control which history textbooks should be used in secondary schooling, although it gave recommendations. At the 7th International Congress of the International Union of Associations for the League of Nations in Vienna in 1923, for example, the *Atlas-Manuel de Géographie* by Léon Alexandre and C. De Nève from 1921, depicting German soldiers as characterised by cruelty, violence and mendacity, was presented by a British representative as an example of a history textbook spreading hatred and resentment.<sup>60</sup>

Paradoxically enough, the narrative on the First World War that Lousberg added to Bone's book was highly innovative. Although imposed during Baltia's dictatorial regime, it turned out to offer a more creative solution to an international understanding of the First World War than any of the other history textbooks available in Belgium at the time. Lousberg's experiment also went far beyond the initiatives of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation.

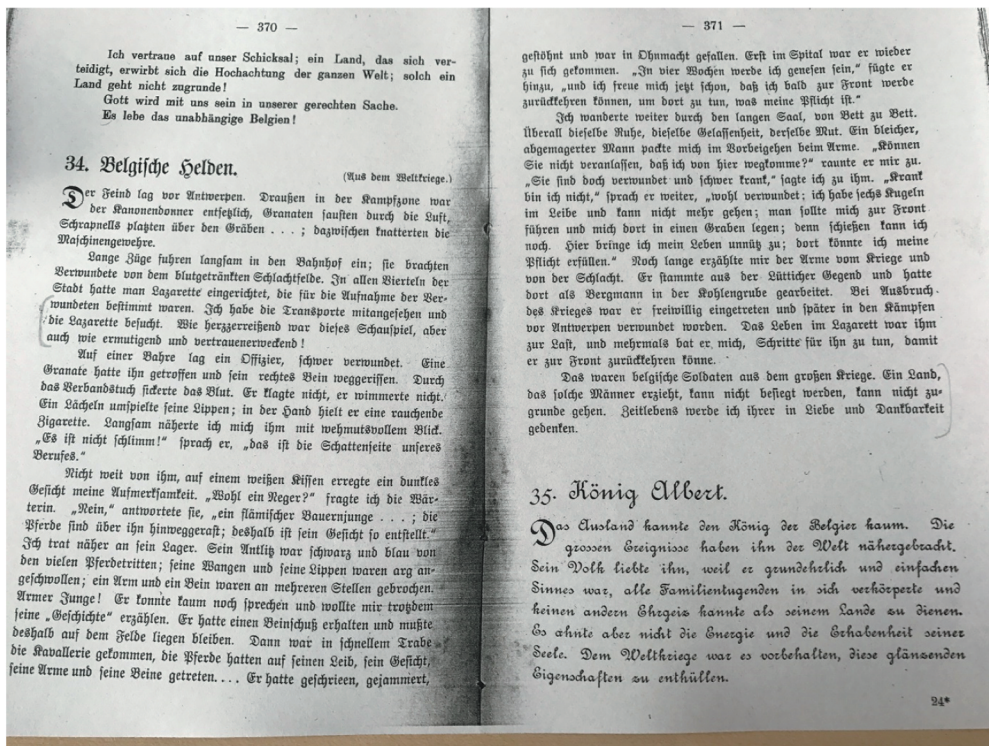
The International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (*Commission Internationale de la Coopération Intellectuelle* – hereinafter CICI), an advisory body to the League of Nations, was established in January 1922. It opened an executive office in Paris with autonomous status, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (*Institut International de la Coopération Intellectuelle* – hereinafter IICI), in 1926. The member states in the League of Nations founded National Commissions in their countries and sent delegates to Paris to attend meetings and conferences. The CICI brought together teachers and researchers with the aim of exchanging ideas regarding the way the First World War should be taught in schools. Initially, it coordinated a revision of school textbooks in order to erase false facts; later, it also issued a statement prescribing that pupils should be offered broad historical knowledge of other nations.<sup>61</sup> However, since the CICI used an elitist definition of cultural and educational production, adhering to printed textbooks widely distributed at national level, its activities ultimately had no influence on the way history was taught in the Belgian–German borderlands.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Lousberg, ed., *Deutsches Lesebuch für belgische Schulen. Zweiter Teil. Für die Oberklassen der Volksschulen und die unteren Jahrgänge höherer Lehranstalten*, 3rd ed. (Verviers: Verlag Alb. Hermann, 1929/30). The book was printed in the early 1920s (Selm Wenselaers, *De laatste Belgen. Een geschiedenis van de Oostkantons* (Antwerp: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2008), 65).

<sup>60</sup> Tinne Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede. De Eerste Wereldoorlog in de klas 1919–1940* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans Uitgeverij, 2015), 91–5.

<sup>61</sup> Société des Nations, *Travaux de la commission internationale de coopération intellectuelle* (Geneva: Société des Nations, 1927), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The Rise and Fall of an Idea* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 188.



**Figure 1.** The reading text ‘Belgian heroes’ in Heinrich Bone’s standard German book *Deutsches Lesebuch für höhere Lehranstalten*, adapted for teaching in the regions of Eupen and Sankt Vith. © Staatsarchiv Eupen. Reproduced by permission of the Staatsarchiv Eupen.

Joseph Lousberg introduced fictional elements to make his Belgian war story in German appealing to pupils at secondary schools in the regions of Eupen and Sankt Vith whose fathers had fought with, and possibly died in, the German army. The reading text ‘Belgian heroes’ (Figure 1) encouraged borderland pupils to identify with an undefined German-speaking observer visiting Belgian soldiers wounded by an equally undefined enemy during the siege of Antwerp. A ‘Flemish peasant boy’ whose face was unrecognisable because a horse had galloped over it, for instance, told the observer that he should be ‘glad to be able to return to the battlefield in four weeks’ time’, to carry out what he called his ‘duty’. The observer concluded: ‘A country that raised such men cannot be beaten, cannot perish. I will remember them with love and gratitude all my life.’<sup>63</sup>

## Pushing aside the liminal phase

ESM lost their political and administrative autonomous status in 1925 and were integrated into the Province of Liège. Léon Cordonnier, a clergyman who had taught philosophy in a secondary school in the Flemish town of Sint-Truiden, became the principal of the Bishop’s College in 1925 and remained in the position until 1932. We will now see how Léon

<sup>63</sup>Lousberg, *Deutsches Lesebuch*, 280–1.



Cordonnier was able to compose his desired school population and design the content of study within the power structure offered by the Belgian nation-state, and how he preferred to make full use of these opportunities instead of sticking to Lousberg's liminal solution from the Baltia era.

The Belgian state did not intervene in the way the Catholic Church organised its secondary education.<sup>64</sup> After the state-owned secular *Realgymnasium* had been transformed into a state-subsidised Roman Catholic Bishop's College, Cordonnier's major concern was to restore traditional social hierarchies to elite teaching, hierarchies that he believed had been challenged in the German Empire.<sup>65</sup> In the 1912–1913 school year, the predecessor of the Bishop's College, the *Realgymnasium* in Eupen, had about 180 pupils. It is not clear how many of these pupils took the final-year exam, but it is known that 22 passed.<sup>66</sup> The Bishop's College saw a significant increase in the number of pupils (249 in 1925, and more thereafter), but only 68 pupils successfully completed their school curriculum over a period of 12 years.<sup>67</sup> In the school archive, no evidence could be found that the Belgian nation-state provided financial support to pupils at this school to help fund their costly secondary education. The tuition fee parents had to pay for a school year was about 10% of the yearly salary of an average worker in Eupen.<sup>68</sup> The municipality offered some stipends to pupils with modest means, the Diocese financed further studies for those who wanted to become a priest, and the Baltia administration provided funding for those aiming for a career in Belgium's colony, the Congo.<sup>69</sup> Until after the Second World War, usually only one son of a large family could enjoy secondary education. One such boy was Emile Mertes, who remembered his mother's decision as follows: 'The girls were placed alternately in domestic service in winter, one of the two boys was able to learn something and the other one stayed on the farm'.<sup>70</sup>

The increase in pupil numbers in the lower school years can be explained by the fortunate economic conditions in the Belgian–German borderlands, but the reason for the steep decline in the higher school years is found elsewhere. While secondary education in the German Empire had focused more on the hard sciences to supply industry in Eupen with a qualified working force, the Bishop's College shifted to the common humanities programme in ancient Greek and Latin taught at elite Belgian schools at the time, an approach intended to reinforce the distance between social classes.<sup>71</sup> The programme was inadequately adjusted to borderland children, not only because it failed to prepare them for a career in local industry, but also because it demanded perfect bilingualism in German and French.<sup>72</sup> Léon Cordonnier did not care that the teaching on

<sup>64</sup>SE, X/168–8, 7 (Rapport sur le Collège Patronné d'Eupen, Eupen, January 1936), 3–4.

<sup>65</sup>James C. Albisetti and Peter Lundgreen, 'Höhere Knabenschulen', in *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte*, vol. 4: 1870–1918. *Von der Reichsgründung bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Christa Berg (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1991), 229–32.

<sup>66</sup>J. Müller, *Progymnasium mit englischen Abteilungen zu Eupen. Jahrbuch für 1912/13* (Eupen: C. Braselmann, 1913), 16–20.

<sup>67</sup>Alfred Minke, 'Schule und Unterricht in Eupen', in *Geschichtliches Eupen* (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 1991), 211–28; SE, X/168–8, 7 (Rapport sur le Collège Patronné d'Eupen, Eupen, January 1936), 3–4.

<sup>68</sup>Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 31.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>70</sup>Emil Mertes, *Emil Mertes erinnert sich ...* (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 2005), 17.

<sup>71</sup>Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 20; Marc Depaepe, *De pedagogisering achterna. Aanzet tot een genealogie van de pedagogische mentaliteit in de voorbije 250 jaar* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Acco, 1998), 252.

<sup>72</sup>Pierre Van Werveke, *La Belgique et Eupen-Malmédy. Où en sommes-nous?* (Brussels: Éditions Du Pays Belge, 1937), 36.

offer caused many pupils to drop out during their school career. He believed that the borderland elite needed to be reduced in order to guarantee a consolidation of Catholic order. In an essay he wrote in the second half of the 1920s entitled ‘The College seen from a denominational perspective compared to an Athenaeum’ (state secondary school), he demanded adherence to the social hierarchical order common in Roman Catholicism in Belgium at the time:

a young person who becomes a doctor. What higher motives fuel his decision? . . . When he sees an ill person, he feels pity. How does his attitude towards his work change when he, being a human himself, sees another human, another soul, and not merely a more or less interesting case? It is not just a source of income anymore. When he recognises that, through his work, he must be a social influence as well – not because of his higher rank but because of the simple fact that he is a doctor – then the horizon of his work widens, too: he will have a bearing on the family lives of his patients. . . . But who will guide the young person along this higher path, if not an influential, knowledgeable teacher, who has wholeheartedly devoted himself to these questions?<sup>73</sup>

When the Bishop’s College reduced elite training to traditional educational pathways (producing lawyers, doctors and priests), however, the German nation-state, which no longer had to deal with Baltia’s repressive regime, secretly started to invest in borderland vocational training. The German Foundation (*Deutsche Stiftung*) succeeded in covering 80% of the budget of a newly founded private agricultural winter school in Sankt Vith, which was attended by an average of 70 pupils a year.<sup>74</sup> In its first yearly report, the agricultural school presented itself as an alternative form of elite training: ‘No sensible farmer will forbid his son from attending the school, and the value of this attendance cannot be overstated.’<sup>75</sup>

Léon Cordonnier had the same freedom in composing a narrative on war memory for his pupils as he did in recruitment. He pushed aside Baltia’s liminal solution in order to be able to make full use of the freedoms the Belgian nation-state had to offer in the organisation of Catholic secondary schooling. In his essay, he suggested how unimportant Bone’s adapted textbook for history teaching was for him:

In addition to the direct teaching of religion, there are still opportunities to teach other subjects. When teaching history or literature, the teacher can offer a deeper insight into religion, or he can also, by offering his own view, teach the pupils how to doubt or disbelieve.<sup>76</sup>

As no equivalent to Bone’s adapted textbook was published in ESM during the interwar years, and until 1936 it was reported that school teachers translated textbooks published in French into German for their pupils or distributed their own translations of specific pages, it is impossible to establish the details of the history curriculum.<sup>77</sup> It was clear, though, that Cordonnier transferred the narrative of the First World War to the sacred sphere, the only

<sup>73</sup>SE, E/2/8 VS II 91 30 (Das College vom konfessionellen Standpunkt betrachten im Vergleich mit einem Athenäum), 5.

<sup>74</sup>Carlo Lejeune, ‘Abtretung, Umerziehung, Autonomie. Eine politische Schulgeschichte des deutschsprachigen Belgiens’, in *Tafel, Griffel, Rutenstock. 150 Jahre Eifeler Volksschulleben*, ed. Arbeitskreis Eifeler Museen (Meckenheim: Warlich Druck- und Verlagsges.m.b.H., 1989), 235.

<sup>75</sup>Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BABL), R57 neu 1051 (Erster Jahresbericht der Landwirt. Schule des Kreises Eupen 1928: Landwirtschaftliche Schule, 2, 1928).

<sup>76</sup>BABL, R57 neu 1051 (Erster Jahresbericht der Landwirt. Schule des Kreises Eupen 1928: Landwirtschaftliche Schule, 2, 1928), 7.

<sup>77</sup>SE, X, 168/8, 32 (Victor Schoonbroodt, Schulbericht von 1936, unpagged, 1937).



social space at that time where the borderland soldiers who had fought in the German army during the First World War were remembered. On Armistice Day, a Belgian national holiday celebrated on 11 November, for example, only soldiers in Belgian uniforms paid a public tribute to the Unknown Soldier at the new war monuments erected in ESM.<sup>78</sup>

In the spring of 1930, the mayor of Eupen held a speech at a prize-giving ceremony for elite borderland pupils, organised by Léon Cordonnier.<sup>79</sup> After the municipal elections on 10 October 1926, the Eupen local council had proposed Léon Trouet as mayor, but the Belgian government did not want to approve that choice because he had played a leading role in the establishment of the pro-German revisionist association *Heimatbund* earlier that year. In 1927, the town remained officially without a mayor, but the Belgian government voted through a resolution in April 1928 that enabled the opinion of the council to be bypassed and Hugo Zimmermann to be directly appointed as the new mayor.<sup>80</sup> Although his views on teaching recent history differed considerably from Cordonnier's interpretation, focusing more on other international, national and local developments, Zimmermann also pushed aside Baltia's liminal solution.

The Locarno Agreements of 1926 safeguarded the Belgian–German state border line, making the prospect of international reconciliation realistic, but the Wall Street Stock Exchange crash in the autumn of 1929 and the developing economic crisis would reduce feelings of internationalism among inhabitants in Belgium.<sup>81</sup> On a national level, Belgium had jumped on the bandwagon of peace education in 1926, when the socialist Minister responsible for education, Camille Huysmans, prohibited the usage of textbooks sowing hatred among people and recommended anchoring democratic citizenship education in an internationalist discourse.<sup>82</sup> The League of Nations was added as a compulsory component to the school curriculum. It was presented as the guarantor of the peace that had arisen after the horrors of war.<sup>83</sup> History textbooks in Belgium now portrayed complex images of Germans' responsibility for the war and focused on human experiences.<sup>84</sup> While the sixth edition of E. Meunier's *The Elementary Year of Belgian History*, for example, had included descriptions of German soldiers slaughtering civilians for pleasure, the seventh edition replaced such depictions with historical facts and numbers.<sup>85</sup> The *Textbook of Belgian History in the Context of General History*, written by Verniers and Bonenfant and published in 1933,

<sup>78</sup>Christoph Brüll, 'Verbotene Erinnerung? Die Neu-Belgier und der Erste Weltkrieg (1918–1925)', in *Quand les canons se taisent. En toen zwegen de kanonnen. When the Guns fall Silent*, ed. Pierre-Alain Tallier and Patrick Nefors (Brussels: Archives Générales du Royaume, 2010), 560.

<sup>79</sup>SE, 670/55/238 (Im verflossenen Jahre, 1930).

<sup>80</sup>Johannes Kontny, 'Zwischen kommunaler Bevormundung und Autonomie. Paternalismus, Stagnation und basisdemokratisches Aufbegehren in Eupen-Malmedy', in *Grenzerfahrungen. Eine Geschichte der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens*, vol. 4: *Staatenwechsel, Identitätskonflikte, Kriegserfahrungen (1919–1945)*, ed. Carlo Lejeune (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 2018), 132–3.

<sup>81</sup>Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede*, 16.

<sup>82</sup>SE, 667/55/222 (Mitarbeit des Lehrpersonals am Werk des Friedens und Solidarität, wie es der Völkerbund erstrebt, Ministerielles Rundschreiben vom 10. April 1926), 100.

<sup>83</sup>Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede*, 101.

<sup>84</sup>Hubert Piron, 'Belgium', in *Report on Nationalism in History Textbooks*, ed. Working Committee of a Special Commission on Education Stockholm (Stockholm: A.-B. Magn Berhvals Förlag, 1928), 42.

<sup>85</sup>E. Meunier, *L'année élémentaire d'histoire de Belgique à l'usage du 3e et 4e degrés des écoles primaires. Aperçu intuitif de la vie des belges à travers les siècles*, 6th ed. (Taminers: Duculot-Roulin, 1927); E. Meunier, *L'année élémentaire d'histoire de Belgique à l'usage du 3e et 4e degrés des écoles primaires. Aperçu intuitif de la vie des belges à travers les siècles*, 7th ed. (Taminers: Duculot-Roulin, 1930), as quoted in Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede*, 124.

probably best reflected the spirit of CICI's internationalist intentions.<sup>86</sup> The authors included an authentic testimony of a medical doctor caring for the wounded near the river Ypres that resembled the fictitious testimony included in the German textbook by Bone adapted for German-speaking pupils in the regions of Eupen and Sankt Vith more than a decade earlier. But whereas the 1933 textbook could rely on facts, the earlier adapted book had needed to disguise the historical context.

Some Flemish nationalists, however, used the League of Nations for their own purposes. When Jozef Uytterhoeven translated Alexis Lallemand's history textbook *Milestones in Contemporary History* from French into Dutch in 1928, for example, he spontaneously added that the establishment of the League of Nations proved that nations should be given the right to decide for themselves. He believed that Flemish people had fought during the war for the right to receive equal treatment within Belgium. Now they deserved to be given that right.<sup>87</sup> As throughout the 1920s any Flemish demand for self-determination was generally associated with the Flemish collaborationism that had taken place during the war, voicing such a viewpoint had long been taboo.<sup>88</sup> By linking self-determination to the League of Nations, Jozef Uytterhoeven hoped to bring that vision back to the debating table.

After the inclusion of ESM in the Kingdom of Belgium in 1925, borderland inhabitants received the right to participate in Belgian elections, but their representation in national politics was severely restricted.<sup>89</sup> Borderland inhabitants founded their own political party, the Christian People's Party (*Christliche Volkspartei*), which demanded a new consultation on self-determination. Together with the revisionist Belgian Workers' Party (*Parti Ouvrier Belge*), which proposed a secret plebiscite, they received 75% of the vote in the parliamentary elections of 1929. With a political fissure between revisionist and pro-Belgian-minded borderland inhabitants emerging in ESM, Zimmermann used his speech at the prize-giving ceremony in 1930 to nip demands of self-determination in the bud:<sup>90</sup>

Teaching history is a problem of far-reaching national and international importance. Neither the detoxification of the internal atmosphere in the nation, nor the reconciliation of nations with each other, can be achieved without the aid of the school. Here special pedagogical tact and delicate consideration are needed in order to come to an internal understanding of foreign cultures, without giving up one's own.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast with the specific demand for self-determination put forward by Flemish nationalists, Zimmermann saw an abstract formulation of the values of empathy and diversity as the key ingredient for international reconciliation, a reconciliation that could bridge the juxtaposing nationalist tensions present in ESM.

<sup>86</sup>Louis Verniers and Paul Bonenfant, *Manuel d'histoire de Belgique dans le cadre de l'histoire générale: à l'usage des écoles primaires, des écoles moyennes, des sections préparatoires aux écoles normales et des classes inférieures des lycées et des athénées* (Brussels: A. de Boeck, 1933).

<sup>87</sup>Alexis Lallemand, *Les grands faits de l'histoire contemporaine* (Brussels: de Boeck, 1924), 209.

<sup>88</sup>Emmanuel Gerard, 'De democratie gedroomd, begrensd en ondermijnd. 1918–1939', in Vincent Dujardin et al., eds., *Nieuwe geschiedenis van België, vol. 2: 1905–1950* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 910.

<sup>89</sup>Pabst, 'Eupen-Malmedy', 331; women in Belgium received the right to vote in 1948.

<sup>90</sup>Freddy Cremer, 'Annexion, Assimilation, Autonomie: Zur Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft', *Informationen und Meinungen aus Deutschbelgien* 1, no. 2 (1994): 9.

<sup>91</sup>SE, 670/55/238 (Im verflossenen Jahre, 1930).

Not much is known about the relationship between school principals, the mayor, teachers, parents and children at the time. Given a shortage of personnel, the Roman Catholic school was populated with young teachers, some of whom had not yet been ordained. Parents criticised the inexperience of teachers, although this could not often be voiced in the press.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, given that modern academic thinking had been strongly influenced by the idealised image of docile children developed under Romanticism, children were not supposed to express themselves without the consent of adults, a practice that leaves us today with no ego-documents produced by pupils concerning their school experiences.<sup>93</sup> Interviews recently conducted with former pupils are overshadowed by their later experiences, especially the region's annexation to Germany in the Second World War.<sup>94</sup>

### A master of ceremonies?

The successor to Léon Cordonnier at the Bishop's College in Eupen, Victor Schoonbroodt (who served as principal from 1933 to 1940), was an old acquaintance of the school. Schoonbroodt had been a teacher at the Bishop's College in the early 1920s, after which he had become a chaplain in the Flemish city of Sint-Niklaas.<sup>95</sup> He was associated with the College for most of the interwar years, and he comes closest to a master of ceremonies leading secondary education through its rites of passage.<sup>96</sup> As a successful school principal, he not only championed the establishment of a new liminal phase; he was also capable of skilfully adapting his practices to the requirements of rapidly changing governments in the fragile Belgian liberal democracy during the post-liminal phase. As we shall demonstrate, he was able to negotiate the composition of the school's clientele and the content of study by jumping in and out of the liminal phase depending on the historical context.

Borderland secondary education became more accessible after the implementation of the new Belgian law on language regulations of 1932, which provided the opportunity to teach more courses in German than before.<sup>97</sup> The new educational law was a compromise between the demands of Flemish nationalists, who wanted 'their' children to be taught in 'their' language on 'their' lands, a majority of the other Belgian statesmen (with differing ideas among themselves), and the reality of language use in the city of Brussels and municipalities along the linguistic borderline. In Wallonia and Flanders, the language of instruction was no longer to be the child's mother tongue but the language of the region, which resulted in the mass 'Dutchification' of secondary education in Flanders.<sup>98</sup> In Brussels and along the linguistic borderline, however, the principle that children were to

<sup>92</sup>Melchior, 'Vom deutschen Realprogramm', 97.

<sup>93</sup>Marc Depaepe, 'De pedagogiek', in *Geschiedenis van de Wetenschappen in België*, ed. Andrée Despy-Meyer et al. (Brussels/Doornik: Dexia/La Renaissance, 2001), 335.

<sup>94</sup>Förderverein des Archivwesens in der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens V.o.G., *Wir durften studieren. Erinnerungen von ostbelgischen Jugendlichen* (Eupen: Grenz-Echo Verlag, 2014), 56, 125, 154, 159, 201.

<sup>95</sup>Alfred Minke, *300 Jahre Eupener Schulgeschichte* (Eupen: Collège Patronne, 1981), 63.

<sup>96</sup>Van Gennep, *Rites*, 39.

<sup>97</sup>SE, 670/55/238 (Ministère des Sciences et des Arts, Loi concernant le régime linguistique de l'enseignement primaire et de l'enseignement moyen, Extrait de Moniteur Belge, August 5, 1932).

<sup>98</sup>Mallinson, *Power*, 166.

receive their education in their mother tongue remained in place.<sup>99</sup> In ESM, these legal changes, initiated by a democratic regime that entrusted municipalities with their implementation, resulted in a widening of recruitment of pupils.<sup>100</sup> This change was brought to ESM thanks to the work of Flemish nationalists in national politics, not the initiative of school principals like Victor Schoonbroodt.

In terms of the content of history teaching, however, Schoonbroodt decided to offer a liminal interpretation. The historian Victor O'Connell recently came to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that as long as ESM were under colonial rule, there was a policy in place, but as soon as they were administratively integrated into Belgium, their future was in the hands of politicians who often acted opportunistically to keep their own heads above water within fragile and rapidly changing coalition governments.<sup>101</sup> The tenth Minister responsible for education in interwar Belgium, who ruled between 17 December 1932 and 12 June 1934, was a member of the Liberal Party called Maurice Lippens. He demanded that school principals give a speech to mark the death of King Albert I, and provided strict guidelines on its content. Attention was drawn to the King's moral decency and glorious role in the First World War with the intention of turning him into a national children's hero. Lippens's aim was to increase Belgian patriotism in times of economic recession and political instability, and to slow down Flemish nationalism after the Dutchification of secondary schooling in Flanders.<sup>102</sup>

Schoonbroodt gave the speech, but he set aside any glorification of the King's military actions during the war and instead emphasised his noble pacifist character:

King Albert gave you, dear pupils, a living example of work, continuous diligence, personal initiative and inquisitiveness – characteristics you do not need to admire, but emulate. ... You pupils will also only have influence and find success later in life when you train your mind and desires to the heart of this school. ...<sup>103</sup>

Schoonbroodt even sent a copy of his speech to the Ministry. Because Ministers responsible for education were often replaced – between 1920 and 1940, Belgium had 20 different Ministers in total, often coming from different political parties and all operating in coalition governments – Maurice Lippens could exercise little effective control over teaching content.<sup>104</sup> Schoonbroodt knew that borderland education was primarily governed at the local level. He considered himself in a strong enough position to disobey the Minister and give his own interpretation of war and peace, on which – he believed – elite borderland pupils could build a meaningful future within Belgium. In other words, he took the initiative to instal a liminal phase.

Later in the 1930s, a new stability was attained in which borderland secondary schooling was entirely incorporated into the Belgian educational system. Sources we possess shed light on the constitutive role Victor Schoonbroodt created for himself as

<sup>99</sup>Maurits de Vroede, 'Language in Education in Belgium up to 1940', in *Schooling, Educational Policy and Ethnic Identity* (Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe), ed. Janusz J. Tomiak et al. (New York: Dartmouth Publishing, 1991), 125.

<sup>100</sup>SE, X, 168/8, 8 (Rapport sur le Collège Patronné, Dechant H. Keufgens, 1936).

<sup>101</sup>O'Connell, *Annexation*, 291.

<sup>102</sup>Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede*, 206, 264.

<sup>103</sup>SE, X, 168/8, 18 (Suite de l'éloge funèbre de S. M. le Roi Albert I prononcé devant le corps professoral et les élèves du Collège à Eupen, February 22, 1934), 2.

<sup>104</sup>Marc Depaepe, Maurits de Vroede and Frank Simon, 'The 1936 Curriculum Reform in Belgian Primary Education', *Journal of Education Policy* 6, no. 4 (1991): 376.

a school principal during this postliminal phase. In 1937, P. van Werveke, a lawyer and former secretary to Herman Baltia, made a public complaint that the reduced amount of teaching in French following the implementation of the 1932 educational law had resulted in Belgian citizenship education being neglected.<sup>105</sup> In response, Victor Schoonbroodt and other school principals in Eupen composed a booklet in which they pointed out the inclusive aim of their citizenship education, including history lessons:

The social task of all educated people consists in retaining and developing the spiritual heritage of a tribe or a nation. Especially in those places where national minorities live, the educated person's sense of duty is of overwhelming significance because the central administration of the new state does not usually pay any attention to maintaining the local culture of the territory that it governs. ... However, if we try to uphold the natural culture in the German-speaking regions, we will certainly be performing a truly social and patriotic act, also as far as the future of religion is concerned. Only then will these people feel 'at home' in the Belgian state.<sup>106</sup>

Schoonbroodt and his colleagues were of the opinion that Belgian patriotism could be taught equally as well in German as in French (or Dutch). The authors were praised for their inclusive interpretation of Belgian citizenship by various Belgian ministries. Following the elections of 1936, the Kingdom of Belgium had turned into a fragile democracy in which one-quarter of the electorate had given its vote to extremist parties denouncing democratic principles.<sup>107</sup> It was felt that the foundations of the Belgian nation-state were crumbling. Belgium's Prime Minister at the time (a member of the Catholic Party), Paul van Zeeland, himself admitted: 'Your reflections on the respect Belgium has to offer for the language and culture of our fellow citizens in the German part of the country correspond to the line of conduct which the government has always wished to practise'.<sup>108</sup> Van Zeeland acknowledged that the authors had creatively fulfilled the imagined policy of the Belgian government. Schoonbroodt and his colleagues were an example of how the sovereign state and individual citizens could co-shape each other. They had acted in order to bring about a more cohesive Belgian nation-state.

On the whole, Schoonbroodt's ideas in 1937 did not differ significantly from those he had expressed in 1934. But the historical context had changed. When, in 1934, a Belgian minister responsible for education imposed a norm on history teaching, Schoonbroodt took it upon himself to create his own liminal interpretation. In 1937, in contrast, he and his colleagues proposed their self-invented norm on citizenship education as a solution for the Belgian nation-state, and were validated by national authorities who felt disoriented in an unstable political climate.

However, Schoonbroodt appeared unable to realise his interpretation of inclusive citizenship among the borderland pupils of his own school. In 1933, Germany left the League of Nations and started to re-militarise and to aspire explicitly to the re-annexation of the borderlands considered to have been lost through the Treaty of Versailles. In 1936, German military forces violated the international agreements made in Versailles in 1919 and in Locarno in 1926, and stationed troops in the demilitarised zone on the German

<sup>105</sup>Van Werveke, *La Belgique*, 36; Lejeune, 'Abtretung', 234.

<sup>106</sup>Hubert Keufgens, Eugène Ahn and Victor Schoonbroodt, *Eupen-Malmedy ein Problem! Wie weit wir sind!* (Eupen: Liège Printing Co, 1937), 36.

<sup>107</sup>Gerard, 'De democratie gedroomd', 1079.

<sup>108</sup>SE, X, 168/8, 32 (Paul van Zeeland à Messieurs Keufgens, Ahn et Schoonbroodt, Brussels, March 15, 1937).

side of the Belgian–German state border. At the very moment when the Locarno Treaties had lost their significance, Belgian politicians were embarking upon a neutral course in international relations and negotiating a bilateral agreement with Germany; the regions of Eupen, Sankt Vith and Malmedy were left outside the talks, as both German and Belgian state representatives considered them currency to pay off a supposedly imminent geopolitical deal, and this contributed to their Nazification.<sup>109</sup>

Before 1933, Germanness (*Deutschtum*) had been defined through appropriate characteristics such as language, culture and sometimes also religion, but it now became related to physical elements.<sup>110</sup> The German community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was to be composed exclusively of people with the correct racial identity. Belonging to the *Volk* became more important than holding citizenship of a state.<sup>111</sup> From 1933 onwards, Germany increased support for activities preserving the language and culture of what it considered as its countrymen living abroad.<sup>112</sup> The strategies of the German government towards ESM can be illustrated by means of three examples. When Hitler came to power, teaching academies in Germany were purged of people hostile to the new regime.<sup>113</sup> New teaching academies, preferably established in peripheral German rural areas at the border, were engaged in gathering scientific proof that the inhabitants on the other side also belonged to the German *Volk*.<sup>114</sup> In 1938, for example, German students had a field trip to the region of Malmedy in order to research how much German was taught in local primary schools.<sup>115</sup> Another strategy was to offer stipends to borderland pupils wanting to pursue their higher education in Germany. In 1933, three ‘Eupener’ received RM 200 each for their higher studies in Germany, and two years later, nine stipends were granted to students from the regions of Eupen, Sankt Vith and Malmedy.<sup>116</sup> A third strategy was to influence local teachers. In Germany, a high proportion of teachers belonged to the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers’ Party or NSDAP).<sup>117</sup> We do not possess sufficient empirical evidence to come to a similar conclusion for the regions of Eupen, Sankt Vith and Malmedy, but we do know that one of the teachers at the Bishop’s College belonged to a revisionist local

<sup>109</sup>Charles Cheney Hyde, ‘Belgium and Neutrality’, *American Journal of International Law* 31, no. 1 (1937): 81–5.

<sup>110</sup>Tammo Luther, *Volkstumspolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1933–1938. Die Auslandsdeutschen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Traditionalisten und Nationalisten* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004), 241.

<sup>111</sup>Mark Allinson, *Germany and Austria 1814–2000* (London: Routledge, 2002), 89.

<sup>112</sup>Financial support issued by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs through its *Reichszentrale für Heimatdienst* (Reich Central Office for Domestic Propaganda), and later by the German Ministry of the Interior through the *Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland* (Association for Germanness Abroad or VDA) for German-minded cultural organisations in ESM had already amounted to RM 60,000 a year at the end of the 1920s, but by the end of the 1930s, this sum had increased to RM 113,200, the equivalent of US\$ 765,000 in 2019, and was provided by the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers’ Party or NSDAP), which had forced the VDA into political conformity, with the clear aim of influencing borderland inhabitants ideologically and politically (Bruno Kartheuser, *Les années 30 à Eupen-Malmedy. Regard sur le réseau de la subversion* [Neundorf: Krautgarten, 2008], 108; Carlo Lejeune, *Die Deutsch-Belgischen Kulturbeziehungen 1925–1980. Wege zur europäischen Integration?* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1992), 120–37).

<sup>113</sup>Otto Ewert, ‘Eric Stern und die pädagogische Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus’, in *Psychologie im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Carl Friedrich Graumann (Berlin: Springer, 1985), 200.

<sup>114</sup>Friedrich Burgdörfer, *Volk ohne Jugend. Geburtenchwund und Überalterung des deutschen Volkskörpers. Ein Problem der Volkswirtschaft, der Sozialpolitik, der nationalen Zukunft* (Berlin: Kurt Vowinkel Verlag, 1932).

<sup>115</sup>Landesverband Rheinland, 4745, unpagged (Zusammenstellung über die derzeitige Lage im Volksschulwesen der drei Kantone Eupen, Malmedy und St. Vith, 1938).

<sup>116</sup>Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BK), 1174-7 (Jos Dehottay-Cremer. Neue Deckadresse: Aachen Bahnhofstrasse 3, bei Justizrat Bohlen, Xhoffraix, an Herrn Dr. Steinacher, Berlin, October 30, 1933); BK, 1174-7. Regierungsrat Thedieck (an die Deutsche Stiftung in Berlin, Köln, October 4, 1935).

<sup>117</sup>Jackson J. Spielvogel and David Redles, *Hitler and Nazi Germany: A History*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 171.



political party and used funds received from German sources to mobilise elite borderland pupils for the German cause outside the school gates, where Schoonbroodt could not assert his influence.<sup>118</sup>

How can we evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies? An archived list mentioning the future careers of the 49 pupils who successfully completed their secondary education at the school between 1925 and 1935 shows 39 pupils as ‘assimilated to Belgium’, nine former pupils with a question mark and one with a cross indicating that he had died. Twenty-one of the 48 were already in employment, 13 having completed university studies in Belgium after secondary school. The eight who had not gone to university had made that decision on the basis of modest financial means. Of the 27 who had not yet entered the workforce, 19 were still studying at Belgian universities and eight had stopped or interrupted their university studies. The list does not mention those pupils who continued their (educational) careers in Germany, although German sources indicate that there were some such pupils.<sup>119</sup>

No powerful German voice at the time was able to offer a meaningful narrative of international reconciliation that might have bridged the tensions among borderland pupils. Out of a belief that intellectual cooperation with a totalitarian regime was possible, supranational cooperation within the CICI was continued with Germany after it left the League of Nations in 1933. In 1925, a resolution was adopted by the supranational body allowing one National Committee to request that another National Committee rectify false facts in history and geography textbooks printed within its country. After 1933, the German delegate Arnold Reimann continued to strive for the removal of false information, subjectivism and prejudice from history textbooks in the CICI through bilateral consultations. In 1935, he sat down with French historians to come to a joint narrative of the past 150 years of French–German history, a narrative that denounced the myth that the people of France and Germany were eternal enemies. On 25 of the 39 difficult historical events they identified, both sides were able to come to an agreement. For instance, they agreed with each other that neither France nor Germany had wanted the First World War, but that the war had erupted in a rampantly bellicose climate. On the neutrality of Belgium, however, they could not reach agreement. While the French historians were of the opinion that Belgium had never given up its neutrality, the German historians claimed the crossing of the Belgian state borderline by the German army had been a preparatory military operation, and that Belgian attacks on German soldiers had started the war. In 1936, Adolf Hitler declared that only the German government was in charge of the revision of history textbooks, and the 39 resolutions Arnold Reimann had contributed to were denounced as treasonous.<sup>120</sup> The German history textbooks published in the late 1930s no longer aimed to reconcile the two nations; Putzger’s *Historical School Atlas*, one of the most widely distributed school atlases at the time, depicted ESM as ‘a territory stolen without a plebiscite’.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>118</sup>SE, E/2/8 VS Ili1 32 (Pierre van Werveke à L.J. Kerkhofs Evêque de Liège, Eupen, December 29, 1936).

<sup>119</sup>SE, X, 168/8, 32 (Dechant Hubert Keufgens. Rapport sur le Collège Patronné, 1936, 3–5); BK, 1174-7. Regierungsrat Thedieck (an die Deutsche Stiftung in Berlin, Köln, October 4, 1935).

<sup>120</sup>Hens, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede*, 211–48.

<sup>121</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm Putzger, *Historischer Schul-Atlas. Große Ausgabe* (Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1938), 25.

Germany eventually invaded ESM on 10 May 1940 and annexed the lands to the Reich. Following the Second World War, ESM switched to Belgian state sovereignty again. However, attitudes towards ethnic and linguistic minorities had changed. Throughout the European continent, an ethnically clean nation-state was now deemed most desirable, with minorities being considered ‘a cause of conflict per se’ who should no longer be granted the privilege to use their language and foster cultural contacts with people across the political border.<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusion

Applying Arnold Van Gennep’s concept of liminality to the Belgian–German borderlands for the first time enabled us to identify the extent to which principals of borderland schools were able to (co-)define which children would become members of the borderland elite and what borderland secondary school pupils should know about their past during the transformation of Belgian–German borderlands in the interwar period. We have shown how each individual school principal gave meaning to the space and time in which the transformation of social statuses was negotiated, accomplished and regulated. A change in the profile of pupils attending borderland secondary schools appeared from the moment German citizens could no longer enrol and secondary education for girls was downsized to three school years. Catholic school principals, who played a major role after almost all German-speaking teachers had left, applauded the reinforcement of the male-dominated traditional social order and only widened their recruitment practices when a new Belgian law adopted in 1932 required them to do so. Regarding history teaching, already during the dictatorial transition regime in the early 1920s, the Baltia administration made use of its legislative and executive power and established a liminal phase that offered a more innovative reconciliatory narrative on the First World War than what was available elsewhere in Belgium or in the leading supranational advisory body, the CICI. As soon as ESM were integrated into the Kingdom of Belgium, borderland school principals decided to push that experimental interpretation aside and make full use of both the Belgian nation-state’s respect for the freedom of religion and its reluctance to interfere in the organisation of Catholic secondary schooling (and its content). The most successful strategy of a borderland school principal that can be observed in the available sources was carried out by Victor Schoonbroodt. He agreed that the massacre of the First World War could not be explained without offering elite pupils a deeper understanding of the various cultures encountered in their borderlands. He felt strong enough to disobey the politically weak Belgian Minister of Education in 1934 and to offer his own pacifist interpretation, thereby de facto establishing a liminal phase. Two years later, Schoonbroodt decided to offer his meaningful understanding of Belgian citizenship in the borderlands in a booklet. In this way, Schoonbroodt proactively shaped the postliminal phase at a moment in time when Belgian politicians faced

<sup>122</sup>Hans Lemberg, ‘Grenzen und Minderheiten im östlichen Mitteleuropa – Genese und Wechselwirkungen’, in *Grenzen in Ostmitteleuropa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Aktuelle Forschungsprobleme*, ed. Hans Lemberg (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2000), 179.

problems in sustaining democracy, an endeavour he was praised for by the Belgian Prime Minister.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Austrian Science Fund under the Elise Richter Grant (number V 360 - G 22).

### Notes on contributor

*Machteld Venken* is a Professor of Contemporary Transnational History at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History of the University of Luxembourg. She holds MA degrees in Slavic Studies from the Catholic University in Leuven (Belgium) and in European Studies from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Poland), as well as a PhD in History from the Catholic University in Leuven (Belgium) and an accreditation to supervise research in Modern and Contemporary History from the University of Vienna (Austria). She is the author of the monographs *Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memories* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011) and *Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York, 2021).

### ORCID

Machteld Venken  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0358-0827>