

# **'Flanders Conquered the World's Fair!' Flemish newspaper discourses and nation- building during the 1958 Brussels World Exhibition**

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This article examines the meaning of the 'Flemish Day' at the Brussels World Exhibition of 1958 for the formation of the Flemish nation. With this one-day festival pro-Flemish organisations contested the francophone character of the Expo, and francophone dominance in Belgian society. Its success announced the steep advance of the Flemish movement in the second half of the twentieth century. But how can we best interpret its impact on Flemish nation-building? The article analyses reactions on the Flemish Day in the Flemish press. Using six newspapers of diverse ideological strands it assesses support for Flemish emancipation. It thereby reveals a broad acceptance of the legitimacy of the Flemish Day, despite remarkable ideological differences. The discourse analysis supports the hypothesis that broadly shared interpretations of, and an almost unanimous identification with Flanders, provided the foundation for the mass spreading of Flemish consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s. Contributing empirical evidence to the study of nation-building in post-war Flanders, this article demonstrates the importance of media as mirrors and sources of national discourses.

**Keywords:** nation-building, national identity, media, newspapers, discourse, world fairs, Flemish movement, Belgium

## Introduction

At world expos, countries flaunt their feathers. The World's Fair of 1958 in Brussels offered a platform for nations to establish their legitimacy in the eyes of others. But not all who claimed nationhood secured a pavilion. On 6 July 1958 the Flemish movement claimed its place by organising a 'Flemish Day'. In doing so, it protested against the French-speaking nature of the Expo and demanded attention to Flemish demands. This article aims to understand the significance of the Flemish Day for Flemish nation-building through a discourse analysis of the coverage of the Day in the Flemish press. Indeed, the actions around and during the world exhibition were seen as the first major success of the Flemish movement after World War II.<sup>1</sup> The next morning, *Het Volk*, the newspaper of the Christian labour movement, headlined: 'Flanders Conquered the World's Fair.' The event was dubbed 'an extraordinary and massive people's festival'.<sup>2</sup> Participants were wearing a yellow and black 'Flemish' flower pinned to their chests and could attend a Catholic mass, a series of speeches on Flanders, and performances that demonstrated Flemish culture.<sup>3</sup>

What does the news coverage of this celebration tell us about the formation of the Flemish nation after World War II? In that process, Flanders transformed from a nationalist project in the 1940s, tainted by collaboration, into a political reality with increasing powers and institutions from 1970 onwards. Historians Bruno De Wever, Antoon Vrints and Frans-Jos Verdoodt situate the breakthrough of the Flemish movement among the masses in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Flemish nationalism then found a large following among the growing group of white collar workers in the context of Flanders' economic expansion. They based this hypothesis mainly on the success of the Flemish-nationalist party *Volksunie*. The dissolution of the Belgian unitary parties that ran parallel to this success can be read as a symptom of a

disappearing Belgian, and a growing Flemish consciousness in Flanders. But what did this consciousness mean and how did it come about? Historian Miroslav Hroch argues that a nation can only be said to exist when ‘everyone or almost everyone who qualifies as a member [of the nation] identifies with the nation’.<sup>5</sup> This would also require the working class to integrate into the national movement. Of these processes, we find indications in the work of historians Maarten Van Ginderachter (for the socialist labour movement around 1900) and Lode Wils (for the Christian labour movement around 1930).<sup>6</sup> But how the broad mass of Dutch-speaking Belgians could re-identify with Flanders after World War II has not been systematically and empirically studied in historiography.

This article starts from the simple observation that, as a historian, it is not possible to examine individual national identifications in a population. What you can investigate, however, is what a large part of that population in the 1950s was reading daily: newspapers. In this regard, choosing the press as a source is not a way of approaching people's national consciousness in a roundabout way, but allows for a layered historical analysis of nation-building. After all, what is nation-building? I understand nation-building as the historical process by which nationhood becomes a dominant category to describe a political relationship between people, in terms of a shared origin or future, shared characteristics, customs or interests. ‘Nation’ can then signify both a community within a society, and society as a whole.

I base this definition on Rogers Brubaker's concept of nationhood and ethnicity. ‘Nation’ will not be taken as an entity or object, whose origins can be proven or explained, but as a category, the use of which we can examine. Brubaker invites us...

‘to ask how, why, and in what contexts ethnic categories are used—or not used—to make sense of problems and predicaments, to articulate affinities and affiliations, to identify

commonalities and connections, to frame stories and self-understandings.’<sup>7</sup>

Thus, if we want to understand how Flanders came into being, we need to examine how the use of the category Flanders developed. While newspapers do not represent the ideas or language use of their readers in this respect, they do offer a crucial insight into the circulation of discourses. Indeed, the Belgian press was part of dominant political-ideological networks (*‘zuilen’* or *‘pillars’*) in which citizens were socialised.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Flemish Day at the World’s Fair provides a unique opportunity to study struggles over national meanings. Whereas world fairs are often seen as international platforms for national self-glorification, here a (sub-)national movement opposed a dominant national discourse.<sup>9</sup> In their reaction to this contestation, Flemish newspapers had to make their national views explicit, making the use of *‘Flanders’* as a category clearly visible.

In summary, this article examines the meaning of Flanders in the coverage of the Flemish Day in the Flemish press, to better understand the social spread of Flemish consciousness in the late 1950s. In what terms and in relation to what themes was Flanders talked about? What meanings were shared, contested, or ignored in the process? These questions allow for a substantial empirical contribution to the historiographical debate on Flemish nation-building.

## **Social-political context**

The creation and organisation of the Flemish Day was a collaboration between the *Flemish People’s Movement (Vlaamse Volksbeweging, VVB)* and the *Flemish Youth Committee for the World’s Fair (Vlaams Jeugdkomitee voor de Wereldtentoonstelling)*.<sup>10</sup> The VVB was a Flemish-

nationalist pressure group founded in 1952 that mobilised a wide audience for Flemish action points such as amnesty for collaborators and federalism. Its actions against the French-speaking nature of the World's Fair were its first major success. The *Youth Committee* was a collaboration of Flemish student and youth movements that organised petitions and protests throughout Flanders in the run-up to the Expo. It demanded the application of language laws at the Expo and the organisation of a Flemish Day.<sup>11</sup>

The chairman of the Youth Committee, later prime minister Wilfried Martens, called the Flemish Day a turning point in the history of the Flemish movement.<sup>12</sup> It was 'the first time that Catholic, dissenting and Flemish-nationalist movements started working together concretely for a common goal.'<sup>13</sup> In fact, this was also reflected in the selection of the speakers who were given a stage at the Flemish Day: a socialist, a liberal, and a Catholic.<sup>14</sup> The pro-Flemish historian Herman Todts also saw the actions around the world exhibition as the beginning of a successful campaign that would result in the language legislation of the 1960s. Especially important in his view was the way the Flemish Day came about. This new generation of Flemish campaigners achieved through protest actions what negotiations had failed to do. Both the hard-fought creation and the successful course of the festival restored the self-confidence which the movement had lost since World War II.<sup>15</sup>

This was remarkable, because since the Liberation in 1944, the Flemish movement had by necessity played a modest role in the Belgian public sphere. The collaboration of part of the movement with the German occupiers during World War II had badly damaged its reputation and sentenced it to political marginalisation in post-war society. Initiatives to establish a new Flemish-nationalist pressure group in the 1940s and 1950s had difficulty to get off the ground. Moreover, they found little support outside the traditional nationalist and Catholic milieus.<sup>16</sup> It was not until 1954 that a Flemish-nationalist party was able to send one

elected member to parliament again. Before the war, there had been seventeen.

Flemish nationalism thus stood weak, but the political conflicts of interest between Flemish and French-speaking Belgians had not disappeared. Three of the most important political debates of the 1940s and 1950s confirmed the communitarian fault line.<sup>17</sup> In the 'royal question', the 'repression' and the 'school war', a Catholic majority in Flanders faced a secular majority of socialists and liberals in Brussels and Wallonia.<sup>18</sup> The abdication of Leopold III in 1950, a consequence of his controversial policy of adjustment during the war, marked a defeat for the dominant, pro-Leopoldist Flemish public opinion, and strengthened anti-Belgian feelings in pro-Flemish milieus. Secondly, the repression, the punishment of collaborators, was seen in pro-Flemish and Catholic circles, and by extension in much of Flemish society, as an unfair and anti-Flemish policy. In the Belgian political debate on amnesty, which involved the remission of punishment, a Flemish majority of Catholics opposed a francophone majority of secularists.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the school war (1950–1958), in which Catholics and secularists fought over the organisation of education in Belgium, also showed an ideological division between Flanders and Wallonia.

The resolution of this last conflict in November 1958 created space for new cooperation within the boundaries of both language groups, thus further undermining cooperation across the language border. Moreover, frustrations grew in Flanders over the lack of enforcement of the language laws, especially in and around Brussels, to the detriment of Dutch speakers. Thus, from the end of the 1950s, the community question took a central place on the Belgian political agenda.

## Sources

I am using news coverage on the Flemish Day in five Flemish newspapers from 7 July 1958, and one weekly magazine edition from 10 July. Each newspaper had a different political persuasion, and most maintained close links with political parties and organisations. The selection includes the Flemish nationalist weekly *'t Pallieterke* (a name based on the novel character 'Pallieter,' which became a symbol for Flemish collaborators during the First World War), the Catholic newspapers *De Standaard* (*The Standard*) and *Het Volk* (*The People*), the liberal daily *Het Laatste Nieuws* (*The Latest News*), the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* (*Forward*) and the communist newspaper *De Rode Vaan* (*The Red Banner*).

I will introduce each of these titles by their relationship to the political family to which they belonged. *'t Pallieterke* was a Flemish-nationalist weekly, founded in 1945.<sup>20</sup> The magazine was Christian and radical-right oriented, and intensely opposed the repression. In the 1950s, it evolved from a radical pro-Flemish stance to Flemish nationalism, with federalism becoming less and less of a taboo. Although it was not tied to the Flemish nationalist party *Volksunie*, *'t Pallieterke* became the mouthpiece of right-wing and traditional Flemish nationalists.

*De Standaard*, then, was a Catholic, pro-Flemish daily, first published in 1919.<sup>21</sup> It stood in a tradition that linked a commitment to preserving the Dutch vernacular together with the Christian faith. From 1947, the newspaper hammered tirelessly on Flemish demands such as amnesty, better enforcement of the language laws and improved representation of Flemings in public institutions. It tried to justify the collaboration and portrayed the repression as an anti-Flemish weapon. The newspaper maintained close ties with the Flemish wing of the Catholic Party (*Christelijke Volkspartij*, CVP-PSC), in which *De Standaard* saw the only guarantee for the recovery of the Flemish movement.

Like *De Standaard*, *Het Volk* linked the Flemish to a Christian-inspired struggle.<sup>22</sup> The newspaper was the unofficial spokesman for the Christian workers' movement in Flanders, which consisted of an influential network of trade unions, health insurance funds and women's associations. The movement acquired an important position of power in the Catholic party and in the 1950s pushed for a solid Flemish programme focusing on employment in Flanders and language rights for Dutch speakers.<sup>23</sup> The pro-Flemish editor-in-chief of *Het Volk* Karel Van Cauwelaert was also a senator for the Catholic party from 1958 onwards.

Since its creation in 1988, *Het Laatste Nieuws* can be considered the mouthpiece of the pro-Flemish liberals, most of whom were secularists.<sup>24</sup> However, Flemish liberalism had little influence on the Liberal Party. On the royal question, for instance, the Liberal Party took a predominantly anti-Leopoldist stance, under pressure from its Brussels and Walloon leaders, but against the wishes of prominent Flemish liberal leaders, including the editor-in-chief of *Het Laatste Nieuws* Julius Hoste.<sup>25</sup>

*Vooruit*, founded in 1884, was the Ghent newspaper of the Belgian socialist party.<sup>26</sup> Like the Liberal Party, the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) did not show a pro-Flemish sentiment after World War II. The centre of gravity of the socialist movement was in Wallonia, where it also became entangled with the federalist Walloon movement. In response, Flemish socialist leaders adopted a defensive unitary strategy, driven also by their aversion to Flemish-nationalist collaboration. They presented the Flemish question as 'a false problem and a clerical manoeuvre,' making further autonomy unnecessary. Around 1958, the socialist cultural organization *Vermeeylenfonds* and the weekly magazine *Links* organised several pro-Flemish demonstrations, but within the party itself, Flemish representatives had little leeway.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the communist daily *De Rode Vaan* was the party paper of the Communist Party of Belgium. As a former resistance newspaper, it



strongly opposed Flemish nationalism after the war.<sup>28</sup> The Belgian patriotic stance it took during World War II was maintained until the 1960s. It thus mirrored the communist party, which joined some governments of national unity in the first years after the war. At a congress in 1954, in response to the massive decline in membership, the party decided to use the notions of ‘Flemish people’ again, and ‘Walloon people’ for the first time. At the same time, the party paid little attention to the Flemish question and mainly emphasised the unity of Flemish and Walloon workers.<sup>29</sup>

## Discourse analysis

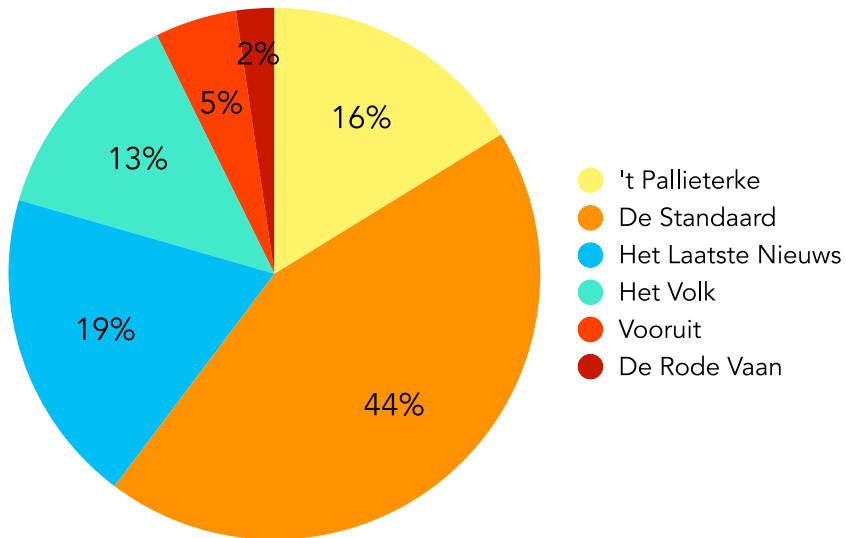
### Distribution of articles and Flemish references

Before starting the qualitative analysis of national meanings, it is useful to get a general idea of the attention each paper paid to Flemish Day. Figure 1 below shows for each title the number of articles, their place in the paper, and the number of images used. The diagram shows a distribution clarified by colors. Measured by the number of articles, *’t Pallieterke* and *De Standaard* paid the most attention to the Flemish day, followed by *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Volk*. Obvious is the low coverage in *Vooruit* and *De Rode Vaan*, which were the only papers not to put the news on their front pages, nor to publish images. *De Standaard* and *Het Volk* did show several photos, including images of the crowd and folk dancing activities, and portraits of the speakers who performed. *’t Pallieterke* included one cartoon of Flemings depicted as medieval insurgents, with the Atomium, the Belgian icon of the Expo, in the background.

	Articles	Page	Images
<i>'t Pallieterke</i>	4	1, 2, 3, 6	1
<i>De Standaard</i>	3	1, 5	8
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	3	1, 3, 6	2
<i>Het Volk</i>	2	1, 3	5
<i>Vooruit</i>	1	3	0
<i>De Rode Vaan</i>	1	2	0

**Fig. 1.** Distribution of articles

Another way to get an overall understanding of the different discourses is to zoom in on certain word frequencies. An obvious way to ascertain to what extent the various articles were permeated by discourses about Flanders is to count the use of the words 'Flanders,' 'Flemish,' and 'Flemings.' The relative distribution of the summed usage of those three terms is shown in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2.** Distribution of the use of 'Flanders', 'Flemish' and 'Flemings'

The distribution that appears here gives a different picture than the table. Of all references to 'Flanders,' 'Flemish' and 'Flemings' that appeared in the articles about the Flemish day, 44% were in *De Standaard*. That is slightly less than all references in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *'t Pallieterke* and *Het Volk* combined (48%).<sup>30</sup> The left-wing press accounts for the remaining 7%. This result primarily reflects the extent of coverage in each newspaper. Compared to the other papers, *De Standaard* devoted much more text to the Flemish day, in part by publishing all the speeches in full. Those speeches contained numerous rhetorical repetitions. The amount of text in *'t Pallieterke*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Volk* was a lot lower. Finally, *Vooruit* and *De Rode Vaan* contained the least text and therefore relatively few references.

## About 'Flemish', 'Flemings', and 'Flanders'

Each newspaper made references to Flanders. But what did those terms mean? The positive association with Flanders in *De Standaard* is clear and frequent. The newspaper called the Flemish Day 'Flemish enough': it was 'Flemish in content and presentation.'<sup>31</sup> Here, 'Flemish' here stood for a certain characteristic, a kind of distinctiveness, a cultural norm that was met. Flemish was also 'the Flemish people' who had proved that they could 'participate in international cultural life.' The 'Flemish people' were in step with the times. And, importantly, the Flemish people were 'we.' The newspaper explicitly identified with the Flemings and their cause. This identification also happened in the Flemish-nationalist weekly *'t Pallieterke*. 'We Flemings' - a recurring motif in the 10 July editorial - 'had shown who and what we were.'<sup>32</sup> Flemings were 'a people' that 'was bounded only by its language, its nature, its culture.' The Flemish Day had thus gone much better than *'t Pallieterke* had expected: 'at least it was Flemish,' it sounded.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, *'t Pallieterke* considered it a historical gain that 'gentlemen of all stripes' had attended the day and had to 'tolerate the Flemish atmosphere.'

*Het Volk*, the newspaper of the Christian labour movement, also celebrated the Flemish Day as a high day. Its headline, 'Flanders Conquered the World's Fair,' expressed a strong sense of triumph.<sup>34</sup> The paper hailed the 'Flemish unity' visible in the participation of 'Flemings of all convictions and from all walks of life,' as the paper noted from one of the four speeches. From another speaker, *Het Volk* quoted the characterisation of 'the Flemish people' as 'a people of world citizens in a United Europe.' The liberal newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* even chose 'The Flemish people in the European community' as its title, quoting a speaker who called Flanders a 'small nation' with a 'new European task.'<sup>35</sup> Flanders was experiencing a 'great day' and reaffirming its 'strong will to live, work and prosper,' echoed another speech from which *Het Laatste Nieuws* quoted.

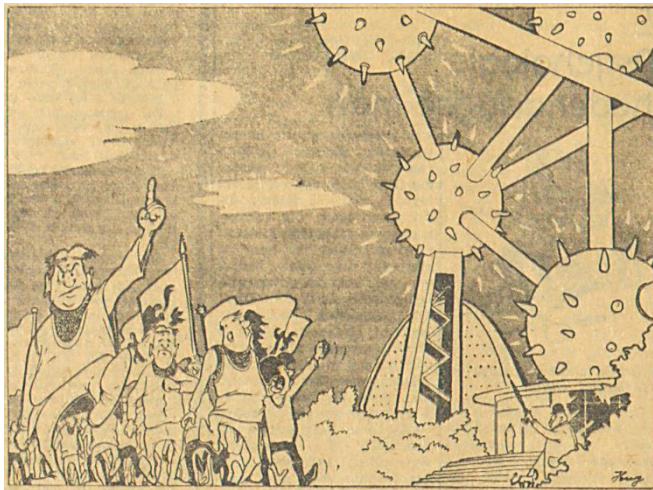
Despite its comparatively short coverage, the socialist daily *Vooruit*, too, made several references to Flanders. It mentioned ‘Flemish youth movements,’ and crowds that sang ‘Flemish songs’ and ‘Flemish battle songs’ — an activity which remained ‘calm and dignified.’<sup>36</sup> The paper cited a speaker who talked of the Flemings as ‘a people on the rise,’ and who characterized ‘our Flemish solidity, our labour power, our sense of art and our joy of life.’ Except for *t Pallieterke* and *De Rode Vaan*, this quote was also present in the other titles discussed here. *De Rode Vaan* was the only paper in which references to Flanders were limited to some organizations’ names.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, ‘Flanders,’ ‘Flemish’ and ‘Flemings’ generally acquired a very positive meaning in the newspapers. Apart from *De Rode Vaan*, every title talked about the Flemings as a ‘people’ or a ‘nation.’ In the liberal *Het Laatste Nieuws* and the socialist *Vooruit*, this was done by quoting from speeches; in the Catholic newspapers *De Standaard* and *Het Volk*, and the Flemish-nationalist weekly *t Pallieterke*, this discourse came from their own commentaries. A similar division between newspapers can be seen in identification with Flanders. *De Standaard*, *t Pallieterke* and *Het Volk* used ‘we’ and ‘us’ to talk about the Flemish. In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the ‘we’ references came from the speeches. *Vooruit* quoted a speaker on ‘our Flemish’ qualities. Only *De Rode Vaan* refrained from identifying with Flanders. Importantly, no title denied the existence of Flanders. No one expressed annoyance about the meaning ‘Flanders’ or ‘Flemish’ had acquired on the Flemish Day: a community with its own language and cultural expression, which merited recognition in Belgium and the wider world.

### **On ‘French-speakers’, ‘Belgium’, and ‘Europe’**

Self-definitions always come with (implicit) definitions of others. If most newspapers identified with Flanders and the Flemish, then who were the ‘others’ who were not ‘us’? In *t Pallieterke*, this other was most clearly

defined: French-speakers and Belgian patriots. The magazine observed how the Dutch language was ignored by the Expo's staff, and how 'hysterical Frenchmen, franskiljons, Walloons and Brusselers' scolded the Flemish.<sup>38</sup> When some violent incidents occurred in the afternoon between pro-Flemish protesters and police, a reporter noted that a gentleman, 'pure Belgian to the core,' pounded his decorated chest 'like a man possessed.' The hostility towards Francophones was also clarified with a historical reference. A cartoon recalled the historical Flemish-French rivalry since the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302.<sup>39</sup> This historical battle between the County of Flanders and the French kingdom had in the nineteenth century become a symbol for Flemish resistance against Francophone oppression. The cartoon depicted the Atomium, the Belgian architectural showpiece of the World's Fair, with its familiar spheres in the shape of 'goedendags,' the medieval weapon of the Flemings.<sup>40</sup>



**Fig. 3.** *'t Pallieterke* recalled the Flemish-French rivalries since the Middle Ages by depicting the Atomium in a medieval martial fashion.

The other newspapers lacked such antagonistic representations, or tended to formulate the relationship between Flemish and French-speakers more positively. *De Standaard* was proud that the Day had shown the Flemish presence in Belgium, both to foreigners and ‘fellow citizens.’<sup>41</sup> *Het Volk* noted that ‘not least the Walloon spectators could not believe their own eyes.’<sup>42</sup> The Christian Democrat newspaper also emphasised Bishop Van Waeyenbergh's appeal that ‘Belgium [...] must provide Flanders as well as Wallonia with the opportunity and means to achieve full development.’ This shows not only the perception of a division between Flemings and Walloons, but also the Christian workers movement's political position on regional autonomy. In contrast, the liberal, socialist, and communist press did not refer to a Francophone other. However, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, like *De Standaard*, did quote Bishop Van Waeyenbergh's description of Flanders as ‘free in free Belgium, under a beloved royal house.’<sup>43</sup> The bishop thereby expressed the pro-monarchist stance the Church had maintained in the politically heated debate surrounding the royal question. *De Standaard* additionally quoted the liberal rector Lambrechts, who called Belgium ‘the common fatherland,’ and who hoped for ‘a nobler Flemish man in a better Belgium.’<sup>44</sup> *t Pallieterke* was unsurprisingly annoyed by such conciliatory, pro-monarchist, and pro-Belgian language.<sup>45</sup>

Europe was a third reference to which Flanders was systematically related. ‘De Vlamingen in de Europese gemeenschap,’ kopte *Het Laatste Nieuws*.<sup>46</sup> Daarmee plaatste de liberale krant het thema van de Europese eenmaking op de voorgrond, en de Vlaamse Dag in de internationale context van de Wereldexpo. De krant citeerde, net als *De Standaard*, de socialist Achilles Mussche, die waarschuwde voor ‘the looming danger of absorption’ in Europe. As a ‘small nation,’ the Flemish would have a hard time, but ‘we’ had to be ready for this ‘new European task.’ Bisshop Van Waeyenbergh too saw a place for Flanders ‘in a united Europe and in a peaceful world.’ *Het Volk* translated Mussche's cautionary critique of

European unification simply (and rather euphemistically) as 'hopeful.'<sup>47</sup> The short coverage of the Flemish Day in *Vooruit* en *De Rode Vaan* did not include references to Europe. *'t Pallieterke*, however, rejected the idea of a united Europe, arguing that 'peace agreements between nations, waffling about European unity, and parliamentary cooperation' were nonsense and a waste of time.<sup>48</sup> 'That is why peoples can reach out to each other, while fatherlands and parliaments cannot.'

So, we see a diversity of 'others', sometimes complementary to 'us' and sometimes not. Only *'t Pallieterke* saw the Francophones as a clear opponent, and Belgium as an obstacle to Flanders. The Catholic, Christian Democrat and liberal newspapers, on the other hand, considered Francophones mainly as fellow inhabitants with whom the Flemings shared the Belgian home. The same division is found in discourses on Europe. The Flemish-nationalist weekly rejected European unification, while *De Standaard*, *Het Volk* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* saw both challenges and opportunities. *Vooruit* and *De Rode Vaan*, in their brief coverage, ignored the existence of Francophones, Belgium or Europe.

### **'National reconciliation' and 'Greater Dutch cooperation'**

Two political themes around which there were some striking differences in coverage were amnesty and the cooperation between the Dutch speakers of Flanders and the Netherlands. The former was a theme in Bishop Van Waeyenbergh's speech, the latter in that of socialist Mussche.

Remarkably, Van Waeyenbergh's call was hailed in the Flemish-nationalist and Catholic press but completely ignored in the liberal, socialist, and communist press. *De Standaard* referred to it as a 'Moving call for national reconciliation.' In his address, Bishop Van Waeyenbergh advocated for 'merciful reconciliation through the long overdue pardon for all those who are not criminals of common law.' *De Standaard* praised this as the day's absolute highlight, applauding how Van Waeyenbergh



had pointed out 'the wound in this people' and 'the hateful discord over what should have long belonged to the past.'<sup>49</sup> *Het Volk* also highlighted Van Waeyenbergh's plea for 'the eventual clearance of the repression,' quoting his call for 'mercifulness' and 'pardon.'<sup>50</sup> While 't *Pallierterke* found the 'allusion to amnesty' to be 'only very cautious,' the bishop also received the blessing of the Flemish nationalists.<sup>51</sup> However, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Vooruit*, and *De Rode Vaan* made no mention of it whatsoever. *Het Laatste Nieuws* only noted from Van Waeyenbergh's speech that 'Flanders, free in free Belgium,' would take its place 'in a united Europe and a peace-loving world.'<sup>52</sup> *Vooruit* and *De Rode Vaan* ignored the content of the bishop's speech and merely mentioned his name as one of the speakers. This silence contrasts with *De Standaard's* remark that 'socialists, liberals, and Catholics' alike applauded the bishop for his speech, and that hopefully none of them was to forget this.

'Greater Dutch cooperation,' then, was the choice of words by 't *Pallierterke* to refer to Mussche's call for increased collaboration among all 'Dutch speakers' from 'North and South.'<sup>53</sup> From the literal transcription of *De Standaard*, we know that Mussche himself did not mention the 'Greater Netherlands.' The concept evoked memories of the authoritarian ideology of the collaborating Flemish-nationalist parties from the 1930s and 1940s. With this formulation, 't *Pallierterke* thus made clear its ideological roots and orientation. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, like *De Standaard*, stuck to a literal rendition of Mussche's words. *Het Volk*, on the other hand, simply did not mention Mussche's proposition. This point was also absent in *Vooruit* and *De Rode Vaan*, which barely gave attention to the speeches. Mussche's call to additionally establish 'one great Flemish front,' finally — an appeal to subordinate ideological conflicts to the Flemish struggle — was welcomed by 't *Pallierterke* and transcribed in *De Standaard* but remained unmentioned elsewhere. 't *Pallierterke* concluded that the Flemish-nationalist party *Volksunie* could still learn a thing or two from Mussche.

### **Folk dance and 'self-determination'**

Finally, there were several other themes that mainly surfaced in the discussion or portrayal of the speeches. They are relevant because they illuminate the broader meanings associated with Flanders, ranging from folkloric and cultural to political. *De Rode Vaan*, for example, contained no descriptions or commentary but, like all other papers, listed the names of the speakers, as well as those of the groups and organizations participating in the music and dance celebration.<sup>54</sup> The newspaper thereby limited itself to a dry description of what primarily seemed like a folkloric public festival. In this regard, the tone differed from that of *Vooruit*, which painted a picture of the atmosphere based on the large number of participants, the youth singing around the area, the presence of Flemish lion flags, and the resounding of Flemish struggle songs. The atmosphere was described as 'enthusiastic' but also 'dignified.'<sup>55</sup> The descriptions reveal the newspaper's sympathy for a Flemish culture that seemed to signify more than just folklore. This impression is confirmed when *Vooruit* quoted a speaker who referred to the Flemings as 'a people on the rise' and who characterized 'our Flemish solidity, our labor power, our sense of art, and our joy of life.' The newspaper noted that the four speakers were applauded 'enthusiastically and at length.'

Similar observations can be found in the Catholic, liberal, and Flemish-nationalist press. However, in those newspapers, the content of the speeches was much more extensively covered, resulting in reflections on various classic themes and grievances of the Flemish movement. There was mention of the historical 'backwardness' of the Flemish, described in terms of 'misery and decay,' 'inferiority,' and 'industrial weaknesses.' The social inferiority of the Dutch language and the lack of compliance with language legislation ('sabotaged' in *De Standaard*, 'not respected' in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 'final obstacles' in *Het Volk*) remained a problem. However, in the fields of education and science, the Flemish were making progress. 'Progress' and 'development' were keywords. There was talk of

the historical 'greatness' of Flanders, which needed to be pursued further, and for which a 'rich past' and 'our forefathers' served as inspiration. This was meant to instill hope in the Flemish for the future. In particular, the youth, 'our Flemish boys,' in the words of the liberal rector Lambrechts, were expected to take the lead in this endeavor.<sup>56</sup>

In *De Standaard*, *Het Volk*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, we thus see a shared interpretation of various aspects of the Flemish matter. Each newspaper emphasized its own ideological accents within this framework. However, no linked as explicitly linked its report to a Flemish political agenda as *'t Pallieterke* did. The paper sarcastically remarked that the day had been 'labeled "cultural" to reassure Brussels residents and foreigners.' Not so.<sup>57</sup> The magazine connected the Flemish Day to a commemoration of the aforementioned Battle of the Gulden Spurs, that had taken place the same week in a Dutch-speaking municipality around Brussels. At this commemoration, the 'state of emergency' of Flemish municipalities around Brussels had been addressed, and Flemish 'self-determination' had been advocated.<sup>58</sup> For *'t Pallieterke*, the Flemish Day was about Flemish culture, but just as much about Flemish politics.

## **Conclusion**

What can the media coverage of the Flemish Day tell us about the spread of Flemish consciousness in the second half of the twentieth century? With this event on 6 July 1958, pro-Flemish organisations aimed to denounce the French-speaking character of the World Expo and the discrimination against Flemings in Belgian society. Participants celebrated the existence of a Flemish 'people' or a Flemish 'nation,' as evidenced by the speeches that were delivered. The fact that all newspapers reported on the Day indicates, at a basic level, that it had significance beyond traditional pro-Flemish circles. At first glance, the

results of the discourse analysis are not so surprising: the right-wing, Catholic, and liberal pro-Flemish newspapers reported extensively and enthusiastically, while the socialist and communist press was more concise and less boisterous in its coverage.

However, three key observations nuance this dominant binary portrayal of a right-left opposition within the Flemish movement. It revolves around the fact that the media coverage reflected a broadly shared understanding of Flanders. Firstly, we see the complete absence of objections or negative commentary on the organisation of the Flemish Day. Even in the press of the traditionally pro-Belgian communist and socialist parties, the celebration was accepted and not questioned. The meaning of Flanders varied from folkloric in the communist press, to cultural in all other newspapers, to political in the Flemish-minded press, and antagonistic in the Flemish-nationalist magazine. But overall, the discourses imply that a Flemish perspective on Belgian society enjoyed a certain uncontested legitimacy.

Furthermore, apart from the communist *De Rode Vaan*, all newspapers displayed a positive atmosphere and expressed a sense of identification with Flanders. In the socialist newspaper *Vooruit*, this identification was expressed indirectly, through a quotation from a speaker who extolled 'our Flemish' qualities in his speech. Yet in combination with its positive depictions, it becomes evident that *Vooruit* did not disapprove of this identification, let alone intend to disregard it. The Flemish 'we' sentiment thus found ample expression in the Flemish newspapers.

Thirdly, it is noteworthy that politically controversial themes articulated during the Day did not lead to criticism or debate but were applauded in some newspapers and completely ignored in others. Most striking was the disparity in coverage regarding the call for amnesty for war collaborators in Bishop Van Waeyenbergh's speech. This theme caused both communal and ideological divisions in Belgian politics after World

War II: Left-wing parties and the entire French-speaking political scene widely condemned the demand, whereas Flemings in the Catholic party, pressured by the Flemish-nationalist *Volksunie*, actively advocated for it. In the news about the Flemish Day, the call for amnesty was warmly embraced in *'t Pallieterke*, *De Standaard*, and *Het Volk*, yet there was no mention of it in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Vooruit*, and *De Rode Vaan*. This tacit acceptance seems to indicate the dominance of the right-wing and Catholic interpretations of Flanders over that of liberal and left-wing groups, who were generally weaker in Flanders and particularly within the Flemish movement.

Each newspaper then, in its own way, crafted its own Flemish Day. Yet, the widespread acceptance and embrace of the festivities, the almost unanimous identification with Flanders, and the notable absence of political contention in the Flemish press, all indicate that by 1958, Flanders could acquire the uncontested meaning of a community. Except within Flemish-nationalist discourse, this community did not manifest any fundamental opposition to Belgium, nor to Europe. The newspaper discourses reveal a shared notion of 'Flanders,' which paved the way for widespread Flemish identification in the post-war period.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Toon Van Moerbeke and Bart De Wever, 'Vlaamse Volksbeweging', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/vlaamse-volksbeweging>> [accessed 2 June 2024].

<sup>2</sup> 'Vlaanderen veroverde de wereldtentoonstelling', *Het Volk*, 7 January 1958, 1. Because the titles of the articles are often very similar, I always include the newspaper's name. When different titles in the same newspaper look similar, I include the full title in shortened footnotes too. If the author is known, the

reference begins with their name. If the author is unknown, the reference begins with the title of the article. All translations from Dutch to English are my own, aided by Deepl and ChatGPT.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of the spectacles, see 'Stijlvol en keurig openluchtfeest op het Voorplein', *De Standaard*, 7 July 1958, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno De Wever, Frans-Jos Verdoodt and Antoon Vrints, 'De Vlaamse patriotten en de natievorming. Hoe de Vlaamse natie ophield 'klein' te zijn', *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* 4 (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen: die moderne Nationsbildung im europäischen Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 45. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Maarten Van Ginderachter, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers. A Social History of Modern Belgium*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); Lode Wils, *Van de Belgische naar de Vlaamse natie. Een geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging* (Leuven: Acco, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, and Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 12. Also see Rogers Brubaker and Frederic Cooper, 'Beyond "Identity"', *Theory and Society* 29/1 (2000), 1–47.

<sup>8</sup> Luc Huyse, *De gewapende vrede. Politiek in België na 1945* (Leuven: Kritak, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See for example David Raizman and Ethan Robey, *Expanding Nationalisms at World's Fairs: Identity, Diversity, and Exchange, 1851–1915* (London: Routledge, 2017); Joep Leerssen, 'Trademarking the Nation: World Fairs, Spectacles, and the Banalization of Nationalism', in *World Fairs and the Global Moulding of National Identities*, ed. by Joep Leerssen and Eric Storm (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 31–52.

<sup>10</sup> Nico Van Campenhout and Frank Seberechts, 'Wereldtentoonstelling van 1958', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/wereldtentoonstelling-van-1958>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Luc Schokkaert, 'Vlaams Jeugdkomitee', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/vlaams-jeugdkomitee>> [accessed 4 May 2024]; Van Moerbeke and De Wever, 'Vlaamse Volksbeweging'.

<sup>12</sup> Piet Piryns and Hubert van Humbeeck, 'Tijl op de Expo', *Knack Historia* 4 (2008), p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Wilfried Martens, *De memoires. Luctor et emergo* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> The socialist Achiel Mussche was the president of the *Flemish Literary Association* (*Vereniging van Vlaamse Letterkundigen*). Piet Lambrechts was the liberal rector of the University of Ghent. Thirdly, bishop Honoré Van Waeyenbergh was the rector of the Catholic University of Leuven.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Todts, *Hoop en wanhoop der vlaamsgezinden. Kroniek van de Vlaamse Beweging 1954–1965* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1967).

<sup>16</sup> Van Moerbeke and De Wever, 'Vlaamse Volksbeweging'.

<sup>17</sup> Lode Wils, *Op zoek naar een natie. Het ontstaan van Vlaanderen binnen België* (Kalmthout: Polis, 2020), 21.

<sup>18</sup> I use 'secularist' as a translation for the Dutch 'vrijzinnig' or 'vrijzinnige,' which stands for someone who advocates the separation of church and state, and who opposes the influence of the Catholic Church in Belgian politics and society.

<sup>19</sup> Koen Aerts, 'Repressie na de Tweede Wereldoorlog', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/repressie-na-de-tweede-wereldoorlog>> [accessed 19 May 2024]; Luc Huyse, 'Amnestie na de Tweede Wereldoorlog', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/amnestie-na-de-tweede-wereldoorlog>> [accessed 19 May 2024].

<sup>20</sup> Peter Verlinden and Bart De Wever, 't Pallieterke', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/t-pallieterke>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

<sup>21</sup> Nico Van Campenhout, Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse and Gaston Durnez, 'De Standaard', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/de-standaard-1914>> [accessed 2 June 2024]. When World War II started, publication of *De Standaard* stopped. However, its board and editorial team quickly initiated an alternative title: *Het Algemeen Nieuws*. They thereby conducted a 'politics of presence', call it 'collaboration light', combing corporatist and authoritarian ideas with a strong pro-Flemish discourse. After a temporary publication ban due to its publishers' 'politics of presence' during the war, it reappeared with a distinctly pro-Flemish agenda from 1947 onwards. See Els De Bens, Karin Raeymaeckers and Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse, 'Pers en natievorming in Vlaanderen sinds de Eerste Wereldoorlog', in *De Verbeelding van de leeuw. Een geschiedenis van media en natievorming in Vlaanderen*, ed. by Gertjan Willems and Bruno De Wever (Antwerpen: Peristyle, 2020), 179–222, 200–201. Also see De Schakel, 'De Standaard hoog!', *De Standaard*, 1 May 1947, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Nico Van Campenhout and Gaston Durnez, 'Het Volk', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/het-volk>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Gerard, 'Christelijke arbeidersbeweging', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/christelijke-arbeidersbeweging>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; Emmanuel Gerard, 'Katholieke partij', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/katholieke-partij>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Ruben Mantels, 'Het Laatste Nieuws', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/het-laatste-nieuws>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

<sup>25</sup> Peter Laroy, 'Liberale partij', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/liberale-partij>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; Els Witte en Adriaan Verhulst, 'Liberale partij', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging*, ed. Reginald de Schryver et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), 1861–1882.



<sup>26</sup> Amsab-ISG and Guy Vanschoenbeek, 'Vooruit', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/vooruit-1884-1991>> [accessed 25 May 2024]; Although the newspaper itself was not known for its pro-Flemish positions, Maarten Van Ginderachter has shown that its readers had more positive associations with Flanders than with Belgium around the end of the nineteenth century. See Van Ginderachter, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers*, 161.

<sup>27</sup> Harry Van Velthoven, 'Socialistische partij', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/socialistische-partij>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

<sup>28</sup> Elias Degruyter and Werner Vandenaabeele, 'De Rode Vaan', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/de-rode-vaan>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

<sup>29</sup> Stefaan Marteel, 'Links-radicalisme', in *Digitale Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* <<https://encyclopedievlaamsebeweging.be/nl/links-radicalisme>> [accessed 25 May 2024].

<sup>30</sup> These figures are rounded. The absolute distribution is as follows: 49 references in 't *Pallierterke*, 144 in *De Standaard*, 58 in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 40 in *Het Volk*, 15 in *Vooruit*, and 7 in *De Rode Vaan*.

<sup>31</sup> Grootse Vlaamse Dag op de Expo. Ontroerende oproep van Mgr Van Waeyenberg voor nationale verzoening', *De Standaard*, 7 July 1958, 1.

<sup>32</sup> 'Vlaamse Dagen', 't *Pallierterke*, 10 July 1958, 1.

<sup>33</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag. Op de Expo-kouter', 't *Pallierterke*, 10 July 1958, 6.

<sup>34</sup> V.B., 'Vlaanderen veroverde de Wereldtentoonstelling', *Het Volk*, 7 July 1958, 1. Only the author's initials were mentioned.

<sup>35</sup> 'De Vlaamse dag. De Vlamingen in de Europese Gemeenschap', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 7 July 1958, 6.

<sup>36</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *Vooruit*, 7 July 1958, 3.

- <sup>37</sup> 'Zondag werd Vlaamse Dag op W.T. gevierd', *De Rode Vaan*, 7 July 1958, 2.
- <sup>38</sup> 'Zuur en Zoet', *'t Pallieterke*, 10 July 1958, 2–3.
- <sup>39</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag. Op de Expo-kouter', *'t Pallieterke*, 6.
- <sup>40</sup> The 'goedendag' actually looked different but is imagined in Flemish-national iconography as a club with metal spikes on the head.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Grootse Vlaamse Dag op de Expo', *De Standaard*, 1.
- <sup>42</sup> V.B., 'Vlaanderen veroverde', 1.
- <sup>43</sup> 'De Vlaamse dag', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 6.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Vlaanderen Nu. De academische zitting in het Groot Auditorium', *De Standaard*, 7 July 1958, 1, 3.
- <sup>45</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *'t Pallieterke*, 6.
- <sup>46</sup> 'De Vlaamse dag', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 6.
- <sup>47</sup> V.B., 'Vlaanderen veroverde', 3.
- <sup>48</sup> 'Vlaamse Dagen', *'t Pallieterke*, 1.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Grootse Vlaamse Dag op de Expo', *De Standaard*, 1.
- <sup>50</sup> V.B., 'Vlaanderen veroverde', 1.
- <sup>51</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *'t Pallieterke*, 6.
- <sup>52</sup> 'De Vlaamse dag', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 6.
- <sup>53</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *'t Pallieterke*, 6.
- <sup>54</sup> 'Zondag werd Vlaamse Dag op W.T. gevierd', *De Rode Vaan*, 2.
- <sup>55</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *Vooruit*, 3.
- <sup>56</sup> 'Vlaanderen Nu', *De Standaard*, 1, 3; 'De Vlaamse dag', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 6; V.B., 'Vlaanderen veroverde', 1, 3.
- <sup>57</sup> Figaro, 's Avonds in het auditorium. De Schelde', *'t Pallieterke*, 10 July 1958, 6.
- <sup>58</sup> 'De Vlaamse Dag', *'t Pallieterke*, 6.