

# Collective Memories of WWII Collaboration in Belgium and Attitudes About Amnesty in the Two Main Linguistic Communities<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Collaboration with the Nazi occupier during WWII has always been a topic of dissent between French-speakers (FS) and Dutch-speakers (DS) in Belgium. According to a popular myth coined after the war and often narrated in the media and literature, collaboration was widespread in Flanders, whereas Walloons bravely resisted, although historical reality is much more nuanced. These representations regularly resurface in political debates surrounding the Belgian linguistic conflict. Demands for amnesty addressed by nationalist Flemish parties are a case in point. A questionnaire survey (N = 521; 315 FS and 206 DS) showed that collaboration was represented negatively and was morally condemned in both groups. However, DS expressed more Support for Amnesty (SA) than FS. This effect of Linguistic Group (LG) on SA was mediated by judgment of morality of collaboration, and this mediation was moderated by identification with the LG. Interestingly, SA was predicted by judgments of morality of DS, but not of FS, collaborators, in both groups, as if francophone collaboration was deemed irrelevant. Results suggest that differences between DS and FS in political position

taking regarding the granting of amnesty are partly due to differences in representations of collaboration, and to different perspectives towards the same historical representation. The myth is both shared and disputed.

**Keywords:** collective memory, social representations, WWII, collaboration, amnesty

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“The Belgians’ memory of war seems primarily dominated by two images built in mirror: a Flanders associated with Collaboration in contrast with a Wallonia associated with Resistance”* [1]. According to a popular myth coined after the war and often narrated in the media and literature, collaboration was widespread in Flanders whereas Wallonia bravely resisted. Of course, historical reality is much more nuanced.

Belgium is an independent state since 1830 and is composed of three linguistic communities. In the Northern part of the country live the Flemings who

speak Dutch; French-speakers mainly live in Wallonia – the Southern part – and in the capital, Brussels (which is geographically located in Flanders but is predominantly French-speaking). There is also a small German-speaking community at the East of the country. Ever since the beginning of Belgium's existence, Flemings have been striving for more cultural and linguistic recognition. The Flemish movement then gradually transformed into a sub-nationalist movement asking for more autonomy, or even secession. These claims have become increasingly insistent since the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though some parts of the Walloon movement also requested more regional autonomy during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most French-speakers have supported the unity of the State since WWII. This incompatibility of views regarding the future of the country has led to several political crises. The most acute led to a period of 541 days without a government in 2010-2012 [2].

Diverging representations associated with WWII in the North and the South of the country have weighted heavily on intergroup relations since the end of the war, and one can expect it will continue conditioning the future of the country. Some historians even think that Belgium "*is sick of these forties*". Indeed, "*From the second half of the fifties, Belgium cultivates a double memory of the war and its inheritance, and in particular the inheritance of collaboration anchors as a parasite in the Belgian national conflict*" [3]. In particular, discussions around the amnesty of collaborators continue to reappear on the political and media scenes. Collaboration and amnesty have been and remain subjects of dissension between Flemings and French-speakers. The most recent debate on amnesty happened in may 2011 when a majority of Flemish senators from all political parties (except the ecologists) approved a

proposal for *discussing* a bill entered by the Vlaams Belang (a Flemish extreme right party), requesting amnesty for WWII collaborators. However, all French-speaking parties opposed this idea. The Walloon parliament further unanimously voted a resolution to support "the duty to remember" and to oppose "any general law of amnesty".

Since the last federal elections (2010), many political figures' statements have referred to collective memories of WWII. For example, in September 2010, Bart De Wever (leader of the N-VA, a Flemish nationalist party) attacked what he called "the Walloon myth" according to which collaboration was mainly the fact of Flemings while Walloons were largely engaged in the resistance. According to him, Flemings have integrated their collaborationist past in their history while the Walloons have so far failed to do it: "*It's better anyway to shed light on the past of a society without masking the reality rather than judging from a misplaced moral superiority and based on collective ignorance*" [4]. On the French-speaking side, some politicians accused Flemings of having failed to turn the page of collaboration with Nazis. For example, Olivier Maingain (leader of the FDF, a French-speaking party) judged Flemish region's government refusal to nominate French-speaking Mayors of Flemish councils "*a reminder of the Occupation*".

In a context of questioning of the very existence of Belgium and of dissensions between Flemings and French-speakers, it is necessary to investigate the collective memories that prevail on both sides of the linguistic border. It is especially important because the myth of the Flemish collaborationist and of the Walloon resistant does not hold in front of historical facts [1,5,6], and because political actors do not hesitate to exploit these representations. Finally, there is a lack of

psychological studies about this issue: Belgian lay people's representations of WWII collaboration have never been investigated so far.

## II. SOME HISTORICAL FACTS

From the beginning of the German occupation, some Belgians decided to resist while others collaborated with the Germans. In Flanders, the VNV (a Flemish nationalist party) decided to support the occupier in the hope to obtain from Germany what Belgium denied them: an independent Flemish state [7]. In Wallonia, Léon Degrelle, the leader of Rex (a catholic extreme-right party) decided to collaborate and created the Walloon legion, which fought on the Eastern front with the Wehrmacht, then the Waffen-SS. Historical evidence suggests that resistance fighters and collaborators were only a small minority in Belgium and that collaboration was present in both linguistic groups in roughly similar proportions [8].

However, the collaborator's profile was globally different in the two linguistic communities. Indeed, in Flanders, some prominent collaborators were intellectuals and politicians defending the Flemish cause. Some of them were even considered as victims after the repression of collaboration. In contrast, in Wallonia, most collaborators were seen as criminals seeking their own self-interest. Others, associated with the Nazi ideology, were perceived as traitors [9].

Finally, contrary to a widespread belief in Flanders, historians have shown that the repression of collaborators at the Liberation was not more severe in Flanders than in Wallonia [10,6,7]. Only 0,64 % of Belgians were condemned for collaboration (0,73% of Dutch-speakers and 0,56% of French-speakers). Sixty percent

of condemnations concerned Flemings but fifty-six percent of capital punishments and life detentions concerned French-speakers. It seems that the higher percentage of Flemish condemnations could be explained by the fact that the Flemish population is more numerous (about 60% of the Belgian population), but also because of the type of collaboration that was the most punished (military collaboration). Finally, in opposition with some political discourses in favour of amnesty, some measures have already been taken to the benefit of collaborators (releases on parole and measures of royal pardon).

## III. A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH OF COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF COLLABORATION

The aim of our study was to investigate WWII collective memories in Belgium and, more precisely, to compare these memories between the North and the South of the country. Maurice Halbwachs (1950) thought that any memory is influenced by membership in communities. He considered that any memory is collective, and that the historical memory of the group provides the framework in which individual consciousness can develop [11]. Therefore, people remember, and forget, as members of a social group.

Collective memory was defined by Licata and Klein [12] as "*a set of shared representations of the past based on an identity common to members of a group*". Every social group would then develop its own collective memory. A distinction is often made between two types of memories: the "living" memory and the official one [13]. The first kind of memory concerns different events and narratives that are transmitted within the group, whereas the second is produced by political

leaders seeking to spread an homogeneous memory in the group. These two memories may be complementary or, on the contrary, antagonistic. Collective memory is thus generally a combination of true facts, reconstructions, and social representations of these facts. Several representations of the same event can therefore coexist and often be used as a function of the actual needs and projects of the group. Understanding collective memory thus requires to “take into account all the social representations that are available in all the discourses of the group” [14].

Furthermore, collective memory fulfils several identity functions. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), a person’s identity derives in part from her belonging in social groups. Individuals seek to attain or maintain a positive social identity through comparison with other social groups on relevant dimensions. The moral dimension is considered as the most crucial for achieving group valorisation [15]. Accordingly, collective memories can be mobilised for preserving or for increasing perceived ingroup morality. Morality judgments of the same past actions may thus vary as a function of group belonging.

Drawing from social identity theory, Licata, Klein and Gély [16] distinguished four identity functions of collective memory. First, collective memory contributes to the definition of a group’s identity because history gives us information about “*who we are, where we came from and where we should be going*” [17]. Collective memory defines (un)desirable actions for the group and has therefore also a normative influence in defining what are the appropriate alternatives for action when the group has to deal with a situation in the present. Moreover, it is also a tool for group valorisation because collective memory is instrumental in

defining the group’s value through intergroup comparisons. According to Klein, Licata, Van der Linden, Mercy and Luminet [2], “*past successes and failures of the group but also its moral and immoral actions contribute to define its relative value*”. Furthermore, collective memory can be mobilised for justifying the past, present, or planned actions of the group. Finally, it can be used in order to mobilise group members for achieving a collective project [18].

As stated above, according to historians [1,3,9,13], in Flanders, the collaborator tends to be seen as a defender of Flanders’ interests. The repression of this collaboration is viewed, by a portion of the Flemish public opinion, as an injustice committed towards the Flemish people. After the war, some former collaborators were included in the main political party (CVP, a Flemish Social-Christian party, renamed CD&V since 2001). Today, Flemish far-right and nationalist right-wing parties have kept, explicitly or implicitly, a connection with Flanders’ collaborationist past. However, it should be noticed that Flemings have been through an historical and memory work filled with self-critical reflections and that there are acute dissensions among Flemings regarding this past [19]. On the other hand, in Wallonia, collaborators are seen as isolated individuals instead of a cohesive group of people. After the war, there was a strong political exclusion of collaborators and the struggle against fascism was seen as the basis of the post-war Walloon identity. Therefore, the Walloon collaboration was generally forgotten and became a real taboo [20]. In collective memories, collaboration was associated with Flemings while resistance was associated with Walloons.

These differences in collective memories regarding WWII help explain the divergence in political position

taking towards the amnesty issue. Requesting amnesty for collaboration may be viewed as a legitimate claim for some segments of Flemish public opinion, and is in line with an effort for building a sense of positive social identity at the regional/linguistic level. In contrast, these claims may seem utterly illegitimate on the French-speaking side, and come into conflict with the Walloon identity, which is partly based on the resistance ideology and on the rejection of collaboration. As a consequence, these diverging WWII memories impede the construction of a common Belgian memory, and therefore also that of a common national identity.

However, the dynamics we have described above are based on observations and analyses of political and media discourses. So far, little, if anything is known about the way lay people represent the history of Belgian collaboration, about the way they make sense of these representations, and about their position taking in the amnesty debate. Is this collective memory of the war really as dichotomous as the political and media spheres suggest? What are the elements of these collective memories that divide the North and the South of Belgium? Is amnesty for collaboration really a Flemish popular claim or is it only a political tool that some politicians seek to use at their advantage?

We expected to find differences between the two regional/linguistic groups in political standpoints about the amnesty of collaborators, but also in representations of collaboration and collaborators and in moral judgments about them. We also expected that differences in representations and moral judgments about collaboration should explain intergroup differences in support for amnesty. Finally, we predicted that people's identification with their regional/linguistic community would moderate these effects: the above hy-

potheses should hold only for people who identify with their regional/linguistic group.

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a Web-based questionnaire survey in the two languages. Questions tapped social representations of WWII collaboration and collaborators, moral judgment about collaboration, political positions about the amnesty of collaborators, identification with the regional/linguistic group and with Belgium, and political orientation. Five hundred and twenty-one participants totally completed the questionnaire (315 French-speakers and 206 Dutch-speakers). Despite the fact that the sample was not representative, all age groups (17 to 94 years old) and various professions are represented. It is worth noting that almost sixty percent of participants were left-wing voters in the two communities. This is in line with actual election results in Wallonia, which is predominantly left wing; but it is at odds with those in Flanders, where the majority votes for right wing parties. For these reasons, we have included analyses of the effect of political orientation. Note that this imbalance towards the left in our Flemish sample should lead to less difference with the French-speakers. One could expect more contrasted results if the sample was more representative.

#### IV. RESULTS

On average, collaboration was represented negatively and was morally condemned, and attitudes towards amnesty were predominantly negative in both groups. However, Flemings were relatively more favourably disposed towards amnesty than French-speakers.

Participants were asked to estimate the prevalence of resistance and collaboration in the whole country and in both groups. It appears that French-speakers believe that, at the country level, there were more Belgian resistance fighters than Belgian collaborators, whereas Flemings think the opposite. Furthermore, the two groups did not agree, either on the number of French-speaking resistance fighters, with French-speakers overestimating their number compared to Dutch-speakers, or on the the number of Dutch-speaking resists (opposite trend). However, participants in both groups tend to agree on the fact that there were more Flemish than French-speaking collaborators. In brief, it seems that French-speakers tend to overestimate the prevalence of resistance (in Belgium and Wallonia), but that there is an agreement between the two groups about that of collaboration.

We also investigated people's representations of motivations for collaborating: collaborating and supporting Nazism are correlated among French-speaking respondents, whereas these items are seen as independent among Flemish respondents. Thus, French-speakers tend to view Dutch-speaking collaborators as Nazi supporters, whereas Flemings tend to view them as defenders of Flemish identity. This suggests that collaboration is represented differently in the two groups.

Participants were asked to ascribe personality traits (on the competence, sociability and morality dimensions) to Flemish and to French-speaking collaborators. Results show that Dutch-speakers hold a more positive image of collaborators on all dimensions. Moreover, on average, French-speakers judge collaboration as more immoral than Flemings. It should be noticed, however, that the means are above the threshold of neutrality in

both groups, so we cannot conclude that Flemings do not consider the collaboration as immoral. We can however note that they perceive it as relatively less immoral than French-speakers.

Political orientation is associated with different configurations of identification at the national and at the regional/linguistic levels. Among French-speakers, we found that the two identifications were positively correlated: the more one feels Walloon or Brusseler, the more one feels Belgian. In contrast, we obtained the opposite trend among Flemings: the more they feel Flemish, the less they identify with Belgium. Moreover, political orientation had a polarizing effect on Flemings: the more Flemish participants' political orientation was right-wing, the more they identified with the Flemish community, and the less they felt Belgian. It is noteworthy that the two levels of identification (Belgian and Flemish) cross precisely at the centre of the political spectrum: Belgian and Flemish identities are seen as compatible among left-wingers, whereas right-wingers view them as incompatible.

Political orientation had an impact on support for amnesty, especially among Dutch-speakers. The more Fleming participants indicated a right-wing orientation (on 7-point scale ranging from extreme-left to extreme-right), the more they supported amnesty. Among French-speaking respondents, rejection of amnesty was general, with the only exception of a small number of extreme-right voters.

Results also show that the level of identification with the linguistic/regional group moderates the effect of group belonging (French vs. Dutch-speakers) on support for amnesty. It means that support for amnesty differs only between Dutch-speakers and French-speakers who strongly or moderately identify

with their group. There is no significant difference between weak identifiers in both groups. Indeed, the more French-speakers identify with their group, the less they support amnesty, whereas the opposite pattern is true among Dutch-speakers.

Based on these results, we further predicted that regional/linguistic group identification would have opposite effects on the moral judgment of collaboration in the two linguistic groups, and that this difference in moral judgment could explain the difference in support for amnesty that we uncovered. In line with these hypotheses, we found that the effect of group belonging (Dutch vs. French-speakers) on support for amnesty was mediated by judgment of immorality of collaboration. We also found that this mediation was moderated by group identification. Therefore, this mediation exists only for middle and high identifiers. To sum up, Flemings who are mildly or highly identified with their group tend to judge collaboration as less immoral and therefore express more support for amnesty. On the contrary, mildly and highly identified French-speakers tend to judge collaboration as more immoral and, therefore, to oppose amnesty.

Finally, it is worth noting that identification with the regional/linguistic group level (Flanders) and with the national level (Belgium) have opposite effects among Dutch-speakers. For example, the more they identified with the Flemish community, the more they supported amnesty, whereas the more they identified as Belgians, the less they supported amnesty. That is not the case among French-speakers: both levels of identification had similar effects; against amnesty.

Another interesting result is that only moral judgment about Flemish collaborators determined support for amnesty. Judgments about Walloon collaborators

had no effect. This result was obtained in the two samples. It thus seems that WWII collaboration tends to be viewed as a Flemish issue, both by Flemings and by French-speakers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Our results suggest that the popular myth of the Flemish collaborationist and of the Walloon resistant is still deeply anchored in the collective memories of the two communities. Hence, participants from both linguistic groups agreed on the fact that collaboration was more widespread in Flanders than in Wallonia. Moreover, French-speakers estimated that resistance was more common than collaboration during WWII in Belgium, whereas Flemings thought the opposite.

However, although general attitudes towards amnesty were on average negative in both groups, Flemish participants were relatively more in favour of it than French-speakers. Furthermore, our results strongly suggest that contemporary political positioning in the debate over amnesty for WWII in Belgium is, at least partly, based on diverging collective memories. We observed differences in estimations of pervasiveness of collaboration and resistance, on representations of motivations for collaborating, and even stronger differences in moral judgments about collaboration between the two groups. Social representations of the history of collaboration tend to be different and, above all, there seems to be a conflict of interpretation about this dark side of Belgium's history.

Political orientation had a huge impact on all of our variables: the further right they stood, the less respondents to our questionnaire judged collaboration and collaborators negatively. This trend was particularly

strong among Flemish participants. This might be seen as a consequence of political discourses of, on the one hand, the post-war Flemish catholic right and, on the other hand, current far-right parties, that tend to portray collaboration as partly motivated by noble aspirations for Flemish autonomy.

Finally, these differences are polarised by people's identification with their regional/linguistic group, and reduced by a superordinate identification with Belgium. Indeed, in spite of the observed differences, collective memories seem to be shared across the two communities among those who identify with Belgium as well as among participants who share the same leftist political orientation.

To conclude, the differences we observed in people's understandings, interpretations, and position taking about collaboration are probably both rooted in different war experiences and in different post-war discourses. In our view, a better knowledge of the history of WWII in Belgium, as well as a better understanding of the other group's interpretation of this history are necessary conditions for improving inter-group relations. In order to achieve this aim, more studies on lay people's understanding of history are needed.

#### ENDNOTES

[1] This study is a contribution to COST Action IS1205 "Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union".

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