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War and Industry: Lille at the Crossroads  
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**Abstract:** This article examines the city of Lille as a point of cultural, economic, social and political intersection between the Low Countries and France. It focuses particularly on the effects of the industrial revolution and the occupation of the region during the First and Second World Wars, in terms of changing patterns of migration, trade, social exchange, and cultural and linguistic practice, as well as the influence of political thinking, involvement, and practice and their relationship to and influence upon cultural development and the formation of identity, both national and municipal.

**Keywords:** Lille, French Flanders, World War I, World War II, identity, economy, industrialisation

### Introduction

Lille is a city not often considered within the context of studies of the Low Countries as a whole, and although politically it may be a part of France, in terms of the History, economy, landscape, architecture, climate and culture, it has striking similarities and bears comparison with its northern neighbours across the border(s). Through an examination of the development of industry and the impact of warfare (actual, as well as the threat or fear of invasion), this paper will examine the ways in which Lille developed very much as a city of the Low Countries, and allow us to assess the impact of the Franco-Belgian border which politically separated it from other similar cities, in terms of its relationship to other regions and the development of municipal identities. It will begin with an historical contextualisation of the city in terms of its similarities and differences to other cities of the low countries, before turning to the specific examination of industry and war.

Throughout the middle ages, Lille had everything in common with the cities of the rest of the Low Countries. Part of the County of Flanders, and the Duchy of Burgundy, it passed into the hands of the Spanish, only being integrated into France following conquest in 1713. Like the other cities of the low countries, it developed an urban culture of trade and manufacture, with a huge emphasis on the independence of the urban elites from the distant ruling aristocracy, and had passed through the wars of religion and the reformation as a part

of the Spanish Netherlands (including the inquisition, and the internal migration of Protestants northwards, and Catholics southwards). By the time of integration into France in the eighteenth century, municipal patterns in economy, politics and religion followed those of other Flemish cities in what became the Austrian Netherlands. Architecturally, it continued to have more in common with its northern neighbours, with tall narrow houses, the use of brick and the equal prominence of the town hall or 'beffroi' alongside the church as significant urban public buildings. Catholicism remained strong in Lille and the immediately surrounding hinterland in French Flanders (from Lille northwards to the coast), isolating it religiously from the areas of France immediately to the south which were much more secular.<sup>1</sup> In terms of popular culture, costume, popular festivals such as the 'kermesse', the drinking of beer or the eating of 'moules-frites' are but a handful of examples of the ways in which Lille resembled other cities of the low countries. Re-integrated politically with its northern neighbours for a short time under the Revolution and Napoleon, renewed division during the nineteenth century would see the development of different political cultures between Lille and its northern neighbours, though similar patterns of municipal independence, socialism and economy persisted. This was particularly true of the development of the industrial economy, to which we will now turn.

## Industry

Like its counterparts across the Belgian border, the city of Lille drew upon the large rural population, the intensive industrial agriculture of the surrounding region and the proximity of coal to become the largest industrial centre of northern France. The primary industry was textiles, and the local pattern one of moderate-sized, family-run businesses with

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<sup>1</sup> This religious divide within northern France led to the creation of the diocese of Lille in 1917 (formerly part of the archdiocese of Cambrai), in order to cater to the more Catholic region of Lille and French Flanders.

a paternalistic character to the relationships between the urban elites and their workers.

Unlike the other cities of the low countries, Lille was able to benefit from the protection of the Franco-Belgian border which gave its goods privileged and protected access to the French market. As international industrial competition increased through the nineteenth century, so these economic advantages of being on the French side of the border multiplied.

From the middle of the nineteenth century through to the middle of the twentieth, French protectionism created a difference not only in prices, but also in wages which coincided with the border. This in turn created some particular patterns of labour migration, for it was cheaper to live on the Belgian side of the border, though wages were higher on the French side. Firstly seasonal, but later weekly and by the end of the nineteenth century even daily commuting across the border to work became an established pattern. The Belgian government set up special trains with reduced fares to aid such commuting, and some industrialists from Lille later provided buses for their workers.<sup>2</sup> No restrictions or even monitoring of the cross-border movement of people was set up until the introduction of the *carte du travail* in 1929, which helped to encourage Lille to fill-up with migrants from the same countryside indeed that sent workers to the other cities of the Low Countries.

As Lille grew as an industrial centre, so too did the workers' movement begin to develop, and also shared much with the nascent movement in other cities across the border in Belgium. Belgian socialist pamphlets circulated in Lille, as did their principal newspapers, and both socialist and trade union material could be found regularly in both languages (sometimes French, sometimes Flemish, and occasionally in bilingual editions).<sup>3</sup> Regular

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<sup>2</sup>See R. Blanchard, *La Flandre: Etude Géographique de la Plaine Flammande en France, Belgique et Hollande*, (Lille: Société Dunkerquoise, 1906), p. 515, J. Theys, 'De evolutie van de grensarbeid tussen West Vlaanderen en Noord-Frankrijk in de 20ste eeuw', *De Franse Nederlanden/Les Pays-Bas Français* (henceforth DFN/LPBF) 13(1988), pp. 89-104 and F. Lentacker, 'Les frontaliers belges travaillant en France: Caractères et fluctuations d'un courant de main d'oeuvre', *Revue du Nord* XXXII(1950), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Archives Départementales du Nord (ADN) M 154 58.

meetings were held in Lille which involved Belgian socialist leaders as speakers throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Even some elements of the Flemish movement within socialism were debated and discussed in Lille as a part of the woder campaign for the rights of workers.<sup>5</sup> Thus not only did Lille show similar patterns to the working class movement of the cities of the Low Countries, but many of the same personal and publications circulated on both sides, and, as Carl Strikwerda has argued, the Belgian trade unionists and socialists had a much greater influence upon the character of the workers' movement in the Nord than is generally thought in works dealing simply with France.<sup>6</sup> From the end of the nineteenth century through the twentieth century, as working-class politics became increasingly pre-occupied with working within existing political systems, and defined by the debates and policies within their separate national contexts, the movements gradually diverged, though something of the character of the early years remained.<sup>7</sup>

Although the development of the industrial economy in Lille followed what can be seen as a relatively similar pattern as that of other cities of the low countries, the significant economic advantages of being on the French side of the border in terms of markets and prices helped to create widespread municipal consciousness of the fact and a correspondingly solid French identity. This was not an exclusive identity, in that local inhabitants were well aware of the particularities that their local and regional culture gave them, both in terms of the

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Lefebvre, 'Socialistes belges et français de la fin de l'Empire au début de la IIIe République,' *Revue du Nord* XXXVII No. 148(1955), pp. 196-7. See also Herman Balthazar, 'Betrekkingen tussen het socialisme in Vlaanderen en Noord-Frankrijk (1870-1914),' *DFN/LPBF* 4(1979), 25-6.

<sup>5</sup> M. A. Vermast, *Le Mouvement Flamand en Belgique* (pamphlet) 20 December 1897.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Strikwerda, 'Regionalism and internationalism: The Working-class movement in the Nord and the Belgian connection,' *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 12(1984), pp. 221-30

<sup>7</sup> See Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. The Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), and Carl Strikwerda, 'France and the Belgian immigration of the nineteenth century,' in Camille Guerin-Gonzales and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *The Politics of immigrant workers: Labour activism and migration in the world economy since 1830*. New York, 1993, 122-3.

distinctiveness this implied within France and the similarities it afforded with their neighbours across the border. It did mean, however, that as time went on it was not only the socialists whose politics became increasingly tied to those of France, but those of the entire political spectrum, particularly when defending the municipal economic interests. Even if the nature of the economy, municipal patterns of trade, industry and collective action can be said to resemble other cities of the low countries, their interests were in keeping a solid hold of the French market and therefore encouraging protectionism at the national level in all possible ways.<sup>8</sup>

## War

As case studies for understanding border dynamics during warfare, few cities could be more appropriate than Lille. The region has been fought over since Roman times, and represented not only a political border, but a religious, cultural, linguistic and by some accounts even a racial divide, at least symbolically. Home to a fortress since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Lille was both a regional capital, and a key garrisoned outpost in numerous wars between the great European powers. This paper will focus in particular upon the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of anticipated and actual wars with Germany, in particular the First and Second World Wars when Lille was occupied. It will examine the ways in which the city prepared for, reacted to and coped with the legacy of war and occupation, and in particular negotiated its position as both regional capital and national outpost, in terms of the identity of its residents, and its place within the French nation.

The threat of invasion and war was not new to Lille in the modern period. Between the late fifteenth and the early eighteenth centuries, France, Spain, Austria and Britain fought

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<sup>8</sup> For a time there was even a specific newspaper produced in Lille to defend the economic interests of the north in the French capital. Entitled *La Chronique des Flandres: Organe de défense à Paris des intérêts du*

regularly over the territory, and Lille was captured and parts of it burned on numerous occasions. The results of these wars saw Lille become firmly ensconced on the French side of the border, and as a part of his strategy for protecting his northern frontier, Louis XIV had Vauban build what he himself considered to be the best of his fortifications in Lille in 1688. The treaties of Utrecht (1713) and later Courtrai (1820) defined the border in more or less its present position, although its movement during war and invasion occurred at least once each century.<sup>9</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, Lille had undergone a massive transformation through the industrial revolution, becoming a significant centre of textile production with a large population and a key position as a trading centre, dependent upon the border for economic as well as military protection. Although the border was quite open, in the sense that goods and people crossed regularly, as well as relatively artificial, in that the population shared many cultural characteristics and values with the Belgians on the other side, the border was increasingly present as a marker in the identity of the region's population.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the border served as a tariff barrier which was responsible for the region's prosperity, protecting them from the competition of the Belgian industry a few miles away. Aware of the protection and economic advantages the border offered by being on the French side, the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War reminded those living in the northern part of France that the rivers and fields of their region through which the border ran were potentially poor protection from a military invasion to which they were exposed – not as much as those directly along the border with the new German Empire, perhaps, but exposed nevertheless. In the closing

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Département du Nord.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the origins of the boundary, see Nelly Girard D'Albissin, *Genèse de la Frontière Franco-Belge: Les variations des limites septentrionales de la France de 1659 à 1789*, (Paris: Éditions A. & J. Picard, 1970); and Firmin Lentacker, *La Frontière Franco-Belge: Etude géographique des effets d'une frontière internationale sur la vie des relations*, (Lille, 1974).

decades of the nineteenth century, thoughts of French defence were reinforced through compulsory military service and also earlier at school, where nationalism and patriotism were linked to the military defence of the nation, possible threats to French security, and the retribution for the war of 1870.<sup>11</sup> Many boys' schools instigated military exercises, if not actual 'school battalions', to help to engender the sense of national pride and unity which comes with the sentiment of defence of one's homeland.<sup>12</sup>

## The First World War

With the declaration of war in 1914, Lille would find itself right on the front line as the German invasion passed through Belgium to enter France in the north. Lille was captured in 1914, and would remain occupied for the remainder of the war, cut off from the rest of France on the German side of the western front. Those who had managed to flee to the safer regions in the interior found themselves unable to contact their families, and those left in Lille were unable to get news throughout the war. The municipal government had to cope with the difficult conditions of living in proximity to the war zone, with the added burden of occupation and no possible support from their national leadership.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the war, when France was collectivising its national experience, the particular hardships of those living in the occupied territory were downplayed and ignored, putting the inhabitants of Lille

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<sup>10</sup> See Timothy Baycroft 'Changing Identities in the Franco-Belgian Boderland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,' *French History* 13,4 (1999), pp. 417-38.

<sup>11</sup> See Raoul Girardet, *Le nationalisme français. Anthologie 1871-1914.* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983), pp. 70-3, 80-4.

<sup>12</sup> For the region around Lille, see Philippe Marchand, 'Les petits soldats de demain. Les bataillons scolaires dans le département du Nord 1882-1892,' *Revue du Nord* LXVII No. 266 (July-September 1985), pp. 769-803.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Vandenbussche, 'La région dans la guerre (1914-1918),' in Yves-Marie Hilaire, ed., *Histoire du Nord/Pas-de-Calais de 1900 à nos jours* (Toulouse: Privat, 1982).



among those who Annette Becker described as the ‘forgotten’ of the First World War.<sup>14</sup>

While war damage was discussed, variety of experience was not, leaving several groups outside of official memory. A significant effort was made to consider that the entire French nation was equal in the heroic sacrifices which had led to the victory, in such a way that those who had in fact suffered more greatly or in a different way gained no extra recognition for that fact. One could talk about relative levels of damage, but not relative levels of sacrifice or indebtedness. Hence the specific war experiences of those who could be described as ‘victims’ in general were passed over with a conspicuous silence, in stark contrast to the widespread commemoration and attention which such groups would receive after the Second World War.

Far from making a fuss, however, the Lillois had to make an extra effort to demonstrate their loyalty to the rest of France, as they were labelled with the pejorative term ‘les Boches du Nord’, meaning roughly ‘the northern Hun’.<sup>15</sup> The implication was that those speakers of a Germanic dialect (Flemish) were in some way affiliated with the enemy, and therefore less than fully French patriots, and occasionally even those living in occupied Lille had at least collaborated, when not positively welcoming the German occupation. Such implied accusations of disloyalty or treason inevitably led to an increased desire to be seen as extra loyal by the rest of France, and contributed therefore further encouragement to downplay the extra hardships they had suffered from being occupied.

Ironically, it was with those in Belgium who had shared occupation with whom the inhabitants of Lille shared an actual war experience, as compared to those in the rest of France with whom they sought to build a single national memory of the war. This solidified

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<sup>14</sup> Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre: humanitaire et culture de guerre 1914-1918, populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre*. (Paris: Editions Noësis, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> The term would come back to haunt the region more severely after the Second World War, when it was employed far more widely and critically.

the peculiar nature of the cross-border relationship – both familiar and foreign, exemplifying the model of understanding border identities developed by Lawrence, Baycroft and Grohmann called ‘degrees of foreignness’.<sup>16</sup> In this model, those across the border form a privileged kind of ‘other’ in relation to the regional and national self, both in actual exchanges, and in terms of identity, often illustrated with a separate word to distinguish these ‘others’ from foreigners who come from further afield, with which they were nothing like as familiar. Although the border in some ways can be said to have divided the people on either side, there was also local consciousness of a cross-border community which shared characteristics compared to those from further afield (including remoter regions of France).<sup>17</sup>

When the war ended, those who had lived in the war zone were preoccupied with securing the resources necessary to repair the war damage, as well as a renewed and heightened preoccupation with their security and protection from further threats of invasion across the border. Special courts were set up to deal with war damages, to which individuals could make claims to have their property repaired or rebuilt.<sup>18</sup> The city authorities drew up a redevelopment plan (‘plan d’aménagement’) for its territory in order to have an overall perspective on the extent of the damage in each area, as well as to be used as a norm against which to judge individual claims and to help the courts in their handling of individual claims.<sup>19</sup> At a meeting sponsored by the Fédération Régionaliste du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais on 9 January 1921, various regional leaders sought to assert the rights of the regions which had been devastated by war to the ‘integral reparation of all of the damage’ via the ‘strict’ application of the 17 April 1919 law regarding the devastated regions, as well as the genuine

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<sup>16</sup> See Paul Lawrence, Timothy Baycroft and Carolyn Grohmann, “‘Degrees of Foreignness’ and the Construction of Identity in French Border Regions during the Interwar Period,” *Contemporary European History* 10, 1 (2001), pp. 51-71.

<sup>17</sup> Baycroft, ‘Changing Identities’, pp. 417-38.

<sup>18</sup> See ADN 10R 1129-1398.

execution of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>20</sup> Given the lack of success overall in obtaining enough money through reparations payments, it is not surprising that the aftermath of the war saw a prolonged campaign by the regional elite to secure funds to rebuild the damage from the national government as well as any other allies they could tap into. The elite network acting in defence of the region's interests which developed as a result of the needs of reconstruction remained active during the years that followed, drawing together those federalists interested in real decentralisation with defenders of regional Flemish culture and those who simply recognised their dependency on the government to secure the vital funding for the city and its environs.<sup>21</sup>

Although accentuating regional solidarity and the dependency of the region on its association with the French nation, the experience of war with Germany had not lessened the cultural and personal ties with Belgium. Leaders of the regional Flemish cultural movement in France such as Camille Looten, President of the Comité Flamand de France were quick to assert that the French Flemish were all loyal, patriotic French citizens, active combatants and heroic soldiers in the French army, but whose love of the 'grande patrie' did not prevent them from at the same time loving their own language and culture.<sup>22</sup> The historian of French Flanders, Jules Dewachter, writing in 1928 analysed the situation in a similar manner to Looten, considering that the French Flemish, while both conscious of and proud of the language, history and culture which they shared with the Belgian Flemish, were nevertheless

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<sup>19</sup> ADN 10 Ra 59-1490.

<sup>20</sup> Central Police Commissioner to the Prefect of the Département du Nord, 10 January 1921. ADN M 154 318. For more on the post-war situation, see 'Sinistés garde à vous', promotional poster, police files, ADN M 154 318 ; Police Commissioner to the Prefect, 10 January 1921. ADN M 154 318; and Timothy Baycroft, 'The Versailles Settlement and Identity in French Flanders' *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 16 (2005), pp 589-602.

<sup>21</sup> For the links between different types of regionalist drawn together immediately after the war, the Special Police Commissioner to the Prefect, 31 December, 1920. ADN 154 318. For an example of one of the publications generated several years later, see *Le Nord Fédéral. Organe de Défense des Droits de la Région du Nord*, (18 March, 1929).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in the Prefect to the Minister of the Interior, 5 January 1921. ADN 154 318.

‘sincerely attached’ to France, and posed no threat to the French State.<sup>23</sup> Here again the war served to accentuate the existing state of play in Lille in terms of the regional and Flemish cultural movements being very conscious of the border and which side they were on, whatever the extent of the links across it.

Alongside of rebuilding, security from future invasion was at the forefront of municipal consciousness in the aftermath of the First World War, and had a similar impact upon regional dynamics to the economic issues. While Belgium clearly would remain friendly and not be the ones to invade, their size and commitment to neutrality meant that the city would be dependent upon the rest of France to contribute to its defence, as it had been for rebuilding the city and its economy. The war and the concern for preserving peace which followed served to increase local awareness of world affairs, of the regions links to the nation, and of the fragility of the border alongside of which they lived. Within a single generation, however, another invasion would cross the border, leading to further occupation, but also a shift in the border.

## The Second World War

The main German attack in the spring of 1940 swept into France across the border just south of Lille. After several days of bombardment, the city itself fell on 31 May. After encircling the troupes in the north, the invasion moved rapidly westwards and southwards, and the French government capitulated a few short weeks later. The result would be four years of occupation, with significant consequences for the city, not only in terms of the difficulties of living under foreign occupation, but also because of the implications for the

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<sup>23</sup> J. Dewachter, ‘La situation du français et du flamand dans le Nord de la France après la guerre mondiale,’ *Revue Franco-Belge* 8e année, Nouvelle série No. 1 (January 1928), pp. 31-2.

border and regional culture, and the longer-term relationship to the French nation, the low countries as a whole, and towards the cross-border region of greater Flanders.

After the capitulation of the whole of France, Nazi Germany divided France into several zones. Lille, along with the rest of the two northernmost French departments, Nord and Pas-de-Calais, was attached administratively to Belgium under the Oberfeldkommandantur (OFK) 670, and referred to as the 'forbidden zone'.<sup>24</sup> Customs on the border between the Nord and Belgium were removed, and access, travel and trade were easier with Belgium than with Vichy France. The OFK 670 also struck down much of the economic legislation of Vichy France as it applied to the parts of France under their control. The initial results of the military control were not only to arouse suspicion and unease at the prospect of future permanent annexation, but also meant a much more onerous occupation than other areas because of the heavy burden imposed by strict military authority, and left the Lillois feeling much more as if they continued to live in a state of war, rather than of mere occupation.<sup>25</sup> One of the motives of the occupying forces was to eventually reclaim former Germanic territory which had been 'Frenchified' and to hopefully re-establish the borders to coincide with the Lotharingia of the Middle Ages.

The Nazi authorities hoped to push not only the border westward, but also to rebuild Germanic culture in places of 'Germanic race' such as Lille and the rest of northern France. They were able to find some allies within France, such as Jean-Marie Gantois, the leader of the VVF (Vlaamsch Verbond van Vrankrijk) one of the organisations which aimed to

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<sup>24</sup> For a general overview of the occupation in the north of France, see Etienne Dejonghe and Yves Le Maner, *Le Nord-Pas-de-Calais dans la main allemande 1940-1944*. (Lille: La Voix du Nord, 1999), Jean-Marie Fossier, *Nord-Pas-de-Calais "Zone Interdite" Mai 1940 - Mai 1945*. (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1977), Michel Rousseau, *Le Nord et le Pas-de-Calais "zone interdite" dans la guerre 1939-1945*. (Lille: Editions Howarth, 1985) and Lynne Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France 1940-45*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

promote the traditional Flemish language and culture within northern France. The VVF was by far the most political of these organisations, seeking to get Flemish taught in schools and at the Universities in Lille and the region, secure the publication of Flemish-language newspapers, allow religious ceremonies to be conducted in Flemish, and gain some measure of official recognition for Flemish culture.<sup>26</sup> The French authorities had always resisted allowing Flemish culture any latitude in the region, and Gantois and his associates were quick to capitalise on the situation when they finally found regional leadership willing to consider their ideas for the sustaining, promotion and extension of their Flemish culture in Lille and its environs. In 1941 the inter-war pro-Flemish culture publications *De Torrewachter* and *Le Lion de Flandre* re-appeared, and the contributors began to make references to the greater Flemish community which had been artificially divided by the border, stressing the natural cultural links between Lille and its northern neighbours the Belgian Flemish and the Dutch. In line with their policy of a possible future re-creation of Lotharingia, the authorities of the OFK 670 based in Lille also authorised the teaching of Flemish ‘dialects’ in the primary schools of the region on 24 December 1941.<sup>27</sup> In February 1943, an ‘Institut Flamand’ was founded at Lille, designed to promote cultural activities. A weekly conference was held until the end of the war, and many people came to attend these cultural events, at which propaganda was spread in favour of the pan-Flemish cause (although it was not a big part of

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<sup>25</sup> Etienne Dejonghe, ‘Le Nord et le Pas-de-Calais pendant la première année de l’occupation (juin 1940-juin 1941),’ *Revue du Nord* LI No. 203(October-December 1969), p. 687, and ‘Le Nord isolé: occupation et opinion,’ *Revue d’histoire modern et contemporaine* XXVI(January-March 1979), p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> The majority of the organisations promoting Flemish culture in France had always been purely cultural and intellectual movements, and shied away from entering politics, regularly protesting their loyalty to the French state alongside of their attachment to their Flemish culture. For a full discussion see Baycroft, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism*.

<sup>27</sup> arrêté, 24 décembre 1941. ADN 1 W 998

the programmes and did not concern or affect many of the participants).<sup>28</sup> Much of the material written at the time was overtly racist in its promotion of the Flemish 'race', but although it capitalised on the presence of the Nazi authorities to further their cultural and political aims, close scrutiny of their activities and writings shows that they remained Catholic and conservative at heart.<sup>29</sup> In spite of the tremendous progress made in general popularity and the large increase in the number of people participating Flemish cultural activities, the Flemish movement during the Second World War remained an elitist, intellectual group. The reception of their ideas of cultural affinity across the Franco-Belgian border among a wider public were hampered by their elitism, and from timing, as the experience of the occupation and the terrible living conditions were hardly conducive to convincing people that association with the greater Flemish community procured any advantages.<sup>30</sup>

As with the First World War, the inhabitants of Lille had to cope with accusations of being the 'Boches du Nord' after the Second World War ended. This was particularly true given the overall atmosphere of persecution of perceived collaborators and the fact that this time around the activities of the VVF lent some foundation to the accusation, even if their cultural regionalism outweighed by far any real affinity with Nazi ideology. At the end of the war Gantois was one of 49 members of the VVF to be charged with collaboration. The main evidence was an unsigned letter which Gantois had supposedly written to Hitler requesting

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<sup>28</sup> Etienne Dejonghe, 'Un mouvement séparatiste dans le Nord et le Pas-de-Calais sous l'occupation (1940-1944): Le "Vlaamsch Verbond van Frankrijk",' *Revue d'histoire modern et contemporaine* XVII (January-March 1970), p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Julliard, ed., *Les conflits*. vol 3. Histoire de France series, André Burguière and Jacques Revel, eds. (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 500. The VVF was indeed a Catholic movement, originating in one of the regional seminaries, and Gantois himself was a priest, but their activities were not supported by the church hierarchy. Because of his political activities during the occupation, Gantois was removed from his parish, and not allowed to say mass with an audience.

<sup>30</sup> On popularity, see 'Rapport sur la mentalité actuelle en Flandre Française' included with commissioner of special police to the prefect 26 June 1941. ADN 1 W 1216.

that Lille and the section of northern France known as the Westhoek (the Flemish speaking part) should be re-united with Belgium and the Netherlands in a single state.<sup>31</sup> In the end he was sentenced to five years in prison, 'national indignity for life,' and forbidden to reside in any one of a number of potentially regionalist departments, although he only had to serve a couple of years.

Although concerning relatively few individuals, accusations could be given slight foundation in claims about race made early in the occupation, for asserting kinship to those across the former border by claiming membership in the Flemish 'race' had one clear and decided advantage for the inhabitants of the Lille area and rest of French Flanders. A possibility for those prisoners of war certified to be of 'Flemish race' to be instantly freed sent hundreds of family members rushing to their local authorities for such certification. Several enterprising mayors had form letters drawn up in French, Flemish and German stating that the individual named was born in Flanders of Flemish parents who had also been born in Flanders and requesting his immediate release from the German prison or hospital where he was being held.<sup>32</sup> Although at least twenty-nine village halls would sign any form on request, several others refused point blank to do so, while others wrote to the prefect asking for direction as to how to act.<sup>33</sup> A police special commissioner sent to report upon the situation found that the practice had begun in Belgium and spread across the border and could only find one person from the village of Warhem who claimed to have been actually liberated for reason of being Flemish (along with three others in the same German camp).<sup>34</sup> Although a

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<sup>31</sup> Some historians accept the authenticity of this letter, but there is certainly some question about it.

<sup>32</sup> ADN 1 W 1464 contains several examples. See also untitled article in the *Reveil du Nord*, (23 March 1941) describing the procedures.

<sup>33</sup> Mayor of Hazebrouck to prefect 21 March 1941. ADN 1 W 1464.

<sup>34</sup> Divisional commissioner of the special police to the sub-prefect of Dunkerque, 29 March 1941. ADN 1 W 1464.



specific case and for clearly pragmatic reasons, this situation did nevertheless have large numbers scrambling to assert their Flemish identity.

Although accusations that the Lillois were still the ‘boches du Nord’ were still made, the opposite view was also promulgated, in that they were among the most anti-Vichy within the whole of France. Partly from lack of contact, and partly because for them the war never seemed over at any point, the inhabitants of Lille were relatively more supportive of the British and de Gaulle than most other cities in France. Within the confines of the city and the surrounding region, there was also a belief that on the contrary, not only were they not anti-French, but they were the most patriotic of all, given that twice in living memory they had fought and suffered material damage to their city, but as soon as the war passed to the more southern region of France, their fellow countryman capitulated, rather than continuing to fight and suffer the kind of damage that Lille had taken in both of the wars. Both of these attitudes, questioning or defending the city’s loyalty to the nation coupled with the parallel thought of how hard the rest of the nation backed it up and protected it from attack and invasion, served to increase consciousness of the city’s links to and dependency upon the French nation, and the fragility of its position on the vanguard at the border.

## Conclusion

The net long-term result of the wartime invasions and occupation of the city of Lille during the First and Second World Wars in terms of identity formation, attitudes towards and images of the border, as well as the nature of the relationships to those on the other side and to the central state was to enhance, accelerate and reinforce the long-term trends that had been forming throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which had already been observed developing in terms of municipal economic politics as a result of industrialisation.

As an administrative border capital with a well-developed industrial base and a significant population, both the economic advantages of being on the French side of the border for the prosperity of its industry and the results of the wars made the inhabitants of Lille more acutely aware of their dependency upon the French national government for its prosperity, survival and its defence. By the twentieth century, even though its place as a military fortress with strength enough to defend the border had been surpassed by advances in military technology, and the development of the European Union meant that the place of the border for the protection of industry had all but disappeared, local identity defined in terms both of the French nation but also of the border was firmly established. Industry and wartime therefore provide good illustrations to study the elaboration of the municipal border identity of what came to be called the capital of the 'French Low Countries' or 'French Flanders, in terms of the clarification of a multiple hierarchy of identities. The city was conceived in opposition –versus the rest of the nation, versus the friends on the other side of the border, and versus the enemies who might come across it (even if ultimately from further away). Points of common culture and mutual benefit could be identified both across the border and with the rest of the nation, but always within a framework of consciousness that the others still had differences: the rest of the nation was not open to the same threat of invasion and destruction (and gave up quickly when they were) and those across the border were not involved in the equation for reconstruction or defence. Finally, when examined in terms of the local population, popular culture, municipal political traditions, patterns and history, Lille can be seen as having a great deal in common with the other cities of the low countries, which happened to find itself in France, the economic and military advantages of which over the long term helped to define its municipal identity.