

# MASTER THESIS

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„Belgium's Rexist Past: the Problem of Constructing  
Identity in Belgium“

verfasst von / submitted by

Frederick Julian Keith Vincent

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## Abstract:

This thesis uses the enigmatic Rexist Party as a vehicle into a discussion regarding Belgian national identity, evaluating the actions of the Rexists and any perceivable legacy within the collective memory. The concept of Belgian national identity has proved hard to distinguish throughout time; in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that rocked Belgium in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, some have gone so far as to say that there is no Belgian identity whatsoever. Traditionally, suggestions for a national identity have centred around the institutions pivotal to Belgian administrative, political, and social life. The topic has been discussed frequently over time, and especially during periods of war. During the build-up to the Second World War the Rexist Party entered this debate and, despite their best efforts, met with opposition on all sides. Addressing Rexism's interactions with the institutional, political and social spheres in turn, this thesis argues that Belgium's home-grown Rexist fascism, so often overlooked by Belgians, did indeed leave an impact on the Belgian national identity. Whilst not necessarily concrete, the impact of the Rexists can be felt across numerous facets of Belgian life, especially given the larger-than-life role of the party's founder, Léon Degrelle. In this regard, the party ultimately serves as a cautionary tale for those attempting to forcibly create a Belgian identity, with the party's name becoming a by-word for authoritarianism and fascism in Belgium. The thesis takes advantage of the existing literature (both primary and secondary), alongside parliamentary records and propaganda material, in order to assess the relative place of the Rexists in history. Such analysis is vital for those wishing to understand an episode of Belgian history that has been overlooked and downplayed for numerous reasons over the past half a century.



## Abstrakt:

Die vorliegende Arbeit nimmt die enigmatische Rexistische Partei als Beispiel für eine übergeordnete Debatte über belgische nationale Identität, bewertet die Handlungen der Rexisten und beleuchtet das Bestehen eines kollektiven Gedächtnisses. Das Konzept der belgischen nationalen Identität lies sich im Laufe der Zeit schwer bestimmen. Nach den terroristischen Anschlägen, die Belgien im frühen 21. Jahrhundert erschütterten wurde die belgische Identität gar in Frage gestellt. Traditionell hat sich die Idee einer nationalen Identität auf die Institutionen konzentriert, die für das administrative, politische und soziale Leben in Belgien von zentraler Bedeutung waren. Das Thema wurde mit der Zeit, insbesondere während Kriegszeiten, vielfach diskutiert. Während der Vorkriegsjahre des Zweiten Weltkrieges trat die Rexistische Partei daher in die Debatte ein und stieß trotz aller Bemühungen auf Widerstand von allen Seiten. Im Bezug auf diesen Austausch der Rexisten mit dem institutionellen, politischen und sozialen Umfeld, argumentiert die vorliegende Thesis, dass Belgiens autochthoner Rexist-Faschismus, tatsächlich die belgische nationale Identität beeinflusst hat. Der Wirkungsgrad der Rexisten ist zwar nicht unbedingt auf den ersten blick zu sehen, lässt sich jedoch in zahlreichen Facetten des belgischen Lebens erkennen, insbesondere angesichts der überzeichneten Rolle des Parteigründers, Léon Degrelle. In dieser Hinsicht dient die Partei letztendlich als ein warnendes Beispiel für diejenigen, die versuchen, gewaltsam eine belgische Identität zu schaffen, wobei der Name der Partei der Definition von Autoritarismus und Faschismus in Belgien nahe kommt. Die Arbeit nutzt die vorhandene (primäre und sekundäre) Literatur, sowie parlamentarische Aufzeichnungen und Propagandamaterial, um den relativen Platz der Rexisten in der Geschichte festzustellen. Diese Analyse wird vor allem diejenigen interessieren, die einen Abschnitt der belgischen Geschichte verstehen wollen, der in den letzten 50 Jahren aus verschiedensten Gründen übersehen und bagatellisiert wurde.



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**Pledge of Honesty**

**Vita**



List of Acronyms and Abbreviations:

ACJB	<i>Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge</i> / Catholic Association of Belgian Youth
CD&V	<i>Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams</i> / Christian Democratic and Flemish Party
CEDADE	<i>Círculo Español de Amigos de Europa</i> / Spanish Circle of Friends of Europe
CFS	Congo Free State
MVBN	<i>Militärverwaltung in Belgien und Nordfrankreich</i> / Military Administration in Belgium and Northern France
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> / Nazi Party (Germany)
N-VA	<i>Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie</i> / New Flemish Alliance
PNF	<i>Partito Nazionale Fascista</i> / National Fascist Party (Italy)
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i>
VNV	<i>Vlaams Nationaal Verbond</i> / Flemish National Union







## Introduction:

### i. The enigma of Belgian Identity

In 2006, the Minister-President of Flanders Yves Leterme (the future Prime Minister of Belgium) caused a national controversy when he ‘joked’ that the country was an ‘accident of history’, and that the only truly Belgian things in it were the ‘king, national football team, and certain brands of beer’.<sup>1</sup> To his supporters in the Flemish CD&V (Christian Democratic and Flemish Party), this was taken ironically. To many French-speaking Walloons in the south, paired with his exaggeration of apparent Walloon inability to learn Dutch, this was an insult to their pride. Reacted to in different ways across the regions of Belgium, this throw-away comment caused the whole country to stop and re-evaluate the national identity and what it really means to be Belgian.

This question of Belgian identity is one that has plagued its citizens ever since the declaration of independence in 1830. In the wake of the 2016 bombings in Brussels, some national commentators went as far as saying that ‘national pride is absent in Belgium’.<sup>2</sup> As seen in Leterme’s comments, where a national identity has taken root, it has tended to be based upon institutions (like the king), shared ventures (like football), and shared culture (like beer). Modern day identity is therefore intrinsically bound up both in the objective events of the past, and in the subjective way in which these events have been perceived by later generations. To this end, an exploration of a concept as broad as identity must necessarily also tackle the concept of legacy, and a people’s treatment of their collective past.

### ii. Introduction to the case study

The polarisation of identity visible today in Belgium has deep roots. Although this is not attributable to any single time-span, a period of particular interest is the decade 1935-1945; the years surrounding the Second World War. In the years building up to the war, the political dialogue across Europe was dominated by questions of identity

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<sup>1</sup> David Rennie, ‘Belgium an accident of history with football and beer’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 19th August 2006, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1526739/Belgium-an-accident-of-history-with-football-and-beer.html>

<sup>2</sup> Marc Hooghe, ‘Belgium's absent national identity comes at a price’, *Politico*, 27th May 2016, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belgiums-absent-national-identity-comes-at-a-price-failed-state-terrorist-attacks-brussels/>

and belonging. A new ‘violently nationalist’ attitude simmered up following the end of the First World War, and became an increasingly visible part of the political mainstream by the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Individuals like Alfred Rosenberg in Germany or Giovanni Gentile in Italy had combined political ideology with their interpretations of nationalism, and had redefined the national identity for millions of people.<sup>4</sup> This direct public engagement with national identity was also visible in Belgium, even if there was no physical assumption of power by explicitly nationalist factions. Beyond this, the events of the war and the German occupation served to highlight a national identity that was evolving and manifesting differently in the different regions of Belgium, from Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north to French-speaking Wallonia in the south. In comparison to their lengthy resistance in the First World War, the Belgian Army surrendered by the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1940, just eighteen days after the Germans invaded.<sup>5</sup> From this moment onwards, the nature of relationships with the German occupiers greatly affected people’s identities, often splitting communities and families. A volatile period such as this serves as a useful focus when looking at Belgian identities.

During this period of upheaval in Belgium, a particularly intriguing aspect is the creation of Belgian fascism, and specifically the actions of the Rexist Party (*Parti Rexiste* in French, and simply *Rex* in Dutch). There were a number of far-right and authoritarian minded political movements in Belgium at the time (which can broadly be classed as ‘fascist’), but it is the Rexists who present the most interesting opportunity for a case study.<sup>6</sup> Despite an ideology that actively incorporated the key institutions of Belgian society, the party was repudiated by each institution and never achieved widespread support comparable to far-right movements in other countries. Despite achieving startling electoral success at the beginning, their early exposure can be linked to the downfall of the party.<sup>7</sup> Despite only existing as a movement for ten hectic years, the party left a long shadow on Belgian politics. Amongst others, these

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<sup>3</sup> F. L. Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 10

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3

<sup>5</sup> Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium: Léon Degrelle and the Rexist Movement, 1940-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 21

<sup>6</sup> See discussion in Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 4 on the wide-ranging and ‘convenient label’ of fascism

<sup>7</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217



potential contradictions serve to highlight the peculiarity of Rexism; they are also what makes it a case study of particular interest.

This thesis will therefore use the Rexist Party as a vehicle through which to address two principle goals. On the one hand, it is an exploration into the events of 1935-1945 and the actions of (and reactions to) the Rexist Party. On the other hand, it simultaneously casts a wider gaze, looking at the legacy of this political party on the Belgian identity. In short, it is hoped that this work will go some way to explaining the current Belgian identity through the events of the past. The key question investigated in this thesis will therefore be whether, and to what extent, the Rexist Party left an identifiable legacy in the Belgian national psyche. Within this overarching question, there exist numerous secondary questions which will be addressed through the course of the thesis. What was it exactly that changed in the public psyche during this time? Did things play out differently in the French speaking south of the country (Wallonia) and the Dutch speaking north (Flanders)? Is there any identifiable causation by the Rexist Party, or merely correlation? This question will be dealt with both in the immediate context of the Rexist Party, and in the context of its legacy in subsequent years.

### iii. Working definition of legacy

Before dealing with the primary concept of identity, it is necessary to briefly discuss the related notion of legacy, which is equally central to the dissertation. A medieval word ultimately deriving from the Latin *legatus* (envoy or ambassador), a legacy was initially something passed down in a will.<sup>8</sup> Over time it has come to mean anything handed down by predecessors, both positive and negative, and both physical and metaphorical. In this regard it is not necessarily the indisputable occurrence of events that affect our perceptions today, but rather their legacy. As this legacy evolves and is reinterpreted (perhaps in light of new facts, or new ways of looking at existing facts), our identity duly changes as well. The notion of legacy (that is to say, the legacy of the Rexist Party) plays a central role in understanding the effects of the Rexist Party upon

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Waite, *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary, 11th Ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 520; and Walter Skeat, *An etymological dictionary of the English language* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005 ed.), 335 for definition and derivation respectively.

society, and necessarily refers to both the events that took place during the specific time frame 1935-1945, and also the presentation and treatment of them in subsequent years. In this regard, the Rexist Party proves to be a rich vein due to its concrete longevity in public discourse. Its founder Léon Degrelle survived both the political jungle of Belgium and the battlefields of the Eastern Front, before fleeing through Axis-controlled territories at the denouement of the war and finding eventual sanctuary in Francisco Franco's Spain.<sup>9</sup> From his refuge in Spain, Degrelle continued to write literature and give unapologetic speeches on the political situation in Europe and his version of events in the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> Provided with this platform, Degrelle remained in the mind's-eye of the Belgian people as 'an ever-present reminder' for another fifty years as the 'last fascist leader', usually wearing a military uniform bedecked in Nazi-era medals.<sup>11</sup> He died in 1994, aged 87.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of legacy is frequently used as an entry point through which to approach the hefty social construct of identity. As mentioned, it allows for flexibility (as people's perceptions change over time) and individuality (as each person will view events differently). Over time, history and the social sciences have combined to provide numerous schools of thought and theoretical approaches for dealing with matters of identity. 'Identity Theory' itself is arguably more rooted in the realms of psychology and sociology, and in simple terms regards the self as 'a collection of identities'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it focuses on the interweaving of present relationships, future expectations and past experiences. More recently, 'Social Identity Theory' has looked at these different elements within the scope of 'membership in a social category'.<sup>14</sup> It is useful to point out these different sociological theories of identity, if only to stress the extent to which past events (and the memory of these events) can have an impact upon identity, both as a community and as an individual.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Griffiths, *Fascism* (London: Continuum, 2006), 144; Edward R. Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party, 1939-1940* (Canterbury: Steven Books, 2005), 11

<sup>10</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>11</sup> Luisa María Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit* (Paris: Morel, 1961), 7

<sup>12</sup> Martin Conway, 'Obituary: Leon Degrelle', *The Independent*, 6th April 1994, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-leon-degrelle-1368399.html>

<sup>13</sup> Guillermina Jasso, *Identity, Social Identity, Comparison, and Status: Four Theories with a Common Core* (New York: New York University, 2002), 4

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 6

iv. Definitions of identity

Placing the broad concept of identity within the scope of this work, the thesis will explore the extent to which Belgian fascism, and the Rexist Party in particular, had an effect upon people's perceptions of the Belgian identity. In its most abstract sense, identity simply refers to 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is'.<sup>15</sup> A broad definition such as this serves little purpose here, acting as a 'catch-all' for as many contributing factors as might be desired. In order to better understand the competing identities within modern (and historic) Belgium, it is useful to adopt at this juncture a limited definition of Belgian national identity, that will allow for the evaluation of particular events and actions throughout the thesis. In this regard, the works of others in this vein are useful in establishing the parameters of Belgian national identity. Josephine Hoegaerts for example helps in defining what the Belgian national identity is **not**. Her investigation into masculinity and male-dominated social spheres rejects from the start the 'romanticised, nationalist and invented histories of the romantic and invented nation'.<sup>16</sup> Instead, her take on national identity is based in the reality of decision-making; in 'a representation of Belgium' within the houses of Parliament, and the King.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Martin Conway states that 'aside from a shared loyalty to the Catholic faith, the diverse populations of Belgium possessed little natural homogeneity', and that a prominent 'constitutional monarchy and parliamentary system' (and army) were created as a binding agent.<sup>18</sup> Even the first King, Leopold I, seemed to abide by this view, 'reconciling nationalism with constitutional government, [and] Catholicism with liberalism'.<sup>19</sup> Connecting the dots between Hoegaerts', Conway's and Leterme's pictures of Belgian identity, it is not some romanticised legends or aspirations that define Belgium, a relatively young country by European standards. Instead, it is the physical structures and institutions that govern the people, and the manifest events and culture that the citizens share.

v. Les Lieux de Memoire

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<sup>15</sup> Waite, *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*, 452

<sup>16</sup> Josephine Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and nationhood, 1830-1910: constructions of identity and citizenship in Belgium* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 31

<sup>18</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 6

<sup>19</sup> David Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon* (London: Penguin, 1990), 170

This focus on the real and tangible allows for greater precision within the thesis, given the size and scope of the work. From a methodological point of view, the thesis combines both an investigation of historical events, and also perceptions or attitudes thereof. After all, when evaluating the legacy of Belgian fascism and the Rexist Party, the reactions are arguably of more importance than the actions themselves. In this regard, the thesis heavily utilises the International Relations theory of constructivism. Within the constructivist school of thought, a significant emphasis is placed upon human agency, and the combination of attitudes and events in shaping contemporary decision-making. This thesis therefore adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, using the schools of history and International Relations to analyse the Rexist Party, the environment in which it functioned, and the way in which it has been remembered over time. This allows twin focus upon both the historic events within the specific time-frame of this thesis, and the understanding of these events in the years that followed. It is this melange that combines within the common cultural psyche to develop a more concrete concept of identity, which can potentially play out differently on a regional and on a national level, given differences in priorities and interests across these jurisdictions.

Constructivism has oftentimes faced criticism for being too generic and all-encompassing in its methodology, especially from realists who focus exclusively on presentations of power. A fruitful way to hone the thesis and minimise this ‘catch-all’ critique is to further narrow the conceptualisation of identity through the notion of collective memory and the academic concept of Sites of Memory. Sites of Memory (*les lieux de Mémoire* in the original French) were formalised by the influential Pierre Nora in his multi-volume *magnum opus*, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, which was itself developed out of the French school of Collective Memory, and key individuals such as Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>20</sup> The idea of certain images or entities that play a significant social or cultural role in the collective conscious is itself long-held, going back to the *loci memoriae* of Cicero and Quintilian.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1998), x

<sup>21</sup> Pim Den Boer, ‘Loci memoriae - lieux de mémoire’ in *Cultural memory studies: an international and interdisciplinary handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara Young (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 19; and Nora, *Realms of Memory*, x

The main contribution of Nora however is in looking at ‘social frames’ (*cadres sociaux*) and ‘realms’ of memory in the abstract, be that through objects, symbols, events, people etc. To this end, I will be treating the Rexist Party itself as a site of memory, and will be using the approach of Nora to analyse the longer term impact of Belgian fascism on the people and the country. After all, later revisions of Nora’s *Lieux de Mémoire* specifically state that this approach is neither chronological nor teleological, but rather a ‘history of the present’.<sup>22</sup> Finally, it is important to note that the impact of this particular strain of fascism can be seen far beyond the explicit reactions or critiques; one of the key contributions made by Pierre Nora is the argument that forgetting is just as much of an important component within collective memory.<sup>23</sup> As with the majority of academic concepts, there are numerous critiques of Nora and his approach; these will be addressed properly when exploring the legacy of the Rexist Party within the general population.

vi. A structural overview

The thesis is divided into three main chapters in order to better address the question at hand from three ever broader perspectives: the institutions, the politics, and the people. It is hoped that through the final overlay of these three strands of research (which are not wholly conclusive in isolation), a general trend may be observed regarding the legacy of Rexism and Belgian fascism. This methodological approach was formalised by the Classicist and sociologist Keith Hopkins as the ‘Wigwam Argument’ and has become popular in reconstructing motivations and attitudes from the past.<sup>24</sup> Before this though, the introductory chapter (Chapter 0) deals primarily with the historical background of the Rexist Movement, from its founding through to its ultimate collapse. Elements of political theory are incorporated when outlining the general tenets of Rexism, along with comparisons to contemporary fascist movements in Spain, Austria and Italy, in order to better understand the unique nature of Rexism. As part of this historical outlook, it is important to treat Rexism as just one of many different fascist movements in Belgium, albeit arguably the most influential. As such,

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<sup>22</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, xii

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. ix

<sup>24</sup> Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 20 for the theoretical description of his Wigwam Theory.

there is also a brief comparison to contemporary parties such as Verdinaso and the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV).

Chapter 1 outlines the far-reaching effects of Belgian fascism on its main ideological institutions. In Yves Leterme's tongue-in-cheek 21<sup>st</sup> Century, these may well be the King and the national football team.<sup>25</sup> In the decade 1935-1945 however, as alluded to by Conway and others, it was the Belgian Monarchy and the Belgian Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> Both would be tainted in their own way by association with the ideologies of Rexism and fascism. Chapter 2 moves from the institutions to the politics of Belgium, looking at how the fascism of the Rexist Party (and others) played its part in the political landscape of Belgium. Collaboration and resistance (often using these parties as vehicles by which to assist/attack the Germans indirectly) would redefine the political spectrum both at the time and in the collective memory.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Section 3 deals with the more intangible impact of Rexism (and to an extent, Verdinaso and the VNV as well) upon Belgian and regional identity for the populace at large. Within this section, Nora's concept of *Lieux de Mémoire* (sites of memory) will also be incorporated. In this regard, the focus is on the role of Belgian Fascism in popular memory in defining post-war definitions of Belgian-ness, Flemish-ness and Walloon-ness.

#### vii. Systematic tensions in Belgium

When considering the role of this thesis (and the topic of Belgian fascism specifically) within the extant corpus of work on fascism and national identity in the Second World War, its peculiarity stands out. The party was formed on a 'firm and well-established doctrine', which was far less radical than the nationalism in countries like Germany (advocating for example 'control' of capitalists and bankers, rather than a total overthrow of them).<sup>28</sup> The leader of the movement, Léon Degrelle, was the embodiment of 'youthful dynamism', and was seen as 'one of the most effective

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-Sébastien Lefebvre, 'Les dérives identitaires du nationalisme flamand', *Slate*, 12th February 2011, accessed 13/08/18, [www.slate.fr/story/34145/nationalisme-flamand-derives-identitaires](http://www.slate.fr/story/34145/nationalisme-flamand-derives-identitaires)

<sup>26</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 212; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 6

<sup>27</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 1

<sup>28</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 212-214

political orators of his generation in Europe'.<sup>29</sup> Yet despite this, the party had already passed its zenith and was fading on the outbreak of war. Was this due to the party and its actions? or the political environment? or the reaction of the people? The Rexist Party is, if anything, an oddity due to the political revolution that it portended yet failed to realise.

Added to this is the unique history of Belgium. The nation is now deeply federalised, with a Dutch-language version of the constitution adopted in 1967, and state parliaments introduced under Jean-Luc Dehaene in 1993; these measures reveal the divergent regional identities that developed over time. To some, this regionalisation has undermined federal government so much that 'the notion of a strong central authority has all but evaporated'.<sup>30</sup> Unlike fellow European states created in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, theirs is not a history of glorious unification (or arguably conquest) by a constituent part, like in Italy or Germany. Rather, it is an inheritance of the Austrians that was granted to the Netherlands through the 1814 Congress of Vienna.<sup>31</sup> The marriage of convenience between Flanders and Wallonia, uniting in demanding independence from the Protestant Netherlands, explains in large part the gradual divergence of identity. Already in the 1880s, there is statistical evidence of a divergence between the more right-wing ('confessional') voters in Flanders and the more left-wing ('anti-clerical') voters in Wallonia.<sup>32</sup> In the face of this strong institutions were key, as was the unifying allegiance in daily life to the Catholic Church.<sup>33</sup> As time progressed, the *status quo* was almost destined to shift.

#### viii. Flashpoints in Belgian history

Following the declaration of independence, many of the key dates in Belgian history revolve around the relative strength of the key institutions and attempts to forge a unified national identity. Following independence, the National Congress of the

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<sup>29</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 12; 20

<sup>30</sup> Hooghe, 'Belgium's absent national identity comes at a price'

<sup>31</sup> Roger S. Keyes, *Outrageous fortune: King Leopold III of the Belgians, Volume I, 1901-1940: The scapegoat who saved the British from defeat in 1940* (London: Tom Donovan, 1990), 3

<sup>32</sup> Marnix Beyen, 'The duality of public opinions as a democratic asset' in *Public opinion in a multilingual society: institutional design and federal loyalty*, ed. Dave Sinardet and Marc Hooghe (Brussels: Re-Bel Initiative, 2009), 24

<sup>33</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 6

fledgling country voted in favour of a constitutional monarchy and, by the summer of 1831, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha was selected and officially sworn in as Leopold I, the first King of the Belgians.<sup>34</sup> From this point onwards, the monarch was expected to play a unifying role in the country, representing not just one linguistic, ethnic or religious grouping (Leopold I himself being a Protestant German), but rather all the citizens. Thus the official title is not the King of Belgium, but the King of the Belgians. Yet outside of the direct kingly line, many claim that there has never been another ‘Belgian’, but rather ‘a Flemish and a Walloon public opinion, that are somehow connected in a Belgian political system’.<sup>35</sup>

The age of colonisation offered another opportunity for this Belgian political system to assert its unifying power, in outward presentations of Belgian might to the world. In this way King Leopold II (1835-1909) used a combination of diplomacy, cunning, and downright skulduggery to construct his own private colony in the Congo Free State (CFS). Similarly, the governing body of the CFS created a vast civil-service and army (*Force Publique* or *Openbare Weermacht*) of native Belgians, whilst the Belgian Catholic Church mobilised a stream of Belgian missionaries. Through their intervention in a foreign country, Belgian institutions were able to craft, to a certain degree, a Belgian identity.

Another period which simply cannot be avoided when talking about either the history of Belgium or the 1930s is the First World War. In this cataclysmic clash of world superpowers, hundreds of thousands of soldiers fought in the trenches of Belgium, which represented the first 20-25km of the Western Front.<sup>36</sup> As the first significant conflict involving an independent Belgium, the war heralded a fresh wave of collective Belgian identity. Painters such as Constant Permeke and Jozef Peeters captured attention across Belgium, and internationalist writers like Paul Colin stressed Belgian unity in the class struggle – Colin would later become a key member of the Rexist Movement.<sup>37</sup> Belgian religious leaders, royals, and the remnants of the shattered

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<sup>34</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 4

<sup>35</sup> Marc Hooghe and Dave Sinardet, ‘Introduction: Is there a Belgian public opinion?’ in *Public opinion in a multilingual society: institutional design and federal loyalty*, ed. Dave Sinardet and Marc Hooghe (Brussels: Re-Bel Initiative, 2009), 3

<sup>36</sup> Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd, 2016), 295

<sup>37</sup> Francis Mus, ‘Internationalization in Belgian Literary Periodicals after WWI. Outline of a Research Project’ in *Translation and Its Others. Selected Papers of the CETRA Research Seminar in Translation Studies 2007*, ed. Pieter Boulogne (Leuven: CETRA, 2008), 4; Hubert Roland, ‘Paul



army came to represent everything that the Allied Powers were fighting for.<sup>38</sup> Above everything else, both metaphorically and physically, stood King Albert I (1875-1934). In the towering figure of Albert, the people of Belgium reified all elements of national identity in one figure. Beloved Europe-wide, the modern-day soldier-king instilled pride in his subjects and came to represent the steadfast defiance of an entire nation.<sup>39</sup>

In 1934, Albert I died in a freak mountaineering accident. If he left a legacy for his country and his son Leopold III (1901-1983), it was that of an 'impressive precedent' and *damnosa hereditas*, an impossibly high bar by which to measure the young Leopold.<sup>40</sup> Post-1918 Belgium had changed dramatically. This was an age of renewed nationalism, with figures like US President Woodrow Wilson promulgating 'self-determination' and focusing on factors like language or cultural heritage. In debates such as this, the heterogeneity of Belgium was unmistakable, and new concepts of 'regionalism' and 'provincialism' took root.<sup>41</sup> In place of the Belgian art of the Great War for example, Flemish artists turned to German Expressionism, whilst the Walloons stuck to 'classical aesthetics' and the French tradition.<sup>42</sup> The darker side of nationalism reared its head too, mainly in the scapegoating and persecution of ethnic minorities like Jews or Roma. Belgium was of course a nation of mixed ethnicity; in every workplace, every village, every community, there was a visible ethnic majority and minority.<sup>43</sup> With the loss of such a potentially unifying figure like King Albert, the divergent identities in Belgium were arguably exacerbated. The world of the First World War was not that of the Second, and Belgian reactions to German aggressors changed too.

It is within this unique set of conditions and relatively short independent history that the Rexist Party was conceived. These factors highlight the peculiarity of Belgium, but also the gross disservice that general perceptions often serve the country. Belgium

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Colin et la réception de l'expressionnisme en Belgique francophone dans l'entre-deux-guerres.' *Textyles 20 / 2001: Alternatives modernistes (1919-1939)* (2001): 33, accessed 13/06/18, <https://doi.org/10.4000/textyles.912>

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 578

<sup>39</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 7

<sup>40</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 12; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 15

<sup>41</sup> Mus, 'Internationalization in Belgian Literary Periodicals after WWI. Outline of a Research Project', 4

<sup>42</sup> Beyen, 'The duality of public opinions as a democratic asset', 25

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that, during this period, communities were often less segregated than they are now. Until 1974 for example, the Flemish town of Ghent offered a popular Francophone daily newspaper, *La Flandre Libérale*. See Hooghe and Sinardet, 'Introduction: Is there a Belgian public opinion?', 4

has been continuously dwarfed by its neighbouring powers and provided numerous battlefields over which foreign powers might fight. Yet this by no means lessens the importance of Belgian history in our understanding of Europe, both historically and in the present day. On the contrary, the clash of cultures and influences that have so frequently come together in the territories of Belgium have paved the way for the numerous complexities and contradictions of the country. A closer look at one of the more intriguing periods of Belgian history, and the remarkable Rexist Movement, may well emphasise and link many of these complexities.

## Chapter 0: An Historical Introduction:

Before looking more closely at the effects of the Rexist Party upon those around them, and any potential legacy within the national identity, it is important to establish what exactly the Rexist Party was, and what concrete things they did during their existence. Unlike contemporary parties such as the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) in Germany or the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF) in Italy, the Rexist Party is unknown by the majority of people globally and receives little, if any, coverage in popular culture. Yet despite this lack of publicity, and despite only functioning as a fully-fledged party / political movement for ten years (1935-1945), the party quickly found itself at the heart of Belgian political history and the major events of the day.

### i. Foundations of Rexism

The founding of the Rexist Party can be traced back to the world of journalism and publishing houses that blossomed in Belgium during and after the First World War. One of these publishing houses was *Christus Rex*, a catholic enterprise that railed against the formal Catholic establishment and the traditional political elites.<sup>44</sup> In the early 1930s, this infant Rexist movement criticised the establishment from within the broad confines of the Catholic Party.<sup>45</sup> On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1935, just four years after becoming the director of this publishing firm, Léon Degrelle burnt many of his bridges, interrupting the annual congress of the *Fédération des associations et cercles catholiques* in Kortrijk, blocking the doors with his young supporters, and denouncing the upper echelons.<sup>46</sup> Thanks to a formal denunciation by the Archbishop of Mechelen and Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Van Roey, and Degrelle's own publicisation of the so-called '*Coup de Courtrai*' (Courtrai being Kortrijk in French), the event gave him even greater exposure.<sup>47</sup> A few months later in February 1936, Degrelle released the official programme of the Rexist Party, formally founding a political movement based

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<sup>44</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

<sup>45</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 10

<sup>46</sup> Giovanni Di Muro, *Léon Degrelle et l'aventure rexiste* (Brussels : Luc Pire, 2005), 77

<sup>47</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 10

upon the world-perspective and values of *Christus Rex* and his own personal journal, *Rex*.<sup>48</sup>

The feverish zeal of this fledgling party in the coming months took the political establishment by surprise. The party's rallying cry against the injustices of the corrupt elites appealed to thousands of the disaffected from all walks of life (including in particular at this early juncture many veterans of the First World War), and saw their ranks swell by the day.<sup>49</sup> The public events and the oratorical displays by Degrelle were backed up by action too. This was a period of economic hardship, following a devaluation of the Belgian Franc in 1935.<sup>50</sup> The problems were exacerbated by paralysing infighting amongst the traditional political elites, and Degrelle's Rexists stood out as the only party systematically supporting the mass strikes of 1936.<sup>51</sup> The results of this high-profile public image campaign were as immediate as they were astonishing. In the general elections of 24<sup>th</sup> May 1936, the brand new party shocked the establishment, gaining 11.49% of the votes and receiving 21 of the 202 seats in the Chamber of Representatives.<sup>52</sup> Degrelle himself narrowly missed out on a seat, finishing as the top 'substitute' (*suppléant* / *opvolger*) in Brussels' 4<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.<sup>53</sup> The results saw the Rexists come less than a percentage-point behind the traditional power-broker, the liberal party (*Liberale Partij*, *Parti Libéral*).

These results sent ripples of alarm through the political elite in Belgium, and further raised the profile of Rexism both at home and in neighbouring countries. Only a few months after the election, Degrelle had been warmly received in meetings with both Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, and the party received considerable donations from the *Duce* and *Führer*.<sup>54</sup> As the description of Rexist ideology will show however, at this stage the party had very little in common with the NSDAP, which it viewed as

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<sup>48</sup> Griffiths, *Fascism*, 119; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214

<sup>49</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 11

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Léon Degrelle, *Campaign in Russia: Waffen-SS on the Eastern Front*, trans. Ted O'Keefe (London: Bloomfield Books, 1985), ix

<sup>52</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

<sup>53</sup> See 'Liste des membres de la chambre et de leurs suppléants', *Chambre des Représentants*, from *dekamer.be*, accessed 14/06/18, <http://www.dekamer.be/digidoc/DPS/K3113/K31130801/K31130801.PDF>

<sup>54</sup> Griffiths, *Fascism*, 120; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 13. Later investigations found that Degrelle had received a total of 19,000,000 francs (c.\$600,000) from Mussolini – see News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 15, April 11 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1086&context=ur-87-68>

a blend of 'Prussian militarism and pagan racism'; both were anathema for the Belgian public.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, maintaining and advancing this dynamic early rise proved a challenge, and the party failed to build markedly on their 1936 electoral results. The main body of this thesis will deal with the specifics of Rex's interactions with Belgium, its institutions, and its people. In short however, the stagnation of the party can be attributed to an amalgam of factors: shifting ideologies in order to pay lip service to foreign powers like Nazi Germany; missteps by Degrelle and the leadership; doubling down and retribution by the establishment. Already in October 1936, the party decided on an alliance with the primary nationalist party in Flanders, the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV).<sup>56</sup> Formed out of a desire for further anti-establishment support, this 8-month alliance backfired drastically.<sup>57</sup> For many ardent Rexists, it represented a watering down of their views, and cooperation with a regionalist party threatened one of their salient aims: a unified Belgian nation.<sup>58</sup> This web of interlinking factors finally coalesced in the final Belgian elections before the German invasion of 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940. The elections of 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1939 saw popular support for Rexism evaporate, falling from 11.49% to only 4.25% and just four seats, one of which was Degrelle.<sup>59</sup> In comparison, their temporary allies the VNV saw a moderate increase in the vote and twice as much as the Rexist Party, earning 8.4% of the votes. In sum, this represents the inability of Rexism to legally obtain manifest power in pre-war Belgium.<sup>60</sup>

## ii. The years of occupation

The imminent invasion by the Third Reich, Belgium's inevitable involvement in yet another World War, and the unavoidable occupation of the country offered the

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<sup>55</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 13

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Again, Conway argues that it is academically dishonest to describe all of these parties simply as 'fascist'. Each had their own unique ideologies and stood on vastly different platforms from one another.

<sup>57</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

<sup>58</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 712

<sup>59</sup> Electoral data retrieved from 'Evolutie van de kieswetgeving', Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken - Directie van de Verkiezingen, accessed 13/06/18, [www.elections.fgov.be/index.php?id=3293&L=1#](http://www.elections.fgov.be/index.php?id=3293&L=1#); Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 8

<sup>60</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 218

possibility of a new start for the Rexist Party and the potential for new influence. From 1939 onwards, the party clearly shifted its ideology and platform, aligning ever-closer with the ideology of the NSDAP. Insistence upon paramilitary uniforms and salutes drew further visual parallels to the NSDAP.<sup>61</sup> In 1940, Degrelle visited the German embassy in Brussels, asking for finance for a new newspaper, and lavished increasing praise upon the Reich.<sup>62</sup> Such actions branded him a pariah and provocateur for all but his most zealous followers, and left him with little choice but collaboration, irrevocably damning the reputation of Rexism.

When the Germans finally did invade in May 1940, the Rexists leapt at the opportunity to collaborate with the invaders.<sup>63</sup> The Germans were quick to utilise these willing supporters, giving the Rexists a series of mayorships (the majority of them in Wallonia) and providing financial support.<sup>64</sup> The Rexists, initially founded on a platform of Catholicism and Belgian unity, were not a natural ally of the Reich however. The Germans and the new *Militärverwaltung in Belgien und Nordfrankreich* (MVBN - Military Administration in Belgium and Northern France) under Alexander Von Falkenhausen (1878-1966) were far more interested in promoting Flemish nationalism and their divisive policy of *Flamenpolitik*, intended to destroy national unity from within. In this regard, far greater levels of formalised collaboration can be seen between the MVBN and the VNV under Staf de Clercq. In contrast, the Rexists (promoting Belgian unity) and Verdinaso, (promoting *Dietsch* unity between Flanders and the Netherlands, and led by Joris Van Severen until his controversial death), were utilised only when needed, and Von Falkenhausen was said to have declared Degrelle ‘*unausstehlich*’ (insufferable) behind closed doors.<sup>65</sup>

The actions of the Rexists during this period of German occupation are far more difficult to document than their actions before the war. Moreover, where collaboration can be seen to have left a distinct impact on the people, it is often hard to distinguish between official Rexist Party action and the opportunism of ‘corrupt

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<sup>61</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 14

<sup>62</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 17

<sup>63</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 3, No. 38, September 18 1943 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1943), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=ur-87-68>

<sup>64</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 43, October 24 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 13/06/18. <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1075&context=ur-87-68>; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>65</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 15, April 11 1942; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 210

brutal men' who happened to be Rexists.<sup>66</sup> A distinct change can be seen during the course of the war however, as the Rexists spearheaded formal Belgian contributions to the German war effort. Degrelle organised a Rexist force of 1,200 Belgian volunteers in late 1941 that served within the Walloon Legion.<sup>67</sup> After months of bloody fighting on the Eastern Front and extensive lobbying of the SS and Wehrmacht by Degrelle, the Legion was transformed into the *SS-Wallonien* on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1943. In these final years of the war, Rexism became linked to Nazism and the martial expansion of the Third Reich, providing the basis for the damning legacy of the party in the eyes of the majority of the Belgian people.

### iii. Fall of Rexism

From this stage, it was not just the legacy of the Rexists that became tied to the Third Reich, but also their ultimate fate. Brussels was liberated by Allied troops on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1944, and just four days later the government-in-exile of Hubert Pierlot returned to a hero's welcome. With a significant proportion of the die-hard Rexists fighting with Degrelle on the Eastern Front, any last vestiges of popular support for the Rexists at home vanished. On the 29<sup>th</sup> December the Belgian War Council sentenced Degrelle to death *in absentia*, and the party was officially dissolved on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1945.<sup>68</sup> Wanted men in their native country, the remnants of the Rexist Party thus fought to the bitter end, defending the rear-guard in the German evacuation of the Cherkassy-pocket, and making a final stand in Estonia in April 1945.<sup>69</sup>

To a large degree, the Rexist Party was the party of Léon Degrelle, and with his absence from Belgium in 1944 and 1945, the post-war narrative regarding the Rexist Party was written by the reinstated government of Pierlot, the subsequent government of Van Acker in early 1945, and the key institutions of Belgium. The deeper legacy of the Rexist Party goes further than this mere denunciation at the denouement of the war however, and it is the purpose of this thesis to explore the extent

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<sup>66</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 18

<sup>67</sup> News from Belgium, *Vol. 1, No. 23, September 6 1941* (New York: Belgian Information Centre 1941), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1082&context=ur-87-68>; Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10

<sup>68</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 281

<sup>69</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10

of the legacy left by the Rexist party within Belgium, and the complexities of any potential legacy in the national identity. It is also important to emphasise that the Rexist Party was not the sole, or even ‘principal’ vessel of communication and cooperation between Belgium and European fascism. Indeed, the rivalries and relationship between the Rexist and the regionalist authoritarian (or indeed ‘fascist’) parties such as Verdinaso and the VNV contributed to the legacy of Rexism in just the same way as their relationship with the traditional political elites.

#### iv. Rexism: tenets and beliefs

Before racing into the analysis of the interactions between Rexism and the institutions, politics, and people of Belgium, it is important to establish what the Rexist Party **did**. Beyond this however, it is also necessary to clarify what the Rexist Party **was**. As mentioned, this is no easy feat given the evolution of the Rexist identity in relation to the growing stature of the NSDAP. In the early days when the movement was first crystallised as a political party however, there was a clear and deliberate framing philosophy, sketched out by another journalist, Jean Denis.<sup>70</sup> This is alluded to within the very name of the party, which harkens back to the early 1930s, when the founding members were predominantly active within the world of publishing and journalism.

One of these publishers was *Christus Rex*, a Catholic enterprise founded by the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge* (ACJB).<sup>71</sup> Out of this (under the guidance of its young director Léon Degrelle), the firm founded an accompanying journal called *Rex*.<sup>72</sup> This literature was rooted in the wider cultural movement of *Christus Rex*, Christ the King, that emerged in the religious literary circles of Europe following the First World War. The movement received considerable attention through Pope Pius XI’s 1922 encyclical *Ubi arcano Dei consilio*, and his *Quas primas* of 1925, establishing the Feast of Christ the King.<sup>73</sup> Amidst the numerous tensions of the time, the political Catholicism of the movement stressed the regnal power of Christ over all

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<sup>70</sup> Denis was one of the shock victors in the 1936 elections, topping the list for the 4<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Namur/Namen – see ‘Liste des membres de la chambre et de leurs suppléants’, *Chambre des Représentants*.

<sup>71</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 8; Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

<sup>72</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 212

<sup>73</sup> John Paul Meenan, ‘Christus Rex’, *Catholic Insight*, 26th November 2017, accessed 13/08/18, <https://catholicinsight.com/christus-rex/>



people, of all nations and all classes.<sup>74</sup> The movement achieved great popularity in Belgium, still recovering from the ravages of the war and rife with class and political instability, as can be seen with grand dedications like the Christus Rex statue in the town of Lier (Province of Antwerp).<sup>75</sup> It is within this deeply theological conversation that the *Christus Rex* publishers developed their ideology, aiming for a new ‘Catholic Crusade’ against the corrupt establishment and the dangers of capitalism and communism.<sup>76</sup>

It is out of these Catholic beginnings that the Rexist movement emerged in February 1936. The party formed its platform around these Catholic values but took on a more political note, formally railing against political corruption and the elites, including within the traditional Catholic Party of Belgium. The party name, *Parti rexiste* in French and simply *REX* in Dutch, emphasised this continuity. Beyond this however, this self-described ‘party above parties’ took as its emblem an interweaved cross and crown. The imagery clearly alluded to two kings (*rex* meaning ‘king’ in Latin): the *rex* physical, Leopold III of the Belgians, and the *rex* spiritual, Jesus Christ.<sup>77</sup> To this end, the party was proudly catholic and monarchist, calling for the people of Belgium to unite behind the key institutions of the Church and the Crown (but also calling them out for their alleged hypocrisies). The resultant interactions between the party and these institutions prove central to any potential legacy the party may have.

Despite these two pillars supporting Rexist ideology, the pre-eminent expert on the party, Martin Conway, has highlighted the striking demographics of Rexist support in their first election of 1936. In large part, the party received its early support from Great War veterans, far-right nationalists, and disgruntled tradesmen and shopkeepers from a middle class furious with the excesses of the elite.<sup>78</sup> This was not a particularly pious alliance, and draws (for Conway, at least), greater parallels with the Boulangism of the 1880s or Poujadism of the 1950s in France. Beyond this, the

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<sup>74</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 5

<sup>75</sup> René Van der Krogt and Peter Van der Krogt, ‘Christus Koning’, *Van der Krogt*, accessed 13/06/18, <http://vanderkrogt.net/statues/object.php?webpage=ST&record=bean098>

<sup>76</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213

<sup>77</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 4

<sup>78</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 11

brief period of time between the official formation of the party in February 1936 and the elections only three months later simply did not allow for many concrete policies to be formulated. The party knew it was angry with the *status quo* but did not really know how to improve upon it. Nevertheless, as is often the way with anti-establishment protest groups, the power of emotion was enough to ensure its remarkable political gains. Indeed, the popularity of Rexism came so quickly that the party's own infrastructure could barely keep up: a central bureaucracy was quickly set up, and Degrelle had to teach the elected Representatives what to actually do (many of them were under 25, and Degrelle himself was only 28).<sup>79</sup> According to Degrelle himself, some of his new Representatives and Senators had to stop and ask directions to the Parliament on their first day, such was their inexperience (a source of perverse anti-establishment pride for Degrelle).<sup>80</sup> The visits to Hitler and Mussolini in the following months must be seen within this environment, as the movement hurriedly sought to change its mindset into that of a serious political party, and looked for role-models abroad.

It is also useful to compare Rexism to the fascist movements of these other countries, to better locate Rexism within the wider European setting. Rexism itself would clearly shift its identity over time, but in realist terms, much of this was a reaction to external pressure from the NSDAP, somewhat comparable to the alteration of Italo-fascism (and to a lesser extent Spanish Falangism) in response to demands from the Third Reich, such as Mussolini's *Manifesto della razza* (Manifesto of Race) in July 1938. When looking for the core of Belgian Rexism however, it is to these first years that we must look.

With its clerical-fascist and corporatist roots, Rexism had more in common with elements of Italo-Fascism, Austro-Fascism, Falangism and *Estado Novo* corporatism than German Nazism.<sup>81</sup> In this regard, the ideology constructed in the early months can be largely attributed to Degrelle and his ally Jean Denis, who worked within the same Catholic publishing circles. Looking at reference points in other

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<sup>79</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 4; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 12

<sup>80</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 206

<sup>81</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 9

countries, Denis in particular was heavily influenced by the ideological contributions of integralism, most notably in Portugal and in France (especially through Charles Maurras' *Action Française*).<sup>82</sup> Portuguese integralism was a notable influence due to its active promotion of Catholicism and monarchy as the binding agents upon which concrete policies (for example corporatist promotion of guilds and trade organisations) were based; the *Estado Novo* that was developing in Portugal at the same time served as a concurrent model.<sup>83</sup>

The result for Rex was two detailed essays by Denis: *Principes rexistes* and *Bases doctrinales de Rex*. Alongside the political theory of Denis, Degrelle took to the public stage to sell the message in more emotional terms, describing their corporatist economic policies (especially regarding the banking sector and the 'super-capitalism' abuse by Belgians in the Congo) as a move to 'maintain the dignity of the working man and cultivate a love of work, order and human solidarity'.<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, in the early years there was also a determination to obtain power through wholly legitimate democratic ways, even if they viewed the democratic system as mightily flawed. When asked if he would claim power by violent means, Degrelle bluntly replied "*Pas de violence*" and called instead for "*la victoire dans la paix*".<sup>85</sup> Later asked why he didn't simply emulate Hitler or Mussolini, he replied that "I am neither the one nor the other, and have no intention of imitating them".<sup>86</sup> The wavering support for Rexism in later years would see Degrelle eat his words, and become a staunch supporter of the Third Reich.

The shift in Rexist ideology over time makes them an interesting case study, especially given their fickle relationship with the Flemish nationalist parties of the time. Whilst Rex was the dominant anti-establishment voice in Wallonia (achieving 29% of the vote in Belgian Luxembourg), it entered a divided field in Flanders.<sup>87</sup> As mentioned, *Verdinaso* and the VNV stood as potential competitors for the vote of the disaffected, and stood on a widely different platform of shared *Dietsch* identity and culture between Flanders and their Dutch-speaking compatriots in the Netherlands; the

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<sup>82</sup> Griffiths, *Fascism*, 119

<sup>83</sup> Griffiths, *Fascism*, 61 for details of Salazar's centralised economic policies

<sup>84</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214; Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 4

<sup>85</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 255ff.

<sup>86</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215; Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 256

<sup>87</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

direct opposite to a strengthened unitary Belgium.<sup>88</sup> What differentiated these Flemish groups, incidentally, was their disagreements regarding autonomy versus independence, and the potential usefulness of the Third Reich in advancing their cause. The situation was naturally different in Francophone Wallonia and in Brussels (the beating heart of a unitary Belgium) but, faced with this variety of voices offered to the average Flemish voter, Degrelle's binary choice of *Rex ou Moscou* was understandably far less potent in Flanders than it was elsewhere.<sup>89</sup>

#### v. The life of Degrelle

Finally, if one is to better understand the ideologies and motivations of the Rexist Party, one must deal specifically with Léon Degrelle as an individual. As happened across Europe in this age, the party would have been impossible without the self-proclaimed *Chef de Rex*. Alongside the *Chef*, the headlines of the decade were dominated by larger-than-life personalities, from the *Caudillo* and the *Conducător* to the *Duce* and the *Führer*.<sup>90</sup>

As might be expected, Degrelle's background had a profound impact upon his political outlook. Degrelle was born on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1906 in Bouillon, in the province of Luxembourg.<sup>91</sup> Not only is Bouillon right on the border with France, but it also gained its fame through its most famous son, Godfrey of Bouillon, the leader of the First Crusade.<sup>92</sup> When writing his memoirs in later life, Degrelle would talk about his own 'Eastern crusade', and the 'true Christian knight[s]' of his unit fighting an 'anti-Communist crusade'.<sup>93</sup> The son of a successful brewer, Degrelle headed from his Jesuit school to Leuven University to study law, an example of the pious and striving upper-middle class that Rexism aimed to benefit.<sup>94</sup> It was during this period that he

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<sup>88</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 7

<sup>89</sup> Di Muro, *Léon Degrelle et l'aventure rexiste*, 135; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 12

<sup>90</sup> Francisco Franco, Ion Antonescu, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler respectively

<sup>91</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

<sup>92</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 32, August 12 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1111&context=ur-87-68>; Encyclopaedia Britannica inc. *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006), 773

<sup>93</sup> Degrelle, *Campaign in Russia*, 130; 200 i.a.

<sup>94</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

acquainted himself with Maurras and the *Action Française*, and headed from university into the world of publishing and the *Christus Rex*.<sup>95</sup>

From the early 1930s, the history of the young Léon Degrelle became synonymous with the history of Rexism. Unlike almost every other fascist leader, he was the party made flesh; he personally founded the Rexist Party and he outlived it by far. Many voted for him as much as they voted for the party, wooed by his fiery oratory and striking youth (especially in contrast to the gerontocracy of mainstream Belgian politics). As the ‘uncontested leader’ enjoying ‘unquestioning adoration’, it was his personal choice to align closer with the NSDAP from 1938-1939, and to swear total fealty in the period of occupation.<sup>96</sup> Having burnt a whole forest’s worth of bridges by 1941, and increasingly frustrated with the favouritism extended to the Flemish nationals by the MVBN, Degrelle reinvented himself yet again, moving from a political crusade to a military one. Over time, his Walloon Legion became a fully-fledged SS division as the *SS-Wallonien*, having by then stated that the Walloons were a ‘lost Germanic race whose destiny was to rejoin the German Reich’.<sup>97</sup>

By the end of the war, Degrelle and his remaining Rexist loyalists had thrown their lot in completely with the Germans; if anything, this further complicated their legacy in their native Belgium. By April 1945 the Red Army of the Soviet Union had reached the outskirts of Berlin; Degrelle was one of numerous Wehrmacht and SS field commanders now trapped behind enemy lines. Through the aid of Vidkun Quisling in Norway, Degrelle made it to Franco’s Spain, where he claimed political asylum.<sup>98</sup> It is important to note that Degrelle was a mere 38 years old at this point; Degrelle proceeded to live out a full adult life in Malaga, running a construction firm and a neo-Nazi publishing house. Throughout his long life, his numerous essays, pamphlets, radio broadcasts and television appearances kept his legacy well and truly alive, combined with his penchant for still wearing NSDAP-style uniforms until well into the 1990s.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 212

<sup>96</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 20

<sup>97</sup> Conway, ‘Obituary: Leon Degrelle’

<sup>98</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10

<sup>99</sup> Conway, ‘Obituary: Leon Degrelle’

vi. The legend of Degrelle

Added to this, Degrelle's story was larger-than-life and his savvy use of the media and propaganda tools, combined with his longevity as the 'last fascist leader', ensured him a cult-like status amongst specific circles across Europe.<sup>100</sup> Supporters revelled in his meteoric rise and remarkable life story. On the eve of the German invasion for example, the Belgian government launched their clandestine *Spooktreinen* (Ghost-Trains) Initiative; all political extremists and dissidents were summarily rounded up by the Belgian Secret Service and sent by train to French incarceration, as far away as possible from the soon-to-be front-line.<sup>101</sup> High-profile figures like Degrelle and Van Severen, the head of *Verdinaso*, were naturally top of the list. Yet whilst scores were never heard of again, and Van Severen was summarily executed in the so-called 'Bloodbath of Abbeville', Degrelle managed to escape the same fate, appearing to everyone's surprise in the Vernet Concentration Camp in the Vichy-occupied Pyrenees some months later.<sup>102</sup>

As a soldier he further built on this semi-divine and immortal image. He refused a commission into the German army, stating that he would fight as a Private like the common man. Details of his heroism on the battlefield soon spread and earned him a rapid succession of promotions, and by the end of the war he was either a *Standartenfuhrer* (colonel) or a full general, with an array of medals including the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves.<sup>103</sup> Even his daring flight across Europe in April 1945 is surrounded in mystery, with the Heinkel aircraft potentially provided by Albert Speer or Vidkun Quisling, before it dramatically crash-landed on the beach of San Sebastian in Spain.<sup>104</sup> Degrelle's life in Spain was no less dramatic, with numerous extradition claims from Belgium and international court summons being fended off by false identities, the employ of lookalikes, and even adoption and remarriage in order to gain Spanish citizenship. Naturally, it has proven almost impossible for scholars to cross-check Degrelle's fanciful tales of his life, but this did

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<sup>100</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 7

<sup>101</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 28ff.

<sup>102</sup> Jeroen Vullings, 'Léon Degrelle. De Führer uit Bouillon - Bruno Cheyns', *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.historischnieuwsblad.nl/nl/artikel/48676/leon-degrelle-de-fuhrer-uit-bouillon-bruno-cheyns.html>; Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10

<sup>103</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10. The uncertainty as to Degrelle's eventual rank stems from the unreliability of official German records by 1945, and Degrelle's own penchant for exaggeration and hyperbole.

<sup>104</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 10

not stop his words seeping back into Belgium and the Belgian conscience, to massively varied reception. On the contrary, his grandiose statements in the following fifty years struck a chord, from his claim that Hitler (upon personally presenting Degrelle with the Iron Cross) had confided that “if I had a son, I would want him to be like you”, to his sole regret in life, which was simply that “we did not win”.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 11

## Chapter 1: The Institutional Legacy:

### i. The institutions of Belgium

When Yves Leterme made his joke / insult (depending on your persuasion) about Belgian national identity, he identified two official institutions that bring the whole country together. In 2006, he was referring to the King and the national football team.<sup>106</sup> Leterme's instincts are understandable: the federal institutions have a duty to represent the entire population of Belgium, and also enjoy high visibility. To this end, it is useful to begin the investigation of Rexism's legacy in Belgian identity by looking at the interactions between the Rexist Party and the key institutions of the period. The august history of the Belgian national football team must not be underestimated or sniffed at, but when considering the principal institutions that dominated the 1930s and 1940s, there are three clear contenders: the monarchy, the army and the Church. These three institutions had a huge effect on everyday political, social and domestic life, affecting (naturally, to varying degrees) almost all citizens whether they particularly wanted it or not.

The Rexist Party naturally occupied only a brief position within the timeline of these three principle institutions. A formal Belgian Catholic Church hierarchy has existed in the territory of Belgium for centuries, working under the overall jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Mechelen (now Mechelen-Brussels), which served as the historic 'ecclesiastical capital of the Netherlands' since a Papal Bull of May 1559.<sup>107</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Belgian Army was formed out of the revolutionary Civil Guard that played such a vital role in Belgium's struggle for independence in the 1830s.<sup>108</sup> Finally, the Belgian Monarchy came into existence only a little after the Belgian state in June 1831, when the National Congress voted by 152 votes to 13 for a constitutional monarchy and invited Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to become Leopold I, the first King of the Belgians.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Lefebvre, 'Les dérives identitaires du nationalisme flamand'; Rennie, 'Belgium an accident of history with football and beer'

<sup>107</sup> Sophie Raux, *Lotteries, art markets, and visual culture in the Low Countries, 15th-17th centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 176

<sup>108</sup> Mario Draper, *The Belgian Army and society from independence to the Great War* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 8

<sup>109</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 169; Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 4



By the time that the Rexist Party was established in February 1936, all three had therefore had at least a century to embed themselves deep into the mindset and everyday life of the average Belgian citizen. In a period with a far smaller (and more centrally controlled) choice of media for the majority of the population, the leaders of these institutions enjoyed considerable news coverage. Added to this, the nature of their roles also ensured a degree of stability and longevity (especially in the Church and Monarchy); being King was naturally a life-time position, and the sitting Archbishop of Mechelen, Cardinal Jozef-Ernest van Roey, served in this position for over 34 years, from 1926-1961.<sup>110</sup> In contrast, Prime Ministers and governments came and went in rapid succession; from Albert I's death (and Leopold III's accession) in 1934 to the invasion of May 1940 there were nine different governments led by six different premiers.<sup>111</sup> It is therefore due to this relative lack of longevity, multiplied by the ever-changing *modus vivendi* and outlook of each successive government, that it is not treated as a monolithic institution within this chapter. Instead, the ramifications of Rexist actions upon the politics of Belgium will be discussed within its own separate chapter.

## ii. The Monarchy and Leopold III

As heavily alluded to within the name of the party, the Rexist Party / Movement stood out because of its vocal promotion of the Monarchy as a rallying point for the nation. This was in stark contrast to other anti-establishment parties like the VNV or Verdinaso who, because of their ideological focus on Flemish history and culture, had little respect for a seemingly Francophile royal family that communicated in French. The three traditional parties (the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal Parties) were naturally supportive of their King yet had been in an extended tug-of-war with the monarchy regarding constitutional powers, which threatened to boil over numerous times during

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<sup>110</sup> *De Leidse Courant*, 'Kard. van Roey overleden', Aug. 7, 1961, accessed 13/06/18, <https://leiden.courant.nu/issue/LLC/1961-08-07/edition/0/page/1>

<sup>111</sup> Tom Vanderstappen, 'Leopold III: The Belgian king who was forced to abdicate after the Second World War', *The Brussels Times*, 21st November 2017, accessed 13/06/18, [www.brusselstimes.com/brussels-times-magazine/9607/leopold-iii-the-belgian-king-who-was-forced-to-abdicate-after-the-second-world-war](http://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels-times-magazine/9607/leopold-iii-the-belgian-king-who-was-forced-to-abdicate-after-the-second-world-war)

Leopold II's formation of his Congo administration.<sup>112</sup> In light of this the Rexist Party was unique in its active promotion not just of the monarchy, but of royal powers too, calling for the King to be given extended powers such as the ability to appoint and dismiss ministers.<sup>113</sup> This active incorporation of the Belgian monarchy into Rexist ideology allowed the party to tap into the monarchy's role within any conceivable Belgian national identity, and naturally provoked widely differing responses.

In order to better understand the relationship between Rexism and the monarchy, it is necessary to outline the importance of the monarchy within Belgian history and in forming any semblance of national unity or pride. As mentioned, the initial demands for Belgian independence from the Netherlands from 1828 onwards were made by a National Congress, formed by Catholic conservatives and Liberals.<sup>114</sup> In February of the following year the Belgian constitution was adopted, in which it was stated that Parliament would establish a constitutional monarchy.<sup>115</sup> The considerable strength of the Belgian parliament contrasted with its neighbouring countries, with arguably more in common with the state of affairs in Britain since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This relationship particularly rankled with Belgium's iconic second king, Leopold II (1835-1909). A man of limitless ambitions, he quickly grew contemptuous of the "*petit pays, petits gens*" under him, and longed for the prestige and power he jealously spied in other monarchs of the period, who were comparatively speaking less bound by parliamentary oversight.<sup>116</sup> The solution, in the eyes of Leopold II, was a powerful projection of Belgian might on the world stage, the result of which was his personal Congo Free State, which became the colonial Belgian Congo in 1908.<sup>117</sup>

The image of the Belgian monarchy in the minds eye of the average Belgian was thus incredibly mixed by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The brutality of Leopold II's regime in Congo was gradually leaking out due to the vigorous campaigning of activists like the British E.D. Morel and the Irishman Roger Casement, and Leopold

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<sup>112</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost: a story of greed, terror and heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan, 2012), 39, 190 i.a.; The Socialist Party (*Belgische Werkleidenpartij, Parti Ouvrier Belge*) was always particularly vigilant regarding royal misuse of powers

<sup>113</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214

<sup>114</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 168

<sup>115</sup> Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 33; Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 169

<sup>116</sup> Marc Reynebeau, *Een geschiedenis van België* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 133

<sup>117</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 25; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 6

gained an international reputation for secrecy, greed and exploitation.<sup>118</sup> Plenty in the national establishment had ties to the Congo however, and individuals like Morel and Casement were still regarded as radical voices in Europe. For the general Belgian population, it is difficult to observe a particularly negative view of the monarchy. On the contrary, the public were simply not taught about the atrocities, whilst even an uneducated illiterate could observe the vast wealth flooding into the country, could appreciate the rise in living standards, and could feel the burgeoning national pride.<sup>119</sup>

The second episode of vital importance is the First World War. Some of the worst (and arguably most high-profile) fighting occurred in the mud of Belgium, a country that had its vaunted neutrality independently recognised back in January 1831.<sup>120</sup> The international spotlight fell on Flanders, and could not help but linger upon the imposing frame of the valourous King of the Belgians, Albert I. Unlike his uncle Leopold II, Albert bore the image of a reformer and moderniser, both in the Congo and in Belgium. Added to this was his patriotic image during the First World War; he was the Commander in Chief of the Belgian army, and wielded immense propaganda value every time he was spotted personally inspecting his troops.<sup>121</sup> Elevated to ‘almost universal veneration’, Albert became an emblem of the ‘Brave Little Belgium’ trope that still exists to this day.<sup>122</sup> This flattering media attention came from all sides; during the war, legend has it that the German high-command forbade their men from shooting at the King on the battlefield.<sup>123</sup> The tragic death of this ‘hero-monarch’ in February 1934 caused world-wide grief, and over 100,000 servicemen from across the world headed to Brussels to commemorate his life.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Hochschild, *King Leopold's ghost*, 186

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 297

<sup>120</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 170

<sup>121</sup> Vanderstappen, ‘Leopold III: The Belgian king who was forced to abdicate after the Second World War’

<sup>122</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 7; Derek Blyth, ‘We remember the courage of brave little Belgium’, *Flanders Today*, 27th March 2014, accessed 13/06/18, [www.flandertoday.eu/politics/we-remember-courage-brave-little-belgium](http://www.flandertoday.eu/politics/we-remember-courage-brave-little-belgium)

<sup>123</sup> William McLaughlin, ‘Albert I, King of Belgium: He Fought in the Trenches During WWI, And His Queen became a Nurse’, *War History Online*, 25th March 2018, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-i/albert-i-king-of-belgium-he-fought-in-the-trenches-during-wwi-and-his-queen-became-a-nurse.html>

<sup>124</sup> See *Central Queensland Herald*, ‘King Albert’s Funeral’ March 1 1934, accessed 13/06/18, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/70313259> for detailed coverage from as far away as Australia.

The institution of ‘monarchy’ as perceived by Léon Degrelle and his compatriots was thus one of valiant tenacity and dedication to the nation. By tying their message to that of the monarchy, the party hoped for both greater appeal and heightened coverage. It is important to note however, that this was not the Belgian monarchy of Albert I, built upon the legends of the First World War, but of his son Leopold III. Leopold was as aware of his father’s legacy as anyone else and had himself fought as the young Duke of Brabant (the title of the heir-apparent) in the Great War. When he swore the Oath of Accession before Parliament on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1934, he swore to maintain an ‘indivisible and independent Belgium’ just like his father had done. Furthermore, his accession speech stressed the need for dedicated monarchy, devotion to the army, and strong Christian faith.<sup>125</sup> In this regard, he can be seen to have turned yet again to those three recurring institutions as the anchor of Belgian national identity, in just the same way as Degrelle and Denis would do exactly two years later. Yet whilst Leopold fell back time and time again upon the precedents of his father from the First World War, Leopold’s name was ultimately vilified rather than lionised.

The story of Leopold III is central to the history of Belgium during the 1930s and 1940s and had profound impacts on the national psyche. By the end of the war, he played the lead role in a crisis that, without risk of hyperbole or exaggeration, was considered bad enough to ‘threaten [Belgium’s] future as a country’.<sup>126</sup> It must be kept in mind that, a few exceptions notwithstanding, the traditional narrative has been relatively scathing of Leopold and his reign. It is not the place nor focus of this thesis to cast moral judgement on his reign, but rather to examine the interplay of his actions with Belgian fascism, and the potential impacts this left on the Belgian collective memory. In short though, the unity that Leopold undoubtedly wished to promote was predicated on stability. If there was one characteristic that defined the 1930s, it was not stability. The rapid succession of governments in Belgium became an irritant to Leopold, who felt that they were damaging the country by their infighting. His public criticisms (something Degrelle commended him for) can be considered to have had an adverse effect, weakening the position of the monarchy by highlighting its

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<sup>125</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 31

<sup>126</sup> Vanderstappen, ‘Leopold III: The Belgian king who was forced to abdicate after the Second World War’

ineffectiveness to 'sort' the situation. Leopold's personal life was equally turbulent: a year after his accession, in August 1935, the King lost control of his car and crashed into a lake in Switzerland. His Queen consort, the widely beloved Astrid of Sweden, was killed, causing a sensationalist scoop for the media.<sup>127</sup>

The political instabilities increased as the threat of German invasion became ever more likely. When the invasion came in May 1940, Leopold reverted yet again to the precedents of his father. The King assumed supreme command of the army (without seeking parliament's assent) and proceeded to bar his ministers from participating in military matters, relying instead on a coterie of royal advisors.<sup>128</sup>

Branded as an arrogant misuse of power by the majority of parliament, it exacerbated the personal tensions between Leopold and his Prime Minister, Hubert Pierlot of the Catholic Party. The constitutional crisis deepened as the King stated that he would remain in Brussels at all costs, against the backdrop of a government hurriedly preparing a flight into exile. The German Blitzkrieg in Belgium was devastatingly efficient, and by the 24<sup>th</sup> May Leopold announced his intention to surrender the country to the Germans, thereby halting what he viewed as the futile loss of Belgian life. On the 28<sup>th</sup> May he did just that, officially surrendering the country. Pierlot's government in exile (by now in France) declared Leopold's actions anti-constitutional and stated that surrender was a sole prerogative of the government; Leopold was declared 'unfit to govern' and was stripped of all constitutional powers.<sup>129</sup>

During the German occupation, Leopold's reputation was shattered, whilst he remained a silent prisoner of the Reich, placed under guard in Germany and later in Austria. Hubert Pierlot was quick to denounce Leopold, Allied press such as the *Daily Mirror* declared him 'King Rat', and the new British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, accused him of perfidy and cowardice.<sup>130</sup> Coupled with the inter-governmental rivalries and debates over the role of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century monarch, it was the

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<sup>127</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 36; Vanderstappen, 'Leopold III: The Belgian king who was forced to abdicate after the Second World War'

<sup>128</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 22

<sup>129</sup> Vanderstappen, 'Leopold III: The Belgian king who was forced to abdicate after the Second World War'

<sup>130</sup> Patrick Roegiers, *La spectaculaire histoire des rois des Belges* (Paris: Perrin, 2007)

relationship between Leopold and the invading Germans that sealed his legacy, ultimately leading to his abdication in 1951 in what became known as the *Royal Question*. The crises majorly weakened the institution of the Belgian monarchy and, with it, feelings of unified national identity. Whilst these events clearly happened independently of the Rexist Party, interactions between Rex and the Crown can nevertheless be considered as a contributing factor within the dilution of national identity.

### iii. Rexism and the Crown

The image of the king was co-opted by the Rexist Party from the very beginning. Indeed, the early ideology of the movement grew out of the writings of Charles Maurras and the *Action Française*, which proved tremendously popular in the University of Leuven and amongst the post-First World War intelligentsia. At the core of these beliefs was hatred of ‘liberalism, democracy and the parliamentary system’.<sup>131</sup> In its place came pro-monarchic hierarchy. For those within Degrelle’s intellectual circle, such as the Duchess of Valencia, Luisa Maria Narvaez (upon whom we must heavily rely for ‘*verbatim*’ interviews and discussions with Degrelle), they had ‘saved’ the monarchy. A *royalisme de raison* (royalism of reason) inspired by Maurras had apparently injected a ‘*béton nouveau*’ (new concrete) into the ailing framework of the Belgian monarchy between 1925-1935.<sup>132</sup> When the Rexist movement became an official political party in early 1936, it is therefore unsurprising that they would codify this pro-royalist monarchism as part of their official doctrine. The name of the party (deliberately dropping the *Christus* half of the publisher’s name) along with the emblem (interweaved cross and crown) further emphasised this.

In February 1936, it is possible to see a group of zealous young adults (predominantly in Wallonia and the Francophone parts of Brussels) tying their political message to the visibility and strength perceived to exist in the Belgian monarchy. Only a few months later however, Leopold III actively reinforced this bond, making it harder to distance himself in later years. Immediately after the Rexist Party’s stunning electoral success in May, Degrelle was welcomed to the palace for an audience with

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<sup>131</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 17

<sup>132</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 49

the King.<sup>133</sup> The event was naturally heavily publicised, and the political establishment balked when Degrelle supposedly said directly to Leopold that he desired ‘power, all power, and not [just] a ministerial post to hold some six months’.<sup>134</sup> This episode is particularly illuminating for two very different reasons. First there is the blatantly anti-democratic megalomania of Degrelle’s boast; the King did not appear to upbraid him or question this language, and moreover allowed such a worrying statement to be disseminated by the national press without a satisfactory Royal response. Secondly, one must remember that although the performance of the Rexists in May 1936 was impressive (and unheard of for a brand-new party), they were still only the fourth largest party. This coupled with their non-cooperative stance towards the other parties made their role in a potential coalition minor, if not irrelevant (and ultimately down to the *formateur*, not the King). Leopold’s immediately congratulatory response was placed somewhere on a spectrum from accommodation and cooperation to pandering and implicit endorsement. The traditional parties condemned it, the Rexists vaunted it, and the link between Rex and Leopold was reinforced in the public eye.

It is a step too far to suggest that Leopold was an active facilitator or collaborator with Rex, but his missteps made this argument increasingly easy to make; it increased the popularity of the King for Rex’s followers and soured his image for the opposing parties (importantly the majority of the country), exacerbating the cleavages in society. Moreover, the Rexists found themselves at loggerheads with the other parties from this early juncture. Thus in October 1936 Degrelle famously called for a ‘March on Brussels’ in the fashion of Mussolini’s infamous *Marcia su Roma* in 1922. In reality, the event merely highlighted the hardening of the political establishment against Rexism and their increasing willingness to fight back; the government of Paul Van Zeeland (himself a member of the Catholic Party) imposed a sudden ban on demonstrations and sent the police onto the streets of Brussels. Rather than the 250,000 supporters anticipated by Degrelle, a small handful turned out, were quickly dispersed, and provided the establishment an opportunity to brand the party a bunch of pariahs and ne’er-do-wells.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

<sup>134</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 205

<sup>135</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 13

Episodes such as this clearly struck a chord, as they elicited a range of unverifiable anecdotes post-fact, with each faction trying to spin the event. Lord Keyes, whose family were close personal friends of Leopold, claims that the depressed turnout was due to Leopold's involvement, and that the King formally denounced Rexism on behalf of the nation following the event.<sup>136</sup> According to Pierre Daye, a journalist within the Rexist Party hierarchy, and more importantly also a close confidant of Leopold III, the King had indeed intervened, but merely to instruct the gendarmerie patrolling Brussels not to fire their weapons if the March escalated.<sup>137</sup> Once again, this would seem a conscious overreach from the King, even if it was well-intentioned.

Ultimately though, it is rather irrelevant whether Daye was telling the truth or not: his comments dominated the news coverage, and the institution of the monarchy appeared yet again in the same sentence as the Rexist Party. More times than coincidence or incompetence might forgive, the Rexist Party was seen to be eliciting responses from the crown that were unsatisfactory for the majority of the country, which was still anti-Rexist. Similarly, even if Keyes' description of Leopold's opposition to Rexism is true, it only reinforces the effective messaging of the party, in that they achieved dialogue with the King in little more than a year. Moreover, the legacy of public perception regarding Leopold would suggest that a condemnation by Leopold was either untrue or deeply ineffective; why else would the established media bother describing Leopold as a friend and accomplice to Degrelle as late as 1950?<sup>138</sup>

In the years that followed, the Rexist Party lost its impetus, as the threat of war in the country became increasingly likely. Nevertheless, Degrelle and other party members previously involved in journalism continued to make increasingly bold and self-aggrandising claims, both at large-scale public rallies and in newspapers like *Le Pays Réel* (The Real Country), the official paper of the Rexist Party.<sup>139</sup> Among these claims, as recounted numerous times by Degrelle himself, was that he was a frequent

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<sup>136</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 72

<sup>137</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 256ff. Daye, like Denis, was one of the shock winners of the May 1936 elections, topping the list for the 4<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Brussels – See 'Liste des membres de la chambre et de leurs suppléants', *Chambre des Représentants*.

<sup>138</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 398

<sup>139</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 216



visitor to the royal palace of Laeken at the invitation of King Leopold III.<sup>140</sup> Again, these claims lack any evidence to back them up, but clearly point to both the Rexist Party's high regard for the King throughout this period, and the apparent public opinions linking the King to the Rexists (and to Degrelle personally).<sup>141</sup> For posterity, it matters little if he did invite Degrelle for evenings at the palace; what matters more is that people believed that he might have done.

The dramatic stand-off between Leopold and his government whilst the Germans swept through the country, combined with Leopold's actions concerning the occupying forces, served to shred his credibility and image. Towards the end of 1940, Leopold headed to Berchtesgaden to parlay with Hitler, resolved to resist overt cooperation with the MVBN, and to negotiate the release of Belgian prisoners-of-war.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, Degrelle claimed in his book *La Cohue de 1940* that already in August of that year, Count Robert Capelle (Secretary to Leopold III) had instructed him and his Rexist Party to formally collaborate with the Germans.<sup>143</sup> In correspondence with Daye, Capelle certainly stated that the King would 'not necessarily disapprove' (and then sent a few interesting follow-ups 'clarifying' the royal position).<sup>144</sup> Capelle even went to Daye's house that August to meet behind closed doors with Degrelle.<sup>145</sup> Numerous tales like this accumulated, and in this regard one of the contradictions of Rexism shone out: the party did everything it could to promote the King, yet in continuing to do so throughout the years of occupation, they contributed to the ill-feeling regarding the King. The backlash against Rexism, combined with the fact that the Flemish right-wing parties (VNV and Verdinaso) were decidedly anti-monarchic (and specifically anti-Belgian monarchy) in their beliefs, severely weakened support for the King. It must be stressed however that a large part of the displeasure against the King came from political circles. Vast swathes of the wider population were in favour of Leopold's decision to stay and try to protect his

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<sup>140</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 328

<sup>141</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 398

<sup>142</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 26. Hitler refused to grant any of Leopold's requests, and returned him to his house arrest in the palace of Laeken.

<sup>143</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 348

<sup>144</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 37

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

people, especially after the influential Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Van Roey, issued an open letter on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1940 defending the King's decision.<sup>146</sup>

When Prime Minister Pierlot returned to a hero's welcome in Brussels on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1944, Leopold had already been moved into Germany-proper under Himmler's orders. By the 20<sup>th</sup> September, Pierlot's new government had already legally disowned Leopold, recognising his brother Prince Charles as the Prince Regent to act in his stead.<sup>147</sup> The constitutional crisis continued for years; only in 1950 was Leopold allowed to return to Belgium following a referendum that voted 57% in favour of his return. Nevertheless, there were huge disparities in the votes between Flanders (c.70% voting for Leopold's return) and Wallonia (c.40% voting for his return).<sup>148</sup> Riots immediately ensued in Wallonia, leading to a number of deaths, and Leopold was ultimately forced to abdicate the throne in favour of his son Baudouin / Boudewijn to prevent a civil war. The numerous claims of Rexist connections undoubtedly contributed to the ill-feeling towards Leopold but represents only one factor. After all, it was the heartlands of Rexist votes in 1936 (Wallonia and Brussels) that were least willing to accept Leopold's return in 1950. In contrast, Flanders had been less fruitful for the Rexist, and was home to republican-minded parties like the VNV. In reality there were a multitude of factors that affected people's votes, including the fact that Leopold had remarried in secret in 1941, a move condemned by many Catholics (but defended yet again by Cardinal Van Roey).

#### iv. The Belgian Army

A second institution with origins dating back to the founding of the country was the Belgian Army. Again, this was in theory one of the few bodies or organisations designed to serve the country as a whole, rather than a specific region or class of people. In this regard, it acts as another yard stick by which to measure the actions of

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<sup>146</sup> M.T. 'The Royal Question in Belgium: The King's Case', *The World Today* Vol. 6, No. 3, (March 1950), 122

<sup>147</sup> News from Belgium. Vol. 4, No. 39, October 7 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=ur-87-68>; *New York Times*, 'Belgium's Charles, Ex-Regent', June 2 1983, accessed 13/06/18, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/06/02/obituaries/belgium-s-charles-ex-regent-is-dead.html>

<sup>148</sup> Susana Medeiros, 'Belgians prevent King Leopold III from resuming the throne, 1950', in *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, 28th November 2012, accessed 13/06/18, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/belgians-prevent-king-leopold-iii-resuming-throne-1950>

the Rexist Party during the period 1935-1945. Even more so than the monarchy, the army had already garnered a complex and oftentimes contradictory legacy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Divergent voting habits and interests between rural Flanders and heavily industrialised Wallonia created tensions, and regional sentiment in Flanders threatened to coalesce. Nevertheless, the invasion of German troops in August 1914 proved to be a powerful engine for reinvigorated unity.<sup>149</sup> At the centre of this unified Belgian feeling was the Belgian army (alongside their supreme commander King Albert I), upon which the hopes of resistance and Belgium's territorial survival were pinned.

In the fractious period following the Great War however, the army came to represent not just the finest examples of Belgian unity, but also the deep cracks below the surface. The resistance of the rump Belgian army was conducted by an estimated 70,000 men (out of an initial army of around 200,000) who held the Ijzer / Yser Front from Nieuwpoort at the eponymous river's estuary down the length of the river.<sup>150</sup> Due to the location of this fighting, a large majority of these soldiers were local Dutch-speaking Flemings, whilst their commanding officers were predominantly Francophone; at the time, theirs was sold as a common venture for a united Belgian future. After the war however, many in Flanders felt that they had been inadequately compensated/rewarded for their defence of the country, and governmental concessions such as making Ghent University Dutch-speaking were seen as mere lip-service (and other institutions like the University of Leuven / Louvain would remain Francophone until an acrimonious split in the 1960s).<sup>151</sup> After all, many felt that the national identities of countries like Canada or Australia had been forged at battlesites like Vimy and Gallipoli. Might this not happen with Flanders too? In general, the Belgian Army of the 1930s came to represent the potential for shared Belgian identity, but also the rifts that extended across society and cut through language, location and social class.

#### v. The Army, Degrelle, and the Walloon Legion

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<sup>149</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 6

<sup>150</sup> Pauwels, *The Great Class War 1914-1918*, 286

<sup>151</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 7

In the early years, the Rexist Party arguably tapped into this mindset attached to the Belgian Army. On a linguistic level, Léon Degrelle tied himself to their intrinsic purpose and aims. Whilst the army would be the defenders of the physical sphere, Rexism would act as the defender of the spiritual and societal sphere (given that the political and Catholic establishments had apparently turned their back on it). Thus the Rexistists were described as ‘true Christian knights’, devoting their lives to a crusade against injustice and oppression, capitalism and Bolshevism.<sup>152</sup> Already in 1936 the party established ‘protection squads’ commanded by a retired colonel.<sup>153</sup> The visuals cultivated by the party played on this military presentation as well; the slogan of the party was a declaration with martial overtones: *Rex vaincra!* (Rex will conquer!).<sup>154</sup> In 1940 a new slogan was added: *Croire, Obéir, Combattre* (Believe, Obey, Fight). Meanwhile, the party leadership decided very early on to wear paramilitary uniforms at all official party events, modelling their outward appearance on the uniforms seen in like-minded parties in other countries. During the period of occupation the party went even further, adopting NSDAP-style uniforms, salutes and rituals; these decisions further aligned the party with the NSDAP in the public perception.<sup>155</sup>

The Rexist Party also actively pursued the military vote in their policies. Their calls for parliamentary reform hinged upon reduced powers for the Parliament (which was deemed dangerously corrupt), with heightened powers for the King and military (who would listen to the King rather than civilian ministers) in a traditional patriarchal system.<sup>156</sup> This coupled with their centrally-planned social programmes attracted a large number of disillusioned veterans into their voting-block in the decisive elections of May 1936.<sup>157</sup>

Once the King surrendered the country and the government had fled into exile, the traditional Belgian Army naturally ceased to exist. In its stead there were two formal options alongside guerrilla resistance/collaboration; the provisional army

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<sup>152</sup> Degrelle, *Campaign in Russia*, 217

<sup>153</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>154</sup> Di Muro, *Léon Degrelle et l'aventure rexiste*, 83, 135 i.a. ; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>155</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 89

<sup>156</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214

<sup>157</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 11

trained in the United Kingdom that would ultimately help liberate the country, and the Belgian units within the German Wehrmacht.<sup>158</sup> After failing to assert himself on the political stage with the MVBN, Degrelle completed the realignment of the Rexist Party to full cooperation with the Reich and the NSDAP. As a result, numerous members of the party resigned in disgust during 1940-1941, including the influential Pierre Daye.<sup>159</sup> In some regards this can be seen as the beginning of the transformation of the party away from a collective venture to something of a cult of personality behind the charismatic Degrelle. During this reorganisation, the Rexist militia was totally overhauled too, with the *Formations de Combat* now given its own strict command structure.<sup>160</sup> Over time the German war effort started to stutter, and the Rexistists were quick to assist. From August 1941 for example, the Germans reassigned thousands of troops to the Eastern Front, and the Rexistists jumped in, using their militia as the guards for the military factories.<sup>161</sup>

During this same period, Degrelle took the personal choice to join the Walloon Legion, part of the German Wehrmacht.<sup>162</sup> Degrelle's claim that 95% of the members of this new division were avowed Rexistists was widely mocked. Nevertheless, the semi-mythical status of Degrelle certainly brought numerous young recruits to the Legion, even if they were not overtly political or erstwhile supporters of Rexistism.<sup>163</sup> Although many of the participants and ideologies changed massively from 1936-1941, the name of the party (and its founder) remained the same. In this way the legacies of both halves were amalgamated and, through military action, became wholly fused with the Wehrmacht and the legacy of German aggression.

Indeed, by mid-1943 the Legion was transformed into the 5<sup>th</sup> *SS-Freiwillige Sturmbrigade Wallonien*, taking on the form of an *Ersatzkommando* with Degrelle at its head.<sup>164</sup> By this point it is possible to see not just the condemnation of Rexistism by the general Belgian population (after all, it was now a part of the infamous *Waffen-*

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<sup>158</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 3, No. 43, October 23 1943 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1943), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ur-87-68> - for an example of a commando unit trained in Britain

<sup>159</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 42

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 1, No. 23, September 6 1941

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> News from Belgium. Vol. 2, No. 15, April 11 1942

<sup>164</sup> Jonathan Trigg, *Voices of the Flemish Waffen-SS: the final testament of the Oostfronters* (Stroud: Amberley, 2017), 117

SS), but also the blind faith that a number of people still had in Degrelle personally, entranced by his meteoric rise through the ranks. During this period, the Chaplain of the division estimated that around 25% were true believers in Rexism. Moreover, in January 1944 only 23 of the new 120 members of the division called themselves members of the Rexist Party; much like the early days of 1935 and 1936, Degrelle found himself surrounded by the disillusioned more than real ideologues.<sup>165</sup> For this reason it is important to reinforce that the *Wallonien* was not the same thing as the Rexist Party (which itself had undergone numerous transformations). The *Ersatzkommando* and the official Rexist Party ultimately became (in the eyes of Conway) ‘parallel Degrellian hierarchies within Belgium’.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, this description of their structures as ‘Degrellian’ reinforces the point: the legacy of both were inescapably bound to the figure of Degrelle thanks to his larger-than-life character and longevity. To this end, the actions of the *Wallonien* on the Eastern Front irreparably sullied the legacy of the party amongst more moderate supporters, whilst non-supporters drawn by Degrelle’s magnetism forged a bond in battle and formed an ardently positive memory of their field commander.

Finally, on top of the actions of Rexists like Degrelle on the Eastern Front far away from Belgian soil, it was actions perpetrated by Rexists within Belgium that left some of the greatest impacts on the collective memory. In this regard, the events of the turbulent weeks of July-September 1944 condemned Rexism’s legacy; whilst not military *per se*, this violence and aggression serves as an interesting counter-point to the formalised violence of Degrelle’s *Ersatzkommando* in the East. By this point the Allies were fighting through northern France and approaching both Paris and the Belgian border; in this period of chaos, it was not unusual for collaborators to grow increasingly desperate and vicious in their actions. Moreover, Hitler replaced the Wehrmacht-run MVBN with a *Zivilverwaltung* under an NSDAP *Reichskommissariat*, Josef Grohé, in mid-July.<sup>167</sup> With their days clearly numbered, the Rexist Party conducted ‘one final paroxysm of violence’ that belied their desperation and ensured their ignominy in the eyes of thousands of Belgian citizens. In the city of Charleroi for

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<sup>165</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 252

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 33, August 19 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1110&context=ur-87-68>; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 268

example, the police logged 21 misdemeanours by Rexists between 23<sup>rd</sup> July and 17<sup>th</sup> August, which resulted in around 40 civilian deaths.<sup>168</sup>

On 13<sup>th</sup> August, Victor Matthys (the acting leader of Rex whilst Degrelle was away fighting) held one final rally at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels.<sup>169</sup> Some 2000 Rexists attended to hear Matthys declaim that '*nous sommes arrivés à l'heure de l'action révolutionnaire*'.<sup>170</sup> Following this party endorsement, the orgy of violence escalated. When the Rexist mayor of Charleroi was assassinated in the village of Courcelles on 17<sup>th</sup> August for example, Matthys organised an official set of reprisals by the party. The following day, party militants rounded set fire to houses across Courcelles and rounded up 20 civilians before summarily executing them.<sup>171</sup> In total, some 27 people were murdered in the so-called 'Massacre of Courcelles', an act which (due to its wide reporting) wholly destroyed the reputation of the Rexist Party in Belgium, and led to impassioned denunciation by the public in the post-war years.

#### vi. The Belgian Catholic Church

The third institution by which one can measure the acts of the Rexist Party (and their legacy upon the Belgian collective memory) is the Belgian Catholic Church. Catholicism was clearly the basis from which Rexist thought emanated, and the party's origins lay deep within the framework of the Church (though this did not stop them from criticising the Church in any way). Furthermore, although there was a distinct Church hierarchy in Belgium dominated by a traditional elite, Catholicism was also a major feature of people's everyday lives.<sup>172</sup> Nevertheless, paternalistic traditions meant that the majority of these people looked towards the key individuals of the Church, most notably the Primate of Belgium Cardinal Van Roey, to shape their opinions (and to a certain degree their identity). In this regard, it is useful to explore the Rexist Party's dealings with the Catholic Church, but even more importantly the responses from the institution. The rebuffs and condemnations experienced by the Rexists not only highlighted their missteps, but also helped to write the narrative of

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<sup>168</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 269

<sup>169</sup> Pierre Stéphany, *Des Belges très occupés: 1940-1945* (Brussels: Racine, 2005), 345

<sup>170</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 270

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. 272

<sup>172</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 34

Belgian history in which the Rexist Party, *prima facie* a promoter of the Catholic cause, was to be damned.

As already mentioned, Belgium in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was still a deeply religious country. Towards the end of the previous century, between 95-99% of the population were Roman Catholic, and the majority of the remainder were Protestants (including a few Huguenot communities).<sup>173</sup> These figures had changed little by the 1930s, and the functioning of society was tightly bound to the institutional framework of the Belgian Catholic Church. Education for example was almost a sole prerogative of the Church, and as a result Parliament failed to impose any compulsory education legislation until 1914, making them the last country in Western Europe to do so. A formal national education system was only implemented in the 1950s, at which point an estimated 65% of the population still attended Church-run primary schools.<sup>174</sup> In this regard, Degrelle's devout upbringing, education under the Jesuits at Namur and then the Catholic University in Leuven were far from unusual, and embedded him within Catholic element of Belgian national identity.<sup>175</sup>

As with the monarchy, it is important to stress the unifying role that the Church played within the community. The hierarchy and organisation of the Church was not necessarily split along regional or linguistic lines, but along traditional parish boundaries; the local priests officially served their whole community, and not just specific classes or ethnicities within. Even the thorny issue of language was mitigated, with the Church leaders speaking the language of their flock privately and conducting the majority of services in a third language, Latin. The upper echelons of the Belgian Church, topped by the Primate of Belgium, the Cardinal Van Roey, also played a part in the international community of the Catholic Church. In this regard the institution of the Church played a key role in representing Belgian interests abroad (either in ecumenical councils or through missionary work). In short, the Church needed to be national rather than regional in order to fulfil its role, and this coupled with its

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<sup>173</sup> Jacques Delacroix and François Nielsen, 'The Beloved Myth: Protestantism and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe' in *Social Forces*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (Dec. 2001) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 521

<sup>174</sup> Herman Brutsaert, 'State and Catholic elementary schools in Belgium: differences in affective outcomes', in *Research in Education*, Vol. 54, Issue 1, (1995), 32

<sup>175</sup> See *Chef de Rex* for Degrelle's account of his early life; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 212



conservative aversion to change made it a source of stability and an anchor upon which to build collective Belgian identity.

vii. Rexism and the Church

Initially the binding ideology for a group of journalists and later the basis of a political party, Catholicism was central to Rexist identity. The Rexist Movement clearly aimed to broaden the reach of the Catholic Church in Belgium, and to promote the aims of the Church. In this regard, the party attempted to strengthen one of the key institutions of Belgian life, acting as a 'movement for Catholic spiritual renewal'.<sup>176</sup> Catholicism remained deeply popular in Belgium (especially during the turbulent chaos that was German occupation), and one might therefore assume that a party dedicated to the furtherance of it would be received favourably and be held in high regard.

It is important to emphasise the general feeling of anger and the desire for change that pervaded everything the Rexists did. They idolised the monarchy, yet they despaired over the Royal Court. Similarly, they ardently believed in the Belgian Catholic Church as a force for good, yet they railed bitterly against the Catholic Party and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which they viewed as old-fashioned, geriatric and corrupt. This fundamentally critical tone split their audience from the very offset in 1936, creating an environment in which time and time again their audience had to choose between supporting their church elders and the young Rexists.

Nevertheless, a large part of the early Rexist message was centred around dissatisfaction with the *status quo*; specifically with the economic situation and the wealth inequality in the country.<sup>177</sup> As a way of ameliorating this (and arguably increasing their visibility too), the party took to large scale displays of their Christian piety. During 1936 for example, a general strike emanated from the docks of Antwerp and soon paralysed the whole country as 600,000 workers downed tools. Degrelle mobilised his party and travelled the country, providing both food supplies and verbal support for the strikers, whilst the traditional political parties kept silent.<sup>178</sup> According to Degrelle, the mass bread-distributions were done out of Christian duty and a desire

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<sup>176</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 38

<sup>177</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

<sup>178</sup> *Chef de Rex*

to improve the country. Cannily publicised by this master of mass-media, the distributions quickly earned Degrelle a reputation for defending true Christian values. Whilst this earned him the vote of numerous disaffected (perhaps as a result of the age-old tactic of bread for votes?), it was not necessarily enough to persuade the mainstream to vote for him however. Although popular in the rural districts, the Rexists of this period struggled to transform their approval into votes from the urban upper classes (who stuck with the traditional Catholic Party) and lower classes (who remained with the Socialists).<sup>179</sup>

Episodes such as this, magnified by Degrelle's youthful stamina and publicity skills, can be argued to have served the Rexist legacy well. A cynical view would highlight the self-serving aspect, and a rational view would emphasise the relative lack of returns at the ballot box. Nevertheless, the social programmes of the Rexists clearly benefitted their image, and remained important aspects of their legacy in later years, as seen in the 1978 documentary series by Jean-Michel Charlier.<sup>180</sup> Even if they were somewhat reminiscent of the 'paternalistic attitudes of late nineteenth-century social Catholicism', the social policies and deeds carried out by the Rexists in the 1930s were undoubtedly presented in a Catholic frame.<sup>181</sup> To this end, these Catholic-based actions were a positive for the Rexist image, at least in the eyes of the disaffected. Furthermore, the startling emergence of the Rexists in the 1936 elections came overwhelmingly at the expense of the Catholic Party, who lost 16 seats.<sup>182</sup> In these earliest of days, the Rexist embrace of Belgian Catholicism left a positive legacy in the country.

As already mentioned however, interactions with the official Belgian Catholic Church left a far greater impact on the later legacy of the party. Given the immense authority possessed by the Church (and their survival throughout and after the war, allowing them to dictate the narrative), the relationship between the Rexists and the institution of the Church arguably mattered more than their relationship with everyday Christian citizens. In this regard, the Church met the challenge to its authority head on, and moreover showed its human side. Although the Christian ideals espoused by the

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<sup>179</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 216

<sup>180</sup> *Chef de Rex*

<sup>181</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 11

<sup>182</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

Rexists were arguably beneficial for the Church in the abstract, Rexism nevertheless represented a challenge to the people who led the Church. The official Church hierarchy was deeply intertwined with the Catholic Party and the traditional power-brokers of the aristocracy, military hierarchy and politics at large.<sup>183</sup> The Church promoted 'God, King and Country' (albeit in a way that advocated incremental change), and found themselves confronted with a new radical party co-opting the same three ideals but in an angry and anti-establishment way. The Rexists had the potential to dismantle the network of established institutions controlled by the Church, something Degrelle said would 'liberate' the Church.<sup>184</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising then that the Church elders refused to officially endorse Degrelle and his followers in the first months of their existence.

Less than a year after the May 1936 elections however, Degrelle made one of his most significant missteps, causing an irreparable rift between the Rexists and the Church. Full of big ideas and grand gestures like the underwhelming 'March on Brussels' in October 1936, Degrelle engineered a political drama of his own in March 1937: he instructed a Rexist member of Parliament from Brussels (the symbolic heart of Belgium) to resign, and for all potential replacements to withdraw.<sup>185</sup> The plan was that Degrelle would then contest the necessary by-election, which had captured the undivided attention of the press across Belgium. However, after signalling his refusal to play to Degrelle's tune by cracking down on the 'March on Brussels', Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland finally opposed the Rexists head on. He shocked the nation by declaring that he himself would stand against Degrelle.<sup>186</sup> None of the three traditional parties wanted to give Degrelle such a symbolic victory, and united behind Van Zeeland as a joint candidate.<sup>187</sup> Nevertheless, polling maintained that the race was extremely tight. Deciding to burnish his Catholic credentials, Degrelle then declared that he had the unspoken endorsement of the Catholic Church under Cardinal Van Roey. Van Roey struck back immediately, releasing a public statement that Rexism was actually a 'danger to the country', and that all god-fearing Catholics should vote

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<sup>183</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 34

<sup>184</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 40

<sup>185</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>186</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 14

<sup>187</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 72

for Van Zeeland instead.<sup>188</sup> Degrelle was promptly crushed (receiving only 19% of the vote); the Rexists forever saw this as a ‘stab in the back’, and grew ever further from the institutionalised Church.<sup>189</sup> Even after this though, the party retained some close links with the Church until 1940 and the occupation.<sup>190</sup>

As has been repeatedly mentioned, the Rexist Party underwent a severe transformation during the German occupation, becoming both a facilitator and active collaborator with the MVBN. Whilst this damaged their reputation locally, it was the active response of the Catholic Church that really spread knowledge of Rexist crimes (and cast an authority-laden judgement upon them). With the Belgian government in exile and the official press under MVBN control, the Church remained as the sole voice of authority for many Belgians, and they proved very hard for the NSDAP to censure. Small-scale acts of defiance had startling effect, and were reported upon by the international community. Parish priests often refused communion to known Rexists, and in September 1942, a vicar in the tiny village of Plancenoit even refused to offer communion to girls in the Rexist youth.<sup>191</sup> Later on the Church became even more forceful in their resistance to Rexism, physically barring Rexists from their churches and refusing their donations.<sup>192</sup> Small as these acts may seem, they reinforced the divide between Rexism and the Church and, similarly to what Cardinal Van Roey did on the eve of the Brussels by-election, forced Belgians to choose between the Catholicism of the Church or of the Rexists. By attaching this choice to the image of patriot versus collaborator, the result was unsurprising: those who belonged to Rex found themselves on a path from which they could not deviate, and thus believed in their ideology (and disgust with the Church) even more. On the other side, the Church effectively branded the Rexists as *Quislings* (named after the Norwegian collaborator

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<sup>188</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217

<sup>189</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 6

<sup>190</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 39

<sup>191</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 3, No. 3, January 16 1943 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1943), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=ur-87-68>; News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 39, September 26 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1072&context=ur-87-68>

<sup>192</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 4, January 29 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=ur-87-68>; News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 22, June 3 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=ur-87-68>

Vidkun Quisling), forever damning their legacy amongst those Catholics opposed to German occupation.

viii. The lionisation of Van Roey

If the Rexist Party was ultimately an extension of the beliefs of Léon Degrelle, then the Belgian Catholic Church was inextricably linked to the leadership of the Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Van Roey. Having served in this position since 1926, he had considerable personal gravitas, especially considering his personal friendship with the Royal family and the leaders of the Catholic Party. Considered '*een forse, rijzige figuur*' (a forceful and giant figure), his word carried authority and came to represent the view of the entire Church in Belgium.<sup>193</sup> In this regard Cardinal Van Roey took it upon himself following the by-election of 1937 to distance himself (and thus the Church) from the Rexist party as much as possible. Initially this came in the form of silence; Degrelle met with Van Roey on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1940 and, although the Cardinal commended Degrelle's piety and Catholic nature, he refused to officially endorse the party or cooperate with its newspaper, *Le Pays Réel*.<sup>194</sup> To this end he used his privileged position to condemn both the current action and the future legacy of Rexism, and millions agreed with his statements.

In March 1942 for example, Van Roey gave a widely-reported speech to the Federation of Catholic Women, a group of values-oriented middle-class Christians with whom the Rexists were trying to engage. In no uncertain terms, Van Roey condemned the 'Catholic defeatism' of Rexist collaborators, placing Catholic philosophy and the racial principles of the NSDAP's 'New Order' in opposition to one another, and stressing the impossibility of interplay or even compromise between the two.<sup>195</sup> Intellectual arguments such as this did untold damage to the Rexists' propaganda effort and exacerbated the tension; Rexists increasingly saw the Church as

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<sup>193</sup> *Dagblad de Stem*, 'Kardinaal van Roey overleden' 7th August 1961. Accessed 13/06/18, <https://krantenbankzeeland.nl/issue/stm/1961-08-07/edition/null/page/1?query=Gram%2013.00%20Nws%2013.15&sort=relevance>

<sup>194</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 39

<sup>195</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 31, August 1 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=ur-87-68>

a vestige of the old-establishment that they were trying to overturn and became increasingly critical, receiving increased backlash from the Church as a result.<sup>196</sup>

Alongside the verbal condemnations, both in person and in print, Van Roey also led a coordinated response specifically targeted against Rexism, and which had an even greater impact than the peace-meal decisions of individual priests. In May 1941 for example, Van Roey declared that no uniforms would be permitted at services or funerals, and that priests had the authority to bar anyone in contempt.<sup>197</sup> This move was clearly aimed at the Rexists (and admittedly also the Flemish nationalists in the VNV and *Verdinaso*), who had taken to paramilitary attire like that of the NSDAP. A year later, Van Roey escalated his contest with Rex even further, announcing in August 1942 that all political badges or insignia and ‘acts of a political or secular character’ were banned from church as well.<sup>198</sup> The long-term result was that, from the summer of 1942 onwards, almost all Rexist funerals (for those who died on the East Front fighting for the *Wehrmacht*) had to be officiated by German chaplains, further equating the Rexists with *Quislings*, and damaging their legacy.<sup>199</sup>

Returning to the individual level, the response of Van Roey had a particularly damaging effect upon Degrelle’s personal legacy. Attending mass in his German SS-uniform, Degrelle quickly found himself excommunicated by the Bishop of Namur.<sup>200</sup> This was naturally a highly-politicised event and shook the devout Degrelle profoundly.<sup>201</sup> Degrelle later had the excommunication lifted by the German authorities, who argued that since he was a German officer, he fell under German jurisdiction.<sup>202</sup> Nevertheless, this high-profile case typified the pattern of legacy regarding Catholicism (for Degrelle as much as for his party): for the Rexists, Degrelle was a messianic figure unfairly excommunicated by a corrupt Church. For the non-Rexists, his excommunication confirmed his perversion of true Christianity, and the

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<sup>196</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 91

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. 92

<sup>198</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 34, August 22 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=ur-87-68>

<sup>199</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 150

<sup>200</sup> Roy Palmer Domenico and Mark Hanley, eds. *Encyclopedia of modern Christian politics: A-K* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 161

<sup>201</sup> Jean-Marie Frérotte, *Léon Degrelle, le dernier fasciste* (Brussels: Legrain, 1987), 186

<sup>202</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 14, April 8 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 13/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=ur-87-68>

removal of the excommunication by the Germans confirmed his status as a Nazi stooge.

Overall then, it is certainly possible to trace a lasting impact of the Rexist Party through their interaction with key institutions. If it is assumed that these institutions form the basis of any common Belgian identity, then it is not too large a leap to suggest that the legacy of Rexism upon Belgian identity may be seen through their legacy upon the institutions. In this regard, many recurring patterns can be observed; the Rexistists were (both in ideology and in deed, at least initially) proud promoters of all three institutions, yet they were extremely critical of conservative elements within them that were deemed averse to change. Their bold actions post-May 1936 were met with everything ranging from scepticism to outright condemnation (most notably from Cardinal Van Roey), and as a result drove a wedge between the party and these institutions.

As German occupation loomed ever closer and eventually became a reality, the party realigned itself dramatically, taking on many of the trappings of the NSDAP. This alienated the Rexistists from the mainstream public perception and simultaneously fanaticised them; as they resorted to violence, something initially spurned by Degrelle, they invited ever greater condemnation.<sup>203</sup> By the end of the war, they were viewed as full-blown collaborators and suffered a *damnatio memoriae*. On a final (and more neutral) note, their legacy concerning the monarchy is perhaps the most intriguing. Although the Rexistists failed to bring about any of the radical changes that they were desiring for any of the institutions, they arguably played a contributing role in destroying the perception of the monarchy in the public eye. Through Degrelle's own boasting and the 'secret' meetings and communications with Count Capelle, it was even easier for Leopold's detractors to paint him as somewhat too friendly with the Germans and *Quislings*. The loss of public faith in the monarchy and the ensuing *Royal Question* arose from numerous factors that undeniably would have occurred even if the Rexist Party had never existed. Nevertheless, the relationship between king and Rexism (even if it was just perceived and never really existed) must have impacted the public conscience and contributed to the post-war image of Leopold III.

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<sup>203</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 256

## Chapter 2: The Political Legacy:

### i. Belgian politics: the structures and the parties

These key institutions have played a large role in shaping Belgian history over time, and also contributed greatly to the Belgian national identity. Beyond this, they also had incredibly complex relationships with the Rexist Party. Alongside this initial approach grounded in personal interactions (predominantly in the form of letters, communications and the recording of events), another way of exploring the legacy of the Rexist Party is by looking at its interactions with the political system of the time, and how the political spectrum as a whole reacted to their emergence. After all, the movement was explicitly anti-establishment, and placed itself at odds with the traditional political elite in Belgium. At a time of political instability for the country, this undoubtedly had broad repercussions for the post-war political structure of the state.

Furthermore, the party was actively involved in collaboration during the German occupation. Looking at the legacy of the Rexist Movement (and its leader Léon Degrelle) regarding both the concrete political parties and the abstract Belgian political environment is yet another way of measuring the general impact of Rexism. Given the fractious nature of Belgian politics already in 1935, it is entirely possible that this political legacy played out differently in Flanders and Wallonia, especially given the greater popularity that Rexism enjoyed in Wallonia compared to Flanders. In this regard, there is also both a short term legacy (that is to say, a legacy grounded in direct interactions with the political establishment) and a longer term one that concerns the evolution of the political system. Thus the legacy of the party can be traced through observing patterns in recorded acts and the discrepancies between Rexist ideals and the reality in Belgium. On top of this, one may adopt a more data driven approach, looking at the concrete legacy of Rexism within the institutional memory of the upper and lower houses of the Belgian federal parliament. Whilst this focus upon political dealings is but one way to trace the Rexist legacy, it is hoped that this may prove a constituent part of a general pattern, as per Hopkins' Wigwam Theory.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 20



When discussing the impact of Léon Degrelle and his Rexist Party upon the traditional power structures of Belgium, it is important to stress the striking peculiarity of their emergence, and the May 1936 elections in particular, within the context of Belgian political life. Firstly, one must appreciate how exactly the Belgian political system in the early 1930s worked, and why Rexism captured the political attention, not just in Belgium but internationally too: in Germany, he was closely watched as the leader of an allied cause.<sup>205</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, he received numerous features in Time Magazine during his lifetime.<sup>206</sup> The sudden appearance of the party, accented by Degrelle's mastery of the press and propaganda branding, represented something of an earthquake in Belgian politics, and in this regard it left a political legacy simply by existing.

To better understand the shock caused by Rexism's emergence, the idiosyncratic structure of Belgian politics must be stressed. It is a truism that every nation has a unique political structure, yet the international community frequently overlooks this when dealing with the presumed *petit pays*, *petits gens* of Belgium. Nor is it fair to see Belgium simply as the meeting point of Romance and Germanic cultures, and therefore a mere blend of French and German features. In the 1930s for example, Belgian politics was notable for its relative stability and traditionalism. True, there were nine distinct governments between 1934 and 1940, but this was not inherently destabilising for a country that functioned through coalition governments. More interesting is the fact that, from Van Zeeland's first government of March 1935 until German occupation, these were 'national unity' governments comprising all three of the largest parties (the Catholic Party, the Socialist Party and the Liberal Party). As such, they were uniquely placed to preserve the *status quo* and to lock out fringe voices. The Rexists themselves ultimately suffered from this systemic factor in the 1939 elections, with the 'national unity' elites banding together to deny smaller parties political traction.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Degrelle was featured in German press as one of their 'Männer des Monats'. See Wolf Heberlein, 'Männer des Monats: Léon Degrelle' in *Zeitschrift für Politik*, Vol. 26, (1936), 720ff., Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH

<sup>206</sup> *Time*, 'Belgium: Degrelle rides again', August 25 1941, accessed 14/06/18, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,765982,00.html>

<sup>207</sup> As clearly demonstrated by their decision to field a single candidate, none other than Paul Van Zeeland, to compete the infamous Brussels by-election of 1937

ii. The novelty of Rex

In order to assess the legacy of the party within this inherently static environment, it is useful to measure the interactions between the Rexist Party and the other parties that made up the Belgian parliament. From the Rexists' point of view, this relationship was deliberately antagonistic from the very beginning, pitting the virtuous Rexists against the corrupt elites of all political stripes.<sup>208</sup> To this end, Degrelle quickly established a linguistically binary opposition between the collective *pourris* ('rotten' ones) and the pure outsiders of the Rexist Movement.<sup>209</sup> This imagery of the dirty and the clean was a masterstroke of visual politics, attracting public approval even without the Rexists offering any plausible alternatives.<sup>210</sup> After the *Coup de Courtrai* on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1935 and the acrimonious split with the Catholic Party, the Rexists focused a large part of their ire on their erstwhile colleagues, lambasting them for betraying their true identity and being out of touch with the average citizen.

In this regard Degrelle made the most of his talent for engineering theatrical displays that elicited a large media response. The most common of these visual statements was to place Rexists outside gatherings from the other political parties, each one of them holding a broom and gazing intently at the ground, determined to 'sweep away' the corruption.<sup>211</sup> One such event that garnered blanket coverage was another General Assembly of the Catholic Party, this time held in Brussels (a place with relatively high Rexist popularity). As the politicians arrived in their cars, the Rexists lined up next to them, brandishing their brooms. The waiting press duly photographed the entire scene, including the arrival of sheepish policemen who struggled to remove the peaceful protesters.<sup>212</sup> The media attention, combined with the relatively light-hearted and peaceful nature of these protests, increased their effectiveness and

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<sup>208</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3

<sup>209</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213

<sup>210</sup> Among Degrelle's other imagery was that of filthy people (*les crasseux*) caked in corrupted dirt, or of a swamp (*marais*) that needed to be drained or purified... See Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 184, 215 i.a.

<sup>211</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 5; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 11

<sup>212</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 184

amplified the ‘Christian’ deeds of the Rexists (such as the alimentary support for striking workforces) to provide much of their early popularity.<sup>213</sup>

During the early days of the Rexist Party, they left an immediate short-term legacy simply due to their novel approach to Belgian politics. The sweeping protests for example had never been seen before and served to highlight the ‘otherness’ of the Rexists. On top of this, the Rexists made use of their youthful vigour and professional background in journalism to launch an unprecedented series of invectives and direct attacks against high-profile individuals. Examples include Degrelle’s attacks on Minister Segers, culminating in his *J’accuse M. Segers*, a paper deliberately reminiscent of Zola’s *J’accuse* (in the Dreyfus Affair). The public attack accused the high-profile Minister Paul-Willem Segers, one of the leaders of the Catholic Party, of being a bankroller, expropriator and a coward.<sup>214</sup> In this specific case, Segers made the mistake of taking Degrelle to court for defamation, providing constant public exposure and leaving the minister red-faced when Degrelle was ultimately acquitted by the courts.<sup>215</sup> On the back of this unheard of *ad hominem*, Degrelle encouraged his party to launch a whole barrage, hitting Catholic Party grandees like the ministers Van de Vyvere and Van Cauwelaert, senators like Philips, and Representatives like Carnoy and de Burlet.<sup>216</sup> To reinforce the supposed binary between the ‘establishment’ and the cleanly Rexists, they also went after the Socialist leader Anseele and Liberal ministers like Franqui and Dens.<sup>217</sup> Within a period of 3 months, the Rexists faced a stream of lawsuits from these politicians, totalling an estimated 2,300,000fr. worth of damages. Naturally, this proved a source of pride for them: Degrelle would gleefully describe it in later life as a ‘massacre’ carried out through words ‘*pleins et explosifs comme des balles*’.<sup>218</sup>

Taken together, these anecdotes reinforce the shockingly ‘new’ nature of the Rexists, both for the ideals they held and for the way in which they acted. Undoubtedly intelligent people (predominantly male and predominantly under 30 years old), they

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<sup>213</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213

<sup>214</sup> Martin Geyer, *Kapitalismus und politische Moral in der Zwischenkriegszeit oder* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS, 2018); Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213

<sup>215</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 185

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. 158

<sup>217</sup> Els Witte et al. *Political History of Belgium: From 1830 Onwards* (Brussels: ASP, 2010), 160 for details of Degrelle’s attacks on Anseele

<sup>218</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 158

used their journalistic skills to craft a movement that generated its own headlines and knew how to stay in the news. Already in January 1930 (when he was a mere 23 years old), Degrelle's journalism was being quoted in the Chamber of Representatives, and was mentioned 13 times in the opening months of 1936 before their first elections.<sup>219</sup> Theirs was a distinctly adversarial type of politicking, and yet one might argue that they needed to be unorthodox in order to have any impact at all versus the combined force of the national unity governments. Apart from a brief 8-month pact with the Flemish nationalist VNV, the Rexists functioned from 1936-1940 as a non-cooperative alternative to the *status quo*; as war with Germany became increasingly likely, the *status quo* appeared to be not so terrible after all, and popular support for the Rexists crumbled.<sup>220</sup>

In this regard it is hard to see a concrete legacy of the Rexist Party on Belgian pre-war politics if one looks solely at legislation. They were deliberately locked out of the decision-making circles by the establishment parties and went so far as to revel in their non-cooperative persona. When they did give floor speeches in the lower house (Chamber of Representatives) for example, it was on moments like in late 1936, when their representative Henri Horward declared that the Rexists would refuse to approve the judiciary's budget for 1937.<sup>221</sup> At other times, their unorthodox antics in the Chamber proved a nightmare for the president of proceedings, as they openly laughed in the face of the speakers and slowed down proceedings with their waspish attacks.<sup>222</sup> This legacy of bullish non-conformism is naturally preserved within the records of parliamentary debates, but it is unlikely that this would have left much of an impact within the collective memory of the Belgian people.

There is however a tangible irony to the political actions of the Rexists between 1935 (when still a movement rather than a party) and 1940: by the time that the country

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<sup>219</sup> See 'Session of 21 January 1930', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 13/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1930/k00380545/k00380545\\_03](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1930/k00380545/k00380545_03); Statistics obtained from Marnix Beyen et al. *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, <https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/>

<sup>220</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

<sup>221</sup> 'Indices of 1936', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1936/k00422113/k00422113\\_30](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1936/k00422113/k00422113_30)

<sup>222</sup> See i.a. 'Session of 9 March 1937', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1937/k00423230/k00423230\\_14](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1937/k00423230/k00423230_14), for a protracted standoff between Liberal representatives Van Glabbeke and Max (also the mayor of Brussels) and Rexists

surrendered to the Third Reich in May 1940, the Rexists were left as one of the sole functioning parties in Belgium. The hierarchies of the traditional parties had fled to London with Prime Minister Pierlot, and the charismatic leader of the *Verdinaso*, Joris Van Severen, was killed in the infamous ‘Bloodbath of Abbeville’.<sup>223</sup> Despite arguably being perfectly poised to take advantage of this fact, the Rexists failed to gain the permission of either the King or the MVBN to form a collaboration government. Without the governmental structure (which they had fought so bitterly against) around them to formalise their role in occupied Belgium, the Rexists no longer had a vehicle through which to act. This is perhaps one of the main contributing factors for the militarisation of the Degrellian movement, as they searched for a new way to project their power.

iii. Outline of the *Plenum* database

Individual interactions like these can be used in combination in order to form general impressions. Beyond this however, it is also possible to adopt a more structured approach to Rexism and its political legacy in Belgium. Through the analysis of large data sets, it is possible to observe trends that reflect the relative importance of Rexism within the political dialogue over time. In this regard, the transcripts from the plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives serve as a particularly useful source of information. This information is freely accessible through the *Plenum* digital archives of the Chamber’s documentation centre, created in cooperation with the University of Antwerp.<sup>224</sup> Covering the entire period 1844-1999, this service allows statistical analysis of data from the original records. Although there is a lacuna between 1940-1944 (due to the exile of Pierlot’s government), the inclusion of later data running up to 1999 makes this an incredibly useful tool for a diachronic study. The database for 1844-1940 alone contains over 137,000 pages of transcripts. Taken individually, the records pinpoint the direct involvement of Rexists in national politics; taken as a whole, they offer aggregated trends over time.

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<sup>223</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 211

<sup>224</sup> Marnix Beyen et al. ‘Credits’, *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, <https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/credits>

The *Plenum* database is an invaluable tool when studying a distant time period (and one where, especially given the political climate and censoring of extreme views, there is not a particularly broad range of primary sources). Nevertheless, the database does have some limitations, and they must be established first before proceeding with the information itself. As mentioned, there is no data for the period 1940-1944 due to the inactivity of the Chamber. This creates a frustrating caesura but does not make the existing data any less interesting. Indeed, the formative years of Rexism between 1935-1940 are well documented, as are all mentions of Rexism from 1944 up until 1999. When analysing the long-term impact of Degrelle and his movement, this vast breadth of evidence is very important. Other limitations of the system include the way in which it logs frequencies of certain terms: key words are registered in the database each time they are mentioned, rather than how many times the topic is mentioned. Thus five mentions of Degrelle across five different plenary sessions might be represented in the same way as one plenary that mentioned him five times. Whilst imprecise, this nonetheless serves as a faithful record of the frequency with which certain names/words/phrases were used and does not devalue a like-for-like comparison.

Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that this chapter looks specifically at the internal political legacy of the Rexist Party. The data trends and patterns discussed here derive from the accumulated plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives. Thus they represent a concrete political legacy within the self-contained environment of politics. This does not implicitly mean that topics of relevance or high frequency in the Chamber equated to issues of particular relevance for the average voter. Nevertheless the politicians that make up the Chamber are, to a certain extent, representatives of the entire nation and in an investigation of Belgian national identity their views and opinions are as relevant as anyone's.

#### iv. Pre-war legacy of Rexism and Degrelle

The frequency with which the Rexist Party was mentioned within plenary sessions between 1935 and 1940 clearly demonstrates the impact they made in 1936 (despite being a non-cooperative faction), before they gradually lost relevance over the following four years. There was of course no singular name for the party, but the most prevalent were *Rex* amongst Flemish speakers and *Parti rexiste* amongst the

Francophones (along with the ideology of *rexisme*).<sup>225</sup> Looking at all three of these appellations, the pattern of frequency for *Rex* and *rexiste* in plenary sessions 1935-1940 are identical: the first mentions are in 1936, almost halve the following year, only slightly decrease in 1938, and then markedly decrease in 1939 and 1940.<sup>226</sup> As an aside, the data for 1940 must be set to one side slightly, given that the plenary sessions were discontinued in May of that year. Whilst the proportional decreases are comparable, the difference lies in the absolute numbers: there were simply far more occurrences of the *Parti rexiste* being discussed in plenary than *Rex*. This is not particularly surprising, given the overwhelming predominance of Francophone as the language of discussion in the Chamber (along with the fact that the Rexists were always more popular in Francophone Wallonia than in Flanders).<sup>227</sup>

More interesting is the differing pattern observable with *rexisme* (the nominalisation of the ideology), which marginally increased in usage between 1937 and 1938, before also declining.<sup>228</sup> The raw numbers are clearly lower, suggesting that politicians were more concerned with the actions of the actual party than its shaky ‘anti-establishment’ ideology, which was harder to discern.<sup>229</sup> Indeed, aside from statements by Rexists like Horward, many of the numerous discussions about the Rexists concerned the prohibition of Rexist demonstrations, or the fallout from their theatrical protests.<sup>230</sup> In this regard, the political legacy of the Rexists until 1940 would appear to be a physical one (due to their unprofessionalism and theatrical protests) rather than any ideological influence. In perhaps a similar realist focus on events over ideology, references to ‘*Allemagne*’ (Germany) massively outnumbered mentions of ‘*nazi*’ by 833 to 32 within this period (with the caveat that matters of foreign policy tend to centre more on states than parties).<sup>231</sup>

Alongside an analysis of the Rexist Party and its impact upon the political landscape, it is also beneficial to look at the mentions of their pivotal leader, Léon

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<sup>225</sup> See i.a. Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 299 for use of *Rex*, *rexiste* and *rexisme* in close succession

<sup>226</sup> See Fig. 1A in Appendix B

<sup>227</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 12

<sup>228</sup> See Fig. 1B in Appendix B

<sup>229</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214

<sup>230</sup> ‘Session of 27 October 1936’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1936/k00421921/k00421921\\_07](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1936/k00421921/k00421921_07);

‘Session of 9 March 1937’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives* i.a.

<sup>231</sup> Data collected from *plenum.be*

Degrelle, from 1935-1940. This has a couple of benefits over analysis of the party: firstly, Degrelle had but one name and one spelling, avoiding the issue of overlapping synonyms seen with *rex/rexisme/rexiste*. Moreover, Degrelle is a relatively uncommon name; when it is mentioned, it is almost certainly referring to Léon. Secondly, Degrelle only entered the Chamber as an elected representative after the April 1939 elections.<sup>232</sup> This maximises the chance (especially until 1939) that mentions of him refer to things he said or did at large, and minimises references to procedural formalities or speeches on issues not particularly related to Rexism itself.

In 1935 Degrelle was only mentioned once in passing in the Chamber (just like Staf De Clercq, leader of the VNV), in late December.<sup>233</sup> With his sudden exposure and shocking electoral success, it is unsurprising that references to him surged in 1936, before dropping somewhat the following year. Unlike references to the party (here meaning *rex* or *rexiste*), Degrelle was actually mentioned more from 1937 to 1938 (increasing from 25 to 36 mentions).<sup>234</sup> Interestingly, the pattern for mentions of Degrelle pre-war has far more in common with mentions of *rexisme*, whereas *rex* and [Parti] *rexiste* follow a secondary pattern. In this regard the political impact of Degrelle and his party quickly followed divergent paths; the explosion of mentions of Degrelle in 1939 cannot be attributed solely to his attendance in the Chamber. With 171 separate mentions of Degrelle in 1939, the man clearly had an impact on political discussion, even if his party was of secondary importance. This serves as a portend of the later evolution of the Degrellian myth, with the man rising far above the party and commanding personal loyalties (hence the desire of many to follow him to the Eastern Front, even if they were not ideological Rexists).<sup>235</sup>

In order to put the relevance of Degrelle into context, it is useful to compare mentions of Degrelle to other key individuals. Degrelle was mentioned a cumulative total of 303 times between 1935-1940 for example, whilst the leaders of the *Verdinaso* and the VNV (Joris Van Severen and Staf De Clercq) were mentioned 3 and 30 times respectively. Many scholars have a tendency to group all three organisations/parties

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<sup>232</sup> Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken - Directie van de Verkiezingen, 'Evolutie van de kieswetgeving'; Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 8

<sup>233</sup> See Fig. 2A in Appendix B

<sup>234</sup> See Fig. 2B in Appendix B

<sup>235</sup> News from Belgium. Vol. 2, No. 15, April 11 1942



together, as the three right-wing non-cooperative factions in Belgian politics. More than that, pre-war Rexism has been (perhaps rightly) criticised for its lack of cogent ideology in comparison to the ‘stronger roots’ and clear demands of the Flemish extremist parties.<sup>236</sup> The data from the Chamber of Representatives drastically disputes this interpretation however: Degrelle was mentioned ten times more than De Clercq and one hundred times more than Van Severen, a man who was also deemed to be eloquent and charismatic.<sup>237</sup> Similarly, a combined count of *Rex* and *rexiste* comes out with 524 mentions from 1935-1940: Verdinaso was mentioned three times, and the VNV no times.<sup>238</sup> At least within the political sphere, it appears fair to suggest that the Rexist Party left a far greater legacy (certainly a more discernible one) than the Flemish nationalist parties.

Moreover, the analysis of Degrelle’s mentions emphasises the overly large presence of the party. Recalling the May 1936 elections, the Rexists did strikingly well, but this amounted to 11.5% of the popular vote.<sup>239</sup> Thus in 1936, Degrelle was mentioned 43 times, behind the re-elected Van Zeeland (307 mentions) and the iconic future Prime-Ministers Spaak (193 mentions) and Pierlot (59 mentions), and slightly behind Adolf Hitler (50 mentions). This is already remarkable for a *novus homo* in Belgian politics, especially when considering that De Clercq was mentioned 4 times in 1936, and Van Severen was not mentioned at all. Yet despite the collapse of Rexist vote-share by 1939 (to just over 4%), mentions of Degrelle rocketed to 171 that year. By comparison, the now ex-Prime Minister Van Zeeland was mentioned only 26 times, and Spaak and Pierlot (the sitting Prime Minister) received 246 and 312 mentions respectively (Hitler received a mere 39 mentions in comparison). The political elite may have dismissed the Rexists as a political non-entity, but they clearly still felt a need to discuss Degrelle, even if his party decreased in mentions. The party received under a twentieth of the popular vote, and yet its leader was being mentioned over half as much as the sitting Prime Minister. With the Rexists only holding 4 seats from 1939, it is also hard to attribute these mentions to the exuberant representatives and their

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<sup>236</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 218

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.* 208

<sup>238</sup> For VNV, searches for ‘vnv’, ‘vlaams nationaal verbond’ and ‘ligue nationale flamande’ yield no results

<sup>239</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 12

procedural antics. In this regard the political legacy of Rexism, and of Léon Degrelle in particular, was far larger than their vote share might suggest.

v. Post-war legacy of Degrelle

This analysis of the pre-war years paints a picture in which the Rexists generated a disproportionate amount of discussion. This points to both their ‘involvement’ within the Chamber (unorthodox though it proved to be) and the impact of their protests in the wider world. These protests must be considered successful to a certain degree, if they created so much discussion within the political establishment. The wider question of Rexist legacy requires a long-term appraisal of their impact, and for this reason, it is also useful to look at the Chamber’s data for the post-war period. Within the general post-war environment in Belgium, wartime experiences were not always discussed much, and the Rexists have not garnered worldwide attention to the same extent as groups from other countries. Nevertheless, Degrelle was unique in surviving for a further fifty years after the liberation of Belgium; the *Plenum* database is therefore useful in evaluating the impact of Degrelle and the Rexist party on Belgian political discourse once they fell out of the national spotlight.

After his dramatic crash-landing on the beach of San Sebastian in April 1945, Degrelle was hosted at the pleasure of Francisco Franco and Falangist Spain.<sup>240</sup> Given this physical distance and the refusal of the Belgian press to grant him any airtime, one might expect him to fade into a non-entity in Belgian politics. The data from *Plenum* suggest otherwise however: from 1944-1999, Degrelle was mentioned in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives 289 separate times. In contrast, Van Severen was only mentioned 14 times in the same period.<sup>241</sup> This suggests that, in political circles at least, the memory of Degrelle was far from absent, and he continued to impact political discussions from abroad. Looking at the spread of these mentions over time, a series of spikes are clearly identifiable.<sup>242</sup> In the aftermath of Belgian liberation, the number

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<sup>240</sup> Palmer Domenico and Hanley, eds. *Encyclopedia of Christian politics*, 161; Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 280

<sup>241</sup> The statistics for Staf De Clercq are much harder to identify, given the number of references to Willy De Clercq (no relation), a leader of the Liberals and a minister in successive governments in 1960s-1980s

<sup>242</sup> See Fig. 3 in Appendix B

of mentions of Degrelle clearly increases until 1946, when there were 30 mentions of him in the Chamber. A clear majority of these mentions were made in attempts to have Degrelle face justice, within the wider context of international criminal law and specifically the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials. The proceedings of 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1946 for example centred around foreign relations with Spain; included here were decisive calls for the extradition of high-profile Rexists like Degrelle and Daye.<sup>243</sup> Throughout the year the issue of subjecting Degrelle to Belgian justice proved a consistent theme.<sup>244</sup>

Following the immediate post-war period, there are some clearly detectable spikes in frequency that correspond to specific events in Degrelle's life. To this end, they show that Degrelle had a concrete impact on Belgian political life despite his absence from the public eye. The first noticeable spike for example comes in 1954, when Degrelle was mentioned 29 times. 1954 was also the year that Degrelle was finally naturalised as a Spanish citizen, thus making extradition to Belgium astronomically harder.<sup>245</sup> Thus throughout the year, the government ramped up extradition attempts.<sup>246</sup> This was deemed especially necessary given the effect upon '*l'opinion publique*' due to the renewed media gaze on Degrelle in Spain (especially when he then decided to make some grand public appearances in Spain).<sup>247</sup>

From this point onwards, extradition became that much harder, and mentions of Degrelle became rather anecdotal, though this in itself highlights the lasting impact Degrelle had on the politics of the chamber.<sup>248</sup> Later spikes include 1964, the year the statute of limitations in Belgium expired, and 1972-1973, at the end of the 10-year extension of the statute granted specifically for Degrelle.<sup>249</sup> A particularly noticeable

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<sup>243</sup> 'Session of 3 May 1946', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1946/k00452923/k00452923\\_04](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1946/k00452923/k00452923_04)

<sup>244</sup> 'Session of 6 August 1946', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1946/k00453728/k00453728\\_14](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1946/k00453728/k00453728_14) i.a.

<sup>245</sup> Times Wire Services. 'Leon Degrelle, 87; Nazis' Top Belgian Collaborator' *Los Angeles Times*, 3rd April 1994, accessed 14/06/18, [http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-03/news/mn-41573\\_1\\_leon-degrelle](http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-03/news/mn-41573_1_leon-degrelle)

<sup>246</sup> 'Indices of 1954', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1954/k00530556/k00530556\\_00ff](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1954/k00530556/k00530556_00ff).

<sup>247</sup> 'Session of 22 December 1954', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1954/k00531540/k00531540\\_06](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1954/k00531540/k00531540_06)

<sup>248</sup> See i.a. 'Session of 3 June 1964', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1964/k00622823/k00622823\\_07](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1964/k00622823/k00622823_07) for recollections of Degrelle's attitude in plenary

<sup>249</sup> John Darnton, 'At ease in his Refuge in Spain, Top Belgian Fascist extols past' *New York Times*, 20th May 1983, accessed 14/06/18,

increase in mentions of Degrelle can be observed in 1983, over a generation after Degrelle left Belgium for good; this represents one of the last concerted efforts to extradite Degrelle.<sup>250</sup> This particular episode fits into the wider context of renewed global discourse, led by Simon Wiesenthal, about the punishment of war-criminals. Following the extradition decision for Dutch SS-officer Auke Pattist, who had become a naturalised Spanish citizen just like Degrelle, socialist minister Burgeon launched a campaign to see Degrelle extradited too.<sup>251</sup> Episodes like these stimulated not just political and legal interest in Degrelle and the Rexist Party, but also kept him in the news both in Belgium and across the world (like on the front page of the New York Times).

#### vi. Post-war legacy of the Rexist Party

Although it was Degrelle that served as a living reminder of the period 1935-1945, one must not rely entirely upon him when measuring the legacy of Rexism within Belgian politics. Alongside Degrelle, it is also useful to carry out the same analysis regarding the terms *rex*, *rexisme* and *rexiste*. On 30<sup>th</sup> March 1945 Degrelle, Matthys and a few others met and decided to officially dissolve the Rexist Party; around the same time, the new Belgian government started to seek them out to face justice.<sup>252</sup> Mentions of the party in the immediate post-war years would therefore not come as a surprise, and the statistics for *rexisme*, *rexiste* and *rex* all display continual usage for the decade after liberation.<sup>253</sup> Combined, the statistics for the party generally track the figures for Degrelle, suggesting that both leader and party were embedded in the political conscience. Moreover, the later spikes in references roughly match those analysed in reference to Degrelle, most notably in the 1970s as the deadline of the extended statute of limitations drew nearer. That is to say, by this point in the 1970s, references to the party were often made in the context of the attempts for Léon Degrelle's extradition.

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<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1983/05/20/issue.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset&region=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article>

<sup>250</sup> 'Session of 17 February 1983', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1983/k00812566/k00812566\\_36](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1983/k00812566/k00812566_36);

'Session of 24 February 1983', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1983/k00812638/k00812638\\_09](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1983/k00812638/k00812638_09) i.a.

<sup>251</sup> Darnton, 'At ease in his Refuge in Spain'

<sup>252</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 280

<sup>253</sup> See Figs. 4A-C in Appendix B

Interestingly though, few of the references to the *parti rexiste* for example are specifically linked to his extradition; as a striking example from 28<sup>th</sup> June 1973 shows, they are often used as insults or aspersions, or brought up to invoke the general sense of the chaos of the historic period.<sup>254</sup> This points to a discernible trend whereby the focus is not so much on the physical political party, but on acts and deeds. Thus terms like *rexiste* are increasingly used as a standalone adjective, whereas initially it was part of a phrase like *parti rexiste* or *mouvement rexiste*. In this regard Rexism did leave a legacy in the Belgian parliament, but interestingly this was arguably more indirect (and linguistic) than direct. Much like with the *Quislings* of Norway, *rexiste* became an adjective of its own, pronounced to evoke notions of non-cooperative politics, fascist ideologies (even if Rex was not whole-heartedly fascist), and collaboration with the Reich. Even in February 1945, former prime minister Carton de Wiart gave an impassioned speech in which he stressed the need to prevent the rise of ‘*un nouveau rexisme*’.<sup>255</sup> To this end, it would be appropriate to say that the political legacy can be distinctly seen in two specific regards: in the form of Rexism as a notion (implicitly containing many connotations associated with the actual Rexist Party), and in the figure of Léon Degrelle, a man who always stood out above his party. In contrast, the party itself received comparatively less airtime in parliament (and in this vein the VNV and *Verdinaso* were only mentioned 60 times and 3 times respectively between 1944-1999).<sup>256</sup>

Finally, it is useful to consider the matter of political legacy in the long term. The statistics that have been discussed concern the trends from 1944-1999; clearly, the patterns are all heavily impacted by the parliamentary discussions in the years immediately following liberation in 1944. Discussions from this period are much more likely to be affected by personal memories and individual relationships. Beyond this wider ‘post-war’ analysis, it is therefore useful to also focus on the latter half of this period. That is to say, the period 1970-1999. This thirty year span began around thirty years after the active participation of Rexists (along with *Verdinaso* and the VNV) in Belgian politics. Given the generational gap and the passing of time, a study of these

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<sup>254</sup> ‘Session of 28 June 1973’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1973/k00713660/k00713660\\_120](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1973/k00713660/k00713660_120)

<sup>255</sup> ‘Session of 6 February 1945’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1945/k00450565/k00450565\\_05](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1945/k00450565/k00450565_05)

<sup>256</sup> The results for VNV contain the caveats laid out before.

later years is perhaps the best measure of ‘legacy’ in the political sphere. There is of course the important caveat that out of all of the key individuals from wartime Belgium, Degrelle was the last man standing.<sup>257</sup> Nevertheless, the data for the Rexist Party in particular is still illuminating, especially when considering regional developments in Belgium at the time.

Looking simply at the mentions of Degrelle and other leaders in this thirty year period, the relative over-representation of Degrelle is striking.<sup>258</sup> Alongside the notable spikes in the early 1970s and in 1983, Degrelle stands out and is frequently discussed even more than Adolf Hitler (and is cumulatively mentioned 90 times to Hitler’s 48).<sup>259</sup> Returning to the mentions of the party itself, the patterns for the 1970s onwards roughly follow the same pattern as mentions of Degrelle, but merely provide lower raw numbers given the division of references between *rex*, *rexiste* and *rexisme*. Whilst *rexisme* is perhaps the most fluid and generic appellation, the other two are deeply demarcated along linguistic lines: *rex* is almost entirely used in a Flemish and Dutch-speaking context, whilst [*Parti*] *rexiste* refers to the party’s French name, and is far more common amongst Walloon and Bruxellois/Brusselaar politicians. In early decades, the procedural language in the Chamber was predominantly French, given its prevalence amongst the upper classes of all regions. A Dutch-language constitution was adopted in 1967 and federalisation continued apace through the 1970s however; thus it is certainly valid to pay attention to the linguistic divides regarding Rexism post-1970. Indeed, in the early 1970s, there appear to be slightly more mentions of *rexiste* than *rex*.<sup>260</sup> As mentioned, these are generally more about the political connotations of Rexism (like a ‘*qualité de rexiste*’ or ‘*l’épithète de rexiste*’) rather than the party itself.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> De Clercq and Van Severen were both killed in the war (1942 and 1940 respectively), Van Roey died in 1961, Pierlot in 1963, Van Zeeland in 1973, and Spaak in 1972.

<sup>258</sup> See Fig. 5A in Appendix B. Unfortunately, it is not possible to do a like-for-like comparison with figures in the pre-war period, due to the limitations of *Plenum*. A search for ‘Van Zeeland’ post-1944 for example includes all results for the Dutch state of Zeeland, whilst Spaak had an active career post-war, and De Clercq can refer to either Staf or Willy – see footnote 38.

<sup>259</sup> See Fig. 5B in Appendix B

<sup>260</sup> See Figs. 4A-C in Appendix B

<sup>261</sup> ‘Session of 22 November 1973’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1973/k00720813/k00720813\\_05](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1973/k00720813/k00720813_05); ‘Session of 3 May 1974’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1974/k00722359/k00722359\\_24](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenum/proceedings/1974/k00722359/k00722359_24)

After 1979 however, mentions of *rexiste* are almost non-existent, and even *rexisme* almost disappears after 1983. In contrast however *rex* stands out, comprising almost all of the mentions of the party in the late 1980s and the 1990s.<sup>262</sup> This occurs alongside an important political phenomenon: the rise of the Flemish far-right nationalist party *Vlaams Blok* (now rebranded as *Vlaams Belang*, after the courts ruled that the party was officially racist).<sup>263</sup> Founded in the late 1970s, the party struggled to gain more than 1% of the vote and was excluded in a *cordon sanitaire*. Their breakthrough came in the 1991 general elections and in the following years they caused numerous headaches in the Chamber and Senate. With their emergence, the Rexist legacy was revived somewhat, both by *Vlaams Blok* and their rivals in parliament. This can clearly be seen in the debate of 9<sup>th</sup> December 1998, in which *Vlaams Blok* representative Filip De Man received many accusations of acting ‘like Rex’ and attacked the whole political system, passionately (and sarcastically) claiming that “we are now also Rex! We are both the VNV and Rex. And we are Adolf Hitler. You need to make your choice! You are forgetting Mussolini!”.<sup>264</sup>

The reason for De Man’s outburst was, amongst other things, a series of pamphlets by other parties equating the *Vlaams Blok* to the Rexist Party. These posters used *Vlaams Blok*’s own campaign literature, highlighting the unsettling similarities in layout and language with Rexists literature. Amongst others, one *Vlaams Blok* poster simply showed a broom, alongside the slogan ‘*Grote Kuis!*’ (Great cleansing/cleaning). The unambiguous parallels to a Rexist poster of 1936 depicting a bucket and broom with the slogan ‘*Groote Kuisch*’ (archaic spelling for *grote kuis*) were impossible to ignore.<sup>265</sup> The controversy was picked up on across Europe and, once again, the Rexists found a place on the front page of national newspapers.<sup>266</sup> Through the *Vlaams Blok* and the rise in Flemish-nationalist feeling, the memory of Rexism was well and truly revived, and clearly played out differently in Flemish and Walloon politics, with some parties using it as a stick with which to beat the *Vlaams*

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<sup>262</sup> See Fig. 4C in Appendix B

<sup>263</sup> *BBC News*, ‘Court rules Vlaams Blok is racist’, November 9 2004, accessed 14/06/18, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3994867.stm>

<sup>264</sup> ‘Session of 9 December 1998’, *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*, from *Plenum.be*, accessed 14/06/18, [https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1998/k01091134/k01091134\\_15](https://sites.google.com/site/bplenium/proceedings/1998/k01091134/k01091134_15)

<sup>265</sup> See Fig. 1 in Appendix A

<sup>266</sup> Jos Geysels and Jack Van Dijk, ‘Wat Colen vergat te vertellen over het Vlaams Blok’, *De Volkskrant*, 4th March 1996, accessed 14/06/18, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/wat-colen-vergatte-vertellen-over-het-vlaams-blok~a437951/>

*Blok*, and the *Blok* retorting that Rexism was historically a predominantly Walloon phenomenon.

vii. The wider political world

Within this most recent period, it was not just internal political clashes which ensured the longevity of the Rexist political legacy. The *Vlaams Blok* did not exist in isolation, but arose as part of the wider European context of parties such as the *Front National* in France or the Freedom Party in Austria. One of the most high profile members of this informal group (bound together as *Non-Inscrits*, and later members of the ‘Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom’ in the EU) was undoubtedly Jean-Marie Le Pen, who garnered international attention for his numerous attempts to secure the French presidency.

A particularly vocal supporter of his was a man in his eighties, living out his retirement in Malaga, Spain. José León Ramírez Reina, also known as Léon Degrelle, gave a series of interviews from 1992, claiming that he was a ‘*vieux copain*’ (old mate) of Le Pen, and frequently spoke to him on the phone.<sup>267</sup> Given the political climate, such claims were widely publicised. Due to his incendiary language and increasing popularity, Le Pen enjoyed considerable media attention and also scrutiny. Thus certain phrases and word choices, like when he infamously talked about a ‘*fournée*’ (roaster/oven, a word with heavy Holocaust connections), did not go unchallenged. This particular word made its reappearance through Degrelle, who had used it in a public letter to Pope John Paul II from 1979 when the Pope visited Auschwitz Concentration Camp.<sup>268</sup> Unsurprisingly, this led to not just renewed discussion of Degrelle (and his relationship with Le Pen), but of the Rexist Party in general. Perhaps in part due to the undeniable effectiveness of many of the Rexist media and propaganda campaigns, their visuals and techniques were revisited in later years by right-wing groups in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe. Especially in the data-heavy modern world, the parallels with Rexism were often picked up, and established a pan-

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<sup>267</sup> ‘*Fournée*’: un ‘*vieux copain*’ fasciste contredit Le Pen

<sup>268</sup> Nabil Touati, ‘La “fournée” de Le Pen inspirée par un “vieux copain” fasciste?’, *Huffington Post*, 19th June 2014, accessed 14/06/18, [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/06/19/fournee-le-pen-video-leon-degrelle\\_n\\_5510145.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2014/06/19/fournee-le-pen-video-leon-degrelle_n_5510145.html)



European legacy of the Rexists as a ‘model’ for language or visuals used by political parties and individuals to this day.

Overall then, there appears to be a recurring legacy of the Rexist Party, that played out both in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe. Whilst the initial post-war environment still concerned itself with the official party and its followers, the legacy undoubtedly changed over time. As had happened even during the war, Degrelle proved larger than the party, and through his longevity (and persistence in publishing literature) he created a legacy for himself (and by extension for his party and movement). Beyond this, the legacy shifted over time to concern the ideology and context of the party rather than the physical apparatus of the group itself. Unlike the Flemish extremist groups like VNV or *Verdinaso*, it was Rexism that continued to crop up in parliamentary discussions (perhaps due to the national outlook of the party), and it was Rexism that was ultimately used as a label with which to brand views deemed extreme or non-conformist, as seen in the 1990s with the *Vlaams Blok*.

### Chapter 3: The Social Legacy:

#### i. The people of Belgium

Despite their relatively brief existence as a political entity, the Rexist Party left an indelible mark upon Belgium and its people. Given the unique linguistic, cultural and historic tensions that permeate Belgian society, the notion of Belgian identity is itself a uniquely ‘Belgian’ concept. As such, it is anchored to a small number of institutions and organisations that have historically provided structure to institutional and political life.<sup>269</sup> In the face of this, the Rexist Party pursued an active campaign that combined both attempts to co-opt and reject the establishment’s *status quo*. In the leadup to the Second World War, the Rexist Party faced a number of rebuffs as these institutions (and politicians) closed ranks and prevented outsiders from gaining considerable influence. The struggles of the Rexist Party continued throughout the occupation and their realignment towards the NSDAP, given the lukewarm reception they received from the MVBV. Nevertheless, the archives of personal interactions (e.g. between Daye, King Leopold III and Count Capelle), along with the parliamentary records, suggest an oversized legacy within the Belgian national identity, arguably in large part due to Degrelle’s propensity to dream big and make high risk moves.<sup>270</sup>

Legacy is an inherently subjective notion however, and it would be wrong to paint this as one uniform ‘Rexist legacy’ for the entire country. Indeed, the institutions themselves (that comprise any perceivable Belgian identity) mean different things to different societal groupings, and they themselves have competing legacies; in the 1950 Monarchy Referendum for example (determining whether Leopold III should return from exile), Flanders voted predominantly in favour as did the province of Luxembourg, whilst the rest of Wallonia voted on average against Leopold’s return.<sup>271</sup> In this regard it is therefore useful to analyse Rexism not just from an institutional or a political standpoint, but also from a societal perspective. Is it possible to discern what Rexism meant for the everyday people of Belgium? Did this happen in different ways in different regions or subsections of the country? Did this legacy change over time,

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<sup>269</sup> Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and nationhood, 1830-1910*, 31

<sup>270</sup> See Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 348 i.a. for Rex’s relationship with the Royal Court

<sup>271</sup> See Herman Van Goethem, *Belgium and the monarchy: from national independence to national disintegration* (Brussels: University Press Antwerp, 2011), 184. Flanders voted on average 72% for Leopold, Brussels only 48%, and Wallonia 42% for the king’s return.

as it did in the political sphere? Serving as the third and final strand of Keith Hopkins' 'Wigwam', this inherently more subjective element will serve as a support and elaboration for the previous chapters, rather than as a particularly self-standing appraisal.

ii. Rexism and the institutional social legacy

In this regard, it is useful to start by briefly returning to the Belgian institutions. On top of their direct relationships with the Rexists, one can analyse the changing ways in which people perceived these institutions, and whether there was an indirect Rexist influence in this or not. The monarchy for example underwent massive change following the Second World War, and the nature of the relationship between the King and the German occupation forces was much debated.<sup>272</sup> This led to the boiling over of tensions in the *Royal Question* of 1950, the referendum, and the ultimate abdication of Leopold III.<sup>273</sup> Unlike the politicians who argued over unconstitutional overreach and legalistic details, much of the broader population saw this debate within the context of collaboration and resistance. In this regard, the attitudes of society regarding collaboration (as in whether it should face post-war retribution or not) played a large part in the *Royal Question*.

For the pre-eminent Belgian scholar Herman Van Goethem, the memory of collaboration played a large part in the legacy of both the war and the monarchy. It is his argument that Flanders was much more open to collaboration than Wallonia (given the preferential treatment offered by the Germans through their *Flamenpolitik*), whilst Wallonia had a far stronger resistance. Within this context, he also contends that Degrelle was a 'much overrated figure' and a non-entity when discussing the Belgian monarchy.<sup>274</sup> Yet this argument seems to misunderstand the polarising effect of Degrelle in Belgian society, and the general tendency for collaboration and resistance to go hand in hand as a matter of cause and effect. Thus it appears overly simplistic to focus on collaboration in one half of the country and resistance in the other. After all, the strength of Rex was not in the north (where one would assume that different

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<sup>272</sup> See Figs. 6A-6B in Appendix B; data taken from Beyen et al. *Plenum.be*

<sup>273</sup> Thomson, *Europe since Napoleon*, 829

<sup>274</sup> Van Goethem, *Belgium and the monarchy*, 191

collaborators might look upon each other favourably in times of war), but in Wallonia. It is therefore useful to look at collaboration and resistance as two sides of the same coin, or at the very least two instincts that are symbiotically related.

After all, if one is to look at the resistance that occurred in Wallonia, then the targets must be considered just as important as the perpetrators. Apart from the Wehrmacht soldiers (who were themselves from many nations), the MVBN was operated in large part by Belgian citizens. In the same way, many of the acts of resistance (at least, those reported and disseminated in propaganda messaging) were carried out by Belgians on Belgians. And in Wallonia especially, these were frequently carried out by the resistance upon Rexists. A vast number of mayors were replaced by Rexists throughout the country, and they became particularly prominent targets for such attacks.<sup>275</sup> Indeed, propaganda pamphlets such as the weekly '*News from Belgium*' frequently detailed resistance attacks against Rexist mayors, from Tournai and Verviers to Charleroi and Ham to name but a sample from across Belgium.<sup>276</sup> It is true that these mayors were attacked for their relationship with the Reich rather than their Rexist outlook *per se*, but over time the two came to mean one and the same thing (as seen in parliamentary debates in later years). It is thus an oversimplification to immediately dismiss Degrelle (and his party) as 'much overrated'; the vaunted Walloon resistance clearly rated them enough to take the risk of attacking them.

Potential collaboration is just one of the factors that dominated Belgian social identity in the post-war years, both in regard to the King and in general sentiment. Through focusing on this one small angle, it is therefore possible to see regional variation and the undeniable role of the Rexist Party within this mental legacy. Emphasised further by the self-declared personal ties between Degrelle and the monarch, this memory of the Rexists as a potential tool of collaboration entered the

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<sup>275</sup> Nico Wouters, *Mayoral collaboration under Nazi occupation in Belgium, the Netherlands and France, 1938-46* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 237

<sup>276</sup> *News from Belgium*, Vol. 2, No. 39, September 26 1942; *News from Belgium*, Vol. 2, No. 46, November 14 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=ur-87-68>; *News from Belgium*, Vol. 2, No. 51, December 19 1942 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1942), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1080&context=ur-87-68>; *News from Belgium*, Vol. 3, No. 9, February 27 1943 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1943), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1054&context=ur-87-68> i.a.

collective mindset in a time when potential collaboration and war-time loyalties was very much the subject on everyone's lips, both inside parliament and on the streets.

As alluded to within previous chapters, the social legacy of the Rexists can also be seen through the Church's inability to fully shrug off the Rexists, and particularly the ever-vocal Degrelle, who continued to publish awkward documents and feature in interviews until his final years. Moreover, Belgium remained a highly religious country; in the late 1950s, around 65% of children still attended Church-run primary schools.<sup>277</sup> Within this context, it must be remembered that Degrelle was undoubtedly a pious man and started his movement as a means by which to promote a catholic revival within Belgium.<sup>278</sup> Although the Rexist Party changed its ideologies massively over time and found itself quickly at odds with the organised Church of Belgium under Cardinal Van Roey, the leadership (and Degrelle above all others) continued to profess their undying faith for the true Catholic Church. As part of his post-war career, Degrelle was one of the leaders of the *Círculo Español de Amigos de Europa* (CEDADE), one of the largest neo-Nazi groups in post-war Europe.<sup>279</sup> In this capacity he ran the group's printing press; almost all literature produced by them had his name attached to it. The Catholic Church (and to an extent the Belgian Parliament) therefore had a fine balance to achieve: dismissing Degrelle's writings and refuting his arguments, but also depriving them of airtime and discussion. As a result, Degrelle slipped from the public consciousness for low-information individuals, but became increasingly polarising for others.

Perhaps the one moment that highlights this the clearest is Pope John Paul II's iconic decision to visit the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in his native Poland, in 1979. Given the Cold War context of the visit (and the recentness of the Pope's election), the preparations garnered mass coverage, not least in Catholic Belgium. In May 1979 (a month before the Pope would ultimately go), Degrelle wrote an open letter to the Pope, calling on him not to go, advising him not to take 'positions in unsettled historical debates' and that he must represent all Catholics regardless of

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<sup>277</sup> Brutsaert, 'State and Catholic elementary schools in Belgium', 32

<sup>278</sup> Conway, 'Obituary: Leon Degrelle'

<sup>279</sup> Marcel Tenenbaum, *Of Men, Monsters and Mazel: Surviving the Final Solution in Belgium* (Xlibris, 2016)

previous political affiliation.<sup>280</sup> This and his frequent and public Holocaust-denials led to a series of court cases, most notably from a camp survivor Violeta Friedmann, and the Supreme Court of Spain ultimately ruled against him, levying a series of fines.<sup>281</sup> The coverage of these high-profile episodes naturally proved controversial within Belgium, due to the risks of engaging with extremist dialogue as already mentioned. Regardless, the result was the continued presence of Degrelle in the public consciousness from a religious point of view, and this later legacy became defined by Holocaust-denial, understandably condemned across Belgium.

Beyond these later modifications to the Degrelle legacy, it is prudent to return once more to the Rexist Party in general. After all, the party did receive a considerable 11.49% of the public vote in May 1936 with very little preparation and with little in the way of organised coercion as had been seen from extremist parties in other nations.<sup>282</sup> A considerable number of people in Belgium had sympathies for the party as a whole, and it is therefore useful to consider the evolution of the social legacy of Rexism for the general population of Belgium. A slight complication in this regard is the difference between the individual and the collective. During the period 1935-1945, the world was far less connected, and people would have been less aware of the *minutiae* of daily life in other communities. As such, opinions on the Rexists for example would have been largely shaped by individual interactions on a local level. Nevertheless, there must have been a semblance of a collective opinion regarding Rex, in order to propel them into national parliament in the first place. In this regard, these ‘general’ opinions would have been shaped to a large extent by the print media and the wireless.

In the pre-war period, a large proportion of the print-media was tied to the establishment. Explicitly Catholic papers like the *Gazet van Antwerpen* or *La Libre Belgique* clearly represented the *status quo*, built around the principles of ‘throne,

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<sup>280</sup> Léon Degrelle, *Letter to the Pope on his visit to Auschwitz* (1979), accessed 14/06/18, [www.mourningtheancient.com/degrele-pope.pdf](http://www.mourningtheancient.com/degrele-pope.pdf)

<sup>281</sup> Tenenbaum, *Of Men, Monsters and Mazel*

<sup>282</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

church, and free-market economy'.<sup>283</sup> In this regard they disseminated the words of institution figures like Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland, or the Primate of Belgium, Cardinal Van Roey. Perhaps more interesting are the comparatively independent newspapers like *Le Soir*, which supported itself financially through advertising. Even *Le Soir* quickly came out in opposition to Rexism, promoting instead the independence and neutrality of the press.<sup>284</sup> Nevertheless, the Rexists had their own widely read newspaper, *Le Pays Réel*, which reported the Rexist cause in a totally different way. In sum, it would be incredibly difficult to assess the impact of these various newspapers in this early period as they all had their own implicit biases, whilst the Rexist identity itself was constantly shifting.

It was during the German occupation that the long-term legacy of Rex was ultimately formed, as the party morphed from a clerical anti-establishment movement into a shaky replica of the NSDAP. The difficulty when studying this period is that media consumption was bifurcated: the officially approved media (from traditional sources like *Het Laatste Nieuws* to the Rexists' own *Le Pays Réel*) operated through the office of the MVBN censors, and the numerous resistance groups each had their own underground newspapers.<sup>285</sup> Both realms of journalism naturally had their own motives and their own ways to present 'fact', and one should not cast judgement on the millions of Belgians who formed their opinion of Rexist legacy (be that good or bad) from their pages.

### iii. Rex and collaboration: the Belgian Information Centre

Bearing in mind the constrictions imposed by both the physical and thematic scope, it is nevertheless possible to tentatively track the evolution of Rexism in the mind's eye of the entire Belgian population. In this regard it is beneficial to use a third form of wartime publication: the compilation 'information pamphlets' created for Belgians living abroad. Deposited within the 'University of Toledo Digital Repository', one of the most useful sources is the weekly '*News from Belgium*', published by the Belgian

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<sup>283</sup> Luc Van Couter, 'Antimaçonnerie 1918-1945: Een onderzoek naar debeeldvorming over de vrijmetselarij in de Belgische pers' (Diss., Universiteit Gent, 2016), 22

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Harry Van Velthoven, *Zwerver in niemandsland: Julius Hoste en zijn Londenoorlogsdagboek* (Gent: Academia Press, 2005), 79

Information Centre based in New York.<sup>286</sup> Issued between early 1941 and the latter half of 1944 (stopping soon after Belgian liberation), these pamphlets provided an ‘outsider’s look’ on all news coming out of Belgium, both from (German-controlled) official and from underground sources. It is unfortunate that there were no copies issued in 1940, the year that the Rexists began their search for a concrete role in occupied Belgium, but the following years nevertheless provide considerable data. Given the regularity of the issues, the (almost) complete corpus enables both individual points of illustration and trends over time, much like the *Plenum* records did for parliamentary debates.

There is no denying the fact that the ‘*News from Belgium*’ was a direct form of propaganda, printed by the Americans for the Allied cause. It therefore contains numerous weaknesses inherent in such material: Germans and collaborators are cast in a wholly dark light, and a fine balance is achieved between emphasising their barbarity whilst not damaging morale or sounding too devoid of hope; resistance groups on the other hand are painted as ‘patriots’ who gloriously resist or are unjustly punished. In short, the pamphlets fail to provide the whole picture. On the one hand, the articles within are source-linked direct summaries from both German- and resistance-controlled media (both print and radio), but conversely one must remember that the editors in New York actively chose what would and would not appear in each week’s edition. These flaws do not make the pamphlets irrelevant; on the contrary, they make the active choices of the editors interesting in themselves. The Rexists existed throughout the publishing existence of the ‘*News from Belgium*’, and yet were included in markedly different ways by the pamphlet over time. Looking at the data trends from the pamphlets over time, it is possible to observe patterns that suggest the relevance of the Rexist Party, from both an outside perspective, and also for those Belgians in the country and elsewhere who were informed by reading these pamphlets.

On a *prima facie* level, the *Belgian Information Centre* pamphlets serve as an incredibly useful source for information during the time of occupation. News (be it factually accurate or not) could be hard to obtain from the outside, but the cumulative impact of these weekly releases serves to sketch the changing fortunes of different

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<sup>286</sup> The ‘War Information Centre’ of the University of Toledo served as a repository for the US Dept. of Education for the period 1940-1945. See ‘War Information Centre Pamphlets’, University of Toledo Digital Repository, accessed 14/06/18, [utdr.utoledo.edu/ur-87-68/](http://utdr.utoledo.edu/ur-87-68/)



groups and individuals throughout the war. In this regard, it is almost of secondary importance whether the printed words are verifiable or not; legacy is built upon opinion and impression far more than fact, and media like this played a large part in the shaping of these opinions. In this regard, the pamphlets provide useful evidence of the Rexist Party's (and Léon Degrelle's) actions and interactions in occupied Belgium. The earlier pamphlets from 1941 for example trace Degrelle's decision to sign up with the Wehrmacht and to fight as a non-commissioned officer.<sup>287</sup> Despite leaving the country, Degrelle's exploits continue to be mentioned, and by 1944 the propagandists producing the pamphlets almost gloat as they track Degrelle's retreat along the Eastern Front, from Korsun and the Cherkassy Pocket and further on.<sup>288</sup> On top of this however, the nature of the documents also means that light-hearted moments are included, such as a widespread joke about Degrelle and his dwindling number of active supporters.<sup>289</sup> Jokes like this are perhaps as useful as the factual content; they track a willingness (at least in certain circles) to make fun of Degrelle and the Rexist Party, whilst simultaneously highlighting a degree of relevancy and importance, if they are still 'joke-worthy'.

#### iv. Rexism and its legacy in Belgian propaganda

As alluded to, the '*News from Belgium*' collections are also useful when taken as a whole corpus, allowing for analysis of certain trends over time. Given the regularity with which they were produced (up to 51 editions per year), one can discern the topics and events that were considered important (to the editors, at least) and how these considerations changed over time. Moreover, the regularised format of the pamphlets creates a structure which can then be analysed: each pamphlet, for example, is almost without fail 5 to 7 pages long, divided into a section on 'The War', on 'The Occupation' (including economic life and the resistance), on 'Belgium Abroad', and

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<sup>287</sup> *News from Belgium*, Vol. 1, No. 23, September 6 1941

<sup>288</sup> *News from Belgium*, Vol. 4, No. 20, May 20 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=ur-87-68>; *News from Belgium*, Vol. 4, No. 21, May 27 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=ur-87-68>

<sup>289</sup> *News from Belgium*, Vol. 3, No. 47, November 20 1943 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1943), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=ur-87-68> – the joke centres around Degrelle's increasing worry that there won't be enough Rexists left to attend his imminent funeral...

on 'Belgian Congo'. Alongside this, the pamphlets arguably benefit from the broad range of sources used, from the New York Times and the *Svenska Dagbladet* to the *Kölnische Zeitung* and the *Le Pays Réel*. Keeping track of both the frequency of mentions over time and the specific terminology used (similarly to what was done with the *Plenum* database), it is hoped that one can trace the impression of Rexism left upon the people of Belgium by the media.

Looking first at the Rexist Party, one can trace the frequency with which the party was mentioned by the pamphlets over time. In comparison to the database of records from the Chamber of the parliament, recording the individual mentions is somewhat easier, although more painstaking. The pamphlet is written in English, and when the party is mentioned, it is almost solely as the 'Rexist' party (or as 'Rexist' people). This avoids the issue of the duplications and overlaps of *rex*, *rexisme* and *rexiste* seen in the previous chapter. Focusing on the mentions of Rexism over the course of the corpus, one can see the struggles of the party for relevance. In the early period of occupation, the party is mentioned with remarkable frequency.<sup>290</sup> Over time however, the Rexists lose some of their high-profile coverage, and if they are mentioned, it is more likely to be in a passing reference. Nevertheless, the Rexists never totally lose their relevance in the propaganda pamphlets, and towards the end of the occupation in 1944 the Rexists are referenced in a far more direct way once again.

This increase can most clearly be seen through the presentation of the data as an average per month; this mitigates the issue of missing editions for specific weeks.<sup>291</sup> Looking at the adjusted values per month, it is possible to see numerous mentions of the Rexists through the first months of 1944. Regarding the focus of these mentions, they often cover atrocities committed by the Rexists, and acts of retribution by the resistance.<sup>292</sup> Beyond this, it reveals a degree of social separation between the Rexists and the rest of the population; they no longer attended the same Church services (but used German army chaplains instead) and by April 1944 even sent their children to

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<sup>290</sup> See Fig. 7 in Appendix B

<sup>291</sup> See Fig. 8 in Appendix B

<sup>292</sup> News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 13, April 1 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=ur-87-68>; News from Belgium, Vol. 4, No. 16, April 22 1944 (New York: Belgian Information Centre, 1944), accessed 14/06/18, <http://utdr.utoledo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=ur-87-68> i.a.

‘Rexist-only’ schools.<sup>293</sup> In this regard the accounts of increased violence between Rexists and the resistance corroborates the claims that the Rexists grew increasingly violent and emboldened in the final year of Belgian occupation, once they could see there would be no favourable outcome to the war in Belgium.<sup>294</sup> In this regard, the persistence of the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ in reporting these misdeeds (from both sides) highlighted the mental disassociation between the Rexists and the majority of the people. No longer treated like redeemable Belgian citizens, they became wholly associated with the Germans in the publications, thereby impacting their legacy as traitors to their country of birth.

It is also interesting to return once again to the individual legacy of Léon Degrelle over the course of the war. In the post-war years, it was natural that there would be far more mentions of Degrelle than his party (at least in parliamentary plenary) given his survival and staying power as a thorn in the side of the Belgian institutions.<sup>295</sup> During the war however, the opposite was true: the propaganda pamphlets of the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ understandably had a far greater desire to report the actions of the Rexists across the country, rather than just one man, no matter how influential. Unfortunately, there are very few surviving *News from Belgium* pamphlets from 1941 and it is hard to provide a definitive interpretation, but the copies that survive nevertheless refer to Degrelle with relative frequency.<sup>296</sup> As the occupation progresses however, Degrelle is mentioned with less frequency than his party, notwithstanding the odd mention in the final months of the occupation.<sup>297</sup> From the middle of 1942 onwards, Degrelle is mentioned with increasing rarity until he is simply not mentioned at all, despite the party itself still enjoying a level of coverage.<sup>298</sup> This is not particularly surprising, given the fact that Degrelle was by this time fighting on the Eastern Front with the Germans, and had less of a direct impact on life in Belgium (at least compared to the Rexist mayors, journalists, and general collaborators who remained).

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<sup>293</sup> *News from Belgium*, Vol. 4, No. 4, January 29 1944; *News from Belgium*, Vol. 4, No. 14, April 8 1944 i.a.

<sup>294</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 257

<sup>295</sup> See Figs. 3, 4A-4C in Appendix B

<sup>296</sup> See *News from Belgium*, Vol. 1, No. 23, September 6 1941, where Degrelle is mentioned in 4 articles, and Rexists in 5

<sup>297</sup> See Fig. 7 in Appendix B

<sup>298</sup> See Fig. 8 in Appendix B

Nevertheless, the distinct language used, both regarding Degrelle and his party, can be of just as much interest. The mentions of the party and individuals clearly suggests their importance within the social mindset, something which is key to establishing a long-lasting legacy. One must also take into account the manner in which they are mentioned however. The early pamphlets categorically refer to ‘Degrelle’ (suggesting no need to provide a first name or mention who he is) or the ‘Rexists’.<sup>299</sup> Over time however, the party was described in a number of varying terms, from *Quislings* to ‘Belgian Nazis’ and ‘Walloon-fascists’.<sup>300</sup> Similarly, a large number of articles within the pamphlets come from *Le Pays Réel*, the party’s official paper. The newspaper is also called various different things over time, from ‘Rexist newspaper’ to ‘national-socialist newspaper’, or even more bluntly a ‘Nazi newspaper’.<sup>301</sup> It is difficult to trace a clear pattern with these appellations, apart from the fact that *Le Pays Réel* is more likely a ‘Rexist’ newspaper in the earlier months of occupation, and as time progresses the Rexists appear to lose their independent agency, at least as far as Allied propaganda is concerned. This again points to the argument that, as the liberation of Belgium drew ever closer, the Rexists found themselves alienated from the rest of the Belgian people, represented as mere puppets of the NSDAP without an independent voice or opinion of their own. Within this artificially black and white world of propaganda, of good versus evil, Allies versus Axis, and patriots versus *Quislings*, the Rexist Party found their reputation dyed completely black, without any mitigating shades of gray.

#### v. Regional variations on the social legacy

Beyond this generalised approach, the data from the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ makes it possible to make some inferences in regard to regional variation. To this end, one can look at the locations in which Rexist activities were reported to have occurred. Whilst by no means a comprehensive compilation of all acts committed by the Rexists, it nevertheless carries weight in the same way as the general mentions do; the editors of the pamphlets made conscious decisions to mention specific locations and not others, and the repetition of certain places presumably left an impact that would have

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<sup>299</sup> See i.a. News from Belgium, Vol. 1, No. 23, September 6 1941

<sup>300</sup> See i.a. News from Belgium, Vol. 3, No. 38, September 18 1943

<sup>301</sup> See i.a. News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 15, April 11 1942

been felt by the people.<sup>302</sup> In 146 instances within the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ pamphlets, the actions of the Rexists are reported in relation to specific towns and villages. Dividing these mentions into the three regions of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region), one can see a clear contrast across the country.<sup>303</sup> 82 of the locations lie within the borders of Wallonia, and 51 were within greater Brussels. In contrast, only 13 such mentions referred to places in Flanders. Thus one can infer a clear regional split: those in Wallonia were far more likely to have experienced the actions of the Rexists first hand, whilst their compatriots in Flanders based their opinions on hear-say and secondary information. At first glance, this would appear to support the narrative that Rexism, enjoying the majority of its support in the Francophone regions, left a totally different footprint in northern and southern Belgium.

Further subdividing Belgium into her 10 constituent provinces, one can see further divergence in the frequency of actions attributed to Rexists.<sup>304</sup> Over 70% of the references are for settlements in either the province of Hainaut or Liège, together comprising 69 of the 95 occurrences outside of Brussels.<sup>305</sup> According to the wartime censuses of 1939 and 1944, these two provinces held around 2 million inhabitants in total: 1,238,500 and 972,500 for Hainaut and Liège respectively in 1939; then 1,190,700 and 885,000 respectively in 1944.<sup>306</sup> During this period the population of Belgium was recorded as 8,386,400 (in 1939) and 8,272,900 (in 1944). It is therefore extremely interesting to note that about 47% of all recorded Rexist action in Belgium, and roughly 73% of action outside of Brussels, took place in two provinces that only represented about 25% of the national population.<sup>307</sup>

Mapping these locations with an even greater level of detail and precision, the concentration of Rexist activity forms an even stronger pattern. By plotting the locations given in the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ pamphlets by their modern-day

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<sup>302</sup> See Fig. 2 in Appendix A for the locations of Rexist activity detailed in the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ pamphlets.

<sup>303</sup> See Fig. 9B in Appendix B

<sup>304</sup> Brussels is a region and not a province, and thus these findings exclude the 51 data points catalogued for the Brussels-Capital Region.

<sup>305</sup> See Fig. 9A in Appendix B

<sup>306</sup> Jan Lahmeyer, ‘Belgium: Historical demographic data of the administrative division’, 2004, accessed 14/06/18, <http://www.populstat.info/Europe/belgiump.htm>

<sup>307</sup> This is of course an interpretation purely of those events disseminated by the ‘Belgian Information Centre’

postcodes, one can see the most precise mapping across the country.<sup>308</sup> Brussels is perhaps unsurprisingly a noticeable ‘hotspot’, in large part attributable to the fact that the Rexist Party operated much of their party machinery out of the capital. Beyond this, a discernable pattern can be observed. This is not the clear-cut Flanders versus Wallonia split that one might think *prima facie*, and it provides far more clarity than the map divided by Belgian provinces, which misrepresents the actual location of reported activity. A few disparate mentions in Flanders and in larger conurbations across Belgium notwithstanding (alongside a few locations in the Rexist heartland of Belgian Luxembourg), the majority of all mentions lie within a horizontal band of the country just below Brussels and the regional border. Rather than particular provinces or regions revealing a predilection for Rexist action, the map divided by postcodes appears to suggest a geographical predilection instead.

Indeed, this visible band corresponds with the *sillon industriel*, the industrial belt that stretches horizontally across Belgium, following the course of the Meuse and Sambre rivers. This industrialised area, dominated by heavy industry (and densely populated) was of key importance to the German war effort, and was conversely the location for widespread resistance and sabotage.<sup>309</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the Rexists would have a large presence here: they were utilised by the Germans to protect places of importance and were offered a number of mayorships in this strategic area, as attested to within the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ pamphlets.<sup>310</sup> Moreover if collaboration and resistance are to be treated as two sides of the same coin then it follows that, in an area of great importance for the Germans, there would be a disproportionate number of attacks, reprisals and counter-acts from both sides. Within this struggle, the Rexists would have found themselves as both perpetrators and victims of activity deemed worthy of being mentioned in the ‘Belgian Information Centre’ periodicals.

It is therefore an oversimplification to simply assume that the Rexists received greater coverage in those areas where they met with early electoral success (being

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<sup>308</sup> See Fig. 10 in Appendix B

<sup>309</sup> Flore Plisnier, ‘Formations B’ in *Belgium WWII*, accessed 14/06/18, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/belgique-en-guerre/articles/formations-b.html>

<sup>310</sup> News from Belgium. Vol. 2, No. 43, October 24 1942; News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 46, November 14 1942; News from Belgium, Vol. 2, No. 51, December 19 1942 i.a.

Brussels and Wallonia). Rather, a large part of their early support base came from the lower-classes that populated the *sillon industriel* (as seen in the Rexists' proactivity in distributing food to striking labourers in the area).<sup>311</sup> As a secondary issue, these areas played an inflated role during the German occupation, and thus the Rexists played a considerable part there in their capacity as facilitators of the MVBN regime. By extension it is not unreasonable to suggest that the persecution of Rexists (and vice versa concerning the Rexist persecution of 'Patriots') was not so much a result of their ideological standpoints, but rather due to their role in coopting the resources and workforce of the *sillon industriel* for the benefit of the Reich's war effort. Regardless of true motivations (which are intrinsically impossible to generalise), the 'Belgian Information Centre' played its part in proliferating this particular interpretation; the majority of articles do not describe 'patriots' facing off against Rexists due to philosophical disagreements regarding the Church's hierarchy or the role of the King in modern Belgium, but rather due to the Rexists' willing collaboration with the MVBN and traitorous betrayal of their compatriots.

vi. *Les Lieux de Mémoire : Rexism*

Finally, one can also explore the social legacy of the Rexist Party through the adoption of a reading inspired by other historical methods or concepts. In this regard one can use the concept of sites of memory (*les lieux de mémoire*) introduced by Pierre Nora. As a method through which to approach the weighty construct of identity, *les lieux de mémoire* treats specific items, places, people or things as sites of memory that contribute to the identity of a collective group. These 'sites' are treated as building blocks that play a role in the creation of identity; although the factual events surrounding the 'site' have long gone, the memory of it survives. Although the 'real environments of memory' fade, the 'real' find themselves replaced by a 'realm' of memory which continues to impact people in the present.<sup>312</sup> Almost as a prerequisite, the site must not be static: it is a benefit if its meaning and place in the public consciousness changes over time (and even the forgetting of certain elements can prove vital in understanding its role in the collective memory).

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<sup>311</sup> See footnote 177

<sup>312</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, xii

Although Nora developed this approach with a clear focus on French national identity and what it means to be French, it is by no means theoretically limited to the French Republic. As has been repeatedly highlighted, the people of Belgium have engaged in a similar struggle in determining a single unitary national identity. Many of the variables central to Nora's concept (a heterogeneous society, a rich history, political upheavals and so forth) apply to Belgium as well, and thus it would appear fruitful to apply Nora's way of reading history to Belgium. In this regard, it is possible to treat the Rexist Party itself as a *lieu de mémoire*; as a 'realm' of memory that has left an impact, but whose very memory and appraisal has been dynamic over time. Pierre Nora himself published a comparative essay looking at the Communist and Gaullist parties that played such a large role in French politics between liberation and the 1970s.<sup>313</sup> In much the same way, one can look at the changing role of the Rexist party as a site of memory. Such a method naturally employs generalisation and assumption but also offers an alternative mindset through which to appraise Rexism.

The power of the Rexist Party as a constituent part of national identity lies in the fact that its founding was accompanied by an active drive by its undoubtedly intelligent and charismatic founders to capture the essence of a Belgian national identity. It is an inescapable truism that in attempting to reify a national identity, they left imprints in myriad spheres that would (to varying degrees) comprise the nebulous identity of the country. Take for example their attempts to curry favour with the royal court, which was initially done through publicised visits to the palace, and the correspondence between Count Capelle (Secretary to Leopold III) and Pierre Daye (leader of the Rexists in the Chamber). Coupled with the party's pro-monarchist policies designed to extend the powers of the king, this served to highlight both the role of the monarchy in Belgian politics (be that for good or for ill), and the role of political parties in shaping the relationship.<sup>314</sup>

This contribution to the national identity would change over time; during the occupation, the relationship between the Rexists, the occupying MVBN, and the Crown became particularly muddled. During the early months of occupation, Leopold

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<sup>313</sup> Pierre Nora, 'Gaullists and Communists' in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora, (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1998), 205ff.

<sup>314</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 214



visited Berchtesgaden and Capelle met with Degrelle.<sup>315</sup> Degrelle and his supporters claimed to have Leopold's backing, whilst the King's supporters like Admiral Keyes denied any sort of relationship at all.<sup>316</sup> People ultimately believed what they wanted to believe, and the result of this opaqueness was felt in public opinion. The Rexists destroyed their own reputation through their concrete and indisputable collaboration. Leopold did nothing of the sort, but through the perceived relationship he had with Rexism, the general feeling that he was 'involved' in collaboration increased, and the media continued to speculate about his personal relationship with Degrelle long after the war.<sup>317</sup> Besides some political actors, the mood in 1935 cannot be considered particularly anti-monarchist or anti-Leopold; nevertheless, the dialogue changed due to the Second World War and the knowledge of Rexism's active collaboration, with the result that anything short of clear repudiation of the Germans was treated as tacit endorsement. This is not to say that the Rexists caused the change of public opinion against Leopold in the post-war years, but rather that the memory of the Rexists changed people's perception of institutionalised resistance versus collaboration. The image of the Church, which symbolically severed ties with the Rexists pre-war and denounced them from the very top (through Cardinal Van Roey), was arguably boosted by this change in mindset and the memory of their condemnation of the Rexists. The Crown, by contrast, suffered the opposite.

In much the same way, one can look at other contributions of Rexism to the long-term national memory. Starting *in media res*, one can return to the 1990s and people's memory of the Rexist Party at the time. In 1991, the *Vlaams Blok* finally made their breakthrough, rocketing from 2 seats and 1.9% of the vote to 12 seats and 6.6%.<sup>318</sup> Naturally, the collective memory lingered upon another party that had risen from obscurity to become a considerable force in parliament. The result was the flow of comparisons between the Rexists and the *Blok*, from media pundits to parliamentarians (accusing people like De Man of acting 'like Rex' or comparing the campaign

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<sup>315</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 26

<sup>316</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m'a dit*, 348

<sup>317</sup> Keyes, *Outrageous fortune*, 398

<sup>318</sup> Federale Overheidsdienst Binnenlandse Zaken - Directie van de Verkiezingen, 'Evolutie van de kieswetgeving'

literature of the two parties).<sup>319</sup> Of interest is the fact that these parallels focused on the non-cooperative nature of the parties, and the accusations of anti-democratic tendencies. That the Rexist Party should be recalled as a point of comparison is remarkable in itself; the two parties were ideologically very different, with one being a Flemish-nationalist separatist party, and the other being a unitarist and monarchist party. Some people mentioned the VNV or *Verdinaso*, but the Rexist Party stood out as the point of comparison; at the very least, this highlights the staying power of the Rexist Party within the collective memory.

Moreover, the comparison is interesting because of the focus on non-conformity. The Rexists clearly were non-conformist and anti-establishment, both in their campaign language regarding the traditional parties, and in their behaviour within the parliament.<sup>320</sup> Within the context of the 1930s, this non-conformity had been a key part of their attractiveness and proved a source of popularity with those seeking a breath of fresh air and a break from the plodding *status quo*. Already visible in 1938 and 1939 and later exacerbated by society's struggle to overcome the cleavage of collaboration versus resistance during the German occupation, non-conformity started to be treated as a liability and arguably even as something unpatriotic. Within the context of national unity governments, anyone not pulling in the same direction became problematic. With the collective memory thus altered, non-conformity shifted from a potential accolade to something implicitly carrying the burden of collaborationism and unpatriotic behaviour. Keeping this in mind one can point to the Communist Party of Belgium, a non-conformist party that failed to achieve the success of its sister-party in France. Despite the Communists organising a vast amount of the resistance in occupied Belgium, they became associated with 'otherness' and un-Belgian behaviour, whilst parties like the Catholic Party, whose upper echalons fled into exile, returned during liberation and burnished their anti-Nazi credentials.

In this regard the trauma of the occupation affected the collective memory; the Rexists were indeed remembered for their non-conformity, but this non-conformity was now an undesirable quality, and it therefore drew uncomplimentary parallels to the *Vlaams Blok*. In this way, one can use the methods of Pierre Nora to reevaluate the

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<sup>319</sup> 'Session of 9 December 1998', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*; see also Fig. 1 in Appendix A

<sup>320</sup> 'Indices of 1936', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives* for Rexist refusal to approve the judiciary budget

legacy of the Rexist Party. By using them as a *lieu de mémoire*, it is possible to explore both the ways in which the Rexist Party have changed the memorisation of the past, and the ways in which the Rexist Party themselves have undergone various recollections over time.

vii. The relevance of Rexism today

Combining these different elements of the Rexist legacy, both direct and indirect, as a concrete party and as a site of memory, and as a collective and a group of people, it becomes apparent that the Rexists are not merely consigned to the past. The party has been dissolved, and its leader has since died (in 1994), but it remains connected to the present day. As the Nora-inspired approach to memory reveals, the Rexists are still important due to their role in impacting Belgian identity, and for their own changing image over time. This is an ongoing process and periodically reignites when new facts come to light or attitudes change. In 2005 for example, it came to light that prominent *Vlaams Blok* (later *Vlaams Belang*) politician Koen Dillen, son of the founder of *Vlaams Blok* Karel Dillen, was hosted by Degrelle in Spain in the 1990s.<sup>321</sup>

The memory of the Rexists has been used by both sides in recent political arguments; given the recent prominence of Bart De Wever and his Flemish-nationalist N-VA (New Flemish Alliance), some Francophone politicians commented on collaborationist elements amongst De Wever's ancestors. In reply, De Wever reminded the country that the most 'notorious' of collaborators had been Degrelle and that he was Walloon.<sup>322</sup> More than that, De Wever argued that Flanders had accepted its collaboratist past, whereas the Wallons had air-brushed Degrelle and the Rexists from their history, treating them as a mere 'aberration'. There is an irony to the fact that the Rexists, devised as a symbol of Belgian unity and unitarism, are now being used as an instrument to beat Flemish nationalists or the Walloon regional identity. With regional tensions in Belgium far from disappearing, it would appear unlikely that

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<sup>321</sup> Bénédicte Vaes, 'Nazis sans frontières: les liens entre Degrelle et le Vlaams B.', *Le Soir*, 11th January 2005, accessed 14/06/18, [http://www.lesoir.be/archive/recup/%25252Fnazis-sans-frontieres-les-liens-entre-degrelle-et-le-vl\\_t-20050111-Z0Q5FD.html](http://www.lesoir.be/archive/recup/%25252Fnazis-sans-frontieres-les-liens-entre-degrelle-et-le-vl_t-20050111-Z0Q5FD.html)

<sup>322</sup> Ian Buruma, 'Le Divorce', *The New Yorker*, 10th January 2011, accessed 14/06/18, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/10/le-divorce>

the memory of the Rexists and Léon Degrelle will disappear from Belgian political and social discourse any time soon.

### Conclusion:

If there is just one immediate impression from this investigation into the Rexist movement, it is an appreciation of that larger-than-life quality that imbued everything about it. From the very beginning, the claims of its founders were bold and brash, as they sized up against career politicians from Belgium's elite. The actions of the early Party, from the food-aid campaigns to the public rallies, were grandiose and exaggerated. The strength of their relationship with the Church and the Crown was overblown and over-emphasised, to the chagrin of many within those institutions. More than anything, the legend of Léon Degrelle was inflated to the extreme, both by him and by his die-hard followers. For a political party that functioned for only 10 years and which failed in most of its apparent goals, the sheer wealth of action and dynamism catalysed by them is staggering. But what did this ultimately mean for Belgium and for the people that lived there? What was the impact both contemporaneously and in later years? To put it bluntly, so what?

It is useful to return once more to the very concept of 'identity', and what it means for Belgium. Many of the component parts of national identity suggested by Pierre Nora are intrinsically problematic in Belgium; a vast array of potential historical figures, literary works or symbols are specifically regional rather than national.<sup>323</sup> Given the relatively recent foundation of modern Belgium, it is perhaps natural that communities maintain the memory of their longer, regional histories. Even in the present day, one must keep in mind De Wever's insistence that Degrelle was a 'Walloon' fascist rather than a Belgian one...<sup>324</sup> In the face of this heterogeneity, Josephine Hoegaert's definition stands strong. Rejecting the 'romanticised, nationalist and invented histories of the romantic and invented nation', it focuses instead upon the actions decided upon and enacted within a unitary Belgian setting.<sup>325</sup> Later comments from individuals ranging from the academic Martin Conway to the Prime Minister Yves Leterme have reinforced this notion of the Belgian identity being founded upon the institutions that drive Belgian administrative, political and societal life. With this

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<sup>323</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, x

<sup>324</sup> Buruma, 'Le Divorce'

<sup>325</sup> Hoegaerts, *Masculinity and nationhood, 1830-1910*, 2

in mind the conscious motives of the Rexist Party, who were determined to build a political message around a perceived national identity, are particularly intriguing.

It must be stressed that this is but one window into the vast (and unwieldy) notions of legacy and identity. Being subjective and hard to measure, any evaluation of these concepts naturally contains a large amount of generalisation and hypothesising. Embracing this complexity rather than shying away from it, this thesis has attempted to mitigate this fact through data analysis and the measuring of trends. In this regard, it is hoped that a degree of objectivity can be brought to the subject, following which the argumentations and justifications might serve as illustration and elaboration.

Keeping these conditions in mind, the thesis thus approaches the question of Belgian identity from a Hoegaerts-inspired direction, breaking down the potential legacy of the Rexists into three distinct (but naturally interwoven) spheres: the institutional, the political, and the social. On the one hand this allows for a broader-based evaluation, which oftentimes offers varied perspectives on the same events, such as the institutional and social legacies of the Rexists' interactions with the Crown, and specifically King Leopold III and Count Robert Capelle. On the other hand, it breaks a challenging question into three more approachable sub-parts. This approach follows that of Keith Hopkins and his Wigwam Approach to sociology.<sup>326</sup> Within this kind of investigation, one can look at a problem from multiple angles. The analysis involved in each one of these angles may well be somewhat weak, or at the very least based around 'insufficient or untrustworthy' evidence. If one treats each avenue of exploration as an individual 'pole' though, they may well have the possibility of leaning upon one another for support. Indeed, if they all point in roughly the same direction, creating a 'wigwam' of inter-dependent 'poles', then the individually weak arguments support each other and 'circumscribe truth'.

Approaching the paper through this mindset, the three main chapters can be considered as the 'poles' of a possible wigwam. Each one represents a different sphere through which the legacy of the Rexists can be measured and evaluated. Within the

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<sup>326</sup> Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 19ff.

institutional frameworks of Belgium for example, the Rexists acted like gadflies that stung the lumbering state apparatus into action. Even though Degrelle explicitly stated that he sought ‘*la victoire dans la paix*’, his messaging of ‘*Rex ou Moscou*’ and the attitudes of his followers quickly gave the Rexists an air of authoritarianism, and dictatorial qualities.<sup>327</sup> Whether fair or otherwise, this perception brought about a necessary dialogue on totalitarianism and fascism directly within the Belgian institutional (and social) milieu. No longer distanced as an extra-territorial phenomenon active in countries like Portugal, Spain, Austria and Germany, it was considered as a domestic risk as well, once the Rexists achieved tangible influence in the General Elections of May 1936.<sup>328</sup> The immediate impact of the Rexists was thus to spur the Church, under Cardinal Van Roey, into institutional condemnation of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. On the flip-side, the Crown under Leopold III was far less strident in its condemnation of Rexism; as mentioned, the result (particularly emphasised within a *lieux de mémoire* reading) contributed to the weakening of the image of the institution.

For different reasons, the political and social spheres of Belgian life were also stung into action by the actions (and perceptions) of the Rexist Party. Like many anti-establishment parties, their stunning electoral success was as much a condemnation of the existing order as it was an endorsement of the new alternative. The early Rexist focus on the *pourris* and the sordidness of the political *status quo*, which was dominated by incrementalist parties led by (often) older patricians, captured public attention and raised some genuine concerns.<sup>329</sup> In the years that followed, before the invasion of German troops on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940, Belgium can be said to have regained a degree of stability: the Van Zeeland administration stabilised the economy, and the national unity governments boosted faith in the productivity of the traditional parties.<sup>330</sup> If the 1936 election results demonstrate the failings of the political order (and public willingness to back an alternative option), then the re-calibration experienced in April 1939 (when the Rexists received only 4.25% of the vote) suggests

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<sup>327</sup> Narvaez, *Degrelle m’a dit*, 255ff.

<sup>328</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 215

<sup>329</sup> Fields, *Leon Degrelle and the Rexist party*, 3; Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213

<sup>330</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 13

a new confidence in the political establishment, and a public repudiation of the Rexist Party.

During occupation too, the Rexistists continued their stinging of the Belgian population, altering perceptions about the Belgian identity and patriotism in a way that provided ample fodder for the Allied-aligned propagandists. Ideologically, the Rexistists between 1940-1944 still believed in the promotion of a unitary Belgian state, but attempted to achieve this through collaboration with the German MVBN. Nevertheless, by the end of the war they were presented as traitors to their country who acted in a wholly un-Belgian way. That is to say, through their struggle to act on behalf of their country, they turned themselves into pariahs and came to embody the definition of un-Belgian identity. The pamphlets from the 'Belgian Information Centre' neatly demonstrate this point: when Belgian citizens partake in acts of resistance against Rexistists across the *sillon industriel*, they are called 'patriots', from which one can deduce that the Rexistists are un-patriotic, and thus un-Belgian. Indeed, when the Rexistists themselves are reported upon, they are invariably called *Quislings*; a Europe-wide name for collaborators, stemming from the name of a Norwegian.<sup>331</sup> The way in which Rexism was used as an insult (especially within the parliamentary Chamber) in later years highlights this point. Even Rexism's uncooperative nature (a selling point for many in 1936) was now seen within a context of unpatriotic collaboration with Nazism, and was used as an attack with which to diminish the arguments of opposition politicians.<sup>332</sup> Taken together, these separate 'poles' demonstrate the catalysing ability of the Rexistists to shake up the system and provoke responses. These responses were often not the desired ones (for example Cardinal Van Roey's denunciation during the Brussels by-election), but interestingly when a response was deemed inadequate by the people (such as that from King Leopold III), the perception of the responsible party suffered as a result.<sup>333</sup> In this regard the Rexistists contributed to considerable change in the Belgian identity.

The 'poles' of Hopkins' wigwam thus point loosely in the same direction. Beyond this, one can analyse this result further from the immediate and the long-term points of view. In the short term, the role of the Rexist Party as a gadfly stinging people

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<sup>331</sup> Vidkun Quisling was the puppet head of government in Norway during the German occupation

<sup>332</sup> 'Session of 9 December 1998', *Belgian Chamber of Representatives*

<sup>333</sup> Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 217



into reactions is particularly striking. From their point of view, they were demonstrating their active desire to identify and promote a common Belgian identity. In this way they themselves identified institutions and politics as key; it was not these frameworks with which they took umbrage, but rather their current stances and the people leading them. The direct impact of the Rexist Party was thus felt in numerous spheres of Belgian life (politically, spiritually, socially and so forth), as they took to their role as a gadfly.

Ironically however, it is in the reactions to Rexism that something of a unified Belgian identity can actually be observed. In the First World War, it had been the unity of adversity that had arguably fostered something of a national spirit.<sup>334</sup> Now due to the Rexistists (and later during the general context of occupation) a new adversity arose. Catalysed by the Rexistists, a national spirit of unity can be perceived, through the national unity governments, the organised backlash of the Church, ‘patriots’ of different strands uniting to attack Rexist mayors and so on. In the social sphere, this was most visible in Wallonia, but arguably more due to the Rexist visibility in the *sillon industriel* than because of divergent opinions amongst the people.<sup>335</sup>

In the longer term, the ‘wigwam’ of analysis looks beyond immediate interactions with and reactions to the Rexist Party. Perversely, despite (or maybe because of?) the institutionalised rejection of the Rexist Party, they continued to hold some relevance in the national dialogue. Through their own actions, like the shocking invectives against political opponents, they became pariahs on a physical level.<sup>336</sup> Following the conclusion of the Second World War, issues such as the Royal Question maintained the focus on wartime relationships, and exaggerated the issue of collaboration versus resistance. Especially when viewing the Rexist Party as a *lieu de mémoire*, this national obsession exacerbated Rexism’s status as something traitorous, and led to regionalised implications that simply had not been a factor.<sup>337</sup> The result is that the Rexist Party shifted within the collective memory from something concrete and physical to something more intangible. With Léon Degrelle seemingly immortal,

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<sup>334</sup> Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium*, 7

<sup>335</sup> See Fig. 10 in Appendix B

<sup>336</sup> See Carsten, *The Rise of Fascism*, 213 for mention of the *J'accuse M. Segers* i.a.

<sup>337</sup> See for example the perception that Rexism was intrinsically ‘Walloon’ or Francophone. Whilst many of their supporters were indeed Walloon, this would seem more due to the Rexistists’ focus on Brussels and the strategically important *sillon industriel*.

his own personal legend added to the ‘otherworldly’ and more incorporeal memory of his Rexist Party. In this way, the Rexist Party became a memory instead of a group of people or their literature. This memory (that is to say, the actual legacy of the party) was that of the dark side of Belgian nationalism, of the refusal to cooperate with the institutions and the willingness to cooperate with external threats, which has subsequently been used against perceived threats ever since.

In sum, there are two distinct Rexist Parties; the physical one that existed between 1935-1945 (which itself underwent numerous transformations), and the memory of it which has existed from 1945 to the present day. Given the penchant of the Rexist leaders for exaggeration and hyperbole, coupled with the power of the war to re-shape perceptions (as emphasised by the work of Pierre Nora), it is unsurprising that the memory is itself encumbered with embellishments and fabrications. The second iteration is the one that comes closest to answers within this investigation. Yet in order to appreciate its nuances, it is of the utmost necessity to appreciate the beliefs and actions that underpinned the history of the first, physical, iteration. Long before Josephine Hoegaerts attempted to define a Belgian identity, or Yves Leterme dared to redefine it, it was the Rexistists who attempted to tackle the notion. Through their overt and aggressive courting of key institutions, and their refusal to operate within the normal confines of the Belgian political systems, they ended up highlighting the Belgian national identity that existed in opposition to them. Indirectly, they highlighted the serious flaws and dangers inherent in trying to create a national identity, especially through an authoritarian or embellished approach. In this regard, the Rexist Party can be considered a cautionary tale of the ironic futility of trying to create a national identity, especially when it forces people to pick sides or actively reject parts of their existing identity.

It is that second iteration however, evolving nebulously from 1945 to the current day, which holds relevance for the future. Whilst the history of the past is of vital importance in order to understand the real Rexist Party, it is the current memory, based upon public perceptions and the collective memory of the Second World War, which can serve to explain Belgian identity today and its potential path in the future. By treating the Rexist Party (whichever connotations this may entail) as a cautionary

tale, the memory of this tale serves as a warning for the present day. With the near dominance of the N-VA in Flemish politics, built upon the notion of Flemish regional identity, there is little that can immediately be pinpointed as truly Belgian. The major political parties exist in twin Francophone and Dutch-speaking versions, the Church is not the force it once was and has been rocked by child sex abuse scandals in recent years, and the Crown lost much of its authority following the Royal Question, which it is still to regain.<sup>338</sup> Nevertheless, the Rexists serve as the warning against forcing the latent national identity to rise to the surface, which would only highlight the artificiality of a forced identity. If there is to be a Belgium-wide identity in all of this, it is that sense of unity in the face of adversity, which was seen so often in the history of Rexism. Those that said that the ‘national pride is absent’ on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016, the day on which 35 people were killed in attacks in Belgium’s capital, overlook this very fact. Mere hours after the attack, politicians from across the aisles stood in joint defiance, and thousands of Belgians of all backgrounds and mother-tongues congregated in a central square in Brussels to express their national defiance and unity against terror.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> For the recent scandal in the Belgian Catholic Church, see i.a. John Hooper, ‘Belgian Catholic bishop admits molesting boy’, *The Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2010, accessed 14/06/18, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/23/belgian-bishop-admits-molesting-boy>. In the Vangheluwe affair, the sitting Bishop of Brugge was found to have molested his nephew. The outgoing Primate, Cardinal Danneels, was dogged by allegations of a cover up, which led to him testifying before a parliamentary committee.

<sup>339</sup> Samuel Osborne, ‘Brussels attacks: Thousands gather to create improvised memorial with chalk messages of solidarity and defiance’, *The Independent*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016, accessed 14/06/18, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/brussels-attacks-thousands-gather-to-create-improvised-memorial-with-chalk-messages-of-solidarity-a6947081.html>



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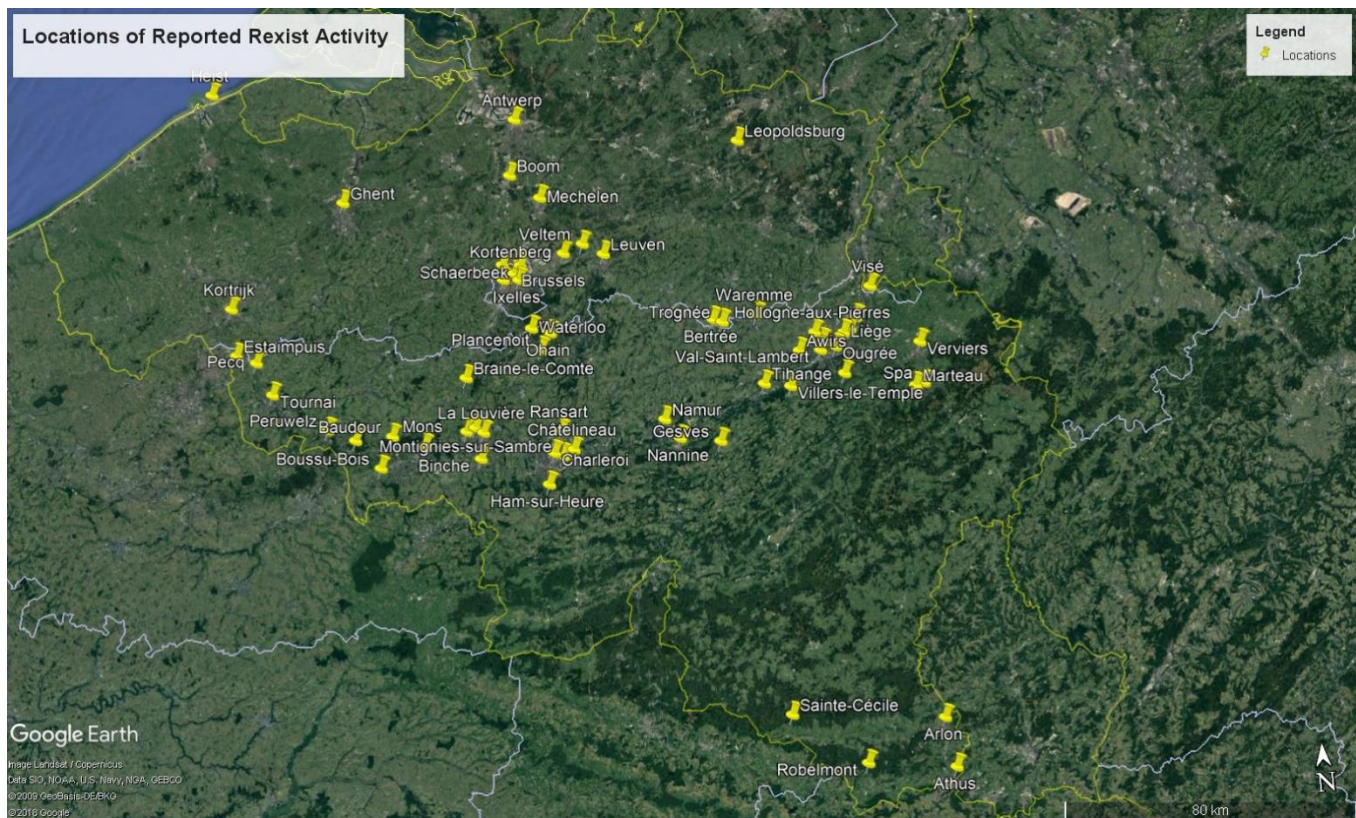


Appendix A: Illustrations:



Fig. 1: Poster issued in 1994 by the PVDA (Workers Party of Belgium). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10796/4386F866-7F88-4738-A69E-AA9E14BE8E43>,

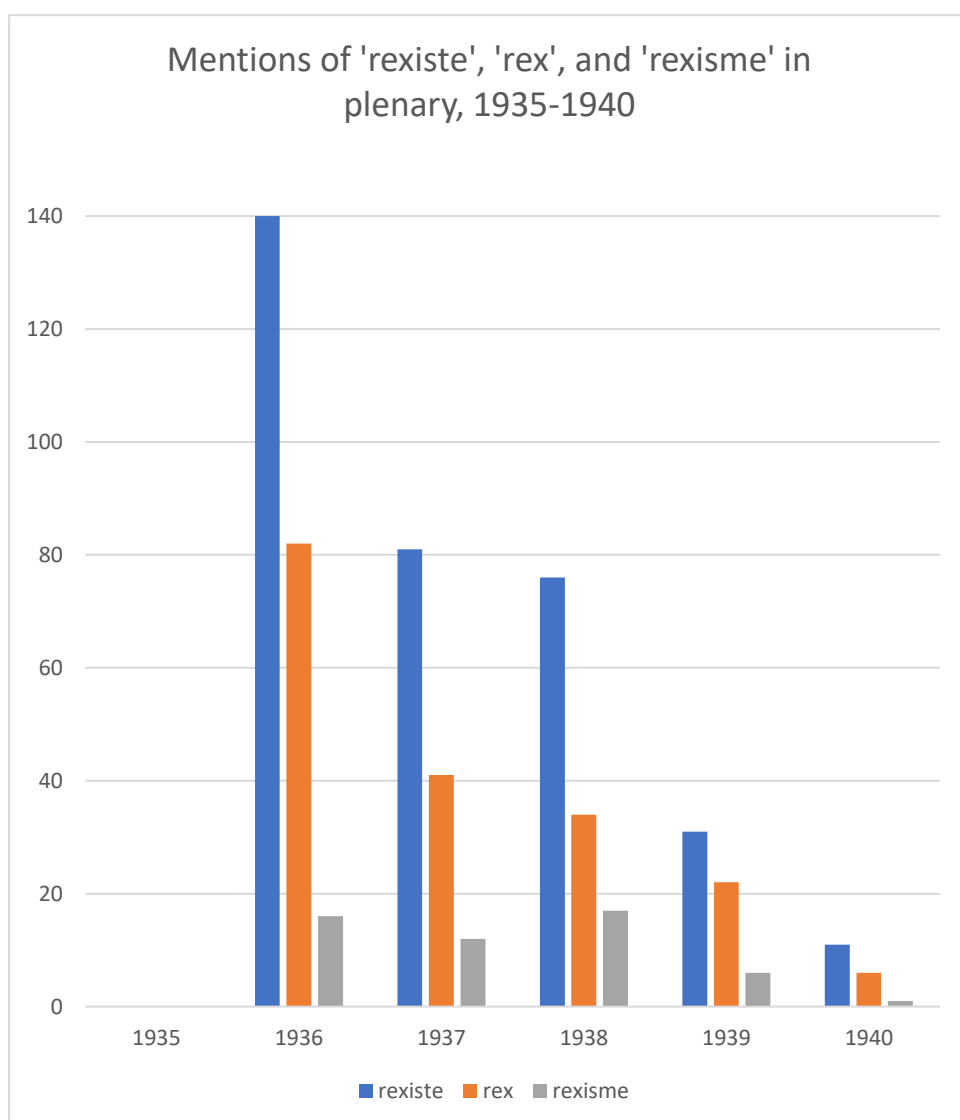
Accessed 14/06/18



*Fig. 2: Map - Locations of activity explicitly attributed to Rexists in copies of 'News from Belgium'. Produced on Google Earth. Data collected from University of Toledo Digital Repository, 'War Information Centre Pamphlets'*

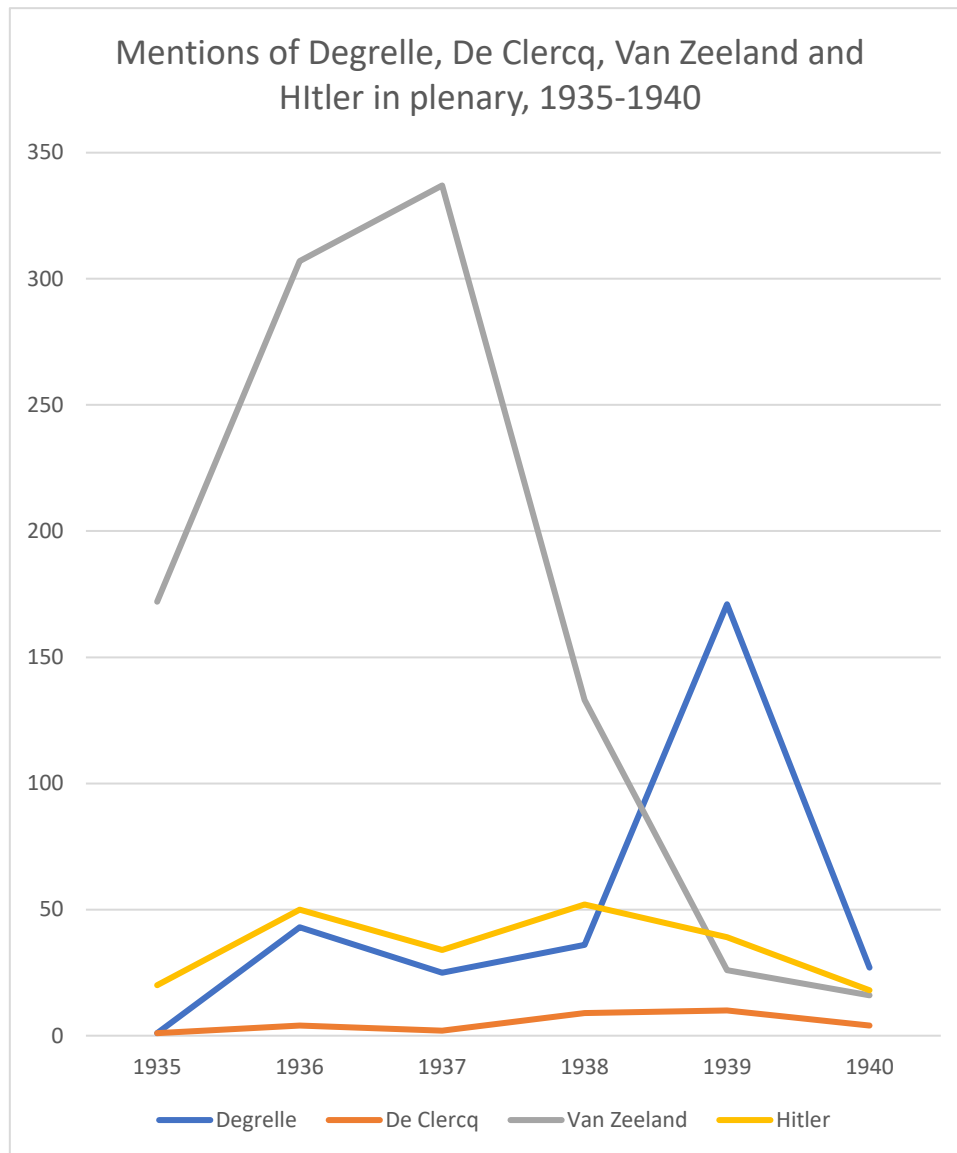


## Appendix B: Tables and Graphs:



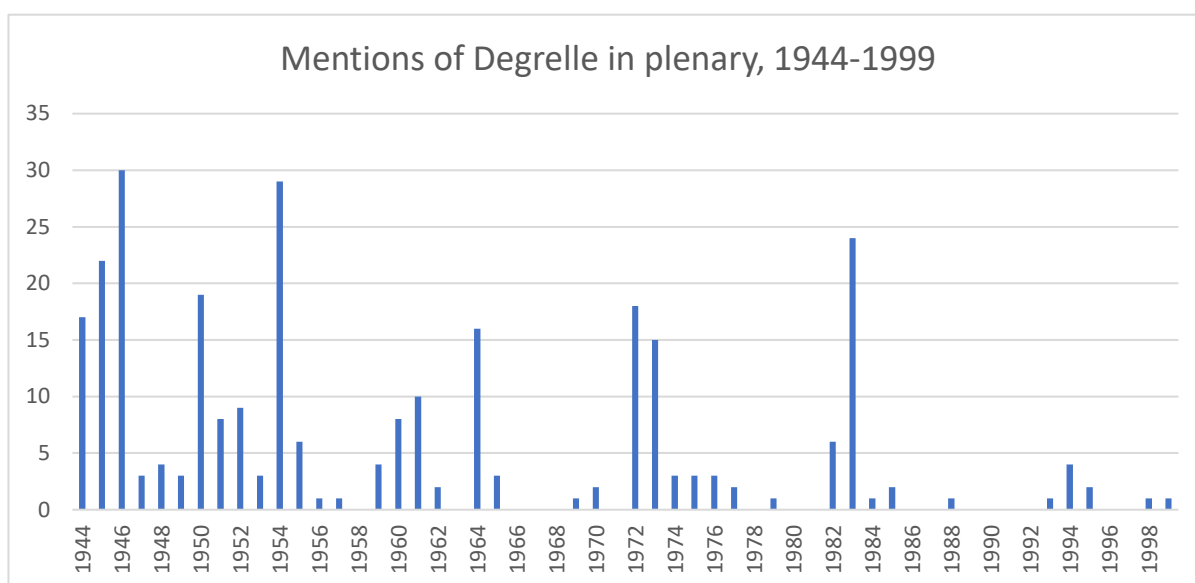
Year:	'rexiste'	'rex'	'rexisme'
1935	0	0	0
1936	140	82	16
1937	81	41	12
1938	76	34	17
1939	31	22	6
1940	11	6	1
TOTAL:	339	185	52

*Figs. 1A & 1B: Graph and Table - Mentions of 'rexiste', 'rex' and 'rexisme' in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1935-1940. Data collected from plenum.be*

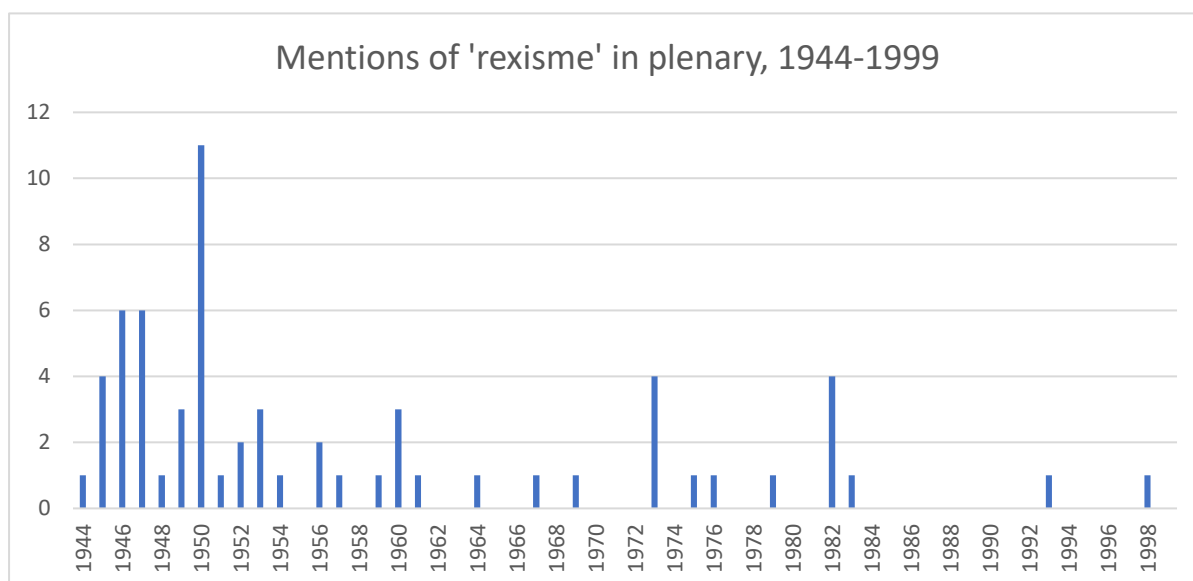


Year:	Degrelle	De Clercq	Van Zeeland	Hitler
1935	1	1	172	20
1936	43	4	307	50
1937	25	2	337	34
1938	36	9	133	52
1939	171	10	26	39
1940	27	4	16	18
TOTAL:	303	30	991	213

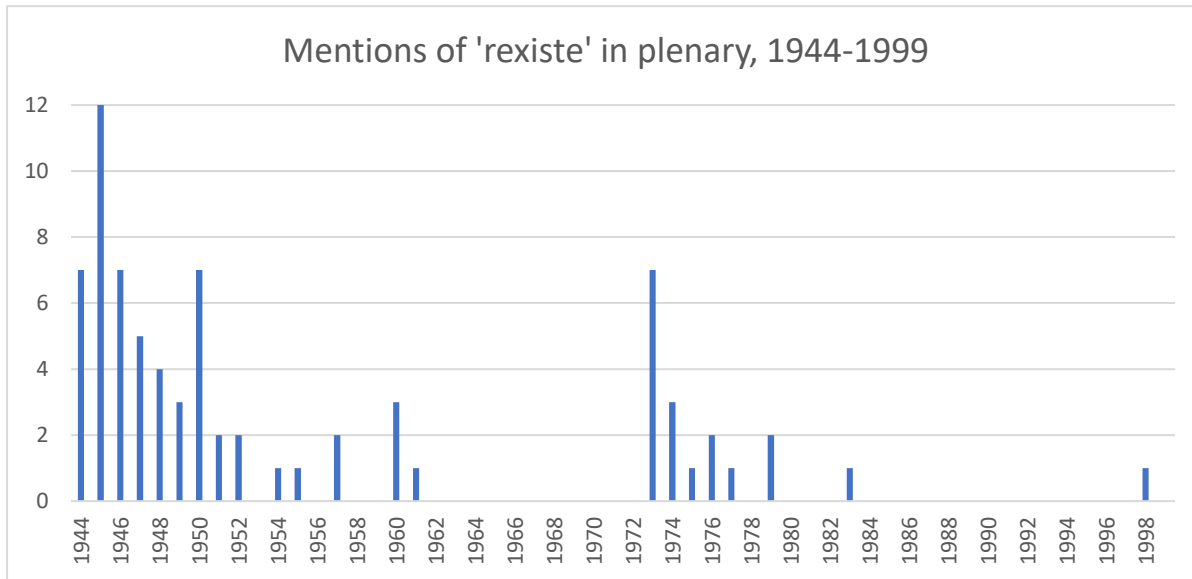
*Figs. 2A & 2B: Graph and Table – Mentions of ‘Degrelle’, ‘De Clercq’, ‘Van Zeeland’ and ‘Hitler’ in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1935-1940. Data collected from plenum.be*



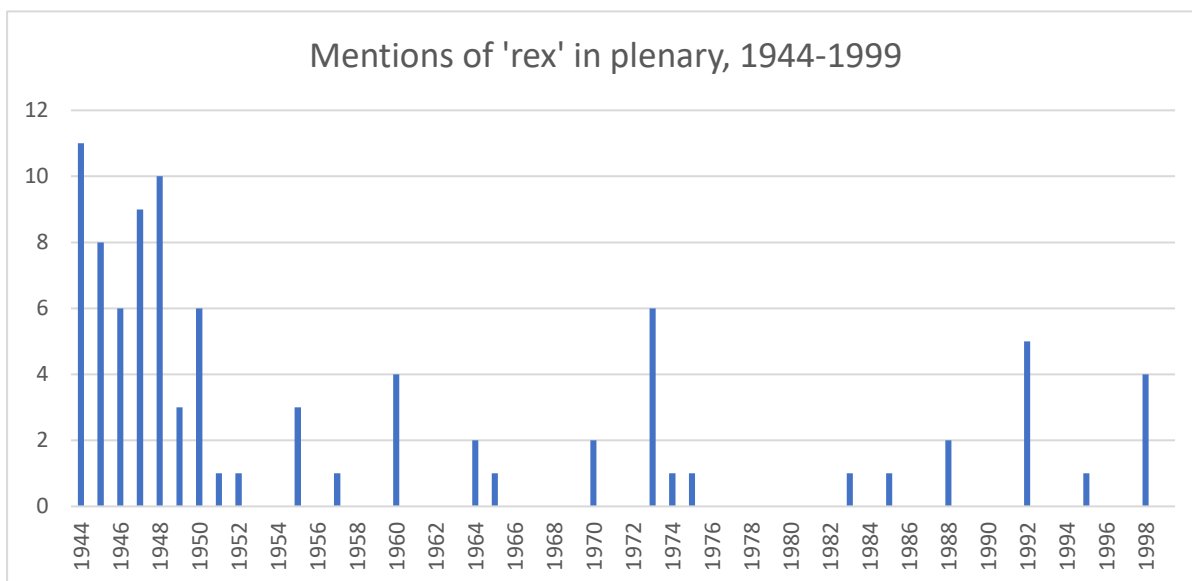
*Fig. 3: Graph – Mentions of ‘Degrelle’ in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1944-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*



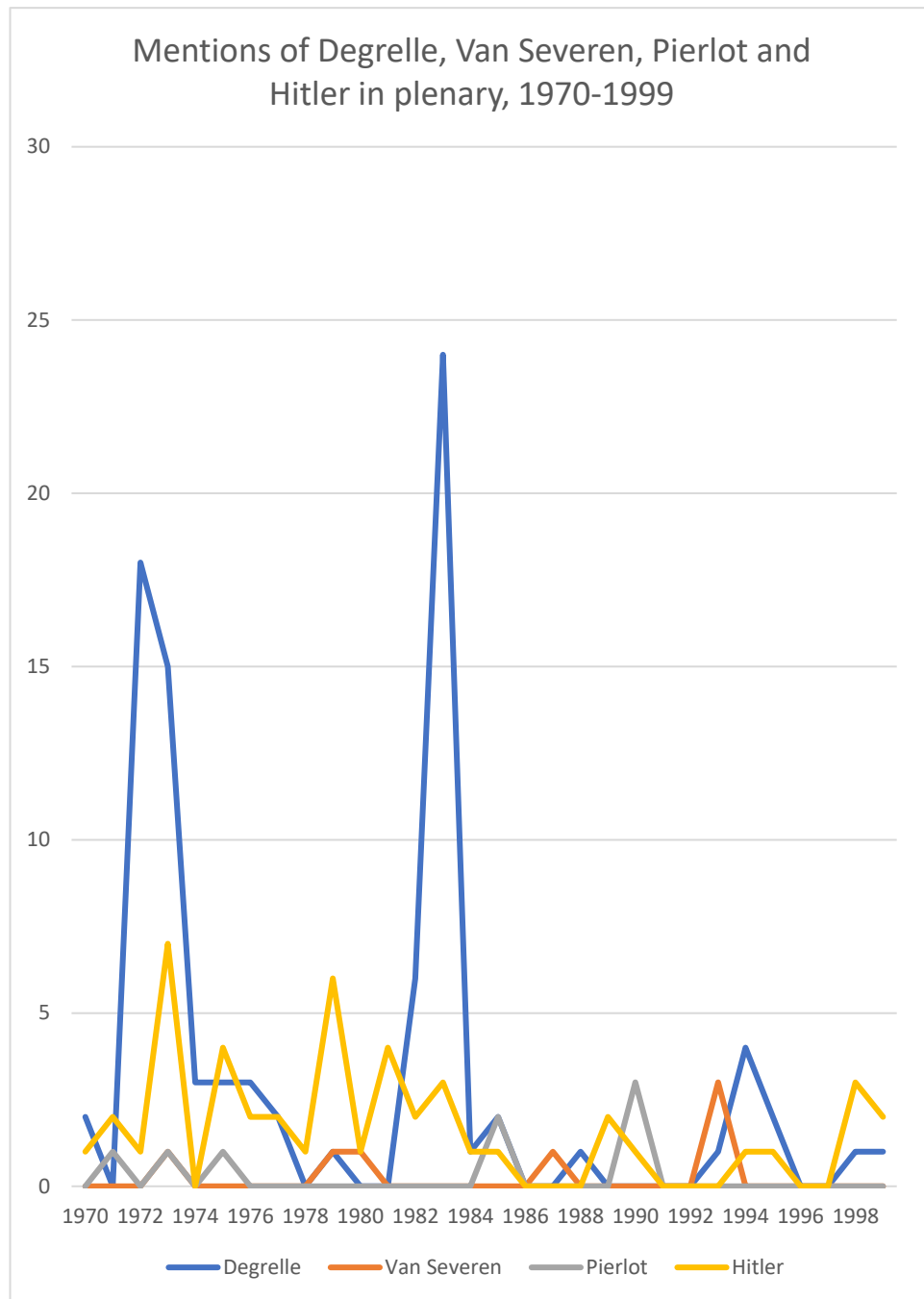
*Fig. 4A: Graph – Mentions of ‘rexisme’ in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1944-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*



*Fig. 4B: Graph – Mentions of 'rexiste' in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1944-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*



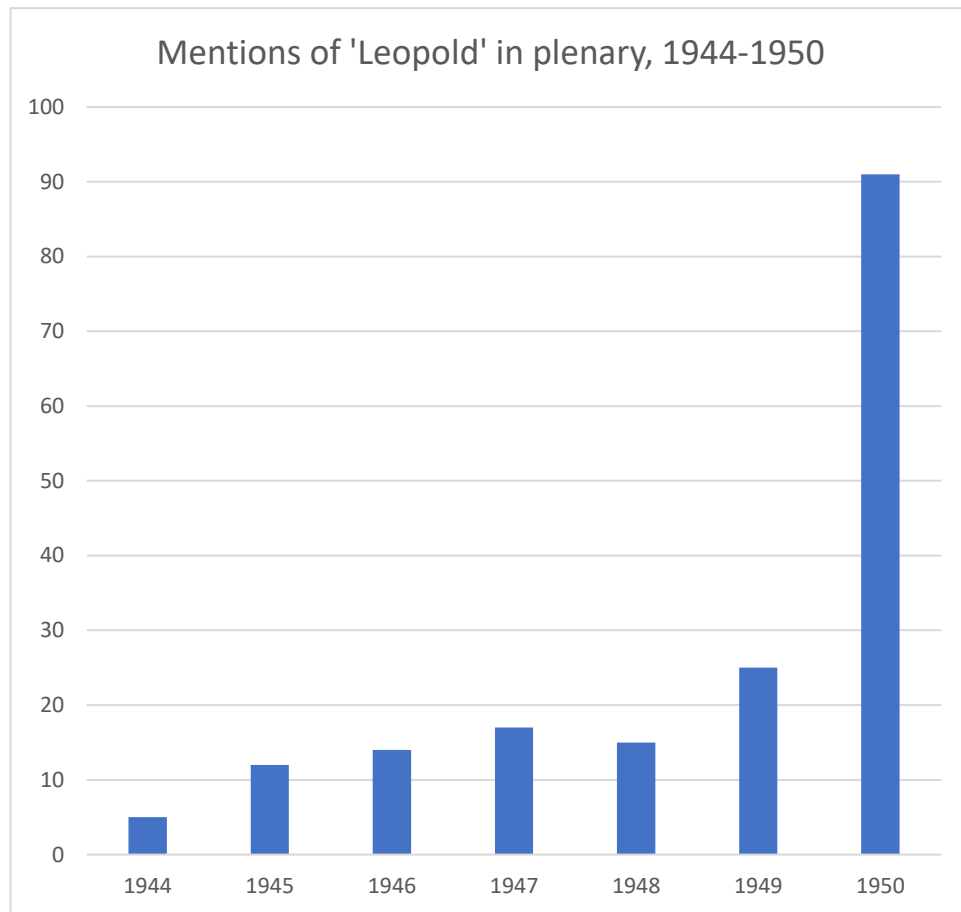
*Fig. 4C: Graph – Mentions of 'rex' in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1944-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*



*Fig. 5A: Graph – Mentions of ‘Degrelle’, ‘Van Severen’, ‘Pierlot’ and ‘Hitler’ in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1970-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*

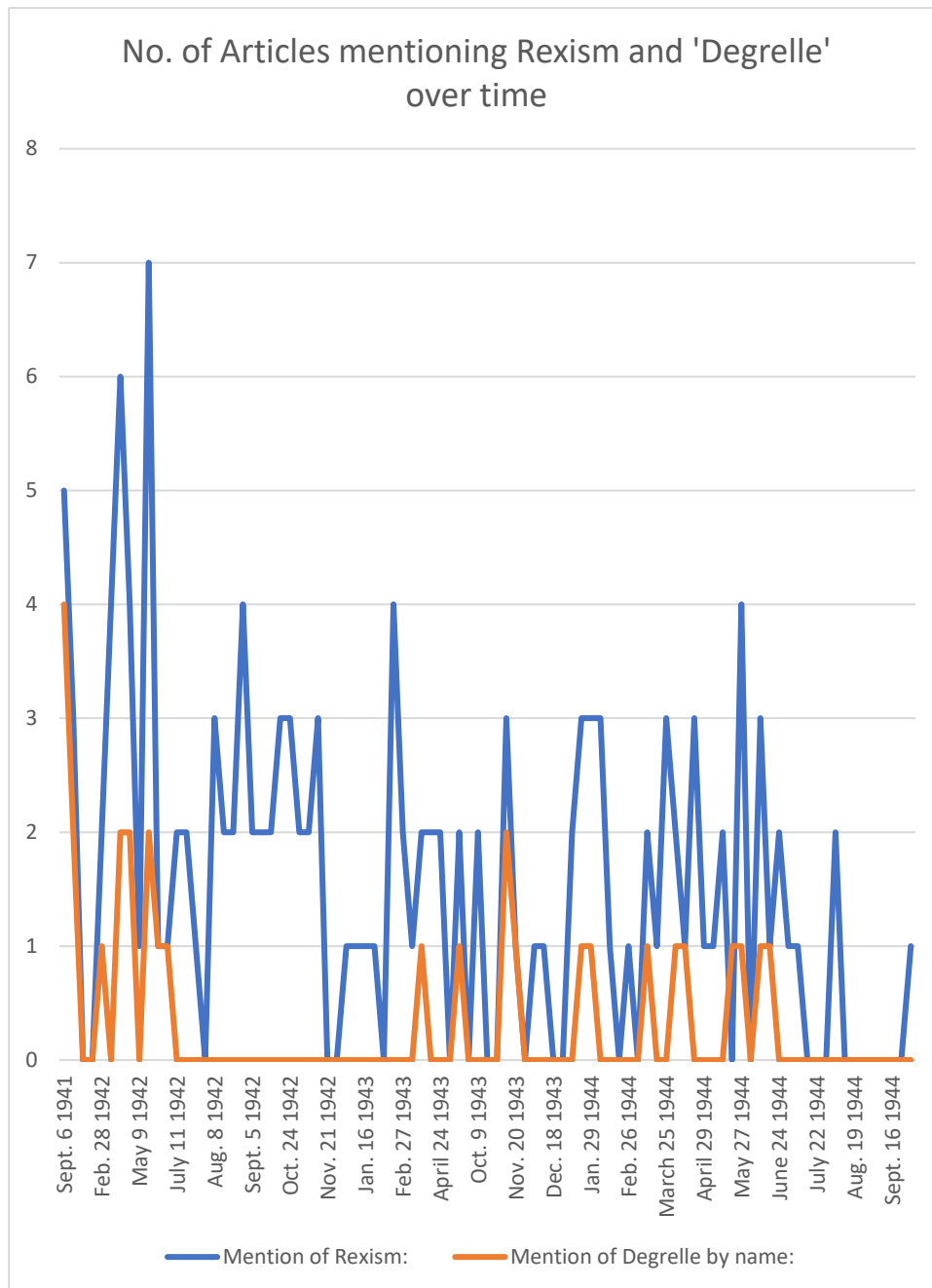
Year:	DEGRELLE	VAN SEVEREN	PIERLOT	HITLER
1970	2	0	0	1
1971	0	0	1	2
1972	18	0	0	1
1973	15	1	1	7
1974	3	0	0	0
1975	3	0	1	4
1976	3	0	0	2
1977	2	0	0	2
1978	0	0	0	1
1979	1	1	0	6
1980	0	1	0	1
1981	0	0	0	4
1982	6	0	0	2
1983	24	0	0	3
1984	1	0	0	1
1985	2	0	2	1
1986	0	0	0	0
1987	0	1	0	0
1988	1	0	0	0
1989	0	0	0	2
1990	0	0	3	1
1991	0	0	0	0
1992	0	0	0	0
1993	1	3	0	0
1994	4	0	0	1
1995	2	0	0	1
1996	0	0	0	0
1997	0	0	0	0
1998	1	0	0	3
1999	1	0	0	2
TOTAL:	90	7	8	48

*Fig. 5B: Table – Mentions of ‘Degrelle’, ‘Van Severen’, ‘Pierlot’ and ‘Hitler’ in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1970-1999. Data collected from plenum.be*

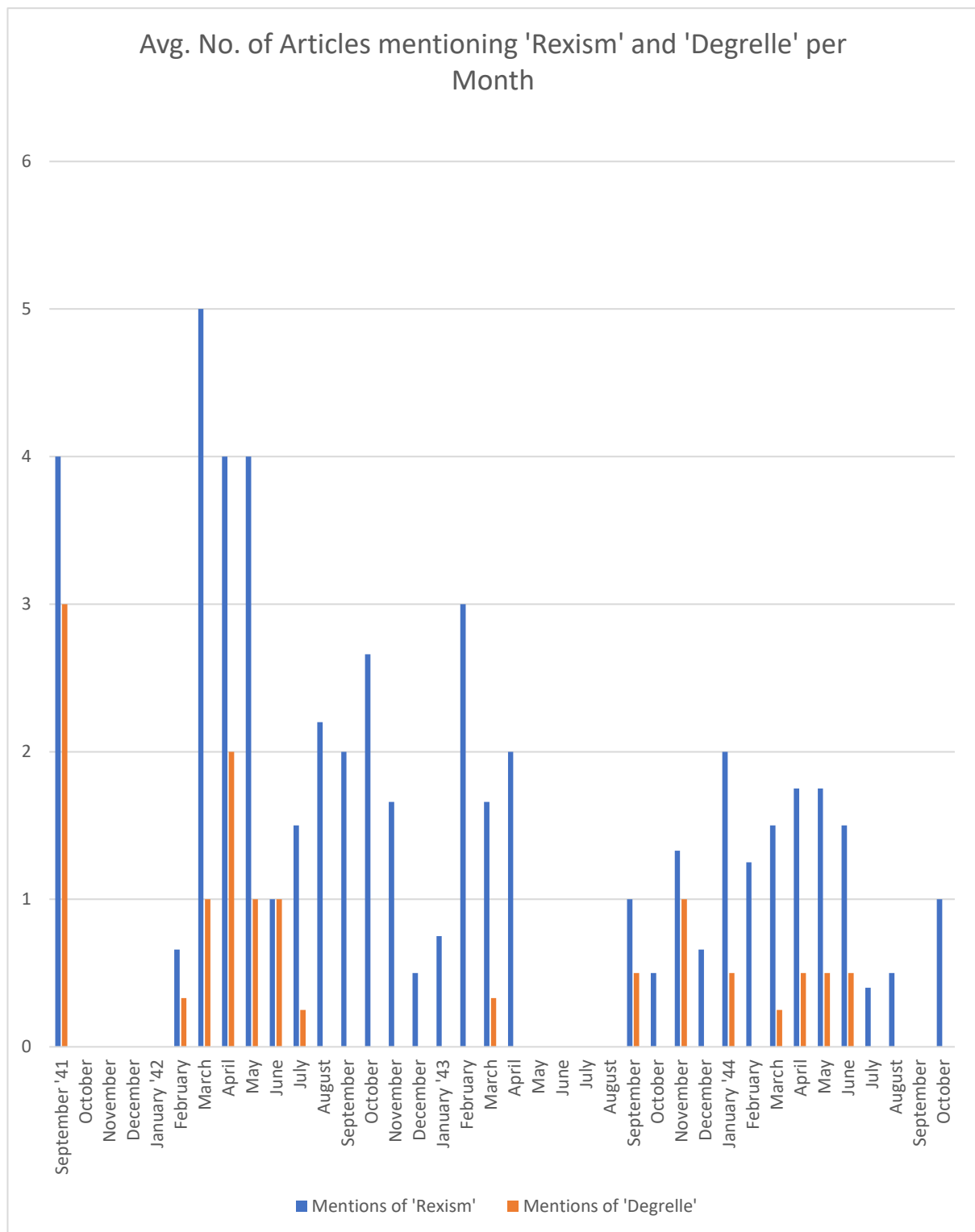


Year:	Mentions:
1944	5
1945	12
1946	14
1947	17
1948	15
1949	25
1950	91
TOTAL:	179

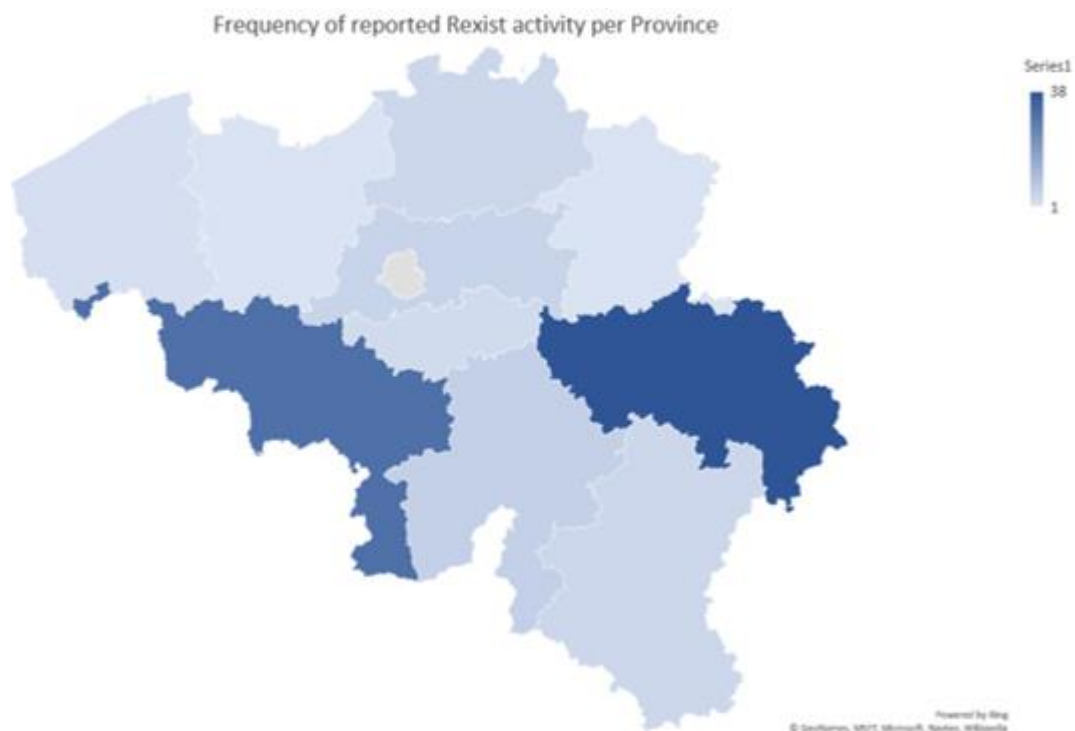
*Figs. 6A & 6B: Graph and Table – Mentions of 'Leopold' in plenary sessions of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 1944-1950. Data collected from plenum.be*





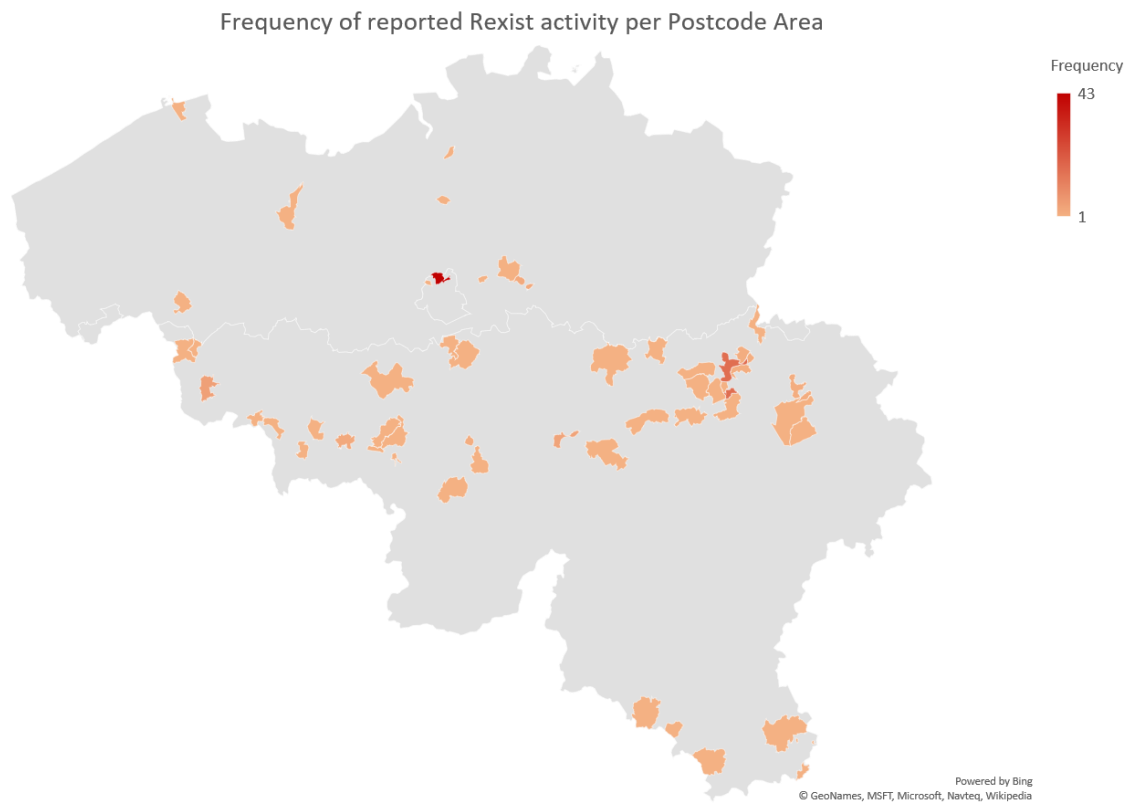


*Fig. 8: Graph – Average mentions of Rexism and 'Degrelle' per month in copies of 'News from Belgium', 1941-1944. Data collected from University of Toledo Digital Repository, 'War Information Centre Pamphlets'*



Province	Frequency
Antwerpen	4
Oost-Vlaanderen	1
Vlaams-Brabant	5
Limburg	1
West-Vlaanderen	2
Hainaut	31
Liège	38
Luxembourg	4
Namur	6
Brabant wallon	3
Region	Frequency
Brussels-Capital Region	51
Vlaanderen	13
Wallonie	82

*Fig. 9A & 9B: Map and Table – Frequency of activity explicitly attributed to Rexists in copies of ‘News from Belgium’, per Province and Region of Belgium. Data collected from University of Toledo Digital Repository, ‘War Information Centre Pamphlets’*



*Fig. 10: Map - Frequency of activity explicitly attributed to Rexist in copies of 'News from Belgium', per Postcode Area of Belgium. Data collected from University of Toledo Digital Repository, 'War Information Centre Pamphlets'*



Pledge of Honesty:

*On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "F Vincent". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent "F" and "V".

Vienna, 15 June 2018

(Frederick Julian Keith Vincent)



Vita – Frederick Vincent:

Frederick Julian Keith Vincent was born in the United Kingdom in 1994, to a Belgian mother and a British father. After studying at Saffron Walden Country High School, he went up to Clare College, University of Cambridge, where he read Classics. He graduated with a BA (Hons.) in 2016, specialising in Roman history and archaeology. Following this, he moved to Vienna to study for a Masters in Advanced International Studies (MAIS) at the *Diplomatische Akademie Wien* (Vienna School of International Studies). His academic interests include history, archaeology, and the way in which history contributes to identity and memory.