

## Part II

# Flanders: 'Eigen volk eerst!'

### The extreme right in Flanders, 1917–80

Until the beginning of the First World War, the heterogenous *Vlaamse Beweging* (Flemish Movement) was primarily cultural in orientation (see Willemsen 1969: 10–27). Its principal goal was the emancipation of the Dutch language (i.e. Flemish) and culture from the dominance of French speaking Belgium, and its supporters looked favourably upon a multinational Belgian state. The First World War led to a split in the movement: a small section collaborated with the Germans and, led by the *Raad van Vlaanderen* (Council of Flanders), proclaimed the independence of Flanders on 22 December 1917; the majority of the movement remained loyal to Belgium (Willemsen 1969). Indignant at being linguistically discriminated against by French speaking officers, Flemish soldiers in the Belgian army founded the so-called *Frontbeweging* (Front Movement), which later gave rise to the *Frontpartij*.

The Flemish Movement was, by the end of the war, discredited, and it soon split into two distinct camps: a patriotic, culturally nationalistic camp that wanted to see a Dutch Flanders within a federal Belgium; and an anti-Belgian, politically nationalist camp that sought political autonomy for Flanders and the destruction of Belgium (Vos 1992). During the first post-war years the former was the sole political representative, in the form of the *Frontpartij*, which called for the establishment of a federalist Belgian state. Initially, it gained moderate successes in the Belgian elections: five seats in 1919, four in 1921 and six in 1925 (Fitzmaurice 1983: 37). However, by the end of the 1930s the Flemish Movement had changed in three respects: its Flemish identity had grown (if initially only in a cultural sense); its leaders had become almost exclusively Catholic; and its ideology had become more extreme, having shifted in favour of the anti-Belgian, politically nationalist camp (Goedbloed 1991: 400–1). In the 1920s and 1930s many Catholic, Flemish nationalist intellectuals, mostly active in the *Algemeen Katholiek Vlaams Studentenverbond* (General Catholic Flemish Students' Association) and in the *Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond* (Catholic Flemish Uni-

versity Students' Association), encouraged an osmosis between Flemish nationalism and the 'new order ideologies' (Vos 1992). This process culminated in 1933 in the foundation of the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National Union, VNV) under the leadership of Staf De Clercq (later Hendrik Elias).

The VNV wished to see the creation of a Greater Netherlands or *Dietsland*, i.e. a 're-unification' of the Netherlands with North and South Flanders,<sup>1</sup> within a Europe structured along the lines favoured by Nazi ideology. After having absorbed the extreme wing of the deteriorating *Frontpartij* and other small Flemish nationalist groups (De Wever 1992), it was left with only one principal rival prior to the Second World War: the *Verbond van Dietsse Nationaal-Solidaristen* (Association of Diets National Solidarists, Verdinaso), founded in 1931 by Joris Van Severen. This was a para-military movement that originally had an almost similar goal as the VNV, i.e. a corporatist, authoritarian and 'organic' Greater Netherlands. However, in the mid 1930s it changed its goal into a 'Diets Empire', including Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands and their colonies (Willemsen 1969).

At the end of the 1930s, the VNV scored some electoral successes after entering into various strategic pacts with other political groups. Under different names the Flemish nationalist pacts secured approximately 13 per cent of the votes (in Flanders and Brussels) in 1936, and 15 per cent in 1939 (Willemsen 1969: 414, 464; Gijssels 1992: 26). During the Second World War a substantive minority of the Flemish Movement collaborated with the Nazis; the VNV members thereby hoped to achieve their goal of completely uniting the Flemish nation(-state) under the VNV banner (De Wever 1992). However, the Germans played the VNV off against other groups, including its main competitor, *De Vlag* (The Flag or German–Flemish Working Community), which prior to the war had called for an autonomous Flanders but had abandoned this line during the German occupation in favour of a Greater Germany. During the war, *De Vlag* was completely absorbed by the General (later 'Germanic') Flemish SS, which fought 'the Bolshevik enemy' on the Eastern Front.

Flemish nationalism emerged from the Second World War in an even more feeble state than following the First World War. The collaborators were exposed to all sorts of repressive measures (the same was true for the many Walloon collaborators) and, although these so-called 'catacomb days' only lasted five years, calls for their amnesty or rehabilitation became major issues for the post-war Flemish Movement (Seberechts 1992). In 1954 some 1,500 collaborators were still in prison and roughly 150,000 Belgians, the so-called *incivieken* (those unworthy of citizenship), did not enjoy civil rights – including the right to vote or to be elected to public office (Gijssels

<sup>1</sup> North Flanders refers to the Dutch speaking part of Belgium (i.e. Flanders), South Flanders to a small part in the Northwestern region of France (around cities like Dunkirk and Lille).

1992: 41). In the first few years after the war, most of the former collaborators confined their activities to charitable pursuits, especially on behalf of former soldiers who had served on the Eastern Front, for example in the *Vlaams Verbond der Oud-Oostfrontstrijders* (Flemish Association of Former Eastern Front Fighters). Within the Flemish Movement, the moderate wing exercised the most influence, particularly in the christian democratic *Christelijke Volkspartij* (Christian People's Party, CVP), and claimed the traditional 'holy' sites of Flemish nationalism as its own. This stirred up ill-feeling among the radicals of the movement, although for a considerable time they continued to remain isolated and marginalised.

As of 1949 several radical Flemish nationalist organisations were set up again, including the anti-repression party *Vlaamse Concentratie* (Flemish Concentration), and the direct-action group, *Vlaamse Militanten Orde* (Order of Flemish Militants, VMO).<sup>2</sup> All these organisations remained marginal until the *Christelijke Vlaamse Volksumie* (Christian Flemish People's Union) was launched as an electoral alliance to contest the 1954 parliamentary election, in which it won 3.9 per cent of the Flemish vote and one seat (Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993: 26). This success led, on 21 November 1954, to the foundation of the *Volksumie* (People's Union, VU) as its official successor. The new political party secured 6 per cent of the Flemish vote in 1961, giving it five seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and two in the Senate (Vander Velpen 1989: 43). This constituted a significant comeback for Flemish nationalism in Belgian politics.

The movement was fuelled further in the 1960s by the smouldering dispute between Dutch and French speaking Belgians over the national language, a dispute that led to rioting and to the first steps towards inaugurating a federalist structure in Belgium. This federalisation soon developed a momentum of its own, causing a split within the Belgian political party structure (see Huysse 1986; Deschouwer 1991). The three important political currents (christian democracy, social democracy and liberalism) split into separate Dutch speaking and French speaking parties. In this climate, the VU, with its Poujadist-like manifesto and style, scored several electoral victories, gaining a record 18.8 per cent of the Flemish vote (and 21 seats) in the 1971 parliamentary election (Fitzmaurice 1983: 177).

Although the VU was the only political representative of the Flemish Movement, and proved to be relatively successful, criticism was nevertheless forthcoming from within its ranks. From the outset, the federalist party was regarded with suspicion by the separatists. These suspicions grew when the VU, under the sway of the democratisation movement of May 1968, increasingly assumed the shape of a left-liberal, moderate nationalist party. Under the leadership of Hugo Schiltz, Nelly Maes, Maurits Coppieters, and others

<sup>2</sup> The VMO was originally called *Vlaamse Militanten Organisatie* (Organisation of Flemish Militants), but renamed into 'Order' only shortly afterwards.

the party attempted to ensure that it was regarded as a respectable coalition partner, incurring the wrath of the radical wing which saw itself as the ‘whip’ of the CVP (see Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993). Relations between the moderate leadership and the radical membership, most notably the activists of the VMO (who had since the party’s inception staffed its stewarding and propaganda service), became ever more strained. After protracted debates, on 12 June 1971, the problems finally seemed to have been resolved when VMO leader Bob Maes was made a member of the Belgian Senate and allowed his organisation to be absorbed by the VU. However, only a short time elapsed before, on 2 July, Bert Eriksson founded a new VMO. In subsequent years this new VMO became a violent, neo-Nazi, direct-action group, and on 4 May 1981 it was outlawed by the Antwerp high court for being a private militia (see Gijssels 1992: 54–68).

By the mid 1970s, dissatisfaction with the left-liberal stance taken by the VU had already prompted several radical members to leave the party. They initially worked together in non-party political organisations, such as the (new) VMO, the *Verbond van Nederlandse Werkgemeenschappen Were Di* (Association of Dutch Working Groups Protect Yourself, Were Di) and the direct-action group *Voorpost* (Outpost), which splintered off from Were Di in 1976.<sup>3</sup> In 1973, twenty-seven of these organisations joined ranks in the *Vlaams National Raad* (Flemish National Council), which had as its main objective to be(come) a thorn in the side of the VU (Gijssels 1992). There were, however, radicals who wanted to found a new party. Although circumstances were soon to change, the time was not yet ripe for such a move.

On 24 May 1977 the leaders of the VU signed the so-called Egmont Pact, which envisioned the federalisation of Belgium.<sup>4</sup> Three days later, the VU party conference adopted the Pact by 62 votes to 31 and joined the second government of Leo Tindemans. The Egmont Pact provoked heated debates, and not only in the VU; the whole Flemish Movement was divided over it and found itself caught up in the worst crisis it had known in the post-war period. Federalisation, so both the pro-democratic and anti-democratic separatists believed, did not go far enough and in September 1977 they joined forces in the *Egmontkomitee* (Egmont Committee).<sup>5</sup> The Committee was united in rejection of the Egmont Pact, but internally divided on how best to oppose it, whether from inside or from outside the VU (see Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993).

<sup>3</sup> For (short) descriptions of these organisations, see Gijssels (1992: 38–81), Vander Velpen (1989: 39–57, 1992: 127–31), Verlinden (1979, 1981) and Verstraete (1992).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Egmont Pact, Belgium was divided into three *gewesten* (autonomous regions), i.e. Flanders, Walloon and Brussels, as well as into two *gemeenschappen* (communities), the Dutch and the French speaking. Both communities could implement their own policies (on education, culture, welfare) in the Brussels region (see Fitzmaurice 1983: 115–17)

<sup>5</sup> Another main problem of the Flemish nationalists was the fact that Brussels had become an autonomous region of its own, instead of being an integral part of Flanders.

The group in favour of opposing from within the VU – led by Edwin Truyens, founder and leader of the *Nationalistische Studentenvereniging* (Nationalist Students' Association, NSV), and Were Di leader Bert Van Boghout – joined forces in the *Vlaams Nationaal Directoorium* (Flemish National Directorate). Despite exerting great pressure, this group did not manage to unite all the anti-Egmont forces under its banner. Two former prominent members of the VU wished to found their own political party: former senator Lode Claes, and former leader of the Antwerp *Volksunie Jongeren* (People's Union Youth), Karel Dillen. Although the two held several sets of talks, they could not reach agreement on a joint party. Claes was interested in a broad, national and liberal popular party, whereas Dillen was planning a small, radical-nationalist, 'solidarist' direct-action party (see Gijssels 1992: 83–8; Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993: 63–84).

On 2 October 1977, after a brief but hectic period characterised by mutual distrust and confusion, the *Vlaams Nationale Partij* (Flemish National Party, VNP) saw the light of day. Its founders included Dillen, Gerard Slegers, Leo Wouters (the latter two were former VU senators) and Wim Verreycken, leader of the tiny *Vlaams Republikeinse Partij* (Flemish Republican Party) that was immediately absorbed by the VNP (Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993). Surprised and indignant, Claes proceeded to found his own party, the *Vlaamse Volkspartij* (Flemish People's Party, VVP) on 19 November. Immediately after these two parties were established, they were urged to come to a merger by prominent outsiders, such as Truyens and Van Boghout as well as Jan Brans, former chief editor of the VNV newspaper *Volk en Staat* (People and State).

The fall of the government fuelled this effort as the parliamentary election was brought forward to December 1978. The VVP was prepared to enter into such a merger, for the duration of the election only, but laid claim to a dominant role in the election list. This was, in fact, what happened, and in December the two anti-Egmont parties campaigned for a joint list of candidates under the name *Vlaams Blok*. The list was dominated by the VVP both in terms of ideology and candidates, but to everyone's surprise only Dillen, whose followers had persuaded him to stand for the list in Antwerp, managed to win a seat in Parliament. Claes failed in his bid to become a senator, dissolved the alliance and unsuccessfully went it alone with the VVP in the 1979 European election. As he gained less than 1 per cent of the vote, this marked the end of the political road for both Claes and his VVP (see Gijssels 1992; Dewinter and Van Overmeire 1993).

