

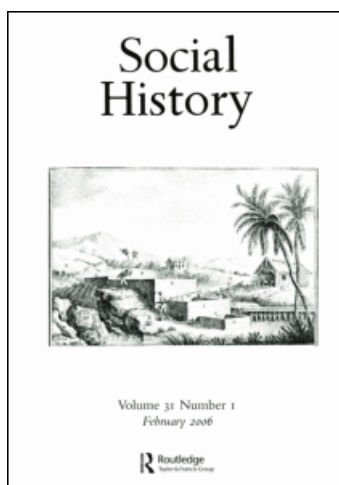
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## Social History

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713708979>

### Contesting national symbols. Belgian belle époque socialism between rejection and appropriation

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Online Publication Date: 01 February 2009

**To cite this Article** Van Ginderachter, Maarten(2009)'Contesting national symbols. Belgian belle époque socialism between rejection and appropriation',*Social History*,34:1,55 — 73

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/03071020802628061

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071020802628061>

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Maarten Van Ginderachter

# Contesting national symbols. Belgian *belle époque* socialism between rejection and appropriation

Socialism and nationalism have a troubled mutual history. 'Reds have no fatherland and patriots denounce the supranational nature of class.' At least, that is a still widely held belief. In academe, too, this 'incompatibility thesis' was once popular. Early historians of socialism, for instance, interpreted national identity as a false form of consciousness that obstructed the class awakening of the proletariat. Since the late 1960s, however, historic research has shown that there was no such thing as a predestined irreconcilability. Already, before the First World War, socialists' 'emotions oscillated in a multi-layered patchwork between alienation from, critical reception of and commitment to the nation-state'.<sup>1</sup> An eminent way to examine this wide emotional range is to focus on their attitudes towards the most visible emblems of the nation: flag, anthem and national holiday.

Although national symbols are a popular research subject, their place within working-class movements has been modestly debated. In spite of its title, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, national symbols are absent in Ward's study of British Labour and patriotism.<sup>2</sup> If studies broach the subject at all, some of the oblique references are still informed by the incompatibility thesis. A recent study of French Marxism, for instance, claimed that the *Parti ouvrier français* unequivocally 'shunned France's national symbols' (*tricolore*, *Marseillaise* and Bastille Day) because they were bourgeois and aristocratic icons.<sup>3</sup> However, even within French Marxism, attitudes were much more ambivalent and there were concerted attempts to appropriate the national emblems for the proletariat.<sup>4</sup>

This article offers a social-cultural approach to the study of political symbolism in the socialist movement of *belle époque* Belgium, broaching two moot issues in the literature. First, in the last decade pertinent criticisms have been vented against discourse studies that

<sup>1</sup>S. Berger, 'British and German socialists between class and national solidarity' in S. Berger and A. Smith (eds), *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870-1939* (Manchester and New York, 1999), 31-63, 34.

<sup>2</sup>P. Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Rochester, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>R. Stuart, *Marxism and National Identity. Socialism, Nationalism, and National Socialism during the French Fin de Siècle* (Albany, 2006), 18.

<sup>4</sup>C. Willard, *Les Guesdistes. Le mouvement socialiste en France (1893-1905)* (Paris, 1965), 202-3, 462.

overemphasize the realm of language, while underestimating the social context in which texts and their authors are embedded.<sup>5</sup> Berger, for instance, criticized Ward's *Red Flag and Union Jack* for discussing notions of labour nationalism 'in a vacuum' and neglecting 'specific historical contexts'.<sup>6</sup> Second, most studies insufficiently address the appropriation of national symbols in everyday life.<sup>7</sup> Given these two problems, the general aim of this article is to chart the grey areas between outright rejection and unquestioning endorsement of national symbols, laying particular stress on the importance of context and highlighting the often neglected point of view of the rank and file.

Key concepts in my argument are oppositional patriotism, appropriation and *Eigen-Sinn*. The process of national integration of social-democratic parties – implying both their accession to the political and socio-economic structures of the nation-state and their emotional acceptance of the notion of the fatherland – has been dubbed the triumph of *oppositional patriotism*. This is a democratic form of patriotism, contrasting with exclusionary bourgeois chauvinism.<sup>8</sup> Yet this distinction is merely theoretical, as it is now generally agreed that there is no waterproof partition between both.<sup>9</sup> Chartier's notion of appropriation is based on the premise that people are not mere passive recipients of the social conditions around them. It generally refers to the processes by which they give meaning to and use the cultural artefacts produced for them.<sup>10</sup> Lüdtkke's *Eigen-Sinn* is a closely related concept which encompasses the attempts of workers to arrange their own lives and to (re)appropriate their surroundings. This often involved suspicion of what bourgeois respectability prescribed and even of what their own labour organizations expected of them.<sup>11</sup>

The case at hand is the Belgian Workers' Party (BWP, *Belgische Werkliedenpartij/Parti ouvrier belge*) in the period 1885–1914 and its only serious dissidence, the *Parti socialiste républicain* (PSR, 1887–9). I argue that the growing acceptance of the national symbols within the BWP was in tune with the rise of oppositional patriotism among social-democratic parties elsewhere in Europe. Yet its attitude at any particular moment cannot be straightforwardly characterized as either appropriative or dismissive. Both positions always co-existed because a crucial characteristic of the party was the tension between its conciliatory efforts to persuade the elites and its harsh revolutionary rhetoric to scare them into sharing their power. Such strategic concerns coupled to ideological immaturity, *Eigen-sinn*, contextual factors and the presence of diverging (Flemish and francophone Belgian) ethnicities provide an explanatory background for the varying reactions the BWP and its rank and file exhibited towards the national symbols.

After a historiographical introduction on national and socialist symbols and on the relationship class–nation in French, German and English socialism, this article will briefly go

<sup>5</sup>G. Eley and K. Nield, 'Farewell to the working class?', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, LVII (Spring 2000), 1–30.

<sup>6</sup>S. Berger, 'Review of Ward, Paul. *Red Flag and Union Jack. Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924*', *International Review of Social History*, XLV, 3 (2000), 488–92.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, the contributions on the tricolour, *Marseillaise* and *14 juillet* in P. Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris, 1984). Compare M. Jeismann, 'Die Nationalhymne' in E. François and H. Schulze (eds),

*Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 3 (München, 2002 [dritte Auflage]), 660–4.

<sup>8</sup>S. Yeo, 'Socialism, the state and some oppositional Englishness' in R. Colls and P. Dodd (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880–1920* (London, 1986), 308–69.

<sup>9</sup>Berger and Smith (eds), *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>R. Chartier, 'Le monde comme représentation', *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*, VI (1989), 1505–20.

<sup>11</sup>A. Lüdtkke, *Eigen-Sinn, Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg, 1993).

into the history of the Belgian Workers' Party. The main argument concerning party and grass-roots attitudes will be developed in two main sections: before and after the breakthrough of oppositional patriotism. Heuristically this article relies on an array of sources, including the party press, pamphlets, court archives, (unpublished) reader letters to the party press and police surveillance reports.<sup>12</sup>

## SYMBOLS OF NATION AND CLASS

Ever since Agulhon's *Marianne au combat* (1979) and Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), the nineteenth-century staging of political symbols and ceremonies has received ample attention. The role of holidays, festivals, banners, anthems, allegorical figures and the like in the construction of nation-states and nationalist movements has been thoroughly examined. There is also a substantial literature on the imagery and symbolism of the socialist movement and its attitude towards the notion of the fatherland.<sup>13</sup> The list of publications on national symbols within socialism, however, is considerably shorter, with the qualification that scholarly interest has been highest in Germany, moderate in France and low in Great Britain, which seems to reflect the degree of contestation these symbols met in the respective socialist movements (the more contested, the more researched). As to research in/on Belgium, national symbols and *lieux de mémoire* have been high on the agenda in recent years<sup>14</sup> and the imagery of the socialist movement has garnered some scholarly interest.<sup>15</sup> However, its view on the Belgian national symbols has remained a marginal issue.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say that the socialist stand on the Belgian flag, anthem and holiday is virgin territory.

In the last decades a scholarly consensus has grown that the social-democratic currents within the (European) socialist movement became increasingly 'national' before the First World War. Their espousal of oppositional patriotism was related to their reformist fixation on the state and was accelerated by the development of state-sponsored welfare systems.<sup>17</sup> This evolution had a different rhythm in France, Germany and Britain and was reflected in differing attitudes towards the national flag, anthem and holiday.

In spite of the complete ideological fragmentation of the French labour movement, most French socialists agreed that France was worth defending as the home country of freedom.<sup>18</sup> In

<sup>12</sup>Cf. my Ph.D. thesis: M. Van Ginderachter, 'Vaderland in de Belgische Werkliedenpartij (1885–1914). Sociaal-democratie en nationale identiteit from below. Een casusstudie van Gent, Brussel en de Borinage' [Fatherland in the Belgian Workers' Party. Social democracy and national identity from below. A case-study of Ghent, Brussels and the Borinage] (D.Phil., Ghent University, 2005).

<sup>13</sup>To name but two: D. Petzina (ed.), *Fahnen, Fäuste, Körper. Symbolik und Kultur der Arbeiterbewegung* (Essen, 1986); J. J. Schwarzmantel, *Socialism and the Idea of the Nation* (London, 1991).

<sup>14</sup>See in particular the work of Jo Tollebeek and Tom Verschaffel.

<sup>15</sup>For example, G. Deneckere, 'De resurrectie van Jacob Van Artevelde in de 19de eeuwse Gentse arbeidersbeweging', *Handelingen der*

*Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent. Nieuwe Reeks*, (1996), 155–87.

<sup>16</sup>P. P. Hilden, 'The rhetoric and iconography of reform: women coal miners in Belgium, 1840–1914', *Historical Journal*, xxxiv, 2 (1991), 411–36; G. Vanschoenbeek, 'Socialisten: gezellen zonder vaderland? De BWP en haar verhouding tot het "vaderland België"', *Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent*, III (1997), 237–55.

<sup>17</sup>S. Berger and A. Smith, 'Between Scylla and Charybdis: nationalism, Labour and ethnicity across five continents, 1870–1939' in Berger and Smith (eds), *op. cit.*, 1–30, 16.

<sup>18</sup>E. Cahm, 'French socialist theories of the nation to 1889' in J. C. Cahm and V. C. Fiserà (eds), *Socialism and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe (1848–1945)*, vol. 2 (Nottingham, 1979), 2–9.

line with the Jacobin patriotism of the French Revolution (with its tenets of the *patrie en danger* and the *nation armée*) it was believed that France had a universal mission to accomplish, namely, launching a World Revolution. By 1880, the left had positioned itself so centrally within the language of nation that the (extreme) right was not able to monopolize this discourse completely as in other European countries.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, the national symbols were appropriated by socialists – a process facilitated by their revolutionary origins and the initial conservative–royalist reluctance to embrace them. However, the use of these symbols by reactionary governments and the Third Republic’s official adoption of the Marseillaise, the *bleu-blanc-rouge* and *14 juillet* introduced a certain ambiguity.<sup>20</sup> According to Agulhon, though, the reds’ hostility towards the bourgeois republic’s symbols should not be overestimated.<sup>21</sup> Socialists did indeed criticize the chauvinist appropriation, but it was only the extreme anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist left that insisted the national symbols be completely relegated.<sup>22</sup> The other currents within French socialism still claimed them. In 1893, for instance, the *Parti ouvrier français* parried the bourgeois accusation that it was anti-national with a tri-coloured brochure that read: ‘To vote for Jules Guesde [the POF leader], is to vote for Alsace-Lorraine.’<sup>23</sup> The *Marseillaise* remained the favourite song of striking workers: of the 164 strikes between 1871 and 1890 in which Perrot found explicit evidence of singing activity, 64 (39 per cent) were enlivened by *Marseillaises*. In two-thirds of cases, the *tricolore* was waved.<sup>24</sup> There were socialist demonstrations against *14 juillet*, but these were aimed against the government or the deployment of troops in strikes, not against the fatherland or the army as such.<sup>25</sup>

The German labour movement had also been influenced by the national ideas of the French Revolution. Marx and Engels had been so impressed by the revolutions of 1848/9 that they opted for an explicitly ‘national-democratic revolutionary interpretation’ of class struggle and championed great-German unity. The conservative small-German *Reichsgründung* was a breaking point. As the conservatives monopolized the national discourse, the social democrats looked for a fatherland *Ersatz*, which they found in the international proletariat. Because of the repression under Bismarck, the SPD started to view the fatherland as a core concept of the enemy,<sup>26</sup> yet this rejection was not unambiguous. Most German social democrats regarded the unified German state as a prerequisite for the eventual downfall of capitalism. They believed that their nation was the geographic and political cradle for a future World

<sup>19</sup>R. Magraw, ‘Appropriating the symbols of the *patrie*? Jacobin nationalism and its rivals in the French Third Republic’ in Berger and Smith (eds), *op. cit.*, 93–120, 95, 120.

<sup>20</sup>R. Girardet, ‘Les trois couleurs. Ni blanc, ni rouge’ in Nora (ed.), *op. cit.*, 5–35, 26; M. Vovelle, ‘La *Marseillaise*. La guerre ou la paix’ in *ibid.*, 85–136, 85, 117.

<sup>21</sup>M. Agulhon, *Marianne au pouvoir: l’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914* (Paris, 2001 [1989]), 291–2.

<sup>22</sup>K. Callahan, ‘“Performing inter-nationalism” in Stuttgart in 1907: French and German socialist nationalism and the political culture of an International Socialist Congress’, *International Review of Social History*, XLV (2000), 51–87, 60.

<sup>23</sup>Willard, *op. cit.*, 202. All translations are the author’s.

<sup>24</sup>M. Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève. France 1871–1890. Thèse présentée devant l’Université de Paris I* (Lille, 1975), 562–3, 567. It should be noted, however, that under the Third Republic the *Marseillaise* was gradually supplemented by *La Carmagnole* and *L’Internationale* as the workers’ movement favourite rallying song. Vovelle, *op. cit.*, 122.

<sup>25</sup>J. Vogel, *Nationen im Gleichschritt: der Kult der ‘Nation in Waffen’ in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1871–1914* (Göttingen, 1997), 243.

<sup>26</sup>W. Conze and D. Groh, *Die Arbeiterbewegung in der nationalen Bewegung. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor, während und nach der Reichsgründung* (Stuttgart, 1966), 29, 48.

Revolution – hence they accepted the principle of national defence.<sup>27</sup> The SPD's attitude towards the national symbols was more rejecting than that of the French socialists because of the repressive climate in Germany. After the *Reichsgründung*, national commemorations of great German poets or historic battles lost their oppositional potential. They became pillars of the Prussian Protestant and military system.<sup>28</sup> The imperial origin of the national holidays – Sedan Day (commemorating the defeat of the French in 1870) and the Kaiser's birthday – and of the black-white-red Wilhelminian flag (as opposed to the black-red-gold banner of the 1848 revolutions) was, of course, a serious obstacle to socialist appropriation.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, bourgeois hurrays on Sedan Day were answered by social democrats singing the *Marseillaise* and cheering the Paris Commune.<sup>30</sup>

English Labour was deeply convinced of its typical brand of socialism – 'evolutionary, statist, non-violent and above all parliamentary'. It generally rejected the idea of class struggle and regarded revolution and violence as foreign, continental phenomena.<sup>31</sup> English socialists claimed an age-old tradition of radical patriotism (the 'ancient liberties of the freeborn Englishman'). Overall, labour's oppositional patriotism came closer to official nationalism in Britain than in France or Germany. It relied heavily, for instance, on the myth of a rural England (the fifteenth century as the golden age of labour) and the monarchy was widely accepted among Labour leaders, who considered republicanism to be a 'vote loser'.<sup>32</sup> The national symbols were not as distrusted as in the German case, but this did not mean that there could be no incidents at all. Robert Blatchford, for example, once refused to stand for 'Rule Britannia' – but then again he did order his daughter to play it every night during the Boer War.<sup>33</sup> Judging by the (fragmentary) evidence, working-class acceptance of the national symbols was relatively high. The close association of nation and empire seems to have contributed to this.<sup>34</sup> In his classic insider account of the Salford slums, Robert Roberts, writing about his schooldays in Edwardian England, conceded that he and his fellow pupils felt proud to celebrate Empire Day (24 May, the birthday of Queen Victoria), draw Union Jacks and hang their classrooms with flags of the dominions.<sup>35</sup>

Roberts's story offers us an exceptional view from below. In Britain and Germany, with their traditions of history from below, history workshops and *Alltagsgeschichte*, the national attitudes of

<sup>27</sup>M. M. Drachkovitch, *Les socialismes français et allemand et le problème de la guerre, 1870–1914* (Geneva, 1953), 262.

<sup>28</sup>M. B. Klein, *Zwischen Reich und Region. Identitätsstrukturen im Deutschen Kaiserreich (1871–1918)* (Stuttgart, 2005), 265.

<sup>29</sup>W. K. Blessing, 'Der monarchische Kult, politische Loyalität und die Arbeiterbewegung im Deutschen Kaiserreich' in G. A. Ritter (ed.), *Arbeiterkultur* (Königstein, 1979), 185–208; H. Müller, 'Die deutsche Arbeiterklasse und die Sedanfeiern. Zum antimilitaristischen Kampf der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei in den ersten Jahren nach der Reichsgründung', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, xii (1969), 1554–64.

<sup>30</sup>B. W. Bouvier, 'Die *Marseillaise* in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung vor 1914' in F. L.

Van Holthoorn and M. Van der Linden (eds), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830–1940*, vol. 1 (Leiden and New York, 1988), 137–62, 157; Conze and Groh, *op. cit.*, 111.

<sup>31</sup>Ward, *op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>32</sup>Berger, 'British and German socialists', *op. cit.*, 43, 58.

<sup>33</sup>Ward, *op. cit.*, 60.

<sup>34</sup>For example, C. Hall and S. O. Rose (eds), *At Home with the Empire. Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006); S. Heathorn, *For Home, Country, and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1884–1914* (Toronto, 2000), 185–91.

<sup>35</sup>R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 42.



the rank and file have received more attention than in France.<sup>36</sup> Overall, though, studies on the class–nation relationship are typically intellectual or political histories that examine the doctrinal discussions or the positions of party organizations and high-ranking members.<sup>37</sup> Yet there is one area where grass-roots socialist attitudes have attracted more systematic interest, namely that of the First World War. The classic histories of the Second International sharply juxtaposed the eager war participation of most European social democrats and their pre-war professions of internationalism. Since the 1960s, however, the radical break between the *belle époque* and August 1914 has been interpreted as a more continuous transition. The earliest ‘revisionist’ historians stressed the contribution of the proletariat to war enthusiasm. The working people, so they claimed, rushed into the war because they were disoriented by the ‘treason’ of their leaders and because their class and internationalist identities were weakly developed. Gradually several scholars have nuanced ‘the crass historiography which claims that the events of 1914, when workers supported their national war efforts, also denoted the demise or absence of class consciousness’.<sup>38</sup> Grass-roots emotions were more complex than previously imagined. In France, for instance, ‘many workers were simultaneously committed to national defence, yearning for peace initiatives and filled with bitter social resentment.’<sup>39</sup>

#### THE BELGIAN WORKERS’ PARTY

The Belgian Workers’ Party was founded in 1885 as a loose federation of unions, mutual aid societies, co-operatives and political groups without a common ideological manifesto. Their unity was underpinned by a concrete programme of reform which hinged on general suffrage and the co-operatives as the foundation of socialist action. In spite of its sometimes fiercely revolutionary rhetoric, the BWP was a reformist party from the outset.

The enormous industrial growth Belgium experienced after 1895 improved the economic climate and undermined Marx’s prediction of the implosion of capitalism. After the introduction of male plural suffrage in 1893–4 the BWP evolved into the second party of the country (in number of votes and seats) and massively entered the municipal councils of the large industrial cities in Brussels and Wallonia (in Flanders the breakthrough was limited to the textile city of Ghent). Concurrently, the economic integration of the party through its consumer co-operatives steadily continued. All these developments help to explain the rise of oppositional patriotism after 1895. By August 1914 the BWP was ready to defend its country.

<sup>36</sup>For example, S. Berger, ‘In the fangs of social patriotism: the construction of nation and class in autobiographies of British and German social democrats in the inter-war period’, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, XL (2000), 259–87, 283; A. Davin, *Growing up Poor. Home, School and Street in London 1870–1914* (London, 1996), 199ff; R. J. Evans, ‘Proletarian mentalities: pub conversations in Hamburg’ in R. J. Evans (ed.), *Proletarians and Politics: Socialism, Protest, and the Working Class in Germany before the First World War* (New York, 1990), 174–83; R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols (London, 1989).

<sup>37</sup>For example, D. Groh and P. Brandt, *Vaterlandslose Gesellen: Sozialdemokratie und Nation 1860–1990* (München, 1992); D. A. Harvey, *Constructing Class and Nationality in Alsace, 1830–1945* (DeKalb, 2001); K. S. Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus: die polnische und ukrainische Sozialdemokratie in Galizien von 1890 bis 1914: ein Beitrag zur Nationalitätenfrage im Habsburgerreich* (Hamburg, 1996).

<sup>38</sup>D. Geary, ‘Working-class identities in Europe, 1850–1914’ in M. Fullbrook (ed.), *National Histories and European History* (London, 1994), 204–15, 213.

<sup>39</sup>Magraw, *op. cit.*, 105–6.

Until recently, there was a scholarly consensus that the BWP shared a common Belgian national identity across the language border, but this vision is no longer tenable.<sup>40</sup> The breakthrough of oppositional patriotism after 1895 went hand in hand with a gradual marginalization of radical cosmopolitanism and a growing acceptance of the monarchy, colonialism and the principle of national defence, but a unified ethnic identity did not develop. In the BWP sections of Brussels and Wallonia a francophone Belgian ethnicity held sway, while in Ghent, the spearhead of Flemish socialism, a sense of Flemishness prevailed. The Ghent socialists regarded Belgium primarily as a *Gesellschaft*, a polity of equal citizens that was to be realized in the future, not as an *ethnie* based on (perceived) cultural or kinship ties.<sup>41</sup> There were even anti-Belgian tendencies because they rejected the country's founding myth, regretting the revolution of 1830 by which Belgium had seceded from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Ethnicity threatened to undercut class solidarity between Flemish and francophone socialists, but it never quite managed to do so because of the eventual ascendancy of class over all other imagined communities within the BWP. The class narrative was ultimately stronger. Those organized by the BWP willingly subordinated ethnicity to class in political and social struggles. This was hardly the case for workers outside the BWP and for the unorganized poor because, in Catholic Flanders, class consciousness was generally less well developed than religious identity. This explains why the BWP had so much trouble attracting Catholic workers. This was not, as has been suggested,<sup>42</sup> the result of its presumed anti-Flemish character, but mainly because of its staunch anti-clericalism and the Catholic labour movement's dual appropriation of Flemishness and catholicity.

#### BEFORE OPPOSITIONAL PATRIOTISM (1885–95)

##### **A party between acceptance and contestation**

During the early years of Belgian independence the national holiday was celebrated on the third Sunday of September to commemorate the ousting of the Dutch troops from the park of Brussels on 27 September 1830. The initial support of the authorities and the bourgeoisie for these festivities disappeared with the European revolutions of 1848. Instead of the third Sunday of September they began to promote a less revolutionary date: 21 July, the day Leopold I was sworn in as first king of the Belgians in 1831, which became the official national holiday in 1890.

Although the September commemoration lost its official support after 1848, parts of the public still celebrated it. The 1830 veterans traditionally held a 'pilgrimage' to the *Place des Martyrs* in Brussels to lay flowers at the monument of the Belgian revolution, a ceremony which was imitated in the major towns of the country. It was this celebration that francophone socialists began to appropriate in the 1880s, interpreting 1830 as a proletarian revolution that had been stolen by the bourgeoisie. On the third Sunday of September 1886, for instance, a socialist manifestation for general suffrage was held in Liège. The day climaxed with 5000

<sup>40</sup>M. Van Ginderachter, 'Social democracy and national identity. The ethnic rift in the Belgian Workers' Party (1885–1914)', *International Review of Social History*, LII, 2 (2007), 215–40.

<sup>41</sup>A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1994 [1986]), 58.

<sup>42</sup>C. Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-century Belgium* (Lanham, 1997).



workers saluting the 1830 monument in the Sainte-Walburge cemetery. In his accompanying speech the Brussels socialist leader Jean Volders described the 'stolen revolution' as part of 'the dramatic history of the Belgian provinces'.<sup>43</sup> In this way the socialist struggle against the conservatives was integrated into the national narrative as a direct continuation of the ancient Belgian battle against foreign rulers. This fitted the party's balancing act between a revolutionary rhetoric and its search for respectability. Claiming 1830, the BWP tried on the one hand to pressurize the bourgeoisie by alluding to a workers' revolt and on the other hand to position itself as the honourable heir of the founders of Belgium.

Opposedly, the 21 July celebration was denounced as 'banal or grotesque, meant to distract or numb the masses'<sup>44</sup> and the BWP admonished its supporters not to participate. Yet huge crowds were usually present, attracted by the same 'Theatralitik' that was central to the success of similar festivities in Germany and France.<sup>45</sup> Even the socialist papers had to admit that 'the masses of victims and pariahs' took part.<sup>46</sup> The BWP was partly responsible because its attitude was often ambiguous. The Brussels party paper *Le Peuple*, for instance, while heavily criticizing the national celebrations, consistently advertised the programme. Moreover, the BWP never disrupted the festivities or staged disturbances, as opposed to the French socialists who often turned 14 juillet into a clamorous confrontation with political adversaries. The BWP, like the SPD, shrank from a head-on collision due to the massive presence of police on these occasions and a climate that was more repressive than that in France. Additionally, Belgian social democracy, being more 'disciplined', chose more opportune moments to antagonize its opponents, while their French colleagues took to the streets more readily, given their tradition of political street protest.<sup>47</sup>

The Brussels socialists tried to downplay the popular appeal of the 21 July celebrations. They either claimed that the so-called 'loafers' who came to gape at the festivities were no workers at all<sup>48</sup> or, while conceding the presence of proletarians, they emphasized their 'icy indifference'.<sup>49</sup> It is likely that these were mere rationalizations. Socialist party members in Germany and France, too, knew that they were supposed to be hostile, or at least neutral, to militaristic and patriotic festivals, but this did not prevent them from attending and actively participating. We can interpret this as an expression of *Eigen-Sinn*.<sup>50</sup>

*Eigen-Sinn* might explain some of the ambiguities towards the national emblems but, especially in the early years of the BWP, ideological ignorance or immaturity must also have played a part. Around 1885 socialist attitudes towards the national anthem and flag – both of which had roots in the September revolution of 1830 – were in flux. On the one hand, internationalist doctrines prescribed a certain distrust of these symbols epitomizing the division of humankind, which was further fuelled by bourgeois repression and workers' discrimination. On the other hand, appealing to the official national emblems fitted older strategies of collective protest based on close ties with local elites – especially in Brussels, where the socialist movement was rooted in the highly skilled artisanal sector. This might explain why the

<sup>43</sup>*Le Peuple*, 28 September 1886, 1.

<sup>44</sup>*Le Peuple*, 10 August 1886, 2.

<sup>45</sup>J. Vogel, 'Militärfeiern in Deutschland und Frankreich als Rituale der Nation (1871–1914)' in E. François, H. Siegrist and J. Vogel (eds), *Nation und Emotion: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1995), 199–214, 207–8.

<sup>46</sup>*Le Peuple*, 23 August 1887, 1.

<sup>47</sup>Vogel, *Nationen im Gleichschritt*, 222, 260.

<sup>48</sup>*Le Peuple*, 23 August 1887, 1.

<sup>49</sup>*Le Peuple*, 24 September 1896, 1.

<sup>50</sup>Vogel, 'Militärfeiern', 209.

founding congress of the BWP in August 1885 left the member groups free as to the colour of their banner – ‘red, blue, black, or tricolour’.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, several Brussels workers’ leagues that joined the BWP had no qualms about brandishing the tricolour and appropriating the national hymn. The *Ligue typographique En Avant*, for instance, had its own ‘typographical *brabançonne*’<sup>52</sup> and the *Ligue ouvrière St Gilloise* inaugurated its banner in February 1886 with three renditions of the *Brabançonne* (against only one *Marseillaise*).<sup>53</sup>

From the spring of 1886 onwards, a growing number of incidents showed that things were changing. An important catalyst was the labour revolt that swept through the country in March/April. Riots spread all over the industrial districts of Wallonia and the army killed twenty-four people. The security police reported that, following the authorities’ violence, workers condemned the black–yellow–red of the national flag as bourgeois colours.<sup>54</sup> It was not only the shock of the spring revolt that made workers more suspicious. Concomitantly, the labour movement was becoming more autonomous of bourgeois–paternalist currents. In this period the decisive transition occurred from the old repertoires of collective protest (local, discontinuous and elite-centred) to modern social action (nationally organized and more autonomous). In all labour organizations where the previously close links with the bourgeoisie became less tight, where workers began to organize themselves and chose the social-democratic path, the tricolour, the *Brabançonne* and the national holiday were replaced by the red banner, the *Marseillaise* and the First of May (or before 1890, 18 March to commemorate the Paris Commune).

The national emblems came fully to epitomize the discrimination of the workers under the ‘bourgeois domination’.<sup>55</sup> Within different contexts, however, diverging reactions remained possible, as exemplified by two consecutive socialist ceremonies on 21 and 22 September 1889. One of the classic arguments voiced against the socialists was that they were a foreign legion acting against the national interest. Francophone socialists vociferously denied these allegations, claiming that they continued the age-old Belgian struggle against foreign usurpers. When the liberal city authorities of Brussels decided to commemorate the execution of guild dean Frans Anneessens (1660–1719), the local BWP hailed him as a labour symbol. On 21 September 1889 an exclusively socialist commemoration was held. The red flag was prominently displayed and the workers’ fanfare played the *Marseillaise* repeatedly. The climax of the ceremony, however, was not a sturdy *Marseillaise*, but a rendition of the well-known patriotic march *Patria Belgica*, during which all demonstrators bared their heads.<sup>56</sup> The following day, the Brussels socialists celebrated the anniversary of the Belgian revolution. Again a parade went through the streets of the capital. A wreath was laid at the monument for the revolutionaries who had been killed; a booming *Marseillaise* was the apogee.<sup>57</sup> Why this difference with the *Patria Belgica* march one day earlier? Context was decisive.

Anneessens was a rather vague figure, a minor national hero who had been rediscovered in the 1880s because he could be used in the anti-clerical fight against the Catholic government (relations had become very tense after the School War of 1878–84). Because of his relatively late arrival in the public domain, Anneessens was a fairly open symbol, not yet monopolized by

<sup>51</sup> *Vooruit*, 21 August 1885, 1.

<sup>52</sup> H. Lhoest-Offerman, *Recueil de documents relatifs à la propagande des mouvements socialistes au XIXe siècle à Bruxelles* (Bruxelles, 1967), 29.

<sup>53</sup> *Le Peuple*, 23 February 1886, 2.

<sup>54</sup> P. P. Hilden, *Women, Work, and Politics: Belgium 1830–1914* (Oxford, 1993), 163.

<sup>55</sup> *Le Peuple*, 21 August 1886, 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Le Peuple*, 21 September 1889, 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> *Le Peuple*, 23 September 1889, 1–2.

any particular ideology and hence susceptible to different interpretations. In other words, the Brussels socialists were not confronted with a hegemonic symbol of a rival group from which they had to distance themselves. Consequently, they did not feel obliged to brandish their own internationalist and socialist emblems. Instead, through Anneessens and the *Patria Belgica* march, they could firmly establish their Belgian roots for the benefit of democratic bourgeois voters (while at the same time steering clear of overly nationalist groups by *not* playing the *Brabançonne*). Such a strategy was impossible with the 1830 revolution. The strong nationalist and royalist undertones of this symbol made the Brussels socialists emphasize their own identity by playing the *Marseillaise*.

Another example, from the early 1890s, shows that the opportunist appeal to the national flag and anthem in order to garner bourgeois support could not be stretched infinitely. In the years 1890–4 there was a strong current within Brussels socialism to co-operate with progressive and even conservative liberals. This did not mean, however, that the Brussels socialists were willing to digest liberal patriotism uncritically. This became clear at a democratic banquet in February 1892 at the Hotel Continental in Brussels. When Edouard Anseele, the Ghent party boss and head of the Flemish socialists, bluntly declared that all supporters of general suffrage had to rally around the red flag, Emile Feron, a progressive liberal heavyweight, replied that he and his allies would stand by their blue flag. To transcend the controversy Paul Janson, the leader of the democratic liberals, suggested adopting the Belgian tricolour. Jean Volders, the Brussels socialists' chief, concurred with Anseele, however, although at that very moment he was negotiating a joint socialist-liberal list for the parliamentary elections of 14 June. Volders rejected Janson's proposal out of hand: 'The proletarians cannot honour, certainly in Belgium, the tricolour flag, which represents to them the absence of justice and happiness.' Moreover, the socialists could not accept a symbol of global discord. Only the red flag, 'that of Humanity', was acceptable to them.<sup>58</sup> Again, this shows that in an extremely contrasting situation, where the socialist identity was markedly highlighted against a rival legacy, the national emblems became too infused with bourgeois meanings to be meaningfully appropriated. It also demonstrates the limits of opportunism: Volders's unmistakable desire for democratic unity could not (yet) overcome his distrust of the tricolour and the *Brabançonne*.

### **Rank and file rejection. The case of the *Parti socialiste républicain***

At the grass-roots level attitudes towards the national symbols grew grimmer after the spring of 1886. Fear of the revolutionary masses made the authorities prohibit the use of 'seditious' emblems such as the red flag and the *Marseillaise*, urging workers to march behind the truly patriotic symbol of the national flag – to little avail. At the previously mentioned suffrage demonstration in Liège, in September 1886, when informed that the mayor would rather have them use the tricolour, the crowd shouted: 'We don't want it.'<sup>59</sup> In the Flemish city of Ghent, the national anthem could no longer be played without full-throated protest. On 20 April

<sup>58</sup>*Le Peuple*, 10 February 1892, 1.

(Archives départementales du Nord à Lille. Série M. 162/5).

<sup>59</sup>Report by the French commissaire spécial of Jeumont, 27 September 1886

1886, in the immediate aftermath of the spring revolt, all hell broke loose at a popular pantomime that closed with a parade of different national flags:

when the Belgian flag appeared deafening shouts and whistles rose. . . . When the director of the theatre asked if the pantomime did not please, there were calls that it had nothing to do with the play, but with the *Brabançonne* and the Belgian flag, after which the shouting and whistling recommenced.<sup>60</sup>

What was unique to the Ghent situation, as compared to the francophone BWP strongholds, was that this attitude not only relied on the rejection of a *bourgeois* symbol, but also of *Belgianness*. As *Vooruit*, the local socialist party paper, wrote: 'What does the Belgian tricolour flag mean especially to the Flemings? Is that the flag of our fathers? Not at all.' If the French army had not come to the rescue of the young Belgian state in 1831, 'that infamous national flag would have been long history'.<sup>61</sup>

The case of the *Parti socialiste républicain*, a short-lived dissidence from the BWP between 1887 and 1889, offers an intriguing look at grass-roots appropriations. This party, led by the charismatic Alfred Defuisseaux (1843–1901), had backing in all industrial regions of the province of Hainaut (the Borinage, the Centre and Charleroi). Although the PSR rhetoric was radically revolutionary, its programme was anything but, arguing for general suffrage without a truly socialist vision. Heavily influenced by French *blanquism*, the so-called *Defuissarts* embraced an anti-German, anti-Flemish and Gallophile Belgian nationalism.<sup>62</sup>

After the scandal of the *Grand complot* in 1889 (which demonstrated that the PSR was infiltrated by the secret service), the party reintegrated into the BWP. The blanquist nationalism of the years 1887–9 had been a contextual reaction to the Boulanger affair in France and the Franco–Prussian tensions which threatened Belgian independence, yet it cannot be downplayed as an inconsequential exception as it was the radicalization of a Belgian nationalism that had already been present. This is obvious when we consider the incidents with the national flag and anthem among Defuisseaux's rank and file. These shed an interesting light on the limits of patriotic propaganda and the grass-roots appropriation of Belgianness.

On 31 January 1887 a riot occurred in Mons, the capital of the province of Hainaut, on the day of the military draft. A band of prospective conscripts from the mining town of Cuesmes marched into town behind a red flag and chanting socialist slogans. They came across a group of fellow draftees from the countryside who were singing patriotic songs and waving the national flag. A short skirmish ensued. The miners captured the tricolour, tore it up and burned it the next Sunday.<sup>63</sup>

This incident put the local Hainaut authorities on edge. In the subsequent year several towns prohibited PSR demonstrations with the red flag. On each occasion the national tricolour was suggested as a substitute, but the *Defuissarts* were not to be persuaded. In Wasmes they circumvented the ban, using the French flag.<sup>64</sup> In Morlanwez a PSR parade left without

<sup>60</sup> *Vooruit*, 20 April 1886, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Vooruit*, 25 August 1886, 1.

<sup>62</sup> M. Van Ginderachter, *Het rode vaderland. De vergeten geschiedenis van de communautaire spanningen in het Belgische socialisme voor WO I* (Tielt/Gent, 2005), 116–29.

<sup>63</sup> *En avant pour le SU*, 6 February 1887, 2; *Le Combat*, 13 March 1887, 3; Report by the French commissaire spécial of Feignies, 31 January and 1 February 1887 (Archives départementales du Nord à Lille. Série M. 162/7).

<sup>64</sup> *La République belge*, 2 September 1888, 3.

banners, but as soon as it had crossed the town boundary a red flag was unfurled, which was duly refurled on the return. The president of the local socialist section, Alexis Ledoux, explicitly intended this as an act of defiance. In an (unpublished) rhapsodic letter full of spelling and grammatical mistakes to the PSR paper *La République belge*, he addressed his mayor: 'The socialist [sic] are more cunning than you think mister mayor.'<sup>65</sup> This example of *Eigen-Sinn* was even surpassed by Jean Callewaert, the president of the Belgian branch of the American *Knights of Labor* (a working-class form of freemasonry) and member of the PSR. On 7 May 1888 he sent a letter to *La République belge* to protest against the red flag ban in Forchies-la-Manche. Callewaert, who was a semi-literate self-educated man, wrote very unorthodox French, hardly used any punctuation and rambled from one thought to another. He defied the ban in a humorous and provocative way. Because the mayor had insisted that the socialists use the national flag, Callewaert had a Belgian black-yellow-red tricolour tailor-made. Its last band was much wider than the others so that, when furled, the flag only showed red. But on the day of the demonstration, the police confiscated the flag. Undeterred, the demonstrators asked if a 'real' tricolour was permitted and after an affirmative answer they came up with a French flag.<sup>66</sup>

It is striking that in none of these cases the Belgian tricolour was rejected as a *national* symbol, but merely as a bourgeois flag epitomizing the workers' exclusion. Ledoux, for instance, complained that 'we do not want to take a flag that we have no place under that it is [sic] only of the privileged'.<sup>67</sup> Callewaert, too, emphasized that the tricolour was 'the flags of Belgian Sencitarianism [sic]' (i.e. the census that was the basis of the restricted Belgian voting system). In spite of his seemingly internationalist objections ('we know perfectly Well that the border have been established by human Stupidity [sic]'), he had used the French flag

to protest against the machination of our masters who would like to turn our Belgium with all its children over to The house of hohenzoler . . . while we are determined that if Belgium should disappear: be French and belonge and reunite to a neighbour nation and friend who has shed his blood for our independence!!!<sup>68</sup>

In other words, although these attitudes were theoretically irreconcilable, in practice radically internationalist notions were intertwined in an unorthodox manner with anti-German, francophile and Belgian patriotic sentiments. The PSR rank and file seemed to respond favourably to these notions by cheering them at meetings<sup>69</sup> or by chanting 'Long live France!

<sup>65</sup>'Les socialiste son plus malin que tu ne pense monsieur le bourgmestre': A. Ledoux to *La République belge* [May 1888] (Archives de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles. Fonds Defuisseaux [hence abbreviated to AULB. FD] 310A).

<sup>66</sup>Jean Callewaert to *La République belge*, 7 May 1888 (AULB. FD. 310A).

<sup>67</sup>'Que nous ne voulions pas prendre un drapeau que nous navions pas placé endessous que c'était seul les privilégié': A. Ledoux to *La République belge* [May 1888] (AULB. FD 310A). These and all subsequent spelling mistakes are original.

<sup>68</sup>'Le drapeaux du Sencitarisme Belge' . . . 'nous savons parfaitement Bien que les frontiere ont été établie par la Betise humaine' . . . 'pour protester contre les agissement de nos maitres qui voudrions faire passer notre Belgique avec tous ses enfants a La maison d'hohenzoler . . . tandis que nous nous prétendons s'il faut que la Belgique disparaisse: être français et appartenire et reunis a une nation voisine et ami qui a verse son sang pour notre indépendance!!!': Jean Callewaert to *La République belge*, 7 May 1888 (AULB. FD. 310A).

<sup>69</sup>Handwritten report of a PSR meeting in Tubize, s.d. (AULB. FD. 311A).

Down with the Germans!<sup>70</sup> On 12 February 1888, for instance, Georges Defuisseaux, Alfred's nephew, received a compelling letter from one of his followers, Thomas Dumonceau. In the rambling, unpunctuated phonetic scrawl of the semi-literate, Dumonceau complained about a devastating change in his daily life. The Catholic government, so he claimed, had tampered with Belgian coins and replaced the national motto *L'union fait la force* by a German text!

We miss on the coin of ten centimes lunion fait la force be cause the belgian government saw that the people want to unnerstand it and useit he said to prove to the belgian people that it is german that he has marked it in german on al our coins and monney butt we have to much red blood in our veins to be german no never the prussians will govern us [sic].<sup>71</sup>

Dumonceau was clearly under the spell of the anti-German sentiments that circulated in the PSR. But what had really happened? A royal decree of 29 March 1886 had introduced Dutch-language money, putting an end to the exclusive use of French on coins. Early in 1888 Dumonceau had got hold of a Dutch coin for the first time in his life and he mistook it for German. This incident shows the strength of banal Belgian nationalism.<sup>72</sup> The omnipresence of coins and bank notes with national symbols contributes to the penetration and acceptance of the nation in daily life. As such, the smallest deviation from routine can 'activate' an otherwise not so outspoken identification with the fatherland.

Dumonceau's case also shows that the nationalist PSR propaganda was not indiscriminately internalized by the party's followers. Themes such as the national revolution of 1830 and the Belgians as the bravest of all Gaul appealed to the militant pride of the rank and file. In unpublished letters to *La République belge* ordinary PSR members proudly called themselves 'the children of the valiant heroes of eighteen thirty'.<sup>73</sup> But they were loath to accept those elements in the PSR propaganda which reeked of official Belgian patriotism with its hoorahs of 'Long Live Belgium'. Alfred Defuisseaux concluded several of his articles with a list of 'Vivas' in which he interspersed a 'Long Live Belgium' among his social demands: 'Long Live Belgium! Long Live amnesty [for those convicted for striking]! Long Live general suffrage!'<sup>74</sup> This did have an impact on the rank and file. Dumonceau ended his letter with a similar list, but he could not bring himself to write 'Long Live Belgium!' Instead he concluded with 'Long live liberty, equality and the Republic'.<sup>75</sup> François Carpent, an 18-year-old PSR member, did the same: 'Long live the black strike. Long live General Suffrage. Long live the republic.'<sup>76</sup> It

<sup>70</sup>*La République belge*, 21 October 1888, 3.

<sup>71</sup>'On ne manque sur les piece de dix centimes que lunion fait la force par ce que le gouvernemant belge a vu que le peuple voulai le comprendre est sent servir [= et s'en servir] il on dit pour prouver au peuple belge qu il etait alleman qu il a loi marque en alleman sur toute nos piece de monai et dargen mai nous avont trop de sans [= sang] rouge dans les vains pour être alleman non jamais les prusiens ne viendrons nous gouverner': Thomas Dumonceau to Georges Defuisseaux, 12 February 1888 [original spelling mistakes] (AULB. FD. 312C).

<sup>72</sup>M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995).

<sup>73</sup>François Carpent to *La République belge*, s.d. [1888] (AULB. FD. 310A). See also a certain Pierre to *La République belge*, 7 March 1888 (AULB. FD. 310F).

<sup>74</sup>*En avant pour le SU*, 28 November 1886, 1.

<sup>75</sup>'Vive la liberté, legalite et la Republique': Thomas Dumonceau to Georges Defuisseaux, 12 February 1888 (original spelling mistakes) (AULB. FD. 312C).

<sup>76</sup>François Carpent to *La République belge*, s.d. [1888] (AULB. FD. 310A).



seemed that the patriotic campaign of the PSR connected to grass-roots notions of Belgianness, but the rank and file determined, to a certain extent, the confines within which state and party propaganda could be successful. They believed in the existence of a Belgian national identity, but not in all tenets of the bourgeois nationalist creed. Trying to have them accept the national flag and anthem or to cry out 'Long Live Belgium' was a bridge too far.

#### THE CONQUEST OF THE FATHERLAND. OPPOSITIONAL PATRIOTISM IN ACTION (1895–1914)

##### 'We too, we love the land where we live.' Party appropriations

From 1895 onwards, oppositional patriotism became dominant in the BWP, as in most other social-democratic parties of (western) Europe. Symptomatically, party cadres increasingly began to appropriate the national flag, anthem and holiday as labour symbols while formerly they were rejected as bourgeois icons. It should be stressed, however, that the rejecting discourse did not completely disappear. It was the juxtaposition of a positive and a negative rhetoric that clearly distinguished the BWP from the nationalist mainstream.

The contrast between a benevolent socialist patriotism and a pernicious bourgeois chauvinism was central to the doctrine of oppositional patriotism. A parallel distinction was made between the good original national symbols of 1830 and the reactionary 'parody' the bourgeois had made of them.<sup>77</sup> The growing veneration for the national flag and anthem as revolutionary symbols was superbly illustrated by the Borinage socialists in 1911. On the third Sunday of September (not coincidentally, the day the Belgian revolution was celebrated) the socialist federation of the Borinage inaugurated a monument to commemorate the battle of Jemappes (where the revolutionary troops of France had defeated the Austrians on 6 November 1792). The apogee of the ceremony was the solemn unveiling of two bullet-riddled Belgian tricolours from 1830, which was accompanied by a rendering of the *Brabançonne* and the *Marseillaise*,<sup>78</sup> the symbolic reconciliation of (a francophile) internationalism with oppositional patriotism.

The BWP's position on the national holiday also evolved. In the last years of the nineteenth century, when it became clear that the electoral successes of the party did not affect the popular appeal of 21 July, a new rationalization for working-class participation cropped up. Life, it was argued, was so 'monotonous and hard for those who labour' that workers understandably seized upon every opportunity to be entertained.<sup>79</sup> Party appeals not to participate became mere ritual verbiage. Socialists still denounced the royalist, bourgeois and clerical character of the festivities, but they no longer plainly rejected them. The new goal was to conquer 21 July for the workers. In 1904 *Le Peuple* conceded: 'Far from being enemies of the festivities, the socialists would want to extend them to everyone' because 'we too, we love the land where we live'.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup>*L'avenir du Borinage*, 26–7 September 1904, 3. In France similar distinctions were made, for instance by Gustave Hervé, between the revered 'national flag of the Republic' and the despised 'flag of a crowned ruffian [Napoleon]'. See P. B. Miller, *From Revolutionaries to Citizens: Antimilitarism*

*in France, 1870–1914* (Durham and London, 2002), 58.

<sup>78</sup>*L'avenir du Borinage*, 25, 26–7 September 1911, 1–2.

<sup>79</sup>*Le Peuple*, 24 July 1901, 1.

<sup>80</sup>*Le Peuple*, 23 July 1904, 1.

The National Jubilee festivities of 1905, when Belgium's seventy-fifth anniversary was celebrated, are a case in point. Officially the socialists did not participate, but ambiguity reigned. To prevent their supporters from accepting the social status quo and to maintain the image of the revolutionary masses, it was important to keep some distance. At the same time, the party did not want to endanger twenty years of gradual power acquisition. Nor can we exclude the fact that some socialists authentically loved their country and really wanted to conquer it for the proletariat. This difficult balancing act explains the considerable number of grey areas that lay beyond the official party stance. The nearer the climax of the festivities (scheduled for 21 July and the third Sunday of September), the less tenable the BWP's position of complete indifference appeared. In early July 1905 the Brussels socialists even decided that their members were free to attend the Jubilee parade of the capital city schools as a way of supporting the official education system against the Catholic government.<sup>81</sup> In Charleroi the local socialist federation *unanimously* decided to replace the First of May parade by a September ceremony at which a plaque honouring the stolen Belgian revolution would be unveiled.<sup>82</sup> Strikingly, commemorating 1830 was at the expense of the movement's own internationalist symbols.

The exception, however, was Ghent where a sense of Flemish ethnicity precluded a straightforward appropriation of the Belgian Jubilee. The theme of the stolen revolution, for instance, was completely lacking. The Belgian revolution was described as 'the historical stupidity of 1830' and disclaimed as a useless clerical insurgency.<sup>83</sup> During the whole Jubilee year the Ghent federation remained opposed to the festivities. While their francophone colleagues were slowly reneging on their vows, bills were posted throughout Ghent: 'We do not participate! Workers, don't do it either.'<sup>84</sup> Singularly straightforward and concrete rules were set down for the party members: they were not allowed to decorate their houses nor to be present at whichever patriotic manifestation which included their children.<sup>85</sup>

### Burning flags. Grass-roots lags

At the turn of the nineteenth century there was a grass-roots lag in the acceptance of oppositional patriotism. The rank and file did not seem to follow the changes *vis-à-vis* the national emblems (immediately). The most striking example was provided by a heavily mediatized incident in Charleroi where a Belgian flag was burned.

On 21 November 1898, the Assize Court of Hainaut condemned two socialists, Emile Degève and Jean-Baptiste Wayemberg, to six months in prison.<sup>86</sup> On 23 May 1898 they had burned a Belgian flag during a parade celebrating the socialist victory in the parliamentary elections. As the anti-socialist press immediately jumped on the affair, several francophone socialists were quick to minimize what had happened (Ghent and the other Flemish socialist federations kept out of the controversy). The doctrine of oppositional patriotism was duly invoked: 'As internationalist socialists we love our country with a passionate and sincere love, but without using the word "patrie" to justify the inequality and injustice of the present regime.'<sup>87</sup> What had been assailed was not the symbol of national unity, but an icon of

<sup>81</sup> *Le Peuple*, 3 July 1905, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Le Peuple*, 5 April 1905, 2.

<sup>83</sup> *Vooruit*, 22 July 1905, 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Vooruit*, 18 June 1905, 1.

<sup>85</sup> *Vooruit*, 15 May 1905, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Bill of indictment, 28 July 1898. All subsequent references to the judicial process derive from the National Archives of Mons. Cours d'assises du Hainaut 1898/18 nr 166.

<sup>87</sup> *Le Peuple*, 25 May 1898, 1–2.

bourgeois and clerical tyranny. To prove this beyond doubt, the socialist *Journal de Charleroi* argued that the tricolour in question had been taken from the Catholic *Cercle Saint Rémy* and that only the yellow band – yellow being the colour of the Catholic party – had been burned.<sup>88</sup> In a long series of articles the paper refuted all accusations and even announced: ‘More than ever we will have the pleasure and the honour to strike the national flag on holidays.’<sup>89</sup>

The authorities were not to be mollified. Within a single week eighty witnesses (a majority of whom were miners and socialists) were identified and questioned. Contrary to their hope of indicting some socialist leaders, the investigators eventually came up with two small fry. Degrève was a 24-year-old indigent miner and the standard-bearer of the socialist association *Libre Pensée* from Gilly, a neighbouring town of Charleroi. His 59-year-old partner in crime, Wayemberg, was an illiterate small shopkeeper.

A socialist form of *omerta* and distrust of the establishment, in line with *Eigen-sinn*, inspired a massive form of ‘amnesia’.<sup>90</sup> Of the eighty witnesses only three provided useful information to the police and barely five were indignant about what had happened. Among the latter was Léon George, the head of the Gilly BWP, who maintained: ‘Although I am a socialist, I am far from approving such an act as I had hung out a national flag at my home to celebrate the result of the elections.’<sup>91</sup> None of the other seventy-five witnesses felt compelled to add to their testimony that they were scandalized by the flag burning. Even the accused, Degrève and Wayemberg, did not try to play the patriot to escape conviction.

After more than a month, the police succeeded in unravelling the full facts of the case. It transpired that Degrève had come across a Catholic print, which depicted a tattered red flag opposite a beaming national tricolour with the inscription ‘God and Fatherland’ (see Figure 1). He was so irritated by this that he brought along a tricolour to the victory parade. Several people vented their rage on it and eventually Wayemberg set it on fire.

The incident showed that the party cadres were outrunning the rank and file in accepting the tricolour and embracing oppositional patriotism. How differently both groups had reacted became clear when the provenance of the burned tricolour was established. Early on in the investigation the rumour that it had been stolen from the catholic *Cercle de Saint Rémy* had proved to be false. Where did it come from, then? The answer was simple: from the Gilly socialists. The concierge of the local *Maison du Peuple* (the socialist headquarters) had given Degrève the in-house tricolour.<sup>92</sup> Leon Georges’s claim that he regularly raised the national flag to celebrate electoral victories, which initially had looked like an idle statement, suddenly seemed not so far-fetched. Why else did a *Maison du Peuple* own a Belgian flag?

Gradually, though, it seemed that the rank and file too came closer to accepting oppositional patriotism. The national emblems evoked ever less extreme negative reactions. During the National Jubilee of 1905 some militants complained about the omnipresence of *bourgeois*

<sup>88</sup>*Le journal de Charleroi*, 25 May 1898, 2.

<sup>89</sup>*Le journal de Charleroi*, 29 May 1898, 2.

<sup>90</sup>Procès-verbal by Emile Henrion, chief of police of Gilly, 12 July 1898.

<sup>91</sup>Procès-verbal by Joseph Leroy, deputy constable of Gilly, 3 June 1898 and testimony by Léon

George, 28 June 1898. See also testimony by Théophile Kest, 19 July 1898.

<sup>92</sup>Testimony by Jules Vanderhaeghen and Emile Degrève, 15 July 1898.



Figure I. Calendar of the Catholic journal *Le Pays wallon*, 1898

symbols,<sup>93</sup> but there were no burnings or catcalls. Revealingly, in towns where a socialist majority gained control, tricolours and *brabançomes* remained part and parcel of the yearly city school parades. The rank and file did not seem to mind. This was especially striking in the Borinage where, at the end of the 1880s, several incidents had occurred, but where audiences now turned a blind eye to school children wearing tricoloured *cocardes* and flags.<sup>94</sup> The national integration of the rank and file clearly continued. Come 1914, there was no massive grass-roots protest against war participation. In the context of the German invasion the Belgian flag and anthem received a new, more popular and encompassing meaning. The gradual pre-war changes had paved the way for this evolution. Yet the gap between party top and base grew because the war, which marked the grass-roots acceptance of *oppositional patriotism*, also converted several francophone front men to mainstream war chauvinism, as was the case for many German and English socialists.<sup>95</sup> The ethnic differences remained, to some extent.

<sup>93</sup>Reader's letter from a francophone militant from Ixelles (*Le Peuple*, 26 June 1905, 2).

<sup>94</sup>*L'avenir du Borinage*, 12 August 1909, 2, and 14 August 1912, 1.

<sup>95</sup>Groh and Brandt, *op. cit.*, 85; Ward, *op. cit.*, 141, 161.

Generally, Flemish BWP federations had more qualms about the war and they were more amenable to peace initiatives such as the Stockholm conference.<sup>96</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The attitude of the Belgian socialists towards the national flag, anthem and holiday cannot be reduced to either unremitting refusal or complete acceptance. During the *belle époque* they moved somewhere along the continuum between these two extremes. At the time of the BWP's foundation, in 1885, social democracy had not yet conquered the whole of the party. Appealing to the Belgian flag and anthem in order to mollify the upper classes was one of the strategies that survived from the earlier pre-socialist labour tradition. As social democracy gained momentum and the Belgian emblems became tainted by the bloody repression of the labour revolt in the spring of 1886, attitudes turned negative. The tricolour, the *Brabançonne* and the national holiday were radically rejected as the outward expression of bourgeois tyranny (although not as symbols of Belgianness, except in Ghent where a sense of Flemish ethnicity prevailed), leaving little room for positive appropriation. Their space in the socialist symbolic universe was almost entirely taken by the red banner, the *Marseillaise* and the First of May. Nevertheless, the BWP's strategy of projecting both revolutionary fervour and respectability created space for ambiguity. When angling for bourgeois support, the socialists could mobilize the national symbols to some extent, but ironically actual co-operation with liberals widened the symbolic distance as it enhanced the need for a more clear-cut marking of group boundaries. Hence the marked refusal of socialists to accept the *tricolour* and the *Brabançonne* in joint liberal-socialist demonstrations and their emphatic foregrounding of the red flag and the *Marseillaise*.

The shifts between critical appropriation and rejection must have sometimes disoriented the rank and file, a confusion reinforced by ideological ignorance and *Eigen-Sinn*. The case of the *Parti socialiste républicain*, a short-lived dissidence from the BWP between 1887 and 1889, shows the diffusion of banal Belgian nationalism at grass-roots level, but also the rank and file's reluctance to follow the hyper-nationalist course of the party top. Traces of *Eigen-sinn* can also be found in their ironic and provocative defiance of the authorities' admonition to replace the red flag by the national tricolour. More generally, the PSR case shows that nationalist propaganda could only be successful within certain confines. It was no compelling top-down phenomenon in which a passive and receptive base merely internalized what state and party presented. There was active appropriation on their part, the limits of which were also set by their own convictions.

After 1895 oppositional patriotism conquered the BWP (although a unified ethnic Belgian identity did not develop). As a result, the room for positive appropriation of the national symbols expanded. A distinction was made between the good, original *Brabançonne* and tricolour that had been workers' symbols in the 1830 revolution and their bad bourgeois counterparts that had been infused with capitalist and royalist meanings. Even the national

<sup>96</sup>M. Claeys-Van Haegendoren, *25 jaar Belgisch socialisme. Evolutie van de verhouding van de Belgische Werkliedenpartij tot de parlementaire democratie in*

*België van 1914 tot 1940* (Antwerpen, 1967), 66, 72, 101–2.

holiday of 21 July, which was essentially a royalist commemoration, became open to socialist 'hijacking'.

The rank and file did not immediately follow this evolution, but ultimately the structural pressures that had made the cadres embrace oppositional patriotism proved decisive for the rank and file as well. The German invasion of August 1914 concluded this process by (inadvertently) promoting the *Brabançonne*, tricolour flag and 21 July into rallying symbols for all Belgians.

In conclusion, the BWP takes up an intermediate position between, on the one hand, the SPD and, on the other hand, the French and English socialists. Just like the SPD, it rejected the national symbols as the outward manifestation of bourgeois tyranny. Both parties had to develop their own form of patriotism *against* the establishment, in a state that used the constitutional freedoms *against* the labour movement and where by the end of the nineteenth century hardly any example of progressive nationalism existed – as opposed to Great Britain and France where a stronger liberal and left tradition of nationalism gave the *Union Jack* and the *tricolore* more positive connotations associated with civic democracy (even taking into account the Boulanger and Dreyfus affairs in France).<sup>97</sup> At the same time, the BWP was unlike the SPD because the revolutionary roots – which the icons of imperial Germany lacked – were the catalyst for a socialist appropriation of the Belgian flag and anthem.

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<sup>97</sup>Berger, 'In the fangs of social patriotism', *op. cit.*, 285; Callahan, *op. cit.*, 62–3.