

# A Story of Victimhood and Sacrifice?

## Self-Interpretation of the Fate of the Nation in Hungary and Belgium

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**Abstract.** Both in nineteenth-century Hungary and in Belgium, historians legitimizing the nation implied the people's lack of freedom and suffering as a main theme in their narratives. The 'myth of foreign occupations' is crucial in their national narrative, as it was developed starting from the late eighteenth century, and with greater strength after the establishment of Belgium as an independent state in 1830. This implies that since the submission by the Romans in the first century BC, the Belgians had always been dominated by 'foreign' dynasties until they finally obtained freedom with the Belgian Revolution and independence. This is a romantic reinterpretation of the past and a myth, as in their own time the dynasties were considered legitimate, and not seen as 'foreign.' The national story of the "eighteen centuries of suffering and struggling" (as the popular Flemish novelist Henri Conscience phrased it) emphasizes the love of freedom and the courageous resistance to suppression by Belgians and their heroes. At the same time though the idea of the people's victimhood and martyrdom, sometimes with a religious connotation, was an important motive in the national historical culture. The religious element is even stronger in the work of nineteenth-century Hungarian romantic thinkers. In fact, they reformulated an older way of thinking: When in 1526 the medieval Hungarian Kingdom collapsed and was divided into three parts, contemporaries tried to understand and explain this tragedy in biblical terms. The Bible teaches that people's sins cause historical failures, but there is always hope because the sin and its punishment are proportional: Once we have suffered enough, the Almighty will help and support us if we deserve it. A pertinent example of the nineteenth-century rephrasing of this idea is the poem *Himnusz* [Hymn] by Ferenc Kölcsey, the official anthem of Hungary today. The motive faded in the second half of the century, due to the successes of modernization, but in the twentieth century, after the defeat of the dualistic monarchy in World War I, and under the weight of the severe pressure of the Trianon Peace Treaty, the mythology of victimhood was reborn. In Belgian historiography, it the idea of the

'suppressed nation' was taken over by the Flemish sub-nation, the Belgian state now presented by radical Flemish nationalists as a new (Francophone) oppressor.

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Hungary and Belgium are both countries with a long history, and most of the time they did not exist as independent states but were part of larger empires. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when they did achieve independence and in the context of nation-building, self-determination became crucial for their national self-understanding, and the continual lack of autonomy was vital for their national self-understanding. It turned into a central and ordering principle of the national narrative. Control and oppression by external forces and foreign powers were seen as determining the nature of the nation and the course of its history. The Hungarians and the Belgians saw themselves as victims of history. Since historical culture served contemporary goals, especially the development of national consciousness and the creation of patriotism, victimhood had to be given meaning and value. Although these developments happened in a similar way in the two countries, there are differences between the ways in which the history of unfreedom and oppression was instrumentalized in Hungary and Belgium. This is explained by the radically liberal path taken by Belgium in 1830, with a revolution and one of the most liberal constitutions in the world at the time, together with the fact that also the Catholics largely associated themselves with the liberal freedoms.

Modern Hungarian national thinking and ideas were, of course, significantly influenced by the fate of Hungary within the Habsburg Empire. The medieval Hungarian Kingdom was shattered by the Ottoman Turkish attack in 1526. Thus, the Hungarian orders (noble landowners, high priests, and the wealthy, privileged city bourgeoisie) chose the king from the Habsburg House because the prestigious and wealthy European dynasty was able to finance the border fortress system, which successfully repelled further Ottoman attacks. This situation changed about 150 years later. The Holy League was formed in 1684—Pope Innocent XI entered into an alliance with Leopold I, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Hungary, joined by the Republic of Venice and Russia—, so that not only was the castle of Buda recaptured (1686), but by the end of the century, the weakening Crescent had been forced to retreat and surrender most of Hungary.

With the reoccupation of the Hungarian Kingdom, the Central European estate complex of the Habsburg family suddenly gained very large areas. The dynasty had already tried to centralize royal power before, that is, seeking to oust the orders from the governing rule of the country. However, the orders resisted, and were now joined by other social groups also suffering severe grievances. In the areas recaptured from

the Ottomans, Hungarian nobles were ignored, while foreign military entrepreneurs received property donations. Imperial mercenaries robbed and plundered throughout the country, counter-reformation policies launched an open attack on the hitherto free religious practice of the Protestant churches, and the tax burden rose to an all-time high. In 1703, the largest latifundium owning aristocrat of Hungary at the time, the Catholic Ferenc Rákóczi II, later the Prince of Transylvania, declared an uprising to put an end to the oppression and regain domestic political power in the hands of the Hungarian orders. The eight-year struggle was called the War of Independence because they felt they were fighting Vienna for the benefit of all the people of the country. Leopold's successor, King Joseph I, recognized that in order to end the Rákóczi War of Independence as soon as possible and to win the Hungarian nobility, the conditions of agreement should not be very strict. The Peace of Szatmár was concluded in 1711, according to which Hungary retained its political institutions, and its privileged could continue to have a say in politics, but at the same time, the country remained part of the Habsburg Empire and supported the dynasty's essentially Western-oriented power aspirations. When the modern Hungarian national movement unfolded in the second half of the eighteenth century and the power-political battles with the Viennese government intensified, the Hungarian side believed and felt the fiction that essentially it was still fighting, over and over again, the same 'War of Independence' that their grandfathers had fought during the brave old times of Prince Rákóczi.<sup>1</sup>

### Victimhood and sacrifice

The national ideologies that emerged in the nineteenth century used both the heritage of the nation's predecessor groups (e.g., the nobility) and the traditions of Christian culture. The so-called 'Hun story'—the idea that Hungarians are united by a community of origin going back to the Huns—appears as early as the thirteenth-century chronicles; however, it dates back to an even older oral tradition.<sup>2</sup> When the medieval Hungarian Kingdom collapsed in 1526 and was dismembered into three parts, and the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires fought for 150 years in Central and Eastern Europe, all the contemporaries tried to understand and explain this tragedy with the help of the Christian tradition, using biblical stories as patterns. The Protestant preachers' sermons and lamenting prayers represented the early modern Hungarian nation as an elected but sinful community. The authors of these texts interpreted epidemics, wars, starvation, and Hungary's 'Babylonian Captivity'

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1 Benda, *A magyar nemesi mozgalom 1790-ben*, 70.

2 Szűcs, *Nation und Gechiche*, 413–555.

as signs that urged the people of ‘Hungarian Israel’ to repent their sins. Preachers used Ancient Israel and its relationship with God in the Old Testament as a model that helped the Hungarian Calvinists (and parallelly, several other Protestant communities in Europe) to construct a sense of collective identity and to make sense of their history and current circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

An adequate realisation of this conception is the famous *Querela Hungariae*, a book by the Calvinist preacher Péter Alvinczy.<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1) Alvinczy adopted the biblical-prophetic pattern to the Hungarian case that sufferings are punishments for sins (for the permanent violation of divine law). But the use of the model was complicated by the fact that Hungary, as a bastion of Christian Europe, guarded the western part of the continent (with the blood of the Hungarian people) against the Ottoman troops. How can a poor believer calculate the time when the suffering will end, when the sin and its punishment will be equalized?

The point of the dilemma is that if there is more suffering than fair punishment, then the people are no longer guilty but they are victims.

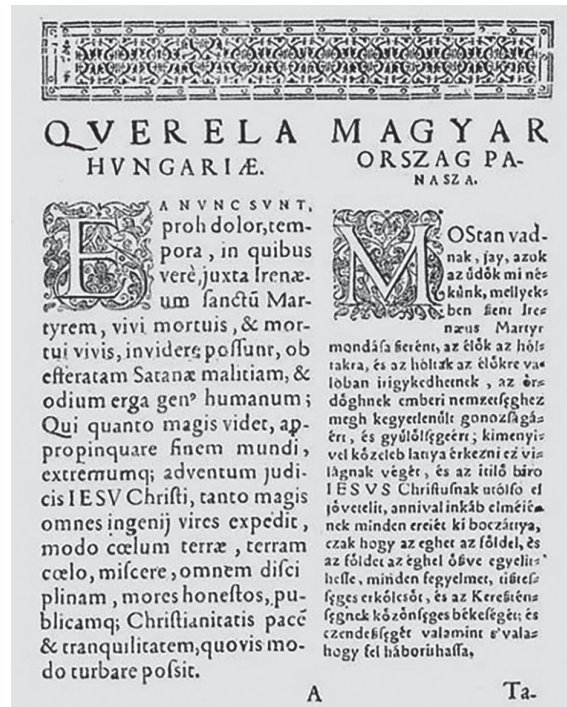


Figure 1 Alvinczy, *Querela Hungariae*, 1.

3 Fazakas, *Siralmas imádság és nemzeti önszemlélet*, 28–29. In European perspective: Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*, 1–34.

4 Alvinczy, *Querela Hungariae*.

At this point, let us make a little detour introducing the changes in the interpretation of the concepts of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘victim’ in post-war historiography. We cannot deal with the origin and archaic interpretations of these concepts in the history of religions: Our focus is on the analysis of their modern forms and on the internal shift of meaning within them.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Reinhart Koselleck’s famous 1998 lecture given in Heidelberg, later published under the title “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung” sheds some light on the issue.<sup>6</sup> Koselleck warns that victim narratives appeared and prevailed in the struggle for collective memory and in the interpretation of history. They are obviously not based on the experience of individual suffering, but on collective interpretations and emotions. The neuralgic point is how the perception of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ victims has changed since 1945. The real meaning of ‘the sacrifice for the homeland’ in modern German history before 1945 was always some active sacrifice made for something, e.g., we read on tombstones or on every war memorial: “The soldier sacrificed his life for Greater Germany.” This concept of sacrifice developed during funeral ceremonies between 1939 and 1945. However, in the 1950s, we see a slow change in meaning. The development of sacrificial narratives is based on the change of values starting from the seventies and eighties, when glory is replaced by confrontation with sin, and the hero is replaced by the victim. This development had a strong civilizing effect, which almost necessarily led to the broadening and spreading of the concept of the victim. At first, only the dead were considered victims, but later the concept extended to all forms of loss. As a result, the victim became an independent moral category, which, of course, was not necessarily the result of any specific action. Thus, the ‘victim’ began to mean passive suffering, and suddenly the same people who had previously sacrificed their lives for Germany fell “victim to Nazism.” This change was spontaneous rather than “intentionally executed” by someone; the current formula is “a victim of war and violence.”<sup>7</sup>

Following Koselleck’s argument, two basic forms of the concept of the victim seem to appear:

1. the sacrifice (as an object): the active nature of the victim—an action in which we give up something, whether we hope for some direct or indirect effect as a result or not;
2. the victim (as a subject): a suffering character as a helpless and innocent victim of unjust violence.

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5 One of the most impressive dialogues dedicated to the changes of the victim-narratives: *Opfernarrative*.

6 Koselleck, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung.”

7 Koselleck, “Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung,” 214.

Clearly, this duality does not represent two sides of the same phenomenon, but a conceptual identification of two different phenomena.<sup>8</sup> The change leads from the victim of violence to the voluntary atoning sacrifice: the martyr, well known from religious culture, is the one who takes on the role of victim for a higher purpose.

### Biblical patterns in the Hungarian narrative

Going back to the nineteenth century, the hypothesis of the nation as an “imagined community”<sup>9</sup> provides help in understanding how the concepts of the culprit, the victim, and self-sacrifice have evolved in Hungarian public thinking. In the Hungarian language literature, following the example of biblical prophets, the speech position of poets, which can be called a ‘Paraclete’ tradition, became immensely popular in the early modern and modern ages. The ‘Paraclete’ is a mediator<sup>10</sup> who, in the name and on behalf of the community, turns to the higher, divine power for his intervention and reconciliation. In this role, poets and writers have been the pioneers at the forefront of creating a real “imagined community” using the raw materials of historical and religious tradition in the process of nation-building. One of the most significant poems of Hungarian national culture was written by Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838) in 1823 and is entitled *Himnusz* [Hymn], which is the official anthem of the Hungarian state today (Figure 2). Kölcsey—in accordance with the biblical pattern—acknowledges that there is abundant failure and suffering in the history of the Hungarian nation because the people have committed sins, therefore deserve punishment.

“But, alas! For our misdeed,  
Anger rose within Thy breast,  
And Thy lightnings Thou did’st speed  
From Thy thundering sky with zest.  
Now the Mongol arrow flew  
Over our devoted heads;  
Or the Turkish yoke we knew,  
Which a free-born nation dreads.”<sup>11</sup>

8 For the two concepts, there are different words in English and French, but in Hungarian and German they are not separated.

9 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

10 The word ‘Paraclete’ (Greek: *παράκλητος*, Latin: *paracletus*) means advocate or helper, mediator; in Christianity this term most commonly refers to the Holy Spirit. Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Teológiai kieszótár*, 555–56.; cp. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Holy-Spirit>

11 Kölcsey, *Himnusz*.

Kölcsey is a true artist, who not only uses the role of ‘Paraclete’ but also reinterprets the biblical pattern. How can we imagine the quasi-real amount of suffering of a nation? The basic idea is clear: the morally justified principle of punishment proportionate to sin, which was chosen by the Old Testament of the chosen people and their patron. (This, as we have noted, is the basic scheme of the history of all the peoples of the world: Everyone knows the rules if they follow them, they get rewards if they break them—thus we can understand the events of world history.) An essential element of the ‘treaty’ between the people and their patron is that the people have to keep the Ten Commandments; however, this includes a moral limitation voluntarily made to the Almighty: He cannot transcend these principles either—that is, if he punishes a sinful people, the punishment cannot be disproportionately severe, but only fair (that is, proportionate to the sin). It follows that punishment may require a great deal of blood and suffering: the amount that is still proportionate to the sin committed.

Naturally, the sinner does not have exact knowledge of how much their sin weighs, therefore how much punishment is due. But everyone can guess the proportions from their own history—and here comes the problem raised in the *Himnusz*. Kölcsey sees Hungarians suffering so much that he thinks this measure is already unfair. He believes that punishment is so large that the nation has already atoned even for the sins it might commit in the future!<sup>12</sup> There are the words of the ‘Paraclete’ for asking God to give forgiveness to the Hungarian people:

“Oh my God, the Magyar bless  
 With Thy plenty and good cheer!  
 With Thine aid his just cause press,  
 Where his foes to fight appear.  
 Fate, who for so long did’st frown,  
 Bring him happy times and ways;  
 Atoning sorrow hath weighed down  
 Sins of past and *future days*.”<sup>13</sup>

If we think through the logic of the biblical narrative, it is clear that if one suffers more than is proportional to one’s sins, one is no longer a sinner but a victim.

Kölcsey’s thinking was not exceptional. It expressed the general conviction of the national public. In support of this statement, it is worth citing a poem that was as popular as Kölcsey’s and which many still consider the second Hungarian anthem: it is the *Szózat* [Appeal], composed in 1836 by another poet-prince of the national culture, Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855). (Figure 3) Certainly, it was no coincidence

12 For the complete analysis of the topic, see Dávidházi, “»Szánd meg, Isten, a magyart«.”

13 Kölcsey, *Himnusz*. (Highlighted by L. CS.).

that Vörösmarty also used the biblical narrative model to explain the possible cause of the horrors and bloodshed that the Hungarian nation had to suffer during its turbulent history.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 2** *Ferenc Kölcsey*  
(Anton Einsle, 1835)



**Figure 3** *Mihály Vörösmarty*  
(Miklós Barabás, 1836)

How does the poet see the meaning of the nation's suffering?

“It cannot be that all in vain  
so many hearts have bled,  
that haggard from heroic breasts  
so many souls have fled!

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It cannot be that mind and strength  
and consecrated will  
are wasted in a hopeless cause  
beneath a curse of ill!”<sup>15</sup>

“It cannot be that...”—this is the key phrase that shows the biblical ‘logic’ of Vörösmarty’s argumentation. Why “cannot”? Because, as we have said, in the biblical logical-moral structure, it cannot happen that the Eternal should be unjust; he himself prescribed this command in the ‘pact’ with the chosen people. The poet, on the

14 For the holistic and detailed analysis of the poem, see Dávidházi, “»Az nem lehet, hogy annyi szív«.”

15 Vörösmarty, *Szózat*.

other hand, is already afraid that there is too much suffering: probably more than the nation's sins. If the divine power is fair, he cannot allow a former sinner to fall victim to unjust punishment.

### “La malheureuse Belgique”

In the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium) the creation of a national history started in the second half of the eighteenth century. The country consisted of ten separate provinces (duchies, counties, and other principalities) that originated from the Middle Ages. In the late Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, they were brought together under one rule: first under the Burgundian dukes, followed by the Spanish and the Austrian Habsburgs.<sup>16</sup> Under these princes, there was a certain centralization, in which Brussels became the capital not only of the duchy of Brabant but also that of the entire Habsburg Netherlands. Formally, however, the provinces retained their autonomy to the end of the eighteenth century. Empress Maria Theresa, for example, was duchess of Brabant and countess of Flanders. Although we can assume that initially this national awareness, growing in the last decades of the eighteenth century, was largely confined to pro-government intellectuals. Historiography witnesses this: Initially, it largely consisted of the separate histories of the provinces, but from the 1770s, this provincial historiography was gradually supplemented and replaced by a national historiography project. In particular, in the circles around the Academy of Brussels, launched in 1772 under the auspices of Maria Theresa, initiatives were taken focusing on the history of the entirety of the Southern (Austrian) Netherlands.<sup>17</sup>

In 1779, François Gabriel Joseph du Chasteler proposed “Réflexions sommaires sur le plan à former pour une histoire générale des Pays-Bas autrichiens.”<sup>18</sup> In 1790, led by Cornelis Franciscus Nelis, priest and librarian of Leuven University and one of the initiators of the Academy, a plan was developed for a large-scale national source collection (*Belgicarum rerum prodromus*), presented in a “dissertation qui sert de prospectus et de préface générale à la collection nouvelle des historiens des Pays-Bas” [dissertation which serves as a prospectus and general preface to the new collection of historians of the Netherlands].<sup>19</sup> Only a few of these source

16 That is with the exception of Liege, now part of Belgium, that remained a fully independent prince-bishopric until the end of the eighteenth century and therefore was not part of the Austrian Netherlands.

17 Verschaffel, *De hoed en de hond. Geschiedschrijving in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden*.

18 Du Chasteler, “Réflexions sommaires sur le plan à former pour une histoire générale des Pays-Bas autrichiens;” see also Mantels, “»Un écrivain patriot«”.

19 Nelis, *Belgicarum rerum prodromus*.

editions were in fact published, but Nelis's plan can be seen as an antecedent to the collections that would be set up by the Royal Commission for History (1835) after Belgian independence.<sup>20</sup> And Jan des Roches, school teacher and secretary of the Academy, was responsible for the first concrete realizations in the form of a school handbook, *Epitomes historiae belgicae libri septem* (1782–1783) and the first part of a *Histoire générale des Pays-Bas autrichiens* (1787), which however remained unfinished due to his untimely death.<sup>21</sup> A first full-fledged national Belgian history, Louis Dieudonné Joseph Dewez's *Histoire générale de la Belgique depuis la conquête de César* was published in 1805–1807, i.e., under Napoleonic rule.<sup>22</sup>

These initiatives were grounded in the research carried out by members of the Academy and in the historical competitions it organized which, in turn, resulted in a corpus of 'mémoires,' partly published in the Academy's series.<sup>23</sup> They addressed specific issues related to national history, but even in their sometimes narrow scope were characterized by the national framework and the conception of the collective history of the inhabitants of the Southern Netherlands as a coherent narrative, and of these inhabitants, in French already referred to as 'Belges' (in Dutch the term 'Belgen' was not yet used),<sup>24</sup> as a (single) 'people.' Des Roches, the first to set up a coherent historical narrative in this context, was therefore already thinking of the (national) identity of Belgians and the specificity of their (national) history. He saw these in the combination of loyalty and love of freedom: the idea that Belgians were loyal to their princes as long as that the princes respected their ancient rights and liberties.

This idea was widely disseminated and would later also form the basis for the historical self-understanding and also for the political actions of Belgians.<sup>25</sup> Monarchs had often violated the rights and freedoms of their Dutch inhabitants; Joseph II was perhaps the most obvious example. His policy had led to and justified the Brabant Revolution of 1789, an uprising aimed at defending liberties and

20 *La Commission royale d'histoire 1834–1934.*

21 Des Roches, *Epitomes historiae belgicae libri septem in usum scholarum Belgicae*; Des Roches, *Prospectus d'une Histoire générale des Pays-Bas autrichiens*; Des Roches, *Histoire ancienne des Pays-Bas autrichiens contenant des recherches sur la Belgique avant l'invasion des Romains*. See among others: Meirlaen, "With Language and Knowledge."

22 Vanbrabant, *L.D.J. Dewez (1760–1834)*; Tollebeek, "De vele geschiedenissen van Louis Dieudonné Joseph Dewez."

23 *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale et Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres de Bruxelles* (1777–1788) and *Mémoires sur les questions proposées par l'Académie Impériale et Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres* (1777–1784).

24 Dubois, *L'invention de la Belgique: genèse d'un Etat-Nation 1648–1830.*

25 Polasky, *Revolution in Brussels 1787–1793*; Van den Bossche, *Enlightened Innovation and the Ancient Constitution*; Judge, *The United States of Belgium.*

leading to the first independence of the country as the *‘États Belghiques Unis’*, or the ‘United Belgian States.’ The name not only points very clearly to the example of the American Revolution, but with the use of the plural noun *états*, it also indicates that in the minds of Belgians, the country’s political form was a federation of ‘states.’ The unexpected success of this revolution can be attributed to the convergence of ideologically opposed parties: on the one hand, democrats who opposed the emperor’s authoritarian rule, and on the other, conservatives who opposed the emperor’s ‘revolutionary’ reforms and demanded the restoration of the structures of the *ancien régime*, including the autonomy of the old provinces. The success and independence of the United Belgian States was short-lived, however, as the death of Joseph II and the withdrawal of some of his reforms by his brother and successor, combined with military action, led to the restoration of Austrian rule in 1791. That restoration was also rather short-lived, however, because the Southern Netherlands, after a first French victory in November 1792 and a second in June 1794, were annexed to revolutionary (and later Napoleonic) France.

At the time when Belgium received its first national histories, it was not yet an independent state. It only gained independence after the revolution of 1830. The historical narrative that had to be developed, therefore, had a ‘happy end’ and a glorious apotheosis but still, for the most part, consisted of a history in which the Belgians lacked freedom and autonomy. This would mean that, also in order to strengthen the contrast with the freedom they had finally won, and to highlight the glorious character of the revolution and the liberal Belgian state since 1830, this lack of freedom was highly accentuated and constituted the backbone of the national story. Belgium’s master narrative was built around what has been termed as ‘the myth of foreign dominations’: the idea that the Belgians lost to the Romans the freedom they had in antiquity, and continued to be deprived of it for about eighteen centuries, under a long succession of ‘foreign’ rulers. Since Jean Stengers established this thesis in his ground-laying article in 1981,<sup>26</sup> many have argued against it and demonstrated that this is, indeed, a myth. It assumes an anachronistic conception of ‘nationality’ and neglects the fact that, following the dynastic logic, in their own time the monarchs were considered legitimate monarchs rather than representatives of ‘foreign peoples.’ The anachronistic application of national terms to previous periods has also led to somewhat bizarre appreciations, such as the contrast between Charles V, who was born in Ghent and in the nineteenth century was often regarded as belonging to the nation and an element of national pride—the most powerful monarch in world history was considered a ‘Belgian’ and a crucial figure in the national pantheon—, while his son Philip II was considered a despicable ‘Spanish’ king and ‘foreign’ oppressor.

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26 Stengers, “La mythe des dominations étrangères dans l’historiographie belge.”

This myth of foreign dominations, as the crucial part of the national narrative, led to the image of Belgium as an ‘unhappy’ country, “ce malheureux pays,”<sup>27</sup> “la malheureuse Belgique” [unfortunate Belgium].<sup>28</sup> This did not stand in the way though of a glorious national history, which was meant to legitimize the existence of the independent Belgian nation-state and to fill the Belgians with national consciousness, patriotism, and pride.<sup>29</sup> Belgian history was, of course, also—and above all—a story with “tant de grandes choses et de grands hommes” [so many great things and great men].<sup>30</sup> This idea of a glorious past was not incompatible with the story of enduring oppression, as there were several ways to reconcile the two aspects.

The first explanation may be that the Belgian national history was seen as an alternation of periods in which the Belgians had indeed suffered heavily under the ‘yoke’ of foreign rulers, with periods of relative tranquillity and cultural flourishing, which could be attributed to some of the monarchs who had ruled over the country: princes from foreign dynasties but associated with the country, because they were born there and considered ‘national’ (like Emperor Charles V), or because they were good and wise, ‘understood’ the Belgians, and respected their rights and liberties (like Empress Maria Theresa). Moreover, the myth of foreign dominations was also linked to the myth of the courageous and unceasing struggle for freedom. The Belgians may have lacked freedom, but they have fought relentlessly for it. As Des Roches had pointed out half a century before the Belgian revolution and independence, the love of freedom was the Belgians’ most fundamental characteristic.<sup>31</sup> That image, of course, fitted perfectly with the contemporary context after 1830, that of Belgium as an eminently liberal country with the most liberal constitution in Europe at the time.

According to national historians, that national narrative and the public manifestations of the historical culture widely disseminated in national festivals, national processions, history painting, and in other sites provided sufficient material to be proud of. National pantheons were filled with heroes, freedom fighters, as well as great monarchs, artists, and scientists who have made significant contributions to

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27 Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, 112.

28 Juste, *Histoire de Belgique*, 421.

29 Emphasizing the suffering of the people has a clear function: It makes the present more glorious, the achievements of 1830 stronger, and increases the value of what the Belgians—“après des siècles d’esclavage,” as it reads in the first line of the national anthem. Suffering has also contributed to the unity of the common destiny. Dufau indicates that the conquest by Julius Caesar led to “il n’y a plus ni Éburons, ni Atuatiques, ni Nerviens; la Belgique tout entière subit le joug du vainqueur.” Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, 20.

30 Juste, *Histoire de Belgique*, iii.

31 Verschaffel, “History and Tradition.”

world civilization. But undeniably, it was also a history of much suffering and misery. This is also emphasized by Théodore Juste, a liberal historian and author of a substantial body of work in the first decades of independence, and in that period regarded as the “historien national de la Belgique.”<sup>32</sup> In many ways and in various terms, he depicted Belgium’s “unfortunate” character in the past, “le théâtre de tant de catastrophes” [the scene of so many disasters].<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, the fact that ‘foreign’ governments succeeded each other already makes it clear that the country had been a battlefield where many wars had been fought. One of the commonplaces in this historiography is that of the Southern Netherlands as “the battlefield of Europe,” “ce coin de l’Europe surnommé le rendezvous des guerres” [this corner of Europe nicknamed the meeting place of wars].<sup>34</sup> And it was not only a battlefield, but also a victory region: successive foreign peoples and rulers oppressed and exploited the Belgians, each in their own way: “Spain exploited us with fanaticism and cruelty, Austria with indifference and self-serving gentleness, the French Empire with disdain, Holland with stinginess and stupidity.”<sup>35</sup>

Oppression and suffering do occupy a large place in the national narrative, but they are not considered or cherished as positive values. In these dark periods, what characterizes Belgians is not martyrdom and resignation, but precisely the idea that they courageously and relentlessly resisted oppression. In the national pantheon, insurgents and resistance heroes occupy a privileged place.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, historians insist that the constant oppression failed to break the courage and resistance of Belgians; on the contrary, it strengthened the cult of freedom. In the words of Théodore Juste:

“Certainly, if the country had been consulted, it would not have consented to suffer the plundering of Holland, for noble ideas were still fermenting among our people. Belgium, despite the misfortunes that overwhelmed it, retained a religious respect for this heritage of freedoms, which had been handed down to it from the Middle Ages and which it considered its safeguard. Assailed by the armies of France and Holland, sacrificed by Spain, the Belgians had to bow to the storm; but they stiffened against any attempt at oppression.”<sup>37</sup>

32 Tollebeek, “Enthousiasme en evidentie,” 61.

33 Juste, *Histoire du Congrès National de Belgique*, dl.2, 315.

34 Juste, *Histoire de Belgique*, iii.

35 “L’Espagne nous a exploités avec fanatisme et cruauté, l’Autriche avec indifférence et une douceur intéressée, l’Empire français avec dédain, la Hollande avec laderrie et stupidité.” *Le Mémorial belge*, 1832, quoted in Tollebeek, “Enthousiasme en evidentie,” 65–66.

36 Tollebeek and Verschaffel, “Group portraits with national heroes.”

37 Juste, *Histoire de Belgique*, 472: “Certes, si le pays avait été consulté, il n’eût point consenti à subir

According to Juste, under foreign rule, Belgians always managed to preserve their own nature and identity, and even their democratic institutions:

“However, we must give credit to the Belgians for the fact that even when they were bent under the yoke of conquest, they managed to keep their old institutions intact. Despite the turmoil they found themselves in and the changes in dynasty, they never lost their distinctive character, or, to put it better, their sense of nationality.”<sup>38</sup>

### The Catholic interpretation of ‘foreign occupations’ in Belgium

The national-liberal view of the national history was generally accepted also by Catholics. In 1830, they supported the revolution and the liberal constitution, which may seem surprising from an international perspective, but can be explained by the history that preceded the birth of the Belgian state. All the regimes prior to 1830, including that of the enlightened and tolerant Emperor Joseph II, of revolutionary France and then Napoleon, and of the Protestant King William I, had posed a threat to the position of the Catholic faith and the Church. They had pushed the Belgian Catholics into opposition. This meant that they had to rely on the liberal freedoms to defend their rights, their institutions, and autonomy against the interference of the authorities. The Belgian state, with one of the most liberal constitutions in the world at the time, resulted from an alliance of liberals and Catholics. They were ideological opponents—their cooperation has been described as a “monster alliance”—but with similar interests. In the first decades of independence, there was a political context of ‘unionism,’ a political system in which Catholics and liberals worked together, including the formation of governments with ministers from both sides.<sup>39</sup>

Although the period of foreign domination spans almost all of Belgian history, with the exception of the beginning and the end, several authors emphasize the more recent period, and more specifically, the French period around 1800, as the

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les spoliations de la Hollande, car de nobles idées fermentaient encore dans nos populations. La Belgique, malgré les malheurs qui l'accablaient, conservait un respect religieux pour cet héritage de libertés, que lui avait transmis le moyen âge, et qu'elle considérait comme sa sauvegarde. Assaillis par les armées de la France et de la Hollande, sacrifiés par l'Espagne, les Belges devaient plier sous la tempête; mais ils se roidissaient contre toute tentative d'oppression.”

38 Juste, *Histoire de Belgique*, 496; “Cependant il faut rendre cette justice aux Belges, que lors même qu'ils furent courbés sous le joug de la conquête, ils surent conserver intactes leurs vieilles institutions; malgré les tourmentes dans lesquelles ils se trouvèrent jetés, malgré les changements de dynastie, ils ne perdirent jamais leur caractère distinctif, ou, pour mieux dire, le sentiment de leur nationalité.”

39 See Witte et al., *Nieuwe geschiedenis van België*, vol. I. 1830–1905.

highlight of foreign rule. Although a whole plethora of foreign ‘peoples’ have been ‘oppressors,’ the French have stood out in the national narrative as the ‘eternal’ and ‘natural’ enemy. This has to do with the geographical as well as mental proximity of France in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it was mainly this influential neighbour that the Belgians had to resist in order to assert their individuality and legitimize their right to exist as an independent nation-state.<sup>40</sup>

For a nineteenth-century Catholic author like Charles Pollet, it is important that this period is not about the oppression by Catholic monarchs (although Joseph II was certainly a Catholic), but about the oppression of the Catholic faith and of the Belgians as Catholics. Pollet wrote *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère depuis Joseph II jusqu'en 1830*, in 1867, using “domination étrangère” [foreign domination] in the singular, although in fact there was a succession of the Austrian regime (“le joug des Autrichiens” [the yoke of the Austrians]), the French regime (“le joug d’un gouvernement tyrannique et persécuteur, imbu de toutes les passions antireligieuses de ceux qui l’avaient précédé” [the yoke of a tyrannical and persecuting government, imbued with all the anti-religious passions of those who had preceded it]), and finally the reign of the Dutch King William I characterized by a clear continuity.<sup>41</sup> They all focused on the struggle against the Catholic faith, each in their own way:

“The sacristan government of Joseph II sought to enslave religion; the Directory government sought to replace the worship of God with that of Reason; Napoleon’s despotic government sought to replace the Pope; William’s Protestant government sought to turn us into heretics.”<sup>42</sup>

The lesson Pollet draws from this, however, is a positive and uplifting one: History shows that these enemies of the faith are defeated. “May God always protect Belgium! The enemies of religion may well indulge their hatred for a while, like those who preceded them; but they will be overthrown like them.”<sup>43</sup> With his history of “les persécutions que leurs pères ont eu à endurer sous les despotes étrangers” [the persecutions their fathers had to endure under foreign despots], Pollet wants to encourage the Belgians to “poursuivre à leur exemple la sainte lutte en faveur de la religion et de la liberté” [to continue, following their example, the holy struggle in

40 Verschaffel, “L’ennemi préféré.”

41 Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, 71, 139.

42 Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, vi–vii: “Le gouvernement sacristain de Joseph II a voulu asservir la religion; le gouvernement du directoire a voulu replacer le culte de Dieu par celui de la Raison; le gouvernement despotique de Napoléon a voulu se substituer à la place du pape; le gouvernement protestant de Guillaume a voulu nous faire devenir hérétiques.”

43 “Dieu protégé toujours la Belgique! Les ennemis de la religion pourront bien pendant quelque temps donner satisfaction à leur haine, comme ceux qui les ont précédés; mais ils seront renversés comme eux.” Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, vii.

favour of religion and freedom].<sup>44</sup> The ‘holy’ struggle of Belgians in the nineteenth century concerns not only the defence of their faith, but of their faith and freedom.

The fact that liberals and Catholics in the middle of the nineteenth century largely subscribed to the same national-liberal narrative does not by any means imply that there were no differences between them. Liberal authors did not deny the Catholic character of the country in the national-liberal narrative, but it is obvious that Catholic authors placed more emphasis on the Catholic faith as an essential feature of the Belgian identity; “the most religious people, not only of ancient Gaul (Gallia) but also of modern Europe are the Belgians.”<sup>45</sup>

Still, the national narrative and the suffering contained therein are not interpreted in religious or biblical terms, not even by Catholics: again, no cult of martyrdom or victimhood as such, or the presentation of Belgian history as essentially a story of suffering. Biblical terms or images were therefore not used very often when describing this national suffering, although such references are present at certain moments. A specific persecution in the beginning of the nineteenth century that received a lot of attention is the fate of the Ghent bishop de Broglie. He embodies the suffering under successive regimes, as he resisted both Napoleon and William I, and was persecuted under both. In particular, the episode in which he was sentenced to exile in 1817, and in which his name was placed between those of two common-law criminals at the time of the announcement, caused much historical indignation. The liberal author Théodore Juste also reported this event with resentment, noting that it was disgusting to Catholic Belgians and contributed to the national revolt against King William’s regime. For a Catholic author such as Charles Pollet, in his description of the scene, the association with the crucified Christ was evoked: “The condemned prelate was compared to the Saviour crucified between two thieves.”<sup>46</sup>

Catholic authors considered the oppression of the Belgian people largely as directed precisely against the Catholic faith and the character of Belgians. The Church had to overcome many obstacles. Thus, the establishment of the faith was difficult, and “in the forests of Belgium, the blood of martyrs was no less abundant than in the amphitheatres of Rome.”<sup>47</sup> Dufau wrote a history of *La Belgique chrétienne* (1847) and estimated periods from this perspective. Thus, he considered the period from Clovis to Charlemagne as “la plus féconde et la plus brillante de notre

44 Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, vii–viii.

45 “... les peuples les plus religieux, non-seulement de l’ancienne Gaule, mais encore de l’Europe moderne, sont les Belges.” Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, v.

46 “On comparait le prélat condamné au Sauveur mis en croix entre deux larrons.” Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, 290 (with a reference to de Gerlache).

47 “...dans les forêts de la Belgique, le sang des martyrs n’a pas été moins abondant que dans les amphithéâtres de Rome.” Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, vi.

histoire” [the most fruitful and brilliant of our history], because: “en même temps que des princes d’origine belge se succèdent sur le trône de France, une foule de saints per sonnages achèvent la conversion du pays” [at the same time as princes of Belgian origin succeeded one another on the throne of France, a host of holy figures completed the conversion of the country].<sup>48</sup> For Catholic authors, despite all the suppression, holding on to individuality also meant the steadfast maintenance of the Catholic faith. “No nation has shown more constancy in its habits, nor more attachment to the faith of its fathers.”<sup>49</sup> Yet the emphasis of these Catholic authors on the Catholic character of the country was not in conflict with attachment to the national consensus. Catholics also regarded the Catholic faith as a basic characteristic and a pre-eminently unifying factor of all Belgians—and thus also the preservation of that belief in present-day Belgium as a guarantee for the future. As Dufau put it: “Let us not forget, therefore, because the past is the most accurate measure of the future, that religion alone, the Catholic religion, will preserve the country’s dignity and independence.”<sup>50</sup> The Catholic politician and historian Etienne de Gerlache, among others, did this.<sup>51</sup>

Gradually, however, the differences between the liberal and Catholic narratives—which were already clearly present in the 1830s when Pollet published his work—diverged into conflicting discourses. This is very much related to the strengthening political and ideological contradictions. When the state was well-established, it was inevitable that the ideological tensions would gain importance, threatening and eventually destroying the initial national enthusiasm. From the 1840s on, cracks started to appear, initially mainly due to the political emancipation and party formation of the liberals, later also of the Catholics. A animosity was growing, especially with education as a battleground, and a number of ‘school wars’ as a result. In the 1870s in particular, the contradictions reached a peak, and a full force clerico-liberal struggle erupted. The past was also turned into an ideological battleground. The initial (rather strong) consensus on the liberal-national narrative, including a purely ‘national’ interpretation of foreign dominations, gave way to interpretation wars and separate and conflicting narratives. The fiercest historical debate was over the Dutch Revolt of the sixteenth century, the rebellion of the Netherlands against the Spanish King Philip II. Initially, it was regarded as a purely national struggle, an uprising

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48 Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, vii.

49 “Aucune nation, en effet, n’a montré plus de constance dans ses habitudes, ni plus d’attachement à la foi de ses pères.” Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, v.

50 “Ne l’oublions donc pas, car le passé est la plus juste mesure de l’avenir, la religion seule, la religion catholique conservera au pays sa dignité et son indépendance.” Dufau, *La Belgique chrétienne*, viii.

51 Tollebeek, “Enthousiasme en evidentie,” 65.

of the deprived Dutchmen (including the inhabitants of the southern part of the Netherlands, i.e., the Belgians) against the tyrannical king and Spanish oppressor. Gradually, however, Philip II was increasingly seen by the liberals as a ‘Catholic’ monarch, who was opposed in the name of tolerance.

In the eyes of Catholic historians, it was the liberals who had undermined the national consensus and, in their struggle against Catholicism in the nineteenth century, had aligned themselves with the likes of Joseph II and William I. The Belgian Revolution and independence had put an end to the persecution of the true faith, according to Pollet, and in the first decades of independence, the Belgians therefore had a happy time, “une ère de prospérité extraordinaire” [an era of extraordinary prosperity], in which “tous les citoyens sans distinctions d’opinions y jouissaient and paix des bienfaits de la liberté sous l’égide de la constitution la plus libérale du monde” [all citizens without distinction of opinion enjoyed the peace and blessings of liberty under the aegis of the most liberal constitution in the world]. But after thirty years, this came to an end at the hands of the liberals, “un certain parti qui a sans cesse à la bouche le mot de tolérance et en réalité se montre constamment d’une intolérance inouïe” [a certain party which constantly has the word tolerance on its lips and in reality constantly shows itself as incredibly intolerant]. They presented themselves as the domestic heirs of foreign oppressors, especially the Jacobins: “En effet, c’était aussi au nom de liberté que les démocrates de 93 traînaient les gens à la guillotine” [Indeed, it was also in the name of freedom that the democrats of (17)93 dragged people to the guillotine].<sup>52</sup>

### Images of suffering in visual representations of the past

In the field of historical painting, a new interpretation of the concept of ‘victim/sacrifice’ was emerging and gained great popularity in Europe in the nineteenth century. According to the art historians, the religious stories, originally classified as historical painting, began to be used in a canonical form to depict certain scenes of national history, so the viewers were encouraged to interpret them in the language of Christian tradition. The first such painting in Hungarian visual culture was produced by Soma Orlai Petrich (1822–1880) when he visited the Munich Academy of Fine Arts as a pupil of the famous master, Wilhelm von Kaulbach.<sup>53</sup> *The Discovery of the Body of King Louis II* (1851) presents a scene after the battle of Mohács (1526), when the medieval Hungarian Kingdom was destroyed by the Ottoman troops. (Figure 4) Of the historical background, we know that during the retreat, the twenty-year-old

52 Pollet, *La Belgique sous la domination étrangère*, v–vi.

53 Keserü, *Orlai Petrich Soma (1822–1880)*, 24–25.

king died when he fell off his horse backwards while trying to ride up a steep ravine of the Csele stream. He fell into the stream, and, due to the weight of his armour, he could not stand up and was drowned. Following the chronicle tradition, the structure of Orlai's picture is similar to the classic visual scene of the *Pietà*: the lifting up of the dead body of Jesus Christ after the Crucifixion.<sup>54</sup>



**Figure 4** *Discovery of the Body of King Louis II* (Soma Orlai Petrich, 1851)

Moreover, it is perhaps not inordinate to claim that there is a strong resemblance between the composition of Orlai's picture and Michelangelo's famous *Bandini Pietà* in Florence. In both art creations, a bearded old figure rising above the dead body plays a prominent role. On the one hand, in Florence, he is the Pharisee in the Gospels, Nicodemus (well-known self-portrait of Michelangelo himself), and on the other, in the image of Orlai, he is Sebastian Ulrich von Czettritz die Burg Neuhaus, the king's chamberlain of Czech origin, who led the search for finding the royal cadaver.<sup>55</sup> In a letter in the early 1850s, Orlai informs that the atmosphere of his picture was inspired by seventeenth-century Protestant prayers and psalms.<sup>56</sup>

But why did Orlai choose the *Pietà* tradition to depict a Hungarian historical scene? Because with the help of the religious symbolic language he wanted to speak about contemporary Hungary's fate. The period of 1820–1840 saw the beginning

54 The analysis of the picture: Sinkó, "Historizmus – Antihistorizmus"; Sinkó, "A Mohácsnál elesett II. Lajos testének feltalálása Orlai Petrich Soma, 1851."

55 For the latest reconstruction of the special details of the death of Louis II, see: B. Szabó, *A mohácsi vész*, 28–42.

56 Sinkó, "A Mohácsnál elesett II. Lajos testének feltalálása Orlai Petrich Soma, 1851," 601.

of anti-feudal, social-economic reforms and national modernization in Hungarian history. Liberal reformers worked out the way to create a market economy, a civil society, and a parliamentary state system in the Hungarian Kingdom, which was still part of the Habsburg Empire. The reform program was implemented in the spring of 1848, along with the European revolutionary wave, but in the autumn of the same year, the Viennese court rejected the Hungarian constitutional demands, and the War of Independence broke out. Following a year and a half of bloody struggle—which became the founding myth of the Hungarian nation in the following decades—the independent Hungary was defeated by the double superiority of the Austrian and Russian armies, and the nation was shocked by the absolutistic pressure and exploitation.<sup>57</sup>

In this situation, desperate for Orlai and others, it seemed a natural choice to find real hope and consolation in the religious approach. The king's body is the body of Jesus Christ, and in this context his pose and features clearly refer to the nation. The national group appears in the secularized form of the mystical body of Christ; thus, the community of ecclesia becomes the community of the nation. With the help of the Christian mystery adapted to the circumstances, the picture is opening a reinterpretation of the victim role, and the murder of an innocent being becomes a voluntary atoning sacrifice. The national failure, the historical defeat, is gaining a new meaning with the help of the parallelism with Christ's body. We can see a national kind of modification of the religious pattern: The nation of all time will be the chosen people of all time, and its sacrifice will be the sacrifice of the world's saviour.<sup>58</sup>

Orlai created a successful symbol. The discovery of the body of Louis II, if not in his composition, which did not become particularly well-known, but in a painting by Bertalan Székely on a similar subject and in a similar conception (Figure 5), is one of the best-known Hungarian historical scenes, the symbolic layers of which everyone understands. For, in the Christian tradition, death is evidently followed by resurrection.

It is easy to see that the two understandings of the 'victim/sacrifice' concept play a central role in the spiritual process of reinterpreting the national tragedy. Hungary, as the Christ of the peoples, has a kind of mission, a messianic role, which saves the world through its sacrifice. The meaning of the nation's history is thus given by transforming the story of the defeated into the story of winners. But the new salvation-historical dimension of the national history has a price: a special kind of vulgarization of Jesus Christ's suffering in his original theological sense. Cultural

57 *The Corvina History of Hungary: from Earliest Times until the Present Day*, 85–111.

58 This issue is analysed in all its aspects by Balogh, "A magyar nemzeti áldozatnarratíva változásai."



**Figure 5** *Discovery of the Body of King Louis II* (Bertalan Székely, 1860)

nationalism is a holistic culture that is able to fuse religious identity, so religion no longer controls nationalism from the outside but serves within; defeat and death assume positive connotations, as they allow the nation to be reborn at all times. Thus, the religious framework gives a new character to the ‘victimity’ of the ‘chosen’ nation: the victorious (voluntary atoning) sacrifice. The sacrifice is replaced by the martyr, who does not suffer an injustice but consciously undergoes suffering for a higher purpose.

Experts of the history of nationalism are well-acquainted with the phenomenon of how effectively national thinking uses and incorporates community-organizing ideas of a religious origin. The Hungarian historian Gábor Gyáni, in his analysis of John Hutchinson’s argumentation,<sup>59</sup> emphasizes that

“cultural nationalism [...] originates from the »organic« concept of nation, inspired by romanticism. Cultural nationalists, who contribute to the building and strengthening of the spiritual community as intellectuals, work on constructing a holistic culture with the purpose of achieving this goal. They step up in the role of moral renewers, acting as ones who are destined to create the new matrix of collective identity. They operate mainly via education and information in order to lessen or preferably

59 Hutchinson, “In Nationalismus Statist?”

eliminate the differences and tensions between individuals and groups that unite in national communities—and in order to enable the nations to stand their ground in the world.”<sup>60</sup>

In Belgium too, history painting also flourished.<sup>61</sup> A broad historical culture was developed on a large scale, which was meant to legitimize and convince foreigners as well as the Belgians themselves of the country’s right to exist as an independent state. National histories and historical novels (in the style of Walter Scott) were produced to popularize stories from the past, national dramas were written and performed on stage, historical pageants went through the streets as part of public festivities, and historical paintings were also created on a large scale. Literally, major events of the national history were visualized on canvases of huge sizes, paintings that often received a great deal of attention, and sometimes went on tour, even abroad; especially in Germany, some of these large canvases were well-received. The most talked-about of these “grandes machines” [big machines], as they were called, represented the glorious past, sometimes explicitly—such as *La Belgique couronnant ses enfants illustres* (1839) by Henri Decaisne, a group portrait of the renowned characters of the national story—or depicted the great moments of national history. The start of this wave of monumental historical paintings, which is also considered the starting point of Romanticism in Belgian painting, was a canvas by Gustave Wappers, who became the head of the file of Romantic history painting in the country: *Épisode des Journées de Septembre 1830 sur la place de l’Hôtel de Ville de Bruxelles* (1835). Five years after the fact, it honoured the Belgian Revolution, not with a fairly realistic representation of a specific event, but with a monumental and theatrical evocation of the struggle for freedom episode, clearly inspired by Eugène Delacroix’ *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). Other painters took other ‘great moments’ from the national past as their subject, such as *L’abdication de Charles Quint* (1841) by Louis Gallait, *Le Compromis des nobles en 1566* (1849) by Edouard de Bieffe, and *La bataille des Eperons d’or* (1302) (1836) (Figure 6) and *La bataille de Woeringen* (1839) by Nicaise de Keyser.

These examples show that the struggle for freedom and against foreign ‘oppressors’ was clearly present in Belgian historical painting. But as indicated with regard to historiography, here too the emphasis was not on suffering and victimisation, but on courageous resistance and heroism.

In addition to these large, monumental paintings, which received a great deal of attention but were, on the whole, not numerous, the past took shape visually and artistically in other ways as well. In the second half of the nineteenth century

60 Gyáni, “Kulturális nacionalizmus és a tudományok,” 78.

61 Holthof, *Historische schilderkunst in de 19de eeuw*; Koll, “Belgien. Geschichtskultur und nationale Identität;” Verschaffel, “Schilderen voor het vaderland.”



**Figure 6** *The Battle of the Golden Spurs* (Nicaise de Keyser, 1836, small version)  
(The large version was destroyed in World War II.)

(and also at the beginning of the twentieth), fresco cycles were installed in many schools, town halls, and other public buildings, often linking local and national history, also with the aim of instilling patriotic pride in the public and especially in young people.<sup>62</sup> On a large scale, smaller paintings were also dedicated to episodes, which allowed a greater variety of historical subjects to be represented.<sup>63</sup> This also applies to the illustrations (engravings) illustrating the national histories (not only school manuals). (Figure 7) Since in some works they were numerous and dealt with a large number of successive episodes, there are sometimes scenes there that put more emphasis on suffering and victimization. Certain mechanisms were used in these scenes, aimed at the identification of the spectators with their ‘ancestors’<sup>64</sup> also in their suffering.

For example, the raids of the Normans that ravaged the area are depicted through the robbed victims the departing looters left behind —leaving ‘us’ with the victims. The Christian tone is not predominant in the visual depiction of this suffering either, but iconographic reminiscences still crop up, such as the image of the *Pietà* in a scene of finding the corpse of Charles the Bold in the battlefield after the Battle of Nancy (1477). (Figure 8)

62 Ogonovszky-Steffens, *La peinture monumentale d’histoire dans les édifices civils en Belgique (1830–1914)*.

63 Colla, *De salons en het verleden: de historieschilderkunst op de Belgische driejaarlijkse salons, 1832–1867*.

64 Verschaffel, “»Par les yeux parler à l’intelligence«.”



**Figure 7** *Ravages des Normands*, (Alfred Ronner) engraving in Henri Moke, *Abrégé de l'histoire de la Belgique*, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, 1887.

## Burdens of the Great War

Hungarian national thinking considered the last third of the nineteenth century a relatively prosperous period, so the idea of ‘victim/sacrifice’ as self-interpretation was pushed into the background. But the situation changed significantly in the wake of perhaps one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, World War I. Initially, the sacrifice element was the leading form for all social groups: the democratization of this narrative took place in the context of the nationalist admiration for the war. The deaths of those killed in the battlefields had to be interpreted, and that was often the religious sacrifice: an analogy of the crucifixion of Christ as the *Redemptor* of the (nationally imagined, divided, and characterised) mankind. This intertwining of religious liturgy and political culture made it possible for an expression of the nation’s immortality through the fallen victim. Fighting and dying for the homeland meant a new hope perspective, not only for the survivors and the fallen, but for the entire nation. The soldiers are not the gears of a destructive machine, but executors of a divine plan that included the dimensions of salvation.<sup>65</sup>

Where millions on both sides of the front were falling victim to world power aspirations, it became untenable to attribute the responsibility for war solely to one side of world conflicts, for example, the Central Powers, above all Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest, the Germans, and Central Europeans. In the historical assessment of World War I, the Great Powers’ common responsibility is the basis for possible

65 Balogh, “A magyar nemzeti áldozatnarratíva változásai,” 42–44.



Figure 8 Engraving (Dupeyron, Dargent) in *Histoire de la Belgique en images*, 1894.

common approaches. As the Hungarian historian László Szarka said: “There is no longer a single person responsible for the war, neither Vienna nor Berlin can be called the sole initiator of the war, since Paris, St. Petersburg and London decided in favour of the war just as much as the government of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the German Empire.”<sup>66</sup>

After the Great War, the hitherto unknown and unimaginable numbers of masses of casualties were gradually made public, so millions were confronted with the absurd amounts of immorality and obvious futility of suffering. The idea of national self-sacrifice lost its explanatory power and came to the fore—let us remember Koselleck’s ideas on the largely similar situation after World War II—the role motif of the passive victim of violence. However, this change, which is strongly reflected in the literature and the fine arts, is not highly visible in the war monuments, because political decision-makers and their interpretive *élites* limited the social and physical space of remembrance. Only ‘private’ (personal, family) mourning work was allowed, the values and purposes of which were in synchronicity with the ruling narrative about the meaning of the nation’s martyrdom.<sup>67</sup> This approach appears almost completely uniform in the monuments, regardless of whether they were erected by the winners or the losers. Thus, albeit with different emphases, it was present in Nazi Germany as well as in the Soviet Union—in fact, it is still extant in Russia today.<sup>68</sup>

66 Szarka, “Minden Egész eltörött...,” 85.

67 Gyáni, “Az első világháború emlékezete,” 316–17.

68 Balogh, “A magyar nemzeti áldozatnarratíva változásai,” 46.

The rebirth of the victim narrative was facilitated in particular by the fact that, for Hungary, the Great War did not only bring about the well-known crisis phenomena—mobilized mass society and greater destruction controlled by the war economy and technological progress. The impact of all this was traumatically aggravated by the disintegration of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, and within it the dismemberment of the historical Hungarian Kingdom. Hungarian nationalism regarded the country as a natural geographical unit, the Hungarian nation as the natural political leader of the Carpathian Basin for a thousand years; this was taught in schools and was echoed in public discourse and public writing. After the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, in the unending wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nearly four million Hungarians died in the Carpathian Basin, and in their place, immigrants arrived, Croats, Slovaks, Serbs, Romanians, and Ruthenians, who had no intention of assimilating ethnically with the Hungarian population. However, the new national historical conception arising in the nineteenth century refused to realise this, maintaining the existence of continuing unity in the country and among the ‘Magyar’ people. Thus, the entire Hungarian society, from nationalists to liberals and social democrats, considered it a deep injustice that the ‘ungrateful’ nationalities—with the active support of the Entente powers—broke up the old ‘Magyar state’ at the end of World War I, and, in addition, persecuted the Hungarian minority in the successor states. Deep emotional impressions of a real trauma—reinforced by the (ultimately) unsuccessful revision episodes before and during World War II—laid the foundations of a strong experience of the passive victim that spans the entire twentieth century, and is perhaps one of the most characteristic spiritual-emotional settings of Hungarian society to this day.<sup>69</sup>

The discourse on the memory of the Great War in Hungary is divided into two parts. On the one hand, there is the exchange of ideas among the élites of the ruling levels of society. Their positions are rooted in historical science, conditioning the ideological context of specific studies. The interpretive point of view of the élites is determined first of all by the question of political responsibility, which goes together with the issues of the right to the government of Hungary after 1920. In total contrast to the memory of such an élite, there is another collective memory that was forming within the poorest classes of society, featuring a certain way of interpreting the past. This will be the other side of the discourse on the memory of the Great War.

An enormous number of peasants were enrolled for military service between

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69 Romsics, “Az első világháborús magyar emlékezetkultúra.” As the peace treaty with Hungary, one of the successors of the losing Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was signed in the Great Trianon Palace at Versailles in 1920, in Hungarian culture the name of the building symbolically signifies the entire historical event and its related social psychological phenomena (e.g., Trianon trauma, Trianon syndrome, etc.).

1914 and 1918, where they had to face the massacre of modern warfare. Under the shock they suffered, many started to write, providing details of their war experiences. The re-evocation and re-thinking of events greatly contributed to the formation of their political conscience. They were country people who had always cultivated the land: for them, as for the poor country teachers, the outbreak of the war meant that politics was radically and aggressively interfering with their lives. They instinctively felt, and often even understood, that under the cover of international politics, a world had taken over their destiny, and they had no alternative but to accept it. As a consequence, they turned soldiers more through a sort of renunciation than through real conviction and joy. Certainly, this experience can be considered an important source of victim self-interpretation. Although there are texts by memorialist authors and scholars in which the memories recalled reflect the influence of war propaganda, in fact the negative *topos* relative to the enemy (including also the way of considering the Romanian, Serb, and Russian soldiers as inferiors) became more widespread in the memory of the élite (tending to the right) than in that of the ordinary populace.

The front-experiences led to fairly clear fundamental questions: If a soldier goes to the front to risk his own life for his sovereign or his country, to what extent is it right to consider him inferior to others? Why was it not possible for the soldier returning from the front to claim—quite rightly, of course—greater respect than had been accorded to him previously? Although the authors of the memoirs, for the most part originally peasants, did not express themselves in abstract concepts, their writing conveys to us that for them the war was the experience of a fundamental turning point, after which it was no longer possible to go back to the rigid old system of social relations. We can see in the case of Hungarian veterans as well the famous “experience of the soldier at the front,” described on the basis of research into the mentality of German and French soldiers.<sup>70</sup>

The second fundamental type of popular memory feeds on the alienating sensation of the dehumanising effects of a war that used the most modern technological resources. The “shower of shrapnel,” the sight of the massacre caused by machine-gun fire, the bayonet battles, the march through scorched earth, the assault in the coldest midwinter, and the building of trenches in the sea of mud and sub-zero temperatures left a haunting impression on the human psyche. As in the case of the criticism of social conditions, this time too we note that many writers limited themselves to the mere recollection of facts without explicitly interpreting them, although their words and the entire economy of the text lead us to conclude (or at times understand) that so much violence and suffering can never be justified by the

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70 Csorba, “Problemi e questioni da affrontare nella storiografia ungherese sulla Grande Guerra,” 114–17.

purposes, true or false as the case may be, of any general or any sovereign. There are many allusions to the disparity between the fighting soldier and certain privileged groups behind the front who had no desire to get embroiled in the torments of war. Contrary to official propaganda, the soldiers frequently knew well that on the other side of the no-man's land there were people just like themselves. If we scrutinize this form of plebeian memory, it also becomes clear why Communist agitation found particularly fertile ground among prisoners of war and veterans, and why even those who had not sided with the supporters of emancipating ideologies developed much more sensitivity to inequality and to the conditions of social relations.<sup>71</sup>

Alongside this egalitarian-emancipation line of collective memory, many veterans fostered a particular feeling of Hungarian-ness that was, in part, incompatible with their other experiences. Such incompatibility, however, is perceived only by us, readers today, while it was not felt by the authors of the memoirs. The soldiers who had been on the Serb or the Romanian front often remembered how the foreign troops irrupting into the country treated the Hungarian community as enemies, not refraining even from acts of cruelty on the civilian population. Others had to take into account the aversion or, more commonly, the explicit hatred from their Slav brothers, even though they all wore the same uniform of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: Not infrequently, their hostility turned against the whole state, not just certain individuals. This gave them a strong feeling of belonging to one nation, experienced much more consciously, bringing them close to the élite, reaching conclusions very similar to that élite's "concern for the homeland."<sup>72</sup> It seems this may also have been an important experience for the spread of victim self-interpretation in Hungarian national thinking.

Belgium's national history was, as we have seen, constructed as that of an oppressed and unhappy nation, but without a strong sense of victimhood and martyrdom. That was brought into the national narrative throughout the nation's fate in World War I, a crucial episode for the country's self-image as well as for its international reputation. In 1914, Belgium's neutrality was brutally violated by the German army which had overrun the country according to the von Schlieffen Plan as a way to attack France from the north from the rear. That failed because Germany did not succeed in taking the whole country. A small area in the westernmost part of the territory, a small corner behind the River Yser, held out, and as in northern France, the front there came to a standstill and would hardly move throughout the war. The partial failure of the German plan is also attributed to the courage of the Belgians, who not only held out there but also offered more resistance during the advance

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71 Two volumes of such recollections: Szent, *Vér és pezsgő*; Hoppál, Küllős, Manga ed., *Emlékül hagyom az unokáknak*.

72 Gyáni, "Az első világháború és a paraszti emlékezet."

through the country than the Germans (and everyone else) had expected, thereby delaying the advance and giving the French more time to organize the defence. This received considerable international attention, met with admiration and solidarity. This was impersonated by the figure of King Albert I, who stayed with his troops as a 'king-soldier' (while the government had fled to France) and led the resistance. He became a symbolic and well-known mythical figure not only at home but also abroad.<sup>73</sup> His wife, Queen Astrid, contributed to this exceptionally positive evaluation. She was popular in her own right, presenting the iconic image of the queen nurse who looked after wounded soldiers.

This mythical image was coloured not only by solidarity and admiration, but also by pity. The German advance in 1914 was accompanied by much violence, destruction, and innumerable casualties. The best-known example getting the most resonance was the destruction of Leuven on 24–25 August 1914. As a reprisal for the alleged attacks by snipers, much of the city centre was burnt down. The destruction of the university's library—one of the oldest and most famous in Europe—where nearly a quarter of a million books, incunabula, and manuscripts were lost, assumed immense symbolic value and greatly contributed to the participation of intellectuals and artists in the war. Leuven revealed the Germans' barbarity and the "furor teutonicus" [Teutonic fury] and became "the Sarajevo of intellectuals."<sup>74</sup> But destruction and massacres were carried out in other places as well, both in Flanders and in Wallonia, giving seven cities 'martyr city' status. In addition to Leuven, these were Visé, Aarschot, Andenne, Dendermonde, Tamines, and Dinant. More generally, Belgium was associated with martyrdom.<sup>75</sup>

## Twentieth-century struggles

In Belgium's history, World War I also meant an important step in the radicalization of the Flemish movement. Part of that was striving for independence for Flanders, in other words, the Dutch-speaking northern part of the country, and thus for the division of the Belgian state. However, the historical material with which this new Flanders had to legitimize itself was what Belgium had previously used to shape its national narrative. The image of history as continuous oppression was transferred from the Belgian to the Flemish (nationalist) narrative. The 'myth of foreign dominations' was (and is) valid, but at this point it was not the 'Belgians' who were the oppressed, but the Dutch-speaking Flemings. In their minds, the Belgian state

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73 van Ypersele, *Le Roi Albert. Histoire d'un mythe*.

74 Derez, "Furore teutonico."

75 Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914*.

switched camps. For the self-confident and nationalistic Flemings, the Belgian state was only the successor to foreign oppressors in the past, and more precisely, just another emanation of the 'eternal' French enemy. The choice and preservation of French as the main official language of the country, the language of (secondary and higher) education, administration, and the courts not only contradicted the fact that Dutch was the vernacular of a large number of citizens (even most citizens) in the country. The Francophone Belgian state now deprived the Flemings of their freedom and autonomy. This is also an anachronistic historical mythology. First of all, the division of the country between Flemings and Walloons is relatively recent and a projection; it is not the case that when the country came into being, the two peoples were forced to live together against their will and against logic. The Flemings as a cohesive unit, as a 'people,' did not yet exist at that time; they emerged only at a later stage as a subnation within the Belgian whole (and as a consequence thereof). Until the end of the eighteenth century, 'Flanders' was the name of one of the old regions, which only partly overlaps with the area now called 'Flanders' (which is the northern part of the country, where the Dutch-speakers live). Only roughly were the two westernmost provinces, West and East Flanders, located in the 'old' Flanders. Moreover, within the Belgian state, at the hands of the Flemish Democrats, who in the nineteenth century were predominantly (or almost completely) patriotic, no independence of Flanders or a split of the Belgian state had yet emerged, and thus no 'Flemish nationalists.' There was then a gradual evolution in which the north of the country first became officially bilingual and later monolingual Dutch-speaking, and in the twentieth century it evolved further through successive 'state reforms' into the federated state, with its own government, parliament, and far-reaching powers, as is the case now. The historical narrative persists though that this is ultimately only the end point of a long history of oppression not only by foreign peoples, but also by the Belgian state and the French-speaking Belgians—for the Flemings, ultimately also 'foreigners.'

In Hungary, the adversities of the twentieth century have unfortunately further the national self-image of the vulnerable victim. There is a strong perception in the national collective national memory that Western countries have not only thwarted a fair revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty (at least the establishment of ethnic borders) but have also idly left Central Europe—and in it the Hungarian nation—as a victim of the aggressive expansion of Nazi Germany first, and the Soviet Union next. The trust or belief, and later the disappointment in the imagined Western help, which in fact lacked any basis, grew especially strong during the 1956 revolution. Thus, it was no coincidence that the motif of the sacrifice's Christian vision reappeared in the most influential poem about the Hungarian uprising in Sándor Márai's poem *Angel from Heaven* (1956):

“It’s watched by the folk of continents,  
 Some grasp it; for some, it makes no sense.  
 Far too much for some to hold at bay.  
 They’re shaking their heads, they shudder, pray,  
 For those aren’t sweets that hang on the tree:  
 ‘Tis Christ of the people: Hungary.  
 ./.  
 And many pass by and some advance:  
 The soldier, who pierced him with a lance,  
 The Pharisee, who sold him for a price,  
 Then one, who when asked, denied him thrice,  
 One, whose hand had shared the bowl with Him,  
 Who for silver coins had offered Him,  
 And whilst abusing, wielded the lash,  
 Had drank his blood and he ate his flesh –  
 The crowd is standing around, they stare,  
 But to address Him there’s none to dare.  
 ./.  
 Silent victim, no accusal tried,  
 Just watches like Christ did crucified.”<sup>76</sup>

We have now arrived in present-day Hungary. Not only was the victim-mythology as self-interpretation reborn in the twentieth century, but it still appears to be with us in the twenty-first century.

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76 Márai, *Mennyből az angyal*.

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