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# Generational Conflicts, the Spirit of '68 and Cultural Emancipation in the German Speaking Community of Belgium. A Historical Essay About the '73 Generation

**Abstract:** *'Changes were in the air' – is perhaps the best way to describe the social mood at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. On the international stage, the gap between the post-war generation, known as the 'baby boomers' and the generation that had experienced World War II as adolescents or young adults came to light in the form of student protests, anti-war movements and new concepts of life. It is scarcely a coincidence that there were protests in eastern Belgium too at this time. What were the 'young wild ones' protesting against in the German speaking region of Belgium? Based on a generational approach, this article aims at contextualizing the autonomy-debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s by focusing on a historical investigation into a few young people in the Eifel region that would strike new political tones with lasting influence on the political landscape as well as on the social or cultural environment of eastern Belgium.*

Sankt Vith, 19 May 1968. A few days after the first 'night of the barricades' in the Quartier Latin and the start of the largest nationwide strike in the history of France, Dr Michel Kohnemann, a teacher of German at the Collège Patronné in Eupen and President of the German-speaking section of the European Association of Teachers (EAT) gave a lecture entitled 'German eastern Belgium in the Europe of tomorrow' to bring the EAT information days in Sankt Vith to a close. The core theme of his lecture was the question as to whether the German-speaking Belgians can act as 'mediators' between 'Romance and Germanic language and culture.' 'After years of linguistic and cultural indifference on the part of administrators and citizens alike,' Kohnemann stated at the outset of his lecture, 'this insight suddenly seems to be the magical formula for the paradisiacal future of our region.'<sup>1</sup>

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1 Michel Kohnemann, 'Deutsch-Ostbelgien im Europa von Morgen' [German-speaking eastern Belgium in the Europe of tomorrow], lecture given to bring to a close the information days of the German-speaking section of Belgium at the European Association of Teachers, Sankt Vith, 19 May 1968, 10 type-written pages, here 2. Albert Gehlen's private archive.

## Actions speak louder than words

Whereas Kohnemann's remarks were aimed at giving cultural and political legitimacy to the political concept of 'German-speaking eastern Belgium,' we are here interested primarily in the conclusions that he drew at the end of his lecture. These were directed particularly to the 'student youth,' whose drive for the realisation of the European idea would hopefully lead to the emancipation of German-speaking eastern Belgium.<sup>2</sup> The educator from Raeren expressly warned at the end of his lecture, 'all lectures, discussions, etc. must certainly not overshadow the fact that what ultimately counts is what has been accomplished, not what has been discussed and planned. Action-minded people are needed to that end, for otherwise things will peter out.'<sup>3</sup>

Kohnemann's call tapped into the spirit of the time. The mid 1950s witnessed the rise of resistance on the cultural and political front in eastern Belgium against the massive Frenchification and pressure to assimilate to which most German-speaking Belgians were exposed in the first decade after the war. The establishment of cultural associations such as the *Volksbildungswerk* [National Educational Organisation] (1957), the *Verein zum Schutze und zur Pflege der Muttersprache* [Association for the Protection and Cultivation of the Mother Tongue] (founded likewise in 1957, later renamed *Bund der Deutschbelgier* [Federation of German-speaking Belgians] under the leadership of Dr Leonard Schifflers MD, from Kelmis) as well as newspapers such as the *Neue Nachrichten* (1955) and *St. Vither Zeitung* (1955) provided outlets for the articulation of German-speaking interests in the mid 1950s. What distinguished these initiatives and made them similar (at least in their intention), was the focus on the language issue. The protagonists of these associations or bodies were hoping to raise political awareness through the recognition and promotion of the German language. Many linguo-political activists held the firm conviction that the people of eastern Belgium could preserve their cultural identity only if their right to the equitable use of their own language in the Belgian state structure was guaranteed.

This demand for cultural recognition of the German-speaking region was of course enshrined in the Belgian Constitution de jure with what is known as the Languages Act of 2 August 1963, but the equal treatment on the language front remained de facto wishful thinking for a long time. Turning such thinking into

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2 'And when I say Europe, I am referring in the same breath – and as a condition sine qua non, so to speak – to the reflection on the true values of a linguistic and cultural nature in German-speaking eastern Belgium,' *Ibid.*, 10.

3 *Ibid.*

fact would be essentially the work of a new generation of cultural autonomists which were consciously or unconsciously inspired by the '68 movement and took action to bring about the actual transformation of social relations. But were the new minds of the autonomy debate – whom I would provocatively like to describe hereinafter as the '73 generation – actually committed to the ideology of historical materialism, according to which the social being determines awareness and not vice-versa? Can the radicalisation of the political autonomy discourse in the beginning of the 1970s be historically understood as a generational conflict, i.e. more as an expression of different socialising and biographic patterns than as a result of political or ideological contentions? To get to the root of this complex issue, the biographical background of some of the protagonists of the autonomy debate will be reconstructed in what follows, without any claims to a collective biographical study.<sup>4</sup> To that end, interviews were conducted with contemporary eyewitnesses which focused prominently on the question as to how political commitment – in the widest meaning of the term, i.e. to parties but also to language, culture or society – came about.<sup>5</sup>

### A short historical contextualisation

But before entering into the discussion of the questions raised above, a short historical retrospection might be necessary in order to put the story into the right political and social context. The region under consideration in this chapter, now called 'German speaking Community of Belgium' and one of the three member states of Belgian Federation, only became part of the Belgian Kingdom after the First World War. During the negotiations of the Peace Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the two German cantons of Eupen and Malmedy which had been part of the Prussian Empire since the Treaty of Vienna in 1815 became part of the compensations of the Allied and Associated Powers. These so called reparations were imposed upon the Central Powers during the Paris Peace Conference, and the Belgian State had great hopes in expanding its territory at the expense of

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4 On the topic of collective biography as a research strategy, cf. Wilhelm Heinz Schröder, *Kollektivbiografie: Spurensuche, Gegenstand, Forschungsstrategie*, in: *Historical Social Research*, no. 23 (2011), 74–152.

5 The author conducted oral history interviews with the following persons (in alphabetical order): Freddy Derwahl, Joseph Dries, Albert Gehlen, Georges Kalf, Robert Oberecken, Lorenz Paasch, Gerhard Palm, Wilhelm Pip, Leonard Schifflers, Richard Schwall, Peter Thomas, Alphons Thunus. Heartfelt thanks are once again in order here to all participants for attending and for their preparedness to provide information.

Germany as compensation for its great losses and violation of neutrality during the war.<sup>6</sup> That the Belgian delegation finally had to content itself with little – that is the two small districts at the very East of its territory – was clearly a great disappointment for the Belgian representatives, but they nevertheless accepted to organise a plebiscite in early 1920 aiming at incorporating the territory into the Belgian state. As has been demonstrated by numerous scholars, this plebiscite was in fact a ‘farce’ as it was not a secret ballot and took place under the auspices of the Belgian authorities, more precisely under the sovereignty of the Royal High Commissioner General Herman Baltia.<sup>7</sup> Baltia, who had served the Belgian Army in the Kongo, had the delicate task prepare and manage the formal integration of the two districts into the Belgian state during a five year transition period which ended officially in 1925.

Although in 1926 the Weimar Republic conducted secret negotiations with Belgium about a return of the territory to Germany which eventually failed due to French intervention<sup>8</sup>, the interwar years showed a slow but steady political, juridical and economic integration of Eupen-Malmedy into the Belgian state. This process was characterized by a high degree of pragmatism or ‘situational opportunism’ by the local population who tried to come to terms with these new political realities.<sup>9</sup> This pragmatism became challenged with the rise of National Socialism in Weimar Germany and certainly after the accession of power by Adolf Hitler in January 1933. The pro-German propaganda and subversive Nazi activities in the former German territories clearly led to a radicalization of the political discourse in Eupen-Malmedy in the mid 1930s. The creation of a new political party named ‘Heimattreue Front’ (HF) in 1936 was the most obvious sign of a rising irredentist current in the region, yet the overtly anti-Catholic ideology of the National Socialist movement eventually got in the way of acquiring a majority of votes during the last democratic elections in 1939 (the HF nevertheless received 45.1 % of the votes).

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6 Klaus Pabst, Eupen-Malmedy in der belgischen Regierungs- und Parteienpolitik: 1914–1940, in: *Zeitschrift des Aachener Geschichtsvereins* Bd. 76 (1965), 205–515.

7 On Herman Baltie see the edited memoirs by Els Herrebout (ed.), *Generalgouverneur Herman Baltia. Memoiren 1920–1925*. Brussels: Generalstaatsarchiv 2011.

8 Manfred Enssle, *Stresemann's Territorial Revisionism: Germany, Belgium, and the Eupen-Malmedy Question 1919–1929*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 1998.

9 See Carlo Lejeune, Andreas Fickers, Freddy Cremer, *Spuren in die Zukunft. Anmerkungen zu einem bewegten Jahrhundert*. Büllingen: Lexis Verlag 2001.

With the outbreak of the Second World War and the German invasion to Belgium in May 1940, the former Prussian districts of Eupen and Malmedy were officially reincorporated into the German Reich. Despite the fact that this annexation meant a violation of international law, the Belgian exile government did never protest officially against the de facto reintegration into German territories.<sup>10</sup> For many people of Eupen-Malmedy, the 'Heim ins Reich' enthusiasm that had characterized the public sphere right after the annexation soon turned into a more reluctant and clearly chilled exaltation, especially after the start of recruiting the male population for the Wehrmacht in the summer of 1941. Both the many losses during the war and the devastations in the region during the 'battle of the bulge' (Rundstedt Offensive) in the winter of 1944/1945 left bitter traces of this fateful episode in the collective memory of the region. Yet the harsh repressions of the Belgian state against the German-speaking population in the immediate postwar years during the so-called 'purge' ('Säuberung' / 'épuration') did anything but facilitate the successful 'assimilation' of the population.<sup>11</sup> It was during these 'dark years' that most of those that I want to qualify as the '73 generation were born as part of the 'war child generation'.

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10 Martin Schärer, *Deutsche Annexionspolitik im Westen. Die Wiedereingliederung Eupen-Malmedys im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Bern: Peter Lang Verlag 1978.

11 Freddy Cremer, Als man den aufrechten Gang wieder lernen musste. Von den 'inciviques' zu den 'Modellbelgiern', in: C. Lejeune, A. Fickers, F. Cremer, *Spuren in die Vergangenheit*, 99–116.



Map 6: The Border Regions After the Treaty of Versailles (1920).



Map 7: The Border Regions During the Second World War (1940-44).

## Questions addressed to the '73 generation

The idea of turning generational sequences into limited timeframes and thus into fruitful patterns for explaining historical chronologies is as old as historiography itself.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the consideration that the basic form of human understanding is to be sought in the biographical experience itself, is firmly embedded in our thinking. Nevertheless, the concept of generations, understood as experience of a certain group of people, as a historical category of interpretation is not without problems. The concept of generations has of course found its way into the interpretive repertoire of historians as an analytical category (since the pioneering study of Heidelberg sociologist Karl Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generation' from 1928)<sup>13</sup>, yet the definition as to what we are to understand by 'generation' remains contentious, and the generalisation of individual experiences (which is necessarily related to that concept) to an entire cohort, remains problematic.<sup>14</sup>

Inspired by Mannheim and the sociological tradition of generation research, I would like to use the concept of generations, following Bernd Weisbrod<sup>15</sup> and Benjamin Möckel<sup>16</sup> in particular, to ask the following questions:

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- 12 Cf. Ohad Parnes, Ulrike Vedder, Stefan Willer, *Das Konzept der Generation. Eine Wissenschafts- und Kulturgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus 2008.
  - 13 Karl Mannheim was aware of the temporal and thematic complexity of the concept of generations. His attempt to draw a distinction between generational strata (an affiliation to a cohort based on age), generational contexts (an experience for a group stemming from historical and social grounds) and generation units (an affiliation to a certain group stemming from social and cultural differentiation), was ultimately motivated by the concern to seek out what are known as 'entelechies' (also referred to as 'aspiration' or 'world aspiration') as the origins of dynamics behind social change in society. Cf. Karl Mannheim, *Das Problem der Generation*, in: *Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie* 7 (1928), Issue 2, 157–185, and issue 3, 309–330, and Lutz Niethammer, *Die letzte Gemeinschaft. Über die Konstruierbarkeit von Generationen und ihre Grenzen*, in: Bernd Weisbrod (ed.), *Historische Beiträge zur Generationsforschung*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2009, 13–38.
  - 14 For a recent discussion of the theoretical and methodological challenges of using the concept of generation for doing contemporary history see Hartmut Berghoff, Uffa Jensen, Christina Lubinski, Bernd Weisbrod (eds.), *History by Generations. Generational Dynamics in Modern History*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2013.
  - 15 Cf. Berndt Weisbrod, *Generation und Generationalität in der Neueren Geschichte*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 8/22005. Online at <http://www.bpb.de/apz/29215/generation-und-generationaetaet-in-der-neueren-geschichte?p=all>.
  - 16 Benjamin Möckel, *Erfahrungsbruch und Generationsbehauptung. Die 'Kriegsjugendgeneration' in den beiden deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaften*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2014.



- Do the generational references of the '73 generation result more from a constituent event<sup>17</sup> (such as World War II) or through structural conditions (such as growing up in the 'post war period')?
- Is the '73 generation an 'elite' shaped by a certain core group? Or are we dealing with a collective phenomenon?
- To what extent can the '73 generation be considered as a 'founding generation' which broke with established structures? Or is it more of a 'transitional generation,' which connects old and new and whose characteristics stem from the dynamic of historical continuity and social change?
- And finally: Is the '73 generation – similar to the much acclaimed '68 generation – actually a concrete experience generation or a subsequently constructed 'narration generation' which is based more on a biographical or medial recollection construct than historical reality?

### Tensions between generations

When the Board of the German Cultural Society convened for its inaugural session on 23 October 1973, it was attended by 25 party delegates who had been chosen by an electoral college in accordance with a proportional representation process (based on the number of votes that the parties had received at the last elections for the lower and upper houses of parliament on 7 October 1971). By decision taken by the federal parliament in Brussels on 29 June 1973, the members of the board would be elected directly as of the next parliamentary elections.<sup>18</sup> A glance at the portraits of the 25 delegates published in the *Grenz-Echo* issue of 23 October 1973 clearly shows that the board was composed of a very young generation of politicians. The average age was just over 40, but most of the board members were in their early-to-mid 30s, and thus born during or shortly after World War II.<sup>19</sup> The youngest delegate was the first 26-year old speaker of the Party of German-speaking Belgians, Lorenz Paasch, who was the only board member

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17 Introduced into the discussion as 'cohort defining event' by the American sociologist Normal Ryder, cf. Norman B. Ryder, The cohort as a concept in the study of social change, in: *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 30 (1965) no. 6, 843–861.

18 Cf. Hubert Jenniges, *Der lange Weg der deutschen Sprachgemeinschaft zur Kulturautonomie*, transcript of the programme of the same name broadcast by the BHF on 27 October 1973, 22. The first direct election of such officials took place on 10 March 1974. For the results of the election and the distribution of seats, cf. [http://www.dgparlament.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-676/978\\_read-18662/](http://www.dgparlament.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-676/978_read-18662/).

19 To this cohort belong in particular Albert Gehlen (CSP, born in 1940), Herbert Genten (CSP, born in 1942), Erich Krafft (CSP, born in 1942), Emil Mertes (born in 1939), Fredy

from the post-war generation. In addition to this group of young delegates, there was naturally a series of 'established' local politicians in the ranks of the board as well, such as Hubert Cremer, August Pitsch, Félicien Déjозé and Michel Louis, whose cohort could be exemplified by Christian-Social (CSP) politician Johann Weynand (born in 1923), who was elected by the delegates as the first president of the board by a wide majority.

The composition of the first Board of the German Cultural Society is in certain respects symptomatic of the generational tension that comes to the fore in the '73 generation. Two genealogically separated generations meet therein – the older generation, which had concrete experience of the war as young adults (partially as soldiers in the Wehrmacht), and the younger generation, which was born during or shortly after the war, and whose political and cultural socialisation had taken place essentially in the first decade of the post-war period.<sup>20</sup> Whereas World War II undoubtedly represented the most defining biographical experience for those born in the 1920s, which was processed psychologically and politically in the post-war years, the political and cultural socialisation of the 'war children's generation' (1930–1945) occurred at a time when World War II left an indirect mark on the living environment of that generation whether through the painfully experienced absence of fathers or other family members, who had perished in the war or were imprisoned, or through the experience of destruction, Spartan living conditions and repression, which marked the lives of many eastern Belgian families in the post-war period.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the generational context of those who had experienced (and survived) the war as adults stemmed particularly from the common experience of the war and its material, political and socio-psychological consequences, it was precisely the indirect presence of the war and its after-effects that shaped the generational

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Dupont (SPB, born in 1942), Jean Cremer (SPB, born in 1938), Bernd Gentges (PFE, born in 1943).

20 In the current research literature, the 'war children's generation' comprises the cohort born between 1930 and 1945.

21 The father of two of the interviewees did not return from the war – either because he had died (as was the case of Albert Gehlen) or because he did not return to his family (as was the case of Robert Oberecken). In many families, if the father had been in the Wehrmacht or been involved in organised politics, he was incarcerated in Belgian prisons for shorter or longer periods of time. This absence of the father was also a traumatic experience for the war children's generation.

context of the war children's generation.<sup>22</sup> This indirect presence of the war for the war children's generation paradoxically found its most pronounced expression in the absence of the public (and very often also private) thematisation and problematisation of concrete war experiences by the war generation. This presence of the absent would mark not only the war children's generation, but also the post-war generation (1945–1955) from which the protagonists of the '68 generation would later stem. Generation research has hitherto focused extensively on the war generation<sup>23</sup> (both on the perpetrators and the victims of that generation) as well as on the political generation of 68.<sup>24</sup> Generation research has recently refocused on the war children's generation, however.<sup>25</sup> Designated by Sabine Bode as the 'forgotten generation,' this generation is distinguished above all by its often repressed (partially traumatic) war experiences in childhood, as well as by the systematic taboo status or silence about the war time in the adolescent phase.<sup>26</sup> In eastern Belgium, this repression of the past often extended to the 1930s, during which the political confrontation between pro-Belgian and pro-German minded eastern Belgians had become increasingly radicalised.<sup>27</sup>

For the '73 generational, there is thus a clear generational tension, which is also reflected in a different political consciousness. Whereas the political day-to-day activities of those members of the war generation who became politically engaged in the post-war period were essentially determined by topics which were directly

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22 For the complex transgenerational links between the war and post-war generation, cf. Anne-Es Ustorf, *Wir Kinder der Kriegskinder: Die Generation im Schatten des Zeiten Weltkriegs*, Freiburg: Herder Verlag 2008.

23 Cf., e.g. for the 'perpetrator generation' Sönke Neitzel/Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag 2011. For the political generations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general, cf. Stephen Lowell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth Century Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave/McMillan 2007.

24 Cf. Ingrid Gilcher-Holety, *Die 68er Bewegung, Deutschland, Westeuropa, USA*, Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag 2008; Jean-François Sirinelli, *Mai 68. L'événement Janus*, Paris: Fayard 2008; Anna von der Goltz (ed.), *Talkin' about my Generation. Conflicts of Generation Building and Europe's 1968*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2011.

25 Cf. the conference proceedings: Die Generation der Kriegskinder und ihre Botschaft für Europa sechzig Jahre nach Kriegsende, 14–16 April 2005, Frankfurt, in: H-Soz-u-Kut, 1.5.2005, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=766>.

26 Sabine Bode, *Die vergessene Generation. Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2004.

27 Cf. Andreas Fickers, Gedächtnisopfer. Erinnern und Vergessen in der Vergangenheitspolitik der deutschsprachigen Beliger im 20. Jahrhundert, in: *zeitenblicke* 3 (2004), no. 9 [9.6.2004]; URL: <http://zeitenblicke.historicum.net/2004/01/fickers/index.html>

or indirectly a consequence of World War II (such as the reconstruction or new construction of destroyed cities, infrastructures and institutions, the issue of men compelled to serve in the German army, or the recognition of disabled veterans and war widows),<sup>28</sup> the political consciousness of the war children's generation took shape at a time that was often marked by pragmatism, forced assimilation efforts and pious recognition of the Catholic Church as the only true and valid moral (and often also political) authority.<sup>29</sup> There were undoubtedly family and social occasions in the post-war period, where the past was broached and contemporary political issues became subjects of controversial discussions. Nevertheless, the assessment that certain topics should not be discussed<sup>30</sup> prevails in the remembrances of contemporary witnesses, and any form of political engagement was viewed with scepticism when not outright rejected.

The fact that at the end of the 1960s, a small minority of the war children's generation or immediate post-war generation would nonetheless become politically engaged – often against well meant paternal advice to stay away from politics – is quite amazing.<sup>31</sup> It would take politicisation from the outside – or so the hypothesis runs – to mobilise this depoliticised war children's generation on the social and political front – in both words and deeds.

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28 Cf. Gerd Kleu, *Neuordnung der Ostkantone Belgiens 1945–1956. Politik, Kultur und Wirtschaft in Eupen, Malmedy und Sankt Vith*, Essen: Klartext Verlag 2007.

29 Nearly all the interviewees indicated that the Catholic Church – in both its institutional and moral dimension – was experienced as an all-powerful authority, from which one could be emancipated only with difficulty, if at all. A sound performance at secondary school to become 'suitable' (often on the recommendation of the pastor) often also meant, whilst being exposed to the wishes of the parents, examining one's conscience as to whether one felt called to 'greater things.' The overpowering presence of priests as teachers who set the tone in Catholic secondary schools as well as in boarding schools marked by strict rules, could generate additional pressure to give serious thought to a possible career as a clergyman.

30 These included, inter alia, the crimes of the Wehrmacht, the persecution of the Jews, the appeal – at least for parts of the population – of the existing Nazi ideology or resistance. Cf. Carlo Lejeune, Klaus-Dieter Klauser, Ein Wort vorab... Die verborgenen Wasserzeichen entdecken und lesen oder: Wie entsteht Wahrheit? In: Lejeune/Klauser, *Die Säuberung, Verdrängte Erinnerungen – 340 Zeitzeugen berichten*, Vol. 3, Büllingen: Lexis Verlag 2008, 17–34.

31 Cf. the interview with Lorenz Paasch, in the Grenz-Echo of 24 January 2013. The words 'For god's sake, stay away from politics' are vividly remembered by many contemporary witnesses interviewed.

## Schools shape ethical values in language conflict

Since for many members of the war children's generation and immediate post-war generation, the parental home had fallen out as the place of political socialisation, the school became for most of them a place of confrontation with the political as well as cultural standards and values in the post-war period.<sup>32</sup> During the harsh purge of the school system, between May 1945 and mid January 1946, 146 primary school teachers were declared 'unworthy' and dismissed.<sup>33</sup> Replaced frequently by teaching staff who had only a rudimentary command of German if any knowledge of the language at all, the rigorous drive to Frenchify the school system in primary and secondary schools by force conducted by district commissioner Henri Hoen led to heated debates time and again. At the beginning of the 1950s, it became apparent to the Belgian administrative authorities that teachers in the school system had to be proficient in the German language.<sup>34</sup> For those certified to have the necessary intelligence for further education, attending a secondary school automatically meant a purely French-speaking curriculum. The strong emphasis on the linguistic proficiency of students in secondary school with a view to higher studies at a French-speaking Belgian university doomed many intelligent, but perhaps less linguistically talented students. The language policy in education was essentially de facto responsible for the fact that eastern Belgian was a right down 'educational desert' until the end of the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> 'Whoever was not linguistically talented to some degree, perished,' is how former professor at the Episcopal School and Sankt Vith resident Chaplain Wim Geelen summarised the situation in retrospect.<sup>36</sup> Only religion was taught in German at the Catholic

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32 Machteld Venken, Nationalization campaigns and teachers' practices in Belgian-German and Polish-German border regions (1945–1956), in: *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42 (2014) 2, 223–241.

33 Cf. Kleu, *Die Neuordnung*, in particular Chapter 4: Die Neuordnung des Schulwesens, 77–96.

34 On the purge, cf. Carlo Lejeune, *Die Säuberung. Hysterie, Wiedereingliederung, Assimilierung (1945–1952)*, Vol. 2, Büllingen: Lexis Verlag 2007.

35 On the deteriorating educational gap, cf. Carlo Lejeune, Von Tafel, Griffel, Rutenstock zur Bildung für alle. Der lange Weg zum lebensbegleitenden Lernen, in: Carlo Lejeune/Andreas Fickers/Freddy Cremer, *Spuren in die Zukunft*, Büllingen: Lexis Verlag 2001, 49–61.

36 Wilm Geelen: 'We knew that we had to roll up our sleeves and scale down our claims,' in: *75 Jahre Impulse auf der Eifel. Retrospektiven 1931–2006. Geschichte der Bischöflichen Schule St. Vith mit Daten und Fakten zu Ostbelgien 1920–2007*, Sankt Vith 2007, 51.

secondary schools in Sankt Vith and Eupen, because they wanted to make sure that the Catholic teaching was understood without any doubt!

It was this experience with a lack of equal opportunities in education, which elicited countless comments and letters from readers in the mid 1960s, and would find its structured articulation in the brochure written by Alphons Thunus in 1968.<sup>37</sup> After completing his studies in theology at the Liège Seminary and then German philology at the Catholic University of Leuven, Alphons Thunus (whose father had lost his teaching position in Bütgenbach during the purge and had ultimately found work in the dairy works in Büllingen), taught at the Episcopal School of Sankt Vith as of 1964. Marked by the political injustice of his father's story, Alphons Thunus embarked on creating a 'German library' already while at the Liège Seminary to hold the then groundbreaking biblical studies and exegeses of German theologians. The unuttered but subtly practiced resistance against the Frenchification of clerical training concurred with the struggle of the people of Limburg for their own diocese, which was a recurrent subject at the Seminary in Liège as well.<sup>38</sup> In addition to Latin, Greek and religion, as of 1964 Thunus also taught history – and his first school leaver's examination (for which Lorenz Paasch and Bruno Kartheuser also sat), caused quite a stir as historical themes such as the Versailles Treaty, World War II or the Holocaust were broached for the first time.<sup>39</sup>

In the Episcopal School of Sankt Vith, Alphons Thunus developed a movement as *spiritus rector* in the subsequent years, which called for German to be accorded equal treatment as a language of instruction in secondary education. At the core of this commitment however was not only the political determination to bring cultural autonomy to an institutional breakthrough, but more the day-to-day ambition for equal treatment of the population in the Eifel region which was

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37 Cf. Episcopal School of St. Vith, *Das Unterrichtswesen im deutschsprachigen Gebiet*, Sankt Vith 1968, 49 typewritten pages.

38 The Hasselt Bishopric was established in 1968. Clerical training was at that time divided into the so-called 'small' or 'philosophical seminary' in Sint Truiden, and the related 'big' or 'theological seminary' in Liège. The many Seminar students from the eastern cantons at the time met not only with Walloon students during their studies, but also with numerous fellow students from the Flemish-speaking municipalities of Limburg. The conflict over language between Flemings and Walloons that had been growing more and more aggressive since the end of the 1950s, thereby became a cohort defining event not only for students in Leuven, but also for seminarians in Liège.

39 In the interview with Lorenz Paasch, the latter remembered vividly his history lessons with Alphons Thunus, in which political – including contemporary – issues were broached for the first time. Alphons Thunus pointed out in the interview that the Holocaust was never broached in the seminary.

severely disadvantaged on the linguistic, intellectual and economic front. Thunus was convinced that only when secondary education was made accessible to broader segments of the population, more equal treatment would follow in a second phase on the labour market and on the education of a critical mass of German-speaking intellectuals and academics. A necessary precondition to that end was to bolster German as a language of instruction as an end in itself, not as part of an autonomy debate reduced to language policy questions. In the aforementioned polemic pamphlet entitled 'The Education System in the German-speaking Territory', Thunus had argued that the recognition of the German-speaking community under the first state reform necessarily had to be accompanied by the transfer of competencies for the education system to the mandated Council of Culture.<sup>40</sup>

These demands had a tremendous impact – not least among colleagues at the Collège Patronné in Eupen. While efforts were being waged in the Sankt Vith school for the introduction of a German examination for French-speaking teaching staff in the eastern cantons, the leading representatives of the Collège Patronné in Eupen such as the maths teacher Jacques Keil or director Joseph Müllender established the 'interest group for bilingual instruction,' which was vehemently opposed to bolstering German as a language of instruction in secondary education. As a countermove, a campaign was conducted in Sankt Vith to establish a German-speaking Belgian section at the 'Council of European Teachers' whose first president was Michel Kohnemann.

It is no overstatement that both Catholic educational establishments – the Episcopal school in Sankt Vith and the Collège Patronné in Eupen – were the intellectual centres in which the controversial autonomy questions were discussed and negotiated. These tensions, which existed already in the mid 1960s, between an educational establishment defending the French assimilation policy, and another, which actually questioned that assimilation policy, would grow even sharper by the end of the 1960s, when a young generation of teachers brought Lorenz Paasch, Joseph Dries, Gerhard Palm and Bruno Kartheuser to the Episcopal School.

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40 In point of fact, this study was also sustained by the practical insight that – with the ever increasing number of students in secondary schools more and more students came to the Episcopal School who could hardly speak French. Purely French-speaking instruction, especially in classes in the Technical Institute (TI) was established in 1962), was de facto inconceivable. Source: Interview with Georges Kalf (born in 1939), who taught mathematics in the TI mechanical – technical classes as of 1963.

Extra-curricular activities were still very limited in the 1960s. Apart from football and gymnastics clubs as well as a few youth groups (scouts in Eupen,<sup>41</sup> Chiro in Sankt Vith<sup>42</sup> as well as some Groups of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC) [Young Catholic Workers]), there were hardly any organised leisure activities, especially for girls. Consequently, for the minority at the time that could attend them, the secondary schools undoubtedly constituted a strong generational context. This applies also for those students, who went to the local secondary schools, as well as for those in Walloon educational establishments. For most students, attending a secondary school meant, in addition to life in a boarding school, an experience that had a marking biographical effect.<sup>43</sup> As graduation from a secondary school with a school leaver's certificate in the 1950s and 1960s constituted almost automatically a step to higher education, the significance of the academic environment can scarcely be overestimated from the biographical and generational perspective. How important it was can be gauged from the next stage in the academic career of graduates of the Episcopal School or the Collège Patronné, many of whom went on to study at the Catholic University of Leuven.

## Politicisation from the outside

The example of 'Eumavia Lovaniensis,' the student fraternity founded in 1926 in Leuven shows how generational contexts can turn into generational units while at school, which then function as germ cells and engines for social change. The Eumavia, which stemmed for the major part from the academic 'elite' of eastern Belgium in the 1950s and 1960s, can be considered as a mirror image of eastern Belgian history, as Carlo Lejeune has shown. In this mirror image, the latent or explicit social as well as political tensions are shown through a magnifying glass,

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41 Cf. *Allzeit bereit! Pfadfinder in Ostbelgien*, published by the G.o.E. Pfadfinder Obere Weser, Eupen 1991.

42 Cf. Andreas Fickers (ed.): *Chiroleute erzählen: Von Gleichschritt, Protest und neuen Abenteuer* (1953–2003), Sankt Vith 2003.

43 All interviewees described their time at boarding school as a marking (positive as well as negative) biographical experience. The separation from the parental home, the strict regime of boarding schools run by Catholic clergymen, and the switchover to purely French-speaking instruction were experienced as a severe test by many students. On the other hand, boarding school life generated close social ties between students, which led to lifelong friendships. This applies also to the many students who, after graduating from secondary school, went to attend colleges in Arlon or Verviers – to become elementary school teachers, for instance.



as it were.<sup>44</sup> Particularly conclusive for the reconstruction of these tensions is a student from the Koblenz cleric Bernhard Kirfel, who devoted his thesis for his sociology degree to Eumavia in the academic year 1965/66.<sup>45</sup> Relying on the ethnographic method of participatory observation, Kirfel subjected the activities of Eumavia members to a critical observation, which provides interesting insight into the social and political conception the students have of themselves. Kirfel's research was conducted at a time when the conflicts between French-speaking and Flemish students at the university were at their height.<sup>46</sup> In discussions with the students, Kirfel tried to gauge their political opinion on the language conflict, and thus to draw indirect conclusions about the political self-conception of German-speaking students. The extreme polarisation of the student body – the slogan 'Walen buiten' [Walloons out] shouted by the Flemish students was countered by the Walloon students with 'Il n'ont pas de couilles, les Flamands,' [The Flemish have no balls] – forced east Belgian students to their own positioning, often against their wishes. This compulsion to take sides was experienced as a dilemma by many Eumavia members, since a return to a neutral stance is scarcely possible in times of crisis. As many of these Eumavia members had friendly contacts with both Flemish and Walloon fellow students, opting exclusive for one or the other side was a difficult choice.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the political orientation was made more difficult by the multiple identities of the students from eastern Belgium.

Kirfel cites an example to show how problematic the behavioural role of many Eumavia members was:

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44 On the history of Eumavia, cf. Carlo Lejeune, *Oh, alte Burschenherrlichkeit... Eumavia Lovaniensis, eine Studentenvereinigung als Spiegel ostbelgischer Geschichte*, Hünningen 1989.

45 Bernhard Kirfel, *Studenten in Löwen. Flamen, Deutschbelgier, Wallonen. Die Löwener Studenten aus den deutschsprachigen Gemeinden der beglischen Ostkantone Eupen – Malmedy – St. Vith in akademischen Jahr 1965/66. Eine teilnehmende Beobachtung*, Löwen 1967.

46 On the Belgian student protest movement and the role of Leuven University see Gerd Rainer Horn. The Belgian Contribution to Global 1968. Views From Abroad : Foreign Historians on Belgium, special English-language issue of *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, 2005, pp.597–635; Jo Tollebeek, Liesbet Nys, Lieve Gevers, Louis Vos, Ruben Mantels, *De stad op de berg. Een geschiedenis van de Leuvense universiteit sinds 1968*, Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2005.

47 Eumavia members from the Eifel region in particular often cultivated good contacts with the Flemings, because they usually stayed in Flemish Leuven during the weekends and thus came into closer contact with the local population and Flemish students.

One student said: 'If things get any worse here in Leuven, we'll have to flee one day.' I asked: 'Who is we?' The student replied: 'The Walloons.' However, in the course of the conversation, he explained 'We feel drawn to the Germans even more.' The word 'we' thus takes on a different content depending on the situation, depending on which sub-role one has to assume.<sup>48</sup>

The overlapping of two complex phenomena – on the one hand, the highly politicised atmosphere at the university<sup>49</sup>, and on the other what Kirfel described as the 'chameleon-like' identity of the eastern Belgians – ultimately led to a 'silent' rather than 'loud' politicisation of Eumavia in the 1970s, which had for long made sure that political and ideological differences be kept out of its associative life.<sup>50</sup> Of interest in the context of the underlying question here as to the significance of the generational units in the student milieu is that the incipient politicisation of the Eumavia members – as in the case of the emancipation debate – occurred along clear social structure and geographic lines. The boundaries between 'pro-Belgian' and 'pro-German' camps, as they were called, within Eumavia, could also be drawn rather precisely along geographic lines, according to Kirfel: 'People from the north (canton of Eupen) tended towards a pro-Belgian position, whereas students from the cantons of Malmedy and Sankt Vith tended particularly to the pro-German subgroup.'<sup>51</sup> Both 'camps' were moreover distinguished by the social structure: Whereas the 'pro-Belgian' minded Eumavia members from the Eupen region came predominantly from middle to upper class backgrounds (professions, civil servants, clerical employees), the majority of the 'pro-German' minded Eumavia members from the Eifel region stemmed from the bottom layer (manual workers and farmers).<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, in Leuven we find both a continuation as well as a spatial-institutional conflation of that polarisation, which was prepared at the secondary school level (Episcopal School in St. Vith versus Collège Patronné).

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48 Kirfel, *Studenten in Löwen*, 41.

49 Cf. Mark Derez, Ingrid Depraetere, Louis Vos, Johan Mahieu, Wivina Van der Steen, *Studentenprotest in de jaren zestig: de stoute jaren*, Tielt: Lanno 1988.

50 In his sociological analysis of Eumavia, Carlos Lejeune speaks of a 'silent politicisation' of Eumavia, which was gradually drawn in by both 'engaged' groups of opinion in the Leuven student body (Flemish/Walloons). Cf. Lejeune, *Oh, alte Burschenherrlichkeit*, 51.

51 Kirfel, *Studenten in Löwen*, 13.

52 Naturally, these classifications did not cover all the members of Eumavia, and each 'camp' could have members from Eupen or the Eifel region among its ranks. Nevertheless, Kirfel's thesis is corroborated in the oral history interviews by former Eumavia members such as Lorenz Paasch, Joseph Dries, Peter Thomas, Leonard Schifflers and Freddy Derwahl.

As Carlo Lejeune has shown, Eumavia members, who were allegedly 'neutral' in the language conflict, were de facto subjected to a 'forced classification,' which compelled them, willingly or unwillingly, to come out for or against certain political points of view (such as the expansion of the cultural autonomy or the equal treatment of the German language in secondary education).<sup>53</sup> From the socio-psychological perspective, it comes as no surprise that generational contexts formed at secondary school would lead to socio-cultural generational units when studying in Leuven, whose effectiveness – as in the case of the political history of the German-speaking Community – would be visible for decades to come.<sup>54</sup> From the generational historical perspective, it scarcely comes as a surprise that the Episcopal School in Sankt Vikt had developed into an intellectual nucleus of a new political movement in the 1960s, which went beyond political party activities.<sup>55</sup>

### **An experience or narration generation?**

When we listen to the stories of the protagonists of the '73 generation, it is difficult not to be struck by the dramatic dimension of the narratives. The unbelievable wealth of events and developments, which consolidated into a phase of social, political and cultural dynamism as well as social change at the end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s at the international, national as well as regional level, is reflected to an astonishing degree in those narratives and remembrances of eastern Belgian contemporary eye witnesses who were interviewed for this study. The recollections of those interviewed are dominated by the feeling of living through – and of having helped to shape, albeit partially a period of intensive political debates, strategic considerations, provocative actions and revolutionary demands. Contemporary analyses and retrospectives, as in Hubert Jenniges' *Hinter ostbelgischen Kulissen* or Gerhard Palm's obituary on Hubert Jenniges, speak of 'glaring forces' and 'times of events.'<sup>56</sup> The manifest 'movements' or 'currents' in many

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53 Lejeune, *Oh, alte Burschenherrlichkeit*, 51.

54 I am thinking here primarily of the history of the parties of the German-speaking Belgians, whose leaders included many 'old boys' of Eumavia. Cf. Leonie Neuens, *A la base d'un parti régionaliste La création du PDB (Parti des Belges de langue allemande) en 1971: acteurs et controverses*; unpublished master's thesis in history, University of Liège, 2013.

55 The 'hot iron' action and the establishment of sheltered workshops and the free health-care funds are worth mentioning here.

56 Jenniges, *Hinter ostbelgischen Kulissen*, 117.

areas of social and political life inside and outside the east cantons appear to have been so marking and singular that they can readily be qualified as ‘revolutionary.’

More and more voices are recently heard, however, increasingly also from the ranks of the ‘68 generation, which are calling for a self-critical approach to the interpretation of individual or collective biographical narratives.<sup>57</sup> There should be no doubt at this point, that the ‘hot phase’ of the autonomy debate (1967–1973) was a particularly eventful period in the history of eastern Belgium. It is nonetheless important to assume a critical stance both as regards the narrative construction of the recollection of the historical actors interviewed and to compare it with one’s own narration perspective applied here. Bernd Weisbrod has rightly indicated that the ‘68 generation is a ‘wondrous proliferation of the narration generation rather than an experience generation in the strict sense’<sup>58</sup> i.e.: Actually, there was only a small but radical minority, which participated in demonstrations or the creation of alternative events proved effective in attracting media coverage. That minority was nonetheless sufficient, according to Weisbrod, as it would today appear that anyone in a position of authority today was part of it!

The speeches and festivities for the 40<sup>th</sup> ‘anniversary’ of the establishment of the Board of the German Cultural Society in 2013 do provide sufficient source material to strengthen Weisbrod’s thesis of ‘proliferating political and public confirmation’ of having belonged to the ‘73 generation. Most of them have actually been silent witnesses of that time. Similarly, the ‘cultural revolution’ which is often mentioned in the same breath with the ‘68 generation – trickled slowly into eastern Belgium only in the mid 1970s. There was not much trace of ‘sex and drugs and rock ‘n roll’ in the eastern Belgian media or in social life at the end of the 1960s/beginning of the 1970s.<sup>59</sup> A generational conflict emerged in Eumavia and in youth groups such as Chiro in Sankt Vith only in the mid 1970s, during the course of which progressive ideas and life styles came increasingly into conflict with

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57 Such as Wolfgang Kraushaar, who takes a critical stance on the concept of generations in the context of the ‘68 movement. Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Achtundsechzig. Eine Bilanz*. Berlin: Propyläen 2008. Götz Aly is even more judgemental of himself and his generation in: Götz Aly, *Unser Kampf, 1968 – ein irritierter Blick zurück*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2008.

58 Weisbrod, *Generation und Generationalität in der Neueren Geschichte*, 3.

59 Music, which today has become the emblem of the generation awakening in the sixties and seventies, played a central role for only one of the contemporary witnesses interviewed, Robert Oberecken.

conservative standards and values.<sup>60</sup> At the peak of the student revolts in Paris and Berlin in May 1968, there was little protesting to be seen in Leuven and Liège. To be sure, one or another student had read Herbert Marcuse's 'The One Dimensional Man' and had heard of Theodor W. Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's 'Dialectic of the Enlightenment,' but abstract intellectual debates were not in the foreground of the protest movement either in Leuven or in Liège. Whereas the '68 movement in Leuven was overshadowed entirely by the language conflict and the division of the university,<sup>61</sup> in Liège, where the subsequent protests in February 1969 culminated in a week-long occupation of the auditorium, the demands were focused chiefly on a democratisation of the university.<sup>62</sup> The media consumed by many young people and students consisted essentially of reading newspapers and magazines (above all *Der Spiegel*) and occasionally listening to radio broadcasts – the new medium television, which would turn into the central catalyst of the 'images of the revolution,' was pretty much absent.<sup>63</sup> These factors suggest that the '73 generation was more of a transition generation characterised by genealogical tensions than a founding generation of the political and cultural autonomy which the Germany-speaking Community enjoys today in the federal state of Belgium. The political and cultural confrontation at the end of the sixties/beginning of the seventies was not characterised by radical demands (even though older contemporary witnesses

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60 In Eumavia, this change in values was perceptible particularly through the increasing tensions between the *Activitas* and the 'Alte Herren' (old boys); in Chiro through the abolition of traditions and symbols (e.g. uniforms), which were perceived as authoritarian and outmoded. Instead, topics such as political engagement, civil courage, sexuality and emancipation came to the fore in the educational debates. Cf. Lejeune, *Oh, alte Burschenherrlichkeit*, 55–61; also, Fickers, *Chiroleute erzählen*, preface.

61 'The student rebellion of the foreigners (Berlin, Paris) was viewed from a distance in the sleepy and sclerotic Leuven. The barren rudiments of a social discussion and questioning were completely obscured and overlaid by the Belgian nationalism discussion,' according to the recollection of Bruno Kartheuser, cited in Lejeune, *Oh, alte Burschenherrlichkeit*, 56. However, Kartheuser's rebellion was evidently limited to reading *Der Spiegel*, which – since it was forbidden reading material in the seminary – he went to his fellow student Joseph Dries to read the periodical, for whom the weekly purchase of *Der Spiegel* amounted to a significant investment. Source: Interview of Joseph Dries.

62 Cf. Danielle Bajomée, *Le mai 68 liégeois*, in: Nancy Delhalle/Jacques Dubois/Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (eds.), *Le tournant des années 1970. Liège en effervescence*, Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles 2010, 13–22.

63 On the significance of television in the creation of a critical public sphere during the 'long sixties,' cf. Christina von Hodenberg, *Mass Media and the Generation of Conflict: West Germany's Long Sixties and the Formation of a Critical Public Sphere*, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 15 (2006) no. 3, 367–395.

may have experienced them as such) nor by utopian life plans, but by the practical effort to bring about a change in the cultural and political landscape. This effort was characterised by reaching a compromise between old and now, traditional and progressive, and not by the activist or propagandistic staging of radical positions. Eupen and Sankt Vith were not Paris or Berlin, and Lorenz Paasch was not the eastern Belgian Cohn-Bendit. Without the 'importance of the older, wise and intelligent people,' Gerhard Palm put it succinctly in retrospect, many of the tempestuous positions of a few 'young savages' from the Eifel region would probably have had few consequences.<sup>64</sup>

In conclusion, it can be stated that as set out herein, the '73 generation was more of an elite phenomenon than an accurate description of a generational stratum comprising broader social classes in Mannheim's meaning of the term. The focus of this narrative on a small circle of historical actors and institutions has entailed that the largest part of the eastern Belgian population has been left out. The mass of 'silent' participators of an experience generation unfortunately did not get a word in. Nevertheless, I believe that the concept of generations has generated heuristic added value, without which certain aspects of the autonomy debate would have emerged less clearly if at all. And if it has brought more historical questions than answers, it has been more to the service than to the detriment of the future regional historiography. For: 'C'est la question qui construit l'objet historique.'<sup>65</sup> [It is the question that constructs the historical object].

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64 Gerhard Palm here names Reiner Pankert, Wilhelm Pip, Michel Kohnemann, Michel Louis, Norbert Scholzen and Rudi Pankert. Cf. Palm, Gedenkfeier für Hubert Jenniges, 7

65 Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1996, 79.