

## The "Von Bissing University" in academically locked Belgium

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The establishment of the Vlaamsche Hoogeschool, better known as the “Von Bissing University”, marks a high point in the period of occupation and the relations between the occupying authorities, Flemish activists and “patriots” during this period. While, in the context of the occupation, universities closed, an academic institution was created in Flanders — in Ghent — in 1916, with the support of German authorities.

Presenting this moment and this particular institution requires to situate it in the context of the Flemish claims that had been developing in the previous decades. Since independence, Belgium had made French its only official language and had neglected the Flemish language and culture. [All education was given in French](#). The Flemish movement, which had been developing in Belgium since the second half of the 19th century, claimed recognition for the Flemish language and culture and called for the creation of a Dutch-speaking university in Ghent. Several sensational trials in the 1860s and 1870s increased discontent among Flemish lawyers and led to legislative initiatives. Dutch was timidly introduced into law faculties following the Act of August 17, 1873 authorizing the use of Dutch before the criminal courts established in the Flemish provinces. The creation of a course in criminal law and criminal procedure in Dutch was therefore necessary. The Dutchization of the teaching of law went no further, but the movement had gained momentum. As a result of this legislation, law books and textbooks were published in Dutch. The desire to create a Flemish university was renewed following the Universal Exhibition in Ghent in 1913. On the eve of the war, the Dutchization of the University of Ghent was on the agenda. A bill was submitted to the House of Representatives. It was discussed in the spring of 1914. According to the proposal, the University of Ghent would adopt Dutch as its official language — Flemish, in the vocabulary of the time — starting in the academic year 1916-1917. [The invasion that took place in August 1914 decided otherwise](#).

Chancellor of the Reich Bethmann-Hollweg perceived very well the tensions that existed between Flemings and Francophones and developed what is now known as Flamenpolitik. The German occupier pursued a strategy of division to rule against the Belgian State. By conceding to the Flemish, the occupier hoped to dismantle Belgium in order to strengthen its ties to the German Empire. The Flemishization of the University of Ghent was one of the milestones of this policy. The project was implemented fairly quickly, although initial contacts with the academic community did not seem favorable. The necessary budgets were released at the end of 1915. On March 15, 1916, Governor General von Bissing issued a decree amending the Royal Decree of December 9, 1849. From that point forward, classes and examinations in Ghent were to be held in Flemish. The propaganda apparatus immediately began to move. The aim was to convince prospective students and their parents of the legitimacy of the process. However, it was met with considerable resistance, not only from Francophile circles but also from a large majority of the Flemish cause supporters. The exiled government condemned it in the strongest of terms and intended to dissuade those who meant to teach or study there: "It goes without saying that all the unworthy officials who have made such a deal with the enemy will cease to be of service to the Belgian State forever, and the diplomas awarded by the new university will hold no legal value in Belgium in the future" (Report addressed to the king by Ministers Poulet and Baron Beyens on October 8, 1916).

Although these reactions made it more difficult for the German authorities to recruit professors, they did not prevent the University of Ghent from opening its doors at the end of October 1916. On October 24, 1916, Rector Peter Hoffman solemnly inaugurated the Vlaamsche Hogeschool.

The Germans showed little creativity. They simply adopted the content of the proposal presented to the House on the eve of the war. They retained the four faculties that traditionally formed an academic institution: the Faculty of Humanities, the Faculty of Science, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Medicine. There was no change in the organization of legal training. The program was divided into a first preparatory year — called "application" — within the Faculty of Humanities, which was followed, within the Faculty of Law, by an application whose success conditioned the access to the law "doctorate" course, for a duration of two years. To emphasize the "Flemish" quality of the Faculty of Law, the statue of poet and champion of the Flemish cause Albrecht Rodenbach was placed in the center of the courtyard. And what about teachers? Their recruitment would not be easy. The project certainly did not receive the expected reception. There would be a total of eight teachers. Only one of them, Julius Obrie, was already a faculty member before the war. He taught notarial law classes. The other seven professors were granted tenure as a result of the occupation: Labberton was responsible for the natural law and international law courses; Dörsfel, for international law and civil law, Book I and Book II; Van Roy, for commercial law and the encyclopedia of law; Claeys, for international law and political economy, mainly; Jonckx, for criminal law, criminal procedure and Book III of the Civil Code; Eggen, who taught civil law, civil procedure and the history of law; and Heyndrickx, who taught administrative law.

These teachers had already demonstrated their commitment to the Flemish cause before the war. They then became radicalized. Julius Obrie, dean of the group, as he was 70 years old at the beginning of the war, was one of the founders of the Flemish Conference of the Ghent Bar. He had been elected to the Royal Flemish Academy of Language and Literature. Lodewijk Dörsfel was from the University of Leuven. His recruitment raised the level of new recruits somewhat. He had been involved in the Flemish cause since his youth. He had distinguished himself in Leuven as one of the leaders of the Flemish Catholic student movement. He was also a member of the Royal Academy of Flemish Language and Literature. Alfons Van Roy had already distinguished himself during his studies through his commitment to Flemish circles. He had played a leading role in the opposition to the organization of the Ghent World Expo in 1913, due to its francophile nature. In the early days of the occupation, he had joined the Jong-Vlaanderen movement, a radical emanation of the Flemish movement, which demanded the independence of Flanders. This was also the case for Johan Eggen, who was also part of the Vlaamsche Stem newspaper editorial staff. Alfons Jonckx had made himself known by his opposition to Fransquillonism, the place given by a part of the bourgeoisie, in Flanders, to the French language and culture. Karel Heyndrickx had served as secretary of Davidsfonds, a Flemish Catholic cultural association founded in 1875 by Canon David, before the war. As for Labberton, of Dutch nationality, beyond his commitment to the Flemish cause, he had stood out in the start of the war by his pro-German sympathies. However, little is known of René Claeys. Many of them would extend — naturally, one might claim — their academic commitment through a commitment in the Flemish political apparatus, within the Council of Flanders which, in December 1917, proclaimed the independence of Flanders. This was the case for Van Roy, Labberton, Eggen, Jonckx and Heyndrickx.

While recruitment of professors was apparently not easy, the number of students enrolled was also quite small. Enrollment was particularly low in the Law School. Of the 480 students who enrolled in the university between 1916 and 1918, only nineteen were studying law. Several reasons can be suggested.

We can first highlight the fact that many students were serving in the army. Of course, we can also highlight the importance of patriotic feelings across the population, including amongst the Flemish. However, practical causes should not be overlooked. Ghent is located in a "staging" area (Etappengebied), an area close to the front which, for military reasons, was subjected to a specific constraint regime. Travel in particular was subjected to strict formalities that made it difficult for university students to return home when they were not living in the city. Students were invited to settle in Ghent, but this came with a cost. A number of scholarships were awarded. It was also planned to be able to complete the registration formalities in writing, without having to go to university. Registration offices were established throughout Flanders. But these measures were clearly not enough to make the opening of the Vlaamsche Hoogeschool a success.

Small as these registration numbers were, they incorporated the increase resulting from the organization of deportations linked to compulsory work. Enrolling in a university was an escape route. Therefore, although there were few registrants, it should be noted that there would be even fewer graduates. Opened in October 1916, closed in November 1918, the institution did not have the opportunity to see many students to graduation. Of the nineteen students enrolled in law school, only one graduated. Arthur Mulier, who had started [his law studies in Leuven](#), was the first and only doctor of law of the Vlaamsche Hoogeschool.

The liberation of Ghent in November 1918 led a number of professors to flee abroad, mainly to the Netherlands and Germany. Houses were burned down, students were brutalized. As for the degrees that had been awarded, they were declared worthless. Several professors and students were prosecuted. Tried in tribunal, they were convicted for activism. They benefited from pardons or reduced sentences and promptly released. Arthur Mulier will graduate as a Doctor of Law before the Central Jury. Some of those who were convicted, who felt that they were being treated unfairly, moved towards further radicalization, and would fall into collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Nevertheless, despite the excesses of activism, the urgency of setting up a Flemish university had come to be understood. King Albert I expressed this explicitly in his Speech from the Throne on November 22, 1918. Still, the Flemish movement emerged weakened from the war period. In the eyes of a large part of the political and academic world, the creation of a Flemish university was inaudible. The representatives of the Flemish movement would therefore have to fight to be heard and obtain what had been about to be obtained on the eve of the war. After many difficulties, the University of Ghent finally became a Flemish university — where courses were given exclusively in Dutch — in 1930.

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