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Homogenising Tendencies: Majority-Minority Relations in Italy, Spain and Belgium from Versailles to the Second World War

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pour l'histoire du temps présent

On 1 October 2017, the Catalan regional government organised an independence referendum promptly declared illegal by Spanish authorities. A couple of years later, in May 2019, two Flemish separatist parties ranked first and second at the Belgian federal elections; their aggregate score hitting 43.3% of the Flemish vote. In between these two events, a proposal by the government led by Sebastian Kurz to deliver Austrian passports to the German-speaking population living in the Italian region of South Tyrol reignited tensions across the Alps that had abated since the late 1970s.

A century after Versailles, majority-minority relations in some Western European countries are still problematic, and sometimes even conflict-ridden. In this perspective, the interwar years are a key moment because the end of the Great War and the process of negotiation of European borders taking place at Versailles enshrined self-determination as one of the main principles of political legitimacy in international relations.¹ The Peace Conference also established a system of international minority protection supervised by the League of Nations that, despite constituting an unprecedented step in the international defence of minority rights, only concerned the new states arisen from the collapse of the Eastern European empires.

Contemporary Europe is still grappling with inter-group tensions that were decisively shaped by the new context of rising nationalism and spreading democracy—although often fragile democracy—ushered in by the immediate post-War period. Hence, looking at minority policies in Belgium, Italy and Spain in a comparative perspective can not only help us to get a clearer picture of the past, but also to understand better some of today's challenges regarding the management of cultural difference.

The End of the War and the Rising Minority Question

Rarely used before 1919, the expression 'national minority' acquired unprecedented relevance at the end of the Great War because of the transition from empires to nation-state in Eastern Europe brought about by the end of the conflict. The new nation-states arising out of the war were founded on principles of formal equality (of all citizens), democratic majority rule and the coincidence of ethno-cultural and administrative borders that turned the presence of individuals belonging to 'racial, linguistic or religious minorities' (to use the terminology of the time) into a problem.

To promote international security, the peace treaties established a system of minority protection with jurisdiction over the new Eastern European states. The reason why such a system was not extended to Western Europe (and more widely to all the members of the League of Nations) are multiple. The Great Powers did not accept any intrusion into their national sovereignty and, in order to avoid dangerous precedents, rejected extending minority clauses on countries that sided with them during the War, or remained neutral. This instrumental reason was vigorously bolstered by two key ideological underpinnings. First, strong civilisational hierarchies that had characterised minority issues and humanitarian interventions throughout the 19th century deeply informed the system.² The new states arising from the former empires were considered as not sufficiently mature to treat their minorities humanly without international supervision. As minority issues could be a source of war and instability, the Great Powers deemed it necessary to impose minority clauses on these newcomers to the Family of Nations.³ Second, Western European countries were widely considered to be nationally and ethnically homogenous. When in 1922 the Lithuanian delegate to the League of Nations proposed at the body's Assembly that the League should generalise the regime of minority protection established in Eastern Europe, the French representative Henry De Jouvenel self-confidently replied that 'France has not signed any Minorities Treaty because she has no minorities. To find minorities in France, they would have to be created in the imagination'.⁴ Similarly, commenting on national heterogeneity in Western Europe, Carlile Macartney, one of the foremost interwar years experts on minorities affirmed that: 'with the advent of settled conditions,



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natural assimilation soon began to do its work...in each geographical unit the population tended to become homogeneous, even if it differed increasingly (although in a minor degree within the great national boundaries) from area to area'.⁵

By contrast, the interwar years were a period of intense national mobilisation in some Western European regions, notably in Belgium, Italy and Spain. These three countries not only show that Western Europe was not as culturally and ethnically homogenous as many contemporary actors would have it, but Western European governments were characterised by strong homogenising tendencies. The dictatorial regimes of Benito Mussolini and General Primo de Rivera pursued radical nation-building policies involving the coercive assimilation of specific minorities. In the very different democratic context of Belgium—which warrants treating this case separately—a more liberal policy was followed, and homogenisation did not occur at the state level. However, in the early 1930s, a specific constitutional pact between Flemish and francophone MPs led to the transformation (for educational and administrative purposes) of these two areas into monolingual Dutch- and French-speaking regions (with the ensuing rejection of the rights of specific linguistic minorities in either area).

Before looking at the three cases more in detail, however, we need to briefly introduce the context of majority-minority relations in each.

Belgium, Italy, Spain: A Very Brief Historical Introduction

Majority-minority conflicts in Belgium, Italy and Spain originated in different historical contexts and contingent events. Belgium was created as a francophone state dominated by French-speaking elites in which, however, the majority of the population spoke Flemish. The francophone-Flemish divide also had a social dimension, since Flemish-speakers tended to be poorer than Francophones, a condition leading some authors to define the Flemings as a sociological minority.⁶ Due to growing discontent with this situation within part of the Flemish population, a movement for Flemish linguistic emancipation developed and by the early 20th century began formulating political demands. While during the Great War, a section of the Flemish Movement became more radical and anti-Belgian, demanding Flanders' autonomy, the main currents within the Movement simply called for equality between Flemish and French.⁷

In the Italian case, in 1919, the Kingdom annexed the former Habsburg regions of Trentino and South Tyrol, on the one hand, and Venetia Giulia on the other. As a consequence, about 200,000 German speakers, 300,000 Slovenian speakers and 160,000 Croat speakers became Italian citizens. The challenge was great for the young Italian state. Until then, Italy had never dealt with national minorities endowed with quite mature nationalist movements and kin-states across the border willing to defend the minorities' rights through diplomatic and covert action.

Finally, in the second half of the 19th century, Spain experienced the development of nationalist forces in Catalonia and the Basque Country. By the end of the Great War, these had grown into two fully-fledged nationalist movements led by the *Lliga Regionalista* (Regionalist League) in Catalonia and the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (Basque Nationalist Party) in the Basque Country. Between late 1918 and early 1919, nationalist leaders in the two regions submitted formal requests for political autonomy to the Spanish Parliament, which, however, were categorically rejected.

How were minorities treated in these three countries? In the next two sections, we will try to answer this question comparatively. Given the similarities of the Italian and Spanish authoritarian regimes, we will treat these two cases together and discuss the peculiar Belgian context in a separate section.

Italy and Spain: Liberal Hesitations and Authoritarian Homogenisation

The history of minority-majority relations in interwar Italy and Spain is essentially a history of two failures: that of the authoritarian governments which in both countries tried to assimilate minorities quite harshly without success; and that of minority representatives, who did not manage to obtain the defence of their rights, or only for a short period of time. At the same time, the ephemeral liberal experience of the Spanish Second Republic (roughly from 1930 to the beginning of the Civil War in 1936) constituted a moment of thriving innovation in the recognition and management of difference, albeit filled with conflicts and opposite trends.

Generally speaking, liberal governments in both countries treated their minorities better than authoritarian ones, however, liberal Italy and Monarchic Spain were much more hesitant and conservative in their approaches to the minority question than Republican Spain.

Liberal Italy made efforts to ensure the maintenance of education in minority languages, although there was a clear disparity of treatment of the inhabitants of South Tyrol and Venetia Giulia. In South Tyrol, the military administration that occupied the area at



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the end of the War and remained in place until July 1919 preserved education in German. The same policy was followed by the ensuing civil administration until the rise to power of the fascists in 1922. In Venetia Giulia, on the contrary, attempts at introducing Italian in schools to the detriment of Slovene and Croatian were more pronounced and most schools in the minority language were closed, or their reopening was prevented, after the War. The General Civil Commissary that replaced the military administration proposed a school system whereby the hours of teaching in the minority language would depend on the numbers of non-Italian speakers in a specific location, but the coming of the fascist regime stopped the development of this plan, which, therefore, never saw the light of day.⁸

Generally, however, although Italian governments during the short post-War liberal period showed some commitment to respect education in minority languages and other minority rights, their approach was hesitant and sometimes, especially in Venetia Giulia, even openly in bad faith. In that region, local authorities often condoned and even exploited the violent attacks of the rising fascist black shirts against some minority organisations.⁹

Until the establishment of Primo De Rivera's dictatorship in 1923, Spanish governments did not allow teaching in Catalan in public schools. Public education was conducted in Spanish throughout the state territory and not even the constitution of the *Mancomunidad de Catalunya* (the first territorial institution uniting the entire area of the former Principality of Catalonia) in 1914 changed this substantially. However, this was also the result of a late interest, on the part of Catalan nationalists, in public teaching in their language. The first inroads into the realm of the use of minority languages in education, however, were made precisely after the War. In the early 1920s, the *Mancomunidad* set up a commission to study the diffusion of teaching in Catalan and it also opened up an experimental school in the local language, the *Centro Escolar Pau Vila*. The coming of the dictatorship, however, stopped all advances in this field.¹⁰ In the Basque country, provincial authorities in Biscay even managed to create, from 1919 onwards, so-called neighbourhood schools that offered bilingual Basque/Spanish teaching—although their aim was to convert Basque-speaking children into Spanish speakers. Similarly, private infant schools using Basque in some form or another—called *ikastolas*—were created sporadically throughout the region from 1914 to the Civil War.¹¹

After these relatively liberal phases in Italy and Spain, authoritarian regimes in both countries unmistakably aimed at the assimilation of their minorities into the identity and culture of the majority. Fascism ordered the exclusive use of Italian as language of instruction in all schools, including private ones. Although Italianisation was gradual (especially in South Tyrol), after 1927-1928, the only occasion for minority children to legally study their mother tongue was as a second language in secondary schools.¹² Similarly, Italian was imposed at all levels of the administration and Italians of non-Italian origins were generally excluded from public posts.¹³

Economic discrimination was widespread. Mussolini ordered the dissolution, or absorption, of all minority economic associations, cooperatives and financial institutions. From 1933 onwards, when the 'colonisation' of South Tyrol and Venetia Giulia with 'old Italians' began being emphasised by local and central authorities as the best means to assimilate the *allogeni* (a derogatory term used by the fascists to indicate Italian citizens of non-Italian origins), the regime directly expropriated land owned by members of the two minorities in order to transfer it on to 'Italian' settlers. Although such colonisation projects ran into financial barriers that frustrated the regime's exaggerated ambition, it remained highly discriminatory.¹⁴

Generally, minorities in fascist Italy shared the experience of institutionalised violence and lack of basic rights and liberties suffered by the entire population of the country. However, although Fascism afflicted all Italians, it was even more of a scourge for the minorities because, as pointed out by the Italian dissident intellectual Gaetano Salvemini, it forced them to 'talk, think and dream solely in the Italian language'.¹⁵

Similarly, one of the first measures adopted by the General Miguel Primo de Rivera in Spain was to impose Castilian as the only language of instruction, at all levels, throughout the country. Primo de Rivera also issued a 'Decree against separatism' that punished with prison sentences whoever spread secessionist propaganda in classrooms. Using Catalan or Basque in schools was a sufficient ground for punishment and purges among public employees were a daily affair throughout the dictatorship. The regime set up a widespread surveillance network to monitor the activity of teachers that could go to prison for the simple reason of having used minority languages in schools. However, Primo de Rivera did not seek the complete disappearance of Catalan or Basque. For instance, during his regime, publications in these languages increased. Yet, Primo de Rivera's conception of Catalan and Basque was as regional folkloric languages that should not hamper the (Spanish) nationalisation of 'the masses'.¹⁶

Contrary to Italy, there is no evidence of systematic economic discrimination against the inhabitants of Catalonia and the Basque Country, mainly because these two regions were the most industrialised and richest in Spain. Both Catalan and Basque industrialists managed to obtain the consistent protection of their own sectors from foreign competition by means of Spanish trade tariffs.¹⁷ The



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provinces of the Basque Country even profited from a favourable fiscal deal with the central administration—called *concierto economico*.¹⁸ Furthermore, Primo de Rivera initially obtained the support of part of the Catalan bourgeoisie, which hoped that the dictatorship would bring stability to the Spanish political system and would curb the rise of the workers movement, while Basque nationalists' opposition to the regime was no more than a testimonial resistance.¹⁹

Primo de Rivera endowed himself with a militia similar to the Italian fascist black shirts that carried out spontaneous punitive expeditions against several targeted groups. Contrary to fascist experience, though, the origin of the Spanish militia, the *Somatén*, owed a lot to the interests and initiative of the Catalan bourgeoisie. The *Somatén* arose in the early 20th century as a militia organised by Catalan industrialists to counter the rising workers' movement. This became more institutionalised in 1919 as a sort of Barcelona civic guard thanks to the support of the local financial elite and the organisational efforts of the Regionalist League and the Monarchic Union. A few years later, it was further militarised by Primo de Rivera and eventually used to quell regionalist dissent in Catalonia as well.²⁰

The establishment of the Second Republic, in 1930, opened up a window of opportunity that led to the granting of political autonomy to minority regions. In Catalonia, the adoption of the Statute of Autonomy in 1932 established the Catalan language as co-official alongside Spanish. An autonomous regional government, the *Generalitat*, was created and allowed to set up a parallel educational system in Catalan—although financed with regional, not state, resources—that granted Catalan equality with Spanish in university education. This did not lead to a Catalanisation of the school system, in part because there was a dearth of teachers fluent in Catalan—a powerful reminder of the constructed nature of nations. However, public primary schools in the municipality of Barcelona taught in the mother tongue of pupils (as established by a decree of 1931) and state schools in the rest of Catalonia introduced professorships in Catalan language. Yet, the experiment of the *Generalitat* also ran into strong opposition in Madrid and the autonomous institution was suspended between October 1934 and February 1936. The beginning of the Civil War brought an unprecedented degree of independence to the Catalan government, which assumed control over several key policy areas, but this lasted only until May 1937, when the Spanish Republican government found refuge in Barcelona and assumed direct control of the region.²¹

In 1931, a process of devolution of powers towards regional institutions was begun in the Basque Country as well. Nevertheless, the higher polarisation of the political spectrum and public opinion there slowed down its formulation and adoption. The region's Statute of Autonomy was eventually passed in mid-1936. It attributed competences in education to the Basque government and recognised the Basque language as co-official with Spanish. More than in Catalonia, the commencement of the Civil War and the relative isolation of the area from the rest of Republican Spain enabled Basque authorities to expand their competences into those of a de facto independent state. This situation was brought to an end by Franco's conquest of the region in June 1937.²²

Belgium: The Drive towards Regional Homogenisation

In the interwar years, the majority of the Flemish Movement rallied behind the so-called 'minimum programme' devised by the Catholic-Flemish leader Frans Van Cauwelaert. This entailed the Dutchification of the education system, the administration and the courts in Flanders and equality between Dutch and French in the army. Hence, political relations between francophone and Flemish elites were focused, during this period, on the question of linguistic equality between Flemish and French.

By the time of the Great War, the Flemish Movement had achieved that primary and secondary schooling in Flanders would be conducted primarily in Flemish, but bilingualism was still very widespread and the territoriality principle (see below) later defended in the 'minimum programme' had not yet been adopted. Furthermore, higher education was carried out exclusively in French. Within this context, in the immediate post-war period the transformation of the state University of Ghent into a Flemish-speaking institution became the main request of the Movement.²³ Opposed by most Walloon and Flemish francophone elites, which saw French as an inherently superior language and feared the creation of a Flemish-speaking elite in the country, the reform was eventually adopted in 1930 only after the anti-Belgian nationalist Front Party doubled its share of votes in the preceding elections, which startled mainstream parties and convinced them that something had to be done to placate Flemish nationalist demands.²⁴

The creation of a Flemish public university in Belgium was the first step towards the creation of two linguistically homogenous regions in the north and south of the country. Another important moment in this process was the transition from the personality to the territoriality principle in the use of languages in the administration and in primary and secondary education, both occurred in 1932. According to the personality principle, each person should be able to choose in which language (among the official ones) she wants to be educated and to communicate with the public administration. The territoriality principle stipulates that the language of the



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majority in the region is the official language of the entire area. Intermediate solutions between these two ideal types (for instance, territoriality with some derogations for minorities) are of course possible. The revolutionary change in this respect happened in Wallonia, where most MPs defended the personality principle throughout the 1920s and then rallied behind the territorial position proposed by the Flemish Movement a decade later lest the Flemish majority would use its political weight to impose bilingualism throughout the country.

The 1921 bill on the use of languages in the administration had already set the basis for the prevalence of the territoriality principle in the country. Yet, the autonomy granted to municipalities with a majority of residents speaking a language different from the regional one to change their official language, as well as other exceptions for linguistic minorities in Flanders watered down considerably the territoriality of the system to the advantage of the personality principle. Furthermore, the law imposed bilingualism onto high-ranking members of the central administration, which played to the advantage of Flemish speakers, since bilingualism was more widespread in Flanders. The vote in Parliament was extremely skewed, with 84% of MPs from Flanders in favor and 78% of those from Wallonia against the bill.²⁵

This electoral victory of Flemish MPs, mostly obtained by means of their numerical majority, was later sacrificed in return for the acceptance by most Walloon MPs of regional monolingualism in the north as well as the south.²⁶ The formidable transformation of opinion that occurred in Wallonia in slightly more than a decade is conveyed by the vote on the 1932 law on the use of language in the administration, which this time obtained the support of 2/3ds of MPs in each linguistic area (Brussels included), with both the Walloon Socialist and Liberal MPs siding with the majority.²⁷ The laws on the use of language in primary and secondary education passed later that year simply reinforced the territoriality principle in that domain, too.

Adopting these reforms meant scrapping the linguistic rights of the sizable francophone minority in Flanders, which Walloon MPs had sternly defended until then, as well as those of the Flemish minority in Wallonia, which, however, the Flemish Movement had been more open to trade in exchange for regional monolingualism. As lamented by a leading figure of the Walloon Movement, the Liberal MP François Bovesse, when commenting on the reform:

'for a long time we [the Walloons] were 'interventionist'. We believed that we had a right and a duty to help them [the Francophone of Flanders] in their secular fight against the Dutchification of the region and we heard those within the Flemish ranks who asked: according to what right do you want to support the French civilisation in our region, when you forbid us to create Flemish islands in Wallonia?...It is hard, it is bitter to abandon the Francophones of Flanders. It would be certainly harder and more dangerous to sacrifice our linguistic unity'.²⁸

Overall, the rise of rival nationalist movements in Flanders and Wallonia led to a compromise that crowned linguistic homogeneity in education, the administration and the courts as a basic norm of public life in these two areas. While assimilation did not occur at the state level, minorities were sacrificed at the regional one.

The homogenisation of Flanders and Wallonia, however, left out Brussels, and a few municipalities along the linguistic border between the two regions. In the capital, language freedom favoured a social process of Flemish assimilation to French for reasons of social mobility that lingered on until well after the Second World War.²⁹ Assimilation there, however, was more the result of a social dynamic than a deliberate government policy.³⁰

Conclusion

A century after Versailles, majority-minority tensions are still challenging Europe. Some of these arose in the years during and immediately after the Great War and became fully politicised in the interwar period. While the current comparative and international literature tends to reproduce a bias whereby Western Europe was a nationally homogenous area and states in that part of the continent were better equipped to deal with issues of national difference than Eastern European ones, this paper shows that (although in different ways and at different levels) strong homogenising tendencies informed intergroup relations in Belgium, Italy and Spain.

In the last two, authoritarian regimes gave free course to coercive nation-building programmes entailing the complete assimilation of national minorities into the majority culture. These historical experiences—continued in Spain with the later dictatorship of Francisco Franco—nourished feelings of enmity and suspicion within minority populations that, although in much more diluted form, still lingers on today and provide powerful victimisation myths that can easily be exploited by minority actors to mobilise local voters against state institutions.



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In Belgium, an eminently liberal country that remained democratic throughout the troubled interwar years, assimilation did not occur at the state level. Belgian policy towards recognising cultural and national difference tended to remain liberal and to accept diversity. This is also clear when looking at the German-speaking minority in the Eastern Cantons of Eupen, Malmedy and St Vith—which for reasons of scope we could not address in this piece. There, the integration of these new citizens speaking a different language into the structure of the Belgian state was quite respectful—especially in a comparative perspective—of their linguistic and cultural rights. Yet, where one can see clear homogenising dynamics at play is within the regions of Flanders and Wallonia. While the equality between French and Flemish that was often at the centre of the political agenda in interwar Belgium could have been realised by means of bilingualism throughout the country—thus allowing each citizen to freely choose its preferred language regardless of where he/she lived—the political elites of Flanders and Wallonia eventually settled for the division of the country into two linguistically homogenous areas—apart from bilingual Brussels and the Eastern cantons. That not only meant scrapping the rights of francophone/Flemish linguistic minorities in the other linguistic region. It also laid down the basis for the administrative, and later political, division of the country into two autonomous regions that, as the recent impasse in the formation of a federal government shows, find it increasingly harder to govern Belgium together.

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