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Language controversies in the 
*Gazette van Detroit* (1916–1918)

Tanja Collet

The first issue of the *Gazette van Detroit* was printed shortly after the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914. *Het boterbladje* (the butter sheet), as its readers lovingly called it, would over the following decades become the main source of news from the ‘old country’ for the Flemish expatriate community in the United States and Canada, outlasting all other Flemish weeklies. It was the brainchild of Camille Cools, a successful member of the community, who was socially engaged but by no means trained in professional journalism. This chapter presents an analysis of the ideological leanings of the early *Gazette*, which were based on two of the dominant -isms of that era: socialism and nationalism. A reading of several editorials and other pieces printed in the *Gazette* between 1916 and 1918 reveals how the *Gazette*’s populism influenced its attitudes towards language and particularly towards Flemish, the community’s vernacular. The early *Gazette*’s outspoken Flemish nationalism permeates its views in a number of areas, ranging from editorial decisions on language usage to workers’ rights in North America and, of course, the linguistic divide in Belgium. Outside pressures, however, would force the *Gazette* to soften its *flamingantism* at least until the end of the Great War: these pressures included interference from representatives of the exiled Belgian government, and legal and extra-legal means employed by various agents in the United States to censor the immigrant press and curtail foreign-language use.
Introduction

In his survey of the Dutch language press in America, Edelman lists a total of six newspapers established by the Flemish immigrant communities in the United States in the late 1800s and the early 1900s: the De Pere Standaard, founded in 1878 and based in Wisconsin, which became Onze Standaard in 1898; its local competitor De Volksstem, founded in 1890; the Detroitenaar, started in 1900; the Illinois-based Gazette van Moline, founded in 1907; the Gazette van Detroit, which made its first appearance in 1914; and finally De Nieuwe Wereld, published for only a short time between 1915 and 1916 from Moline, Illinois.1 By the 1920s, all but two of these weeklies had folded: the Gazette van Moline and the Gazette van Detroit were the only survivors. Then, in 1940, at the onset of the Second World War, the Gazette van Moline merged with the Gazette van Detroit and the latter became the sole surviving Flemish ethnic weekly in North America. It continues to the present day, servicing the Flemish communities in the United States but also in Canada, where the Flemings, who had settled mostly in south-western Ontario, did not find their own ethnic press, quite possibly due to their proximity to the United States and particularly the city of Detroit, which in the twentieth century became home to the largest Flemish expatriate community in North America.2

Today's Gazette is bilingual, containing articles in both English and Dutch; standard Dutch, in fact, or Algemeen Nederlands. The newspaper currently has about 1,200 subscribers, who live, much like in the 1910s and 1920s, in the United States and Canada but also in Belgium, particularly Flanders. At its heyday, however, in the 1950s, the Gazette printed more than 10,000 copies of each issue.3 The newspaper's most recent editors-in-chief, Wim Vanraes and Elisabeth Khan-Van den Hove, see the newspaper as ‘politically neutral’, that is, not engaged in political debate, whether it concerns North American matters or more importantly Belgian issues, such as the long-standing language question.4 On its website, for instance, the Gazette’s mission statement, which still starts with the slogan coined by its very first editor-in-chief, Camille Cools, Het Licht Voor ’t Volk (A Light for our Community), reads as follows: ‘The Gazette van Detroit is an unaffiliated, apolitical, non-profit organization written by and for North Americans of Flemish descent and Dutch-speaking Belgians.5

During the early years, however, the Gazette had a somewhat different approach. It was a for-profit organization, or more accurately a ‘commercial paper’, i.e. ‘a paper conducted for the purpose of making
money’. It was politically unaffiliated, as were most commercial papers, in the sense that it was not the official organ of a political organisation. Indeed, each issue of the Gazette proudly announced on its title page: ‘This is a strictly independent newspaper.’ However, it was certainly not ‘politically neutral’. The Gazette was very much a politically and socially engaged newspaper, one that ran editorials and other pieces that voiced strong opinions on matters, political and social, taking place in either North America or Belgium.

The purpose of this chapter is to present an analysis of the ideological leanings of the Gazette, particularly with respect to language, arguably the defining social and political issue amongst Belgians, in the homeland but also, as will become clear, the diaspora.

The time period covered in this study is relatively short, only about two and a half years, stretching from the end of March 1916 to the end of December 1918. The year 1916 was an important one, a pivotal year, for the Gazette van Detroit. During it, its founder and editor-in-chief, Camille Cools, died rather unexpectedly, and a new editor-in-chief, Frank Cobbaert, took over. It is also the year during which the Gazette positioned itself more clearly on the issue of the Flemish language; particularly with respect to the language question in Belgium, under German occupation since 1914, but also with respect to the language rights of the Flemish immigrants in the United States and Canada. The year 1918, on the other hand, marks the end of the First World War and with it the lifting of certain content restrictions imposed on ethnic newspapers. In October 1917, for instance, the American Congress, increasingly distrustful of the foreign element in American society, had passed a law aimed specifically at controlling the foreign-language press. It required that ‘exact translations of all matters relating to the war […] be submitted to the local postmaster until such time as the government was sufficiently convinced of the loyalty of the foreign-language paper to issue a permit exempting it henceforth from the cumbersome and expensive process of filing translations’. Another piece of wartime legislation that was also revoked by the end of 1918 was the infamous Babel Proclamation, a drastic measure issued by the then governor of the state of Iowa, William L. Harding, which forbade the use of any language other than English, i.e. ‘American’, in public. However, the legal debate concerning the public use of immigrant languages, such as German, Dutch and Danish, continued well into the 1920s in many Midwest states, where extra-legal means and intense social pressure had been applied during the war severely to restrict their use.
The chapter is divided into three sections. ‘Camille Cools and the founding of the Gazette van Detroit’ takes a brief look at the founder of the Gazette and attempts to situate the newspaper among the other ethnic dailies and weeklies of the early twentieth century. Significantly, the section aims to contextualise the ideological leanings and positions the newspaper was to adopt with respect to language. ‘Language and style’ gives an overview of the more salient stylistic and linguistic characteristics of the early Gazette and shows how these relate to its Flemish immigrant readership of the time. In particular, the section hopes to demonstrate the relationship between the newspaper’s populism and its targeted audience. Finally, ‘Language attitudes’ analyses the Gazette’s stance on issues pertaining to the Flemish language, both in Belgium and in North America. Together, the three sections presents a picture of a populist Flemish nationalist diasporic newspaper, which took a very specific position on the Belgian language question, a position very much shaped by events in both the homeland and America.

For both brevity and ease of reading, quotations in the original Flemish or Dutch are provided only in English translation in the main text. The original quotations, mostly from the Gazette but also from other Flemish and Dutch ethnic weeklies, are reproduced in the endnotes.

**Camille Cools and the founding of the Gazette van Detroit**

Camille Cools was born in Moorslede, West Flanders, in 1874. About fifteen years later, in 1889, he emigrated with his parents and siblings and settled in Detroit, a city with a growing Belgian (mainly Flemish) community, but which was still overshadowed by Moline, Illinois, then the most popular Belgian (also mostly Flemish) centre in the United States. He became a successful business man in the City, as Detroit was then called, starting a furniture company in 1905, Cools & Co. Furniture.

As an adult, highly aware of the many difficulties, financial, social but also linguistic, that confronted the Flemish immigrants in Detroit and its surrounding areas, Cools became increasingly involved in community organisations. He became a Board Member of the Belgian-American Century Club no. 1, a charitable organisation whose goal it was to enlist at least one hundred members who would assist each other financially and otherwise in case of death or other needy circumstances. Also, concerned over the fact that Belgian diplomats stationed in the
Midwest were mainly French-speaking, while the immigrants were mostly Flemings, he became the president of Voor Vlaamsch en Recht\textsuperscript{10} (also spelled Voor Vlaamschen Recht)\textsuperscript{11} (For Flemish and Rights or For Flemish Rights), an organisation aimed at defending the rights, and specifically the language rights, of the Flemings in the United States. Under his leadership, the organisation worked diligently to bring Flemish-speaking diplomats to the United States by among other things publishing their demands in Flemish ethnic weeklies:

1. Request respectfully of our Flemish senators, our Flemish members of parliament and also of our pro-Flemish societies that they pressure the Belgian government to post from now on, to the United States of America, only consular personnel who are also proficient in Flemish . . ., and not only in French.
2. Request respectfully furthermore that all currently posted consular personnel who unfortunately do not speak the mother tongue of by far the largest number of Belgian immigrants staff their office with a Flemish-speaking secretary.\textsuperscript{12}

Then, shortly after the founding of the Gazette van Moline in 1907, Cools took up his pen and became that newspaper’s Detroit correspondent. Seven years later, in 1914, when partly due to the booming car industry, Detroit had become the largest Flemish settlement in North America, he considered the time ripe for the Detroit community to have another Flemish-language newspaper, the Gazette van Detroit.

In 1914, at the outbreak of the Great War in Europe, ‘the number of [ethnic] papers started [in the United States] increased more than 60 per cent […] and remained high for the [next] three years’.\textsuperscript{13} The increase was caused, according to Park, ‘by the great eagerness for news of the warring countries of Europe on the part of […] foreign-born and foreign-speaking immigrants’.\textsuperscript{14} However, by the 1920s, ‘a high ratio of deaths to births’ led to the demise of large numbers of these wartime papers. The explanation for this downward spiral lay, among other things, in ‘the financial stringency and the paper shortage which the small foreign-language paper was unable to weather, as well as the lessened interest of readers after the war’.\textsuperscript{15} The Gazette van Detroit, then, is one of the very few remaining ethnic newspapers from that era.

The first issue of the Gazette was published on 13 August 1914.\textsuperscript{16} On its first page it carried an editorial written by Cools in which he linked the founding of the Gazette to the German invasion of Belgium and the
community’s need for news in its own language about the state of affairs in their former homeland.

TO OUR READERS
Although we are not ready yet to publish full-length editions of our Gazette, we feel compelled to inform our friends, who are not fully at ease with the English language, about everything having to do with the war in Europe.17

Two years later, to commemorate the second anniversary of the Gazette, Cools wrote another editorial in which he identified another factor that played a role in the founding of the newspaper: issues of social injustice among the Flemings in Detroit.

It has now been two years since the terrible war broke out in Europe and the Germans invaded Belgium, events that have brought a lot of suffering upon our people, and that prompted us to start a newspaper that would inform its readers about the war and about humanity in general. A paper that would inform its readers about all that our people have to endure but that would also make its readers aware of all the fraud and deception that is committed among the Belgians in Detroit and to which they all too often fall victim.18

The three motivators identified in these two editorials – the First World War, the living and working conditions of the Flemish immigrants and matters of language – were the three main topics covered by the Gazette in its editorials and articles from March 1916 to December 1918, the period under review in this study. During those two and a half years, the Gazette reported, furthermore, on American internal politics, e.g. Prohibition, and carried bits and pieces of local news, often of the fait divers type, covering the American Midwest and south-western Ontario. It also contained a weekly feuilleton, i.e. a Flemish novel in instalments, reports on the activities of various Flemish societies, and advertisement and job sections.

Its content, then, was largely like that of other immigrant newspapers of that era. Park, in his classic study of the immigrant press in the United States in the early twentieth century, identifies common themes – the war in Europe; the sufferings of immigrant workers; the political situation at home – and claims that these topics were usually viewed through two dominant ideological prisms: nationalism, on the one hand, and socialism, on the other.19
Many of the immigrant groups in the early twentieth century, from the Bohemians to the Norwegians to the Flemish, left a homeland in which their language and culture were denied a role in the official affairs of the state. In the homeland, their nationalist struggle for linguistic and cultural recognition became, ‘by a natural course of events’, according to Park, ‘involved with the economic and class struggle, because everywhere the racial conflict and the class conflict involved the same parties’.  

This view certainly applied to Belgium. Strikwerda, for instance, argues convincingly that ‘many [Flemish] working class leaders were aware that Flemish linguistic demands and the social and economic demands of the lower class could be closely connected’. Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century, socialists in Antwerp readily mixed Flemish patriotism and socialism in their literature. The same can be said of the Catholic Workers’ Federation in Ghent, whose 1891 programme also ‘included a demand that [Flemish] be made equal with French’.  

Similarly, overseas, the immigrant’s nationalism also became intertwined with socialist ideas and ideals. Immigration, Park argues, tends to accentuate the national consciousness. In the New World, the immigrant’s nationalistic tendencies were intensified by his isolation from the homeland, and tended to find a natural expression in the ethnic newspapers, ‘which keep [the immigrant] in touch with the political struggle at home and even give […] opportunities to take part in it’. Moreover, in the New World, the immigrant, who had often been an unschooled farmer at home, found himself often a labourer in an industrialised city. His living and working conditions in the early twentieth century, however, were such that he was very likely to come into contact with the socialist movement and its push for organisation. This social struggle is also played out in the ethnic press.

Nationalist and socialist motives likewise inspired the early contributors to the Gazette. Its two first editors-in-chief, Camille Cools and Frank Cobbaert, for instance, were actively involved in the workers’ movement. Both considered the Gazette a tool to further the interests of the Flemish immigrant workers.

In an editorial, for instance, in which he reminisced about his first meeting with Camille Cools, Frank Cobbaert wrote:

It is now nearly three years ago that I met Camille Cools and that he spoke to me about his plans to print a Flemish newspaper here in Detroit. After I asked him a few questions about what he intended
to do with his newspaper, he replied that his only objective was to defend the people against the interests of big business; upon hearing that answer I promised him that I would be there to help.26

When Frank Cobbaert succeeded Camille Cools as editor-in-chief, he promised the Gazette’s readers not to make any changes to the newspaper’s main leftist ideology:

The Gazette van Detroit will continue to support and assist the worker. The paper will remain loyal to her slogan, ‘A Light for our Community’, and will, just like she did before, use her columns to defend the working class against big capital.27

The other dominant prism of the time, nationalism, influenced the Gazette’s stance on issues as varied as workers’ rights and the war efforts at home. Cools and Cobbaert, for instance, printed Flemish nationalist pieces that tackled the language question. A wonderful example is the following allegory, written evocatively in Flemish dialect, which intimates that the Flemings expect to be rewarded for their solidarity with the French-speaking Belgians and their efforts at the Front, with equal rights – specifically equal language rights – in a post-war Belgium:

The Tale of Teuto the Giant
There was once a Mother and she had two beautiful children. They were twin brothers. The Mother’s name was Belgica [Belgium] and her children were called Flamine [Fleming] and Waelken [Walloon].

How this came to be I do not know, but Flamine never got enough to eat from his Mother. Most of the time, he had to make do with bits and pieces of French bread. The little guy did not dislike French bread, but his little stomach nevertheless would have preferred to eat something else.

Little Flamine complained and wept for days on end, and at times made very loud demands because he was so terribly hungry.

Mother Belgica then said sweet things to try to calm him down, but never did little Flamine get what he wanted.

Now in the neighbourhood there lived Teuto [name referring to the Germans], a giant and a low-life who could not be trusted.
One morning he came to their house and wanted to kill Mother Belgica.
Flamine and Waelken ran as quickly as their little legs would allow them to and, side by side and hand in hand, they stood still right in the middle between their Mother and the ugly giant Teuto. [. . .]

‘Go away!’ yelled the giant, but they would not listen.
Teuto came closer and they started to hit him with their fists.
Suddenly, the giant softened the expression on his awful face and he said with compassion, ‘Flamine, my boy’, and he winked at Flamine, ‘your mother is letting you starve; just come with me and eat to your heart’s content.’

‘Hands off my mother!’ yelled Flamine [. . .]. Then the two boys – Waelken and Flamine – fought the giant so courageously that he had no choice but to flee.

Since then he lies buried in the old Yser [name of the river and region where much of the trench warfare took place in Flanders]. The story has it that afterwards Mother Belgica could simply not continue on in the same manner: instead, she decided to give Flamine everything that he needed to live, just like she had always done with her Waelken. Waelken and Flamine grew up and became two handsome and tall young men and all the neighbours liked them very much.

[. . .] – and this is the end of my tale.28

Still another piece, by a certain H. De Wandeleire, called, without mincing words, for an independent Flanders:

This will strengthen in the true friends of Flanders their belief that only self-governance can save our people.29

This piece, incidentally, elicited a strong reply from Albert Moulaert, the Consul General of Belgium, based in Chicago at the time, which was promptly printed by the Gazette in its next issue:

[. . .] all the senior and better-known leaders of the Flemish Movement have indicated that the fight for language rights should be halted for the entire duration of the war.

Later, when Belgium will once again be free, we will discuss and examine these issues and I am sure that we will be able to come to an agreement and that without foreign interference.
[...] I am appealing to your love for the old country, dear Sir, in asking that you print my reply to Mr. De Wandeleire’s letter.
Sincerely,
Albert Moulaert, Consul General of Belgium

Albert Moulaert’s response clearly referred to the official wartime attitude of the three main Flemish leaders, the liberal politician Louis Franck, the Roman Catholic Frans Van Cauwelaert and the socialist Camille Huysmans, which was temporarily to halt the fight for Flemish language rights and in particular to resist the German offers of intervention on behalf of the Flemings. The activist movement, however, of which Moulaert seemingly believed De Wandeleire to be a sympathiser, would not heed the official call for restraint and national unity in a time of war and would, instead, work closely with the German occupier to obtain Flemish self-governance.

The excerpts given earlier provide but a small sample of writings in the Gazette that reflect its two main and interlinked ideologies: socialism, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other. It is important to note again that this ideological mix was rather common amongst ethnic newspapers in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

The nationalist and socialist populism typical of the early Gazette mirrors the main concerns of the paper’s Flemish expatriate readership, but it also impacts upon another important feature: the Gazette’s language.

Language and style

The language of the Gazette at this time was definitely Flemish, as opposed to Algemeen Nederlands or standard Dutch, a variant only actively propagated in Belgium after the Second World War. At times it was strongly dialectal (as in the allegory reproduced earlier), and often resembled more spoken than written language. This was the language of self-taught journalists – neither Camille Cools nor Frank Cobbaert had any formal training in journalism – and of a readership with little formal education. A piece written by Ben Van Malder, a correspondent from Wallaceburg, a small town in south-western Ontario, presents all of these linguistic traits. Interestingly, it also paints a picture of a readership with low literacy in Flemish.
If only I could read and write!

Many of us have heard someone say: I wish that I also knew how to read and write, and have often heard that person add: I knew how to do it but I have now almost or completely forgotten it. [. . .]

Although we no longer live in a Flemish-speaking country anyone who is interested can get Flemish newspapers and books here to fill some spare time and learn something useful.

Is it not sad that when one wants to write a letter, one first has to reveal everything that one wants to put in it to someone else, and often feel quite ashamed about what one says and then still have to say thank you [. . .].

Is it not unfortunate that we do not know the language well that is most spoken here [. . .].

BEN VAN MALDER
Wallaceburg, Canada

Ben Van Malder’s piece confirms Park’s observation, in his study of the American immigrant press of the early twentieth century, that ‘foreign-language papers [have] a public [. . .] composed of peoples who, in their home country, would have read little or nothing at all’. Park argues further that the editors of ethnic newspapers, such as the Gazette, had to adapt the language of their dailies and weeklies to their readership, which was mainly composed of members who spoke dialects and read with difficulty. They had to opt for a language that would appeal to their readers, a language that they would understand. Indeed, ‘in order to get [their] paper read, [they needed to] write in the language [their] public [spoke]’. This often meant writing in the vernacular of the immigrant community: the dialect brought from the homeland, but which became quickly permeated with linguistic elements of the language, i.e. English, that was dominant in the community’s new environment.

The Gazette, in a similar fashion, retained the Flemish vernacular and quickly incorporated in it English loanwords and calques that would have been present in the language of its readership. In the period under review, for instance, the Gazette called upon the beetwerkers (loan blend or hybrid, beet worker) to take part in an openbare vergadering met meeting (vergadering is the Dutch equivalent of meeting); discussed het droog stemmen (calque of to vote dry) of several cities in the state of Illinois; reported on the war efforts of the Rumanen (after Rumanians, instead of Roemenen); included advertisements for zachte dranken (calque of
soft drinks), Christmas giften (adapted loan, Christmas gifts), bier in bottels (adapted loan, bottles), voetwaren (adapted loan, footwear); and described social events taking place on Zaterdag or Zondag achternoen (Flemish dialectal expression reinforced by afternoon).

Edelman, incidentally, in his survey of the Dutch language press in America, notes that the ‘low quality of the language of the papers in editorials and, especially in advertising’ was already a common complaint among contemporary commentators on the Dutch/Flemish immigrant press of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Another linguistic and stylistic concession, also identified by Park, is a highly emotional and dramatic language usage to suit the ‘sentimental’ and ‘intellectual’ tastes of a poorly educated immigrant public. In this area, as well, the Gazette did not distinguish itself significantly from its contemporaries: its language was rarely abstract, always charged with emotion, at times even melodramatic.

Poverty should not be a source of shame!

[...] It is one of the most laudable struggles of humanity. Equality for all. – And equal rights for all.

Respect for the poor workman, because the fields of a farmer full of potatoes or corn are worth more than a barren piece of land or the magnificent gardens of a man of leisure. [...] The great philosopher Lasalle once said: The working class is the rock upon which the church of the future will be built.

SEVEN RUTSAERT

In 1960, Sabbe and Buyse, two members of the Flemish immigrant community, ardently defended the Gazette’s early and subsequent editorial decisions in a book dedicated to the history of the Belgians in Detroit:

Some ‘wise-guys’ in Belgium have snidely remarked that the ‘Gazette’ writes archaic Flemish. Let’s say that the ‘Gazette van Detroit’ is written to be read and enjoyed by the Flemings in the United States and Canada [...]. Theirs is a simple Flemish. The Flemish of the immortal Guido Gezelle, Stijn Streuvels, Ernest Claes, Felix Timmermans. [...] They came with an elementary education, but that did not prevent them from reaching the top! [...] That [...] is the type who reads his ‘Gazette’ every week. He never reads your column nor does he care to read your super-duper, highfaluting Flemish. He would not enjoy it anyway, but he thoroughly understands and enjoys his weekly ‘Gazette van Detroit’.
All of these linguistic and stylistic traits are characteristic of a popularised press. Frank Cobbaert seems to have been acutely aware of this. When, after Cools’s unexpected death at the age of 43, he suddenly found himself at the helm of the Gazette in October 1916, he stated unequivocally: ‘[…] we know that our Gazette is a populist paper […]’, i.e. a paper for ordinary people, written in their language and dedicated to their concerns.39 These concerns are all in one way or another linked to language. They include the immigrants’ predicament in the United States and Canada, as well as the resolution of the political conflict in the homeland.

The nationalist and socialist ideologies the populist Gazette adopted with respect to the main language-based concerns of its targeted audience are the subject of the final section.

Language attitudes

In 1916, the Flemish immigrant community was still struggling to become proficient in the English language, a linguistic challenge alluded to in many of the Gazette’s articles and editorials. The following is an example which is also an appeal to the community to learn English but to continue using Belgian, i.e. Flemish, in public meetings.

From Chicago
The Moving-Pictures show organised by Professor van Hecke was attended by a large number of people last Sunday. We now have a better understanding of what life is really like for the Belgian refugees in Holland. […]

The presentation by Mr. van Hecke was in English! The talk by Dr. Vermeiren was in English! Mr. Streyckmans spoke in English! But there were 500 mothers present, from Flanders […] and Holland who could not understand one word because they only know their mother tongue.

Oh, no, I am not a fanatic Flemish nationalist, we are in America and we need to learn English! … [B]ut, when a meeting is exclusively Belgian, I think we should speak: Belgian. […]
Louis Braekelaere40

The lack of linguistic integration is most apparent in the newspaper’s many job postings, which often specify that knowledge of English is a must.
HOUSEMAIDS NEEDED
For a family of two, must know English and know how to cook. [...]41

Looking to hire a clean and hardworking girl to work as kitchen maid in Pompton Plains, New Jersey, [...] for a friendly couple with no children, a good home for a nice (Belgian) girl, it is necessary to speak a little English.42

Needed: A FLEMISH GIRL who speaks English and who has worked in a clothing store [...]43

Relatively recent arrivals, the members of this community were not only linguistically, but also culturally and politically still predominantly Flemish. The community’s main point of reference being Belgium and not the New World, it projected typically Flemish values onto political events taking place in the United States and Canada. A case in point is the incomprehension with which it views the attempts of the Prohibitionists to ban the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages, such as Belgium’s national drink: beer.

Moline voted dry
Several cities in the state of Illinois have been voted dry, such as Moline [...]. We find this news very surprising since there are so many Belgians that live in Moline, but it is possible that they neglected to vote. Every person who has the right to vote should, in a case like this, see it as his duty to vote, because a Belgian cannot allow that his favourite drink be taken away from him.44

The Gazette’s stance on language and on language rights needs to be viewed within this context: that of a little-integrated community that maintained strong ties with its homeland. The newspaper, and by extension the community, tackled the language question on two separate fronts: at home, i.e. in the United States and Canada, and abroad, i.e. in Belgium. In the United States and Canada, the language question became an integral part of the Flemish immigrants’ struggle for better working conditions. With respect to Belgium, the newspaper and its many contributors remained strongly focused on the country’s linguistic divide and positioned themselves firmly as ardent defenders of the language and culture of the Flemings, i.e. as Flemish nationalists.

Both Camille Cools and Frank Cobbaert were actively involved in efforts to unionise the Flemish beet workers employed on both sides, American and Canadian, of the Detroit river.
TO THE BEET WORKERS
DEAR BROTHERS,
In order to try to better our fate, that can be described as miserable and disastrous, we have decided to hold a big public meeting to discuss the situation [...] [...]

On behalf of the temporary Committee
FRANK COBBAERT

THE MEETING OF THE BEET WORKERS
[...] Mr. Cools presided over all the meetings and called them to order. Then he would give the floor to his friend Frank Cobbaert [...] 46

On 14 April 1916, the Gazette printed the beet workers’ demands for better work conditions. One of these alluded to a language barrier, akin to the one the Flemish immigrants would have experienced in Belgium with their overwhelmingly French-speaking employers, and made a linguistic request: ‘6. – That we be assigned Belgian Field Bosses, or people that understand our language [...]’. 47

This request for the apparent promotion of Flemish in the workplace is somewhat surprising within the North American context, but it was an integral part of the Flemish struggle for language rights at home, i.e. in Belgium. Interestingly, Ben Van Malder, one of the Gazette’s Canadian correspondents, wrote an appeal for support to the beet workers, published in the Gazette of 12 May 1916, in which he seemingly compared their situation in Canada and in the United States to the one experienced by Flemish soldiers in the Belgian army, which in the 1910s de facto had only French as the official language. Rumours grew during the Great War that Flemish casualties were very high because the soldiers could not understand the orders given by their officers. These rumours were to play an important role in the escalation of the language conflict in post-war Belgium.

To the Belgian [...] Beet Workers
[...] To recruit that volunteer corps one has dispatched a number of English-speaking officers who claim, in their letters, that the battalion will be complete in good time.

Although these gentlemen have little or no training in such manoeuvres they are convinced, nevertheless, that they are fully in their right to give orders to so many good beet soldiers.

And because they do not know the language, they get so many of us in trouble. [...]
When then equality – only if we unionise.
Ben Van Malder
Wallaceburg, Ont, Canada

As shown previously, the Gazette of 1916 often contained Flemish nationalist pieces. Ben Van Malder’s piece inspired by the Frontbeweging (a Flemish nationalist movement which originated in the trenches of Flanders) and the already quoted ‘Tale of Teuto the Giant’ provided two poignant examples.

From September 1916 onwards, however, the Gazette found itself increasingly pressured by official representatives of the Belgian government to stop reporting on any ‘Flemish nationalist’ or ‘activist’ activities taking place in occupied Belgium, or at least not to present these political goings-on in a positive light. Reasons for this may be related to concerns that Flemish diasporic groups might (1) aim to undermine official Belgian and Allied attempts to enlist full American engagement in the war, and (2) conspire to further inflame the political situation in the homeland. The Gazette van Detroit, contrary to other Flemish ethnic weeklies, such as De Volksstem, obliged and significantly softened its Flemish nationalist rhetoric for the next few years.

On 8 September 1916, the Gazette printed a piece by the socialist Member of Parliament, Modeste Terwagne, in which he strongly criticised the rather Machiavellian move by Moritz von Bissing, the German governor-general of occupied Belgium, to grant wide-ranging language rights to the Flemings. Later that same month, the Gazette also printed several of Albert Moulaert’s letters to Adolph B. Suess, the editor of the militant weekly De Volksstem, based in De Pere, Wisconsin. The Belgian consul’s letters were written in reaction to articles which seemingly reported on the activities in occupied Flanders by ‘activist’ members of the Flemish Movement. The following is an excerpt from one such article, published by Adolph B. Suess, which attracted the ire of the Belgian consul:

THE FLEMISH NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN FLANDERS. – On 11 July, the Battle of the Golden Spurs of 1302 was commemorated with much enthusiasm in all of Flanders. In Antwerp, the Flemish nationalists met in the Vlaamse Opera [an opera house in Antwerp]. The room was packed with people. […] All sang the Vlaamse Leeuw [Flemish national anthem] at the end of the meeting […].
In Brussels, the Flemish nationalists met at the Vlaams Huis [Flanders House]. Not only were the seats in the great hall all taken by a select public [..]. Achille Brijs gave a speech in which he severely criticized the anti-Flemish politics of the [exiled] Belgian government in Le Havre. There was much applause. [..]49

The *Gazette*’s willingness to print Moulaert’s letters, while *De Volksstem* refused to do so, is significant. Indeed, it can be taken as an indication that the *Gazette* disapproved of the alleged collaboration of some Flemish nationalists with the German occupier and sided with the more moderate leaders of the Flemish Movement – Louis Franck, Frans Van Cauwelaert and Camille Huysmans – who considered it necessary to temporarily halt the language struggle so as not to unduly weaken Belgian resistance to the German occupation.

Albert Moulaert’s letters, printed in the *Gazette*, constantly allude to the patriotic quality of that temporary ceasefire at a time of war, as in the following three excerpts:

To the editor-in-chief of the Volksstem, De Pere, Wisc.

Dear Sir,

I have read in your esteemed weekly newspaper of the 9th of this month an article entitled ‘The Flemish Nationalist Movement in Flanders’, which described the festivities held in occupied Belgium to commemorate the Battle of the Golden Spurs. Allow me to express my amazement at the inexperience and the blindness of these Flemings who take the Huns for defenders of their mother tongue. Luckily most if not all of the senior and better-known leaders of the Flemish Movement have understood that the only objective of our enemies is to divide the Flemings and the Walloons by creating discord and strife so that they can rule more easily over our country. [..]

Albert Moulaert

Consul General of Belgium50

To the editor-in-chief of the Volksstem, De Pere, Wisc.

Dear Sir,

[..] Regrettably there are Belgians, who are so fervently anti-French, that they tie everything to the language conflict and, even in this latest battle between freedom and oppression, between democracy and aristocracy, do they think only of the centuries-long battle between the French kings and the Flemish communes.
It is sad that they do not realise that they are aiding the Huns. Allow me to mention that the Chicago Journal of the 22nd of this month declared in an editorial that anyone who wishes to bring about the administrative division of Belgium acts solely to the advantage of the Germans. […]

Sincerely,
[...] Albert Moulaert
Consul General of Belgium

To Mr. Adolph B. Suess, editor of the Volksstem, De Pere, Wisc. Sir,
[...] May I ask why you publish articles that could create conflict between the Flemings and the Walloons and why you do not print my letters written in response to their content? […]

ALBERT MOULAERT
Consul General of Belgium

De Volksstem, not in the least impressed by Albert Moulaert’s pleas, continued reporting on Flemish ‘activists’ activities, and in particular on the political autonomy achieved by Flanders under German occupation. On 10 April 1918, for instance, it printed a list of all ‘activist’ representatives elected to the Raad van Vlaanderen, a Flemish parliament created with German approval. In the same issue, it also mentioned the removal of all French street names in Antwerp.

ANTWERP. – Last week one has started painting over all of the French street names. From now on only Flemish street names will be allowed.

The Gazette remained mum on all of these issues and in fact, as already mentioned, significantly toned down its overtly Flemish nationalist content. Instead, one finds articles that are weary of any accusation of activism, i.e. of collaboration with the enemy.

RASH JUDGEMENT
Because of the war the Belgian people find themselves in a peculiar situation. […] Let us remember that today there is not a greater insult for a Belgian than to be accused of being a traitor; […] let us remember that to promote national unity, misunderstandings and bitterness have to be prevented as much as possible, and that one should not question anyone’s loyalty to the state if one does not have absolute proof to the contrary.
The *Volksstem* ceased publication shortly after the First World War, when it merged in 1919 with the *Gazette van Moline*, which was ultimately absorbed by the *Gazette van Detroit* in 1940.

For some members of the Flemish community in Detroit, the *Gazette*’s stance on the language question during the years of the Great War had not been militant, i.e. not flamingant, enough. In the 1920s, this led to two short-lived attempts at militant Flemish publications promoting the Flemish nationalist idea: *De Straal* and *De Goedendag*.55

Finally, besides Flemish ‘activism’, the *Gazette van Detroit* also avoided another linguistic hot potato: extra-legal and legal attempts to curtail the use of immigrant languages in the United States after that country decided to enter the war. One such attempt was the *Babel Proclamation*, issued on 23 May 1918, by the then governor of the state of Iowa, William L. Harding. The *Proclamation* forbade the public use of any language other than English. Specifically, (1) it made English the sole ‘medium of instruction in public, private, denominational and other similar schools’, (2) it required that ‘conversations in public places, on trains and over the telephone’ always be conducted in English, (3) it ordered ‘public addresses’ to always be spoken in English and (4) it advised ‘those who cannot speak or understand the English language to conduct their religious worship in their homes’.56 This piece of wartime legislation quickly became controversial and was repealed a few months later on 4 December 1918. Americans in general did not object to the prohibition of German, but felt that the banning of all foreign languages was somewhat over-zealous. Indeed, many advised the Governor that the languages of America’s allies and friends should not be classed with those of its enemies. Several immigrant groups also made strenuous protests: among them the Bohemians, Norwegians, Swedes and Danish, and also the Dutch.

We do not believe that the Governor has the authority to maintain this proclamation, and even if he did, why would he include all the friendly nations and put them on a par with the Hun? […] To forbid the use of French, Bohemian, Dutch, Italian or Flemish would be a hostile act against many of the best Americans and also against the nations who are our allies in this war.57

None of this controversy, however, was reported on in the *Gazette van Detroit*. Today, scholars agree that the *Babel Proclamation* significantly speeded the switch to English of several immigrant groups in the United
States: the Germans, of course, but also the Danish\textsuperscript{58} and the Dutch,\textsuperscript{59} who were in a sense dealt a double blow by the pervasive confusion of Dutch and German by the American mainstream.

**Conclusion**

Briefly then, to conclude, in 1916–1918 the *Gazette van Detroit* was the main newspaper of an only moderately integrated community that maintained strong ties with its homeland in the Low Countries. Its language was the vernacular of its readership, i.e. Flemish, and its populist ideology was both leftist and Flemish-nationalist, but not radical (or ‘activist’). Its attitude was careful to say the least, and this may well have played a role in its surviving the First World War. This carefulness may be explained by the ban that had been imposed on all foreign-language newspapers by the American Congress in October 1917. Newspapers had to submit to the Postmaster General English translations of their articles and editorials.

> [...] we have to abide by the law. As you know, all newspapers written in a foreign language have to translate their articles about the war and file a copy with the Postmaster.\textsuperscript{50}

If translations were found not to be exact, the penalties included heavy fines and imprisonment as well as the loss of second-class mailing privileges. It became dangerous for newspapers to print editorials arguing that the draft was illegal, or that big capital had brought on the war, as the *Gazette* had done, for instance, a year before the ban.

**Why War?**

> [...] Don’t you see that the war in Europe totally destroys the quality of life of the working class but puts more money in the coffers of those money-hungry barons. [...]  
> Albert Baertsoen\textsuperscript{61}

The *Gazette*, then, was in an uncomfortable position, being constantly scrutinised not only by representatives of the Belgian government (such as Albert Moulaert), but also by the American government. After the Great War, in the 1920s, the *Gazette’s* overtly Flemish nationalist content increased again. At least two active supporters of the Flemish
Movement, one of them a former member of the Front Movement (or Frontbeweging), a Flemish nationalist movement started by Flemish soldiers at the Yser front, would be among its most frequent contributors: Adolf Spillemaeckers and Jozef Segers (Father Ladislas), based in Blenheim, Ontario, who had been a stretcher-bearer during the war.62