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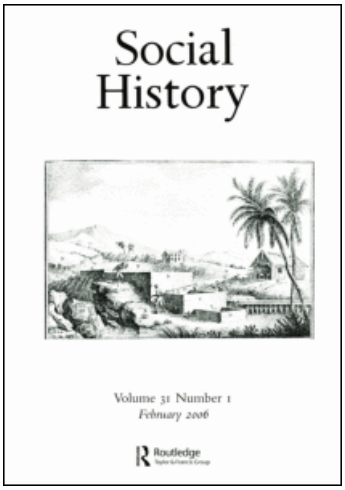

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Haunting pasts: time and historicity as constructed by the Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and radical Flemish nationalists

Berber Bevernage [a]; Koen Aerts [a]
[a] Ghent University,

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Berber Bevernage and Koen Aerts

Haunting pasts: time and historicity as constructed by the Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and radical Flemish nationalists

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Remove from our eye that mourning tear: The dead have ascended into us alive.[1]

Triumph is resurrection, birth knows death but resurrection no longer! Nobody shall live longer than thou, dead of the Yser.[2]

Death does not exist.[3]

INTRODUCTION

Why compare two societal groups of such different natures and opposing political stances as the Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and the radical wing of the Flemish nationalist movement that is active in Belgium?[4] The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* are a group of elderly women who decided to organize after their sons and daughters disappeared without a trace during the military dictatorship and period of state terror (also known under the contested name 'Dirty War') in Argentina from 1976 to 1983. From the first year of the dictatorship until today, the *Madres* have been struggling for justice and memory in the name of an estimated 30,000 *desaparecidos* ('the disappeared'). In the course of these three decades of struggle, the

[1]W. Gyssels and J. Van Hoof, 'O Kruis van den Ijzer' ['O Cross of the Yser'], *XI Bedevaart 2e Mededeeling*, Temsche, 5 February 1930. [Own translation: 'Neem weg uit onze ooge de rouwende traan: De dooden zijn levend in ons opgegaan.'].

[2]C. Verschaeve, *Voor Vlaanderen. Tweede bundel* [*For Flanders. Second Volume*] (Bruges, 1959–61), 229. [Own translation: 'Zegepraal is verrijzenis, geboorte kent dood maar verrijzenis niet meer! Niemand zal langer leven dan gij, doden van den Ijzer.'].

[3]President of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, Hebe de Bonafini, quoting the words of the writer Eduardo Galeano.

[4]This article could not have been written without the financial support of the Research Foundation – Flanders and the help of Bouke Billiet, Professor Jan Art, Professor Gita Deneckere, Professor Bruno De Wever, Professor Baz Lecocq, Professor Chris Lorenz and Professor Maarten Van Ginderachter.

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Madres have revealed themselves as a strongly organized movement that calls itself revolutionary left and mobilizes around a broad series of socio-political issues.

In contrast, the group of radical Flemish nationalists on which we want to focus here is situated at the extreme right end of the political spectrum and is primarily made up of, or at least led by, elderly men.[5] The radical Flemish movement has most of its historical roots in the experience of the two world wars. Its current political mythology for a great part still revolves, on the one hand, around the memory of Flemish people who, during the Second World War, because of allegedly 'idealist' motives, collaborated with the German occupier, often by fighting 'godless' Russians on the Eastern Front, and, on the other hand, around their self-acclaimed victimhood during the post-war years of judicial reaction to that collaboration (in Belgium often called *de repressie – la répression* – 'the repression'). Besides these striking divergences, the most important difference between the two movements, however, can be found in their opposing stances on the issue of amnesty: while the radical Flemish nationalists are lobbying for a (posthumous) blanket amnesty or rehabilitation for Flemish people who were convicted and punished for collaboration, the *Madres* are struggling precisely to void the blanket amnesties which prevented the punishment or even conviction of most of the military officers who are responsible for severe crimes against humanity.

Because of these clear differences, the representatives of both movements would probably be quite offended (the *Madres* rightly so, we fear) if they heard about the comparison we are about to set up. Nevertheless, there is one crucial parallel that, according to us, does legitimate such a comparative analysis: both the *Madres* and the radical Flemish nationalists, despite their politically marginal position and often against the will of the broader society, were remarkably successful in keeping a burdened past 'open' or 'alive' over a period spanning several decennia. For a long time, the protest of the *Madres* found little response in Argentina, where the perpetrators kept living their fairly undisturbed lives in full freedom, sharing the same public space with their victims. More recently, however, since the installation of president Néstor Kirchner in 2003, the continued struggle of the *Madres* finally proved fruitful when most amnesty laws were declared null and a number of important trials against high military officers were re-opened after several decades. Although with less unequivocal success, the radical Flemish movement, too, still regularly manages to place the war record high on the political agenda and to regenerate the heated debate on the collaboration and its juridical outcomes. In 1991, the influential Belgian sociologist Luc Huyse observed that Belgium was still 'sick of its forties'.[6] Some years later, in 1999, and then again in 2001, a group of Flemish intellectuals in reaction launched a call finally to close this chapter of history and think about the future, thereby coining the slogan 'Forward without Forgetting'.[7] In 2001, the then minister-president of the Flemish government stated that Belgians could learn a lot from the case of

[5]It should be stated right away that there is no such thing as *one* unified Flemish movement. Instead, it is the generic name for a plurality of factions that all pursue a Flemish identity and/or state and alternately focus on cultural, social and economic issues. See Bruno De Wever, 'Vierduizend pagina's Vlaamse beweging' ['Four thousand pages of the Flemish movement'], *Nachbarsprache niederländisch*, XIV, 2 (1999), 165–6.

[6]L. Huyse, S. Dhondt, P. Depuydt, K. Hoflack and I. Vanhoren, *Onverwerkt verleden: collaboratie en repressie in België 1942–1952* [*Persistent Past: Collaboration and Purge in Belgium 1942–1952*] (Leuven, 1991), 9.

[7]F.-J. Verdoodt (ed.), *Voorwaarts maar niet vergeten* [*Forward without Forgetting*] (Gent, 2001).

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South Africa, where the apartheid past was, according to him, dealt with properly by the erection of a truth commission. This plea for a Flemish truth and reconciliation commission was later repeated by moderate Flemish nationalists.[8] The recurring appeals for reconciliation have been to no avail, however: also in 2001, one minister of the Flemish government had to resign after he attended a radical Flemish nationalist festival where fascist and racist songs were sung (ironically including South African Afrikaner songs). In recent years, the war past has increasingly haunted Flemish society and politics.

By focusing on the cases of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and the radical Flemish nationalists, we do not want to suggest any close political or even organizational resemblances between the two movements. Rather, this article wants to raise the specific question of how minorities succeed in keeping alive a painful fragment of an increasingly less recent past, despite the pressure coming from the majority of the nation to 'let the wounds heal' or simply to 'bury' the past. Attempting to answer this question, we will borrow the concept of the 'regime of historicity' ('*régime d'historicité*') from the French historian François Hartog.[9] This concept refers to the specific manner in which a culture relates to time and the temporal dimensions of past, present and future. In addition to a number of obvious contrasts with non-western cultures, Hartog perceives a clear evolution within western history itself: he discerns three successive regimes of historicity for which he takes the symbolic dates of 1789 and 1989 as break points. During the *ancien régime,* societies primarily focused on the past for their norms and values: history was seen as the great teacher of life (*historia magistra vitae*). After the French Revolution, a new regime of historicity came into existence in which people broke with the past and expected all good to come from the future. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, this modern regime of historicity, with its typical belief in progress, according to Hartog, in its turn has had to make way for a novel (post-modern) attitude that pays almost no attention to past or future but instead privileges the present. Although regimes of historicity for Hartog seem to be a matter of great cultures and historical civilizations, the concept, according to us – on the condition that it is slightly adjusted – can shed a very interesting light on intra-cultural conflicts in contested nations. Dominant regimes of historicity (such as those of modern nation-states) in our view never remain uncontested. Instead, they are always challenged by subcultures or minorities and their divergent political strategies.

We put forward the thesis that the *Madres* and the radical Flemish nationalists succeed in keeping their burdened pasts an 'actuality' by contesting the dominant regime of historicity and by developing a competing regime of historicity of their own. In their regime of historicity, 'being past' cannot be equated with 'being absent', and in fact conflicts with the objectifying distance and the linear concept of time often used by historians. The core of the conflict can be situated in the longing for, or in contrast the rejection of, 'closure'; in the breaking, or conversely the binding, of past and present; and in the perceived temporal 'distance' to that past. In fact, the ontological status of the past, and thus its relation with and

[8]P. Dewael, *Vooruitzien: ideeën over een kleurrijk Vlaanderen* ['Looking forward: ideas about a colourful Flanders'], 4 March 2001, 9–10. This plea for a Flemish truth and reconciliation commission has in the meantime been repeated publicly by more moderate Flemish nationalists, most recently in 2007. L. Abicht, 'Vrijheid, vrede, verdraagzaamheid', a speech given on a Flemish nationalist war commemoration in Diksmuide, 27 August 2007. Available online at: http://www. ijzertoren.org/indexnew.php?section=2&chapter=57 (last accessed 19 January 2009).

[9]F. Hartog, *Régimes d'Historicité* (Seuil, 2003).

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relevance for the present, are at stake on a meta-historical level in conflicting regimes of historicity even before this past has been attributed a specific and explicit content or meaning. In order to analyse the conflict on this deep meta-historical level, we model our argument on an interesting analytical distinction made by the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch between the 'irreversible' and the 'irrevocable'. While both concepts appear to be identical and are often confused, according to Jankélévitch, they refer to two radically different perceptions of time. The irreversible is a having-taken-place (*avoir-eu-lieu*) that should primarily be deciphered as a having-been (*avoir-été*) and refers to a transient or fleeting past. The irrevocable past is a having-taken-place most often associated with the having-done/having-been-done-to (*avoir-fait*) and, in contrast, is stubborn, tough and stuck in the present. Human beings experience the past as irreversible if they experience it as highly fragile and as immediately dissolving from the present. They experience the past as irrevocable if they experience it as a persistent, enduring and massive depository that is vitally present.[10] The irreversible and the irrevocable experience of time share a recognition of the inalterability of the past, but in contrast to the former, the latter rejects the notion of a temporal 'distance' separating past and present.

To obtain a clear insight into the construction of these conflicting regimes of historicity, with their irreversible or irrevocable notions of time, we will focus on rituals of mourning and commemorations of the dead, because more than any other *lieux de mémoire*, the dead are directly related to our experience, imagination and evaluation of past and present. For the Flemish movement which developed and radicalized during and after the two world wars, this focus is certainly not far-fetched. From its very beginning, Flemish nationalism developed on graveyards and commemoration sites, often guided by prominent figures with a great sense for the posthumous. Its history is permeated with desecrated, disturbed and opened graves. For the movement of the *Madres,* in contrast, this focus on the dead is far less self-evident, because it is an important characteristic of the 'disappearance' as a typical Latin American technique of terror that no bodies are found or handed over. The disappearances typically took place without any official arrests or trials, and the bodies were burned, dropped into the sea from planes, or secretly buried in anonymous mass graves. In the case of the *Madres*, it will consequently not be the dead themselves but, rather, their (incomplete) absence that grants us an insight into the alternative regime of historicity.

The past's stubborn refusal to close and the often lugubrious fondness for graves, human remains or ghostlike figures can, from a Freudian perspective, seem to be the result of a failed process of mourning. But this ritual staging of the dead from our (meta-historical) perspective – and this is our second core thesis – should be seen as politically highly instrumental and efficacious instead of being a psychopathology. With this article, we desire to contribute to the study of alternative conceptions of the past that have all too often been neglected or simply

[10]V. Jankélévitch, L'*irréversible et la nostalgie* (Paris, 1974), 211–12. Sadly, Jankélévitch prematurely aborts this promising opening offered by the concept of the irrevocable quasi immediately after he has stated its existence as an experience. Jankélévitch would not have been the great theorist of the modernist sense of time if he did not stress the merely metaphorical or subjective character of the claim that the irrevocable past remains stubbornly present or alive in the present. In reality, Jankélévitch claims, all time moves constantly in one direction and the endurance or repetition of the past into the present can thus only be a distorted experience of what in reality is a process of irreversible becoming.

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discarded as irrational. From our 'anthropological' perspective, we want to reveal ritual aspects in relation to the past that are often believed still to exist exclusively in so-called primitive cultures.

CONJURING UP GHOSTS: THE *MADRES DE PLAZA DE MAYO* AND THEIR *DESAPARECIDOS*

Ever since the disappearance of their sons and daughters in the late 1970s the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* have been claiming that disappearance is a 'state of being', something more than merely signifying death or the absolute lack of knowledge about someone's fate.[11] The *Madres* consistently speak about their sons and daughters in the present tense, count their birthdays as if they were still ageing each year, and write them letters that invariably open with the words 'dearest children' as terms of address. Even after, or rather, especially after, several bodies had been washed ashore on the coasts of the Atlantic, and after secret mass burials had been discovered in Argentina, the *Madres* maintained that the *desaparecidos* are not like 'ordinary' dead but are somehow between life and death. Hebe de Bonafini, the charismatic president of the *Madres*, in a preface to a recent *festschrift* on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup, even quoted some odd words from the writer Eduardo Galeano: *la muerte no existe* – 'death does not exist'.[12]

This idea of 'immortality' might seem strange for a movement that grew out of a group of grieving women who initially met in what one commentator referred to as 'public institutions of death': hospitals, police stations, army garrisons, morgues and cemeteries.[13] This was certainly the case in a society where women were considered merely 'passive witnesses to war' and were expected to perform their traditional roles as 'reproducers of life and guardians of death'.[14] Once the military dictatorship was over, the persistent refusal to mourn (as opposed to grieve) and to recognize the death of the *desaparecidos*, therefore, did not make the *Madres* very popular in wider Argentinian society where their stance was renounced by a majority who wanted to move on and who thought that the mothers should mourn privately and keep silent.[15] It is, however, exactly in relation to this urge to 'move on', expressed by both the military juntas and the democratic successor governments, that the *Madres'* peculiar denial of death and stress on the spectral status of the *desaparecidos* must be understood.

[11]Expression from A. F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 1997), 111.

[12]I. Vázquez and K. Downie (eds), *Un país. 30 años. El pañuelo sigue haciendo historia* (Buenos Aires, 2006).

[13]J. G. Schirmer, ' "Those Who Die for Life Cannot be Called Dead". Women and human rights protest in Latin America' in M. Agosin (ed.), *Surviving Beyond Fear. Women, Children and Human Rights in Latin America* (New York, 1993), 52.

[14]*ibid.*, 53.

[15]A. Malin, 'Mother who won't disappear', *Human Rights Quarterly*, XV (1993), 207. It is important to make a clear distinction between the notion of 'mourning' and that of 'grief'. Grief refers to a natural emotion that is a universal human reaction to loss. Mourning, on the other hand, refers to a culturally or socially constructed response to loss that can manifest many historical and geographical varieties. While grief is mostly experienced privately by the individual, mourning is a task that is often bound to social rules. While grief can be found in some animals such as primates, mourning is considered to be typically human. So, while the *Madres* refuse to fulfil the societal demand for the work of mourning, they do, of course, grieve for their disappeared children. For a clear discussion of both terms, see P. Homans (ed.), *Symbolic Loss. The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (Charlottesville, 2000), 1–3.

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The sinister figure of the *desaparecido* was not, of course, 'invented' by the *Madres*. Rather, it resulted directly from the specific technique of terror used by the military. Disappearance had several advantages for the military juntas: first, it made the terror total; second, the absence of visible victims strongly reduced international media attention; and third, the perpetrators could hardly be prosecuted for murder as long as no bodies appeared. It was only relatively late that the military realized that their technique of terror produced an unanticipated side-effect: because disappearance, in contrast to 'ordinary' death, can never be closed off, and thus never 'passes', the terror had produced a legion of ghosts that could potentially haunt the country for a very long time. Once they fully grasped the danger, the junta leaders attempted to reduce the damage by denying the existence of the *desaparecidos* and by instead speaking about the dead. In May 1979, General Viola, in a notorious speech, implicitly referred to the *desaparecidos* as 'those forever absent' ('*los ausentes para siempre*'), as if to deny their ghostly presence and their capacity to return.[16] Soon after this speech, the military leadership issued a series of laws that automatically declared the death of all persons who had disappeared for longer than a few months, presenting these laws as a gesture of philanthropy that would enable the relatives to claim inheritances and go on with their lives.[17] Even during the military dictatorship, some representatives of democratic parties began to deny the (ghostly) existence of the *desaparecidos*. One of them infamously stated on Spanish television that in Argentina there were no *desaparecidos* but only deceased. 'Everybody knows', he declared, 'that the *desaparecidos* are dead persons, but a country cannot live with phantoms. It has to deal with realities, however hard they are. We prefer mothers crying over their dead and not begging, like it is now, for an answer, which those who have to give it, deny them because it is impossible to give.'[18]

Initially, the *Madres* voiced their protest primarily in terms of a right to truth. Already in 1977, a year after the coup, they placed a notice in the papers entitled *Solo pedimos la verdad* – 'We only ask for the truth'.[19] In the early protest actions, the request for truth was even backed by a discourse which claimed the universal right to mourn the dead. In April 1979, for example, the *Madres* sent a document to several international power holders, including the UN, the US, and the pope, in which they expressed the exceptional pain of the relatives of the *desaparecidos*:

> The abducted remain deprived of any identity, one does not know whether they are dead or alive, and in the latter case whether they are detained and where. This generates ambiguities of all kinds, of which the psychological injuries are the gravest results. The relatives end up relating themselves to absents which convert into 'ghosts'. . . . One has to confront the absence, which, because of its extreme painfulness, is not a common process of mourning. It is a 'mourning without object'. It is emptiness, absolute loss, death

[16]Cited in M. Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror. Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York, 1998), 13.

[17]After the end of the dictatorship, these laws were cancelled by the democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín. However, his government issued a new series of similar laws.

[18]Cited in M. C. Salama, *Tumbas anónimas. Informe sobre la identificación de restos de víctimas de la represión ilegal* (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense) (Buenos Aires, 1992), 51. Own translation.

[19]The notice is reproduced in M. Sánchez, *Historias de vida. Hebe de Bonafini* (Buenos Aires, 1985), 238–9.

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> without a corpse and without burial. . . . The families ask for the truth in order to be able to come to terms with it.[20]

However, soon after the first public denials of the existence of the *desaparecidos* and the first claims that there were only 'normal' dead or, at most, '*ausentes para siempre*', the *Madres* learnt that they had to change their strategy. From then on, they no longer just demanded the truth but, further, in the name of justice, started to demand the living (re)appearance of the *desaparecidos* – hence their controversial slogan '*Aparición con vida*' ['living (re)appearance']. When it comes down to their disappeared children, they refuse to fulfil their traditionally ascribed task of mourning or assume the attitude of 'hired mourners'.[21] As the president of the *Madres* once famously declared, 'The mothers of the disappeared will not be converted into the mothers of the dead.'[22]

The refusal to mourn and the stress on the ghostlike presence of the *desaparecidos* are clearly reflected in several of the *Madres'* activist stances. In a document that lists a number of their principles, for example, the first sentences assert that the *desaparecidos* 'are not dead' and demand punishment for the perpetrators of the 'genocide'.[23] The principles that are listed further in the document faithfully build on the first two: the *Madres*, for example, radically reject forensic exhumations or reburials – 'because our children are no corpses' – and refuse all economic reparations – for 'what has to be repaired with justice, one cannot repair with money'. Another principle at first sight seems peculiar for a movement that struggles for the remembrance of historical injustice, but it is once again highly consistent with the idea that the *desaparecidos* are not dead. The *Madres* reject posthumous honouring: 'We reject nameplates and monuments because they signify the burying of the dead . . . posthumous honouring only serves those who are responsible for the impunity and want to wash away their guilt'.[24]

The *Madres'* radical protest, however, certainly cannot be reduced to a mere listing of principles. For example, the *Madres* not only symbolically opposed the exhumation of

[20]Cited in Salama, *op. cit.*, 43–4. Own translation.

[21]Expression from M. Mellibovsky, *Circle of Love over Death. Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (Willimantic, 1997), x. It was, of course, very difficult for the *Madres* to assume this radical position. As Hebe de Bonafini recalls, 'It cost us weeks and weeks of meetings at which there were many tears and much despair, because the profound Catholic formation of our people creates almost a need to have a dead body, a burial, and a Mass.' Cited in A. Robben, 'State terror in the netherworld. Disappearance and reburial in Argentina' in A. Robben (ed.), *Death, Mourning and Burial. A Cross-Cultural Reader* (Malden, 2004), 143.

[22]Cited in C. Joyce and E. Stover, *Witnesses from the Grave. The Stories Bones Tell* (Boston, 1991), 254.

[23]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'Nuestras Consignas'. Document available online at: http://www.madres.org/

[24]Own translation. These radical stances and the discussions around the slogan 'aparición con vida' in 1986 eventually led to a split within the movement of the *Madres*, with a more moderate group, calling themselves the *Línea Fundadora*, leaving the main group led by Hebe de Bonafini. In contrast to de Bonafini's group, the *Línea Fundadora* does accept exhumations, if they are not carried out on a massive scale and if they happen after consultation with the close family of the victims. They do not reject posthumous honouring performed in universities, schools, syndicats, etc., if it is aimed at real remembrance and is not an excuse for forgetting. Furthermore, they state that the individual families have to decide whether they accept economic reparations. See Madres de Plaza de Mayo – Línea Fundadora, 'Brevísimo resumen de la creación y desarrollo del movimiento de Madres de Plaza de Mayo' (1987). Document consultable online at: http://www.madresfundadoras.org.ar/

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desaparecidos, but also, on several occasions, physically attempted to stop forensic archaeologists from digging up bodies. While the forensic archaeologists defended themselves by stating that it was their main objective 'to give back a name and a history to those who have been robbed of both',[25] the *Madres* answered that the exhumations would only result in a 'horror show' and a 'memory of death' ('*memoria de la muerte*'), both designed to close off the painful past. For similar reasons, the *Madres* also fiercely opposed the work of the CONADEP truth commission and its internationally celebrated report entitled *Nunca Más* – 'Never Again'. Although they recognized that this report undoubtedly contained a lot of truth, the *Madres* complained that this was only a 'truth of the graveyards' ('*verdad de los cementerios*'), and they feared that its conclusions on the lugubrious fate of the *desaparecidos* would function as a declaration of death or as an act of closure. In the late 1990s the *Madres'* rejection of posthumous honouring also led to a serious conflict with the city council of Buenos Aires, when the latter announced its plan to build a 'memory park' on the site of the former torture centre ESMA. The design for the monument, following the example of some of the great war monuments erected internationally, included a space to list the names of the 30,000 *desaparecidos*, so the *Madres* sent a letter to the Commission for Monuments to assure the initiators of the *Parque de la Memoria* that 'if necessary they would use pickaxes, hammers and steel chisels to erase the names listed on this monument'.[26] As recently as 8 July 2005, the *Madres* proved the almost frightening consistency of their refusal to mourn when the remains of three of the founding members of the *Madres*, infamously abducted by the infiltrator Alfredo Astiz, turned up totally unexpectedly after almost three decades.[27] During a speech at a press conference before the gathered crowd on the Plaza de Mayo a few days later, they explained that they would respect the wishes of the sons and daughters of their former fellows, but that the *Madres* as a collective would not participate in the funeral or in any rituals connected to death. They stated that they did not need the appearance of dead bodies to know what had happened, that their children had to be considered '*desaparecidos* forever' ('*desaparecidos para siempre*'),[28] and that 'the white headscarf [the symbol for their protest], this one who bears not the name of one person but the names of more than 200,000 *desaparecidos* in the whole of Latin America, will never associate with death'.[29]

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[25]Salama, *op. cit.*, 13. Own translation.

[26]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'Carta a la Comisión Pro-Monumento a los desaparecidos'. Document available online at: http://www.madres.org/asp/contenido.asp?clave=744.

[27]In 1977 Alfredo Astiz, a captain and intelligence officer of the Argentine Navy, infiltrated into the organization of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* by claiming to be the brother of a *desaparecido* and presenting himself under the false name of Gustavo Niño. After having attended a few of the *Madres'* clandestine meetings, Astiz organized the abduction of the founder of the *Madres*, Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti, and two French nuns, Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet. Although Astiz was involved in the abduction and torturing of many other innocent victims, the kidnapping of Domon and Duquet together with that of a Swedish girl, Dagmar Hagelin, provoked a lot of international protest. Both Sweden, Italy and France have requested Astiz's extradition, but these requests were refused.

[28]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'Nuestras tres mejores madres'. Press conference, 14 July 2005. Document available online at: http://www.madres.org/asp/contenido.asp?clave=1146.

[29]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'No revindicamos los cuerpos de nuestras compañeras, sino sus vidas, su pensamiento, su historia'. Speech by Hebe de Bonafini, Plaza de Mayo, 14 July 2005. Document available online at: http://www.madres.org/asp/contenido.asp?clave=1140 (own translation).

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THE FLEMISH NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND THE 'FLEMISH DEAD'

In strong contrast to the *Madres'* denial of death, the radical Flemish nationalists, like most nationalist movements, maintain a strong tradition of commemorating, celebrating and honouring their dead, especially the prominent or illustrious among them.[30] Just as with the case of the *Madres*, however, the relationship to death of the radical Flemish nationalists is a peculiar one, and is the scene of considerable contestation and conflict.

Already, during the First World War, a conflict between the Flemish nationalist movement and the Belgian government arose about the 'identity' of some of the war casualties, whether they should be considered Belgian or Flemish in the first place. In order to claim their dead, Flemish nationalists placed specially designed tombstones on several of the graves of perished Flemish soldiers: a Celtic cross bearing the Dutch inscription '*Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Kristus*' (AVV – VVK) ('Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ').[31] This replacement of the official Belgian tombstones that bore the French inscription '*Mort pour la patrie*' ('Died for the fatherland'), however, did not remain uncontested. In the last year of the war, for example, the lettering AVV – VVK on the tombstones of thirty-six graves in the cemetery of the little Flemish village of Oeren were filled in with cement.[32] The event is still often referred to today by Flemish nationalists as the 'first Belgian violation of graves'. A few years later, in 1925, another desecration of graves took place that would become even more central in the formation of Flemish nationalist mythology and political identity. That year, the Belgian government ordered the destruction of a great number of the Flemish tombstones and salvaged the rubble for the construction of a road. The government justified its actions by citing the need for uniformity in the military graveyards and arguing that, according to the minister of national defence, the relatives of the deceased had been consulted. The Flemish nationalists were enraged, however, and the crisis was resolved only after the authorities offered to return what remained of the tombstones on condition that no political activities would be organized around the issue.

In the meantime, however, the graves of some of the most important Flemish war casualties had already become sites of yearly pilgrimages.[33] A few years after the war, the organizers of this pilgrimage to the Yser – in Dutch called the '*Ijzerbedevaart*' – bought a piece of land in order to build a monumental tower on it.[34] This *Ijzertoren* (literally, Yser tower) was designed in the form of an enormous tombstone, but it was more than merely a symbolic grave; it also literally contained a crypt in which the remains of a number of the best-known Flemish nationalist dead were interred. Engraved above the portal of the crypt was a verse by the iconic Flemish 'priest-poet' Cyriel Verschaeve, who played a key role both in articulating the Flemish protests during the First World War and in organizing Flemish nationalist hero worship in that period: 'Here lie their bodies like seeds in the sand. Hope for the harvest, Oh Flanders.'[35]

[30]A. D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 1999), 268.

[31]F. Boudrez, 'Heldenhulde' ['Homage'] in R. de Schryver, B. De Wever, G. Durnez, L. Gevers, P. Van Hees and M. De Metsenaere (eds), *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse beweging* [*New Encyclopedia of the Flemish Movement*] (Tielt, 1998), 1418.

[32]F. Seberechts, 'Slechts de graven maken een land tot vaderland' ['Only graves make a country a fatherland'] in F. Seberechts (ed.), *Duurzamer dan graniet* [*More Durable than Granite*] (Tielt, 2003), 126.

[33]L. De Ryck, *Terug naar niemandsland* [*Back to No Man's Land*] (Veurne, 1996), 101–3.

[34]Seberechts, *op. cit.*, 131.

[35]Own translation: *Hier liggen hun lijken als zaden in het zand. Hoop op den oogst, O Vlaanderland.*

The dead performed a leading role in much of the Flemish nationalist poetry of this period, and this poetry can consequently offer us some interesting insights into the cult that the radical Flemish nationalists constructed around their dead. This is certainly the case for the poetry of the aforementioned Cyriel Verschaeve, for whom Sophocles – the Greek author of *Antigone* – was a major influence and who actively staged the dead in his literary work. Already, in 1915, on the occasion of All Souls' Day, he wrote about the illustrious afterlife of the Flemish dead: 'Immortal thou shalt be. Thy immortality will commence on the day of triumph. Triumph is resurrection, birth knows death but resurrection no longer! Nobody shall live longer than thou, dead of the Yser.'[36] Verschaeve increasingly developed a radical anti-Belgian stance and eventually supported the fascist-inspired *Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen* (Verdinaso). Verschaeve was convinced that the Flemish war casualties had not been treated with due respect by the Belgian authorities.[37] Moreover, while he himself had been one of its pioneers, Verschaeve became increasingly critical of the pilgrimage to the Yser, which he considered to be much too moderate.[38] Writing under a pseudonym, he formulated an accusation in the literary journal *Jong Dietschland*: 'No peace is reigning over the graveyards of Flanders, because the dead found no rest in their death. . . . For centuries thou could'st not close thy graves. Restless dead, battlefields eternally red and drenched, graves forever remaining open.'[39] On the occasion of the pilgrimage to the Yser in 1929, Verschaeve anonymously repeated his message in *Jong Dietschland*: 'Death is the tutor of life. . . . The corpses of the perished lie in the direction of the future. They fell for no past, they fell for the future. Death is no step backward, but a step ahead. They went, they go in front of thou, those thou art searching in the past, in the future.'[40] By 1934, Verschaeve's wrath culminated in the anonymous pamphlet entitled 'Do not let them rot, Oh Flanders'. Using a persiflage of his own verse engraved above the crypt of the *Ijzertoren*, he jeered at the pilgrimages to the Yser, especially their pacifism.[41] The pamphlet was conceptualized as a choral reading in which, besides the protagonist and the chorus of the living, the dead were also awarded a voice. Verschaeve lets them use this voice to fulminate against the passive attitude of the mourning living: 'Loudly thy mourning roars, silent is the loyalty! Our silence is disrupted by loud hymn and hollow word. It does not serve us, it serves thy distraction. For the dead, distraction is dissipation. Freely fill one day, out of your time. . . . We live in eternity . . .'[42] The tone was set, and Verschaeve did not stop

[36]Verschaeve, *op. cit.*, 228–9. [Own translation: *Onsterfelijk zult gij zijn. Uw onsterfelijkheid zal met den dag van de zegepraal beginnen. Zegepraal is verrijzenis, geboorte kent dood maar verrijzenis niet meer! Niemand zal langer leven dan gij, doden van den Ijzer*].

[37]R. Vanlandschoot, 'Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen' in de Schryver *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, 3192; R. Vanlandschoot, *Kapelaan Verschaeve: biografie* [*Chaplain Verschaeve: A Biography*] (Tielt, 1998), 305–12.

[38]Vanlandschoot, *op. cit.*, 285–6.

[39]Verschaeve, *op. cit.*, 354–5. [Own translation: *Er is geen rust op Vlaanderens dodenvelden, omdat de doden geen einde in hun dood vonden . . . eeuwenlang kondet gij uw graven niet sluiten. . . . Vredeloze doden, eeuwige rode en natte slagvelden, steeds openblijvende graven.*].

[40]*ibid.*, 367–8. [Own translation: *Dood is 's levens leermeester. . . . Lijken van gesneuvelden liggen gericht naar de toekomst. Zij vielen voor geen verleden, zij vielen voor de toekomst. Dood is geen stap achteruit, maar een stap vooruit. Ze gingen, ze gaan u voor, diegene die gij in 't verleden zoekt, in de toekomst.*].

[41]Vanlandschoot, *op. cit.*, 299.

[42]C. Verschaeve, 'Laat ze niet rotten, O Vlaanderland' ['Don't let them putrefy, O Flanders'] (Antwerp, s.d.). [Own translation: *Luid brult uw rouw, Stil is de trouw! Onze stilte is gestoord Door luid lied en hol woord. 't Dient niet ons, het dient u tot verstrooiing; Voor de doôn is verstrooiing vergooiing. Vult vrij één dag, zo, uit uw tijd. . . . Wij leven, wij, in de eeuwigheid . . .*].

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radicalizing. Eventually, in 1940, he unconditionally opted for Nazi Germany and the incorporation of Flanders into the German Reich.

Ironically the nominally pacifist organizers of the Yser pilgrimage during the years of the Second World War mostly followed the route taken by Verschaeve, first radicalizing their nationalism and developing a rabid anti-Belgian position, and then, soon after the Belgian capitulation, actively supporting the New Order and turning the *Ijzertoren* into a much-hated symbol of the collaboration.[43] The fascist turn and political or even military collaboration of a considerable part of the Flemish nationalist movement, along with the subsequent inclusion into the Flemish nationalist hero worship of the Flemish who perished on the side of the occupier, often fighting on the East Front, once again turned the 'Flemish dead' into a heated source of conflict. By the end of the war the enraged population directed its anger at the graves of prominent or less prominent collaborators. The mausoleum of the notorious Flemish nationalist and collaborator Staf De Clercq, for example, was still an important place of pilgrimage for his followers during the war, but in 1944, on the eve of the Belgian national holiday, it was desecrated and later even dynamited.[44] In the years after the war, the *Ijzertoren* met with a similar fate: in 1945 it was partly destroyed by explosives, and a year later unknown activists blew it up almost completely.[45] However, these events did not deter the radical Flemish nationalist movement at all. By 1947, the pilgrimages to the Yser were officially organized again – the first two respectively under the slogans 'Resurrection' and 'Reviving rubble' – and in 1950 it was decided that the *Ijzertoren* should be rebuilt, only a little higher this time. Although the organizing committee decided to dissociate itself formally from the wartime pilgrimages, an important part of the hero worshipping remained dedicated to the Flemish who died at the side of the German forces, and the pilgrimages were very often seized upon as an occasion to bring up the collaborationist past and loudly to demand amnesty. Together with the prosecution and persecution of collaborators, the desecration of the graves and the destruction of the *Ijzertoren* for the post-war Flemish nationalists became the basis of a renewed political identity and mythology, once again centred on an alleged victimhood.

In the 1970s, the 'Flemish dead' became the subject of a series of lugubrious clandestine operations of an extremist paramilitary wing of the Flemish nationalist movement calling itself *Vlaamse Militanten Orde* (VMO) (Order of Flemish Militants).[46] In 1973, the VMO secretly dug up the remains of Cyriel Verschaeve. After the liberation he had fled to Austria and, having been sentenced to death by default in Belgium, had been forced to stay there until his death in 1948. For years his grave in Austria had attracted hundreds of pilgrims and sympathizers, but the VMO wanted to fulfil the wish of the priest-poet to be buried in Flemish soil.[47] As if wanting to outstrip the master necromancer himself, the leader of the operation claimed to have seen 'a wisp of a smile' on what, after twenty-five years, remained of Verschaeve's face. Originally, the intention had been to appear on the pilgrimage to the Yser

[43]A. Beck, 'Ijzerbedevaart(en)' ['Pilgrimage(s) of the Yser'] in de Schryver *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, 1507–8; Seberechts, *op. cit.*, 139–40.

[44]J. Tyssens, 'Geene rouwplechtigheid, een feest der Onsterfelijkheid' ['No ritual of mourning, a feast of immortality'] in Seberechts (ed.), *op. cit.*, 104.

[45]Seberechts, *op. cit.*, 142–3.

[46]See the updated website of this organization: http://www.vlaamsemilitantenorde.com/ (last accessed 19 January 2009); and Bart De Wever, 'Vlaamse Militanten Orde – Vlaamse Militanten Organisatie' in de Schryver *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, 3465.

[47]See http://www.vlaamsemilitantenorde.com/brevier.htm (last accessed 19 January 2009).

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with the remains, but a leak in the organization ultimately thwarted these plans. Eventually the remains were reburied somewhere else, after some negotiations with the Belgian government. Unexpectedly, however, Verschaeve's grave was covered with concrete by the authorities immediately after the interment of the coffin. The intervention was clearly meant to frustrate any further attempts to dig up the body, but for the VMO it was the occasion for a new series of anti-Belgian myths. On the website of the organization, several questions are raised. 'Were Verschaeve's remains still in the coffin after they were temporarily sequestered for autopsy by the public prosecutor? Or was he thrown into the incinerator of the academic hospital? Would that not have been a perfect act of revenge for the belgian [sic] state?'[48]

The exhumation of Verschaeve's remains was not the only operation of its kind that the VMO proudly recounts. In 1978, the organization unearthed the remains of the aforementioned Staf De Clercq, which, after his grave had been dynamited, had been buried without Christian rites in an anonymous and secret location. The intervention was romantically called 'operation Delta', and the VMO left a note in the pit that declared their success in exhuming the remains in order to 'inter them in consecrated ground'.[49] On the second day of Christmas, the bones were placed in a family vault, and a year later hundreds of Flemish nationalists commemorated his death.[50] These commemorations go on to this day. As recently as 1997, a third and last clandestine action was set up, this time to exhume the remains of Anton Mussert, the leader of the Dutch national socialist movement known as the NSB.[51] Mussert had been executed and buried anonymously after the war, along with some other collaborators, but in 1956 the Dutch authorities lost track of his remains. According to the VMO, the remains had been seized by four ex-NSB members, who years later contacted the VMO with the request to find a solution for this case, as they had for De Clerq and Verschaeve. The VMO did find a solution, and – just as in the previous operations – the exhumed and displayed bones were photographed as proof.[52]

In the mid-1990s, the quest to 'resurrect' the 'Flemish dead' took on a new shape when Flemish nationalists started to request the reopening of several court cases in order to rehabilitate posthumously some Flemish who had been condemned to death after the Second World War. In 1995, for example, a senator of the extreme right-wing Flemish nationalist party, *Vlaams Blok*, twice vainly demanded a revision of the case of collaborating wartime mayor Leo Vindevogel.[53] More success was achieved in the case of Irma Laplasse, whose trial was actually reopened after more than half a century.[54] She had been found guilty of collaboration with the enemy on the ground of treason with grave consequences and had been executed on 30 May 1945. The new verdict confirmed her guilt, but this time mitigating circumstances were put forward as a result of which the death penalty was posthumously

[48]Own translation. Radical Flemish nationalists often refuse to capitalize *Belgium* or *Belgian*.

[49]Own translation.

[50]M. Reynebeau, 'Bert Eriksson brengt fascistische helden postuum weer thuis' ['Bert Eriksson brings fascist heroes back home posthumously'], *De Standaard*, 16 December 2004.

[51]http://www.vlaamsemilitantenorde.com/wolfsangel.htm (last accessed 19 January 2009).

[52]'Mussert ligt nog in Nederland' ['Mussert still lies in the Netherlands'], *De Standaard*, 31 December 2004. In December 2004, a Dutch journalist questioned these facts. According to him, Musserts's remains are still in the Netherlands, because the VMO dug up the wrong person.

[53]'Vraag nr. 48 van de heer Verreycken d.d. 29 September 1995', *Vragen en Antwoorden* ['Questions and Answers'], Senaat, n° 1–47 (November 1995), 128.

[54]W. Moons, *Het proces-Irma Laplasse* [*The Case of Irma Laplasse*] (Groot-Bijgaarden, 1996), *passim*.

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converted into life imprisonment. The juridical revision fitted well into the context of reconciliatory measures for which King Albert II had launched an urgent call the year before. Indeed, the reopening of the trial could be perceived as one of the rare attempts by the Belgian state to engage indirectly in a dialogue with the 'Flemish dead' and the war past in the hope of provoking closure.[55] This hope proved vain, however; nationalist demands only increased in the following years, and the strange new decree, 'posthumous lifelong', ironically assured Irma Laplasse of a 'lifelong posthumous'.[56]

In general, the Belgian state has always attempted to preclude any critical evocation of the war years in the Flemish as well as in the French-speaking part of Belgium. A mere two weeks after the Walloon collaborator Léon Degrelle died while in exile in Spain, the government in 1994 issued a 'royal decree' that prohibited the repatriation of his remains to Belgian territory.[57] Back in 1964, a law called the *Lex Degrelliana* had already been issued that prolonged the term of prescription for condemnation to death in absentia from twenty to thirty years, so as to prevent Degrelle from returning.[58] Nevertheless, the juridical measures did not foil the rumour that the ashes of Degrelle were spread near *Le Tombeau du Géant* (literally 'the tomb of the giant'), a hill near his birthplace.[59] Whatever the truth may be, it is clear that the government does not feel comfortable at all about the presence of 'compromised' dead in the present.

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ANIMATED PASTS

The dead have always been important societal actors, but in the last two decades it is hardly possible to imagine politics without them. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the communist Eastern Bloc, along with the pulling down and replacement of statues and monuments, were accompanied by an impressive series of exhumations, replacements and reburials of the dead. One famous case is the honourable reburial in 1989 of the Hungarian prime minister who, in the wake of the revolution in 1956, was hanged and scandalously buried anonymously, without a coffin and face down. Best known, undoubtedly, is the forever-regenerated discussion about the removal of the mummified body of Lenin from the mausoleum of the Kremlin.[60] Political funerals have also been important moments of mass mobilization in the liberation struggle of the ANC and contributed to the demise of apartheid in South Africa.[61] Funerals or funeral processions in many conflict situations make up an attractive goal for violent attacks, because the terror is deepest precisely when the process of mourning is made impossible. Also remarkable is the relatively recent discussion about the moral and legal ownership of the dead who are preserved in the great European museums as cultural treasures. Several ethnic groups now demand these remains as a form of restitution for

[55]Albert II van België, *Toespraak tot de Overheden van het Land* (Speech to the authorities of the country], Brussels, 2 January 1994.

[56]Thanks to Professor Baz Lecocq for this expression.

[57]'Koninklijk Besluit van 18 April 1994', *Belgisch Staatsblad*, 23 April 1994.

[58]T. De Meester, 'De natie onder vuur' ['The nation under fire'], *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, 3 (1997), 90.

[59]Bruno De Wever, *op. cit.*, 116; G. Fonteyn, 'De as van Léon Degrelle' ['The ashes of Léon Degrelle'], *De Standaard*, 22 May 2001.

[60]K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (New York, 1999).

[61]M. Ramphele, 'Political widowhood in South Africa', *Daedalus*, CXXV, 1 (1996), 99–117.

the suffering that was caused to them in the past. In past years, diverging views on the status of the dead resulted in a series of conflicts between archaeologists, who believe ancient human remains primarily to be part of world heritage or a source of scientific knowledge, and ethnic groups, who see themselves as guardians of the dead and strongly resist each desecration of their graves.[62] One example is the dispute in the US about the destiny of the 9200-year-old skeleton of 'the Kennewich Man'.[63] More than merely being about the material possession of corpses, the real stake in the aforementioned cases is situated in a series of political claims on the past: who is the heir of what past, and how is that past to be related to present claims and identities.

The extraordinarily powerful influence of the dead in claiming the past can be accounted for by conceiving this influence as a symbolic variant on a very old tradition that attaches the dead and graves to territorial claims. Giambattista Vico, in his 'Scienza Nuova', asserted that the distant forefathers of what would later become the most important aristocratic families in Europe originally claimed their territories by referring to the wooden tomb-pillars on the graves of their ancestors. In a similar way, Fustel de Coulange related the history of the antique polis to the presence of an underlying necropolis of ancestral graves.[64] In one of Pirandello's stories, a Sicilian baron forbids his farmers to bury their dead on his land, for otherwise they could start believing that the land belonged to them as a natural right.[65] The symbolic appropriation and imagination of the past through the dead thus closely resembles the way in which territories are created and appropriated by the burying of the dead.[66] This would, for example, explain the attempts of Flemish nationalists to reclaim the borders of the 'old Netherlands' and the 'great *Diets* history' by means of the grave of the Verdinaso leader Joris Van Severen, which is situated in northern France.[67] A similar interpretation of graves as a means to claim both territory and history reverberated in an oration of a prominent radical Flemish nationalist in 1937: 'Only graves make a land into a fatherland.'[68] Robert Pogue Harrison also speaks about the 'foundational power of the sepulcher'.[69]

The main interest of this article, however, is directed not primarily at this rather evident relation between the dead and the appropriation of the past. Instead, it is focused on a dimension that transcends or precedes the struggle over the control of, or the attribution of meaning to, the past. For academic historiography and the dominant modern regime of historicity in which it is embedded, (biological) death functions as a master-metaphor for the past. The strict juxtaposition of the 'present' present and the 'absent' or 'distant' past that is so

[62]R. Layton, *Conflict in the Archaeology of Living Traditions* (New York, 1994).

[63]K. McEvoy and H. Conway, 'The dead, the law and the politics of the past', *Journal of Law and Society*, XXXI, 4 (2004), 545.

[64]R. P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago, 2003), 25.

[65]Cited in *ibid*.

[66]For a discussion of competing claims on the dead within different factions of the Flemish movement, see M. Van Ginderachter, 'Mythen en martelaren in het Vlaams-nationalisme' ['Myths and martyrs in Flemish nationalism'], *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, CXIV, 3 (2001), 394–410.

[67]After the German invasion in 1940, Van Severen was removed to the French town of Abbeville by the Belgian state security department, where he was shot by drunken French soldiers. The epitaph on his later grave read as follows: 'Here rests, awaiting resurrection, Joris Van Severen, new unifier of the Netherlands, Father of the Fatherland'. See Bruno De Wever, *op. cit.*, 114–15.

[68]A. D'Haese, 'Slechts de graven maken een land tot vaderland' ['Only graves make a country a fatherland'], *Strijd*, 2 (1937), 5.

[69]Harrison, *op. cit.*, 110.

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central to both the modern regime of historicity and modern historiography is essentially a reflection of the separation between life and death that has been presumed to be absolute since the Enlightenment. As Michel de Certeau famously claimed, historiography is a tomb (sepulcrum) that places the dead into a linear chronological time and only narrates their fate on the condition that they themselves remain silent and leave the present to the living.[70]

The *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, probably better than anyone else, have a perfect understanding of the close link that, within the modern regime of historicity, exists between death as a metaphor for the past and the latter's representation as absent or distant. Fearing that the ontologically inferior status ascribed to the 'dead past' (in comparison to the 'living present') could facilitate the neglect of historical injustice and indirectly legitimate the reign of impunity, the *Madres* for more than thirty years made resistance against the metaphor of death one of their main strategic objectives. As their president puts it rhetorically: '[Why do] they like the dead? Because death is final. Capitalism has two options that go together. Money to pay death, and death itself as the end of a struggle. Both things that we reject from the deepest [sic] of our heart.'[71]

More likely obsessed by death than denying its existence, the radical Flemish movement at first sight seems to confront us with a completely different situation. Still, in order to understand how the dead determine our perception of the relation between past and present, more than merely their factual interpretation, we should not restrict our view to the presence or absence of the dead but should also look at the capacity in which they are present or absent. The death to which the 'written tomb' of historiography can/wants to grant a place is but the 'sterile' death conceived of as the immanent end, which the Enlightenment brought to the West. As de Certeau brilliantly remarks:

> historiography takes for granted the fact that it has become impossible to believe in this presence of the dead that has organized (or organizes) the experience of entire civilizations; and the fact too that it is none the less impossible 'to get over it', to accept the loss of a living solidarity with what is gone, or to confirm an irreducible limit. What is perishable is its data; progress is its motto.[72]

A resistance to this death of the Enlightenment, born from another perspective on death, can therefore affect the very core of modern historiography and the modern regime of historicity. And this is precisely what is at hand in radical Flemish nationalism. The 'Flemish dead' do not remain mute; they shout loudly, taunt both the Belgian enemy and moderate sister factions, and threaten to curse all those who do not respect their legacy. The dead form an essential part of the community, and the living have to serve their interest. Therefore, there is no such thing as a strict separation of past and present in the radical Flemish movement. By violating the Flemish graves, the Belgian government has violated the community, and the continuing presence of 'Flemish dead' in unconsecrated or non-Flemish soil remains a great problem.

[70]M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York, 1988). For an intellectual history of the break between past and present, see also R. Koselleck, *Futures Past* (New York, 2004).

[71]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'Las madres nos sentimos revolucionarias' (March 1995). Own translation. Text available online at: http://www.madres.org/asp/contenido.asp?clave=420.

[72]M. de Certeau, *op. cit.*, 7.

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The 'Flemish dead' remain restless: 'For centuries thou could'st not close thy graves.' The denial of death as an absolute end constitutes a *leitmotiv* in the radical Flemish movement. The 'Flemish dead' are immortal: 'Nobody shall live longer than thou, dead of the Yser.' If the ideal of the dominant regime of historicity is that of the 'healthy' mourning process that first recognized the loss to objectify it subsequently, then the contesting regime of historicity that we want to analyse here is one that resists the objectifying and exorcizing aspect of the work of mourning: 'Remove from our eye that mourning tear: The dead have ascended into us alive.' Anthropologists often describe the transition phase, that in the mourning process functions as a *rite de passage* between life and death, using the term *liminality*. The *liminal* traditionally entails aspects of potential pollution or ritual danger, but if actively cultivated it can also be used for political aims.[73] In sum, we can state that, just like the *Madres* do with their *desaparecidos*, the radical Flemish nationalists let their dead haunt the present, so the painful past cannot be closed off and stays liminal. The ritual or spectral resistance of the *Madres* and the radical Flemish nationalists yields an animated or spirited past that is nigh on immune to closure and has nearly no connection with the 'dead' past of the dominant modern regime of historicity.[74]

In both of the cases we have discussed, the tensions around the question of how to deal with the past thus cannot be reduced to an antagonism between advocates of remembrance and advocates of forgetting, or to a quarrel over historical facts or even their meaning. Instead, it also includes a conflict over the perceived (temporal) 'distance' that is to be situated between past and present.[75] The conflict can therefore be analysed as a 'politics of time', in which two radically different chronosophies diametrically oppose each other. To understand the opposition between these chronosophies, Jankélévitch's aforementioned analytical distinction between the irreversible and the irrevocable proves very useful. The ritual staging of the immortal dead and the ghostly *desaparecidos* in the first place aims at keeping the painful past irrevocable and also at denying the notion of temporal distance inherent to the irreversible past of the dominant modern regime of historicity. The *Madres* straightforwardly deny the 'pastness' of the military coup, despite the more than thirty years of calendar time that have 'passed' since its occurrence, and one of them recently explicitly referred to the counter-clockwise circular marches on the Plaza de Mayo as a rebellion against linear time.[76] Similarly, there is no space for the *forward* of the reconciliatory 'Forward without Forgetting' slogan

[73]On the cult around the dead as a potential space of resistance in Argentina, see S. Leferink, *Wij armen kunnen niet sterven* [*We Poor Cannot Die*] (Amsterdam, 2002).

[74]This spectral resistance of the *Madres* and the Flemish nationalists is certainly not unique. In China, for example, the local belief in ghosts is used instrumentally as a form of resistance against the ideology of progress of the central government. See E. Mueggler, 'Spectral subversions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XLI, 3 (1999), 458–81. In Europe, too, the dead have been returning ever since antiquity in order to demand justice, name perpetrators, or take revenge personally. See R. C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead* (London, 1982).

[75]Mark Salber Phillips rightly remarks that historians, by solely focusing on truth and meaning, have all too often neglected the dimension of 'distance' in historiography. The 'distance' between past and present, according to Phillips, is not just a given fact but is partly constructed by historians. See M. S. Phillips, 'Distance and historical representation', *History Workshop Journal*, LVII (2004), 123–41. Thanks to Professor Chris Lorenz for this reference.

[76]Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 'Algunas relaciones entre ética y política en la post-dictadura parte I' (6 November 1999), lecture by Inés Vázquez in preparation for the creation of the popular university of the Madres, the UPMPM. Text available online at: http://www.madres.org/asp/contenido.asp?clave=168.

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within the *necrocratic*[77] faction of the Flemish nationalist movement; the past remains a part of the present and remains the standard for any further political development. In the radical Flemish movement, resistance against the dominant 'Belgian' regime of historicity even takes the shape of a far-reaching symbolic refusal to be contemporaneous with the rest of the nation. This 'refusal of contemporaneity' can be found, for example, in the organization of an alternative calendar with specific holidays and days of remembrance, but it is most evident in the instrumental use of anachronisms: from medieval iconographies, over banner-festivals, to the use of an archaic idiom and the wearing of costumes inspired by trends of the 1930s.[78]

In sum, it can be claimed that the *Madres* and the radical Flemish nationalists, as minorities or subcultures, have not only developed the specific set of norms and values that James Scott called an 'alternative moral universe' but also that they developed something which in similar terms could be called an 'alternative historical universe'.[79]

THOU ART A SCHOLAR; SPEAK TO IT, HORATIO ...

All of the above, of course, raises the question of what can be done by the broader society if it (making abstraction of some ethical questions) does want to 'move on'. As we have seen, the junta leaders in Argentina, and some of their democratic successors, mistakenly believed that a combination of (self-)amnesty, imposed amnesia and the passage of time would solve the problem automatically. For a long time, the Belgian government, too, believed that amnesia was the best solution, and it asked its 'good citizens' simply to forget. This position connects to a long tradition that closely associates citizenship and amnesia. Already, in 403 BC, the survival of the Athenian polis after a civil conflict seems to have been guaranteed by an amnesty arrangement that included a ban on recollection.[80] Large parts of European history, according to Timothy Garton Ash, have been founded on a base of amnesia and amnesty. Or, as Ernest Renan wrote on the importance of forgetting for the French nation, '*Or, l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses. ... Tout citoyen français doit avoir oublié la Saint-Barthélemy, les massacres du Midi au XIIIe siècle.*'[81]

In recent decades, in contrast, governments and policy-makers all over the world have come to understand that the simple recourse to amnesia and amnesty is no match for the great strength of spectral past. The intellectual tide has turned completely: no longer forgetting but precisely the meticulous revelation and chronicling of the historical truth must solve the problem now. This new position is clearly reflected in the international tendency to defend the idea of a 'right to truth' and to erect truth commissions after violent internal conflict in the hope that they will bring about reconciliation. Argentina was one of the pioneers of this trend when democratic president Raúl Alfonsín installed the so-called CONADEP commission

[77]Term from Harrison, *op. cit.*, 25.

[78]On the close relationship between nationalism and contemporaneity (simultaneity), see B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 2006).

[79]J. C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, 1976).

[80]Nicole Loraux, *La cité divisée: L'oubli dans la mémoire d'Athenes* (Paris, 1997). In the meantime, this assertion has been nuanced by Jon Elster, who writes that the citizens of Athens had to take an oath of reconciliation which stipulated that they were not allowed to be resentful, but that this oath did not include a general ban on each reference to the past. See J. Elster, *Closing the Books* (Cambridge, 2004).

[81]Cited in Anderson, *op. cit.*

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immediately after the end of the military reign, and it is this same belief in the healing power of historical truth that explains the repeated appeals for a Flemish truth commission and the official support for the 'Forward without Forgetting' initiative.

While the recent turn to historical truth undoubtedly constitutes a great improvement in comparison with the option for amnesia, it remains to be seen whether it actually 'works' when confronted with a haunting past. Already, in the early 1990s, Jacques Derrida argued that this international trend, which he described as a 'worldwide work of mourning', should not pin too much faith on a strictly academic approach for the management of 'the persistence of a present past' and 'the return of the dead'.[82] It had been naive of Hamlet's friend, Marcellus, Derrida asserts, to ask the scholar Horatio, of all people, to address the spectral appearance of his murdered father ('thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio . . .'). Scholars, indeed, do not believe in ghosts. Historians are no exception here. Despite their growing interest in all kinds of 'enchanted' popular beliefs and the wealth of work that has been done on the 'ghosts of memory', the problem of the haunting past almost always remains that of a mere subject of research, while its potential implications for the practice (and conceptual foundations) of historiography itself are rarely ever taken into consideration.[83] This is not primarily due to a lack of interest or will by individual historians, but, as we have tried to argue, in the first place relates to a structural feature of modern historiography itself. Modern historical discourse presumes an absolute break between past and present, and therefore leaves no space for a spectral or irrevocable past that hovers in between. Modern historiography has no notion of a liminal phase in the transition between present and past, and the very simple but fundamental question of how exactly social phenomena turn from being present into being past is never explicitly raised. This is unfortunate, for it is primarily the liminal past onto which truth commissions and reconciliatory initiatives are focusing all over the world today, and if historians do not deal with this liminality, the vacuum will be filled up by the involved historical actors themselves. Once ghosts have been conjured up and we are confronted with an *animated* past, however, then Reason and historical truth seem powerless.

Ghent University

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[82]J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, 1994), 101.

[83]For a great overview of historical studies on 'enchantment' and popular belief in magic, see M. Saler, 'Modernity and enchantment. A historiographic review', *American Historical Review*, CXI, 3 (2006), 692–716. For an interesting discussion of the recent interest in memory by historians, see K. L. Klein, 'On the emergence of memory in historical discourse', *Representations*, LXIX (2000), 127–50.