

Digitalising and internationalising research on nationalism in Flanders: Towards a third Encyclopedia of the Flemish movement

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ADV N
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In the 1970s, the first edition of a reference work appeared that would serve as a general starting point for research, inquiries and

other forms of acquiring knowledge about the Flemish Movement: the *Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement* (1973-1975) left its mark on countless books, articles, theses, websites, lectures, reports, exhibitions, documentaries, and debates. When a second edition was published twenty-five years later, the influence of this standard work only increased. The *New Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement* (NEVB) is still an indispensable instrument in the year 2022. However, this does not alter the fact that nationalism in Flanders, both within and outside party politics, as well as the general social context, has changed profoundly. Now that another twenty-five years will have passed since the last edition, this rich scholarly tradition demands a new addition.



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Figure 1: The *New Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement*, published in 1998

The DEVB-project

At the end of 2018, ADVN | archive for national movements (Antwerp, Belgium) launched a broadly-supported scientific project, with a grant from the Flemish government, which will ensure the further development of the encyclopaedia and will guide this standard work into the digital age. The digital *Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement* (DEVB) aims to make the collected information widely accessible to a broad audience: from researchers with a scientific agenda, policy makers, journalists, to all other possibly-interested parties. Even more than its predecessors, the DEVB has the ambition to become the starting point for all research and knowledge on the Flemish Movement and Flemish nationalism, both in Belgium and abroad. It wants to form a bridge between historical knowledge and heritage, between academic research and public outreach, and between science and education. Because of its online nature, the massive amount of information the DEVB holds is only a mouse-click away from a broad audience and will also be regularly updated after its initial launch in 2023.

As a reflection of the state of research and novel insights in nationalism studies, this edition also tends to place various new accents on its content. One of the focal points is the international dimension of both the history of the Flemish Movement and research on it. After a general presentation of the DEVB-project by means of the two phases in the development of the encyclopaedia, we will briefly discuss this important but complex challenge.



Figure 2: Frontage of the ADVN | Archive for National Movements, © Lucid Vermelden

Phase 1: the start-up (2019-2020)

Based on the principle that scientific knowledge should be used for the benefit of society as much as possible, an 'open access' model was chosen, with free use of the encyclopaedia. The first phase of the project therefore focused on the development of an underlying digital infrastructure that meets the requirements of the different target audiences. Furthermore, all the texts of the *New Encyclopaedia* were made available digitally via www.nevb.be as 'NEVB Online'. Both the public and research community were involved in the project from the outset by means of crowdsourcing: visitors to the website were invited to point out errors or gaps in the NEVB.

Another focus in this first phase was the development of a widespread network and solid cooperation structures. These would guarantee a fruitful interaction between authors, editors and advisors, which is essential for this project. Thus, a core editorial board was established from the authoritative academics in the field (in particular: Marnix Beyen (UAntwerp), Elke Brems (KULeuven), Bruno De Wever (UGhent), Chantal Kesteloot (Cegesoma/Rijksarchief), Dave Sinardet (VUB), Johan Tollebeek (KULeuven), Jeffrey Tyssens (VUB), Maarten Van Ginderachter (UAntwerp), Kaat Wils (KULeuven)) who oversee the scientific quality of the project, and an advisory board of dozens of specialists from various disciplines and bodies was put together. This working method makes it possible to furnish the DEVB with all the studies that have been carried out over the past twenty-five years, as well as stimulate new research on the Flemish Movement within the university departments. Such a broad mobilisation of experts not only illustrates the current status quaestionis, but also identifies gaps in our knowledge.

After a thorough preparation and documentation round, which resulted in formulating necessary working documents such as authors'

guidelines, lists of terms and a vision text, authors were appointed to update a first selection of the general introductory articles of the *New Encyclopaedia* (Literature, Economy, Catholic Party, Second World War, etc.) and to supplement them with a number of completely new texts. Each revised article was read and commented on by three specialists in accordance with the principle of blind peer review.



Figure 3: Logo of the third and digital *Encyclopaedia of the Flemish movement*, designed by Adriaan Tas.

Phase 2: the development (2020-2023)

After the digital foundations of the encyclopaedia have been laid, this basis will now be further developed in a second phase covering three years (2021-2023) and culminating in the official launch in the course of 2023. This second phase will start by updating the remaining introductory articles. Furthermore, all the lemmas of the NEVB will be

reworked and supplemented with a first set of necessary new lemmas. In addition to these content-related objectives, a new step is also being taken in the development of the digital tool: after the development of a data infrastructure for the management and research of the lemmas and the structured data that are linked to them, the construction of a user-friendly online portal is in progress.

The development of an online portal is not only intended to make the DEVB easily searchable and to make the lemmas accessible to a wide audience in an attractive way. The portal will also function as a conduit to other information sources and thus help to unlock the rich collection of digitised heritage. To this end, the effort which started in the previous phase to provide lemmas with links to external databases will be continued and expanded on to include the ADVN's heritage collections and links to the collections of other archival institutions.



Figure 4: Picture of M. Hroch. With, among others, a new lemma on the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch, the encyclopaedia wants to pay more attention to the international dimension of (research on) the Flemish Movement. ADVN.

Challenges: internationalisation of the research on the Flemish movement

As a renewed and innovative historical standard work, the digital encyclopaedia wants to open itself up to recent social evolutions and new scientific insights, although it must also admit its own limitations. Since the DEVB, like most reference works, is bound to the state of research, it is not its task to fill in the gaps. It does, however, want to identify them thoroughly and draw attention to them in order to facilitate new research.

One of the most important challenges for nationalism research in Flanders is the international-comparative perspective and the problem of methodological nationalism: the tendency to interpret historical actors and evolutions in a one-dimensional way in the light of nations and national movements. From the point of view of methodological nationalism, many of the most critical studies on nation-building and nationalism reproduce and perpetuate the ideology of the nation by not fundamentally questioning its self-evidence as a perspective on the world.

As a counter-reaction, international nationalism studies have recently developed a strong interest in transnational cross-links and overlaps. Thus, researchers compare different national movements and draw attention to mutual parallels and differences that relativise and put into perspective their supposed uniqueness. Others elaborate on how a national movement is not an isolated phenomenon but shows great sensitivity to international developments and even continuously interacts with other (national) cultures.

By contrast, the flourishing interest in international comparisons and transfers in other regions' historiography shows how little resonance this approach currently finds in the study of the Flemish Movement. With

new articles such as 'The Flemish Movement from an International and Comparative Perspective', 'Cultural Transfers', 'Spain' (on both the Basque and Catalan question) and 'Ireland', the DEVB wants to draw attention to this lacuna and offer an impetus to an international comparative study of the Flemish Movement.

Finally, this objective of internationalising the study of the Flemish movement is further emphasised by the ambition to make at least part of the encyclopaedia (the introductory articles) available in English and French. The DEVB can thus present the study of nationalism in Flanders and the Flemish Movement internationally, and offer a platform and point of reference for an external target audience that wants to immerse itself in Flemish and Belgian issues.



Figure 5: The Flemish politician Nelly Maes exchanges gifts with Ernest Benach i Pascual, former president of the Catalan Parliament (2003–2010), in the Catalan Parliament. The international dimension of the encyclopaedia is reflected in new introductory articles, among others on the Catalan and Basque nationalist movements. ADVN.

Keywords: Flemish movement, Flemish nationalism, Flemish historiography, Flemish archives, Encyclopaedia of the Flemish movement, comparative study of national movements.