



*'Losgemaakt uit de verdrukking'. Opiniejournalistiek rond de scheiding van Noord en Zuid 1828-1832*

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## Summary

The timing of the Union of the northern Netherlands and the former Austrian Netherlands in 1815 was not unfavourable, since both countries were relieved to be liberated from French occupation. Even so, the start could hardly be called impeccable, as the passage of the Constitution immediately caused commotion in the South. Although a majority of the Belgian notables had voted against it, King William I viewed the Constitution as accepted by using a mathematical trick. Especially the clergy in the South opposed this procedure fervently.

In 1825 the government obliged the clergy to be educated at a priest school in Leuven, the Collegium Philosophicum. This meddling of the state in Catholic education ran up against much opposition in the South. From that moment onwards, Catholics from the North and the South unified to show their discontent. Magazines like the *Courrier de la Meuse* and *Le Catholique des Pays-Bas* in the South and *De Untramontaan* and *De Godsdienstvriend* in the North voiced their demand for freedom of education.

The Liberals in the South were anti-catholic and pro-government minded until 1825. This changed when a group of young and enthusiastic journalists took over the editorship of the *Courier des Pays-Bas*. They urged the government to insure freedom of language, to introduce ministerial accountability, and to acknowledge freedom of speech without any repressive measures, so without getting charged with press crimes as was practice in those days.

In 1828 the Catholics and Liberals united in contesting the policies that were followed since 1815. They joined forces in a Union. The Minister of Justice, C.F. van Maanen, decided to take strong action. This led to the notorious press trials. The most wanted journalist was L. de Potter who got sentenced several times. During his imprisonment he planned the strategies. As a result an unprecedented petition movement started; a development that the government did not know what to do with.

From 1829 King William I tried to release some of the pressure by making some concessions. The Collegium Philosophicum became optional and new bishops were appointed. The French-speaking were granted the right to write their official documents in their own language. Nevertheless, these amends proved insufficient, because a second wave of petitioning erupted. In 1830 the king decided to abolish the compulsory language.

In cities like Liege, Ghent and Antwerp the political situation was different from the circumstances in Brussels. There prominent and influential merchants and industrials were active; they supported the monarchy for opportunistic reasons. The king had invested millions in their enterprises. They belonged to the Orangists and were vocal even after the thirties of the nineteenth century.

The criticism towards the government's policies was not confined to the South. Voices were also raised in the North where they pleaded for reformation of the regime. The magazine *De Bijenkorf* from The Hague even supported the demands of the South. This evoked critical responses of more moderate publications in the North, like the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, *De Noordstar* and the *Nederlandsche Gedachten*.

When a number of journalists in the South were banished, the resistance increased even more. This sentence was counterproductive because the convicts were perceived as martyrs. The positions of the North and the South toughened and the already tense situation was in danger of escalating. This actually happened on August 25, 1830. After a performance of the opera *La muette de Portici* in Brussels riots broke out. Police and the military force

acted as bystanders, so a citizen guard that had to subdue the rebels was established. Two delegations, one from Brussels and one from Liege, were sent to King William I with a list of grievances. His response was not adequate and the delegations returned without result. After that the matter was being taken at a gallop. Soon a Temporary Rule was formed and in November 1830 the National Congress was established. When the European powers declared Belgium's independence in December 1830 the outcome of the conflict had become clear. From that moment on the king was overtaken by events.

The press in the North showed little understanding for the events in the South. They were called mutinous and ungrateful. They reasoned that King William I had done so many good things for them. Only *De Bijenkorf* published a celebratory issue after August 25, 1830. This magazine was the only one of its kind that completely supported the actions in the South and even voiced the hope that the revolution would spread to the North.

King William I's fate was in the big European powers hands. They gathered on November 4, 1830, in London to speedily decide on the issue of fencing off the border between Belgium and the Netherlands. The first resolution of the Conference that was presented to both parties consisted of the January-protocols of 1831. King William I accepted those, but the National Congress of Belgium rejected them. After that a lengthy diplomatic tug-of-war started.

In the meantime Belgium frantically searched for a king. Initially the Prince of Orange (the title of the heir-apparent in the North) seemed to be an acceptable candidate, but his candidacy came to nothing. Therefore the choice of their king became a complicated issue for the people of Belgium. One candidate after the other dropped out. In the end Leopold of Saksen-Coburg was chosen. He accepted the throne on the condition that the proposals of the Conference in London, which were amended in the meantime and formulated in the Eighteen Articles, would be accepted. The National Congress agreed with the treaty as it was stated in the Eighteen Articles, so Leopold could swear on the Constitution on July 21, 1831.

William I refused to accept the Eighteen Articles and invaded Belgium on August 2, 1831. The purpose was to win better conditions for the Netherlands than proposed by the Eighteen Articles. After an initially successful advance the fighting ceased after intervention by France. The press in the Netherlands was very excited about the achievements and counted on increased prestige amongst the powers. *De Standaard* was sombre because of a potential negative response of those powers. The Belgian press was just indignant.

The powers made a new offer based on the propositions of King William I. These Twenty-four Articles were also rejected by the Dutch monarch. This refusal laid a heavy financial burden on the people, as the army needed to be in a permanent state of combat readiness. When William I lost the support of his allies Austria, Prussia and Russia – they ratified the treaty- the king got more and more isolated. Put under pressure by the States General William agreed with the separation, but this time Belgium refused because they did not want to give up Limburg and Luxemburg. The Conference of European powers had not been active since 1833, but was reopened in 1838. After negotiations the parties involved concluded the Treaty of London on April 19, 1839. A dragging conflict ended and the separation of North and South was a fact.

The cooperation in the North was very different. Between 1828-1832 many newsmagazines were published there. Many of them had a common cause: to change the Constitution into a more liberal version. This came to nothing during those years. The editors of the magazines kept busy watching what others were publishing instead of caring about their own principles. This practice resulted in major division. While the newspapers in the

South kept on being published, in the North one after the other disappears. Their political commentary did not result in the intended effect: liberal changes in the Constitution.