

16-ST VITH

St Vith – from market town at a crossroads, to busy railway hub

St Vith was one of the places most altered at the time by the arrival of the Vennbahn. For many years previously, it had been an important market town for the region. It lies at a junction of vital ancient thoroughfares. The old Roman road from Reims to Cologne here intersects the road that links the two medieval abbey towns of Prüm and Malmedy. As a market with a customs house, already mentioned in the 12th century, St Vith drew traders and merchants in particular. Its interregional importance was also due to its geographical position between the Trier-Lorraine, the Lower Rhine and Lower Maas regions. In 1887, the town was connected by the Vennbahn with Aachen and Troisvierges in Luxembourg. With the completion in 1917 of the spur to meet the Libramont–Bastogne–Gouvy line, St Vith became an important rail hub.

St Vith – rail hub on the Vennbahn

The connection with the railway system in 1887 started a rapid expansion, which was soon felt in construction, traffic and employment. In this golden era of rail, every second person in St Vith was working in some way for the railway. The Railway Company gave direct employment to more than 1,000 of them. In 1850, only 1,100 people lived in St Vith, by 1917 that number was already 2,740. Almost all rail-related professions were practised here: dispatcher, rail service manager, crossing guard, signal man, shunting master or rail workers such as track and plate layers, etc. The rail-yard repair sheds alone employed 700 people. With the bed widened to take two-track travel, and with the construction in World War I of the military marshalling yard, a total of 26 tracks came together in St Vith station. This meant that at its height, up to 1,000 wagons were loaded, coupled up for dispatch or marshalled on the sidings. On market days, another 100 cattle trucks were loaded.

World War II:

The beginning of the Second World War – St Vith is brought “home to the Reich”

Although St Vith could thank the development of the railway for its rise, and although it profited greatly from rail traffic during the First World War, yet the same railway would cause it to be turned into a heap of rubble at the end of the Second. In East Belgium, World War II began with the invasion of Hitler’s troops on 10th May 1940. An official decree from the Führer announced on 18th May that the districts of Eupen, Malmedy and St Vith would be “brought home into the German Reich (Empire)”. In an exhibition of eye-witness reports at the historical museum “Zwischen Venn and Schneifel”, Johanna Gallo-Schmitz, born in 1936, recalls how everything changed from that day: “In the morning and at the close of lessons at school, we all had to stand to attention and shout ‘Heil Hitler’ with the raised and outstretched-hand Nazi salute. ... Instead of our familiar folk melodies, all you heard on the radio were ‘Hitlerlieder’, in which they sang of ‘last salutes’ and ‘marching on’, of ‘bravery’ and ‘heroism’, and we sang along with them, our hearts swollen with pride. The crucifix was taken down in the classroom and in its place hung a picture of the Führer. The smallest and weakest had to bring a spoon with them to school. Every day at break time, they would have to swallow a spoonful of cod liver oil to help them grow big and strong.”

The beginning of the end of World War II in St Vith – East Belgians began to desert the Wehrmacht. Among the thousands of young East Belgian men drafted into the Wehrmacht, only to die on the battlefields of Europe, many were from St Vith. Some managed to avoid being drafted by going into hiding in the, as yet still Belgian, interior. If such objectors were found they were summarily executed and their families subject to repression and harassment. But once the situation became clearly hopeless in the winter of 1942/43, with the fall of Stalingrad, the page began to turn. Soon, every common soldier from St Vith knew that Hitler’s plans were out of touch with reality. If they were lucky enough to come home on furlough, they did not return to the front. However, this required a secure hiding place with relatives or friends.

The first physical effects of warfare on St Vith occurred on 9th August 1944. Both the church and the station were reduced to rubble. On 4th September the town was evacuated. Most people left with whatever they could carry, even a few head of cattle, and headed into Germany. Yet there were some who ignored the order to evacuate, preferring to take their chance with the advancing Americans. In mid-September, US troops took St Vith without a fight; the Belgian civil authority was reinstalled.

St Vith is heavily bombarded after the Battle of the Bulge

The Ardennes Offensive began with the attack on East Belgian villages on 16th December 1944. It was to be the German Army's last great military offensive in World War II. The strategic goal of the offensive was Antwerp, to prevent the provisioning of the allied advance from that port. The Americans, though initially surprised into losing much ground, were able to regroup effectively and succeeded in significantly throttling the German advance, causing its failure. Poor visibility at the start of what the Americans called the "Battle of the Bulge" (on account of the shape of the front line) at first hindered the allied air forces. Once the skies cleared before Christmas, St Vith, which only days before had been captured by the Germans after a week of intense fighting, became their first target.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1944 were the worst two days in the entire history of St Vith. 153 civilians and more than 1,000 soldiers were killed. Nearly 600 buildings, 90% of the town, were either totally destroyed or severely damaged. 20 years after the war, Anna Krings, who writes in the monthly review of the historical museum "Zwischen Venn and Scheifel" recalled being surprised by the attack as she was convalescing after the birth of her daughter. On the second day of the bombardment, she succeeded in fleeing the flaming inferno with her new-born baby in her arms. She needed the entire night to reach her house in Hünningen, since she had to make a wide detour around the burning town. Many of the dead could only be recovered and identified after the snows had melted. The battle for St Vith and the subsequent air attack had a decisive effect on the Ardennes Offensive, according to Klaus-Dieter Klausner. The German advance had been halted for four days at a time when supplies were critical; the entire planning of the offensive was ruined and was thereafter destined to fail. Many experts consider the battle for St Vith as more influential on the course of the war than Bastogne.

New life after the inferno

Today in St Vith, one can see public information boards marking the stages of a historic tour around the town. Otherwise, there is scant sign of the horrors of that time. By 1947, the rebuilding of the town had begun. Twelve years later, the bells of the new parish church were ringing. The ancient Büchel Tower, from the 14th century, stands now a symbol of the toughness of the town and its modern rebirth. It withstood the inferno of phosphorous, high explosive and splitter bombs that rained on St Vith. Yet one bomb did hit the Büchel Tower, causing the death of a family of seven and some soldiers who had sought shelter there. Only in the Spring of 1945 were their bodies found. The town's website notes that maintaining social coherence, within an intact environment, has become a particular concern of St Vith, whose people are careful today that "their traditional values of rural life, their German mother tongue and their well-rooted sense of culture do not come to any harm".

German-speaking Community:

St Vith, one of two towns in the German-speaking Community

Nine localities form the German-speaking Community in the East of Belgium. It is the smallest of the kingdom's three political communities. It has its origins in the language and autonomy laws of the 1960s. Every year, on 15th November, the people of the "DG" (Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft), as it is regionally known, celebrate the "Day of the German-speaking Community". Today the German-speaking Community of Belgium, with a surface area of 854 km², numbers roughly 75,000 inhabitants. About 19,000 of these live in the administrative capital of Eupen, some 9,000 in the second largest town, St Vith, with its neighbouring localities.

Rulers come and go up until the provisional administration in 1925

Today's German-speaking Community was once claimed by diverse rulers and formed part of diverse territories: until the 12th century, the northern part (Eupener Land) belonged to the Duchy of Limburg, then to Brabant. The southern part (St. Vith Land) belonged during the same time to the Duchy of Luxembourg. These two areas, separated by the High Fen, first came together under Spanish rule in 1555 and then, in 1713, under the Austrian Habsburgs. From 1794 to 1815, the region was part of the French Département Ourthe. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the area was ceded to the Kingdom of Prussia, and thus German became the official language. In the wake of the "Reichsgründung" in 1871, this Prussian region joined the German Empire. After the Treaty of Versailles, the districts of Eupen and Malmedy were ceded to Belgium in 1920 as the "East Cantons". The local people were not consulted on this choice. Belgium was obliged by the League of Nations to carry out a referendum in the new regions. Instead, the Belgian administration organised something that went down in the annals as "petite farce belge" (little Belgian joke). Only 271 out of 34,000 eligible to vote actually registered to vote against the forced cession to Belgium. According to Klaus-Dieter Klausner of the historical museum "Zwischen Venn and Schneifel", one reason for the poor turnout was that voting registers were only available in Eupen and Malmedy, meaning a long journey for most of the rural population. Add to this the political disinterest of a people whose fate had already been de facto decided, as well as the fear of being sanctioned for voicing an opinion (the ballot was not secret), or even deported. With the provisional administration under Lieutenant General Baltia, things became calmer from 1925.

The path to annexation of East Belgium by National Socialist Germany

The first free elections were held in 1925. When the next election came along in 1929, the Belgian government received a cold shower. More than 75% of the electorate voted for revisionist parties, which called for a legitimate re-run of the 1920 referendum. Many felt left out by politics in Brussels. In 1926, the Belgian government had even suggested selling the East Cantons back to Germany for 200 million Reichsmark. But this plan was vetoed by the French. In the 1920s, nationalist parties were gaining the upper hand at elections on both sides of the border. After Hitler's arrival in power in 1933, the Nazi party financially and ideologically strengthened its support of cultural associations, sports clubs and political movements promoting a pro-German stance in neighbouring countries. At first, their efforts garnered only meagre success. The Nazis complained that the German Belgians were incapable of tearing themselves loose from Catholicism. In 1936, the Gauleiter of Cologne raised the stakes for the financial support of such groups. It was no longer sufficient for a regional population or minority to be just German-speaking or only German in a general sense, such groups "must be shaped by national socialist leadership", lest they lose their "inner connection to the Reich". Nazi organisations began openly to develop their structures and enjoyed increasing influence. However, the population of Eupen-Malmedy only became citizens of the Third Reich on 18th May 1940 with the German invasion of Belgium. On that day, the region was annexed. The Belgian government did not make a formal protest. The "return home into the empire" atmosphere soon soured, as the brutality of the NS regime became daily more obvious, and worsened further when the first bodies of East Belgian soldiers began to arrive home. Around 8,800 men were drafted into the Wehrmacht from the East Cantons and some 3,200 of them never came back.

After World War II, East Belgium was "purged"

During the war years, the annexed countries had time and reason enough to develop a hatred of all things German or associated with the occupier. After 1945, all this hatred would find an outlet. Resistance fighters of the "Armée blanche" (White Army), genuine patriots, but also some very dubious characters, arrived in the wake of the US troops, plundering and arresting people indiscriminately. De-nazification began in the summer of 1945 and took on hysterical features. Basically, any German-speaking citizen was treated with suspicion. The Military Prosecutor appointed for the "East Cantons", Pierre Koumoth, made it perfectly clear that in his mind the inhabitants of the two districts were "definitely Germans". This was not something that would be changed by twenty

years of Belgian politics. With regard to acts of collaboration with the Nazis, they would be tried and, where necessary, condemned as might any other citizens of occupied Belgium. “Of course, this was unfounded”, says historian Carlo Lejeune, “because the citizens of the East Cantons had been ‘brought home into the empire’ and had therefore lived, unlike the rest of occupied Belgium, as citizens of the German Reich. Yet, in the politically inflamed post-war atmosphere, there was really no alternative.” In the end, the process became a bitter paying-off of old scores: One in two citizens was the subject of an official inquiry, one in six was interned; one in twelve was the subject of court proceedings. In addition, 50% of the electorate was excluded from voting in the first post-war elections of 1946 and 7.5% were stripped of their nationality and expelled to Germany. The conscious processing of those years, whether of their own guilt or their entanglement in the meshes of others, was a long time coming. The politics of national unity pushed all other considerations aside. A ‘good Belgian’, according to Carlo Lejeune, was now someone unreservedly committed to the ‘eternal Belgian fatherland’ and thus ready to give up any attachment to German language or culture. The inhabitants of the East Cantons fell increasingly into a state of political apathy and bitterness.

After a long political winter, 1956 saw the beginnings of a thaw in the frontier region

Between 1945 and 1956, the East Cantons were all but sealed off from Germany. All eyes were to be turned away from the familiar frontier, inland towards Brussels. Crossing the border had become considerably more complex. A special access pass was now required from the District Commissioner. Only smugglers could be guaranteed to find a way across the frontier. But in 1956, a political thaw began to take place in the Belgian-German border region. The ‘Reich’, had long since become the Federal Republic of Germany. The former wartime enemies found new reasons to cooperate; a “neighbourhood pact” was signed, wherein the annexation of Eupen-Malmedy by Hitler’s Germany in 1940 was declared invalid under international law. In addition, border corrections, compensation payments and a cultural accord were agreed.

The long and winding road to autonomy for the German-speaking Community

In 1963, language borders were drawn between Belgium’s language Communities. These were valid for the official language as well as applying to language use in schools. All language issues were now the remit of “language laws”. German was recognised under the new laws as the country’s third official language, judicially anchoring the principle of language singularity in the East Cantons. In addition, 25 local authorities were listed in which German was the official language of administration. This was the official recognition of a German language area.

In the wake of the language laws, the three language communities of Belgium were established in 1970. The “Council of the German Culture Community (RdK)” was voted in 1973, changed to “Council of the German-speaking Community (RDG) in 1984, finally becoming the “Parliament of the German-speaking Community (PDG)” in 2004. This has 25 members and sits in Eupen. The Parliament votes an Executive as its own Government, which currently consists of four Community Ministers. Following the local authority fusion of 1976, today’s German-speaking Community contains nine local authority districts. The German-speaking Community, now known everywhere simply as the “DG” (Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft), was enshrined in the national constitution on 22nd December 1983. Today, the people of the DG are proud of their autonomy. They refer to themselves, tongue in cheek, as “Europe’s best protected minority”.

The little differences between the north and the south of the DG, with the High Fen between

“To tell the truth, the German-speaking Community is an artificial construct”, says Klaus-Dieter Klauser of the historical museum association “Zwischen Venn and Schneifel” in St Vith. The High Fen has for hundreds of years divided the northern part around Eupen from the southern part around St Vith. A direct land connection was only made in the mid-19th century with the construction of the Fen road. Today, a high-speed bus, the “Vennliner” regularly connects the two. Between them lie the local authority areas of Malmedy and Waimes/Weismes, under the territorial administration of the



Francophone Community of Belgium. Together with the nine German-speaking localities, these build collectively what are still referred to, for historical reasons, as “Eupen-Malmedy”, “Les Cantons de l’Est”, “Die Ostkantonen” or, more neutrally, “Ostbelgien” (East Belgium).

For an outsider, the differences between the North DG and the South DG can be heard as well as seen. Around Eupen, the Lower Rhine dialect or “Platt” is the common tongue; the “Platt” of St Vith is the more lilting Mosel-Frankish variant. High German binds the two together. St Vith developed traditionally around a micro-economic model (small farmers, small businesses, leather tanning, etc.), while in the Eupen area there were more large landowners, big farms and a significant textile industry. In addition, both Eupen and St Vith are administrative and school districts. Today, more and more people in the south are attracted by employment prospects in Luxembourg.

Belgium’s German-speakers take no part in the ongoing dispute between Flanders and Wallonia, The historian Carlo Lejeune believes that after all the shocks and catastrophes of the 20th century, East Belgium's German-speaking Community has come to an understanding with its past. However, they have continually to reach an accommodation with the Walloons, because the Wallonian Region is responsible for the economic policy, agricultural policy and infrastructure of the East Cantons. But what would happen to the tiny DG, if the ongoing strife between the two major communities were to cause Belgium to fall apart? Joining Germany as the 17th Federal Land is not even up for discussion: we’re far too independent. So maybe the real homeland of this German-speaking minority might be where it always was, thinks Carlo Lejeune ... in between everyone else’s chairs!