

The Question of God in Émigré Ghent: Religious Heritage, Émigré Politics, and Dialogical Negotiation among Migrants and Hosts during the Cold War*

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This article explores the influence of various factors on the formation of identity among the community of World War II Polish veterans which formed in the Flemish city of Ghent after the rise of a socialist regime in their home country. Challenging popular perceptions of the term “émigré,” the article highlights the diverse ways in which the members of this community promoted their heritage within their host society. Particular attention is given to the role of religious and cultural heritage, the émigré community’s engagement with anti-communist politics, and the evolution of this political engagement over time. Interactions with the local Catholic Diocese of Ghent are examined through a framework of Polish Catholicism as a “lived religion” which facilitated the formation of a hybrid identity. In particular, the role of Carlos Bressers, a Belgian priest and chaplain on whose personal archive the research is based, is analyzed. Through his position and contacts, Bressers served as a mediating figure in the negotiation of hybrid identity and helped the community of Polish veterans carve out a place for itself in the city of Ghent.

Keywords: Polish migration, émigrés, lived religion, dialogical identity, anti-communism

The presence of a Polish exile community in Belgium dates back as far as the country’s independence in 1830. Polish refugees arrived after having fled the failed November Uprising of the same year and settled in areas across Western Europe throughout the rest of the century in the *Wielka Emigracja* (Great Emigration).¹ Students, Polish Jews, and eventually economic migrants would continue to migrate westward in the interwar period,² but World War II led to a significant and distinct swell in the Central and Eastern European migrant populations of Belgium. Some 20,000 Displaced Persons (DPs) arrived in the

* This study was conducted under the auspices of the research project “Émigré Europe: Civil Engagement Transfers between Eastern Europe and the Low Countries 1933–1989,” which received financial support from the CELSA fund (Central Europe Leuven Strategic Alliance).

1 Goddeeris, *La Grande Emigration*, 13–23.

2 Goddeeris, *De Poolse Migratie*, 13–50.

country either as a result of military activities or as forced laborers who had been dragged across Europe by the German occupation. Though the DPs had originally come from several of the countries that now found themselves on the far side of the Iron Curtain, among them were around 350 Polish soldiers who had fought for General Stanislaw Maczek's 1st Armored Division, which engaged in the liberation of northern France, Belgium, and the Netherlands under Allied command. The soldiers who remained in Belgium at war's end were unwilling to return home with the rise of a socialist regime in Poland, and most settled down and married local women.³

The history and heritage of these Polish veterans in the Low Countries has recently been commemorated in Johannes Van de Voorde and Dirk Verbeke's 2020 popular history book *Vergeten Helden* (Forgotten Heroes), which features interviews regaling their brave testimonies of combat and their attachments to both their homeland and their adopted nations.⁴ Machteld Venken, a Belgian scholar of immigration who has conducted extensive research on these veterans in the context of their activities in Flanders, remains somewhat skeptical of this triumphant narrative, describing the veterans' popular valorization as a "successful cult ... which combined heroism and political victimisation."⁵ Of particular interest is the veterans' use of military ceremonies and symbolism to "construct their own vision of the past," which "equated Catholicism with anti-communism."⁶ This combined their imagined conception of inextricably Catholic *Polishness* with their military experience and the political atmosphere of the Cold War, standing firmly at odds with the narrative pushed by the Polish People's Republic Consulate in Brussels, which argued that the communist government was the final result of a "centuries-long struggle for the Polish motherland."⁷

Émigrés: What's in a Name?

Whether heroes, victims, or both, the Polish veterans who settled in postwar Belgium were just one group of "émigrés" among many who either refused to return to or escaped the "captive nations" of Central and Eastern Europe and

3 Venken, "Migration and War Memory," 17.

4 Van de Voorde and Verbeke, *Vergeten Helden*.

5 Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?*, 166.

6 Ibid.

7 Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain*, 130.

sought refuge in the “Free World” of the West. At least, that is how the narrative of East–West migration during the Cold War has popularly been recounted in the Western world, often with a few carefully selected examples of émigrés who seem to have had a significant degree of agency in shaping their own fates.⁸ The research on Polish and broader Eastern Bloc emigration during the Cold War in particular is extensive, with Polish authors such as Dariusz Stola exploring the means of exit and the politics of mobility or Sławomir Łukasiewicz and Anna Mazurkiewicz chronicling the spread of politically-minded émigrés across Western Europe and the US.⁹ Among these destinations, Belgium became a base for prominent refugees, dissidents, and émigrés of various political persuasions, with many among them Polish in origin, whose histories have been covered by Belgian historians such as Idesbald Goddeeris and the aforementioned Venken.¹⁰ Among the most well-known is perhaps Jan Kulakowski, the lauded trade unionist and secretary-general of the Christian Democratic World Confederation of Labor in the latter half of the Cold War.¹¹

A figure like Kulakowski arguably represents the popular understanding of the term “émigré,” a politically oriented actor calling for overarching change in the Eastern Bloc while safely stationed on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. Yet Kulakowski and his politicized peers made up only a small number of the Poles living in Belgium, and they were by far the most politically engaged. In his study of Solidarność-era migration, Patryk Pleskot remarks that a “critical attitude toward the communist regime [...] is not sufficient to define someone as a political emigrant.”¹² Indeed, many who may fall under the “émigré” label had varying and fluctuating relationships with political engagement, which suggests the limitations of the term. Less understood are the everyday ways in which the wider Polish community, displaced by the communist project, behaved as “émigrés” or otherwise as they sought to recapture, safeguard, and even reshape the national cultural identities that had been repurposed or distorted in their homeland, and also the importance (or lack thereof) of their political outlook.

This article seeks to complement existing research on migration and heritage by subjectifying the lives of Polish veterans, taking their community in

8 Mazurkiewicz, “Political Emigration from East Central Europe during the Cold War,” 68.

9 See for example Stola, “Patterns of the Evolution of the Communist Regime”; Łukasiewicz, “The Polish Political System in Exile”; Mazurkiewicz, *East Central European Migrations During the Cold War*.

10 For studies of Polish political activities in Belgium, see Dumoulin and Goddeeris, *Intégration ou représentation?*; Venken, “The Communist ‘Polonia’ Society.”

11 On Kulakowski, see Jesień, “The Social Virtues of Christian Democracy.”

12 Pleskot, “Polish Political Emigration in the 1980s,” 61.

the Flemish city of Ghent as its subject of analysis, particularly with reference to the significance of the Catholic and anti-communist vision alluded to in Venken's quote above. However, it will also investigate the diversity of their civic engagement and challenge assumptions that their sole motivation for mobilization was political. Inspired by Robert Anthony Orsi's landmark text *The Madonna of 115th Street*, the first section of this article will analyze how a "lived religion" could anchor the collective identity, civic engagement, and cultural heritage of migrant communities.¹³ The second section explores how members of the Polish community of Ghent engaged or did not engage with ideas of anti-communism related to their country of origin. The article will also track how these developments were shaped and formed over time. Inspired by the concept of "dialogical" identity formation (developed through negotiation between in- and out-groups), the final section of the article investigates how a religiously oriented host society actor (the Belgian priest Carlos Bressers) served as a broker and mediator of Polish-Belgian hybrid identity and heritage.¹⁴ This incorporation of Belgian agency avoids the pitfall of treating host society agency as an abstract and static monolith by looking instead at a dynamic social actor who engaged actively with the migrant community in the identity negotiation process.¹⁵ By offering an analysis of Bressers' personal archives, this article aims to consider the agency of the migrants themselves in identity formation processes, while also giving attention to the role of representatives of the host society in influencing the "lived religion" and construction of imagined identities through shared heritage among members of the migrant community.

The Poles and Chaplain Bressers

The case study of the Polish community of Ghent presents interesting particularities. As one of the Flemish cities liberated by the Polish 1st Armored Division, Ghent became home to a community of veterans after the war. Ghent's distinctiveness lies in the presence of the Belgian priest Carlos Bressers, a dedicated Polish community chaplain appointed within the Catholic city diocese.

13 Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* 3rd Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. xxxix.

14 Yuval-Davis, "Theorizing identity: beyond the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy."

15 On dialogical identity formation, see for example the study of Yugoslav Muslim migrants in Luxembourg by Lucie Waltzer, "Negotiating Identity."

Carlos Bressers was born in Ghent on September 6, 1912 into a prominent family of religious mural painters and church architects who had established an atelier in the city in 1860.¹⁶ Bressers' brothers Jozef and Leopold served as pastors and religious teachers at the seminary of Sint-Niklaas, a small city roughly 40 kilometers away.¹⁷ In 1926, the Bressers family hosted a young Hungarian girl, Sára (or "Sari") Gáspárdy at their home, whom Bressers would refer to in later life as his "sister." Sari arrived during the "Hungarian child relief" effort of the mid-1920s, one of thousands of Hungarian children hosted by Belgian families with Church support in the wake of the tumultuous breakup of Austria-Hungary.¹⁸ This encounter likely sparked Bressers' lifelong interest in Central and Eastern Europe, and he remained in contact with his "sister" years after her return to Hungary.¹⁹

Bressers was ordained as a priest at St. Bavo's, the towering Gothic cathedral and seat of the Diocese of Ghent, in 1942.²⁰ The arrival of the Polish soldiers during the liberation warranted attention from the Catholic Church as they began to settle down, and the Diocese of Ghent was significant for these migrants as a receiving structure or familiar point of localization in their new country. The city's chapels became a spatial and social hub for the devoutly religious members of the community. The Church sought to serve as a constituent part of these colonies, and Ghent's Bishop Mgr. Karel Justinus Calewaert, observing the growing Central European presence among church congregations, appointed Bressers to serve as chaplain of the Polish and Hungarian communities of Ghent in 1944.²¹ Though also recognized by the church, the Hungarian community was much smaller and did not explicitly engage in the civic sphere to the same extent as the Poles. For this reason, the focus here is solely on the latter group.

16 Adriaan Bressers. Online Database for Intermediary Structures (ODIS), last modified July 8, 2022. [http://www.odis.be/lnk/PS_60440]. Accessed April 18, 2023; Atelier Bressers-Blanchaert. ODIS, last modified October 29, 2021. [http://www.odis.be/lnk/OR_13739]. Accessed April 20, 2023.

17 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/129: Pieces concerning priesthood (Holy Orders, first Mass, jubilee, cuttings), 1927–1984. KADOC, Leuven.

18 For further reading on the Hungarian child relief programs that were organised in Belgium, see Hajtó, *Milk Sauce and Paprika*.

19 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/202: Postcard from Sára Gáspárdy, Budapest, August 30, 1977. KADOC, Leuven.

20 Carlos Bressers. ODIS, last modified August 22, 2022. [http://www.odis.be/lnk/PS_54968]. Accessed April 21, 2023.

21 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/1: letter to the Lord Substitute, April 24, 1981. KADOC, Leuven.

Catholicism as a Lived Religion in Polish Ghent

Nira Yuval-Davis' analysis of religion and identity politics notes how migrant communities use socially accepted discourses which draw on historical and cultural contexts in their formation of identity, and religion serves in this process as a means for individuals and collective groups to "perform" identity by acting with reference to their own experiences and interactions with the wider world. Religious practices (the endorsement of a faith, church attendance, acknowledgement of symbols, and demonstrable piety) therefore can be used to draw boundaries between what an individual or a community is or is not.²² This section of the article will demonstrate how Catholicism served among the Polish community of Ghent as a lived religion which was integrated into their wider sense of national heritage and civic engagement, alongside their tangible means and practices of reshaping their collective identity into a hybrid of Belgian and Polish culture grounded through their experience of faith. It will highlight Bressers' role as a key contact and dialogue point for the organization and performance of events championing the religious heritage of the Polish community, which is further discussed in the final section.

At the core of almost all the activities coordinated by Ghent's Polish community were two small and distinct but often overlapping organizations: the "Belgian-Polish Committee" and the "Polish Catholic Colony and Polish Veterans," the latter of which was later divided into the "Polish Catholic Union of Ghent" and the "Polish Veterans' Association." Despite the multitude of monikers, these groups often had no more than a few hundred members (some of whom were members of more than one of the groups). The first group was honorarily chaired by local aristocrat Count Henri de Hemptinne and initially led by Colonel Joseph Casimir Oborski, a Belgian veteran of both World Wars born in Aalst to Polish parents, as the functional chairman. The Union was formed with the aim of integrating the new Polish arrivals into Ghent's wider society, while the "Polish Catholic Colony and Polish Veterans" organized the "activities properly Polish."²³ Catholicism would be a central theme to many of the events overseen by these groups, and crucially, Bressers served in key organizational positions, such as treasurer, in the Polish community organizations. He worked closely with the president of the latter group, veteran Ryszard Łuczak. Bressers

22 Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging*, 114–15.

23 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/3: Newspaper clipping "La colonie polonaise à Gand," January 28, 1966. KADOC, Leuven.

warmly referred to Łuczak as “our diligent and exemplary President” in 1981 in a letter recommending him for Belgian citizenship.²⁴ The two organizations worked closely to host Christmas and Easter parties along with other religious celebrations in the city’s churches, drawing on Polish traditions such as eggpainting.²⁵ Through Bressers, they also made contact with and invited members of Brussels’ Polish Catholic Mission and the Belgian Episcopate, alongside Polish priests from across Europe, to their various masses and celebrations. One Polish missionary attending the ceremony came to visit from as far away as Rwanda.²⁶

As early as 1951, Bressers and the Polish community arranged for the bishop of Ghent, Mgr. Calewaert, to consecrate the banner of Ghent’s Polish Catholic Union, led by Łuczak. Oborski, de Hemptinne, and the Polish Catholic Mission rector were all present for the ceremony, which drew 300 Polish attendees and featured art, music, and gifts for the bishop.²⁷ The banner itself, designed by the members of Łuczak’s Catholic Union and warmly received by Ghent’s newspapers as a “fine work of art,”²⁸ symbolized the negotiation of a shared identity between Belgians and Poles. On one side, the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, a symbol of Polish Catholicism’s resilience against foreign threats, was flanked by both the Polish eagle and the Lion of the City of Ghent. The reverse side had the eagle surrounded by symbols representing the Polish airmen.²⁹ The decision to include both their homeland and host city’s coat of arms in the banner emphasized the emergence of a dual affinity to both Poland and Belgium, with a clear dedication to their religious heritage placed at the very center of their identity. After all, Catholicism was a natural bridge

24 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/1: letter to the Lord Substitute, April 24, 1981. KADOC, Leuven.

25 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Newspaper clipping “Kerstfeest bij de Polen,” 1959; Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/190/1: Newspaper clipping “Polen vierden pasen,” S.D.; Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/1: Newspaper clipping “Fête de Paques chez les Polonais,” *La Metropole*, April 5, 1972. KADOC, Leuven.

26 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Program of “Academic Festive Season” event, Ghent, May 29, 1977; Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/1: Invitations to “Solemn Mass” commemorating Polish war dead, December 1985. KADOC, Leuven.

27 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Newspaper clipping “Poolse missie huldigt Z.H. Exc. Mgr Calewaert,” *Het Volk*, November 22, 1951. KADOC, Leuven.

28 *Ibid.*

29 The banner can be viewed here [<https://kadocheritage.be/exhibits/show/emigreeurope/bressers/madonna>] Accessed May 2, 2023.

across boundaries for the migrants and Belgians alike, a shared faith that was a prominent element of Belgian (particularly Flemish) identity.³⁰

The 1960s were incredibly significant years for Polish Catholics worldwide, as they marked the millennial anniversary of the Christianization of Poland under Duke Mieszko I. The event, known as the “Polish millennium,” was celebrated throughout the diaspora, including in Belgium.³¹ In 1966, the Archbishop of Warsaw and Gniezno (the most prominent clergy position in Poland) was Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who had been imprisoned by the state socialist government over ten years earlier.³² According to the Belgian press, Wyszyński partly attributed his release during the reforms of the 1956 Polish October to “more than a million Polish pilgrims” across the diaspora, and he sought to thank them by sending replicas of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, an icon of Polish Catholic art, to their host countries.³³ The copy that arrived in Belgium in late January was exhibited in Brussels, Liège, Hainaut, and Antwerp before being brought to Ghent. Upon arrival in the city, it was not taken immediately to the central St. Bavo’s Cathedral but instead was placed in the tiny Schreiboorn Chapel, the church in which Bressers conducted his biweekly Polish mass. This recognition may have been facilitated by the personal relationship between Bressers and the Cardinal. They had exchanged letters in the 1950s, and Wyszyński had sent his personal condolences to Bressers and his brothers when a member of their family had died in 1959.³⁴ The arrival of the Madonna was greeted by the congregation with flowers and local women in traditional Polish dress.³⁵ Three days later, when it was moved to the Cathedral, the Bishop of Ghent and Bressers’ superior, Mgr. Léonce-Albert van Peteghem, sought to emphasize the importance of Ghent’s Polish Catholics to the wider city’s religious body through a large mass with song.³⁶ The bishop followed up by presiding over an academic discussion on Polish history and religion and then opened a weeklong exhibition called “Poland through the centuries.” Surrounded

30 Cook, *Belgium: A History*, 83.

31 Goddeeris, “Exilpolitik of Identiteitsvorming?,” 290.

32 Kosicki, “Vatican II and Poland,” 137.

33 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Newspaper clipping “Arrivée à Anvers de l’icône de N.D. de Czestochowa,” January 18, 1966. KADOC, Leuven.

34 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/193/1: Letter from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński to the Bressers family, December 12, 1959. KADOC, Leuven.

35 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/3: Newspaper clipping “Kopie van Zwarte Madonna van Czestochowa te Gent aangekomen,” January 26, 1966. KADOC, Leuven.

36 Ibid.

by prominent members of the Polish community, van Peteghem thanked the Polish nation for its contributions to the history of the Catholic Church, and he spoke of the “the spiritual bond between our two lands.”³⁷ For the few hundred Polish Catholics who attended the small masses held in Bressers’ chapel, the public acknowledgement of Poland’s “spiritual bond” with Belgium on such a significant occasion would no doubt have been welcome. Indeed, van Peteghem’s reception indicates that the devotion of the Polish community was recognized by the host society’s religious authorities, which clearly shows the potential of Catholicism to facilitate the integration of the members of this community into this society.

In sum, Catholicism exemplified the concept of a lived religion in the identity construction of Ghent’s Polish community. Catholicism’s centrality to Polish civic engagement is highlighted by its incorporation into rhetoric, symbols, and celebrations and the discursive precedence it eventually gained over the community’s interactions with the Diocese of Ghent.

Anti-Communism in Polish Ghent

As Venken has shown, the Polish veterans living in Belgium also sought to equate their Catholic faith with an explicitly anti-communist political stance in defiance of the socialist Polish Consulate in Brussels.³⁸ This was particularly apparent in the early years of Ghent’s community. In these early activities, Bressers seems not to have been a prominent figure. He is mentioned as an attendee to the events covered in this section, but there is no further allusion to his involvement in their planning or programs. Up until the 1960s, there were evident anti-communist sentiments at Polish cultural events. In 1966, the Belgian-Polish Committee’s effective chairman Colonel Joseph Casimir Oborski emphasized commitment to “faith, fatherland, Polish traditions and freedom” during a speech celebrating the Committee’s fifteenth anniversary.³⁹ Present at the event was Józef Rzemieniewski, who served as a leader of the Belgian wing of the agrarian Polish People’s Party (PSL). Members of the PSL who returned from exile or remained in Poland during the communist era after 1945 felt that

37 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/3: Newspaper clipping “Monseigneur Van Peteghem opent tentoonstelling – Polen door de eeuwen heen,” January 1966. KADOC, Leuven.

38 Machteld Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?*, pp. 165–66.

39 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Newspaper clipping “Poolse dag te Gent: 15-jarig bestaan van de kolonie,” September 26, 1966. KADOC, Leuven.

they had been deceived by outcomes of the Yalta Conference and were subject to intimidation by the communist government. As Sławomir Łukasiewicz has explained, the PSL and other “exile parties” enjoyed modest support from the Polish émigré community in the West, and therefore their presence at the celebration could serve to further their legitimization in the eyes of the diaspora, as well as associating the Belgian-Polish Committee with support for dissidents who experienced the abuses of communism firsthand.⁴⁰

Oborski’s invocation of faith and freedom and Rzemieniewski’s presence suggest a posturing by the community as standard-bearers for the historical Polish nation and its values in opposition to the socialist government, solidifying the significance of their heritage as a means of expressing their collective political identity. Additionally, the banner of the Polish Union also constituted a performative example of anti-communism by the community. The banner’s central Madonna icon was flanked by the following prayer: “Heavenly Queen of the Crown of Poland, return us to our free land.”⁴¹ The selected words stressed an imagined link between the Virgin Mary and the “Crown of Poland,” an allusion to the country’s pre-partition history and an assertion of the notion that their nation and community could only “return” to freedom with the reinstatement of traditional religious devotion. Here, as Venken argues, the veterans’ vision of the past, which fused religious heritage with a romanticized historical perception of Poland and a tacit acknowledgement that under communism the country was not free, reflects the creative ways in which these migrants constructed new and imagined interpretations of their heritage and equated faith with freedom in defiance of the state atheism of the Polish People’s Republic.⁴²

Over time, the expectations these Poles had of themselves to protect a romanticized conception of a traditional, Catholic Poland began to take precedence over active anti-communist mobilization and rhetoric. The shift was visible beyond Ghent, and it impacted Polish communities across Belgium, as Goddeeris’ research into the intellectual Brussels-based émigré organization, the Union of Free Poles in Belgium, has shown. Goddeeris concludes that this group grew to prioritize the preservation of an imagined Polish identity in their

40 Łukasiewicz, “A Shadow Party System,” 51–53. For further reading on the PSL, see Goddeeris and Pleskot, “Polska migracja w Belgii,” 230–33; Wasilewski, “Pospolici zbrodniarze,” *Tygodnik Przegląd*, August 17, 2015. [<https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/pospolici-zbrodniarze/>] Accessed May 2, 2023.

41 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/2: Newspaper clipping “Poolse missie huldigt Z.H. Exc. Mgr Calewaert,” *Het Volk*, November 22, 1951. KADOC, Leuven.

42 Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?*, pp. 165–66.

new country over anti-communist “exile politics,” and their mission in Belgium gradually evolved into a quest to bring their cultural heritage “to the attention of their Belgian hosts.”⁴³ In Bressers’ archive, an invitation to the celebrations of May 3 as Constitution Day by the Polish Catholic Mission in Brussels supports the idea that such changes were taking place. As a commemoration of the signing of the 1791 constitution, a symbol of “enlightened patriotism,” independence, and modernity in Poland, the holiday was banned by the state socialist government in the late 1940s and became a symbol of opposition to communism.⁴⁴ In the 1970s and early 1980s, the Polish Catholic Mission, which organized educational, cultural, and religious initiatives across the country, sent invitations to the Polish community of Ghent for their May 3 celebrations. Bressers apparently enjoyed a close relationship with Henryk Repka, the Rector of the Mission, as he was present at many of the community’s events in Ghent. In the 1975 invitation that was sent to Bressers, Repka called Constitution Day a remembrance of “one of the most important days of our history.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, in their brochure from the 1980 celebration, the Mission used the event to connect the Belgian Revolution of 1830 to Poland’s November Uprising of the same year and to promote the countries’ bilateral friendship.⁴⁶ The day thus served as an occasion to negotiate commonalities between the host and migrant communities, with the 1830 revolutions serving as historical evidence of the two states’ resistance to foreign tyranny. For the Polish communities in Belgium, the day had clear symbolic value. It was a ceremonial means of emphasizing their continuity with pre-communist Poland, and Repka’s centrality to the celebration emphasized the religious aspects, which centered around a holy mass. However, the Catholic Mission makes no mention of the anti-communist significance of the holiday in their brochures, suggesting a reluctance to engage in exile politics. Instead, the event offered an occasion to celebrate Polish history, heritage, culture, and religion and explicitly to highlight the common historical struggle faced by both countries, thus drawing Polish and Belgian identities together.

43 Goddeeris, “Exilpolitik of Identiteitsvorming?”, 292.

44 Kożuchowski, “Jak to było z Konstytucją 3 Maja,” *Polityka*, May 3, 2017. [<https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/historia/1515182,2,jak-to-bylo-z-konstytucja-3-maja.read#ixzz1LGIZ7s4Q>] Accessed April 28, 2023.

45 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/190/1: Invitation to Constitution Day from Henryk Repka, May 4, 1975. KADOC, Leuven.

46 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/190/1: Brochure for May 3, Constitution Day, 1980. KADOC, Leuven.

While Colonel Oborski declared Catholicism and anti-communist freedom to be inextricably interlinked in the early years of Ghent's Polish community, as was true in the case of other groups of émigrés in Belgium, the commitment of the members of the Polish community in Ghent to solidarity with their homeland appeared increasingly ambivalent as time passed. By the 1980s, the declaration of martial law in Poland sparked renewed Western interest in Central and Eastern European dissidents, with the Polish trade union NSZZ Solidarność serving as the posterchild for the wider protest movements. Solidarność was popular among both Catholic and secular activist movements in Belgium. The earliest solidarity initiatives formed before December 1981 "all had a Christian profile," but as the crisis grew, Solidarność received aid from a wide range of solidarity committees and both of Belgium's main trade unions, albeit to varying extents.⁴⁷ The Solidarność Co-ordinating Office Abroad was even provided an office space in Brussels by the Christian Democratic World Confederation of Labour, led by the Polish trade unionist and émigré one-time refugee Jan Kulakowski.⁴⁸ The Solidarność cause had a marked resonance among Catholics both in Poland and abroad. As historian Magdalena Waligórska has noted, in Poland, "hanging crucifixes in public schools and factories became a way of voicing support for the burgeoning opposition movement."⁴⁹ Internationally, one of the movement's most prominent champions was Pope John Paul II, himself a Pole. According to historian Michael Sporzer, Poland, "the oppressed land [w]as the 'Christ of Nations' resisting 'atheistic Communism.'"⁵⁰

Bressers was among those who felt the impact of the movement. His interest in the Polish crisis was clear. He had gathered a selection of material on Solidarność, including issues of Brussels-based émigré magazines and various pamphlets that mentioned them, and he rallied the different Polish organizations in Ghent to raise money for aid through a postcard appeal, "Oost-Vlaanderen helpt Oost-Polen" (East Flanders helps East Poland).⁵¹ However, this seems to have been a largely humanitarian initiative, and Bressers' work with Central Europe typically blended humanitarian intent with an implicitly political slant. This can be seen in his diverse activity, serving as a board member of the

47 Christiaens and Goddeeris, "Beyond Western European Idealism," 644.

48 Goddeeris, "Solidarity or Indifference?," 378.

49 Waligórska, *Cross Purposes*, 148.

50 Szporer, "Managing Religion in Communist-Era Poland," 115.

51 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/190/2: Copy of *Wolne Słowo*, May 1988; Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/191: Support card "Mensen helpen Mensen: Oost-Vlaanderen helpt Oost-Polen," 1980s. KADOC, Leuven.

obscure “Inter-committee for Assistance to the Refugees of Central Europe” in the late 1970s and 1980s, alongside his support for the anti-communist Catholic *Oostpriesterhulp* organization in its Polish activities, suggesting he had a longstanding interest in developments in the Eastern Bloc.⁵² He also maintained contact throughout the Cold War with high-profile members of the Polish clergy, such as Bishop of Poznań Antoni Baraniak, who was imprisoned and tortured by the communist authorities in the 1950s.⁵³ Baraniak sent Bressers a portrait of himself in 1960 and expressed his “profound gratitude,” and he also signed a letter of condolence after the death of a relative in 1962. He also exchanged religious and holiday greetings with Bishop Karol Józef Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II.⁵⁴

Bressers’ focus on the upheavals in the Eastern Bloc could arguably be seen as a means of engaging his congregation in the wider political context and opening them to Belgian initiatives surrounding *Solidarność*. His interest is comparable to the endeavors of other Belgian priests active in Polish political engagements at the time, such as the Catholic University of Leuven’s Canon Jozef de Smet, the university’s resident “advocate of Poland.” De Smet, in his position as professor, hosted numerous Polish figures (including future Polish prime minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki) for lectures and study at his constituent college in order to foster dialogue and understanding between Belgians and Poles.⁵⁵ However, while it cannot be said that the Polish community in Ghent did not support the *Solidarność* cause, his archives contain no persuasive indications that interest in *Solidarność* went beyond Bressers. This would corroborate Goddeeris’ contention that many longer-term Polish migrants in Belgium “paid strikingly little attention to events in Poland,” and it suggests that the hybrid identity that had developed in this émigré community left little space for contemporary Polish politics.⁵⁶ As late as 1988, when the winds of change were blowing in Poland, Bronisław Recki, the veteran who led the “Friends of the Polish Air Force” charity and was considered the “leader of Ghent’s Poles,” professed

52 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/199: Correspondence between Carlos Bressers and “Inter-committee for Assistance to the Refugees of Central Europe,” 1975–1985; BE/942855/1925/193/1: Documents concerning Cardinal Wyszyński and the Eastern European church, Kerk in Nood – Oostpriesterhulp, 1974. KADOC, Leuven.

53 Wąsowicz, “Troska salezjanów o abpa Antoniego Baraniaka SDB,” 159.

54 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/193/3: letters from Bishop Antoni Baraniak, 1960–1962; BE/942855/1925/193/3: letters from Bishop Karol Wojtyła, 1973–1978. KADOC, Leuven.

55 Vos, “Leuven, Louvain and Poland,” 25.

56 Goddeeris, “Solidarity or Indifference?,” 384.

in a newspaper interview that the “Free Polish [...] have sworn allegiance to the Polish government-in-exile” in London, which had long since ceased to be the main representative of anti-communist Poland and had itself thrown its weight behind *Solidarność*. Recki went on to criticize the Polish Consulate for appearing at veterans’ commemorations, but not attending Bressers’ biweekly Polish mass. “I have stayed in Ghent,” he said, “precisely because I can continue to protest against [...] the deal Churchill and Roosevelt made with Stalin on Poland [in Yalta].”⁵⁷ Though Bressers personally kept his finger on the pulse with regards to the *Solidarność* movement, his congregation remained attached to the immediate postwar political milieu, having apparently undergone a stasis of political attitudes, firmly grounded in the veterans’ combined military and Catholic heritage, and Recki remained silent on the changes that were underway in Poland, which enjoyed the support of more recently exiled dissidents.

Religion as Dialogue: Carlos Bressers and Negotiating Identity

A dialogically constructed identity does not draw on predetermined narratives or historical context. It represents, rather, a “perpetual state of becoming” through which one group (migrants) identifies and interacts with other groups around it (the host society).⁵⁸ Representatives of both in-groups and out-groups are active agents in the process of negotiating a dialogically constructed identity. The figure of Carlos Bressers as chaplain of the Polish community in Ghent provided this community with privileged access to a host society actor who was positioned to serve as a mediator between migrants and hosts. Through his role as a priest and connections to wider Catholic society in Belgium and beyond, he provided essential opportunities for dialogical encounters between the two groups, and he centered their religious and military heritage in his efforts.

Throughout his chaplaincy, Bressers worked to foster encounters between his migrant congregations and wider Belgian society. In his involvement with the Polish community of Ghent, he explicitly fused the importance of Catholicism with their military heritage through an annual solemn mass held to commemorate five Polish airmen who perished during the battle of Ghent (and for the losses of Polish soldiers in both World Wars more generally), a service he led well into the post-Cold War period. Bressers’ memorial services emphasized the Polish

57 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Newspaper clipping “2 Regio Gent: Bevrijders van Gent afwezig op 1 november?,” November 1, 1988. KADOC, Leuven.

58 Yuval-Davis, “Theorizing identity: beyond the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy,” 271.

veterans' religious devotion, which was repeatedly brought to the attention of the city's public and covered by the Belgian media.⁵⁹ Bressers would typically lead a church service in the city and then lead a procession to the King Albert Memorial in one of Ghent's city parks for a wreath-laying ceremony. The masses were organized in collaboration with the "Belgian-Polish Committee" of Count Henri de Hemptinne, the "Polish Veterans' Association," and the "Friends of the Polish Air Force" charity, which was led by the aforementioned veteran Bronislaw Recki. The guests of honor at these masses furthered an understanding of the Polish community among prominent Belgian actors, and Polish priests and missionaries living in the West were also often invited.⁶⁰ Among the invitees to the solemn mass over the years were Count de Hemptinne (replaced by his son François after 1978), Mgr. Emile Dujardin, representative of the Belgian Episcopate for émigrés and refugees, members of the Brussels-based Polish Catholic Mission, and both Polish army-in-exile and Belgian military representatives.⁶¹ A similar service at Villers-la-Ville, a village in Belgium's French-speaking Wallonia region and home to the historic ruins of a Cistercian abbey, was organized in 1994 "to consecrate a great day of Polish-Belgian brotherhood." The service, led by guest chaplains from Poland and with Bressers in attendance, saw the mingling of Polish, Belgian, and wider European veterans' associations.⁶² Through his role in participating in, organizing and often leading these ceremonies, Bressers connected the religious and military identities of the Polish community to the wider Belgian Catholic landscape.

Sint-Denijs-Westrem, the barracks and former airfield where the Polish veterans living in Ghent had been stationed during the war, was of key symbolic significance to the community and replaced the King Albert Memorial as the destination of the procession in the 1970s. However, the site saw considerable redevelopment from the 1950s up to the 1980s, when the airfield was finally paved over. With the tangible heritage of the Polish veterans' legacy under threat, Bressers sought permanently to codify their contributions to Belgium

59 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Newspaper clipping "2 Regio Gent: Bevrijders van Gent afwezig op 1 november?," November 1, 1988; Newspaper clipping "Inhuldiging Pools monument te St-Denijs-Westrem," *De Gentenaar*, September 25, 1974; Newspaper clipping "1 januari 1945: luchtslag boven Sint-Denijs-Westrem en Gent," September 26, 1974. KADOC, Leuven.

60 Ibid.

61 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/1: Invitations to "Solemn Mass" commemorating Polish war dead, December 1973–2001. KADOC, Leuven.

62 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/1: Newspaper clipping "Villers-La-Ville: La Pologne se souvient", May 6, 1994. KADOC, Leuven.

with a public monument. He worked with Recki, who was also the sculptor who led “Friends of the Polish Air Force” and who was described as the “leader” of Ghent’s Poles.⁶³ Recki designed and installed a sculpture, complete with a World War II-era propeller replica, on the small Poolse Winglaan (Polish Wing Lane) street near the airfield site.⁶⁴ Its unveiling on September 21, 1974 was sponsored by the city of Ghent and steeped in Catholic ceremony. The preceding mass that year had been overseen by Bressers’ superior, Mgr. van Peteghem, and the event attracted a number of prominent delegates, including a representative of the Belgian monarchy.⁶⁵

1976, two years after the dedication of the monument and a decade before the pope’s visit, marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Polish Catholic Union of Ghent, and Bressers worked to involve the Polish clergy in the celebrations. Specifically, he wrote letters to the Diocese of Kraków in an attempt to invite Archbishop Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II) to Belgium. The invitation outlined an “academic session,” followed by gifts of flowers for the attendees by Polish children and a classical music concert. Bressers hoped that the archbishop would be able to conduct a Catholic mass attended by representatives of the Polish community and concluding with a “democratic banquet of Poles and guests.” Notably, here Bressers brought the Poles into contact with prominent members of Belgian society. He invited important figures, such as the former Minister of State August De Schryver and the Mayor of Ghent. Bressers also expected the aforementioned Henryk Repka (the rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in Brussels) to attend, which would bring together his congregation and the nationwide Belgo-Polish Catholic community.⁶⁶ Despite the effort, in a follow-up letter, Bressers noted that he had waited “in vain” for a response and lightheartedly expressed his disappointment that Mgr. Wojtyła could not attend with the Polish word *szkoda* (pity), expressing his hopes for a future visit.⁶⁷

63 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Newspaper clipping “2 Regio Gent: Bevrijders van Gent afwezig op 1 november?,” November 1, 1988. KADOC, Leuven.

64 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Annotated schematic “Monument voor de Poolse Piloten gesneuveld te St. Denijs-Westrem – 1945,” S.D. KADOC, Leuven.

65 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Newspaper clipping “Gent-LW: Poolse monument onthuld te Sint-Denijs-Westrem; Aandenken aan gevallen Poolse vliegeniers,” September 23, 1974. KADOC, Leuven.

66 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/1: Letter from Bressers to Kraków Diocese, September 11, 1976. KADOC, Leuven.

67 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/188/1: Letter from Bressers to Kraków Diocese, October 21, 1976. KADOC, Leuven.

Despite the unfortunate no-show, Bressers' intentions showed a desire to use Catholicism as a bridge between his congregation, the upper echelons of Belgian society, and the native Polish clergy. The request, however, would eventually meet with a positive response, as Recki's sculpture further underpinned the commemorative significance of the Polish community heritage. Indeed, the site took on a new religious meaning in 1985, when Bressers, Łuczak, Recki, and François de Hemptinne wrote a letter petitioning Pope John Paul II to make a brief stop at the site on the occasion of his official visit to Belgium that year. Their request was honored with an open-air mass which was "preceded by a grand spectacle" and attended by 150,000 people.⁶⁸

Conclusion

As the Cold War gradually wound to a close, Bressers received commendation from Poland's most prominent clergy for his work as a valuable bridge for dialogue between the migrants and their Belgian neighbors. For his work with the Polish veterans, he was commended with the title of honorary canon of the Archdiocese of Gniezno by Cardinal Józef Glemp in 1987 (he also received a similar honor from the clergy of Hungary).⁶⁹ In his speech thanking Glemp and the Archdiocese, he closed with a simple message describing his decades of chaplaincy: "this spiritual debt of gratitude for the good received I try to pay by prayer and by a dedicated ministry, so that the Poles who live in Belgium transmit the heritage of their faith to future generations."⁷⁰ Notwithstanding the specific limitations he may have faced surrounding *Solidarność* in the 1980s, overall Bressers' dialogical mediation between migrants and hosts was essential in the identity formation processes which preserved and shaped the religious and secular heritage of the communities, with the Church acting as a bilateral partner, situating itself and revolving around church settings, practices, and

68 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/187/3: Letter from "Friends of the Polish Air Force" to "Honorary Registrar Paul" and "Juffrouw van Kemseke," November 9, 1984. KADOC, Leuven; the pope's visit to Sint-Denijs-Westrem is recorded here [<https://www.tijdvoor80.be/de-paus-in-belgie/>] Accessed November 15, 2022.

69 In 1984, the Archbishop of Esztergom, Cardinal László Lékai, made Bressers an honorary canon of that diocese in recognition of his services to the Hungarian community in Ghent. See Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/204: Certificate of honorary canonship of the Diocese of Esztergom, February 18, 1987. KADOC, Leuven.

70 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/194: Certificate of honorary canonship of the Diocese of Gniezno, February 18, 1987. KADOC, Leuven.

networks. Perhaps the highest endorsement of Bressers' efforts came on the occasion of his fiftieth year of priesthood in 1992, when he received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland from the country's first non-communist leader since the Second World War, President Lech Wałęsa.⁷¹

The different methods and practices with which the members of the Polish community of Ghent expressed their identity were heavily influenced by their cultural and historical heritage and connections to their home country, but also by the time they spent in the host society, which shaped the evolution of their political attitudes and their relationship with Carlos Bressers, the Catholic Church, and the Diocese of Ghent. The formation and evolution of this identity and the interaction between members of this community and wider Belgian society suggest a number of conclusions and areas for further speculation.

The Poles of Ghent perhaps fit the popular definitions of "émigré" in the very broadest sense due to their early engagements with anti-communism. They were loyal to the anti-communist Polish government-in-exile, and as Allied military veterans, they took an anti-communist stance. However, this was limited by prolonged exposure to the host society or other factors unseen in the archives of Bressers (a perception of the futility of any efforts to further change, perhaps, but more likely the erosion of personal connections to Poland and increased assimilation.) The members of this community also differed significantly from the prominent "exiles" of the 1970s and 1980s. They behaved more as cultural custodians, safeguarding a Polish identity and heritage heavily influenced by their Catholic lived religion. Though, they remained nominally anti-communist, with the passage of time, their identities shifted from "Poles in Belgium" to "Belgian Poles." This was not the case everywhere. For example, in Goddeeris' studies of the Polish trade unionists active within the Belgian syndicalist arena, *Solidarność* served to reignite solidarity, albeit short-lived, with the home country after long periods of dormancy, though the actions of these groups were not always necessarily politically motivated and often took humanitarian forms.⁷²

The role of Bressers as a mediator between home and host resonates with Yuval-Davis' emphasis on dialogical identity formation, particularly the "importance of the communal context" and the conversations, contestations, and authorizations that take place between two groups between which there are

71 Archief Familie Bressers, BE/942855/1925/197: Letter to Jacek, Beata, and Peter Barfuss, December 11, 1992. KADOC, Leuven.

72 Goddeeris, "The Polish Section of the Belgian Christian Trade Union ACV/CSC," 265; Goddeeris, "Solidarity or Indifference? Polish Migrants in Belgium and *Solidarność*," 80.

inherent imbalances in power.⁷³ In the case of migrants, this imbalance is the result of many considerations, from language to cultural difference and social norms. For the members of the Polish community in Ghent, their negotiation of collective identity was greatly facilitated by contact with a dynamic host society actor, the in-between figure of Bressers, and the religion and wartime heritage they shared with their hosts. Ghent's Catholic Church was willing to act as a receiving structure to increase the visibility of Polish Catholicism among the people of the city, and it granted the Poles access to high rungs on the ladder of the Belgian societal hierarchy, perhaps best embodied by their successful petition to have Pope John Paul II, an icon among Catholics worldwide, visit their humble monument in Sint-Denijs-Westrem.

The experiences of these communities support the argument that the tireless exiles well remembered in popular conceptions of the Cold War were a significant but small population, and that Central and Eastern European migrant communities were equally likely instead to remain attached to pre-socialist visions and culture of their homelands. Far from being an abstract or passive host society influence, the work of Carlos Bressers outlines the flexible exchange in which local actors can engage in shaping the collective identity and notions of belonging among migrant communities. The processes in which both the migrants and the host society engaged with each other at their own initiatives and in the common interests of each were dynamic, bilateral, and subject to both internal and external influences.

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