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A social psychological perspective on World War II collaboration in the 21st century: A Belgian case

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Abstract

The present study addresses antecedents and consequences of attitudes towards collaboration in the context of World War II (WWII) in Belgium. A survey conducted on 922 Belgian French- and Dutch-speaking participants shows that, on overall, Dutch-speakers perceive collaboration as more moral and support amnesty of the former collaborators at a higher level than their Francophone counterparts. In addition, we show that these attitudes are predicted by the generational belonging, linguistic and national identification of the participants. Finally, we find that attitudes towards WWII collaboration are linked to specific political prospects for the future of the country only among Dutch-speakers. These findings suggest that, 75 years after its end, the issue of collaboration during WWII still divides the Belgian society. Furthermore, they underline the added value of a multilevel approach in the understanding of social psychological phenomena.

KEYWORDS

Belgium, collaboration, intergroup relations, political psychology, social identity, World War II

1 | INTRODUCTION

On the night of May 8–9, 1945, after a first signature on May 7 in Reims, German and Allied military representatives signed the capitulation of the Third Reich. This act marked the end, on the western front, of the deadliest war of the twentieth century: World War II (WWII). While the time had come for popular celebrations among the winners, the purge of those who had collaborated with the Germans was on its way. Belgium, which was liberated by the allies a few months earlier, was no exception. Indeed, 0.64% of Belgians were condemned for collaboration:[1] 0.73% of Flemish and 0.56% of Francophones. Together with this penal procedure, alternative sanctions such as deprivation of civil rights and administrative exclusions

[1]Collaboration during WWII covered a very different range of activities. Strictly speaking, collaborating means working voluntarily to achieve German policy and objectives. In Belgium, collaboration has taken many forms: political (Wouters, 2006), military and repressive (De Wever, 2003), economic (Nefors, 2000), artistic and intellectual (Devillez, 2003; for an overview, see Van den Wijngaert et al., 2015). At the national level, widespread forms of collaboration were political and military (e.g., some 40,000 Belgians were sentenced for carrying weapons, which is the most important form of collaboration). At the regional level, collaboration, although not widespread, is part of a broader movement in Flanders than in French-speaking Belgium. In this case, the collaboration is linked to a broader Flemish movement mixing anti-Belgian nationalism and Flemish Catholicism (De Wever, 1994). On the French-speaking side, there is no regionalist movement comparable to the Flemish one. There are also fewer collaboration movements than in the north. Nevertheless, some members of the far-right party "Rex", in favor of a new order, collaborated strongly with the occupier at the military and repressive levels. In addition, politicians from this party were placed in responsible positions by the occupier (Conway, 1993).

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from benefits of the social welfare state, the postwar purge targeted a total of 100,000 inhabitants, which was around 1.20% of the Belgian population (Aerts, Luyten, Willems, Drossens, & Lagrou, 2017; see also Gilissen, 1951). However, the popular and private repression took place outside the legal system and precise figures on the postwar purge as a whole do not exist so far.

What was unclear at the time was that collaboration and the consequences of its repression would have a long-term impact on the society of one of the most prosperous and stable countries in Western Europe. Indeed, from the liberation onwards, a binary vision of war soon developed dividing Belgium's two main linguistic communities: Flemish (Dutch-speakers) and Francophones (Gotovitch & Kesteloot, 2002). This binary vision developed in response to specific experiences of the occupation and to deep antagonisms running through the Belgian society. These dividing representations are themselves anchored in the experience of Belgians, especially in Flanders, during World War I (Warland, 2019). The memory of this traumatizing event provides the template for memory conflicts in Belgium. In this regard, WWII has been perceived by some groups, especially among Flemish nationalists, as the repetition of one single scenario due to the arrogance of the French-speaking elite. This scenario can be summarized by two main words: unfairness and contempt.

In addition to the linguistic division, there was a clear polarization between a predominantly Catholic and conservative Flanders and mainly anti-clerical and left-wing Francophones. Combined with the absence of a strong role for the Belgian state in the imposition of a centralized memory of war, a tumultuous memory landscape gradually emerged (Benvindo & Peeters, 2012). In Flanders, collaboration, although done by a minority, was broader than in French-speaking Belgium, while resistance was less intense. In addition, the collaboration was associated with a broader Flemish movement linked to Flemish nationalism and the Catholic movement. After the war, this entanglement between Catholics and Flemish anti-Belgian nationalists went further. The Catholic party gradually pronounced itself on the question of the repression of collaborators. This led to a representation of the war in Flanders as very comprehensive in relation to the collaborators and critical in relation to the resistance: a kind of inverted image of the one that exists in French-speaking Belgium and in most European countries (De Wever, 2019). Specifically, soon after the war, collaborators in Flanders and their sympathizers, on the one hand, succeeded in creating a dominant discourse of an anti-Flemish, harsh and never-ending purge (Aerts, 2009, 2018a). In this discourse, the Belgian state is described as having punished Flemish citizens as a whole instead of the collaborators (Aerts, 2011, 2018a). Among the Francophones on the other hand, most collaborators were perceived as criminals and traitors (Beyen, 2002). In parallel, a strong memory of resistance gradually emerged among Francophones, supported by the networks of former resistance fighters.[2] These memories then impacted the identity of the Francophones who associated their identity and the Belgian nation with the memory of the resistance. On the Flemish side, a counter-memory associated with the unfair repression of the collaboration, which was initially only developed by Flemish nationalists, was then included within the larger Flemish identity (see Lagrou, 2003).[3]

The existence of this binary vision gradually fueled tensions between the two linguistic communities and contributed to their disunity (Beyen, 2002). In the 1960s, after a long Francophone domination at the political, economic and cultural levels, changes in the economy led to a radical shift of power. The Flemish, who had hitherto been economically and culturally subordinated, were getting richer and increasingly organized in terms of political and cultural identity, while at the same time Francophones were suffering greatly from economic changes. This movement led to the adoption of new laws giving more autonomy to the regions and communities.[4] The Flemish emancipation movement, supported by a number of former collaborators at high level decision instances, including political leaders (Aerts, 2018a), required that the issue of amnesty for collaborators be discussed in the Parliament.[5] However, in line with most of the Flemish parties, all Francophone parties were and still are strongly opposed to the amnesty and are in favor of the "duty to remember" (De Guissmé, Lastrego, Mélotte, & Licata, 2017). So far, no amnesty has been granted at the national level and the issue of collaboration still hinders intergroup relations in Belgium. In addition, politicians from both communities regularly exploit the issues of collaboration and amnesty for political purposes. In October 2014, for instance, a criticism against the coalition between Liberals and Flemish nationalists of N-VA provoked a polemic at the Belgian Parliament. In evoking the "noise of the boots" that resonate within the Belgian government, one of the leading socialist MPs emphasized the relationships existing between some N-VA members and former collaborators during WWII (La Libre, 2014; see also Aerts, 2018b). Five years later, the same comment was made in the aftermath of the federal elections. While academic historians in the last two decades have deconstructed the myth of the false dichotomy between Flemish collaboration and Francophone resistance (Benvindo & Peeters, 2009; Conway, 1993; Gotovitch & Kesteloot, 2002), the legacy of WWII still enters the public debate as a theme which divides the Flemish and Francophone segments of the population (Conway, 2005). The striking absence of any unifying national or patriotic memory of the war contrasts with the strong narratives of the events that are present in the country, especially in Flanders.

Different representations of the past are associated with concrete consequences in terms of identity (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu &

[2]Flanders also had strong networks of former resistance fighters, but they did not succeed in building a dominant narrative of resistance.

[3]This is especially the case for the Flemish nationalists. For major studies on the links between collective memory and identity, see Liu & Hilton (2010) and Liu & Sibley (2005).

[4]Belgium is a Federal State divided into three territorial regions—Wallonia, Flanders and Brussel—and three communities—French-speaking and German-speaking in Wallonia, Dutch-speaking in Flanders, and a bilingual mix in Brussel.

[5]Amnesty is a general legal measure voted by the Parliament that corresponds to the erasure of the committed violations. Acts committed are supposed not to have occurred. As far as collaboration is concerned, amnesty is above all a political and collective measure. As we will see below, amnesty for former collaborators has major symbolic, legal and economic implications. So far, in Belgium, no amnesty has been granted for acts of collaboration during WWII.

Sibley, 2009) and world perceptions (Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014). The same war and purge generated two different memories delimited by the two main linguistic communities of Belgium's successive post-war state reforms. It is therefore important to understand how, at the beginning of the 21st century, French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians are positioning themselves with regard to the issues of collaboration and amnesty. More specifically, we are interested in how Belgians from both linguistic communities position themselves with regard to support for amnesty and the perceived morality of collaboration. The objective of this article is thus threefold: (a) to examine—beyond the level of the political debate—whether the issues of collaboration and amnesty still divide the country's main communities 75 years after the Second World War; (b) to identify the potential determinants of support for amnesty and the perception of collaboration; and (c) to empirically test whether these issues are related to political preferences for the future of the country. Beside theoretical considerations, each of these goals is critical to better understand the current political challenge faced in Belgium and in most deeply divided societies.

1.1 | A social identity approach

Social identity theory constitutes one of the major approaches to intergroup relations (Tajfel, 2010). And we believe that it provides an especially relevant prism of interpretation in the context of WWII collaboration in Belgium. A social identity is a categorization of the self into more inclusive social units (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One of the premises of social identity theory is that individuals try to maintain or acquire a positive identity for their group (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975). At the intergroup level, preservation of a positive identity is determined to a large extent by social comparisons that favor the ingroup over relevant outgroups (Hogg, 2000). For instance, during and after the war, French-speakers could preserve a positive social identity by comparing themselves with the "Flemish collaborators".[6] But what happens when the positive identity of the ingroup is threatened from within, by the deviant behavior of some of its members? When members of the ingroup behave in a deviant way—such as Belgian collaborators in times of war—a way to preserve a positive identity is to judge much more negatively group members who are considered "deviant" than similar outgroup members. This phenomenon, highlighted by Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens (1988), is known as the black sheep effect (see also Marques & Páez, 1994). Another strategy lies in the modification of the group's narrative with regard to its culpability in past atrocities in order to avoid feelings of collective guilt and shame (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). According to Hirschberger, Kende, and Weinstein (2016), this might lead to the development of defensive representations of history attributing wrongdoing to external pressure, which would in turn impact contemporary intergroup attitudes. These effects are especially present among individuals who strongly identify with their ingroup (in the black sheep case, individuals highly identified with Belgium and in the other case, individuals highly identified with Flanders; see next points) (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). With regard to the observations on the historical and socio-political context of Belgium and the social identity perspective, we formulate a first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 *Current support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration is higher among Flemish than among Francophone participants.*

The Belgian socio-historical context mentioned above depicts how Belgians from the two main linguistic communities would position themselves on the issues of collaboration and amnesty, but the factors leading to this remain unclear. We thus aim to examine, in a social identity perspective, three potential factors driving the support for amnesty and perception of collaboration. These factors correspond to three classical levels of analysis of social psychology: individual (micro), group (meso) and societal (macro).

1.2 | A multilevel perspective on amnesty and collaboration

As discussed above, the questions of collaboration and amnesty are primarily viewed as societal issues. However, beyond this macro-social dimension, wartime collaboration and its consequences are also directly linked to family and individual experiences. These two dimensions have been particularly addressed by Welzer's researches on the transmission of memories among families of former Nazis (Welzer, 2010; Welzer, Moller, & Tschuggnall, 2002). Through a series of interviews, Welzer shows that memory dynamics within these families are influenced by the generational belonging of individuals and the ties that binds the different family members (see specific point below). At the Belgian level, the family and individual dimensions of WWII collaboration have recently been highlighted through the TV series *Kinderen van de collaboratie* (Children from the Collaboration), that was seen by more than 500,000 Dutch-speaking viewers (Canvas, 2017). In the series, 14 individuals explained how their parents collaborated with the Germans during WWII and how this affected their lives, especially after the war.[7]

One of the strengths of social psychology is that it has the capacity to approach its objects through different levels of analysis: individual (micro), group (meso) and societal (macro) (Bar-Tal, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2006; Hewstone, 1997; Pettigrew, 2006). The combination of these levels of interpretation allows individual processes and experiences to be situated within broader group dynamics and specific contexts. In our case, these levels of analysis make it possible to

[6] Despite a similar level of collaboration in both communities (see higher).

[7] A major research project on the family and individual dimensions of WWII collaboration is also being supported by the Belgian Science Policy Office: "The Sorrows of Belgium: WWII memories and family transmission".

http://www.belspo.be/belspo/fedra/proj.asp?l=en&COD=BR%2F175%2FA3%2FTRANSMEMO

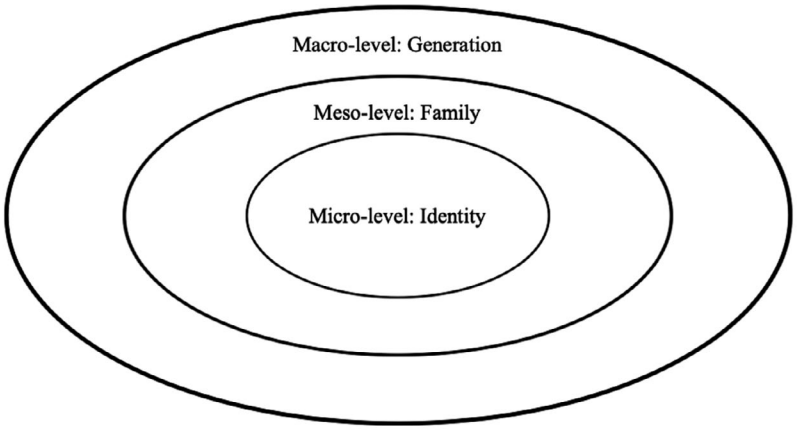


FIGURE 1 Layers of influence on support for amnesty and perceived morality of WWII collaboration in Belgium

understand the question of collaboration in Belgium from three major perspectives: social identity (micro), family (meso) and generation (macro) (see Figure 1). Starting from these three levels, we hypothesize that current support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration in Belgium can be understood in a social identity perspective.

1.3 | Identity, family and generation

This study focuses on the attitudes of French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian citizens on collaboration and amnesty 75 years after the end of the war. Three main guiding questions will allow us to better understand the influence of three levels of interpretation on the current positions of Belgian citizens. (a) At the micro-level, which types of Belgian and linguistic social identities are linked to more or less support for amnesty and collaboration? (b) At the meso-level, are families in which one or several members were directly involved in the collaboration more in favor of amnesty than families not involved in collaboration or involved in the resistance? (c) At the macro-level, are older generations reacting to collaboration-related issues in a more polarized way than the younger generations?

1.3.1 | Social identity

One of the specificities of the Belgian context is that, in addition to their Belgian national identity, individuals are characterized by particular social identities in relation to their linguistic community. The French- and Dutch-speaking identities, which were partly shaped by the experience of war, often reflect radically different realities, whether at the political,[8] cultural or memory level (Billiet, Maddens, & Frognier, 2006). We have seen above that the Francophone and, more broadly, the Belgian identity[9] classically associated themselves with the resistance against the Germans while the Flemish-nationalists conceived themselves as victims of the postwar purge—collaboration is perceived by supporters of the Flemish nationalist movement as a lever for emancipation from the Belgian state.[10] Further, research has shown that high identifiers feel particularly threatened by the wrongful actions of members of their group even if they happened decades earlier (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). In order to support a favorable view of the ingroup, they then tend to modify the group's narrative with regard to its culpability for past atrocities (Bilali, 2012; Sahdra & Ross, 2007). Hirschberger et al. (2016)—who called this process "defensive representations of history"—underline that, in order to reduce guilt and shame, group members might attribute their past behavior to external sources or even portray themselves as victims (for instance, of a postwar purge). Since collaboration has contributed to the affirmation of the Flemish identity, we might expect that individuals who identify strongly as Flemish citizens would show higher levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration than low-identified Dutch-speaking individuals. Further, it has been shown that individuals seek to maintain or increase their positive social identity by comparing themselves with other groups (e.g., Tajfel, 2010). Knowing that the Francophone "members of the resistance" identity has been built up in relation to that of the Flemish "collaboration identity", we might expect that individuals who identify strongly with the Francophone group will show lower levels of support for amnesty

[8]The polarized results of the last federal elections on May 26, 2019 are emblematic. The elections were marked by a distinct shift to the extreme-right in Flanders region (the far-right Vlaams Belang scored more than 18.6% of the vote and became the second-biggest party behind the nationalist N-VA, which remains the largest party in Flanders with 24.8%). In Wallonia, however, voters gave leftist parties a clear win (the Socialist PS remained the strongest party in the region, with 26.2% of votes). These results mean that the country's linguistic divide is also doubled by a political divide.

[9]In the Belgian case, "Belgium" constitutes a superordinate level of social identity, especially among French-speakers (see Common Ingroup Identity Model; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014).

[10]Yet, the representation of these identities—which is based on the assumption of the existence of two distinct groups—may seem too simplistic, even a caricature. Indeed, the plurality of Belgian experiences and memories of the war cannot be reduced, today as in the past, to a binary division between Dutch- and French-speakers (Benvindo & Peeters 2012). Thus, the specific situation of Brussels (i.e., Belgium's capital city but also a bilingual region) cannot be properly understood in considering these two categories only. Likewise, the particular features of the German-speaking community in Belgium show the narrowness of such categories.

and perceived morality of collaboration than low-identifying individuals.[11]

Regarding identification with Belgium, we might expect it to play a significant role especially among certain Dutch-speaking participants. Indeed, unlike the Francophones, for the Flemish nationalists,[12] Belgian identity does oppose the Flemish one (see e.g., Vrints & De Wever, 2008). One of the drivers of this opposition is the policy of nation-building pursued by the successive Flemish governments, aimed at creating a Flemish national consciousness. For part of the Flemish population, another driver is the perception of the Belgian state as the punisher of Flanders instead of the collaborators after WWII (see above; see also Aerts, 2011, 2018a). Finally, in a black sheep perspective, we might expect individuals highly identified with Belgium—be they Flemish or Francophones—to show low support for amnesty of former collaborators considered as deviant ingroup members. This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a *Identification with Belgium is negatively correlated with support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration.*

Hypothesis 2b *Regarding identification with the linguistic group, we expect a positive relation between support for amnesty and perceived morality among Flemish—whose social identity relies partly on a memory and history of collaboration. We expect a negative relation between support for amnesty and perceived morality among Francophones whose social identity is classically associated with resistance and opposition to amnesty.*

1.3.2 | Family

In his seminal study on the memory transmission of the Nazi period in Germany, Welzer underlined the relevance of a family approach to collective memory (Welzer, 2010; Welzer et al., 2002). One of his main observations was that, in many cases, family members of former Nazis do acknowledge and condemn the crimes of Nazism but tend to exonerate their ancestor by building stories in which their own grandparents act in a morally upright, dissident way and show moral courage. From a social identity perspective, dissociating a family member from wrongful acts of his or her ingroup would help to preserve a positive social identity at the family level. In line with Welzer and the social identity perspective, we might expect no differences in support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration between members of former collaborators' families and members of families uninvolved in collaboration. Nevertheless, we might expect a difference in the levels of perceived morality of collaboration and support for amnesty between families of former collaborators and descendants of resistance fighters, who would be opposed to forgiveness in a logic of fidelity to the "sacrifice" of their ancestors.

Our third hypothesis is thus the following:

Hypothesis 3 *Individuals having a family member involved as a collaborator during the war show similar levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration as individuals reporting no collaborator(s) within their family. Still, we expect participants reporting family member(s) who resisted against the Germans to show lower levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration.*

1.3.3 | Generations

Beyond the family level, individuals are rooted in collective experiences shared at the level of their generation. Mannheim defines the concept of generation as a group of individuals with similar perceptions and memories (Mannheim, 1928/1952). Each generation grows up in a particular social and historical context, which profoundly influences its representations, attitudes and shared values (Ester et al., 2002). In the Belgian case, this level of analysis is particularly appropriate for investigating intergroup relations and political attitudes (e.g., Bouchat & Rimé, 2018; Licata & Klein, 2010; Stone, Luminet, Van der Haegen, & Hirst, 2014). In a study on the collective memory of victimhood in Belgium, three generations of Francophones and Flemish have been shown to possess different memories of victimization and to have diverged in terms of intergroup attitudes and political aspirations (Rimé, Bouchat, Klein, & Licata, 2015). These three generations corresponded to key socio-political periods of Belgium's history: (a) the "pre-federalization period" (i.e., a period of relative domination of a Francophone elite and of WWII and its immediate aftermath); (b) the "federalization process" (i.e., a period of strong tensions corresponding to the creation of a linguistic border[13] and the expulsion of the Francophones from the University of Louvain); and (c) the "federal state period" (i.e., a period during which the linguistic communities acquired a large number of responsibilities and the Flemish were in a strong position at the political and economic levels). Comparing these generations, it was found that memories of victimization and political aspirations were much less polarized between Flemish and Francophones in younger generations than in older ones. The younger generation was more favorable to a unified Belgium and shared fewer memories of victimization than the older one. Unlike their elders, their memories and political aspirations were thus much more convergent. In order to explain this evolution, the authors suggested that the current socio-political situation does not fit anymore with the collective memory of victimization of the Flemish. As a result, memories of victimization would fade and political aspirations would tend towards a reconciliation between the two linguistic communities (Rimé et al., 2015).

[11] A similar pattern has been evidenced by De Guissmé et al. (2017) in one of the first social psychological studies on WWII collaboration in Belgium. In this case, they considered identification as a moderator of the relation between linguistic group belonging and perceived immorality of collaboration (De Guissmé et al., 2017; see also De Guissmé, Licata, & Mercy, 2014).

[12] In the current Belgian context, the notion of "nationalist party" covers a regionalist orientation and implies an aspiration for separation from the Belgian state and autonomy of one's linguistic region (see Rimé et al., 2006).

[13] The linguistic border is an administrative border established in 1962 which divides the country into three officially unilingual regions (the Flemish, Walloon and German regions) and a bilingual region (the Brussels region).

In the case of WWII collaboration, we believe that, parallel to a change in the socio-political situation, a social identity process is at work. We assume that for generations whose social identity is strongly linked to the issues of war and the immediate postwar period, the issues of collaboration and amnesty are much more polarizing than for younger generations, characterized by a significant temporal distance from the war and more peaceful intercommunity relations. In connection with the black sheep effect, we expect the oldest French-speaking Belgians, whose identity was threatened by Belgians who collaborated with the Nazis, to perceive collaboration as highly immoral and to be poorly supportive of amnesty for former collaborators. On the opposite side, we expect the oldest generation of Dutch-speakers, for whom the issue of amnesty could have had immediate symbolic consequences in terms of identity,[14] to show high levels of support for amnesty. As the request for amnesty no longer concerns anyone alive and WWII happened long before their birth, it is likely that the consequences of this major event are no longer considered as hot societal issues by the younger generation of Belgians (see Aerts, 2018a; Assmann, 2008). Using the findings of Rimé and colleagues on the generational evolution of the memories of victimization and on the temporal distance from WWII, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4 *The younger generations of Francophones and Flemish are closer to each other regarding their support for amnesty and perception of collaboration, compared to the older generations, who hold more diverging positions.*

We now turn to the impact of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration on a critical outcome for intergroup relations, which concerns political prospects for the future of Belgium.

1.4 | Political prospects for the future of Belgium

Previous studies have shown that representations of the past can greatly impact current intergroup attitudes (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005). This is especially the case for collective memories of victimization. For instance, Wohl and Branscombe (2005) have shown that memories of historical victimization are associated with greater distancing from members of the "former perpetrators" group. In order to support their autonomist political agenda, the Flemish nationalist parties raise issues that polarize public opinion. For example, in early March 2019, a prominent representative of the N-VA (the main Flemish nationalist party) compared the sufferings inflicted by "Belgium" on Flemish soldiers in the Great War with those inflicted on the Congolese during colonization (Le Soir, 2019). As the elections of May 2019 showed, dealing with the collaboration remains a highly polarizing issue.

More precisely, we wonder whether the issue of collaboration and of amnesty for the former collaborators might still impact Belgians' political preference for the future of their country. Previous research has shown that, among Flemish, political prospects for the future of Belgium were driven by a collective memory of victimhood (Rimé et al., 2015). Because memory of victimhood is closely linked to WWII experience among Flemish (see above), we expect emblematic political prospects—radical separation of the two communities or augmented integration in a unified government—to be influenced by the issue of collaboration. On the Francophone side, collaboration during WWII is not associated with any memory of victimhood and has not driven the political agenda since the immediate postwar years. As such, we do not expect support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration to be related to the Francophones' political prospects for the future of Belgium. Further, among Flemish, memories of victimhood and adhesion to radical separation tended to decrease according to generation (see above; see also Rimé et al., 2015). This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 5 *According to the observation that the question of amnesty is mostly relevant in the Flemish political landscape, we expect support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration to be significantly correlated with two emblematic political prospects (i.e., radical separation of the two communities and augmented integration in a unified government) among Flemish only. Specifically, among Flemish, we expect a positive link between support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration and radical separation of the communities. We also expect for Francophones a negative relationship between support for amnesty on the one hand and perceived morality of collaboration and augmented integration on the other hand.*

Hypothesis 6 *Among Flemish, we expect the link between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and the two emblematic political prospects (i.e., radical separation of the two communities and augmented integration in a unified government) to be significantly lower among members of the younger generations than among the older ones.*

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Procedure and participants

A vast online survey was designed in order to address these hypotheses. It was distributed through a mailing list of participants in a previous study who agreed to being re-contacted.[15] Nine hundred and twenty-two Belgian participants completed the questionnaire, which

[14] In the case of amnesty, acts committed are assumed not to have occurred.

[15] More specifically, we sent the online questionnaire to a mailing list of 2,749 individuals. This list was composed of e-mail addresses of individuals who had participated in one or several prior surveys on intergroup relations in Belgium (2010, 2011 and/or 2014). At that time, these individuals were recruited through public announcements posted on the websites of the main Belgian daily newspapers (in both communities). They then agreed to be re-contacted for future studies on the topic of intergroup relations in Belgium. These individuals did not receive any compensation for their participation. However, they were offered the opportunity to request detailed feedback on the results of the study.

TABLE 1 Subsamples' characteristics

Measures	Flemish *N* = 377	Francophones *N* = 545
Gender	67.4% men	55% men
Age	43.61 (18.12)	43.17 (18.21)
Highest diploma	Master (36.3%)	Master (36%)
Generations	Old (22%), Middle (37.1%), Young (40.8%)	Old (23.2%), Middle (31.7%), Young (45.1%)
Ancestor collaborator	Yes (15.4%), No (65%), Don't know (19.5%)	Yes (6.6%), No (77.4%), Don't know (16.1%)
Ancestor resistant	Yes (37%), No (35%), Don't know (28%)	Yes (58.9%), No (19.7%), Don't know (21.3%)

was accessible from September 20 to October 14 2018 (40.9% Flemish and 59.1% Francophones). Both subsamples—Francophones and Flemish—share highly similar characteristics (see Table 1). The same data collection procedure has been used in several studies in the same context (Klein, Bouchat, Azzi, & Luminet, 2017; Klein, Licata, Van der Linden, Mercy, & Luminet, 2012; Rimé et al., 2015). Each item of the questionnaire was presented in a strict alternation of languages in order to avoid any precedence effect. All items were translated and then back-translated by native-speaking researchers in psychology. They were also pretested in previous studies (De Guissmé et al., 2017; Rimé et al., 2015). Of the participants 85.4% mentioned the political party to which they felt the closest. Eighty-two participants felt the closest to N-VA (Flemish nationalist party), 196 participants selected green parties: Groen! (Flemish) = 69 and Ecolo (Francophone) = 127. Two hundred and thirty-three participants selected traditional parties: sp.a (Flemish socialists) = 17; PS (Francophone socialists) = 27; CD&V (Flemish Christian Democrats) = 22; cdH (Francophone Christian Democrats) = 43; open vld (Flemish liberals) = 34; MR (Francophone liberals) = 63; DéFI (Francophone center) = 27. All major Belgian political parties are represented in further analyses with the exception of the PVDA/PTB (a communist party which hold a common group between Flemish and Francophones at the Parliament; *n* = 42; we did not use it in further analyses because it is not possible to distinguish between its French- and Dutch-speaking voters). Finally, two parties, LLD and Vlaams Belang (nationalist/populists parties) which were selected by too few participants (respectively 2 and 8) and "others" (*n* = 56) were not considered in the analyses. In addition to their preferred political party and given the importance of political ideologies in the shaping of collective memories (Yamashiro, Van Engen, & Roediger, 2019), we measured the political orientation of the participants and included it as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

2.1.1 | Three generations

Both subsamples were divided into three generations corresponding to three clearly different experiences of the Belgian intergroup relations described by Rimé et al. (2015). To that end, we referred to Mannheim's conceptualization according to which a generation refers to individuals who shared similar youth experiences in their formative years, that is, according to this author, the period between 8 and 16 years (1928/1952). The first (old) generation is composed of individuals born between 1920 and 1957 (corresponding to WWII and its immediate aftermath and to the pre-federalization period). The youngest members of this generation were 16 years in 1973, corresponding to the beginning of the transformation of Belgium into a federal state. The second generation (middle) corresponds to the federalization process and comprises individuals born between 1958 and 1982. Finally, the last (young) generation is composed of participants raised after the end of the main federalizing steps (the oldest among them were 8 years old in 1991 at the end of the federalization process). Numbers of participants for each generation are provided in Table 1. The proportions of participants in the three generations were equally distributed between the Francophone and Flemish subsamples, $\chi^2(2,920) = 3.03$, $p = .220$. No outlier was excluded.[16] In addition to demographics variables—including the political party to which participants felt the closest—participants were asked to answer the following questions.

2.2 | Measures

Perceived morality of collaboration was measured using the following 2 items: "Collaboration during the Second World War is morally wrong" (reversed) and "In some circumstances, collaboration with the Germans was moral". These items were adapted from De Guissmé et al. (2017). Participants were asked to respond to these items on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Given their acceptable level of correlation ($r = .44$), we aggregated them.

Support for amnesty was assessed using 4 items (2 reversed) adapted from De Guissmé et al. (2017): e.g., "We could grant amnesty to collaborators" and "If a referendum on amnesty was to be held, I would support the amnesty". Scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. We aggregated the items into a single indicator, as the internal reliability of the fours items was very high ($\alpha = 0.93$).

[16]The only outliers were related to the political prospect of "separation". Fifteen individuals answered from 4 to 7, whereas all the others answered between 1 and 3 on a 1 to 7 scale). We decided to keep them in the analyses as separatists do indeed exist in Belgium and are an important part of this study.

Preferred political prospects correspond to four contrasted perspectives for the future of Belgium (see Klein et al., 2017) ranging from more integration to more separation: (a) augmented integration ("The linguistic regions will come together to establish a more unified government"); (b) no change ("The organization of the Belgian federal state will remain unchanged"); (c) more autonomy for the regions ("The linguistic regions will become more and more autonomous, but the Belgian state will remain") and (d) radical separation ("Belgium will split into two independent states"). These items were rated on a 7-point scale going from 1 (=not at all desirable) to 7 (=very much desirable).

Family involvement in WWII. We asked participants if any member of their family collaborated during the war or was involved in the resistance against the Germans. Participants could answer "yes", "no" or "I don't know". These two items were adapted from a study by Bouchat et al. (2017). Asking participants about their family's involvement in WWII is not an objective measure of participation. Indeed, it is possible that some participants, on the basis of family histories, may deduce the involvement of one of their ancestors. Their answer would thus reflect their subjective perception of the involvement of their family in the war. Nevertheless, in the absence of easily accessible archives, it is the most accurate measure we have for this type of data collection.

Identification with Belgium and with the Linguistic Ingroup assess the extent to which participants feel identified with Belgium and their linguistic group. Levels of identification were measured using three items adapted to the group of reference: "I am proud to tell my friends that I am Belgian/a Dutch/French speaker", "I am committed to Belgium/Flanders/Brussels/Wallonia" and "Most of the time, I like to think of myself as a Belgian/a Dutch/French speaker". Dutch speakers were presented with the 3 items relating to Belgium and then the same 3 items relating to Flanders/Brussels. Francophones were presented with the 3 items relating to Belgium and then the same 3 items relating to Wallonia/Brussels (see questionnaire at: https://osf.io/enp2x/?view_only=97297e39432149bbab7c72984343e40c). Items were rated on 7-point scales (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). Given their good internal consistency, items were aggregated to form two indicators: $\alpha_{Belgium} = 0.93$; $\alpha_{Linguistic} = 0.80$).

Political orientation was assessed with a single item measure. Participants were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale ranging from far left to far right (1 = Far left; 2 = left; 3 = center left; 4 = center; 5 = center right; 6 = right; 7 = far right). Research conducted with French-speaking samples in Belgium confirmed the validity of this measure by showing that it is correlated with various socio-political issues (see Van der Linden, Leys, Klein, & Bouchat, 2017). The question, which was not mandatory, was answered by 83.9% of the participants.

3 | RESULTS

Analyses were performed in three steps corresponding to the main objectives of this study: (a) we examined the levels of perceived morality of collaboration and support for amnesty within the two linguistic communities (Hypothesis 1); (b) we assessed the effect of three potential predictors—social identification, family involvement in WWII and generational belonging—on perceived morality of collaboration and support for amnesty (Hypotheses 2–4); (c) we examined the links between perceived morality of collaboration, support for amnesty and preferred political prospects as a function of the linguistic groups and generations (Hypotheses 5 and 6). Levels of all items are provided in Table 2.

3.1 | Perceived morality of collaboration and support for amnesty in Belgium

First, we expected support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration to be higher among Dutch-speaking participants than among French-speaking ones. Using *t*-tests, we showed that it was indeed the case. Dutch-speaking participants had a significantly higher level of support for amnesty, $t(619) = 12.18$, $p < .001$, and

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics for the main variables considered

Measures	Flemish *N* = 377	Francophones *N* = 545	*t*-tests values and effect sizes
Political orientation	3.91 (1.47)	3.52 (1.34)	3.81 (0.28)
Perceived morality of collaboration	3.67 (1.36)	2.41 (1.18)	12.18 (0.99)
Support for amnesty	4.81 (1.64)	3.04 (1.64)	13.10 (1.07)
Politics: unification	4.17 (2.28)	5.61 (1.60)	−10.73 (0.73)
Politics: no change	2.46 (1.66)	3.19 (1.82)	−5.91 (0.42)
Politics: more autonomy	3.80 (1.88)	3.34 (1.90)	3.44 (0.24)
Politics: separation	2.99 (2.44)	1.55 (1.34)	10.94 (0.73)
Identification Belgium	3.66 (1.95)	5.31 (1.66)	−13.61 (0.91)
Identification linguistic group	4.70 (1.68)	3.95 (1.53)	6.87 (0.45)

Note: Scales ranged from 1 to 7 (see above). Mean levels of all variables of interest differ significantly between Francophones and Flemish ($p < .001$). The values in brackets in the two first columns are Standard Deviations. In the third column, values in brackets are Cohen's *d*.

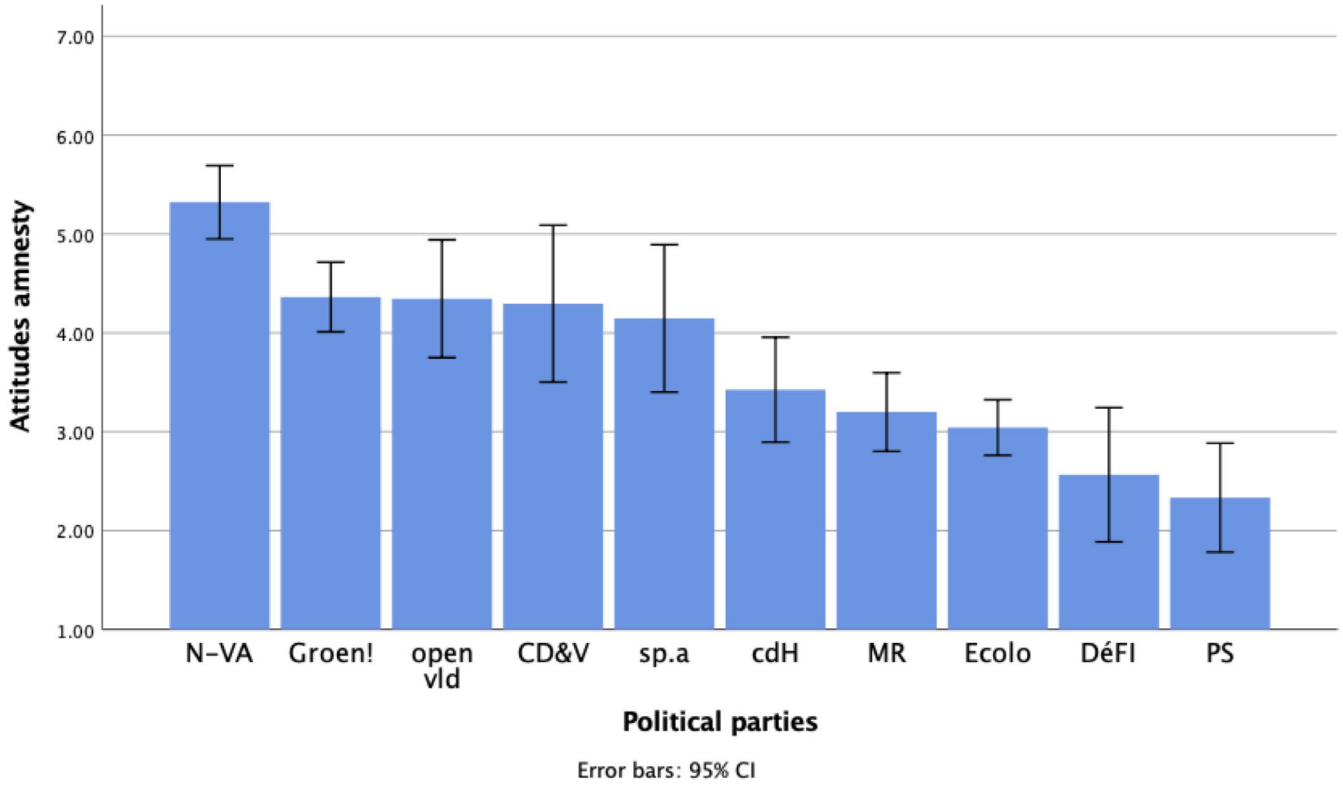


FIGURE 2 Support for Amnesty as a function of political party. *Note.* 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

higher perceived morality of collaboration, $t(618) = 13.10$, $p < .001$, than Francophones. Effect sizes are strong: Cohen's d = respectively 1.07 for support for amnesty and 0.99 for morality of collaboration. Hypothesis 1 was thus strongly supported.

In addition to Hypothesis 1, we assessed in an exploratory approach the levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration as a function of the political party the participants felt the closest to. Results are displayed in Figures 2 and 3. They show that participants who felt close to all Flemish parties (five first on the left of the chart) presented higher support for amnesty and morality of collaboration than those who felt close to Francophone parties (five on the right). Further, highest levels of support for amnesty and morality of collaboration are displayed by participants voting for the right-nationalist party from Flanders: N-VA. We complemented this exploratory approach by investigating the links between political orientation and our two main variables.[17] Using bivariate correlations, we showed that support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration were significantly linked to political orientation only among Dutch-speakers. More specifically, a right-wing political orientation was associated with higher levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration (see Appendix). These results are in line with observations of the political landscape in Belgium.

[17]First, we showed that, in both linguistic communities, the mean level of political orientation is close to the central point of the scale, which suggests that most participants place themselves at the center of the political landscape (see Table 2). Next, using a *t*-test, we found that Dutch-speaking respondents are slightly more right-wing oriented than French-speaking participants, $t(773) = 3.81$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.28$.

3.2 | Potential predictors

3.2.1 | Social identity

We expected the level of identification with Belgium to be negatively correlated with support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration especially among Flemish. Results of bivariate correlations supported the first part of Hypothesis 2a. Indeed, support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration were negatively linked to identification with Belgium only among Flemish. For Francophones, those correlations were non-significant (see Table 3).

Next, we expected a positive relation between support for amnesty and perceived morality and identification with the linguistic group among Flemish. We expected the opposite relation among Francophones (Hypothesis 2b), which was what was found. Among Flemish, identification with the linguistic community was positively linked with support for amnesty and morality of collaboration. We found an opposite relation on the Francophone side (see Table 3).

3.2.2 | Family

In a first step, we explored the proportion of individuals reporting the presence or the absence of collaboration and resistance in their family. Results greatly differ across linguistic communities, respectively χ^2 (2,626) = 30.58, $p < .001$ for resistance and χ^2 (2,626) = 15.82, $p < .001$ for collaboration; see also Table 1. Thus, 2.3 times more Flemish than

TABLE 3 Correlations between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and two levels of identification

	1	2	3	4
1. Support amnesty		0.684**	−0.330**	0.195**
2. Morality collaboration	0.720**		−0.181**	0.150*
3. Identification with Belgium	0.018	0.001		−0.043
4. Identification with linguistic community	−0.128*	−0.108*	0.292**	

Note: Sig. One-tailed: *p < .05; **p < .01. Correlations between variables have been calculated separately for the two subsamples. Results for the Dutch-speaking sample are provided in the upper part of the correlation table. Results for the Francophones are provided in the lower part and are highlighted in light grey. Correlations were controlled for political orientation.

Francophones reported having a family member involved in the collaboration (15.4% vs. 6.6%). We found an opposite pattern regarding the resistance. In this case, 58.9% of the Francophones reported a family member involved in the resistance versus 37% of the Flemish. In the case of the resistance, the proportion of "no" was also informative: 35% of the Dutch-speaking participants reported having no ancestor who was a member of the resistance while the proportion is only 19.7% among Francophones. These patterns must be interpreted with caution given the absence of a purely objective measure of participation and will be further discussed.[18]

In a second step, we compared levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration between individuals with a former collaborator in their family and individuals with no collaborators in their family. We also compared participants from former collaboration families and from families of former resistance fighter(s). Results of comparison tests within both linguistic communities showed no significant difference in the levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration between individuals with or without family member(s) involved in collaboration, respectively $t(195) = 0.09$, $p = .929$ and $t(195) = -0.11$, $p = .910$ for Flemish and $t(313) = 0.69$, $p = .489$ and $t(313) = 0.44$, $p = .642$ for Francophones.[19] The pattern is similar for the resistance, respectively $t(174) = -1.43$, $p = .155$ and $t(173) = -0.98$, $p = .326$ for Flemish and $t(295) = 0.45$, $p = .654$ and $t(295) = 0.42$, $p = .676$ for Francophones. Hypothesis 3 was thus only partially supported.

3.2.3 | Generation

We expected to find less divergence in attitudes towards amnesty and collaboration among the younger generations of Francophones and Flemish. In order to test this hypothesis, we used ANOVAs with language group, generations and gender as between-subjects factors. Political orientation was included as covariate (gender and political orientation were introduced as control variables). We decided to use a categorical predictor—generation—to maximize the validity of the construct. Indeed, unlike age, this construct assumes the existence of clear discontinuities from one generation to the other. However, multiple regressions using age as a continuous predictor yielded similar results.

In a first model, we tested only the main effects of between-subjects factors. In a second model, we introduced the interaction between (a) language group and generations, (b) between language group and gender, and (c) between language group and political orientation. This sequential procedure was adopted because the between-subjects factors were not independent (there was an imbalance in gender and political orientation distribution among language groups) and main effects may therefore be influenced by the introduction of the interaction terms (Judd, McClelland, & Ryan, 2009; see also Rimé et al., 2015).

Regarding support for amnesty, we first tested a model including only main effects. There was a significant between-subject effect of language group, $F(1, 589) = 143.658$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.196$, showing that level of support for amnesty was higher among Flemish than among Francophones. There was no direct effect of generation and gender but a significant effect was observed for political orientation, $F(1, 589) = 12.986$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.022$. Right-leaning voting was associated with a high level of support for amnesty. We then ran the second model and found a significant interaction between language group and generation: $F(1, 589) = 18.838$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.021$.[20] This interaction reflected that while the Francophones and Flemish differed from each other for the first and the second generations, the difference was less important when considering the young generation (see Figure 4). This result showed a convergence in positions towards amnesty among the younger generations of Francophones and Flemish. Regarding Francophones, the results of the Tukey post-hoc test showed that the level of support for amnesty was significantly higher among the youngest generation than among the other two. For Flemish, support for amnesty was significantly lower among the younger generation than among the older one (see Figure 4).

Regarding perceived morality of collaboration, there was a main effect of language group, $F(1, 589) = 129.902$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.181$, a small but significant effect of generation, $F(1, 618) = 5.294$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.013$,[21] and a direct effect of political orientation, $F(1, 589) = 24.484$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.040$. Flemish perceived collaboration as more moral than Francophones and, overall, the younger generation was less negative towards collaboration than the older ones. In contrast to support for amnesty, in the second model, there is no interaction between language group and generation (see also Figure 5).[22]

[18] There are no significant differences in terms of political orientation and gender balance between the families of collaborators, resistance fighters and other families.

[19] Results of non-parametric tests show the same pattern.

[20] The pattern is similar when using age as a continuous variable instead of generation. We also noticed an interaction between language and political orientation and language and gender. They are not reported here for the sake of clarity.

[21] This small effect disappears when using age as a continuous variable. This is the only difference in terms of results between generations (categorial) and age (continuous).

[22] When using age as a continuous variable, the pattern is similar with one exception: there is no more direct effect of age on morality of collaboration in the first model.

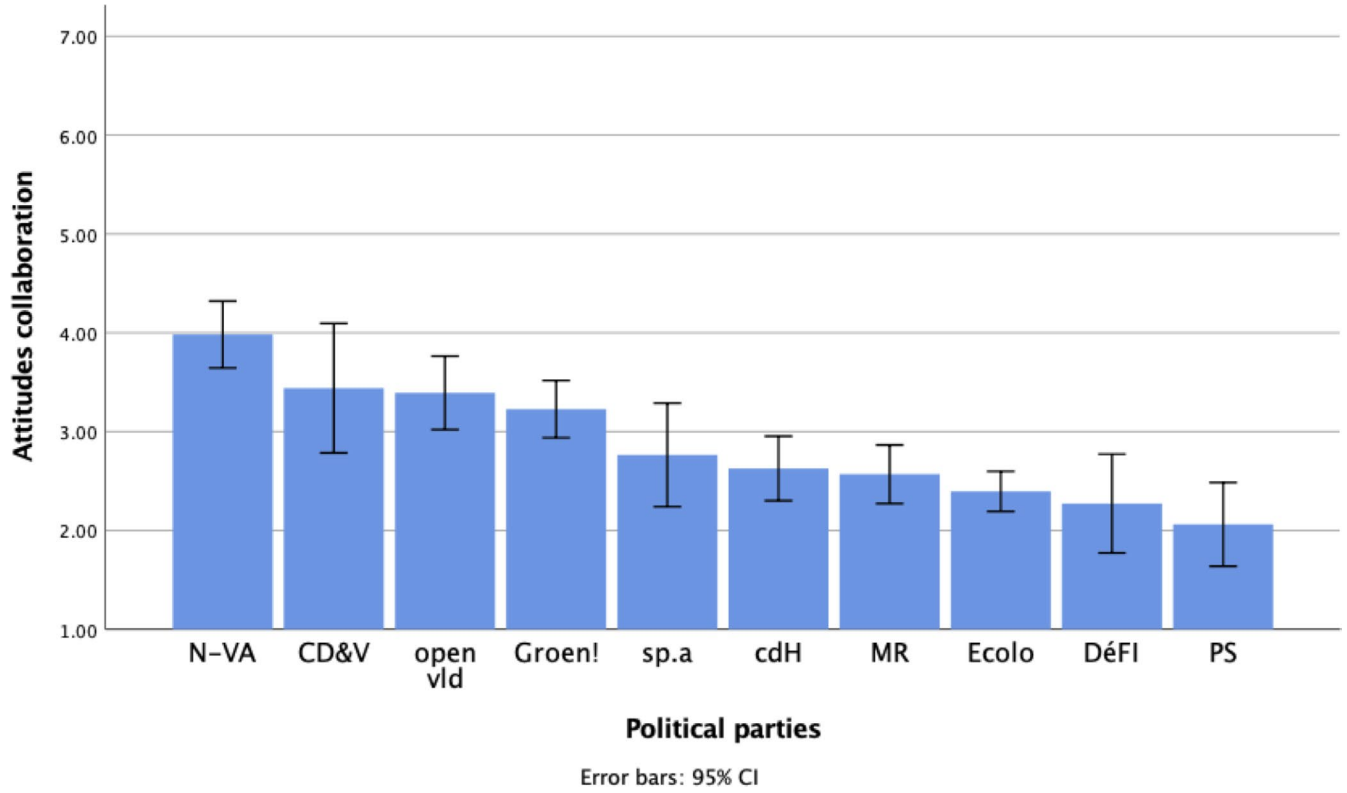


FIGURE 3 Perceived morality of collaboration during WWII as a function of political party. *Note*. 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

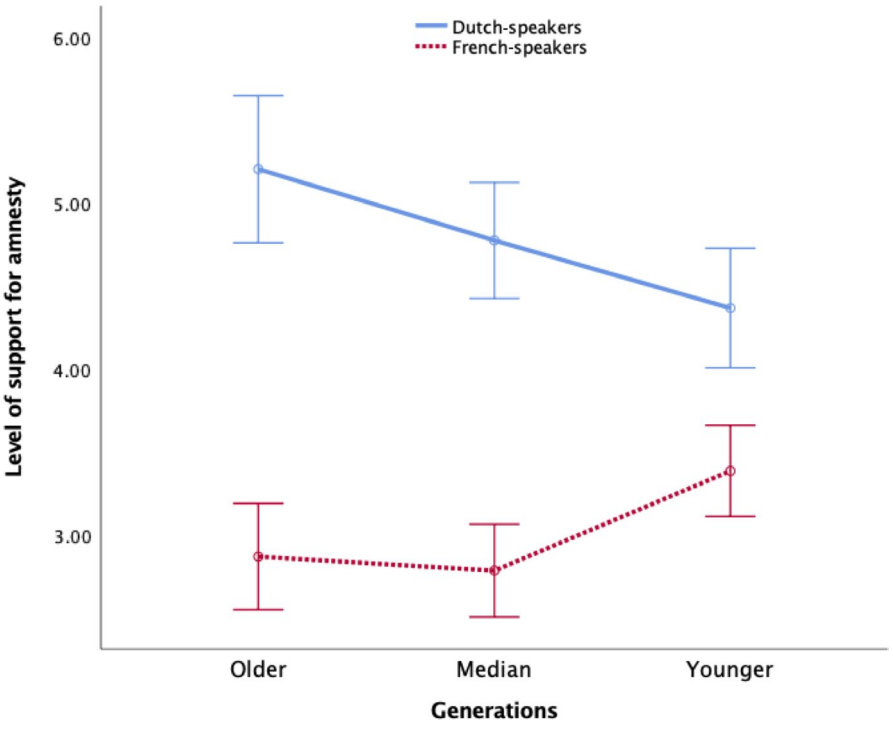


FIGURE 4 Results of mixed ANOVA language groups, generations and gender as between-subjects factors on support for amnesty. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

3.3 | Links with political prospects

Flemish showed higher levels of autonomy and separation prospects and lower levels of non-change and augmented integration than Francophones (see Table 2). The largest difference related to the radical separation prospect. While levels were quite low (respectively 2.99 and 1.55 on a scale ranging from 1 to 7), the score of Flemish was almost double that of Francophones. Interestingly, the

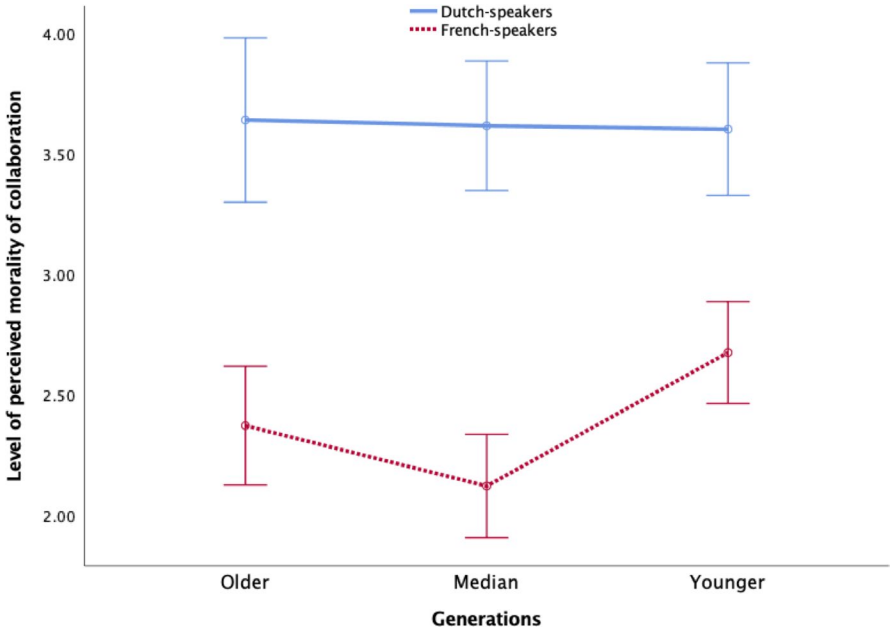


FIGURE 5 Results of mixed ANOVA with language groups, generations and gender as between-subjects factors on perceived morality of collaboration. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 4 Correlations between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and four political prospects

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Support amnesty		0.681**	−0.184**	0.085	0.096	0.119*
2. Morality collaboration	0.717**		−0.132*	0.075	0.064	0.123*
3. Politics: unification	0.057	0.020		−0.085	−0.221**	−0.435**
4. Politics: no change	−0.026	−0.023	−0.059		0.270**	−0.127*
5. Politics: more autonomy	0.164**	0.124	−0.226**	0.192**		−0.020
6. Politics: radical separation	−0.056	0.056	−0.448**	0.012	0.059	

Note: Sig. One-tailed: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Correlations between variables have been calculated separately for the two subsamples. Results for the Dutch-speaking sample are provided in the upper part of the correlation table. Results for the Francophones are provided in the lower part and are highlighted in light grey. Correlations were controlled for political orientation, age and identification with Belgium.

most favored prospect was "enhanced unification" (at 4.17 and 5.61 respectively).

According to Hypothesis 5, we expected support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration to be positively linked to "radical separation of the communities" and negatively linked to "augmented integration" (the two most radical political prospects) only among Dutch-speaking Belgians. Results of correlations are provided in Table 4. These correlations were controlled for age, political orientation and identification. They supported our hypothesis. Indeed, within the Dutch-speaking sample only, support for amnesty and morality of collaboration were positively linked to the prospect of radical separation and negatively linked to the prospect of augmented integration.

Next, we expected the link between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and the two more radical political prospects, to be significantly lower among members of the young generation than among the older ones. Results of correlations did not support Hypothesis 6. Indeed, when controlling for political orientation and identification, most relations became non-significant. Further, they showed that support for amnesty was significantly linked to enhanced unification (negatively) only among the middle and youngest generations, and positively linked to radical separation only among the youngest one (see Table 5).

4 | DISCUSSION

Building on a large and diversified sample, the present study provided evidence that the issue of collaboration during WWII still

TABLE 5 Correlations between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and four political prospects among Flemish, and as a function of the generations

	Politics: unification	Politics: no change	Politics: more autonomy	Politics: radical separation
Support amnesty—old	0.011	−0.085	−0.020	0.032
Morality collaboration—old	−0.204	−0.123	0.069	0.100
Support amnesty—middle	−0.273**	0.163	0.178*	0.080
Morality collaboration—middle	−0.125	0.134	0.090	0.160
Support amnesty—young	−0.184*	0.105	0.092	0.218*
Morality collaboration—young	−0.044	0.123	0.085	0.093

Note: Sig. One-tailed: *p < .05; **p < .01. Correlations between variables have been calculated separately for the three Dutch-speaking subsamples. N_{old} = 63; N_{middle} = 99; N_{young} = 82. Correlations were controlled for political orientation and identification with Belgium. The three shades of grey correspond to the three generations of the Flemish sample: old, middle, young.

divides Belgian society. Overall, Flemish perceived collaboration as more moral and supported amnesty of the former collaborators at a higher level than their Francophone counterparts. This result echoes the historians' observations about the development of a binary vision of WWII in Belgium. While, on the Francophone side, most collaborators were perceived as criminals and traitors (Beyen, 2002), an active minority of Flemish nationalists succeeded in creating a dominant discourse portraying the collaborators as victims of an anti-Flemish purge (Aerts, 2009, 2018a). This trend is also noticeable when interpreting the results from the perspective of participants' voting preferences. Again, all Flemish parties were characterized by higher levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration than the Francophone parties. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that with the exception of individuals who feel close to the N-VA (Flemish nationalist party), the average levels of support for amnesty and perception of morality were relatively modest.

4.1 | Which predictors?

4.1.1 | Social identity

The second part of the present study aimed at investigating the potential predictors of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration. Social identity was considered as a potential predictor of these two variables at the micro-level. Results showed that Flemish identified primarily with their linguistic community and then with Belgium. The pattern was the opposite for the Francophones. This result confirmed previous findings regarding the identity categorization processes of the two Belgian linguistic communities (see De Guissmé et al., 2017; Doutrelepont, Billiet, & Vandekeere, 2001; Rimé et al., 2015). While the Francophones feel themselves first and foremost Belgians, a long history of successful political struggles and linguistic unification might explain why Flemish identify firstly with Flanders and then only with Belgium. Beyond this descriptive dimension, we showed that, among Flemish, identification with the linguistic community was positively linked with support for amnesty and morality of collaboration. We found an opposite relation on the Francophone side. While not resulting from a similar data analysis strategy, these results are in line with pioneer findings by De Guissmé and colleagues on the links between identification and attitudes towards collaboration (De Guissmé et al., 2017; De Guissmé, Licata, & Mercy, 2014). On the Flemish side, this pattern can be explained—at least partially—by the fact that, in the eyes of some descendants of collaborators (during WWII and WWI), collaboration was and remains associated with the legitimate expression of Flemish nationalism. After being despised for decades, some Flemish nationalists chose to collaborate with Germany in order to get freed from a Francophone elite perceived as arrogant. From this perspective, collaboration cannot be reduced to a political mistake. It was driven by an idealized vision of some form of autonomy for Flanders. Moreover, some nationalist militants maintain that the repression that followed the end of the war was far too severe and targeted "the Flemish" as a whole instead of specific collaborators (Aerts, 2011, 2018a). Thus, claiming amnesty might be a way of restoring some sense of justice and respect. This observation echoes results from a stream of research showing that high identifiers of groups that committed violent actions in the past tend to possess biased memories in order to maintain a positive social identity (Hirschberger et al., 2016; Sahdra & Ross, 2007). Regarding the Francophone pattern, the only accentuation of the resistance in terms of identity might explain why individuals who identified more strongly with the Francophone group showed lower levels of support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration than low-identifying individuals. We then showed that, among Flemish, national identification had the opposite effect to identification with the linguistic community. Again, this result echoes De Guissmé's findings (De Guissmé et al., 2017). Again, we suggest that it is the perception of the Belgian state as responsible for the repression of Flanders as a whole (Aerts, 2011, 2018a) that explains this relation. Another interpretation is that the Flemish who identify the most with the superordinate group of Belgians would share representations of collaboration more similar to the Francophones than the least identified ones (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014). In a black sheep perspective, we indeed expected individuals highly identified with Belgium—be they Flemish or Francophones—to show low support for amnesty of former collaborators considered as

deviant ingroup members. Finally, these processes related to identity and different narratives of each group as resisters or collaborators might also be interpreted in terms of identity content (Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006). Indeed, for social identity theory, behaviors can never be derived simply from group membership—they also depend of the beliefs and norms of the groups with which ones identifies (Reicher et al., 2006). In this case, different identity content results in different group attitudes and actions. Note also that, given the cross-sectional nature of the study design and despite previous experimental evidences (Sahdra & Ross, 2007), other directional paths cannot be excluded (e.g., the question of collaboration might drive identification rather than the opposite).

4.1.2 | Family

Among the factors that may explain support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration, we have shown that the family trajectory regarding collaboration—as we appraised it—did not play a major role. Indeed, in both linguistic communities, participants reporting a member of their family as involved in collaboration during the war did not show higher levels of support for amnesty and did not perceive collaboration as more moral than participants with no collaborator ancestor. This result tends to support Welzer's observations on the transmission of memory within families of former Nazis according to which family members acknowledge Nazi crimes but exonerate their ancestors from them (Welzer, 2010; Welzer et al., 2002). A possible explanation of this result is that families of former collaborators managed to preserve a positive identity by dissociating their elder(s) from his/her/their ingroup crimes and therefore do not need to claim amnesty for him/her/them. Another potential explanation lies in hardliners' views that they, or their parents, did nothing wrong and therefore didn't have to be pardoned by a measure of amnesty. The fact that most former collaborators have passed away might also explain this pattern. However, a similar pattern was found regarding the presence or absence of a family history of resistance. In this case, we expected that descendants of resistance fighters would be opposed to forgiveness in a logic of fidelity to the "sacrifice" of their ancestors. This absence of differences emphasizes the need for further research in that matter. Moreover, our findings should be interpreted in the light of the following observation.

Beyond these results, important information was provided by the percentages of participants reporting the presence of collaboration and resistance within their family. Indeed, while the proportion of condemned collaborators after WWII was quite similar among Flemish and Francophones, Flemish participants were more than twice as likely as French-speaking participants to report collaboration within their family (15.4% vs. 6.6%). On the opposite side, 58.9% of the Francophone participants linked their family to the resistance while the proportion was only 37% on the Flemish side. These results may suggest that the individuals who answered these questions constitute specific segments of the Flemish and Francophone population. Nevertheless, a more compelling explanation is that participants' responses were strongly affected by their personal representations of the past, which are strongly influenced by the dominant narratives about resistance and collaboration in both linguistic groups. Among Francophones, collaboration largely remains a taboo and therefore does not call into question the identity based on resistance against Germany. In Flanders, a more nuanced vision of collaboration explains that the memory of resistance fighters did not monopolize the public space. In this regard, the memory landscape in Flanders appears to be less consensual than in Wallonia and Brussels.

4.1.3 | Generations

Our results showed that generational belonging played an important role in the positioning of Belgians regarding the questions of amnesty and collaboration. While the Francophones and Flemish differed significantly from each other for the oldest generations, the difference was less important when considering the young generation (i.e., individuals born after 1983). The most remarkable result was the continuous decrease in support for amnesty on the Flemish side, while young Francophones were less against amnesty than their elders. These results echo previous findings on the evolution of the collective memory of victimization in Belgium (Bouchat & Rimé, 2018; Rimé et al., 2015). More specifically, using the same generation groups as in the present study, it was shown that memories and political aspirations of the young Flemish and Francophones were much more convergent than those of their elders. And this convergence effect was especially driven by the youngest Flemish, who greatly differed from their elders. In order to explain these findings, it was suggested that the current socio-political situation does not fit anymore with the collective memory of victimization shared in Flanders (see Rimé et al., 2015). This interpretation holds for the present results. Since the Flemish are in a position of power at the Belgian level—in demographic, political and economic terms—it is presumably less critical for them to portray WWII collaborators as victims and ask for their amnesty. The social identity perspective provides a complementary interpretation of the results: The oldest French-speaking Belgians whose identity was threatened by Belgians who collaborated with the Nazis perceive collaboration as highly immoral and are poorly supportive of amnesty of former collaborators. This pattern corresponds perfectly to a black sheep effect. On the other side, the oldest generation of Dutch-speakers, for whom the issue of amnesty could have had immediate symbolic consequences in terms of identity, showed high levels of support for amnesty. A third interpretation of the results on the Flemish side lies in an increasing awareness in Flanders about the crimes committed in the framework of the collaboration with Germany. This awareness, which was driven in particular by the historiography, might explain the reduced support for amnesty among young Flemish people (Aerts, 2009). This interpretation would suggest a form of appeasement. A fourth one is more directly linked to forgetting. The temporal distance from WWII and the progressive disappearance of the last witnesses of this historical period can also explain the convergence in the positions of the younger generations of Flemish and Francophones.

In this case, WWII collaboration would be characterized by fewer polemical representations and amnesty would no longer be a hot societal issue in present-day Belgium (Aerts, 2018a; see also Bouchat et al., 2019). These interpretations, be they more related to active appeasement or passive forgetting, seem to open the possibility for the establishment of a minimal but appeased memory in order to overcome past resentments. This potential long-term trend might seem to contradict the intensity of the polemic that has characterized the political scene in Belgium since the elections of May 2019. However, rather than considering these processes as contradictory, it might be useful to describe the current dynamics as a multilayered phenomenon where the social psychological trend described in this article does not prevent the existence of a strategic trend on the political scene. Among all the tools that are available to stigmatize the other camp and/or to praise one's own group, references to the past remain particularly powerful. Hence, the analysis of the political uses of the past can certainly not be sufficient to capture the complexity of the processes that characterize the Belgian context. Indeed, in addition to the linguistic divisions, we showed that the Belgian society was and still is divided between mainly conservative Flemings and predominantly left-wing Francophones (Billiet et al., 2006). Given the importance of political orientation in the understanding of the past and in the shaping of political preferences for the future of a society (see e.g., Yamashiro et al., 2019), we deemed it important to analyze the effects of this variable. When political orientation was integrated in the analyses, we showed it had a significant effect at almost all levels. Nevertheless, even when a variable as important as political orientation was considered, the vast majority of our results were still valid.[23] This suggests that beyond political ideologies, considering collective memory of past major events is of great added value for understanding political and intergroup attitudes.

4.2 | A multilevel social identity approach to collective memory

In order to understand the issue of collaboration in Belgium and its political and intergroup implications, the adoption of a social identity perspective, combined with a multilevel approach, has been of great added value. From families of collaborators dissociating their ancestors from the actions of their group, to Flemish nationalists developing a victimizing discourse, the mobilization of concepts such as defensive representations of history and the black sheep effect has highlighted how important identity dynamics are in understanding representations of the past and intergroup relations. The multilevel perspective has been allowed to replace the identity dynamics at stake in a broader context, which is the only way to shed light on the complexity of the social. This is not the first time that the perspective of social identity and a multilevel approach have been used in the study of memory issues (see e.g., Elcheroth, 2006; Hirschberger et al., 2016). Nevertheless, we believe that the systematization of their joint use would be a major step forward in the study of collective memory and intergroup relations in Belgium and beyond. The Belgian case is indeed highly emblematic of any deeply divided society (from Cyprus to Northern Ireland, Bosnia or Iraq). In this respect, an ambitious comparative analysis based on a multilevel approach would definitely be useful to confirm—or not—the robustness of the three variables emphasized in this study.

4.3 | A link with political preferences

In a third step, we investigated whether the question of the collaboration would still be linked with Belgians' political preferences for the future of their country. On the descriptive side, we noted that the prospect of enhanced unification of the two communities was most favored both by Flemish and by Francophones. This pattern was surprising given the results of the last federal elections in which 43.3% of the Flemish population voted for separatist political parties (Belgian Federal Elections, n.d.). A first explanation for this incongruence might be the specificities of the present sample. It was composed of many fewer far-right voters than the average Flemish population. Another interpretation is that the citizens who voted for separatist parties did it for other reasons than wanting a radical separation of Belgium regions. Indeed, immigration, social care and fiscal issues were the three top priorities among Flemish voters (RTBF, 2019). Still, while its levels were quite low (respectively 2.99 for the Flemish and 1.55 for the Francophones on a scale ranging from 1 to 7), the score of the Flemish sample in favor of the prospect of a radical separation of the two linguistic communities was almost the double of the Francophone one.

In line with Hypothesis 5, we expected that, given that the question of amnesty is mostly relevant in the Flemish political landscape, support for amnesty and perceived morality of collaboration would be significantly correlated with the two emblematic political prospects of radical separation and enhanced unification only among Flemish. Correlational results confirmed this hypothesis. More specifically, within the Dutch-speaking sample only, support for amnesty and morality of collaboration were positively linked to the prospect of radical separation and negatively linked to the prospect of augmented integration. Moreover, contrary to our expectations (Hypothesis 6), we showed that this pattern was present especially among the youngest generation of Flemish participants. These results suggested that, despite the evolution of the socio-political landscape, the issue of collaboration is still pervasive among a subgroup of the youngest Flemish. Beyond the highlighting of a link between the issue of collaboration and political preferences for the future of the country, the study's design does not provide information on the direction of the relationship. We can assume that political prospects for the future of Belgium are being shaped by the attitudes to collaboration. However, it is also likely that the individuals who are most in favor of the separation of communities are also the most exposed to narratives that highlight the repression of Flemish collaborators. Therefore, the collective memory could somehow justify the current politics. The question of the respective influence of these variables consequently remains open. Research

[23] The only exception to this trend is related to Hypothesis 6. When controlling for political orientation and identification, most links between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and the two more radical political prospects become non-significant.

carried out so far indicates that these two dynamics (influence of memory on political positions and vice versa) are not incompatible.

4.4 | Political and societal implications

The still critical significance of the issues of collaboration and amnesty in national politics raises major questions at both the societal and political levels regarding the Belgian case. Practically speaking, two main points are worth highlighting at the end of this study. First, the analysis confirms the absence of any unified memory work in Belgium regarding WWII. This pattern is not specific to Belgium, as most post-conflict settings of the world are characterized by difficult memory work (Rosoux, 2004). However, what is peculiar to Belgium is the existence of extremely contrasted trajectories on both sides of the linguistic border. Admittedly, and it has already been evoked, we can hardly categorize all Belgian citizens only on the basis of their linguistic community. The case of bilingual families, for instance, not to mention the case of refugees who recently migrated to Belgium, shows rapidly the limits of the exercise. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny the existence of a gap between an active debate about WWII in Flanders and a rather passive attitude in the French-speaking part of the country. This contrast contributed to the establishment of a divided memory landscape. Belgians do not talk about the past in a consensual way. When they refer to WWI or WWII, they often refer to different events, or even present diverging narratives of the same events. The question is then whether these narratives are simply different (which is relatively healthy in a democratic society), or rather incompatible. There is much at stake here: If the hero of one side is perceived as a criminal by most people on the other side, how can we gradually draw a line between the past and the present?

Second, and this point is intimately related to the first one, the divisive impact of memory issues is reinforced by the increasing mutual ignorance of the other side's media coverage. The news in each part of the country rarely coincides (Sinardet, De Swert, & Dandoy, 2004; Sinardet & Hooghe, 2009). The mutual ignorance favors the multiplication of misunderstandings between communities, the stereotypes and simplified visions of the other (Klein et al., 2012; Luminet; Licata et al., 2012). This situation raises the question of the particular role to be played by the Belgian state. Should it be a mediator between communities or is it a party as such? According to the answer given to this question, the relational dynamics between parties can vary considerably. The answers to this question are important in Belgium's relatively functional democracy. They are all the more so in countries marked by recent episodes of violence and intractable conflicts (Rosoux, 2019). If we go beyond the specificities of the Belgian case, this article addresses broader theoretical questions that deserve further research. A multilevel approach to collective memory allows us to explore the long-term articulation between social and individual mechanisms that explain the formation, transmission and representation of collective memories of controversial episodes. From this perspective, it questions the persuasiveness of officials recounting narratives of the past to the public and helps to evaluate their effect on subsequent generations. Besides the transmission of narratives, it is also worth considering the intergenerational transmission of emotions such as grief, anger, resentment, shame and guilt. These emotions are widely shared and passed on in family circles. The question then remains: Can we actually escape the "tyranny of the past" (Jervis, 1976)? If yes, how? From a methodological perspective, these questions do not systematically imply a prescriptive approach such as that adopted in the field of conflict resolution. The objective of the whole study is ultimately to *explain*—without charging or exonerating. In a more specific manner, it can also be to question the notion of "post-conflict"—which is generally taken for granted. It is defined in handbooks, dictionaries and encyclopedias. However, the duration of these "post-conflict" environments can still be uncertain. What are the basic criteria that determine when a conflict is over? How long do the notions of victim and perpetrator make sense? When does the victors/vanquished dichotomy lose its meaning?

4.5 | Limitations

The present study is not devoid of limitations. The first resides in the cross-sectional nature of the data. Among the correlations we have identified, we cannot assert, with a high degree of certainty, the causal direction of the relationships. This is especially the case for the relationship between social identifications and support for amnesty and perception of the morality of collaboration and between these variables and political preferences for the future of Belgium. A second limitation lies in the composition of the sample, which is not totally representative of the Belgian population. It is indeed slightly more educated than the average Belgian population. The sample of participants is also not totally representative of the voting choices expressed by the Belgian population because green parties and Flemish nationalists are overrepresented, while traditional and populist parties are underrepresented—especially among Flemish. Moreover, the small number of individuals in several subcategories of our indicators (e.g., family collaboration, party preferences) prevented us from running more complex statistical analyses. It is worth mentioning that multilevel analyses—taking into account the effects of variables at different levels of analysis—would have been ideal in the case of a larger and more balanced sample, but could not be run as the size of several subsamples was too small. Third, as has already been discussed above, we have to emphasize that the measure of family involvement in WWII is not immune to biases. The main bias is that recollection might not be accurate and might reflect more a representation of the family past than an "objective event". Fourth, the choice of specific variables, which was dictated by the particularities of the Belgian context and the need for a short questionnaire, did not allow the effects of other key variables in the study of memory and intergroup relations to be tested. Further studies are thus necessary in order to investigate the specific role of collective guilt and shame, competitive victimhood and different types of identification such as attachment versus glorification. Finally, the use of single items for measuring political prospects and presence of only two items for

measuring perceived morality of collaboration, which are the result of the length of the questionnaire, may appear insufficient. More attention should be paid to these aspects in future studies.

5 | CONCLUSION

Our way of representing history influences our present and is an essential indicator of what our future may look like. The present study shows that history does constrain memory, and that our current attitudes and representations are influenced by events that took place long before our birth. This observation is the result of a series of empirical studies (see Bouchat et al., 2017; Rosoux, Bouchat, & Klein, 2019), but above all, of a particular approach consisting in paying attention to history in the understanding of social psychological phenomena. We suggest that the consciousness of the influence of history on the individual and society will allow our discipline to put some of its results in perspective but above all to broaden its scope and its understanding of reality. Further, at the level of a country, it is probably a *sine qua non* condition for moving forward.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as authors' national ethics guidelines.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Bivariate correlations between support for amnesty, perceived morality of collaboration and political orientation

	1	2	3
1. Support amnesty		0.708**	0.303**
2. Morality collaboration	0.727		0.333**
3. Political orientation	0.044	0.090	

Correlations between variables have been calculated separately for the two subsamples. Results for the Dutch-speaking sample are provided in the upper part of the correlation table. Results for the Francophones are provided in the lower part and are highlighted in light grey.

**$p < .001$.