

Flemish Interior Minister exposed as fascist SS supporter

Steve James
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Flemish Interior Minister Johan Sauwens has been exposed as a long standing sympathiser of the SS—the elite Nazi forces used to guard concentration camps in World War II.

A "sting" operation organised by the *De Morgen* newspaper revealed Sauwens as one of 1,500 people in attendance at a meeting of the Sint-Maartensfonds, an organisation established in 1953 by SS volunteers who fought with the Waffen SS on the Russian front. The gathering included representatives of other European far-right groups and featured a para-military style parade of the banned fascist Vlaamse Militanten Orde (Flemish Militants Order). In meeting halls decorated with portraits of Waffen SS soldiers and SS banners, the air resounded to Nazi anthems and a speaker called for the re-construction of "Germania".

Challenged about his attendance, fifty year old Sauwens at first refused to resign his government position, claiming that he had done nothing wrong, that he had been misinformed about the nature of the meeting and that he was unaware of the songs being sung and speeches being delivered. Nevertheless, he did admit to "applauding at certain times."

It emerged that Sauwens had, in fact, been a member of the Sint-Maartenfonds for 25 years. His exposure provoked calls for his resignation by Jewish groups and from the other Green, Socialist and Liberal parties in the powerful regional coalition government alongside Sauwens own Volksunie (United People) in Flanders.

The Belgian Foreign Minister, Louis Michel, echoed the demands, noting that Sauwens' behaviour challenged Belgium's "European values." Belgium, where the European Union headquarters are located, is due to take over the rotating EU presidency in July.

Michel, horrified at the prospect of regionalist fascists crawling out of the disintegrating woodwork of the

Belgian state during the country's term of EU office, also called for "truth and reconciliation" and a national dialogue between the two major Belgian regions—Flanders and Wallonia—to clear the air over events in Belgium during the Nazi occupation. This will prove rather difficult, since Sauwens is by no means an isolated individual, nor was his behaviour an aberration.

When Hitler's armies invaded Belgium on May 10, 1940, both Flemish and Wallonian fascist parties celebrated the opportunity given them to win political power, and to settle accounts with Bolshevism. The Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (Flemish National Union—VNV) paraded in Antwerp, with the slogan "Antwerp Is Ours! Jews Out". In 1941, thousands of their supporters volunteered to join Nazi armies in the war against the Soviet Union, as did supporters of Leon Degrelle's Rexist Party in Wallonia, which sought Hitler's aid in carving a "Greater Burgundy" out of Belgium and parts of France.

After Nazi Germany's defeat, 500,000 Belgians were investigated for collaboration with the Nazis, tens of thousands were jailed, fined, and lost property. 3,000 were sentenced to death, although only 242 were in the end executed. The then King, Leopold III, was forced to abdicate. The present day racist, anti-immigrant Vlaams Blok—which calls for the suppression of strikes and is currently the largest political party in Antwerp—is the political descendent of the VNV. What is significant about Sauwens is that he is a member of Volksunie, an ostensibly more moderate Flemish nationalist party from which the Vlaams Blok split in 1978.

The Volksunie's democratic pedigree does not bare close scrutiny. It has long campaigned for an amnesty for Flemish Nazi collaborators. In 1998, the Flemish

Parliament approved state-aid for thousands of collaborators, who were thereafter to be treated on the same legal basis as "victims of war" who suffered or were persecuted by the Nazis. The 60 Flemish MPs who supported the measure were from the Christian-Social CVP party, the Volksunie and the Vlaams Blok.

Faced with the escalating crisis over Sauwens, the Volksunie was still reluctant to force him to resign his ministerial post. The party leadership took six hours to conclude he should go and was reported to be bitterly divided over the decision. Only the threat of a vote of no confidence and the possible collapse of the Flemish administration forced his resignation. Sauwens conceded he would resign to "offer the Flemish government room to get itself out of the situation." Parties in French-speaking Wallonia present Flanders, with some justification, as having a uniquely serious right wing problem. Therefore the head of the Flemish Parliament, Patrick Dewael, claimed that Sauwens' resignation proved that "it is not up to the Francophones to give us lessons in tolerance and democracy."



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