

Belgium: Racist murderer linked to Flemish nationalists

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Some 20,000 people, many wearing white armbands, joined a march against racism in Belgium's second largest city, Antwerp, last month. The march had been called following two recent attacks in the city that left three people dead and another seriously injured.

The murders have highlighted the growth of extreme right-wing tendencies in Belgian politics. One of the murderers has direct links to the far-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest—VB).

At the beginning of May, five skinheads beat up a black Frenchman in the city of Bruges. He is still in a coma following the assault. In Antwerp, 23-year-old Moroccan Mohamed Bouazza drowned in the River Scheldt on the night of April 30 following an apparently racist attack at a nightclub. In Brussels, earlier in the year, a black man was attacked at a petrol station. The beating left him partially blind and paralysed.

The incident that focused public concern took place on May 11 in Antwerp. Facing expulsion from his agricultural and biotechnological college after he was caught smoking, 18-year-old Hans van Themsche shaved his head and bought a Winchester rifle. He warned his fellow students that he would commit suicide and take 10 immigrants (he used the racist term “makakken”) with him, saying that by doing so he “would have...done something good.” Dressing himself in black, he left a note for his school friends and headed for the city centre.

Once there, van Themsche started firing, deliberately targeting immigrants. He shot and wounded Songul Koç, a young Turkish woman wearing a headscarf, as she sat reading on a bench. She is still in intensive care recovering from her injuries. He then opened fire on a two-year-old white child and her Malian nanny. Both Luna Drowart and Oulematou Niangadou were killed.

Van Themsche was then stopped by a plainclothes policeman. When he refused to drop his weapon, the officer shot him, wounding him in the stomach. He was charged with murder and attempted murder and is presently in hospital under police guard. In his first statement after his arrest, van Themsche said, “That girl [Luna Drowart] was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

After his arrest, van Themsche told prosecutors that he “sympathised with the extreme right side” of Belgian politics. Although not a member of VB, he grew up schooled in its racist politics. His father, a local party leader, was a founding member of Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc), the party's precursor. Van Themsche's Aunt Frieda is currently a VB MP in the Flemish regional government. His grandfather was a member of the Waffen SS on the Eastern Front during the Second World War.

VB, like the Vlaams Blok before it, is a far-right Flemish nationalist party that calls for the separation of the economically dominant Dutch-speaking north of Belgium from the rest of the country. It argues that the 1830 Belgian state was “artificial” and bases its proposed “independent Flemish state” on linguistic identity. It also lays claim to the Belgian capital Brussels, a French-speaking city in the centre of the Dutch-speaking region.

It is the proponent of unbridled free-market capitalism, declaring that the “right of ownership and free enterprise...constitute the foundation for economic development, employment and prosperity.” As such, VB opposes public expenditure, insists that responsibility for social care lies with “families and their social entourage,” and supports sweeping tax cuts.

The main planks of VB's programme have been opposition to immigration and a repressive law-and-

order policy. VB was forced to change its name from Vlaams Blok two years ago in order to avoid legal penalties after judges ruled it was an openly racist party. The Blok had called for an end to new immigration and the repatriation of North Africans. VB calls for repatriation of immigrants who do not “adapt to our values and morality,” reserving voting rights for “Flemish” citizens.

The party took 24 percent of the vote in regional elections two years ago. In Antwerp itself, the Blok took 33 percent of the vote in the 2000 local elections and is hoping to gain control of the city’s council in October’s elections.

VB has attempted to distance itself from van Themsche and sought to downplay his political background.

Chairman Frank Vanhecke told a party congress that “nobody has the right to hold [VB] morally responsible” for the killings. VB’s Philippe van der Sande said that van Themsche was “probably mentally disturbed” and the murders had “no racist motives.”

VB has even sought to exploit the crime to demand greater police powers. Vanhecke, declaring the party was “shocked” by the murders, demanded the “heaviest possible penalty” against van Themsche. The party called on its members to participate in the “white march.”

The victims’ families have expressed their anger at the way in which VB has attempted to use the murders to appear respectable. Calling on VB not to participate in the march, the families said that VB’s voters were implicated in the murders. Demonstrators told the press that they were there to oppose VB. Mohamed Bouazza’s mother told the march that VB and its leader Filip Dewinter were responsible for what had happened.

The “white march,” though, sought to channel popular anger away from drawing any political conclusions about the roots of the racist violence. As at similar marches in Belgium recently, no placards were carried. The march followed two banners, reading “The sadness of Antwerp” and “Stop racism: Diversity is reality.”

The main parliamentary parties are using VB’s politics to justify their own rightward shift. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt denounced the murders as the result of a “climate of intolerance,” but both the

VLD and the Christian Democrats have adopted similar language to VB’s on immigration.

Since 1989, the main parliamentary parties have agreed to maintain a *cordon sanitaire* around VB. This is now beginning to change. In 2004, after VB’s electoral success, Verhofstadt called for opening dialogue with the party in order to expose their weakness.



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