Usually, historians are writing at their desks. Even when reflecting the present, they are committed to the past. But from time to time, for instance during war, things get mixed up, and historians are pushed into ‘history’. Suddenly, they have to react and take sides. However, as historians they may also have the opportunity to reflect on this involvement. In this chapter I try to show how the two World Wars of the early twentieth century have forced two important historians, the Belgian Henri Pirenne and the Frenchman Marc Bloch, to confront history in a new way. My focus will be not so much on their practical or political reactions to these events, but more on their mental and intellectual reactions.

Henri Pirenne: comparative vs. national history

Before the ‘Great War’, Henri Pirenne (1862–1936) was considered to be not only Belgium’s most important historian, but the best example of a national historian as such. Four volumes of his Histoire de Belgique had already been published – dealing with Belgian history from ancient times to the seventeenth century. This work was looked upon as a monument of its genre. Consequently, Pirenne was showered with honours not only in his homeland, but also in Germany (honorary degrees from the universities of Leipzig and Tübingen). Interestingly, the first edition of the Histoire de Belgique, which had been commissioned by a German colleague and friend, Karl Lamprecht, first came out with the German publisher Perthes in Gotha in 1899, while the original French version was published only the following year.

Pirenne’s love affair with German historiography, which originated in his studies in Göttingen and Berlin, where he became a member of the ‘Akademischer
After the Deluge

Historischer Verein’, and which was also expressed in his co-editorship of the Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte from 1903 onwards, ended abruptly in 1914. Together with most of his professorial colleagues, he protested against the invasion of his home country and also against the German policy of occupation. When the German governor of Belgium, General von Bissing, tried to reopen the University of Ghent, which had been closed down after the invasion, and transform it into a Flemish institution, which meant banning any teaching in French, Pirenne refused to obey. As a consequence, he and another leader of the opposition, the Flemish historian Paul Fredericq, were arrested on 18 March 1916, and both, although civilians, were deported to Germany, like prisoners of war. This deportation rapidly became known throughout the world, provoking a storm of protest.

Dozens of academic institutions and political leaders, especially of neutral governments, and even the Pope wrote to the Kaiser and the German chancellor. American Universities like Princeton and Cornell offered positions. Another proposal was that the two historians should be released to a neutral country like Switzerland. But the imperial government ignored all these protests and kept the Belgian prisoners until armistice came in November 1918. While Pirenne had been known in his field – medieval history – long before the war, he now became even more famous; not just as a great Belgian historian, but, for many years, as the most famous historian in Europe and the whole Western world.

What is most interesting behind this event, is not only the political issues and so on, but an intellectual shift – or even an ‘internal’ transformation of Pirenne himself – the traces of which can be followed closely in his writings during and after the war. For his contemporaries, the consequences of this shift were at the same time both visible and invisible during the 1920s and 1930s. Pirenne, indeed, became a world-famous person, especially for the English and American public. The most symptomatic event here was in 1919 when, along with a number of prominent military leaders such as Joffre and Pershing, Oxford University awarded him an honorary degree. In other words, Pirenne was one of the figures de proue of the victorious allied camp. As a consequence he was elected to important functions such as the presidency of the Union académique internationale or the Comité international des sciences historiques which was organizing international congresses for the historical

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