

# Human Rights Leagues in Europe (1898–2016)

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	7
<i>Barbara Helige</i> Foreword by the President of the Austrian League for Human Rights .....	9
<i>Florence Bellivier</i> Foreword by the Deputy Secretary General of the <i>Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme</i> (FIDH). The Death Penalty as an Area of Activity of the FIDH and the Leagues for Human Rights .....	11
<i>Wolfgang Schmale / Christopher Treiblmayr</i> The History of Human Rights Leagues. An Introduction .....	15
Appendix: Human Rights Leagues in the Interwar Period .....	24

## CONTRIBUTIONS

<i>William D. Irvine</i> War, Peace and Human Rights. The Dilemma of the <i>Ligue des droits de l'homme</i> .....	35
<i>Gilles Manceron</i> The French <i>Ligue des droits de l'homme</i> 's Interest in International Issues from 1898 to the 1980s. Founding and Supporting the <i>Fédération internationale des droits de l'homme</i> .....	45
<i>Emmanuel Naquet</i> The LDH and the <i>Bund Neues Vaterland</i> . The Convergence of Two Human Rights Associations, 1914 to 1939 .....	79
<i>Lora Wildenthal</i> The Reincarnations of the German League for Human Rights in Occupied and West Germany .....	95
<i>Paul Aubert</i> The Spanish League of Human Rights .....	123

## Table of Contents

<i>Michalis Moraitidis</i> The History and the Interventions of the Hellenic League for Human Rights (1918–2016) .....	139
<i>Izabela Mrzygłód</i> The League for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights in Interwar Poland (1921–1937) .....	157
<i>Eric Vial</i> The <i>Lega italiana dei diritti dell'uomo</i> (Italian Human Rights League) .....	173
<i>Stilyan Deyanov</i> The Romanian League for Human Rights – a “Child of the Comintern”? (and possible comparison with the Bulgarian League) .....	195
<i>Christopher Treiblmayr</i> The Austrian League for Human Rights and its International Relations (1926–1938) .....	223
<i>Osman İşçi</i> The History of 20 <sup>th</sup> -century Human Rights Movements in Turkey .....	257

## FORUM

<i>David Morelli</i> The Belgian League for Human Rights. A First Outline for Future Research .....	283
<i>Paul Fonck</i> The Luxembourgish League for Human Rights .....	293
<i>Doris Leuenberger / Patrick Herzig</i> A Brief History of the Swiss League for Human Rights .....	303
Contributors .....	311
Index of Names .....	315

# THE BELGIAN LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

A First Outline for Future Research

*David Morelli*

## 1901–1940: THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE ORGANISATION

The Belgian Human Rights League – in French *Ligue des droits de l'homme* – was the second league to be created after the French League for Human Rights. The former was established in 1901 shortly after the latter, created in 1898 in response to the Dreyfus affair. After being dissolved once during the First World War, the league was rebuilt in 1923 under the brand name *Ligue Belge pour la défense des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* – Belgian League for the Defence of Citizens and Human Rights. We will call it “Belgian League” in the following.<sup>1</sup>

The Belgian League was mainly composed of prominent citizens at the time, including lawyers, legal experts and former or future Secretaries of State, and reached its zenith in the 1930s.

Internationally speaking, the actions of the Belgian League during this period consisted mainly of manifestations against the rise of Nazism and of dealing with political refugees’ applications. More specifically, it assisted Italian refugees trying to escape Mussolini’s fascist regime by intervening with Belgian authorities to support their applications for asylum. The League also organised supporting actions for asylum seekers from Eastern Europe and collaborated with the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) to increase the impact of its interventions. Its representatives also attended the FIDH’s congresses, for example in 1923 in Paris, where Emile Vandervelde, Louis Piérard and Mrs. Koopman-Lorand were present. In 1926, the FIDH congress was even held in Brussels.<sup>2</sup>

From the very few documents about the pre-war League still available today, we can determine that Emile Vandervelde, president of the Belgian League between 1933 and 1937, regularly met the secretaries of the Italian Human Rights League as well as members of the International Federation. However, one of the few traces we have regarding agreement between the Belgian League and a

- 1 Where no other sources are specifically indicated, this paper is primarily based on the thesis paper “Histoire de la Ligue belge pour la défense des droits de l'homme entre 1954 et 1983: positions et actions internationales” written by Fabrice Delooz in 2001 and presented to the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Source references can be found therein. I would like to thank Fabrice Delooz for his permission to quote from his text.
- 2 See Gilles Manceron’s contribution in this volume.

foreign one is a handwritten document about asylum rights, signed in 1935 by the secretary of the Italian League, which by then had settled in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the pre-war Belgian League has yet to be written.<sup>4</sup> The only documents witnessing this period are a few records, newspaper articles and letters. Apart from these reports and the few references to the Belgian League in Emile Vandervelde's private letters<sup>5</sup>, barely any records of the pre-war Belgian League remain. A few traces of epistolary exchanges also exist in the archives of the French League and its journal, but to the best of our knowledge these documents have not yet been studied by historians interested in the topic.<sup>6</sup> Further material may well be located in the archives of other leagues, including the Austrian one. In summary, there is as yet no academic paper or extensive scientific written report covering this period of the history of the Belgian League.<sup>7</sup>

The primary reason for this gap in the memory and literature about the Belgian League is the fact that during the 1930s, the league was often considered and presented as a partisan organisation by the media. This was probably due to the political orientation of its president at the time, Emile Vandervelde, one of the great actors of Belgian socialism before the Second World War who was elected State Minister several times.<sup>8</sup> With such a pedigree, it is not surprising that the Germans prohibited the activities of the League and seized their archives when they invaded Belgium in 1940. Since this confiscation, nobody had access to these precious documents. Due to hitherto unknown circumstances, most of the archives were eventually transferred to the Soviet Union, and apparently remain in Moscow to this day.

3 On the history of the Italian League, see Eric Vial's contribution in this volume.

4 Delooz cites the somewhat incomprehensive research by Marc D'Hoore and an article by Anne-Marie Dieu as the current state of research on the Belgian League. After a short introduction placing the creation of the interwar Belgian League in the 1920s and its dissolution at the moment of the Nazi occupation, Anne-Marie Dieu focuses primarily on the activity of the Belgian League in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however. Marc D'Hoore, *Note relative à l'histoire de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme*, Bruxelles 1992. Anne-Marie Dieu, *Valeurs et associations. Entre changement et continuité*, Paris 1992, chapter 2 "La Ligue des Droits de l'Homme", 169–188.

5 Archives of the Institut Emile Vandervelde, Brussels.

6 Archives of the LDH, *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*, Université Paris-Ouest-Nanterre.

7 Future research efforts at the Department of History, University of Vienna aim to include the Belgian League as well.

8 See the website of the Belgian League, <http://www.liguedh.be/lhistoire-de-la-ligue-des-droits-de-lhomme/46-1901-1954>, consulted 29 November 2016.

## THE POST-WAR HISTORY: TWO EXAMPLES

Luckily, the second part of the history of the Belgian League is better documented, even though the lack of a proper archiving policy and the bad storage conditions make it difficult to access many of the files. An eventual thorough historical study of the post-war period is certainly warranted.

In the following, I will discuss two examples of international actions by the post-war Belgian League. These examples come from the aforementioned work of a student in history at Brussels Free University who wrote his thesis paper in the context of the League's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2001. As his main sources, Deloos used records of the League's central committee and joint reports as well as the newsletter, which served as the organisation's only information and communication tool for many years.

In 1954, nine years after World War II and the loss of its archives, the "Belgian League for the Defence of Human Rights" was established again. This new League consisted of previous members of the pre-war League as well as new human rights defenders. Two main factors prompted the reconstruction of the organisation: Firstly, the infringement of the rights of the defence during the trial of the Nazi regime collaborators. Secondly, the shock caused by the sentencing of the spouses Rosenberg to death for spying. The activities of the new League were dedicated, besides its educational function, to reacting to problems like police violence, infringement of prisoners' rights, anti-Semitism, and censorship of artists and intellectuals.

But the international vocation of the work of the reconstructed League became apparent during its inauguration ceremony in March 1954. At this occasion, the new president Henri Botson stated that the League was re-established in order to

struggle against the decline of international morality between the two world wars and against the manifest apathy towards the countless injustices committed by the totalitarian regimes and towards some abuses of rights carried out in democratic regimes.

This commitment to international questions can also be explained by the good economic and social situation in Belgium during the immediate post-war period. In this positive context, the League focused mainly on international problems and, more specifically, on the topics of decolonisation, struggle against dictatorships and respect for human rights in democratic regimes.

The steady and close relationship between the International Federation and the Belgian League since its reorganisation may also explain this leaning towards international affairs. In regard to this relationship, it is also worth noting that Jeanne Vandervelde, Emile Vandervelde's second wife, had been appointed vice-president of the International Federation. She held this position from 1954, the year of the re-establishment of the Belgian League, until her death in 1963.

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**LIGUE BELGE  
POUR LA  
DÉFENSE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME**

BRUXELLES, LE MARS 1957  
BRUSSEL,

**BELGISCHE LIGA  
VOOR DE  
VERDEDIGING VAN DE RECHTEN  
VAN DE MENS**

BULLETIN D'INFORMATION N° 1  
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C. C. P. N° }  
P. C. R. N° } 7389.61

Le Comité central a décidé, au cours d'une réunion tenue le 15 février 1957, d'envoyer régulièrement aux membres un bulletin relatant les principales activités de la Ligue.

Ce premier bulletin retrace brièvement l'activité générale de la Ligue.

Membres - Secrétariat

Au 31 décembre 1956, la Ligue comptait 570 membres. Si elle veut poursuivre efficacement la mission que ses statuts lui assignent, la Ligue doit faire un vigoureux effort et faire appel dans tous les milieux à toutes les bonnes volontés. Un premier plan de recrutement est en cours d'exécution.

Le secrétariat administratif est assuré par Melle M.-Th. Cuvelliez (66, rue de l'Hôtel des Monnaies. Tél. 38.15.34)

Commission juridique

Sous la présidence de Mr. Jules Wolf, cette commission a une activité permanente. Elle dépouille et examine toutes les demandes individuelles qui sont adressées à la Ligue.

Les interventions de la Ligue auprès des autorités administratives ou judiciaires sont l'objet de la part de celles-ci d'un examen attentif et sérieux.

Commission coloniale

Cette commission présidée par Mr. Fernand Waleffe, Conseiller colonial, est commune à l'Association belge pour les Nations-Unies et à la Ligue.

Elle élabore pour le moment la réponse à donner au questionnaire envoyé par l'Ecosoc et relatif à l'application dans les territoires d'outre-mer, de l'art. 9 de la déclaration des droits de l'homme de 1948.



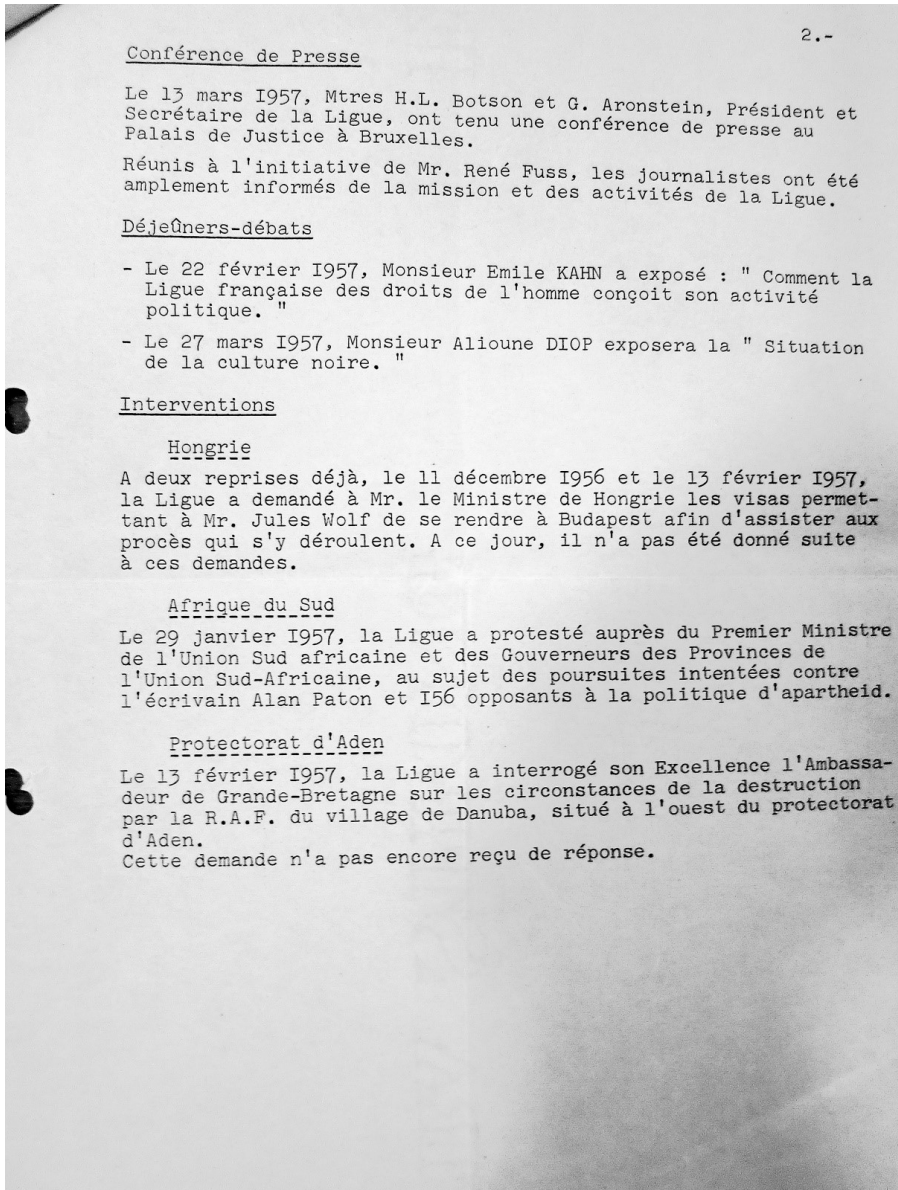


Figure 1. Newsletter No. 1 of the Belgian League after its re-establishment in 1954. Source: Archives of the Austrian League for Human Rights.



During the aforementioned inauguration ceremony, lecturer Henri Rolin emphasised the positive and important impact of the Convention of Human Rights, which had been signed by the members of the Council of Europe four years earlier in Rome, on the colonial issue.

I will now discuss the relations between the Belgian League and the other national leagues by way of two examples connected to decolonisation issues. From 1954 onwards, the League focused on two decolonisation processes in particular: the Algerian and Congolese ones. Starting in 1957, it also published a newsletter (see Figure 1) informing about these and other activities.

### The Algerian Case

The efforts of the Belgian League pertaining to Algeria are particularly interesting since they represent an excellent example of encroachment by one league upon the range of actions of another one – in this case, the French League for Human Rights. The Algerian War that took place from 1954 to 1962 was a war of liberation and of decolonisation, pitting France against Algerian nationalists mostly united under the national liberation front. But it was also a twofold civil war: between the communities on the one hand and within the communities on the other hand. The Belgian League took an interest in the Algerian problem for the first time in 1955, almost a year after the beginning of the conflict. In October 1955, a resolution was passed by the League blaming terrorists for acts committed in Algeria as well as the deportation and internment of civilians. The destruction of villages conducted by French authorities was also condemned in the resolution. The Belgian League contacted the French League to find out what it planned to do regarding the issue, but the French League did not receive this enquiry warmly. Indeed, it was surprised by the late concern of the Belgian League regarding the conflict. In December 1955, the Belgian League sent a letter to the French League expressing its gratitude for the latter's protest actions related to the issues with Algerians. The letter also stated, however, that the French League "must not claim to have the monopoly of criticism when human rights breaches occur on the territory of the French Union". It might seem that the Belgian League's interest in a range of action closely related to France represented a source of tension between the two leagues. But as Delooz points out, the Belgian League was very careful not to adopt a partisan position on the Algerian independence issue. Its intervention was aimed exclusively at ensuring respect for human rights in this long and bloody decolonisation conflict. During the war, the Belgian League kept a close watch on the official reports between Belgium and France, focusing particularly on police collaboration and the exchange of Algerian prisoners between the two countries. In December 1957, the League was informed about an Algerian person living in Belgium being displaced to France. This situation raised the question of the observance of human rights. Indeed, Algerian activists and partisans of the National Liberal Front or other nationalist organisations were likely to face capital punishment if they were deported to France. Due to various worrisome adminis-

trative measures taken in Belgium, one could assume that people from Algeria who seemed to be in contact with nationalist groups were considered unwelcome there. Also, the expulsions to France of Algerian immigrants living in Belgium appeared to be disguised extraditions. For instance, a royal decree was promulgated in 1958 with the goal of facilitating the expulsion of foreigners who were considered unwelcome during the Brussels Universal Exhibition. The Belgian League suspected that the intent of this decree was to expel Algerian immigrants living in Belgium. Moreover, Algerian students also had to cope with administrative difficulties if they wanted to study in Belgium. As a result, the Belgian League closely monitored expulsions of Algerians between 1957 and 1960 and intervened with the competent minister every time irregularities were observed. Somewhat later, another event would further aggravate the tensions between the Belgian and French Leagues: In June 1960, new decrees were issued by the French government to decrease the rights of defence at a time when many Algerians were being driven back to Belgian borders. One of these decrees directly targeted the lawyers of accused Algerians, and this decree was condemned in a resolution drawn up by the Belgian League on 12 October 1960. The resolution was sent to French authorities and the French League for Human Rights although the transmission was not met with unanimity among the members of the central committee. Some members, including President Jeanne Vandervelde, thought that the Belgian League should act in accord with the French League, while other members maintained that the French League could not act efficiently as long as the controversial act of legislation was in force in France. The French League reacted vehemently to the resolution by the Belgian League, and the record of its central committee session of 18 November 1960 sums up its position as follows: "The French League especially rises up against the Belgian League's threatening tone. Also, we deplore the intervention of the Belgian League regarding issues which fall in the competences of the French League." Following this incident, a delegation of the Belgian League went to Paris to meet with French League staff and to try to smooth out the disagreement in question. As mentioned earlier, the Belgian League at no time took sides in the Algerian independence issue. In terms of the dispute between the two leagues provoked by the Belgian League's stance, one may consider its careful behaviour to be the sensible reaction, at least in regard to the future of the relationship with its French counterpart. Indeed, a more drastic attitude would have probably lead to serious problems with the French League or even to loss of contact, and this was the worst-case scenario the Belgian League tried to avoid by sending a delegation to Paris to handle the situation. Despite trying to work out the tensions with the French League, however, the Belgian League still assumed a vigilant and even wary position towards its French colleagues and even towards the International Federation. A good example is the Belgian League's perplexity regarding the capacity of the International Federation to manage, in a neutral and appropriate way, human rights issues that were consequences of a conflict occurring in a French colony. In the course of the Algerian conflict, the persons in charge of the Belgian League were particularly upset by the belligerents' serious actions and weighty words. In 1958, for instance,

members of the National Liberal Front (NLF) executed three French soldiers, and Colonel Bigeard, one of the principal actors of the French army general staff, urged his troops to “break the Fellagha”, referring to Algerian combatants struggling for the independence of their country. In this explosive atmosphere, the Belgian League decided to be initiative and tried to organise a meeting between both sides of the conflict. Indeed, the League hoped that both France and the Algerian freedom fighters would respect the Geneva Conventions concerning the protection of prisoners of war as well the humanitarian rules. It therefore suggested a conference between the French government and the NLF under the eyes of the Red Cross International Committee. Most members of the central committee warmly welcomed the suggestion during their meeting on 14 May 1958, but some others believed the International Federation should take this initiative instead. Jules Wolf, president of the Belgian League’s legal commission at the time, was strongly opposed to this idea, warning that the French League’s dominating role within the International Federation was a real issue in this case. Moreover, he stated that this kind of event should be organised in a small and neutral country like Belgium. This statement was supported by the president of the League, Georges Aronstein, who likewise pointed out the close ties – presumably too close in his opinion – between the International Federation and the French League, claiming that the International Federation was “almost a manifestation of the French League”. This suspicious point of view would eventually prevail, and the League thus made discreet contact with both sides of the conflict and addressed a call for collaboration to the Red Cross International Committee, leaving the International Federation uninformed. The initiative was ultimately unsuccessful due to the lack of concrete results of the Red Cross actions. Even though the Algerian conflict caused tensions between the Belgian and French Leagues, the Belgian League has always made sure to maintain regular contact. It does so by regularly sending its resolution texts to the French League and requesting complementary information about the situation in France. It is also important to note that in 1959, the Belgian League organised a conference on Human Rights in France and appointed Daniel Mayer, president of the French League, as the speaker for the event. This first step undoubtedly helped the two leagues establish a cordial relationship despite the strained context. Many other initiatives were undertaken to improve the situation between the leagues, but traces of the tensions resulting from the Algerian conflict nevertheless remained for a long time. Indeed, once the conflict in Algeria had ended, the Belgian League at least partly ignored the human rights situation in France: For almost 20 years, between 1963 and 1983, the Belgian central committee barely intervened on subjects relating to France. In 1963, the Belgian League had concerned itself with the expulsion of a Belgian journalist at the French border, an expulsion that later turned out to have resulted from an error. The journalist had been blacklisted by mistake because of his previous comments during the Algerian conflict. This last case in relation with the Algerian conflict did not further damage the relationship between the two leagues, however.

The second conflict that shall briefly be discussed is also connected to the decolonisation period, specifically the independence of Belgian Congo. In the

context of this conflict, I aim to show an attempt by the Belgian League to establish a league “on the spot”.

### The Belgian League and Belgian Colonialism

After the end of World War II, emancipation and independence movements grew continually in Congo. The violent events that occurred in Leopoldville on 4 January 1959 marked a new high in the rise of these movements.

In 1955, the Belgian League founded a colonial commission aiming to keep under surveillance the observation of human rights in the colonies, especially in regard to racial discrimination. At the time, no Congolese League for Human Rights existed, and the Belgian League received a large number of requests to join the association from people who were still being called “indigenous”. In June 1955, a group of people from Ruanda-Urundi who described themselves as “moralists” expressed their interest in joining the Belgian League. President Georges Aronstein was afraid of this group’s highly politicised notion of human rights, and wished to be more closely informed about the way they approached the concept of the defence of human rights before accepting their membership. In June 1957, several students from Ruanda-Urundi eventually became members of the Belgian League. In November 1958, the League received a letter with a surprising letterhead from an inhabitant of Kisengi in the Lower Congo province: It was addressed by the “Belgian League for the Defence of Human Rights, local committee of Kisengi”. The secretary general of the Belgian League replied to the signatory asking him to “refrain from acting on behalf of one of the Belgian League local committees” and pointing out the fact that “the question posed in this letter deals not with the work of a League for Human Rights”. Indeed, the content of the letter concerned excessive medical fees. Before the independence of the Congo, the colonial commission of the League received several offers by Congolese people to create a Congolese League, and it tried to give a concrete shape to this idea in June 1960, a few weeks before the independence. Unfortunately, the Congolese people who had shown interest in the project were never heard from again, and the initiative did not succeed. In June 1961, when the Congo had been independent for one year, the Belgian League again tried to create a Congolese league. It began to set up the Congolese league with the help of a leading Congolese figure whose identity was kept secret by the League. The realisation of the project, for which we have no details, was pursued for a certain time but ultimately failed. In May 1962, the Belgian League was informed by a previous Congolese member that he was planning to form a Congolese league, but once again, this intent did not come to fruition.

In June 1967, a certain Londole contacted the president of the League to announce that he was the head of a Congolese human rights league he had created. As a sign of their support, the Belgian League gave a typewriter to this newly founded league, which had been established without Belgian help. It is unknown what happened with the Congolese League after this symbolic support, however.

Delooz provides no any information about its work in the independent Congo, nor about any collaboration between the Belgian and the Congolese League. The Congolese organisation seems no longer to exist today. As had already been the case during the Algerian war, the Belgian League was careful not to take sides in the question of independence. The League acted on all Congo-related issues only in terms of supporting basic human rights. For example, it was only in February 1960 that the term “independence” appeared in a Congolese document, while the Belgian government had already declared the transition towards independence of the Congo a month before.

In both the Algerian and Congolese conflicts, it is clear that the Belgian League was not at the leading edge of the struggle for human rights regarding the populations in conflict. However, one should not overlook the Belgian League’s efforts: Not only did it struggle to find a diplomatic solution to the Algerian conflict, but it also raised awareness among Belgian authorities in respect to the differences of treatment between black and white people in the Congo.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

To conclude this paper, I would like to take a 50-year leap forward. Obviously, the current Belgian League is thoroughly different than the one established in the 1950s.

Firstly, the League is now divided into two regional entities; and secondly, legal experts and public figures are no longer its only members. It is now open to the general public and is highly professionalised. Last but not least, although the international aspect of the League was the main motivation for rebuilding it in 1954, it now focuses almost entirely on observation and promotion of human rights in Belgium. Nevertheless, the Belgian League has the opportunity to stay informed as well as to collaborate with and support the International Federation’s initiatives and battles for human rights issues abroad. Globalisation and the extension of the European Union have led to a decentralisation of decision centres. The decision-making process is therefore likely to occur regardless of national borders, and national legislation often consists of decisions made in decentralised organs. Many of these decisions relate to privacy or social, economic and cultural challenges, and thus have a great impact on human rights principles.

In the future, the Belgian League will naturally keep fighting to promote all kinds of human wellbeing. Our organisation is aware that this fight will be more efficient if global challenges and even some local challenges are addressed with a more global and international approach.

Accordingly, collaborations between the national leagues and between the leagues and the International Federation have never been as crucial as they are today in regard to spreading information and developing European and international strategies and actions to guarantee human rights and human dignity all over the world.