

The late 1960s Belgian math war: “Papy-ists” versus “anti-Papy-ists”

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There was no consensus among mathematicians and mathematics teachers about the introduction of modern mathematics in Belgian secondary schools in the late 1960s. On the contrary, it led to a “battle of Hernani” between “Papy-ists”, advocates of the reform led by Georges Papy, and “anti-Papy-ists” (Colot, 1969). This battle was not only fought in academic circles but in the public arena with participation of all stakeholders (including parents). Partly for that reason, an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of this late 1960s Belgian math war is lacking. Thanks to the recent digital disclosure of all Belgian newspapers from that period, we were able to fill this gap in the literature.

Initially, Papy-ists were on the winning side: Already in a circular of May 14, 1965, Henri Janne, Minister of Education and political friend of Papy, had announced the upcoming generalization of modern mathematics in all secondary schools from September 1, 1968 (Janne, 1965). Janne’s decision was met with displeasure in some academic circles, as well as in most technical schools, but the protest was marginal and poorly organized. On April 11, 1968, Janne’s decision was confirmed by Frans Grootjans and Michel Toussaint, the Ministers of Education at the time, but their decision only concerned the general sections of secondary education (Grootjans & Toussaint, 1968). On June 17, 1968, however, a new government was installed with two new Ministers of Education: Piet Vermeyleen and Abel Dubois. The newly appointed Ministers soon allowed some schools of general secondary education “not yet ready to implement the new curricula” to postpone the introduction of modern mathematics by one year (Noël, 1993). These two elements gave the opposition wind: Could the introduction of modern mathematics in technical education be averted, and could the “provisional” postponement given to some schools of general secondary education be perpetuated? The battle was fought mainly in the francophone Belgian press. Based on a systematic search of the newspapers of the time via *BelgicaPress*, a database of historical Belgian newspapers up to 1970, and some other sources from this period, we present and analyze the arguments and “discourse” of both parties in this political rather than content-based debate.

The war was eventually won by Papy and his proponents: Vermeyleen and Dubois stuck to the decision of their predecessors. From September 1, 1969, all students of the first years of secondary education, both in the general and in the technical sections, without any exception, were subjected to modern mathematics. The late 1960s math war ended quickly.

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