

The 12 people and ideas that ruined Molenbeek

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The perpetrators of a string of attacks in France and Belgium passed through the Brussels quarter.

One metro stop away from the center of Brussels and several minutes from the headquarters of the European Union, Molenbeek modernized so quickly in the 19th century that it won the nickname “Little Manchester,” after the world’s then-leading industrial city. Now it’s known as “Europe’s Terror Capital” — shorthand for the policy and police failures that enabled a string of terrorist attacks, including Friday’s killing spree in Paris. Here are the people and ideas that got the district to this point:

The Belgian constitution

Belgium has eight parliaments (federal, three regions, three language communities and the EU), 19 municipalities with 19 different mayors in Brussels alone, and six separate police departments. Never mind that these bodies often do not communicate with each other or share information. The Belgian constitution enables a peculiar Belgian national condition of encouraging those with power to “look the other way” when an intractable problem emerges.

Philippe Moureaux

He was [the mayor of Molenbeek](#) for 18 years until October 2012, the period during which radicals took root. But he claims “[I have nothing to do with it.](#)” Few with knowledge of the district agree. As a newly elected mayor in 1993, Moureaux said: “We are totally incapable of integrating a new wave of immigration.” Critics say he changed his tune when he realized how many votes he could court from immigrants, and subsequently became a staunch supporter of voting rights and citizenship for new arrivals. The backflip was so pronounced that Molenbeek recorded the greatest population increase in Belgium — 30 percent over 15 years of Moureaux’s mayoralty. “For twenty years, a kind of omerta reigned,” a senator from the opposing MR party, Alain Destexhe, wrote in *La Libre Belgique* this week. The result: the district turned into an “retreat base for jihadists,” in the words of Georges Dallemagne, a center-right lawmaker in the Belgian parliament.

Abdelhamid Abaaoud

He’s the suspected mastermind of Paris attacks, but he’s not alone in Molenbeek’s Hall of Shame. [Abaaoud](#) was jailed with one of the Abdeslam brothers, Salah, in 2010 (another, Ibrahim, blew himself up in Paris). The brothers lived a stone’s throw from the Molenbeek police station. Moroccan national Ayoub el-Khazzani, who

opened fire with a Kalashnikov on a high-speed Thalys train in August, had also lived in Molenbeek. Amedy Coulibaly, from January's Charlie Hebdo attacks, bought his arms from a Molenbeek arms dealer, and French-Algerian Mehdi Nemmouche, who killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels last year, spent time in the area. The two suspected terrorists killed by Belgian police in a shootout in the eastern town of Verviers in January also were from Molenbeek.

Johan De Becker

The [chief of the Brussels West](#) police region that covers Molenbeek won reappointment in 2012 after being convicted of involuntary manslaughter for returning a gun to a depressed police officer — after the officer had turned it in — which the officer then used to kill a woman he loved. De Becker was later [acquitted on appeal](#). De Becker now has to explain how the police force he runs let the Abdeslam brothers slip through its fingers despite their living and being involved in drug trafficking on a street adjacent to his office. The behavior was so concerning, De Becker's officers shut down a bar run by one of the suicide bombers in the Paris attacks, just nine days before the attacks. As of now, no politicians have called for De Becker's resignation.

Françoise Schepmans

The current mayor of Molenbeek hasn't been able to turn the district around in her three years in office, acknowledging this week that it is "a breeding ground for violence," and that this ["does not surprise me really."](#) Yet the mayor has also claimed that Molenbeek is ["not a nest of terrorism,"](#) and fails to even mention radicalism in her introduction to the [latest annual police report](#) for the district, in which she congratulates the police for the lowest recorded level of incidents ever. These claims are made in parallel to Schepmans' admissions that [30 young residents](#) have left the area to train as jihadis in Syria, and that others continue to take refuge in Molenbeek.

Charles Picqué

The minister-president of the Brussels Capital Region for 19 years, during two stints between 1989 and 2013. After sounding alarm bells about radical preachers in the 1980s, Picqué's tenure also must now share some of the blame. Despite some gentrification in Brussels under Picqué, the city and region failed to offer many young Muslims opportunities that would allow them to thrive. The administration of the city is "dysfunctional," says [Bilal Benyaich](#), a policy adviser at the Social and Economic Council of Flanders and researcher at the [Itinera Institute](#) think tank. "Brussels is a black hole in Europe's anti-radicalization policy. It is easier for people with bad intentions — be they criminal, mafia or terrorist — to live life under the radar here than in any other major European city." With a massive underground economy, notable to even short-term visitors, because of the prevalence of cash rather than electronic transactions, Brussels is also an arms and drugs haven.

Belgian-government sponsored Salafist preachers

The Belgian government came to have a close relationship with Saudi salafists via a freak department store fire in 1967 that killed 323 people while the Saudi king was visiting Belgium. His offer of financial assistance to the victims and their families was repaid with the gift of a building opposite today's EU diplomatic service that became Belgium's first mosque and [Islamic Cultural Centre \(ICC\)](#) in 1969. The Belgian state formalized its relationship with the ICC, long regarded as the official voice of Muslims in Belgium, and encouraged the arrival of both more Muslim migrant workers and clerics. In contrast to most countries, Belgium's preachers are mostly born or trained outside the country. The ICC encouraged clerics from the 1980s onwards to shift to fundamentalist Salafist teachings, including the placement of over 600 salafist teachers into schools. Pointing at Molenbeek, the MP Georges Dallemagne said: "The very strong influence of Salafists ... is one of the particularities that puts Belgium at the center of terrorism in Europe today."

Sharia4Belgium

The now banned terrorist organization was a radical Salafist group which denounced democracy and called for Belgium to convert itself into an Islamist state. The group incited riots in Molenbeek in 2012, despite having a stronger presence in other districts, and worked to recruit and radicalize local youth. Its spokesman, Fouad Belkacem, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in early 2015.

Jan Jambon

The Belgian interior minister bluntly admitted ahead of the attacks that Molenbeek was full of problems. And then on Saturday, he said: "We don't have control of the situation in Molenbeek." While taking useful steps to set up much needed databases and demand results from local officials, Flemish Jambon also is knocked by many for paying too little attention to Brussels, despite a constant string of warning signs. The Flemish regional government, led by Jambon's NVA party, [cut funding](#) to the very services in Molenbeek that Jambon says should have been doing more to work together and prevent radicalization.

Charles Michel

The prime minister of Belgium said after the Paris killings: "Almost every time [terrorists attack Europe], there is a link to Molenbeek ... It's been a form of *laissez faire* and laxity. Now we're paying the bill." Many of the district's former low-pay factory jobs are gone, and most of the jobs in Brussels require people who speak both French and Dutch or have a university degree, or both, according to Bilal Benyaich, a senior fellow at the Itinera Institute. Yet there's no plan to ensure Dutch is taught to all, a plan to help get disaffected youth back into formal training, nor plans to expand the Belgian security service as the already better-prepared UK is planning. Those are policies a prime minister can champion.

Belgian State Security Service

While stretched with [just 600 staff](#) to manage individual threats and a host of

international institutions, Belgium failed to have even a team dedicated to monitoring internet activity until 2015. The service could lean on the four countries it shares borders with that have perhaps the best security services in Europe: France, Netherlands, Germany and the U.K, or at the very least share information. In the case of the Abdeslam brothers, it knew [at least one of them](#) was traveling frequently to Paris in the weeks before the attacks but kept the information to itself. Louis Caprioli, former head of the French intelligence services, said: “Belgian authorities could have signaled to the French that these attackers would threaten France’s security.”

The Schengen Zone

The EU’s ease of travel is a major facilitator of the [82,154 illegal weapons court cases](#) brought before courts in Belgium between 2009 and 2013. That’s around one case for every 100 adults in Belgium. According to the Flemish Peace Institute, which studies radicalism, “An important source for illegal firearms in Europe is cross-border smuggling. European integration, creating the Schengen area, has facilitated these smuggling practices: as soon as a firearm enters the EU it can easily circulate.”